

# Seeds

Poems by Rachel A Elmer



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Published in the United States of America

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## Advice

She told me, "Nothing ever comes out right the first time," and what she meant was that it never comes out right. The second time is hell, the third is hopeless, and if you keep trying until you die you might get it, but she sure hasn't yet. She watched her love eat dirt before he kissed her, but his smile said, "It's ok to fuck up," and she loved him for it.

She said, "You can tell someone's value by what they think is worth something," but she meant that my priorities were off. She loved a sharp knife for tomatoes and ice water, cold and rewarding.

She stopped what she was working on to warn me, "What you do with your time is who you are" but I still spend some nights lying on my back thinking about death.

I never once heard her say "I'm sorry," and I wouldn't want her to lie to me anyway.

She would say, "Never say never," by which she meant no one will call out a hypocrite. I wouldn't dare with her smiling back at me all confident glare of blinding teeth.

She told me, "Don't tell anyone your dreams," which means, don't show your hand. It's revealing to share your nightmares. But nothing is real until you say it out loud.

Lullabelle Ln.

I know these street signs so well it's like counting  
backwards from a hundred while the neighbors run,  
hiding behind trees or silt banks. It's hard to pay attention  
to the road when you know the landmarks by heart:

left at the big spruce, past the pond, slow down  
for washboards on the banked turn, hug the centerline  
where the side is sliding to the ditch from  
the spring creek forming. You are shotgun, smoking

out the window even when I ask you to stop, even when  
you aren't really here. I can smell it when I drive  
this stretch between our old cabins. Sun strobes  
through the trees as I drive your way. I want to

close my eyes against the throbbing light and miss  
the corner where you said goodbye walking me home.

## Improv

Every mannequin wearing a backless dress  
shows the seam between the torso and leg pieces,  
like a dotted line saying “cut here”.

Dawn made her uncomfortable,  
as if the sky were setting the scene  
for a movie. Feeling like an actress  
makes her act. The way she stroked  
a rain soaked window in a mournful way  
disgusted her when she saw the reflection.

The clouds parting felt unnecessary, even though  
it was real. Sunbeams struck the ground,  
she avoided them. She didn't want her skin  
to be dappled by sun. It was easier to maintain  
a shadow. Nothing catching in the light.

It can't be hard, she thought, to avoid attention.  
There are so many people we don't notice  
as we go about our days. She could be one of those  
lucky few and never wear a backless dress again.

Jean, House on the Bay

She is evergreen, soft skin folded  
careful into the shape of a woman  
stepping cautious on the garden path  
placing each foot on rounded stone steps.

She, with her gnarled root hands, plants herself  
across from me in a low padded chair  
scribbles secrets into crosswords where I  
can only guess or latch on to patterns.

I, with my bound heart of pages, have sat  
with her so often now she has heated  
the binding glue, melting around my stitched  
spine, letting words fall out like loose leaf.

Ink pours from my skin  
forming letters on white plastic table top  
across stacks of bills and newspapers  
half-finished puzzles now coated in a slick of words spilling over the table  
onto the hardwood floor  
seeping between my toes  
my soles black with the repeated words  
this is the best I can do  
this is the best i can do  
sliding creeping pooling  
filling the room  
my lungs with words  
every inhale a composition  
exhale a proclamation

She, cutting a pear with a short blade,  
doesn't notice disaster in her dining room,  
glances out over the harbor for seals,  
slices the soft fruit smiling as the seeds  
fall, offering me a piece of her lunch.

Smart

My father scolded me, Don't get smart,  
so I bite my tongue at parties, bleeding  
hypotheses on origins of holes

in space, Bering Sea ice, large intestines,  
or the perception of time. Swallow it  
all down or they will find you out, girl,  
you can't run with the big dogs or even  
outrun your own doubts. This urge in my gut,  
to teach, to know, to speak: it is poison.

They will turn on me, push their fingers down  
between the folds of my brain, pulling hard,  
splitting open like coral branches  
letting remarks that would cut just slide in  
between my many polyps hungrily snaring  
their words, no longer filtering to survive.

## When The Label Says “Non Habit Forming”

Twenty minutes, I think, Maybe  
since I took the pill in my hand  
after running to a woman's  
house on this very road to fling  
her door open and shout inside,  
have her press the phone in my hand  
while she shouted to the others  
who had stopped on their four-wheelers  
and didn't heed my fearful curse  
running up to check for bodies  
led by the man bringing me home  
from the festival by the station  
the back way down my parents road  
where we all stopped in the driveway  
for just one lost moment before  
she had to call the cops again  
for the third time that night  
about the apartment upstairs.

My phone voice stuttered; she gave me  
her truck's keys, her son stashed inside,  
to drive down the road to a man  
who was shirtless and trustworthy.  
I ran back without keys, feet numb  
and hot, to watch it burn down, watch  
volunteer firefighters watch  
it burn from the upstairs stovetop  
down into her kitchen where she  
may have lit candles earlier  
for her calm son's seventh birthday  
that day. And the house is blinding,  
searing the shape of pouring smoke  
from under the eaves as I watched  
from the street where I used to bike.



And I cannot tell if my eyes  
are open or shut or blinking  
to dust constellations that wink  
against the sponged paint  
on the ceiling of my childhood  
room where I shiver next to the heat  
of the man who tried to comfort  
my fears, when I had no plan left,  
even the light of the flame's heat  
could not persuade. His memory  
only reaches back two years, far  
past dates I had planned for alone,  
and he will never know the ache  
of my child body nesting. Dense  
night softens his breath, leaving me  
curled next to his radiant heat  
as I once felt my extra pillow.

