



selections from
LOVE, CHILD. LOVE.

LESLIE RALPH

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INVOCATION

Muses of Love of Life of Light, I surrender these words to you. Guide me through the telling of these stories. I call on you to guide me to what's calling to be said. What story needs to be told?

Love, speak of the journey through dreaming and waking. You have seen us through rising and falling and rising again. Tell me what the Earth says, the Moon, the Sun, and the sky. Tell me of the stars and canyons. Bring the sunrise and sunset to my heart. Guide me to the gold in me.

Translate the chorus of life so that my humble ears may hear even the faintest echo. I am but your scribe. I will write down all you have to say until your words feel like my own.

Tell me, Life. How can I help? Love, what can I restore?

Thank you, thank you for the courage to take on this task.

PROLOGUE

There is a clearing. I found it most accidentally, yet I knew somehow that it was waiting just for me.

The air was crisp and bright where the edge of fall tapped upon summer's back. I spent the day with the birch tree, gathering her fallen leaves and placing them along her branches' shadows. One by one, I laid them down in devotion, without a care for the passage of time.

Not even the echoes of the voices I'd grown so identified with followed me there. In their absence, I made the spectacular discovery that I was not left in silence as they'd have me believe, but in a symphony, over which a voice I once loved rose clear and true to mend my heart.

I didn't notice the sun arc overhead, but the shadows did. They slipped beneath my feet to escape a still warm noon. I giggled as they clamored to find a place to rest. The tree looked on at this display, her dark eyes smiled, and her paper skin, peeling here and there, turned the page.

"You see it, don't you, Child?" she said to me.

After a while, the shadows woke and resumed their work of painting the world upon the grass, twisting through my fall mosaic, and leaving a perfect portrait of me at my feet. Goosebumps told me I must be going, but I dared not leave this place where I could feel the gentle tug on my spirit from the things I used to know. I saw life in the stillness there.

"Will I ever return?" I asked the birch.

"Always," she replied.

I looked at her, puzzled.

"Trust that you are the way," she answered before I could speak.

I left as the shadows reached the sky and knocked on the doors of the stars, inviting them to carry on their nightly waltz.

I brought a seed with me and thought of what to do with it. *I could plant it or set it on a shelf. Perhaps I shall eat it,* I thought. I pictured you then and knew what I must do.

When you greeted me at the door, I pressed the seed in your hand, closing your fingers around it. I pressed my cheek to yours and whispered in your ear. "Meet me there," I said.

You looked at me, confused.

"You are the way."

SWEET SURRENDER

I lie in bed with an open book in my lap, my thumb keeps track of my place somewhere in the middle, and my eyes rest on the window across the room. I haven't turned the page in a week.

In the moments right before sleep, I am most watchful and awake. Every night is the same. I find a taste of freedom on the edge of consciousness. It's as if I've forgotten my body until I come back to it to rest.

I smile when a distant flash of lightning lights the clouds.

Rain taps on my window.

I set my book on my nightstand, unread again, and turn out the lights.

As I pull the covers to my chin, I watch the rain paint rivulets down the window.

The lightning flashes again, and I hold my breath waiting for the thunder.

One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, four, one thousand.

It's far off still. I imagine being where the thunder and lightning are. The rattling windows, the flash of daylight, the electricity in the air.

For now, the thunder sings an unlikely lullaby, sweet and rolling.

Lightning flashes again, so quick I wonder if I've imagined it. At once pulled into daylight and dropped back into the night.

"It's not the dark that scares me, you know," I say to the thunder that follows, a little closer this time.

"What then?" it seems to reply.

"It's the surrender."

"I see," it says. "Look inward, Child. There's always something to hold onto there."

I close my eyes. The colorful light playing in my eyelids reminds me that it's safe to be inside of me.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Breathing, I search my heart for something to hold as I let the day go. I've spent so much time moving pieces, working at making something better, different, more refined.

"You always were the hero," the thunder says as I drift off to sleep.

DREAM, CHILD. DREAM.

May you dream, Child and find that what you seek resides in you.

Rest, Child.

When you wake, may you remember a piece of who you are.

Do you see? If Love is there, you will find it. And Love is absolutely everywhere.

Do you hear? That voice? Trust that.

Follow what you love and you'll find your way. This is liberation, Child.

You feel it, yes?

So now you dream, Child. Dream.

UNTAMED

For a moment, I am a tiger. Bold and unreasonable in my beauty.

I move silently through the trees, confident in my power, steady in my gait.

"Stay with us awhile," the trees say as I pass beneath their boughs.

And I pause.

"Look upon the world with love and tell us what you see."

I scan the jungle. An eagle breaks through the greenery and glides overhead. My reflection shines up at me from the river. A fish flits to the surface, erasing my image.

"Everything," I answer.

"With love, listen," they tell me.

I close my eyes and concentrate on the music of the forest. The rustling and cawing and whoops and howls. I lose myself in sound. I am the beating of my heart. I am the flow of air through my lungs. I am the song of the forest. I am the waves crashing on the distant shores. I am the wind wailing through the mountains. I hear to the ends of the earth, all of life is a conversation between the universe and me.

"Tell me what you hear," the trees say.

"I hear Life. It's limitless," I reply.

I lie beside the river, watching, listening until the emerald forest grows dark. Sunlight gives way to moonlight, and creatures of the night emerge from their rest.

"Now you must go."

I rise.

"And when you speak, speak with only ever love," the trees call after me.

I answer with a mighty roar.

And for now, I am everything. Do not wake me yet.

