

This Long Century: Beginners

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One of my first words was *myself*. I said it when my parents would try to do something for me, perhaps I grabbed the washcloth out of their hands.

There are dark molecular clouds made of gas and dust that are left over when a galaxy is created. The cold temperatures cause clumps of matter to form and as they grow gravity causes them to collapse. This collapse creates heat, which forms baby stars. Some molecular clouds are nurseries full of new stars. Planets are formed in a similar way. Heat from collapse. Birth from death. A beginning at the end.

When I was little, my best friend Star had to practice piano every day. All I wanted to do was be with her, so I would sit on the soft sofa in her mom's small Hollywood apartment while she played Chopin, Joplin, and Debussy. Star sat with perfect posture. She had straight blonde hair and thin tan dancer limbs. Our bodies were not similar, but I knew hers like I knew my own. Her strong fingers traveled the keys with assertive ease. Sometimes the tick of the metronome. When my son was old enough, I enrolled him in lessons. The sound of him practicing soothes me in ways I didn't know it could.

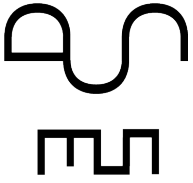
In Buddhism, the teaching of anatta refers to no-self. It is the practice of not clinging or grasping onto the things or ideas that we identify with that cause us suffering. The practice helps to not take things personally and stop viewing life between the two lenses of fear and desire. When I am teaching fiction writing, the first thing I tell my students who are developing characters, is to get in touch with what the character is most afraid of and what they want most deeply. No college student is writing about enlightenment. I have known about anatta for two decades, yet I am only beginning to see glimpses of what it would mean to embody it.

My son's first steps were taken, wild eyed, arms up in the air as he walked towards me after hauling himself up to a standing position by gripping the wooden coffee table. He was in purple leggings breathing heavy and smiling open mouthed with wet shiny lips. If I close my eyes I can feel his warm breath.

Once, I fell in love on a summer day. I walked down a dry hillside in flip flops and a short lavender dress to get to a lake I had never been to. I wanted to fold my body to fit inside of theirs before we had ever touched. I am terrified of lizards and for the first time in my life I didn't mention it and followed where there was no clear path down a steep dusty hillside. I brought tofu sandwiches and plums which we ate on the beach. My bathing suit was red. Later, I looped my arm through theirs while we walked back to their old green Honda. The hot cloth seats, the smell of still air, our arms rolling down the windows as the engine started.

In April Star died. When I got off the train I had rushed to get on, I knew she was gone. I got to her house and walked upstairs to her bedroom where her body was and dropped to my knees. I sang to her. Held her beautiful feet. I missed her breath and her laugh weeks before I got there. Hours later when the coroner came to take her, I held her two kids in my arms as they cried and I said things I don't remember to soothe them. None of us knew how to do this.

This summer Kate and Lauren got married. There were monarchs flitting about on bare and sequined shoulders and we all watched the couple share what they saw in one another. Redwoods towered overhead and the clouds parted to let the sun greet us and warm our skin like happiness. There was a chair covered in marigolds for Lauren's mother who had died that spring. Somehow we knew she was with us. We waved rainbow silk ribbons tied to driftwood in the air. We all made our own new vows without uttering a word. Each one of us walked away with a seed planted inside, a burning ember. The next morning we took packets of California poppy seeds and matchbooks as souvenirs.



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On the property where I stayed that night there was a fairy circle of redwoods. I stood in the center and looked up toward the kaleidoscope of tree tops. The circles are formed when an elder tree dies. Its shallow roots send up new saplings in a ring around the decaying stump.

I spent my birthday on a remote beach on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. I floated on my back in clear salt water that was both crisp and silky. A bald eagle perched on a rock in silhouette above the beach. Children gleefully pulled a lobster with one claw from the rippled sandy floor. The next night the fire alarm went off in our cabin for four hours before the owner could figure out how to dismantle it. There was no fire. Nothing collapsed. The milky way was a cloudy insistent ribbon over our heads emphasizing our smallness. A luna moth came to the window with its large effervescent celadon wings flapping. We turned off the lights and watched it fly away into the darkness.

Sometimes the ocean holds you like a mother. At times it takes you under. Sometimes the water blesses you and you are reborn.

- Amra Brooks