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LAUREN E. BURROW

## **A Poet in Austyn’s Pocket: A Fantastical Tale for Mothers Who Think They’ve Lost Their Play**

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In dedication to my children ... this is a bedtime story I always meant to write for y’all.

*This short, multichapter fairy tale is a fantastic(al), semi-autobiographical tale of a MotherScholar battling self-doubt, work demons, and a lack of creativity in the United States during the early quarantine months of the global COVID-19 pandemic. “MotherScholar” is a unique and intentional stylization of “motherscholar” (a term originally coined by Cheryl Matias, a Pinay antiracist scholar) that emphasizes, through intentional capitalization, the importance of my two identities while maintaining the original lack of spacing to signal a blended coexistence shifting towards a singular identity (Burrow and Jeffery). This fairy tale was structured in the vein of similar “social fictions” (Bhattacharya; Leavy) that are written in literary form to both entertain and educate while offering both social critique and “critical hope” (Bishundat et al.). At its heart, this is a bedtime story written to my children as I confess the tragic journey of fighting to rediscover my hope in a fairytale world of childhood poetry, song, and story as my scholarly labour was under attack and being belittled by the “work harpies.” Universally, the fairy tale should speak to those MotherScholars and mothers whose gentle and joyful scholarship and labours are often discounted and dismissed because they take creative, playful forms.*

### **Prologue**

There once was a wild child named Austyn who grew to age five and was then captured from her homeland. She was sat in neat rows and taught to memorize her times tables. She passively watched videos of science experiments being conducted by others and was told to be quiet while eating her lunches. She copied spelling words from blackboards and completed worksheets by the

hundreds. And after all the creativity had been pushed out of her mind and her appetite for play had been fully curbed, only then could she pass all the fill-in-the-bubble exams laid before her. And as congratulations for sitting so quietly and properly for all those years in her metal school desks, she was immediately rewarded with an office cubicle and nine-to-five spreadsheets in a concrete tower where her life was still run by strict schedules kept by other people's clocks. She went to work each day before the sun had even been born and was kept barely lucid under fluorescent light until that same sun had gone to bed. She worked to realize other people's dreams, to fill other people's pockets. And as time went on in the city she now lived in, she tragically lost her voice ... she couldn't see in colour ... and she had no imagination to speak of ...

*Then one day she stepped  
off the subway and noticed  
a rainbow in mud*

## Chapter 1

Austyn paused. Something pulled her closer to a muddy puddle beside the sidewalk's curb; something was calling to the "her" of younger years, drawing closer the "her" of a life left behind. She knelt to her knees and then she saw it: a rainbow in the mud. She pressed the tip of her button-round nose to the edge of the rainbow-in-the-puddle and down she sank.

When she came out to the other side, she was surrounded by darkness save for a spark of light. And that was all it took to right Austyn's world again: a spark. For really, that is all it ever takes for change to start.

"I remember you," Austyn whispered to the tiny spark, who was not just any spark but actually was ... a poet! A poet as tiny as a pixie. A poet named Alexuel.

Austyn's soul compelled her to reach out to scoop them up from the void of darkness before they could escape her (but the poet had no intention of fluttering off to anywhere, for, in truth, they had been waiting for her to return). Not knowing what to do next, Austyn instinctively tucked them gently into her pocket. And there the poet remained as tiny as a pixie in Austyn's pocket, whispering imploringly:

Now, let's have some fun.

Count with me down from nine to one.

## Chapter 2

Austyn counted down obediently, feeling herself thrust outwards and upwards the whole time. As soon as she uttered “one,” she opened her eyes and found herself back in her world of brash car horns, demanding expectations of superiors, and pointless repetitive tasks. But now, everything was different, for she had a poet in her pocket.

