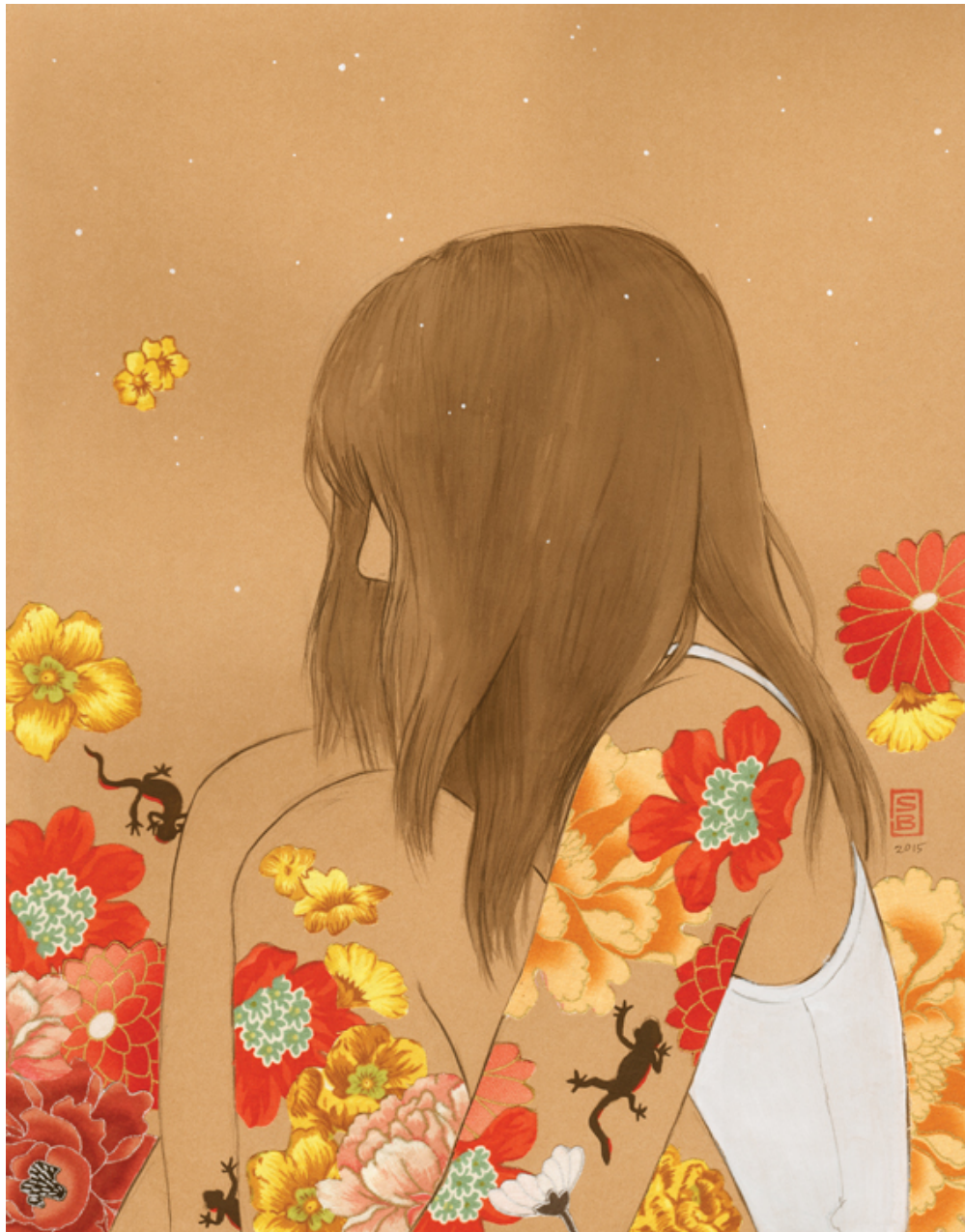


ORION

MAGAZINE

by MICHELLE ROBERTSON

SEPTEMBER 28, 2015



Art by Stasia Burrington

AS A CHILD, I climbed my dad like a tree, hanging from his arms and never wanting to detach myself from his legs. At six-foot-two, with leathery brown skin, long-reaching arms, and wild white hair, my dad has always reminded me of a tree. He has always seemed knowledgeable like one, too, like he contained as much wisdom and maturity as an ancient sequoia. When I entered adolescence, however, my social life and sports teams stole my focus, and my dad's job as a field biologist—the binoculars hanging around his neck, the field guides filling the pockets of his cargo pants—never failed to embarrass.

We used to hike the hills of the Briones Regional Park the first Sunday of every month, my dad and me, but we hadn't been there in three years. When I became anorexic, my doctors forbade me from exercise in any form in order to preserve the tiny caloric intake I subsisted on.

