

Emergence

Maria Arena

Slouching in my seat, I track the butterfly that meanders over the bonnet of my car; the vibrant, shimmery blue of its wings reminds me of her eyes. I glance across the street, to the house – her house – and sink lower, feeling (absurdly) conspicuous. As the butterfly sashays up the slope of the windscreen, I wonder if it's a coincidence that my car is camphor laurel green and whether I, too, am toxic to humans. No doubt, she would frown at my self-deprecation, or she would've the last time I saw her. She wasn't big on pity back then, especially of the wallowing kind. Don't get me wrong; she had boundless compassion for those in pain but, as she once told me: 'Pity is a deceitful kindness.'

I've been in the house across the street maybe two dozen times, but not in the last four years. It belongs to her parents, or it did; I don't know if they're still alive. My feeling is they are; little has changed about the house since the last time I was here. The lemony paint glimpsed over the high hedge suggests conservatism; the security gate refuses unsolicited visitors. Not even the butterfly, which crossed the road with such boldness, dares to go closer than the footpath and risk disturbing the solitude. It wings onward and disappears over the neighbour's low fence.

Not that there's anything wrong with a little solitude; we all need time on our own. It's a 'growth experience'. At least, that's what my therapist says.

I prop my elbow on the armrest, press my chin against my hand, and gaze at the house, waiting for a sign of movement. One comes; the Blue Triangle butterfly makes a dashing re-appearance, dipping over the neighbour's gate and along the fence line towards a shrub burdened with blossoms. A moment later, another butterfly follows. They loop around each other, as the woman inside the house and I did, all those years ago, when we danced until morning.

But before that, like the butterflies cavorting across the road, we had to meet.

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'Mind if I sit here?'

On any other day at Honey's Deli, her request wouldn't have been unusual since Honey's was one of those bustling establishments where sitting with a stranger was almost mandatory, unless you wanted to eat standing up. But on that day, in the waning of an afternoon, most of the other tables were empty, while the table I sat at was just big enough for my coffee, a muffin, and my writing pad.

I could've refused—I was in the middle of a growth experience and 'no' was my default response to imposition—until I looked into her face. She was pretty but not disarmingly so, yet there was something captivating about her. Was it the hint of laughter in her eyes? The assured lift of her brow? Or something more ephemeral? I didn't know, but I pushed aside my muffin to make room for her pot of tea.

As it turned out, it was the writing pad that caught her attention. In the age of technology, crisp layers of paper and sharpened pencils had an old world charm that some writers found hard to resist. So it was with her. The first thing she did when she sat was to

take up a pencil and roll it between her hands, before turning it end to end and slipping it between her fingers to test the fit.

I knew immediately we shared the same addiction.

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Addiction.

The word leads to an idea, and I twist in my seat, reaching into the back for my laptop, which is lying on the floor. I've given away my habit of writing on paper in the last few years (*will that disappoint her?*), succumbing to the ease of screen and keys—especially the one marked 'DELETE'.

Ah, blessed self-judgment—

But back to addiction.

I type: *The first kiss is like heroin...* and gaze at the words, wondering if every jezebel remembers the first shock of unrestrained passion this way, or is it only me? Then I write: *The first illicit kiss is as sweet as heroin; euphoric, suggestive, leaving her wanting more...*

I look away from what I've created, through the window. Across the street, the butterflies visit the flowers, wings battering the air; they are never still. We were like that, she and I, for the first year of our friendship. If we weren't dancing, we were writing, encouraging each other to greater heights of creativity (our shared compulsion). Or we were reading our words aloud, in full performance, becoming our characters, sharing their loves, suffering their pains, dying with them in the letters before the full stop.

My laptop hums, the fan cooling the internal (*infernally*?) heat of the machine. I highlight the words I've written—DELETE.

Sweet obliteration.

I think that was the title of one of her songs. Or was it *Sweet Oblivion*? Maybe. Either way, playing music and singing were the other forms her addiction took; her drive to create

more nuanced than mine. Then there was the drawing and photography. No wonder I was in awe of her.

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‘Promise not to be disappointed?’

The first time I heard her sing was in a dusky bar, infused with the taint of old beer. I went along to help her set up for the gig and to steady her nerves. It had been awhile since she’d last performed, although, as a kid, her family had been constantly on the road.

When she talked about those days—which only happened when we were in our darker moods—I imagined a cross between the Partridge Family and the Dollanganger’s; a gorgeous, incestuous ensemble swanning up and down the East coast, performing to half-deaf retirees at RSL clubs.