Throughout Austyn’s dreary workdays, Alexuel would whisper hyperbolic praises and gush magnanimous odes that wrapped around Austyn’s heart like those flowered crowns Victorian storybook children used to craft in dewy meadows. While Austyn’s bosses droned on and on with buzzy-corporate acronyms that truly meant nothing at all in countless dull and tedious meetings (which all could have been emails), Alexuel would entertain Austyn’s mind with big words, fun words like “montrosity” and “portmanteau.” Sometimes the poet would speak straight to Austyn’s soul with syllabic sonnets so sweet, and other times they would simply sing to her in verses that rhymed a little off-key. On days when even Alexuel was bored to tears by the droning soliloquys of Austyn’s micromanaging bosses, the poet in her pocket would indulge the naughty side of its pixie nature and make Austyn blush as they rattled off bawdy limericks about Titian and ladders.

At the end of the day, the poet would coax Austyn to shake off the shackles of her work-appropriate attire (pencil skirt, pantyhose, and sensible heels) and run far from the concrete tower—free in verse, in ballad, in song. Pinching her thigh skin as a signal to notice a world that was no longer in HP ink grayscale but was now ablaze with brilliant blue skies, maroon-red stop signs, and burnt sunset oranges, the poet prompted Austyn to take the road less travelled (because that is where all adventures await us!). More tiny pinches prompted Austyn to smell it all: the sharp sting of smoke from chimneys, the soft pelt of wet rain, and even the pungent punch of gasoline. Alexuel went on pinching Austyn to prompt her to take it all in: tastes, sights, and feels. But it just was not enough, so Alexuel led Austyn back to the rainbow in the mud:

It’s time to go back to a land pushed aside  
 to the margins of your human lives,  
 a land whose roadmap often fades  
 with all those passing years of age.  
 Come to a place where clots of creativity never plague the mind.  
 And I can holdyouthisclose the entire time.  
 Oh! How happy you shall be  
 In the Land of Poetry!  
 Now, count with me in your mind.  
 Yes, count our way up from one to nine.

### Chapter 3

The poet in her pocket took her to a land where roses grow from cracks in the sidewalks and the hills that needed to be climbed left no one out of breath. Together, they went on epic adventures—rolling down hills after Jills and narrowly escaping the claws of Jabberwockies. They followed silly ol’ bears through looking glasses and chased after the disappearing Cheshire Cat.

They roused early by 6:00 a.m. to chow down on morning toast and then continued to munch on pizza crumbs the whole day through. Other days they feasted on olives and ice-boxed plums with trash goblins. They never tasted a sour milkshake and never knew the tragedy of a candy drought.

Across nine summer days, they explored the aquatics of the land,  
dipped their toes in pensive ponds,  
bathed in babbling brooks,  
splashed in steady streams,  
raced each other down roaring rivers,  
and wished upon whispering waters.

Throughout eight crisp falls, they skipped through meadows of willow trees as they talked of moments frozen on Grecian urns and then lay under cherry trees to speak of roses by any other name. They spoke in couplets and tankas and called to each other in echoed rhymes. They listened to Psalms sung by sheep and proverbs preached. They would lift every voice and sing til earth and heaven ring. And when they got the urge to hurl curses at the stars or simply shout aloud with unbridled “crazy woman’s” rage—oh! how they would let their beautiful, unjudged rage just

RAGE!  
RAGE!  
RAGE!

They would explain their tirades to no one but simply go back along their merry ways.

And so, throughout a week of winter dusks, they danced with eagles, nightingales, ravens, and flamingosexuals under the magic mirror of the moon, adorned in its radiant beam, until they crashed into lullabied sleep, content in the beauty of truth and the truth of beauty.

Six hundred unbirthdays past and then the poet in her pocket introduced Austyn to some of their dear, dear cousins in adjacent towns—towns filled with old English manors that housed wardrobes of fur winter coats, towns protected by fairytale knights, and towns with secret gardens tended by

sleeping beauties and little women. They spent days and nights travelling in perfect cozy train seats to sleepy hollows and haunted villages where they crept down dark alleys and came across black cats with tell-tale hearts. They bit back at vampires and once helped hide a sugarplum fairy being pursued by a rat king.

When spring blossomed into the sixth of May, they boarded the Dawn Treader and set sail up into the skies, past the second star on the right, and straight onto morning. Sirens beckoned to their passing ship as they sailed onwards to islands with monsters that promised to eat them up because they loved them so. They flew to planets with foxes and princes and roses kept in glass containers, planets that housed caves of solitude, and planets where black panthers were perfecting mind-boggling technological advancements.

