

WINNER

Heart Home

BY AUDREY MILLER

The black desert floor in the shallow valley below shimmers in the midday heat, even in winter, but the sandstone bowl where I sit is shaded and cool. It is a natural amphitheater of giant red stone rising monolithic from a pavement of sharp volcanic rock, broken here and there by scraggly attempts at plant life, sticks really, eking their arid existence from infrequent rain and ancient igneous nutrients. I breathe deep the desert wind.

I cough.

Decades of asthma and allergies built up now to decaying lungs. I read somewhere that human genes are not evolved to live past the age of 38. I am twice that age and more and it was all I could do to limp out here from my car. Thank goodness they've extended the guidance systems out this far or I'd have never been able to make the drive on my own. My eyes are still sharp enough with glasses anyway; but my reflexes are slowed by chronic inflammation. My grandniece Erin, smug with a semester's worth of medical school under her belt, says I'm not safe to drive anymore.

She's right, of course. For a last drive, I could do worse. The autoguide reaching to this lonely spot means that it won't be lonely much longer. Already houses and commercial centers extend far further down this road than I remembered. The State must have sold off the national park land to the developers. It's too peaceful to feel anything but resignation. People must live somewhere, after all. I'm too old, too tired to do anything about the problems of the world.

No sound breaks the silence of the desert save the sighing of the wind and a caw of a crow. I trace the rough edge of the sandstone rock I am sitting on and for once my back doesn't hurt. I realize I am crying, silently, tears falling on my dress. I am alone.

I turn. A child of ten or so squats on a rock near me. Her straight brown hair blows across her face and she catches my gaze in hers. Deep in her blue eyes...

Next year at middle school there won't be playgrounds anymore. The middle school serving our tiny town has some climbing equipment on the grassy field meant for exercise, not play; and some weird round concrete stumps in a courtyard meant for conversation, not climbing. I don't know how I'm going to function without recess.

End of the day. We pour through a narrow gate to find the buses, our parents, our carpools; to walk or bike home. We can't get through the gate fast enough. Some of the kids launch themselves over the chain link fence, expertly climbing up and leaping down. It is a race.

I am one of the fastest, over this short distance. I hit the ground on the other side and keep moving. Behind me are shouts of dismay that I would dare join the game. "You can't do that!" "You're going to get us in trouble!"

Tears. Always tears. I grit my teeth and keep running.

I make it to the carpool, a powder blue minivan, first, and hurl myself into the furthest back seat. One after another, four other

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kids join. The daughter of the driver takes shotgun and rummages through the center console for a cassette to replace the radio coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial that her mother had been listening to. The cassette proves to be rap music. I can't follow the lyrics – too much background noise in the car – but I don't care. I hope the others don't notice that I am not singing along.

It is report card day and my grades are better than anyone else's in the carpool. Complete straight A's, some A+'s, some A-'s. (Never mind the teacher's comments about social development.) The other kids are cheerfully comparing their report cards when someone gets a look at mine. Before the other kids turn on me, the carpool mom offers to buy us all treats at the 7-11 because we all did so well this quarter. I saw everyone else's report cards. I know we didn't all do well. I don't say anything though.

At home, I lament the A-'s. I have

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difficulty with arithmetic. Numbers don't come easily to me and number facts won't stick in my mind. I can't believe that I am less than perfect. Even the A's without +s sting. If I am not the best, I am nothing.

I'm crying again. I try to hide in my room, to cry silently. I hate myself that I am so weak that I cry so easily, that I can't stop.

I am so ashamed.

I'm still wheezing as I change out of my gym clothes. Why, *why* can't I make it a mile in fourteen lousy minutes? I'm going to get a "B" in gym at this rate, a mortifying proposition. I can almost fly up a sheer rock face but I can't run around a damn track.

The bell rings and I hurry out of the locker room. The path back to the central corridor is lined with temporary storage units, hulking metal rectangles padlocked shut, holding who-knows-what. I hear laughter behind me. I ignore it. There's a lizard darting across the path. I hurry to watch its progress before it disappears in the dark space under a storage box.

A shove, violent and sudden, and I'm sprawled across the concrete, my bag spilling open some yards away. My head misses the metal storage shed by a hair's breadth and my knee is skinned. I start coughing. The girl who shoved me is laughing like it's the most hilarious thing she's ever seen, and her friends are congratulating her.

"Hey!" I protest between coughs.

The girls continue on their way, still screaming laughter. The rest of my classmates ignore me as they stream past on their way to their next class. Someone trips over my AP Government book, breaking the spine, and curses me for leaving it in her path.

