

**Is This Mine?**  
Michelle Webster-Hein

Before I begin, two epigraphs.

G. K. Chesterton: “Gratitude is happiness coupled with awe.”

*Awe:*

“a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder.”

When I consider gratitude, one image dominates the rest. It is the image of Sembatu, an Eritrean refugee who arrived at Jubilee Partners with her three young sons after moving from camp to camp throughout Africa for nearly a decade. A few volunteers, myself included, were moving her into her new cottage, where she would learn survival English and American culture – get a firm enough grasp on our way of life to move to Atlanta in a few short months. After wandering dazed from room to room, she returned to the kitchen, where she opened a cupboard and took out a bag of flour. She studied it for a moment. Then she turned to Amber, a volunteer who spoke Arabic, and asked her something. Amber answered her, then translated for us.

“She's asking if these things are hers,” she said.

Sembatu pulled out a carton of salt and asked the same thing. *Is this mine?* She did this for each item in the cupboard, in the same astonished tone, the knot of her yellow head-wrap bobbing above her forehead like a large flower. A bag of rice, a package of lentils. *Is this mine? Is this mine?*

When I first became a mother, nearly five years ago now, I dropped down into a crippling sadness, deep and dark, shot through with white-hot arrows of pure terror. The clinical term is post-partum depression, and thankfully, having dealt with depression before, I was able to recognize it as such and seek treatment. After a time, the counseling and medication began to lift me up. My body healed, Alyosha learned to nurse. We all slept a little more and then a little more.

Still, I continued to grieve my old life. I felt ungrateful doing so, which of course made it worse. I had a steady husband, a healthy child, a house that would keep us warm through the winter. At times, I thought of Sembatu, and then I thought of our own cupboards, obscenely full by comparison. I tried to reason myself into gratitude. Why should life be so hard for someone so privileged? What right did I have to be so ungrateful?

In the spring after Alyosha's birth, I decided to start what I now recognize as a gratitude journal. The challenge was to find something beautiful each day and write a small meditation on it – bring my mind to it, let my attention linger.

To keep myself accountable, I fashioned it into a blog titled “The Common Beet” since my first entry was about, you guessed it, beets. I wrote, too, about carrots and silence and dandelions and cardinals and the way all of you Menno-Brethren folk sound when you sing together. I wrote about the color green and bicycles and cats and dust and the way my daughter stared out the window each morning, like it was really something to see. Each day became an exercise in vision. I knew, intellectually, that life was rife with beauty, but only when I sought it out, when I took a tiny piece of it and stared for a long time, could I actually start to see it. And – miraculously, it felt – I did, indeed, start to see it. Day by day, I took one step up from the pit, and then one more, and then one more.

A few months later I retired the blog. I had returned to school to finish my MFA, and other writing projects called out for my time. I did assemble my favorite ruminations into a list essay and sent them on to a literary journal, which, happily, decided to publish the piece. They also invited me to curate a weekly column titled “Beautiful Things,” where other writers could submit their tiny ruminations on beauty in the everyday. I’ve asked three people to come up and read three of my favorite pieces from this column. They demonstrate something, I think, about gratitude and beauty and awe. We’ll hear those now, and then I’ll share the rest of my thoughts.

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Cologne, by Dawn S. Davies

Not too long ago I was in a crowded public place, trying to slip past people without touching them, when I caught a whiff of the same cologne my ex-husband wore while we were married. I would have thought it would sicken me, revisiting this scent of something so long dead, shoveled down into the underground of memory, the way we bury regret and sadness in order to keep on moving through life. But this cologne? It smelled like good things: his starchy, ironed dress shirt when we hugged, the way he rocked each of our warm, new babies in the night, the way he sanded a door, stirred a pot of chili, then tasted it. I stopped and stood while a holograph of what I once loved about him bloomed in the crowd, rose up amid echo and dance of strangers’ heat, then was gone, leaving me with a quick, beautiful gift of forgiveness.