I realised how wrong my impression was that first night when she walked onto the stage and stood in front of the microphone. She was radiant, angelic; then she started to sing.

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In my head, I hear her croon a cover of *Throw Your Arms Around Me*, and my belly aches. Not because of her, but because of him—the Philanderer—the one my friends (if I can still call them that) say I need rescuing from, for my own good.

For we may never met again (she sang), *so shed your skin and let’s get started* (he said), and I fell for them both.

On the screen in front of me is part of a sentence: *I never meant to hurt anyone...* though I don’t remember typing it. No writer of sound mind would start a story with those words, but I don’t delete them because, clichéd as they may be, they’re also true. Although, until five months ago, I would’ve sworn they were a deceit.

My life, it seems, has come full circle: from transgressed to transgressor.

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‘How many times have you smiled today?’

The crowd at Honey’s pressed forward, impatient for us to order, but she didn’t care. She’d nursed my bruised heart during the months since our first conversation, and she wasn’t about to let me backslide into post-infidelity melancholia.

‘I smiled a lot yesterday,’ I protested, and she gave me that look: the one that drew out the sadness like a splinter extracted from under a nail.

I don’t know why I opened up to her the way I did; it’s not in my nature to share my problems, yet when I was with her, I couldn’t help but confess my sins or, rather, his sins (*No one called him a jezebel*, I type). Perhaps it was because judging—either of us—was beyond her; she just listened, and then told me to read Tolle.

‘The power of now fixes everything,’ she said.

Except her own suffering.

No one picked up on her condition. She was the epitome of effervescence: bright, bubbly, and with a smile for everyone. After hanging out with her for a while, I came to understand why she went to extremes to hide her exhaustion. She loathed pity. Once—she told me—she’d lived the life of the super-enthused, working all day and half the night, riding her pushbike from home to job to job to home until the lack of sleep became a habit, which became an addiction not of her choosing.

If only I had known her then, maybe I could’ve—

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A clatter across the road startles me. Anticipation makes my skin tingle. I push up in my seat as the butterflies flee. *Is it her?* I search, but the street is empty except for a kid on a bike, growing smaller as he pedals away. The urge to shush him is as strong as it is ridiculous. *Relax*, I think, *he’s gone*, and a searing pain that has nothing to do with the boy flares in my heart.

Beneath the words, *I never meant to hurt anyone*, I write:

Celia Brown didn't see the truck coming, which was funny because that kind of blindness usually only affected men. Her father and brother suffered from it, as did her cousin, who never recovered from the shock and, finally, killed himself.

So far, Celia had been stronger than that, but it was a near thing. She couldn't lie: she thought about it every day.

I read the words over, liking them while understanding that they are the antithesis of what my therapist wants me to write about; suicide apparently is not a growth experience. I'm not sure she's right, at least in terms of my writing.

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'Does the tormented soul fly closer to the sun?'

I posed this question on the first night she invited me into her house; although, it wasn't really an invitation, more of a necessity since her gear from the gig was in my car, and she was too exhausted to carry it inside on her own. So I lugged it into the garage for her and, when I was done, she asked me to stay for a cup of tea.

Inside, the house was what I expected and yet, not. Plastic covered a settee in the living room; a piano organ with keys the colour of curdled cream skulked in a corner of the family room, where a wedding portrait of her parents, three ceramic flying ducks, and a cross-stitched picture of a dachshund adorned the walls. A display unit crowded the dining room; I surveyed the useless knick-knacks on the shelves: thimbles, decanters, commemorative spoons, a crystal swan, salt and pepper shakers shaped like chickens, and asked after her parents.

She kept her voice low and made tea without the usual clatter. 'Asleep.'

'Will they mind me—?'

'Being here?'

I nodded.

‘Not if we’re quiet.’

As she moved around the kitchen, the other story of the house became apparent. In every cupboard and on every shelf of the refrigerator was a jumble of concoctions formulated to help her sleep. This night she was brewing kava and filling the kitchen with an appalling wet-earth smell.

Leaving the tea to steep, we sat at the dining table and discussed her condition. Here was the addiction that robbed all others of vitality; that stole her energy and shrank her world to the size of a postcard. When I expressed my sympathy, she scoffed gently and poured a cup of kava, which she drank without a grimace.

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A movement across my bonnet: the butterflies are eloping, twirling in tight, seductive circles. I follow them with my gaze, leaning across the passenger seat to watch their haphazard path through the park next to my car. They skirt the swings, duck under the slippery slide, circle the plastic rocking horses, never more than a wing tip apart. When they’ve visited each apparatus, they fly up, whirling towards the privacy of the treetops.

