

High Desert Journal

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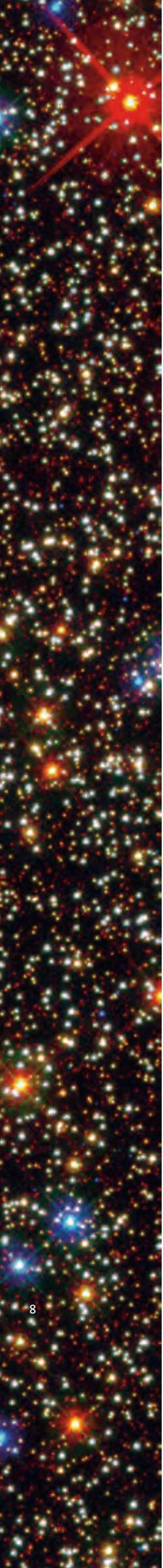
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THE COVER:

By Nate Ronniger

Ohmmm Moo
Oil on linen
40 x 30 inches



W I L D F I R E S T A R S

“You can’t manufacture love: You can’t build it back up, like a fire. You start out with a certain amount, and then hope it is strong enough to sustain itself against the hard winters and the assault of time. And it changes; it fluctuates. And sometimes the core can just get cold, and stay cold, for too long. It’s one of the dangers.”

— RICK BASS

By Laura Pritchett

GLOWING WHITE STARS fly into view when I turn off my lamp and settle my head back into the pillow. Someone has painted the night sky on my bedroom ceiling, invisible by day, but glittering at night. Whoever did this, some previous owner, got the spacing and patterns right – her rendition of the sky looks like the real night sky, large flecks of light and small clusters and space. The dots of paint fade after a half-hour; I watch them dim as whatever fluorescent chemical in the paint ceases to react.

Then I watch the real stars. There’s a small skylight in my bedroom, so I can see the specks of light that shine the night through. An airplane or satellite sometimes crosses my rectangle view, but mostly it is the stars, and since I live in the country, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the stars are very bright. I appreciate their intensity and the fact that they don’t fade, because I have a long night ahead of me, into the insomnia-created vault of time, and I like their company, their fiery energy burning with my own.

I keep as still as I can, not wanting to wake my husband, but my mind is in constant motion. I am manufacturing love. I am daydreaming about first



kisses and men's hands and about love-making. I am even daydreaming about the reason I'm daydreaming so much. Which is this: These daydreams exist because, sometimes, love can't be manufactured in real life, and when it's not there, or if it seems too far distant, the mind protects.

I am lonely. These dreams protect me against a cold core, keep my spirit warm enough until danger has passed. And I wonder what is wrong or right about that, and whether daydreams can sustain the real thing, and if so, for how long, and I wonder about the layers of my life and what, at the center, is feeling so in need of protection.

*

YELLOW ASPEN LEAVES FALL from the trees and onto my deck, onto me, even, I've been sitting here so long. I'm sitting on the wood planks, leaning back against the house, looking at the mountains, my head turned toward the sun. I'm also eating an orange and crying. I am crying because of an imaginary scenario my brain has invented: My real friend Antonio has run into me at a small party, and I'm telling him that my schizophrenic brother has just committed suicide. In the melodramatic exaggeration of my brain, Antonio's eyes dart off even as I tell him this, he wanders off first chance he gets, and I'm left standing there to tell myself, *ah, who needs 'em anyway?* I watch myself have this daydream, and I understand that I am coping with the real-life fact that my brother seems suicidal, the real-life fact that I have a crush on Antonio, and the real-life need to feel loved and noticed. But these tears are ridiculous – they come only from the power of my brain – and to prove this to myself, I start another daydream that soon has me smiling. Antonio and I are at the same party; he's laughing softly at something I've said; and I can say funny things because I'm not worried about my brother, who is fine; and Antonio says *It's nice to run into you* and he's thinking *Now this is a Real Conversation, two souls brushing up against each other in a true way, how surprising, how nice!* and we share a look that means we both understand and appreciate this brief connection.

Another aspen leaf falls, lands on the deck at my feet, and brings me back into my real life. Oh Laura, you have work to do, I tell myself, enough already, get back inside, go! But when I stand up and struggle back to my computer, I find that I'm not at work on my current project, I am instead emailing friends and family and I am asking them: What percentage of time, during your awake hours, do you daydream?

Suddenly I need to know. I want to balance my reality with that of others. I want to know how off-kilter I am.

*

MY FRIENDS INDULGE me and offer up figures and stories.