At fifteen-and-a-half, I stopped eating carbs. At sixteen, I stopped eating pretty much everything and dropped twenty pounds from my already-slim frame. And soon after, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and placed in a rigorous outpatient treatment program. The week of my diagnosis, our monthly treks to the reservoir stopped.

When I was first diagnosed, my dad refused to believe it. "She has a fast metabolism. I was a skinny teenager too," I overheard him say to my mom over the dishes one night. I stopped really talking to him after that, and eventually he stopped trying to talk to me. He didn't get it, didn't accept that my sickness was real. Without our monthly hike, we lost all connection.

THE DESTINATION OF THOSE HIKES was always the reservoir, which, up close, looks more like a dingy pond, only fifty meters across with grubby algae covering its surface and mud flats ringing its perimeter. In late summer, though, it springs to life. Bubbles and splashes appear as the heads of orange-bellied California newts break through the surface. Flashes of red puncture the dark water like fireworks exploding against a black sky.

This sight only occurs for a short period of time, just as the newts emerge from a summer spent hidden from view. In the spring, as the days become hotter and drier, they walk a few miles from their breeding pond to shelter in burrows previously occupied by gophers or moles, or they crawl under rotted logs, all of which promise shade from the unforgiving sun.

"The newts would die from overheating and drying out, so they go underground, where the temperatures are cooler," I remember my dad telling me years ago. "They aren't hibernating—they're estivating. Instead of burrowing to avoid the cold in the winter, the newts burrow in the summer to avoid the heat. Their metabolism slows down, and they stay in their burrows, only leaving occasionally to catch bugs."

Prior to estivation, the newts engage in a mating frenzy. The females enter the pond and release a scent of seduction, the Chanel No. 5 of newts, which sends the males into sexual overdrive. In response to this aroma, the males deposit a spermatophore, or sperm-sharing sack, in front of the female, who then perches atop it to absorb the sperm. Once the eggs have been fertilized, she deposits gelatinous egg masses, which hold up to thirty eggs apiece, onto plant roots or in rock crevices and then waits for her offspring to emerge.

The reservoir during breeding time reminds me of a fraternity party: boys and girls doused in the latest Marc Jacobs scent or Axe body spray, trying to attract the best mate before night ends. As a sophomore in college, I often wore crop tops and bright miniskirts on the weekends. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't trying to attract a mate like the others, but there was more to it for me.

When I was anorexic, I lost not only weight, but also my sense of womanhood. My breasts shriveled, my long hair fell out in clumps, and my period stopped altogether. I'd made it through four years of puberty, only to shrink back into my preteen body, like a butterfly returning to its chrysalis. When I recovered from my eating disorder, I gained thirty pounds in nine months. I struggled with the extra weight, noticing a thick layer of fat nuzzling against my midsection, limbs, and face. I was twenty years old, a sophomore in college. Hormonally, it was puberty 2.0. I felt like a woman again, and I wanted to show off my body as a way of telling the world I was back.

"*LASTHENIA CALIFORNICA*, common name: goldfield," says my father, crouching to examine a golden-yellow flower under his hand lens. Around him, the natural world carries on without him noticing; all of his attention is absorbed by his study of the bloom. Then he plucks it—a sacrilegious act for any self-respecting biologist—and hands it to me, then continues walking. Except for my dad occasionally calling to birds in the trees with his signature *wsh sh sh sh*, we walk the next few miles in silence.

It's September, and I'm home from college. The rains have just begun to fall, so my father and I have set out in pursuit of those orange-bellied newts, hoping that the sudden arrival of moisture will have roused the amphibians from their deep slumbers. It's our first hike to the pond since my diagnosis.

With his dust-colored khaki pants and wide-brimmed hat, my father blends in with the towering oak trees. I have to run to keep up with his long strides, my legs already tired from the walk from the parking lot.

At the top of a tall, yellow hill, my dad pauses without saying a word and breathes in the air and the sunlight. Then he keeps walking as if nothing has happened, occasionally breaking the silence by pointing out a mariposa lily with its signature burgundy spotting or an Alameda

whipsnake. “Endangered,” he says, pointing to the yellow-and-black reptile as it slithers across our path.

When my father doesn’t know what to say, he talks about nature. Growing up, I perceived this as negligence. He couldn’t understand my teenage problems: heartbreak, friend drama, struggles with calculus, pimples. On the rare nights when my mom was out of town, we would sit at the dinner table with only the sound of our forks scratching the plates, no *wsh sh sh sh* to break the silence.

In November of my freshman year, at one of these silent dinners, I tried to discuss with him the idea of taking time off from college or dropping out altogether. “My anorexia has become too much for me,” I said softly, defeated. “I barely have energy to walk to classes.”