I straighten in my seat, feeling oddly voyeuristic. *Is the whole world having sex?* I wonder, as the memory of his hand cupping my breast steals into my mind. An animal heat moves from my belly, into my groin and along my thighs. I shudder. After all the ugliness, how can the idea of him stir such wanton need? Am I that despicable?

I deserve to be loved.

I deserve to be loved.

I deserve to be loved.

I type the words fast, row after row, to the bottom of the page: lines of contrition.

My therapist would be pleased.

It doesn't help. Like any addict, I'd sell my soul this instant just to feel him moving inside me. I rub a hand over my face and find the moist warmth of my mouth; I type another page—*I deserve better*—with fingers possessed.

Highlight.

DELETE.

Goodbye Celia Brown.

Sliding the laptop onto the passenger seat, I turn towards the house across the street and feel a different kind of longing. The hours I spent inside those walls were some of the most content of my life. I was safe with her. She had no expectations, no demands to make, and I could relax in a way that was impossible with any other I had loved. Transformations took place in that house. I healed there, grew whole and beautiful again. It was my cocoon, and I emerged emboldened.

The longing deepens, and with it comes a spurt of impatience. *Come on!* I think, but I should know better than to demand that she operate to my schedule. She always did things in her own time; why would that have changed? In fact, I don't want her to have changed. I want her to be the same woman who took me into her house and healed me with her compassion. That's what I need; that's why I'm here, isn't it? To return to the cocoon?

No.

Okay, yes, but that's not the only reason. This is not just about me; our friendship was never a one-way street even if it has seemed that way over the last few years. Not that I'm bitter about her 'rain checks' and infrequent emails. I get it; love diverted her. No drama. Still, I wonder what changes four years inside the cocoon of that house have wrought upon her?

Trying not to imagine the worst, I take up my laptop.

Jasper Cullen emerged from the black mouth of the tunnel with an arm flung over his eyes, which were squeezed to slits against the brightness. His pallid skin flushed salmon-belly pink through the thin shirt hanging over his emancipated frame, while the heat—after the constant cold of the mine—was a sledgehammer taken to his knees. He stumbled but didn't try to stop himself from falling, knowing Sarah would be there to catch him.

Except she wasn't; Sarah was dead, and there was no one in the world who would catch him ever again...

I look at the house. Will she be able to catch me? Will I be able to catch her?

Maybe.

*

'You can be my wingman anytime.'

It was a game she played, filling our nights with silly quotes from cheesy movies, leaving me breathless with laughter. Yet, beneath the frivolity lay a truth: our friendship provided protection from the leering predators who tracked us with ravenous eyes. Together, we were inviolable. Or so I thought until the Poet slipped passed me and into her life.

We meet him at a poetry reading in the city. To me, he was unremarkable; a small man with glasses and hair that curled at his collar. His poetry was more interesting, layered with dark yearnings and passions that would make the most brazen blush if not for the veiling sorcery of his words. We listened with rapt attention, then, as his last syllable faded and the applause started, he stepped off the stage and came straight to her. The moment their hands touched in introduction, she was lost to me.

Not that it happened all at once. She was bold and high-spirited but skittish about giving her heart. The Poet was undeterred. He wrote haiku, odes, and sonnets, declaring his devotion to her amid crowds of strangers, drawing her heart to his with an undivided

attention. As he worked his magic, I saw her less and less, until the days stretched into weeks and soon became a month.

How I missed her. Yet, as happens, the ache was somewhat mitigated by the arrival of the Philosopher on my doorstep.

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The butterflies have returned. Or perhaps it is two others who caper beside my window. I gaze at them, trying to discern some sort of individuality, some uniqueness, but any difference they have escapes my eye. Am I like the butterflies? No different to every other jezebel who has existed throughout history? Should I wear an 'A' pinned to my shirt? Shave my head? Suffer a public flogging? Some think so: the Philosopher's sisters and mother, the friends we shared, our neighbours, his work colleagues.

There is no such thing as a private matter on the public scaffold of social media.

Claustrophobia squeezes my chest. Breathe. Breathe. I snatch up my phone to check for messages, although the device has been mockingly silent all morning. No messages from the Philosopher, which is a blessing of sorts; his pain is still unbearable. Nothing from the Philanderer, which is an agony and a relief. There are notifications for Facebook and Bluesky, but I ignore them; no good can come of those. More importantly, there is no message from the woman across the street, although she's ten minutes late.

I try to stay calm.