From many, I get a simple percentage: Five percent is the low, 90% is the high. Some people give me numbers: 20 minutes a day, eight hours a day. Men, I notice, daydream less than women. Their average is about 20%. Women's average seems to be about 40%. My writer friends daydream more than my non-writer friends. Some people give me their mathematical computations: "I'd give myself five

minutes an hour for 12 waking hours, plus a good 20 minutes before falling asleep, so that's ... $80 \text{ minutes} = n/100 \times 720 \text{ minutes} = 11.11\%$."

Many people want to define daydreaming. Between 15 and 30%, writes one friend, depending on whether I mean all non-task thinking, or the dreamy-dreaming of finding Mr. Right. Another writes, "Hmm ... plain ol' daydreaming, with no other purpose than to delight and entertain the brain, as opposed to, say, working-on-novel daydreaming ... which do you mean?" Someone else emails me, "If daydreaming means being in an unfocused non-alpha-wave brain state, then I'm there quite often. But if daydreaming is something we do, in the Walter Mitty sense, while we're bored, then I'm certain I never daydream, because I'm never bored."

Many, many people apologize to me for the amount of time they spend daydreaming: "I am a Fantasy Wacko. I spend 80% of my awake hours daydreaming, and I daydream no matter what else I'm doing. It's the reason I could never be a proper Buddhist kinda gal. I am never here; I can't get myself to stay in the present. This is a bad thing, no?"

Everyone seems a little uncertain. What are these intangible, emotion-laden scenarios, these stories that make up so much of our lives?

*

IF WE ADMIT WHAT we daydream about, we admit our deepest desires. I will say mine. My deepest desire is desire. And, of course, everything that goes along with desire – intimacy, and love, and connection with another human being. It is the thing that fuels me.

Jean Paul Sartre writes, "Our daydreams tell us the extent to which we are not living."

Oh, how I want some clarity. To what extent am I not alive? To what extent do I not have desire in my life?

*

KNOW THYSELF. SO SAID the oracle at Delphi. So I test myself by asking my brain the following: *Laura, what is the one thing you're most afraid of?*

I don't think about this, I daydream about it, about me having a conversation with Antonio, and since Antonio and I are falling in love in my daydream, we are curious about each other in the extreme. Also, because he is falling in love with me, Antonio tilts his head at me and smiles, his eyes are filled with concern. In this way, I can find the answer to my question.

"Okay," I finally mumble. "Here's what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of not ever being loved by people as intensely as I love them. I will always love people more than they love me. I'm afraid of what that will do to me."

Days later, when I am far out of that daydream, I recall my response. I think, *That's exactly right, Laura. That's your biggest fear.* A few days later, I think about it again: *Laura, that's probably everyone's biggest fear* and then, just for good measure, I add, *so quit being so damn melodramatic, you're nothing special.* And then I drop the whole conversation, because I'm tired of it. But I'm glad I had someone loving me, even if he was imaginary, as I worked through it all.

TEN THOUSAND SILVER DOLLAR

WESTERN
MONTANA,
2007

By Maya Jewell Zeller

The feathers and belt buckles are sticky
on the students' hands. Arrowheads,
amber, a turquoise pendant
all stay in the cases. I order an ice cream cone
and rub my fingers on a blanket
imported from Mexico, the kind my dad
used to sell before he bought the old gas station.
The kind on my bed in the old house.
In the parking lot, five native kids wait
on a tailgate, eating trail mix and gelatin
peaches, flicking their knives. The chubby one
laughs, Blazers jersey jerking
tight across his chest. His almost-breasts.
His feet dusty in their sandals.
He reminds me of you, brother.
A salt of wounds. The stalled truck.
Do you remember getting out of the Toyota
Celica in the middle of Fred Meyer's parking lot,
pushing that gray car until we could start it in
second? Those days I was ashamed
to be the tire guy's girl, the daughter
of people who lived by the slough.
Those days I was trying to cut the jeans
not an inch too high or low.
Wanted to try mascara but didn't know
how to apply it. Dad said I couldn't date
the black guy. He had a name.
For a long time I waited for someone
to walk in the door and shoot me. Waited
by the swamp where the red
winged blackbird called with her smoky
lounge voice. Waited for *my* voice
to turn dark enough to help me speak.
Waited for dawn to light the cattails
and dogwood, for our mother to bring flame
to the candle wicks. The book was my
water pirate. I read Rachel Carson
and ate. I took a ticket and stood in line.
No bullet. No break.
Your bottle probably still in your hands,
map folded in the drawer, you looking
out across the river at the hills you only see as gray.



Swing State
found metal, carved wood, oil & enamel paint
44 x 15 x 23 inches



Bobcat
oil & enamel on wood panel with handmade tin frame
12 x 12 inches



Between the Two of Us
encaustic on wood panel
11.5 x 24.25 inches



It's No Secret
oil & enamel on wood
48 × 42 inches

PHOTOS: LONI MCINTOSH