The lizard reappears, skittering out from under the far side of the storage shed onto a low wall. I scramble to my feet, looking for my books. Some boys spot the lizard. One picks up my notebook and hurls it at the little creature.

"Asshole!" I screech. I strike at the boy and my hand connects with his head. He turns on me.

"What was that for, bitch?"

I can't explain through the lump in my throat and the sudden tears.

"What are you crying about?" says one of the boy's friends, derisively. He kicks the broken government text further away. I

scramble after it. The lizard, well-used to teenage monsters, regards me from the safety of a crevice in the wall.

"Ah, she's not worth it," says a third boy, and the group continues on its way.

I throw my book bag unceremoniously on the aging bed and dump the box of legal tomes in a corner, but I place my camera bag carefully on a shelf. The high ceilings and creaking floors of my new room are old but clean. I glare at the stack of luggage and the last load I have just brought in as though they have given personal insult, then abandon the work of unpacking in favor of meeting my new housemates in the common kitchen.

The girls are friendly enough; graduate students like me in other departments; a biologist and a future social worker. They greet me cordially and exchange pleasantries before they return to their homework. The boy, though, barely looks at me as he

mutters a "hello." Our landlady introduces him as Dennis and suggests I ask him to assist me with setting up my computer.

I built my computer myself, and I feel tears prickle my eyes. Why would they doubt my ability? Do I look that incompetent? But then Dennis asks, "Do you want to watch this movie with me?"

The sudden shift derails me, and I cough as I consider the television set behind me. An animated wild girl races over a rock face with a pack of enormous wolves. "What are you watching?" I ask.

"It's called *Princess Mononoke*," he says. "It's pretty good."

I settle awkwardly into the chair beside him at the kitchen table. His hands are busy with a PalmPilot and he does not appear to be paying much attention to the movie. He notices my attention on him. "I'm doing homework," he explains.

"Oh?"

He shows me the figure on the screen, a map. "The mountains around here are granite, but it turns out it's the same granite as in mountains hundreds of miles away..." Dennis launches into a convoluted explanation of volcanic shifts and magma flows under tectonic plates. I listen, fascinated, my own problems forgotten as his enthusiasm grows.

Then he asks what I've been working on, and I explain the law review note I'm writing about water rights and how East Coast ideas of water belonging to the landowners adjacent to the surface water didn't work in the arid West, and instead, a system of "first

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in time, first in right” developed; but that was unworkable too because there was simply not enough water to go around. Dennis asks a question, just as fascinated by this obscure area of law as he is in his rocks.

We talk late into the evening. He shows me pictures from his last geology field trip. I show him the last photographs I took of the amphitheater, black sand and red stone and deep blue sky. “It’s beautiful,” he says. “We should go there.”

I almost forget how lonely I am.

It’s still too cold in a Montana winter for my old bones, though we haven’t had any snow in a few years. Winter is when the planets are above the horizon in the evening, though; and my favorite deep sky objects are at their brightest; so we load up the thermos with hot chocolate and bundle up tight before we drag the scopes and mounts and cameras into the back field at sunset to sight off the North Star.

Some things never change. The sky is brighter now than it was when we retired as thousands of people moved to the area over the past few years, and the winters are warmer, and the summers are straight-up hot. But the stars and planets are what they are. I feel moisture on my cheeks.

“Are you OK?” asks Dennis, looking up from his camera feed. I still cry silently. I love him for noticing.

“I’m fine,” I say. “It’s just beautiful.”

He nods, stands up with effort on his bad knees, and slides an arm around my waist. We watch the sky without equipment, just our eyes, for a moment.

“I want to go back to the amphitheater,” I say. “Sometime before we can’t travel anymore. And while it’s still there.”

“Alright,” he says. No questions asked.

I love him for that.

There’s a brief due tomorrow in the land use case I’ve been working on for our biggest client, but I can’t make myself care on this glorious Sunday. That’s another problem for next week, along with politely turning down a request from an old friend and dealing with my paralegal’s uncertain temper. Now is for recharging in the desert.

I snap a photo of Dennis kneeling over the red sandstone, the new camera that I gave him for his forty-first birthday in front of his face. Many of my portraits of him look exactly like this. He’s a geologist, or was back when we met in college, and his instinct is still to place an object next to whatever interesting stone has caught

his eye for scale. But now he's looking at a beetle, trying to focus on it before it wanders into a patch of yellow sage, oblivious to the giant observer above it.

"Don't forget your wallet," I tell him.