The box of treasures I hoarded  
as a seven year old, under  
the only window that opened  
onto the roof of the garage  
is long gone. As is the flat roof  
of the garage, built up as space  
for additional rooms. I had  
plans then: two exits from each room,  
when to ignore cold or manners,  
how to avoid fumes and get safe.  
A carefully folded blanket,  
pencil box of colors, scissors,  
and my best sticker, money jar,  
pooh bear jewelry box with pearls,  
a small library, and stuffed shark  
couldn't leave the box at night.

He tells me I worry too much,  
skips class to go out skiing,  
slides his car on every corner,  
tells me we will be together  
as long as we are still happy,  
which he hopes is a long time, but  
hope is blind and his convictions  
leave me dwelling on the future  
like the child who drifted to sleep  
staring at the fire alarm light  
flashing on the ceiling in this room.  
I meant to see him two weeks,  
but it's been as many years now  
and we are serious all the time:  
he might like to live with me now,  
he wants me to call him boyfriend,  
he says that he loves me often  
but sometimes it is a reflex.

## How I Define Being a "Couple"

I learned that when you kiss another mouth, the saliva you exchange can change the microbiome of your mouth drastically, by a degree of eighty million bacteria for every intimate kiss. Try to read a scientific article defining an intimate kiss. You will question what intimate means. Isn't any kiss intimate? or can you kiss your friend without crossing the line? Is a short press of the lips enough? or must you measure the ounces of saliva you suck from your lover's open mouth? Scientists decided ten seconds of tongue-kissing is the optimal amount. Over time, kiss the same mouth like that nine times a day and your oral bacteria will be more similar than not. The bloom and bust of colonies will be rapid, so you must maintain this frequency of intimate kisses to call yourselves fluid bonded.

## Soothe

They want to soothe me like the lotion commercial  
where the woman gets out of the shower  
dewdrop-dry, smiling at her propped-up  
close-shave multi-blade smooth leg,  
glowing like a beach, her small foot  
resting on the edge of white porcelain,  
a perfect terrycloth robe cinched  
in midair over bronze legs bared  
to the thigh, beyond the thigh,  
and somehow there is more thigh  
and it never ends in woman,  
ass, sex, cunt, shit, piss, blood,  
only oversized shapeless white towel  
topped with a sparkling white smile  
as it squirts a white dollop  
from dispenser to disembodied hand  
that lathers generous globs  
from ankle to the offscreen top of thigh  
that may or may not exist.

Pry it out of me.

You fill my mouth with hot wax  
radiating as it pools around  
my gums and teeth, burning  
my cheeks from the inside  
as the warmth is stolen  
and the wax solidifies  
from liquid to mush to  
a solid lump I can't swallow  
or spit out. I can only  
hold my tongue in this  
form mid-speech, mid-  
explanation as if you stole  
the words from my mouth  
like the cat. If you could  
get the wax out in one piece  
you would see the mould  
of all the eloquent words  
I was trying to say, you could  
put your tongue inside, fit it  
to your mouth, as if you were  
reading lips, sounding out  
my thoughts and understand.

## Living Half in the Sky

He told me: he doesn't fly in his dreams  
anymore. He was born facing the sea  
through a wood framed window that showed him  
cold waters, deep, filled with nets and icebergs  
hundreds of miles below the timberline,  
where his mother let the salt grow between  
her muscles and it slowly wore her down.

He grew ripe in a costal root cellar  
where rocks pressed into his body, forcing  
him to bend, bulbous, contorted to earth  
in a way that only fisherman know  
in their oily joints. Each year when the snow  
fell in patchwork, rose bushes stitching quilts,  
he would climb onto rock ledges, pushing  
his knotted fists into cracks of ice, just  
to extend his horizon over the  
curving earth where ships trolled deeper waters.

Even as frosted eyes saw lowlands spread,  
he was bound to the glacier's edge, his feet  
crystallized with hoar, itching to catch wind  
and soar to the bases of cumulus,  
stratocumulus, through the stratosphere  
to cirrus, where he would breathe the thin air  
like medicine. That day, and many more,  
he leaned into gusts, feeling the unseen  
river as curls and eddies, his knees bent,  
testing the heights. Leaning wasn't enough.

He knew he had to jump, so he leapt out  
sliding slow at first, slivers of ice shot  
spray from his soles as he gathered more speed.  
His mind emptied of the earth. Every rock  
became a chance to fly, briefly kissing  
the airstream until skidding on hardpack.

He spent years climbing giddy heights to glide  
back down, trying to gain momentum to  
launch from the ground, into the atmosphere  
where he could wash the dirt out of his lungs.  
He longed for the raven's wing, for currents  
to climb; warm pockets caught in his expanse.

Until one day at the peak, he looked out  
over ravines and slides below, ocean  
grey and windswept into whitecaps tossing  
the docks and moored boats all tied in neat rows  
knocking together like stabled cattle,  
wooden hips swaying like saucy drunkards.  
He pushed himself off balance, off his toes,  
off the world, he felt the wind inside him,  
as he thought no human could, inside his blood  
through his skin, where feathers ought to grow.

I have never seen a man take flight  
like he had never touched a stone, like he  
was drinking water after years of thirst,  
like he was overflowing. Every day  
he steps lighter, letting the concrete reach  
up to his feet, noticing how large we  
are at ground level with the same wonder  
as we look down on the ants of people  
and city lights through our square jet portals.