

Sacred Play

T. A. BARRON

NATURE AND CULTURE ORION

NATURE HAS ALWAYS soaked me in waterfalls of wonder. In a redwood forest, when I crawled into the hollow of an ancient tree and listened to its centuries of stories. By a lake, as I watched thousands of flamingos suddenly take flight. In the ocean, when I first swam in a ring of dolphins. Atop a windblown ridge, when I found a single, star-shaped columbine. On a great river, while I kayaked through millions of years of geologic time. Among a family of mountain gorillas, as I gazed into deep brown eyes so like my own. At an alpine meadow on a moonless night, as I viewed countless bright stars and endless dark spaces.

But before all that came the wonder of the Big Snow.

I was just seven. A massive New England snowstorm had slammed into our hillside, burying our house. When my parents at last dug out the doorway and a path outside, snow covered everything—my bike, the bushes, even my dad’s dilapidated Jeep.

Old enough to be curious but young enough to need help putting on my puffy snow gear, I waddled outside. I tossed snowballs, dug a snow den, rolled down drifts, lost a mitten, found it again, and blew clouds of mist. I found a jagged row of icicles, stroked their slippery cold surface, then smashed them to smithereens. Once I caught a wide, glistening snow crystal in my bare hand, felt its sting on my skin, then watched it melt away.

Awake in all my senses, as children are naturally, I truly lived that storm. I played, digging and twirling, kicking and tasting, seeking the all of it. Finally, exhausted, I leaned against a snowdrift that rose higher than my head.

My mother approached me with a knowing gleam in her eyes—a look I’d seen many times before, her druid look. She patted the snowdrift, sending up a puff of shimmering crystals.

“Believe it or not,” she said, “there are flowers under there.”

I stared at her, thunderstruck. Flowers? Under all that snow? I was sure she had lost her mind.

As the months passed, though, I saw that she was right. In spring, bright yellow dandelions sprouted in that very spot, joined by some purple bells of pasque flowers. To me, that storm was a thrilling playscape. To her, it was a sign of the miracle of the seasons.

And in time, I would discover that this was only part of a much greater miracle. When she patted that enormous pile of snow and predicted the astonishing birth of wildflowers, she was speaking about something deeper than drifts, brighter than dandelions, grander than seasons. Nature’s power of transformation. That power—the magic of renewal and rebirth—is woven through the wondrous tapestry of life. It is the true source of nature’s sacredness.

How can one tiny seed produce a mighty apple tree that bears crisp, tart fruit whose flavor explodes in our mouths like liquid sunshine? How can we feel, at the same time, incredibly small and infinitely large when we walk in a great forest, swim in the sea, or lie beneath the stars? Why does nature eternally expand our minds, lift our hearts, and heal our aching souls?

There are flowers under there.

At last, after enough years of life, I’m beginning to understand what my mother really meant. Nature’s power of transformation is a reminder of the ongoing miracle of life, death, and rebirth. And it is also something more—a call to believe in our own power to shape our lives and ourselves.

By that, nature offers us one more gift. It is elusive, often very hard to find. But it just might be the most precious gift of all.

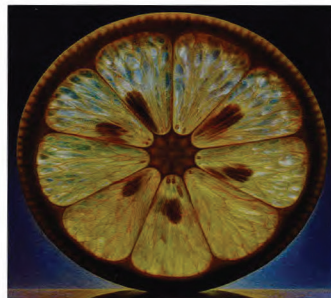
Hope.

At times in life, I feel surrounded by deep snow. Cold and lifeless, it chills me to the bone. And then I hear a voice, faint but insistent, like a half-remembered song.

There are flowers under there.



ROSETTES SERIES #97, OIL ON CANVAS, 48 x 48 INCHES.



ROSETTES SERIES #93, OIL ON CANVAS, 48 x 48 INCHES.

T. A. Barron is the author of thirty-two books for children of all ages, including the award-winning Merlin Saga. All his books and his podcast, Magic & Mountains, explore environmental themes and radiate passion for nature. He is also the founder of the Gloria Barron Prize, a national award for diverse, public-spirited kids who are making a positive impact.