He makes a noncommittal noise, still distracted by the beetle.

I cough in the blowing pollens of the autumn desert blooming season and consider dragging my inhaler out of my backpack, but it's really too nice a day to care about things like that. "I think it's right over here," I continue. The back side of a ridge faces me. I'm pretty sure the amphitheater is on the other side of the rocks, but it's been about twenty-five years since I was last here so I can't be certain. I know I'm not imagining that the city is encroaching more on this spot than it did when I was a child. Nor am I imagining the unseasonable heat, this early in October.

I give wide berth to a shadowy crevice right by the flat stone that looks great for climbing up: it's the perfect hiding spot for a young diamondback rattler and I'm wearing loose polyester capris. Kind of stupid, really. Jeans would have been better. I knew things like that when I was a teenager. I also would never have worn Birkenstocks for rock scrambling back then.

I really never gave myself enough credit. I smile, remembering how fast I was once, and how athletic, in spite of the undiagnosed

asthma. But my eyes are prickling. I feel my cheeks burning and I turn away from Dennis almost at a run, hurtling myself up the rock face with abandon, anything so he won't see the weakness that I've never in four decades been able to excise.

I dash over the rocks in adolescent fury and joy. My legs are strong from riding my bicycle everywhere around town and my balance and footing are sure. I cannot go for long—my lung capacity is terrible; clearly, I don't get enough exercise—but I can move fast and I far outpace my family in mere seconds.

I love them but they are infuriating. They do not understand me. I still cry over everything, too easily. Last night I felt so low I might have wanted to jump off one of these cliffs, but that feeling has dulled to a mere background roar. Now, in the clear light of day, in the heat of a fine summer, I feel ashamed. The world is beautiful.

But it is better, far better, to be alone. Especially here, in the natural amphitheater. They brought us here when I was ten on a class field trip and I think it was the first time I'd ever been at peace. My classmates melted away and all that mattered, all that existed, was the midmorning sun slanting between the high rocks of the sandstone bowl. The teachers put on some Andean flute music and led

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us through a breathing exercise, and I didn't even comment on how out of place Andean music was in the Mojave Desert or think about how much I'd have been teased if I'd pointed that out to anyone; I just rested and felt calm.

But my favorite seat is occupied by a child of about ten. An old lady sits a little way away, white hair unbound and tangled, flowing dress torn on the rocks. A middle-aged woman in capris and thoroughly inappropriate Birkenstock sandals stands on the ridge, taking in the scene.

I'm walking with the teacher. She's telling me about how cities are hotter than countryside because of the heat island effect. This seems dubious; the volcanic stone we're hiking over seems pretty warm to me. It's wonderful out here though. The spring air is full of small pollinators and the sound of singing birds, and I can't help but imagine climbing over the giant red sandstone boulders that are heaped around us. Behind us, other teachers stop my classmates from losing themselves among the rocks.

Then the pathway opens wide and a small, bowl-shaped valley spreads itself before us.

"Everyone find a place to sit!" my teacher calls. My classmates, boisterous and making rude jokes about the shapes of some of the piled stone pillars, clamber over the rocky bowl to find seats. I look for a place apart from the others and find a broad, flat space, right in the middle of the bowl.

"Settle down!"

My classmates are taking awhile to calm themselves. I lean back, breathing in the clean air. I close my eyes, then look at the sky, and let the people around me fade into silence.

And suddenly I am...

on a ridge overlooking a sandstone bowl
ancient voice crackles over the natural sandstone echoing
youth, barely an adult climbs down, reaches a hand
to a crone while
the child on the rock looks to the
woman stepping carefully down the crags

each of me coughs
I feel tears in my eyes
I am so old young older younger strong weak I am I am
here in my peaceful spot
where there is wind and the sun

the scree of an eagle hunting
I am...

Then I cry, as a child, because one day I will be old and I know the planet will warm and my lungs will fail and I won't be able to

I know, now, it's not wrong to cry;
but here, with my younger selves
so scared, so hurt, so overwhelmed by
their own emotion, I cannot remember
my hard-won acceptance.

travel anymore and I know I am mortal and the great love of my life will have bad knees and there is an end to all things...

"But that's alright," I say to the child in my raspy old voice. "All things end. My life is good. I have everything I need. I do not fear the end because I know that I have done what I meant to do and I have loved as I meant to love and I..."

"But I didn't!" I break in. Adults, even I, don't understand me or the rage that has been building and building ever since I started high school. Since childhood. My child self nods along. "Everything is awful! No one understands and I cry so easily and it's just..."