He put his fork down. “I took a year off from college when I was your age,” he said. “I went up to Tuolumne Meadows to hike, and foraged food to supplement the canned goods I’d brought. I slept in the woods with a rifle next to me, in case of black bears.”

My eyebrows knit together in an expression of exasperation. *Here he goes again, I thought, trying to relate his one love, nature, to my real problems. If I were to drop out, I wouldn’t be frolicking in the woods and shooting bears, I’d be entering an in-patient eating disorder treatment clinic.*

He kept talking, “I was out walking in those untouched woods when I suddenly felt the need to run. I ran and ran through towering sequoias and heavy fir trees until I tripped on an oak sapling and started tumbling. I tumbled for what felt like miles until I reached the bottom of the slope. A week later, I hitchhiked back to Berkeley and re-enrolled in classes.”

RECOVERY IS A SEASON that often goes unnoticed by others, but this period of time—after you’ve gained the weight, gained the energy, gained your life back—brings with it unexpected challenges. Like many anorexics, I spent more time “in recovery” than actually being sick. In fact, my anorexia went untreated for only six months before my mom brought me to the doctor.

When I finally gained those thirty pounds and the will to eat, I was like a newt awakening from estivation. After being absent from the pond, after not seeing sunlight for so long, I wanted to do and feel everything. I went from being a ninety-pound zombie to a newt in the sun.

I stopped binging on vegetables and started binging on experiences. I wanted to try every food, take every class, meet every stranger, experience everything I had missed out on during those years of sickness. My lack of a menses, and consequent lack of sex drive, triggered an explosion upon its return. I went to every party, tried every drug that crossed my path, hooked up with one frat guy Friday night only to hook up with his frat brother the next. I missed that anorexic “high,”

that feeling of being on the edge at every moment, and so I replaced it with whatever thrills I could find.

One September night, I got drunk off of a plastic-handle bottle of vodka at a frat party and slunk off with a cute stranger to his apartment. Along the way, he spoke of his passion for environmental science—a self-proclaimed “nature nerd.” We went to his room and talked for hours, mainly about our backpacking experiences and favorite native perennials. He reminded me of my dad in his unabashed passion for native grasses and preference of poppy breed.

As the night progressed, we started making out. It was harmless, until it wasn’t. I felt the air in the room dry out, then heat up, as he pushed me further and further, hurting me yet ignoring my pleas to stop. I couldn’t break away. I felt stuck under a rotting log, immobile, lifeless.

After that night, I no longer wore skirts and crop tops. I turned to my eating habits to express my helplessness and confusion, just as I had done in high school.

The trouble with recovering from anorexia is that you never really recover from anorexia. Just as the newts know another dry season is coming in which they will have to return to a state of half-life, recovered anorexics always fear that their old habits will return.

Two weeks later, I came home from school to talk to my doctors and try to get my eating back on track. I had been driving from doctor’s office to doctor’s office, trying to keep up with a steady stream of appointments, when on my last day home, a Sunday, my dad suggested we hike out to the reservoir.

IT LOOKED JUST AS SHABBY and insignificant as I remembered it—the reservoir that saw me as a plump preteen, an anorexic teenager, and now a recovered woman on the verge of a relapse.

My father and I scanned the water, and everywhere we looked we saw newts that seemed to stretch and leap and gulp in the air as they peeked their heads out of the water, relishing the sunshine that they had hid from for so many months. My dad and I exchanged grins, acknowledging the magnificence of the moment.

We spent some time rolling over logs to look for those that had yet to emerge from estivation. Under one such log, I found a newt crushed beneath the home that was meant to preserve him. I reached for my dad’s arm like I did as a toddler. He held onto me tightly and said, “Don’t forget that the rains came, and he failed to realize it. He missed his chance at freedom.”

While my father stood on the bank basking in the glory of the California newt, I tramped around the edges of the reservoir, coming upon a wart-covered newt that looked different from the rest. I

called my dad over for a diagnosis. He looked at my worried expression and then at the newt. “Sometimes males grow thick, wart-covered skin to prevent themselves from absorbing too much water after they return to the pond following estivation season,” he said.

The skin, which I took to be a sign of illness, really acted as a shield.

“The skin is telling him, ‘Absorb it slowly, you’ve got time, the water isn’t going anywhere,’” said my father, taking off his field hat so that his blue eyes were no longer hidden. In that moment, he seemed to acknowledge everything that happened over the past few years.

As I cradled the warty newt in the valleys of my hands, I marveled at the creature’s ability to adapt and overcome. His body was telling him it was okay to get back in the pond. But also, to enter with caution. I gently set the warty newt down in the murky water and looked back to see my father’s protective gaze watching over me. As soon as our eyes met, he looked away, but in that brief glance, I knew what he was telling me. I needed to trust my instincts. I needed to get back into the pond.

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