My therapist says impatience is one of my failings. On this point, she and the Philosopher concur. I lift my laptop again and banish Jasper Cullen and his dead wife to the recycle bin, leaving the page blank (oh for such a simple solution to my own messy life).

Write out your faults until you can let them go was the good doctor's advice. I rest my fingers on the keyboard and think of a line she suggested: *I am a gift worth waiting for*, but I type:

Right from the beginning, Alain teased Eva about her inability to wait, for anything. She thought it impolite of him to mention the flaw, especially when he was busy feeling her up in the alleyway behind the cheap restaurant where he'd taken her on their first date. Still, he had a point. There were gaps in her life, gaping hole left by those who'd abandoned her, that she needed filling with an urgency that made her imprudent.

Despite his mocking, Alain was more than willing to comply. And why wouldn't he have been? Her desire for satisfaction meant he didn't have to work at winning her; she gave up everything with the merest encouragement: her body, her love, her time. It was all his and had been for three increasingly desolate years.

Eva took a drag on her cigarette. The smoke crawled from her mouth and drifted around her head, sending tendrils across the darkened bedroom where she waited. Feeling the coldness of the .38 against her thigh, she wondered whether her impatience for love was why he had come to take her for granted.

The sound of a car door slamming interrupted her thoughts, and Eva smiled; she couldn't wait to ask him.

I've killed the Philosopher. Not in the way Eva will dispatch Alain, but no less brutally. My heart aches with guilt, especially since I didn't even have Eva's grievance to bear against him. He's a sweet and tolerant man, and I was lucky he found me even if it meant it was easier for the woman across the street to let me go and disappear down the rabbit hole of her condition.

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'Poets are insular by nature. We have to be to find elegance in the barbarity of language.'

Was this his way of warning me of where he was taking her? Of where she wanted to go? If it was, I didn't listen. I plunged ahead with our friendship, expecting it would always be the same, but I underestimated her willingness to concede the fight for normalcy.

In the months after I started dating the Philosopher, she and I meet irregularly at Honey's for coffee and conversations that exhausted her all too soon. I'd barely start raving about the glorious new man in my life before she'd beg off and send a message to the Poet. He would arrive a few moments later and, with an apologetic smile, he'd help her from the chair, guiding her out of the deli and, inch by inch, out of my life.

The last time I saw her, she and the Poet came to my apartment, bearing gifts for Christmas. The Philosopher took the Poet onto the terrace and was soon waxing lyrical on his pet topic of the moment. The Poet nodded, but his eyes were on her, waiting (it seemed to me) for the slightest sign that would allow him to initiate their escape.

While the Philosopher kept him busy, I asked after her health and their plans for the New Year. She spoke of a new remedy for her condition and notions of marriage when she was healthy again. We exchanged a glance containing more truth than any words we could offer each other, then I agreed to be her Maid of Honour, and we built on the lies from there. Within the hour, the Poet was hovering behind her. She took his hand, and I walked them to the door, hugged her and promised to see her after the holidays, but I never did.

I filled the first year of her absence building a life with the Philosopher: working, travelling, learning to ignore his liberal-socialist ranting, and placating those he offended; dreaming of a bigger life but settling for the safety of 'us'. Yet, she was never far from my thoughts. Every now and then, I'd email, asking after her and making semi-playful requests to catch up. Always she'd reply, days later, that she was too ill but when she was better—blah, blah, blah.

Silence descended between us and I knew no more of her life, until mine fell apart.

*

'I think, therefore, I am.'

So Descartes declared, but I don't believe in what I can't experience through my senses. Maybe this has something to do with my impatience; I can't put my faith in the unseen or the unknowable—in an idea, or a God—in the hope that, when I die, everything will be revealed. No, I need to know now through a tangible reality.

I experience, therefore, I am.

The woman in the house across the street, on the other hand, drew on the esoteric like a butterfly sipping nectar; for her, it was the essence of life. No school of thought was barred from her exploration, no teacher went unheard, no mediation untried. Maybe this was the product of her condition—too much time to fill—but, despite her dalliance with everything that came her way, she was discerning, only taking what she needed from each to give her tranquillity and balance.

At the height of our friendship, she introduced me to her favourite teachers and encouraged me to open my heart to their messages. I tried to follow her lead, but I was too much of a realist to take them seriously. She accepted my obstinacy with her usual grace and assured me that one day something would happen to provide the experiential evidence I needed to believe in a force beyond myself.

That something came after she'd been absent from my life for three years; on the same day the Philanderer made himself known to me with a kiss stolen as we rode the elevator to the ground floor of our office building, ending months of speculation.

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The long days shorten as the world calls to me.

