

Waiting at the Well: Essays

by Jocelyn A. Chin

Rudolph William Rosati Submission 2022

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I.

Overflow

The first time it fell, I consoled myself: *there's plenty of bottles in the sea. Nothing special about this one.* It was a simple gift: a 21 oz. Hydro Flask in the color *fog*. I named this fresh dent “the dimple.”

As a runner, I'm a lover of water, collector of bottles. She knows this, hence this gift. We first crossed paths at Sunday school, where we learned of the collapsing Red Sea, its deep crash upon chariots and bodies, underneath wavelengths of blue. We imagined the wives and children, in flaxen Egyptian fields, lifting their heads, and listening. Afterwards, every rain that followed must've felt like infinite walls of water, caving in. Yet standing, still breathing, beneath its torrents must've been a reminder – that in this moment, we are wholly alive.

Each body of water on our earth shares the same lifeblood, the same endless flow: looping, cycling, rising, falling, like empires, rushing down onto windshields, lampposts, faces, forgotten bikes, washing up against grains of sand, hugging the shore. What a miracle, that in such a world, we meet each other, and don't walk away. That in this current, we find each other, two drops on a blurry mirror, trails merging. Our breaths, light condensation; our heartbeats, an ebb and flow.

I run; she swims. Together, we race beneath clouds, climb trees with sweaty palms, drink to our love. My thumb presses against the dimple; my fingers curl around this bottle's periwinkle skin that ends at a silver lip, metal mouth. I pour our world's freshwater down my throat, every undulating roll of thunder, each gently splashing tide – when God promised *stars of the heavens* and *sand on the seashore*, He may well have said *sparkles in the rivers* or *dewdrops at the dawn*.

Envision this. A decade before we were born, in a late Bangladesian April – 138,000 people drowned: which, as writer Annie Dillard remarked, is hard to imagine. Across the paper resting on their kitchen table, Dillard's seven-year-old daughter put it simply: *just lots and lots of dots, in blue water.*

So here we stand, still breathing beneath the torrents. In awe, in deep, desperate hope, I ask: *Where can I get this living water?* The answer comes swift, as to the woman at the well: *Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.* Then follows, perhaps, a pause, a questioning gaze, and then this assurance, freely given – *indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*

That is not to say, we no longer come to the well. That is not to say, we no longer thirst. But indeed, we find satisfaction. Living, we become each other's springs. We race, climb, drink, pour; my track spreads onwards, her pool is vast. We dream a shared future: renovated kitchen, maybe more. Grand piano in the corner. Walls of windows, floods of light, evening stars through breaking clouds. Every morning, a new sunrise: pink as salmon, swimming home.

Yet in the end, that's where water goes: home. Trails diverge, trickles thin, then evaporate into mist, into air, into white sunshine, into another bubbling spring. Again, I come to the well, thirsting. What a miracle, that in this world, we meet each other, though we then part ways. That we leave gifts containing, in 21 ounces, eternal life, in the color of fog. More dimples accumulate, depressions across a surface, scratches along a base. Metallic slivers peep through paint; specks of dirt hide in crevices. It stands slightly off-balance, weighted with the memory of two drops, one current, one moment together, breathing still. All along, a storm churns on overhead, froths on within, whipping forth waves, uncontainable, overflowing, *just lots and lots of dots, in blue water* – I tilt my head back, and drink.

So. We console ourselves. Take deep breaths. Count our steps. Sleep on Sundays. We sip, swallow, and say out loud: *nothing special about this one.* Just a bottle – its pose a little shifted, body a little tilted – holding the Red Sea waters at bay. In the distance, a nation swells onwards, singing towards Mount Zion – and remaining in the field, I till dark soil, waiting for a new promise to bloom from this wet earth.

II.

Last Wednesday

I didn't ignore my sibling's calls. I didn't text them: EMERGENCY, CALL YOU LATER. I had no emergency, nothing emergent at all, and my phone did not remain face-down on your desk, vibrating dully in vain.

You didn't sit in your roommate's chair, and I didn't perch, legs crossed, shoulders hunched, in yours, swiveling the plastic seat slowly side to side, but still facing you, close. You didn't lean forward – seriously, probingly, a bit cautiously – listening. Your roommate had not left an hour ago, so you never took his chair, I never took yours; our knees were not touching, nor our shoes; your gaze did not hold mine. You weren't wearing the white sweatshirt I gifted you a year ago, and the months had not passed us by, worn us down, smoothed us away.

Earlier, my mum hadn't called after arguing with dad again. She and I hadn't fought either – yelling, crying, tug-of-warring, hearts in the middle of our fraying rope – her voice in a state eight hours away, mine in an empty parking lot – no, it never happened – and afterwards, I didn't call you, sobbing into my soiled sleeve, begging for comfort, and you didn't come running down the trail to me, to brace me, to soothe me, to walk me home. Overhead, the branches were not bare. They did not strain against hugs from the cold, wet sky.

Your blinds were not halfway drawn, and the night was not dark. My fruit cup did not rest on a crumpled napkin, the fork stabbed into a watery chunk of pineapple, and I could not taste its tartness on my tongue, could not imagine a grape's sweet juice lingering on your lips, and I didn't say, I don't see us working out in the long run, and you didn't ask, does this have to do with your fight with your mom. I didn't lie. The napkin you lifted to my cheeks did not soak through with my tears. I didn't say, but there's still so much I wanted to do together, and you didn't ask, what do you mean, and I didn't reply, I wanted to spend Valentine's Day together, and you didn't stare back

vacantly, wooden, glazed, inscrutable, and ask again, why, that's a day that couples spend together, and we're no longer that. Your words did not feel like a stone forced into my mouth, something impossibly heavy swallowed, a gray mass dragging me down, sinking me into persisting waters, without a dapple of light. I was not reminded of the line: a hole is nothing/ but what remains around it.