"...the worst," I finish, remembering the last time I accidentally cried at work, hiding in my office. Law firms are somewhat unforgiving of emotion. I know, now, it's not wrong to cry; but here, with my younger selves so scared, so hurt, so overwhelmed by their own emotion, I cannot remember my hard-won acceptance. I stop and breathe, pulling in the pure dry air of this place, concentrating on how it feels as it flows deep into my lungs, just as my therapist taught me...

...I cough, four coughs in unison. "Damn asthma," I say, the crone.

"Is that what it is? I knew it!" I say, the teen. Why had no one noticed?

"Tell mom," I say, the woman. I regard the teen, her sullen anger born of fear. Her eyes burn at me. I walk to the child. "Take care of you. Of me."

"Why?" I mutter, looking away from the woman who is me. She wears polyester pants, which I have sworn to avoid at all costs. She wears makeup and an expensive blouse and expensive shoes. She is...I am...obviously a sell-out like any other grown-up. "I just grow up and become you."

I exchange a glance, the woman and the crone. I roll my eyes, the child and the teen. How quickly our grown selves forget us!

Fury, fear. "No one cares about me," I remind me. "It doesn't matter what I do." The child nods vigorously. I am weeping and trying to hide it.

"Of course they do!" I protest. I learned, as a college student

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and an adult, how much my family cared. “You’ll see. It does get better.”

The child’s eyes shine hopefully, but my teenage skepticism overrides her. “If they cared,” I start. I move to the child’s side. “If they cared...why am I always alone?”

“I chose loneliness,” I explain. “I was embarrassed but I didn’t need to be...”

I am crying in earnest. I am embarrassed, but my adult self is telling me that even that is wrong. I am caught in a loop and losing what little control I have. I am a child, so young; and everyone has more control than I do, but no one will tell me how to maintain control. “I didn’t choose this!” I sob.

“Oh,” I whisper. I look at my younger selves. “Oh.” The tears are flowing freely down my wrinkled cheeks. My ten-year-old self sniffles, red-cheeked and ashamed. My teenage self is furiously wiping at her eyes. My 42-year-old self is holding back tears. “Oh. I understand.”

“What could you understand?” I whisper. My older selves are standing around me. Two of them are simply trying not to cry but my oldest self is walking toward the rock where I am crouched, her hands extended. My anger bleeds backward, feeding the child’s tears.

“No one ever told me I was already whole,” I say as I watch my elder self walk, arms outstretched, toward the child that I was. “I had to learn it along the way.”

“And I’m still learning it,” I say.

“Nuh uh,” I say, backing away, frightened as only an adolescent can be. “You won’t hurt me again!”

The old woman kneels, slowly, taking care not to place arthritic knees on loose stones. She is strong and slightly plump. Her shoulders are rounded and soft. She reaches for the child.

The child looks doubtful, then worried, then scared. “But,” she whispers, “it’s wrong. You shouldn’t care how I feel. It’s all wrong.”

“It’s not wrong to feel,” says the old woman. “It’s not wrong to cry.”

“They tease me.”

The old woman shrugs. “Let them tease. You’re a whole individual, past and present and future and their words can’t hurt you.”

“But it does hurt!”

“Yeah,” I say. I kick off my Birkenstocks to feel the warm red sand sand between the black volcanic shards beneath my feet. “And it never stops hurting when people don’t understand.” The teen looks at me, apprising.

“What do you do about it?” I ask.

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"You hurt," I say. "But that's alright. It's alright to feel."

"I can't control it," I sniffle, wiping my cheeks. The other kids tease and tease, and the adults ignore me, but I can't stop crying and I can't stop feeling. The only thing I know how to do..."

"I just hide," I finish, and cough as tears choke my throat. Does this just get worse as I get older? My elder self is carrying an inhaler. I am worried for her.

"I still hide," I realize, thinking of last week in my office, door closed against possible help.

"You feel unloved."

"I am unloved!" says the teen, voice cracking, but that's just rage, and I don't believe the truth of that outburst for an instant.

"No," says the adult woman. "I'm not. My family loves me. They may not always understand me but they love me. And eventually there's Dennis. He loves me. And..."

"And I love the person I am, and the person I was, and the person I can still be," whispers the teenager and tears stream down the woman's face and the crone holds the child who sobs into my shoulder and I cry as I have never let myself before, at least not when anyone else is around, have I?

The eagle screams the clouds pass overhead the sun on the rocks

the breeze my heart home is here and now and always and there are things I can't change and some of them are good and some of them are bad, but there are plenty of things that I can change in my long long life.

