

**\*CONTENT WARNING: Suicide\***

## **Field Trajectories: A Triptych**

**by Rayya Liebich**

### **Véronique 1978 - ?**

You weren't sure what to think about the new girl with the rat tail who bragged about the metal detector at her old school. Your friendship grew out of fear and awe, an unlikely match of rainbow and black. The first time it happened was in seventh grade. It was spring, you were kissing a boy on the lush grass so you let the rumours about her whisper in the green. She came back to school with bandages on both wrists. But she didn't explain. Maybe there was nothing to say? A small patch of darkness grew between you.

Across a field of middle school memories, you'll never forget how the day Kurt Cobain died, she charged you in a hug. You let your tears roll down the back of her leather jacket. She held you upright and time stood still. How safe you felt in those tough arms. Safer here than on the grass, flirting with boys barely taller than you. You would

return to this moment in your mind as proof that she could be there for you. With all the times she bailed, stood you up, forgot, you forced yourself to remember that she could be a good friend. She didn't mean to sabotage everything. She would eventually apologize.

The second time was different. You were in high school now. Fifteen? Does it matter? A classmate called you, and you ran to her house. You remember her swollen eyes not wanting to meet yours as if predicting your disapproval. She muttered a series of slurred *I'm sorry's*. You recoiled when she whispered your nickname: *Rainbow*. But five steps back you could still see the pill bottles by her bedside. Two standing upright like pawns, one lying on its side. Checkmate. The jingle of her mother's keys in the door was your cue, and you bolted. That night you held the telephone to your ear and let it ring and ring and ring. Punishing yourself for your silence, imagining her in the hospital bed, shadows of a flatline painting white walls.

She survived. The friendship didn't. Years and years and years later, you would receive a letter in your cubicle at work, the handwriting instantly recognizable. How did she find this address? You were across the world from home and hadn't communicated with her in years. An A.A. assignment, she wrote you an apology for all the times she had been selfish, manipulative, dramatic, deceiving, destructive. She listed moments you had long forgotten— or had tried to. You were a young woman now. Dressed in nice clothes at your first real job. But you still didn't have the tools to deal with this. Maybe you hadn't forgiven yourself yet for your silence. You folded the letter and sealed it back in the envelope. You searched for the courage to scrawl: *Return to sender*.

\*\*\*

### **Marie 1979-1996**

We moved by echolocation. Across the November field, we fluttered in black trench coats like bats, shielded from the sight of a flag at half-mast. We clung to each other to survive the vacant chair in homeroom, the empty locker in the hallway, the extra parking stall by the gate. At night, we filled our lungs with smoke and howled like a pack of wolves under shattered stars. All of us nocturnal now, we endured hours of staring at white ceilings in our own floating beds. Time bending as we watched sunlight skim our curtains, counting shadows like minutes until we could reunite with our clan.

Where were the adults? I remember crying on my mother's lap when I came home from school that day. Had the principal called all the parents to tell them about the accident? My mother let me slip away to my friend's house for what would be the first night of vigil. The next day at school, I remember which teachers addressed the loss and which ones didn't. Silently, I categorized in two: worthy of respect, or, hypocrite. Quadratic equations, iambic pentameter, the third person plural in German. White letters scratched on blackboards in a world that no longer existed.

The only meaningful gesture was from our theatre teacher. He shifted with discomfort carrying a tray of tea from the cafeteria and let us collapse in a heap on the empty stage. He gave us permission to speak, sit in silence, or wail. Some of us did all

three. Awkwardly, he hovered by the door at the end of the day and offered to hug us goodbye.

Later in life, I wrote him a letter. It was one of the many *Thank You* cards I wrote after my mother died of ovarian cancer to acknowledge those who showed up for me. Perhaps an attempt to make up for those who hadn't. His kindness on the darkest day of my adolescence came to me so strongly, I felt compelled to reach out. I addressed him by his teacher name, though I must have been the same age that he had been as my teacher then. He replied in a long letter revealing his own experience with loss at seventeen, admitting he still felt haunted by witnessing a friend drown so many years ago. He recalled feeling utterly helpless as an adult in our world, but his loss had taught him that all he could do was sit with us in the circle of sorrow.

I could list bitter blame and reasons why so many of our lives went sideways after that year. The friends that didn't finish high school. The ones who never learned to drive. Those who could never get their addictions under control. I was one of the lucky ones. I carried my grief across the world to start a fresh life. But unlike my new peers, I felt the hollowness of loss in my bones. Like a flightless bird, I was always scanning the sky for my flock.

\*\*\*

## Dawson 1999-2017

I cross the snowy field and enter the high school. Familiar. Unfamiliar. Teens slither in as the bell rings, and slump into their seats. I wonder which desk was his. Twenty years since I was in their shoes, a lifetime of preparation for this moment. But the rawness is palpable. Grief trickles down the back of my throat as I introduce myself and disclaim I'm not a counsellor. I'm just someone who has survived loss. I tell them grief is chaotic. Suicide is unbearably confusing. Adults in the world are so filled with discomfort, no one knows what to do. I tell them all feelings are allowed, and that sometimes writing helps. I ask them to pick up a pencil and do the impossible.

They write about how things should have been. How this is not it. I tell them I knew him. Their pencils pause in midflight and they look up at me with shattered eyes. I tell them a long time ago I was his teacher. He was always making jokes and disrupting my lessons. Later, when my mother died and I went overseas, he had taken care of my dog. He had always wanted a dog and this was his chance to show his parents how responsible he was. Unfortunately, the dog was terrified of thunder and within days in his care there had been a summer storm. My dog destroyed his mattress, their family sofa, and his mothers best sheets. I tell them how a few weeks ago he had filled up my car at the gas station, and how I had marvelled at how grown up he was. How well he looked. I tell them it's nobody's fault.

They write about all the things he loved, and who he might have become. Finally, they write a letter: *If you could read this letter, this is what I would say*. They find the courage to write his name: *Dear Dawson*. I pass out white envelopes weaving my way up and down

aisles of loss. They write until the bell goes, then lick the envelopes closed. I stand by the door and find the courage to meet their eyes. They trickle out like a row of ducklings. Awkward and shuffling, protecting each other down the narrow hallway. I watch until they are out of sight, silently repeating: *you are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone.*