Tiny Purple Flowers, by Sarah Broderick

My mother stands at the grocery store counter. Tiny purple flowers rest tucked behind her ear. They have wilted as we walked through the aisles, comparing prices per ounce and coupons to sales. Now, the flower petals are withered balls of lint. They droop down on spindly stems as dry and thin as discarded threads.

"Isn't my mommy pretty?" I say. I plucked those lavender stars, clusters that sprout from the cow pies that litter our fields, especially for her. Standing in the kitchen, shaking the dishwater from her hands, she placed the gift in a rinsed-out jelly jar and nestled the remainder within her hair.

The lady behind us scoffs, and my mother reaches her hand up, brushing the weeds that had been forgotten before walking into the store. "My daughter," she says, embarrassed.

The cashier furrows his brows. "Yeah, sure. A real looker," he says.

Suddenly, I am very aware of something running deep that I do not yet understand. I study my mother as she digs within a purse that doesn't match her shoes, flexes open her wallet with its broken hinge, but leaves those flowers where they are. It is a slight gesture that will stay with me wherever I go, no matter how far away from her. Right there as right now, handing over our food stamps to the register man, my gifts tucked behind her ear, she is the only true woman in the world, the most beautiful woman there is.

#### Resting Place, by Kate Levin

When we arrive at daycare, I step out of the car and close my door gently, hoping not to startle my son awake. As I open the back door to retrieve him from his car seat, I see the bird.

I gasp, but only its stillness is gruesome. Otherwise, it's perfect—round, brown, downy, wedged between leather and metal, tucked into the space where the door opens and closes. A baby; a sparrow, I think. When I was young, we had a Christmas ornament just like it.

There is my sleeping son, and there is the dead bird.

When he was younger, just born, fear overtook me in waves. I could lose him at any time. I could lose him because I had him, and anything I had, I could lose. The logic was airtight, suffocating.

But then I would look at him, breath muscle bones, humming in motion; a system insisting on itself. Who was I to doubt it?

A clean napkin is the best I can do for a shroud. I pluck the sparrow from the backseat, amazed by its lightness and lack of resistance. A few feet away, a thick wall of green shrubbery separates us from the daycare's yard. No one is watching. I reach in and give the bird to the branches. Through the windshield I can see my son, eyes still closed. Beneath a buckled harness, his chest rises and falls, rises and falls, rises and falls.

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I've wondered for years over what separates art, fundamentally, from mere entertainment, and I've come to the tentative conclusion that entertainment distracts us from the fact of our mortality while art, either directly or indirectly, brings us close. In that way, art is bigger, truer, because it encompasses more. It speaks not only to the comical or suspenseful or romantic elements of our experience, but to the whole blessed mess.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, author of *The Great Gatsby*, wrote, "Draw your chair up close to the edge of the precipice, and I will tell you a story." He doesn't tell us to curl up beside a crackling fire with a lap afghan and a hot toddy. He tells us to sit beside the end of ourselves and listen. This is what I seek out when I read for the column, too. Each of these Beautiful Things has framed a piece of the fight. A glint of light from a broken shard. A resting place beside the abyss. Leverage, a foothold. A keyhole to a broad and unflinching vision.

The practice of gratitude calls me to the same. Not simply focusing on the good to the exclusion of the bad. Not shutting myself in a safe room of tidy aphorisms. Gratitude, like beauty, like awe, cannot be divorced from the context that surrounds it. It is a bed you can build to rest on in the flux of everything else.

Sembatu's gratitude for food means little if we have no sense of how hungry she must have been. Her wonderment at her home means little until we know how many years she wandered without one. I have not known her desperations, but I have known others, as have you. I can let these desperations keep me fixed inward on myself, or I can pursue the daily practice of turning myself inside out. I can walk through the world and stop at each item that catches my eye. I can stare at it for a while and turn it over and over and ask, "Is this mine? Is this mine?"

And the answer, to so much of it, is yes.