I am alone in the middle of the natural amphitheater that they showed us a few years ago on that class trip. My family is behind me. Something made me cry yesterday, worse than usual, with worse feelings than usual. That can't be normal.

But I'm not alone, am I?

My parents and my aunt and cousin and siblings are talking. I can hear them around a corner of a rock. The voices get louder. "There you are!" says my dad.

"Glad you're not dead," says my cousin.

"Yeah," I say soberly. For a moment, a dim shadow of yesterday's despair washes over me, a conviction that I am a dark blot on the face of the earth that should be eradicated. I shudder and look away. A couple of tears fall, and I let them. The feeling fades.

"You alright?" my sister asks.

"Fine," I say, meaning it for once.

"This is a great spot for a picnic!" says my aunt. She swings her backpack onto the rock.

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"Works for me!" says my mom. My family settles in for lunch. I take a moment to bask in the connections between us.

"Mom," I say quietly when we've had a chance to digest some of my aunt's potato salad and the hummus I made this morning. "I need to talk to you about something..."

I am alone in the middle of the natural amphitheater that I remember from childhood. The sense of peace that washed over me then washes over me now and I feel tears fill my eyes and fall to the rocks, splashing where they land. I feel my cheeks rise as I smile.

I think of the environmental-protection nonprofit that my law school classmate was trying to convince me to help her to start up. It'd be a hell of a pay cut, and I had just about decided that I'd tell her "no" on Monday.

I had cried about that decision, there at work, in my office. I remembered staring at the email and finding no good reason to leave a solid job for something that might not even work, no matter how much it hurt, because my coworkers would think I was silly.

But there's still time to write her back and say "yes."

Dennis appears over the ridge. He must be done with his beetles. He calls down to me. "You okay?"

I raise my salt-stained face to him. "I'm fine," I say. "I'm great! Just rethinking some stuff. Oh, did you remember your wallet?"

Andean flute music is so out of place in the Mohave desert. I giggle at the thought.

"What are you laughing at?" hisses one of my classmates. I smile and shrug. My classmate scoffs, but for once derision does not disrupt my sense of wellbeing.

"Quiet please!" calls one of the teachers. As if fifty fifth-graders are capable of quiet, even here in this amazing place. They're calling it a natural amphitheater, a bowl of red sandstone rocks rising from the black desert floor, baking in the early May heat. I watch a startled whiptail lizard dart out of sight. I contemplate some honeybees visit sagebrush and poppies in the crevices of the rocks, joined now and again by an early monarch butterfly. I let the flute music wash over me and breathe the spring breeze as deep into my lungs as it will go before I start coughing.

I should probably talk to my parents about the coughing, actually. I was just thinking about how I can climb rocks all day, but I

can't jog around the track at school – that's a little weird, isn't it?

The cassette tape with the flute music comes to an end and the quiet whispers rise to a loud babble. The teachers summon us back to the buses. I lag, unwilling to move from my chosen rock.

I don't get hugged very often. But then, I don't often feel I deserve it.

Maybe I can change that.

My inhaler is in my pocket, but when I breathe the dry desert air, I don't need it.

The sun is starting to set. I take a few last shots of the desert with my conventional camera, but then Dennis and I hurry to set up the travel telescope while there's still light. How special it will be to get shots from this place! I'm glad I'm still healthy enough to drive myself out here.

"Surprising how little light pollution there is," says Dennis. He grins at me conspiratorially. That grin

of his still makes me giggle like a schoolgirl, even though I'm well into my eighties.

"Not really," I say around the giggles.

"Sometimes I think you two have your own private language," my grandniece Erin comments. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Just your aunt refusing to retire," Dennis says.

"I am absolutely retired," I retort. "That's why I had time to write that thing."

"What thing?"

"The written testimony portion of the Director of the National Park Service's Congressional hearings when they passed the Natural Spaces Preservation Act," Dennis grins. "She's directly responsible for the continued existence of this park."

"Indirectly responsible," I say. "And, I might add, for the lack of autoguide out here. Sorry, kid."

Erin chuckles. "I'd trust your driving less with the autoguide than without it."

"There's Polaris," Dennis interrupts, eyes on his monitors. The scope slews across the sky, getting its fix on the stars.

Everything, everything changes. Even the stars shift positions, in their own patterns, for their own reasons. I am here, beneath the bowl of the galaxy, in my heart home, in this time and space, for now, for ever. **AZ**

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amphitheater, a bowl of
red sandstone rocks rising from the
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