At five o'clock, the autumn airs started to cool, so they hitched a pumpkin carriage to the tips of lightning thieves and returned down to solid land, where men in lincoln green taught them to shoot arrows that whistled through outlawed trees. They trip-trapped across drawbridges past ogres fighting billy goats and on into a stone castle where they sat around a round table and engaged in deep discussions with four horsemen about love, loyalty, and legends.

It was all so beautiful—soft like a dream while bold as real life and always full of possibility. It was a holy, idealistic trinity, so it had to come to an end because throughout their time together,

throughout the many chords of concrete things,  
 throughout the many strings tied into memory,  
 throughout the many, many fantastical melodies,

as Austyn began to take notice that she was finally getting her voice back—stronger and more precise than ever; she was once again seeing colours in all their brightness, vibrancy, and shades, and her imagination had regrown into one that even a girl from Green Gables would envy. Others had taken notice of these truths, too!

## Chapter 4

Then, one day, while Austyn and Alexuel sat along Walden Pond engaging with Gus, the theatre cat, in witty banter and comical word play, they heard a terrifying ripping sound in such discord with the joy and harmony of poetry that it instantly heralded forth unspeakable tragedies: Ancient lovers' hearts broke, everlasting oaths shattered, and tinkling fairies fell to the ground with their life bells snuffed out. The excruciating sound, like nails on a chalkboard, was soon joined by an equally distasteful sight. Through the streaks that now shredded the soft, pastel sky, icy silver claws of harpies appeared. The claws

tightened into fists at the end of long, scaly arms and punched down through the tears in the sky and swung about wildly in all directions in search of their prey. The harpies cared not about whatever destruction and misery resulted from their reckless swipes for they were singularly determined to recapture and drag this land's newest resident back to a cubicled-life of droning boredom. When they finally managed to wrestle their perfectly toned bodies (resulting from years of depriving themselves of sweets and happiness of any kind) through the cavities they had carved into the formerly lovely sky, it took Austyn but one look at their judgmental, disapproving eyes to know that they would not hesitate to drain every last drop of poetic freedom from any who dared stand in their way. Their laser-focussed purpose was painfully obvious; they were here to reclaim her, their prisoner, that they callously referred to as Minion #987654321.

Austyn knew that her happiness, content, and strength had summoned the harpies here. Her growth threatened the harpies' way of life, for if they could not dictate the when and where of those under their middle-management control, then their precious paychecks and fancy titles would certainly disappear with them into an existence full of impotence and unnecessary waste. And so, knowing that her withdrawal from the Land of Poetry was the only way to protect her friends from the nearing whirlwind of destruction and misery, but not yet resigned to the impending Fates, Austyn cried with tears rolling down her cheeks as her hands grasped about for something concrete to hold onto: "I don't want to go. Please, I don't want to go Alexuel!"

Kind, kind Alexuel gently wiped Austyn's cheeks, clasped her hands with a soft squeeze, and gently explained:

Dwelling solely in this land or the other, you cannot survive

You must go back to the real world and revise! Revise!

You must take from this land all its possibility

And somehow make it into your reality.

You must return to the land of age.

But, never fear. You will no longer be caged.

For now, you know a secret of critical hope:

A balance of ideals and actions that will help you to cope.

"But I'm no poet," Austyn self-criticized. "You must come with me. You must help me never lose my way again. The world needs poets in their pockets to always hold onto them this tight."

But the pixie-sized poet only shook their head "no," forcing Austyn to hurry up her internal journey towards peace with this untimely, harpy-imposed departure from the land she loved so dear. Then a burst of negotiation struck

her, and Austyn implored over the harpies' screeches (they were trying so desperately to drown her out), "But I can come back, right?!" To which Alexuel giddily replied:

Yes, of course, whenever you need to, my dear!  
I'll always be exactly right here.

Now, join me in happy number counting against the setting sun  
as we count our way down from nine to one.