Black crumbs of mascara did not speckle your sweatshirt's right shoulder. Your expression did not soften from shock into sadness; you did not plant a kiss on my forehead; I did not express regret. You did not know me better than I know myself, and you did not let me say what, deep down, I felt I had to say. I did not hate the truth. You did not tell me I needed comfort right now, from someone else, someone not you, and you didn't stand up first, pulling me upright beside you, our chairs swiveling once more in our absence. Your voice was not gentle with pain. You didn't hand me my jacket from your bedpost, help me into it, and the left sleeve did not snag on my watch. I didn't tug it, finish putting it on alone. On your desk, my fork did not remain breaking through the pineapple's center, and I did not imagine it whole and prickly and bright, in the sticky plastic cup. As I never left your room, you did not look me in the eye, and say – you are still/ the love of my life.

The next dawn, birds did not pierce the mist with clear, harsh calls, alight on their perches. Heavy in their silence, stones did not line my path, cobbled slick beneath my soles. Even today, I do not feel myself turning, dissolving, crumbling – as a pillar of salt, into the wind.

III.

String

I used to have a younger sister, and I would tell her stories in bathroom stalls. When I was stressed — oftentimes in public, being a high-strung ten-year-old — my bowel movements suffered also. Then we'd find ourselves squeezed into one stall, her five-year-old devotion, an unmatched loyalty, keeping me company.

The stories I'd devised — while she squatted near the door, and I perched on the toilet — always followed the same template: a day in the life of our family as animals. She'd choose a different animal for the story each time, and I would tell. Rabbits, with their large, thin ears circulating blood. Moles, blind and slow, feeling their way underground. Deer, fast and fleeting, darting through forests. Gospels of survival, a primal storge affection, familial love. Siblings. Isn't this who we are born to be?

Cain killed Abel, as the story goes, in a fit of rage. Thus, we learn, the line of evil extends, inherited from Adam, who'd received it from Eve's bitten fruit. Yet with each retelling, each translation, each analysis, the story changes. In *American Standard*, God orders Cain: *triumph over sin*. In KJV, He promises *thou shalt triumph over sin*. But in Hebrew, God states: *timsbel* — thou mayest — which is, as Steinbeck said, the most important word in the world. Existing in or escaping our so-called sin then, is perhaps neither an order nor a promise. It is a choice.

Steinbeck, in *East of Eden*, writes of two generations of characters forced to tread in the footsteps of Cain and Abel. Repeating sagas of sibling rivalry, murderous hatred, and our intense, immanent desire to be loved. A timeless competition for God's approval, for divine attention, for some uncomplicated acceptance of who we are.

Our father is a missionary, so we are familiar with Biblical narratives. Underneath them, we grow up. Time passes, and we grow naturally distant. We take turns at the sink as the other waits

outside, and at night we lie silent in our bunks, without whispering in the dark. Our successes are compared, our failures, our responsibilities, attitudes, internal reckonings. We fight, and we are not surprised, and we know anger.

Tales of antiquity teach us that love springs from a limited source.

Jacob and Esau, vying for a single birthright, their father's blessing. A sly deal as the older stalks an animal, hunts it down, and the younger stirs a thick, red soup. *Jacob have I loved, but Esau I hated.* We are reminded to guard our backs.

Joseph's brothers, jealous of the love he receives from their father, throw him into a dry well. Sweltering heat, tears and shit, his cloak streaked with a sheep's dark blood. Then the brothers bind Joseph with ropes, and sell him, in the desert, in the evening, into slavery.

In the dead of night last winter, I receive a call from our dad: *do you know about the cuts on your sister's legs?* My fingers trail instinctively towards two scars on my own forearm, thin as white thread. I say no, and the next day, I call her instead, and we cry together, silently, over the line, for a long time.

We begin writing together, challenging ourselves to 100 words a day, choosing to put our ideas onto pages. One day, I open our shared document, and see, in a scrawled, Indie Flower font, the words *understood* and *trust*. Then *simply a sibling, unsure, coming out*. In the third person, they had written: *They want you to know that they love you, and hope that you love them back, despite all their secrets and differences.*

Hope for love. Isn't that all we seek? Something unconditional, no strings attached. An unconstrained, reckless love from another, despite all they expect us to be. There is fear in this hope, knowing that Esau was tricked, Cain rejected, Joseph's brothers unpreferred. Despair that God, our Heavenly Father, may turn away. In a bathroom stall, a pair of siblings in pigtailed spin tales for their family. Imagine agape love, on earth, into being.

Each morning we wake again and pray for love. As dusk casts long shadows on the horizon, we are not yet satisfied. Time flows linear, reaching us now. See, it is not a circle. We stand in the field, a sibling before us. It's who we are born to be with, who we are meant to keep. Perhaps we pick up a dusty stone. Perhaps not. We return to the freedom of "thou mayest." *Timsbel* – time repeats to us – *timsbel*. We cannot forget the stories we've been taught, but we may learn to forgive. Tomorrow's moon rises in the distance, round and red, ripe and ready for the plucking. Take a full bite, taste its juice on your thirsting tongue. Listen. What account will we tell? What story will we choose? What secrets will we bear for each other?