An email.

From her.

I was elated. I read the words over and over, deciphering the message behind them: 'I'm alive! I'm still here!' they seemed to say, 'And I haven't forgotten you.' I could've

wept, except I was too jittery with excitement. The Philanderer's audacity had left me shaken and aching in a way I'd forgotten.

I re-read the line: the wonder of its appearance helping me to regain control. How would I respond? My fingers itched to tell her everything but, after so much time apart, how could I dump the sordid potential of an affair on her? I couldn't. Instead, I settled on a few paragraphs about life in general, hoping she'd miss the turmoil beneath my words, and signed off with my usual offer of a catch-up.

She didn't reply for over a month.

By then, I was plump with my liaison, every inch of me swollen with desire: my body, my mind, my soul. Life was richer, riskier; discovery was implicit in every encounter, and it was a thrill. Yet, I was wracked with guilt, dreading the day the Philosopher uncovered the truth, but I couldn't resist the Philanderer. I was hopelessly addicted, headed for disaster and unable to stop for the life of me.

Her second email was longer, a whole paragraph that ended with: *Last night I dreamt you were caught in an Angel's Trumpet flower. Weird, huh?* She signed off and added a postscript: *Thinking about getting out of here. Should be strong enough soon.*

My heart leapt—Was it true? Would she re-join the world?—but I didn't have time to answer her with the depth and encouragement she deserved. The Philanderer was waiting and I yearned for him. In haste, I threw together a brief missive that began with a witticism about not using an Angel's Trumpet to fall asleep and finished with a platitude from Jung: 'Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes,' knowing the sentiment would annoy her but hoping she'd forgive me anyway.

Five months passed before I heard from her again. Her email came as I sat in my therapist's waiting room, fighting tears of disappointment when I saw that her message was not from the Philanderer.

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Within its sheltering cocoon, a caterpillar undergoes a metamorphosis that transforms it into a thing of beauty. Inside my car, it's hot enough for my own molecular conversion, yet I can't bring myself to get out. Somehow, it's only right that I should suffer while I wait for her to make a grand re-entry into our friendship.

I check the time; it creeps forward like ruination.

Needing a distraction, I contemplate the words on my laptop. The cursor winks at me, inviting me to finish what I've started, but I can't watch Eva as she stands and raises the gun, aiming at the place where Alain will appear. I don't want to see more lives destroyed; the thought fills me with horror. To save myself the torment, I open my mail program, bringing up the email that I've read a hundred times in the two weeks since she sent it.

The first paragraph contains a memory:

Remember the salt on the air and the sweep of waves against the rocks beneath us? And how the breeze took the bite out of the sun, and the voluptuous clouds, meditating on the horizon? I remember sitting shoulder to shoulder with you, waiting for the spectacle to begin. You spotted the first one; its wings white as a wedding gown, beating at a frantic pace. It bobbed toward the beach, just above the breakers, coming closer as it flittered towards the headland. Then came another and another until the air was a flurry of butterflies making a dash for land. I remember delight filling my heart as I wondered where these delicate seafarers had come from, and where their arduous journey would end. We shared a smile, but we didn't speak. There was nothing to say. The day was perfect: you, me, the sea, the sun, and a thousand beautiful reminders of the miracle of life.

The second paragraph was about me: *I Facebooked you*. Enough said; every sordid detail, out in the open, yet—as was her way—there was no reproach. The last paragraph was

about us: *We are like those butterflies from long ago, journeying through the mystery. We need each other to survive.*

She was always the wiser one.

A week passed while I wrestled with my shame before I replied, but there wasn't really any question that I'd come. And not because I've lost sight of the shore, or because I'm swimming through the dark waters of abandonment again; that's the least of my reasoning. No, it's because she's emerging from the safety of the house across the street—her cocoon—to share her radiance with the world once more.

A warning beep comes from my laptop as the battery fades towards terminal. I close the lid and put it back on the floor. For a second, I long for a blank pad of paper and a sharpened pencil, but the nostalgia doesn't last. Like the white butterflies flying towards the coast, there is only one direction to go now.

As though hearing my thoughts, the Blue Triangle butterflies return to the street, dipping and twirling, flying closer and closer to the hedge outside her home, where they land. They rest for only a moment before something startles them: the click of the latch on the security gate. With a flash of dazzling blue, they flutter away, and I reach for the door handle with shaking fingers as the last four years shrink around me until it feels like only yesterday that I last saw her. The gate inches open. I step onto the street, and a thought rushes into my head:

Will we recognise each other?

And my addicted heart answers: 'Of course.'