## Chapter 5

Austyn's lavender-coloured eyes opened widely and darted frantically about because she could still hear the unbearable, high-pitched screeching all around her. It was the screech of bus brakes trekking along the city streets and splashing a muddy puddle next to the scorching sidewalk where Austyn stood. She breathed in a deep sigh of relief. She reflexively touched her side for reassurance, but the poet in her pocket was no longer there. Surprisingly, though, Austyn did not feel alone, and she did not feel abandoned. Instead, her hands at her side instinctively turned into fists placed upon her hips, her chest puffed forwards, and her chin pointed to the sky—and there she stood next to a muddy puddle with a rainbow in it, in a superhero pose. She held her stance for a count of nine and then strode into her revised life with renewed purpose and a power infinitely better than prose.

The next day at work when the monstrous bosses prattled their demands at her, Austyn reached deep inside and borrowed from the allegories, pantoums,<sup>1</sup> and cinquains of the poet in her pocket and spoke them—all on her own. Her bosses scurried away to preserve their dignity, but their gaping mouths betrayed their fears and confusion, for they knew not what to do when confronted by Austyn's undaunted truth. Her bosses quickly tried to dismiss the power shift with claims of "Oh my word! She's so insane!" But other colleagues quickly reframed the disparaging narrative the bosses had hoped would take hold and countered with "Listen to how Austyn speaks now. Boldly! Concretely. Succinctly. Confidently! Vividly! She's a woman to take notice of now."

Over the years, the doubters and the nay-sayers still made attempts to steal away her creativity and threaten her joy, but Austyn always dispatched them all with a quick thumb through her poetic lexicon until she landed upon just the right words to proclaim her power, confirm her contributions, and validate her value and worth. Her uncanny ability to make sense from even the most complicated situations with a poetic metaphor or simile eventually earned her a promotion or two. When Austyn chose to speak with Alexuel's kindness (for



no one speaks as kindly of others as a poet who is fluent in odes), she felt happiest, experienced the best of times, and collected the most friends.

Austyn never did return to the Land of Poetry through the muddy puddle with the rainbow in it. Nay, instead, she found herself drawn to companions and colleagues whom she sensed had all once had poets in their pockets, too. In their company, her heart was encircled with wreaths of flowery sonnets. In their conversations, she found an everlasting supply of clever and creative words that spoke to her mind beautifully. She even crossed paths one day with a partner who made her cackle with spicy limericks, and they wooed each other with ballads of love. Years later, she gave birth to her lovely little sprite whom she taught to visit the Land of Poetry every night.

Austyn would whisper as she kissed Aleighallton's cheek and clicked off the bedroom light: "Remember, only during dream times, though, my love. You can stay in that Land of Poetry until Grandfather Twilight places his moon pearl gently above the sea, but then you must return to me. You must use your lyrical wit to fight the injustices of our world and your poetic curiosity to solve all our problems here. You must share the rhymes you learn there to bring smiles to strangers as they pass near. You must always promise to awaken in the morn, for this world needs poets in it, too—and that's why you were born."

## Epilogue

The years passed, as they are wont to do. And on that day when Alexuel sensed Austyn's light had finally gone out, all the inhabitants of the land gathered around—the lilac, the white rabbit, and Ms. Everdeen—and Alexuel proclaimed to them all:

Come now and dry your eye sockets!  
We gather around to speak not of her in elegy,  
for those who lived with a poet in their pocket  
live on for eternity!  
And so together we all shall dwell,  
(night and day)  
living life so well  
in eternal hope and forever play.

## Notes

This story was initially inspired by the writer, Armani Scott. It is dedicated to my kindred poets Naomi Shihab Nye and Justin Jannise and all the other poets I wish I could keep in my pocket and is wrapped up in thanks to my peers of Stephen F. Austin State University's ENGL 5366 who were so willing to play along with me and to all the storybook authors, songwriters, and movie-makers who have lent their words to me since childhood (all references to their works are made with the most sincere homage and gratitude). Finally, dear readers, the writing of this tale was a reflective, redemptive, and restorative act for me as an author. With gratitude and joy, I now call to you to join me and my children to long live—night and day—in a life of eternal hope and forever play.

## Endnotes

1. "The pantoum is a poem of any length, composed of four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza. The last line of a pantoum is often the same as the first" ("Pantoum").

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