* * *

For a moment, I am an eagle soaring through the canopy.

I spread my wings and fly, brave and true, to carry messages from the earth to the sky and back again.

"Hello, beloved," they call to me as I ride the wind that flows between them.

My eyes flash as I set my determined gaze on a clearing. A tiger rests beside a river there and watches me pass overhead.

"Tell me of the view," the earth says to me.

"You're beautiful," I answer.

I land at the riverbank. A fish catches my eye as it kisses the water's surface. I see the tiger's watching, too.

"What's it like to be down there?" the sky asks.

"Sometimes, I just don't know. It can all be so mysterious."

"And what of love? What's that like?" the sky replies.

"Love?" I ask.

"Yes, Child. Love," the sky says.

"Well," I pause to find the right words. "I suppose it's a little like knowing the way."

"Trust that," the sky answers.

And for a moment, I know the way. Do not wake me yet.

* * *

For a moment, I am a fish, glittering in the light that curls and folds around me.

I am free to swim in any direction I choose. The water flows over me as I cut through her currents.

I look up at the patches of color, the shifting, shapeless forms suspended above me and imagine what may lie beyond the edges of my world.

"What's out there?" I ask the water.

"More of you, Darling," it answers.

I feel one hundred times bigger, stronger, and I speed through the water now telling everyone I cross paths with, "There's more of me, more of me, more of me than I knew."

The others are not concerned about the mysteries above us and go about their day. The fish swim in a school, talking about the warm summer water. The crab drags her claw through the sand looking for a snack. A manatee floats nearby and dips her nose into the air outside.

But the caimans hear. They smile and call to me.

"It's dry," they say. "And green! Can you imagine? There are such strange creatures. And..." they look around to make sure no one's listening, "I hear tales of other rivers out there."

"But are there more of me?" I ask.

"Is there, is there, is there more to you? There is," they sing before disappearing through the surface.

I've discovered more of me than I knew. Do not wake me yet.

HELD

Lying in the grass, half earth, half air, I become the horizon.

At once rising and sinking, I allow myself to be cradled in a state of peace I didn't know was possible.

You haven't let me hold you like this in ages, the earth says.

Beneath me lies the grass and soil and seeds and all of life. I can almost feel the footsteps of all who travel upon the planet.

The clouds pass overhead. In my breath, I am the clouds.

The trees sway. In my breath, I am the trees.

The air sings of her travels, of the wishes and beauty she carries to me. Through me. From me.

She speaks of the mountains. In my breath, I am the mountain.

She speaks of the sea. In my breath, I am the sea.

In my breath, I am the bird, the sand, the stones.

My breath becomes the wind, and I breathe for the earth.

I could have sprouted roots and pushed them deep into the soil to stay here, where I feel so safe.

"But you are meant to be free," the sky tells me.

FREE AS A BIRD

You long to be free? Asks the bird.

You praise me, yet it is your very nature to be free. You are freedom, Child.

Become the bird. Become liberation. Let go of the branches and lose sight of your nest. Fly toward wholeness, carrying desire on your back. And sing until your fears are singing, too.

LIGHT SPRING RAIN

"Renew me," I begged the rain.

"Help me start again."

I know

I know

I know, my love.

And I melted.

DANCING

She's dancing like a child,
as if that's the only way to move,
as if her body is her home.
Her feet barely touch the floor
when she's dancing that way,
and it's all anyone can see.

She's dancing like the wind,
even sitting still,
as if she's only ever danced.
And she can't see
how it's all anyone can see
when she's dancing that way.

EPILOGUE

You find me at sunrise, in a field of wildflowers and eucalyptus, feathers woven through my hair. My eyes are in full bloom as I sing with the birds to usher in the light.

"Come this way, I've been expecting you," I call as the sun peeks over the hilltops.

I lead you to the river where we watch the earth stretch before us. Her red, blue, green, and gold emerge through the grey of dawn, and we dance in patches of sunlight.

The scent of hyacinth and mint fills the warming air.

I look you in the eye and take your hands in mine. "Welcome home," I say.

"What is this place?" you ask me.

I bow to you in deep reverence, "Love, Child. Love."

We find a comfortable place to sit along the riverbank and dip our toes into the cool stream. I hand you a bowl of tangerines. We peel them in silence and watch the turtles sun themselves beside us.

You tell me of your travels, and I nod in recognition.

"Tell me about the sea again," I say when you finish. You catch your breath and tell me all over again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Leslie Ralph. By day, I'm a psychologist specializing in mindfulness, self-compassion, and positive psychology. By nights and weekends, a wife and mother of three. And in the spaces in between, in my thoughts and heart and dreams, a writer and illustrator. I used to struggle to define what I did, like I had to put one label on it or choose what my life was really about. It wasn't until recently that I believed I could call myself a writer or artist. Now, I know it's *all* my life's work, and it's all contributing something to this world.

For years, I wrote a self-help newsletter. My articles were featured in major sites like Positively Positive and Tiny Buddha. It was through writing for others seeking clarity or courage that I found my own.

Today, I write poetry. S l o w l y. This was a selection from the book I'm working on now, *Love, Child. Love*. Find out more about my work at leslieralph.com.

The majority of my creation time is now spent as Ivy Junetree, author and illustrator for children and the young at heart. **You can find out more and get a free ebook and audiobook of my short story *Maevethe Moon* at ivyjunetree.com.**

Whatever I create is in celebration of love, humanity, connection. And whatever form it takes, it's always a story about love in the end.

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Maeve the Moon by Ivy Junetree