

## Finally Fall by Ashley Collins

I worried our weather would jump from summer to winter without the beautiful autumn for which the east coast is famous. I felt caged. I wanted to tear at my skin and shred my clothes, become a wild animal, one that belongs in this forest. That's how completely the incessant rain and grey curtain of thick air that settled around everything affected me. It seemed like a derivative of fog. Real fog is beautiful in its texture and chiascuro. But this was cloying wet air with no dimension, opaque, suffocating. Combined with the tangled green jungle surrounding my new home, I was so claustrophobic I didn't even enjoy walking the dogs. Everybody said it was unusual. Perhaps post hurricane weather, or maybe my fault for bringing the rain from Seattle. But this wasn't Seattle weather. This felt like a swamp.

I'm homesick for northwest air. I miss the soaring pines and firs, the high sky, mountains and water that decorate the land like jewelry. I miss mist that has transparency, and dew that sparkles like diamonds, highlighting spider webs spun in such beautiful artistry there must be a divine source. I miss the crows that descend this time of year in such great numbers it feels like dark magic at work, even though I know they are feeding on the trees of the arboretum. I miss the eagles and herons that sit like sentries on platforms in Lake Washington, good omens as I drove over the bridge. I miss my house. I miss my friends,

my family. But most of all, I miss my boy.

Fall is the dying season, when leaves dry up and fall off trees, flowers stop blooming, grass stops growing. The earth prepares itself for winter, for dormancy. It feels like that is happening to my heart. I knew it would be painful. I saw my friends wander around with unseeing eyes that first fall after a child left the nest, grief etched on their faces. Now I'm one of them. I wear that lonely place in my soul like a secret scar. Because his childhood is over. My job is finished. When he returns he will be a man, never needing me quite the same way again. It's a necessary cycle of life, like leaves falling from a tree, beautiful, poignant. The wind has taken this leaf of mine on a journey far away. He has changed colors by now. But he said, in the lines of a poem he wrote before he left, that I would still recognize him.

I thought I would escape the pain of separation. I was fleeing from it at the same time he was falling away from me, in the frenetic process of moving from west coast to east. As long as I kept moving, literally as well as figuratively, maybe I wouldn't feel the loss so acutely. And it worked for a while. I still had two girls entering a new school, a new house to unpack, the animals to settle, a new life to create. But after the rush at the end of summer, when the lion's share of work was done, there were moments of quiet when my mind sneakily let in thoughts of my boy. I missed his energy like I missed the cacophony of crows at

dusk in Seattle. I missed his playing the piano when he knew I needed cheering up. I missed his chatter every night at dinner while his father read the wine bottle and his sisters ate in stony, adolescent silence. He wasn't in college in America where I could have delivered him with new sheets and towels, a bucket of red vines, and met his roommate. There was no transition. He went to Africa.

I watched him plan his gap year out of the corner of my eye while I was planning goodbye parties and putting our house on the market. I saw him carry REI bags to the basement while I was meeting with the moving people. I heard him on the phone with African and Indian Consulates while I typed new school applications for his sisters, bracing myself for his graduation. I didn't want to help him.

The barometer did finally fall. The air cooled and dried out. The leaves turned from green to yellow, started falling. I can see through the forest. The sun has scattered my demons, revealed them to be internal rather than external. The dogs look at me knowingly. Winding roads lined in old stone walls have regained their bucolic charm. Mailboxes are decorated with corn stalks and hay bales, scarecrows and pumpkins, pots of red and yellow mums. We saw a young deer on the lawn of school the other night, small antlers gleaming in the moonlight. There is magic here too.