

Winner of the Shift Report Prize for Nonfiction

In Chrysalis

by Kylie Smith

The morning burns so hot that splotches of cobalt and sienna crack and dry on our palettes. It is too bad, I think, that The Jordan River Traumatic Brain Injury Center does not have different oil paints, the kind that can handle occasional bouts of August heat. I peak across Sitka spruce trees and watch Mark work. As usual, he asks me to measure the breadth and height of each of his strokes with a ruler; his hands steady as they rip pages and start again every time he fails to master lines. It is only my second week working as a nurse for the center and so far, I spend every afternoon in the courtyard practicing art therapy with Mark. His therapist tells me that colors soothe him, and creativity gives him a sense of order and control. Most importantly, art therapy helps Mark to stay oriented to all three spheres: person, place, and time.

Above us, golden-plovers leap and dive, and Mark wonders out loud whether or not he can put them down in color. He says he wants to capture the way the feathers drape across their velvet backs and the tinny freckles of deep auburn on their wings.

“What are you working on?” Mark asks.

“I have absolutely no idea,” I reply. “What do you think I should paint?”

“I think you should paint this picture,” he says as he pulls up a photo on his phone.

In the photograph, a muscled man towers above ficus trees and holds a tiny baby on his lap as a blonde woman rests her head against his chest.

“Who is this?” I ask Mark.

“It’s me,” he replies. “It’s me in my other life.”

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Lepidopterologist Vladimir Nabokov once said that "it is astounding how little the ordinary person notices the lives of butterflies." The tiniest ones so often rest on handrails and blades of grass, almost invisible, common as a wind-chill, and yet, when you look closer, you see scallops of mango orange and patterns of gold and russet. A sliver, a dot, a language in code.

On an October morning, I drive two hours through an autumn-kissed canyon and watch as soft burgundy and sand-colored leaves burst above the pine trees of Northern Utah. When I pull into the parking lot of the butterfly biosphere located in the city of Lehi, I see rusty tips of *Brown Siproetas* through the glass walls. Though I long to get a closer look, I walk to the reception area and wait for my tour guide to meet me. Usually, this is a self-guided tour, but a friend of mine has called in a favor, a woman named Reyna who specializes in butterflies. While I wait, I watch children race down a red-spiraled slide, their parents clutching pamphlets with titles like *Mariposa Miami Blue* and *Butterfly Garden Signs*. After a few minutes, a tall woman with brown, frizzy hair introduces herself as Reyna and guides me into the glass-walled dome.

The biosphere's moist breath clouds the glass with fog. People around me comment on the heat, but I am distracted by a single pink stripe on a *Cydno Longwing*. In my view, there is every type of butterfly I ever knew existed. Faded gold and grey butterflies as tiny as commas rest on milkweed, while I duck to avoid a blue *Morpho* as wide as my palm.

"Sorry, I know it's warm," Reyna tells me. "Since most of these butterflies come from tropical climates in South America, we try to keep it at around eighty-five degrees and sixty percent humidity," she tells me.

"How do you get them all the way over here?" I ask.

"They are shipped to us in chrysalis form," Reyna replies.

From years of studying biology, I know that butterflies retain sensory memories from their time as caterpillars. When these butterflies emerge from their cocoons, 3,000 miles away in Utah, I wonder if they wake up confused at the different smells and sounds. I wonder if it feels like falling asleep in one place and waking up in another.

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In August of 1948, Hanna Willner woke in the belly of the night and stumbled through her small bedroom. *Anyone resisting or disobeying any law, order, or regulation from this day forth will be severely punished*, the Soviets had threatened when they first entered her farming village. Perhaps at that moment, angry winds pushing against the windowpane, Hanna remembered those words. At twenty years old, German law still considered Hanna a minor and did not permit her to leave home without parental consent. Knowing she could face beatings or prison if she did not succeed, Hanna pulled a brown suitcase from beneath her bed and folded her woolen sweater and cotton shift, wondering again if she could make it to the West.

Before sunrise, Hanna tiptoed down the stairs, careful not to wake her parents or any of her eight younger siblings. She closed the front door behind her and passed the day-hammered fields and half-timbered houses where she once ran street races and played hide and seek with her brothers. She rounded the corner by the church and started toward the station. When she arrived, she boarded a train to Magdeburg and tried not to call attention to herself. Through the window, she watched the passing landscape, the wheat-colored farm fields, and the late summer sage.

With no map and no plan for how to make it to the border, Hanna assumed she would have to find a place to jump off and then run westward. The wheels of the train rattled beneath Hanna's feet, and for a moment, though her body sprang into the future, I wonder if her mind

sifted through the past. Perhaps she thought of her father and the nights he spent teaching her to play Christmas carols on the mandolin. Perhaps she held the warmth of the wool sweater knit by her mother and thought of the way she once spent time in prison for accepting a gift of extra food from her own parents' garden. Maybe she thought of her sister Tiele and how they used to run through meadows making daisy and cornflower crowns for one another, or of her new baby sister Helga and how they mayor cancelled her christening, announcing communism as the only religion allowed in the country.

Though she did not know how or when she would see her family again, Hanna convinced herself that she would somehow find a way to stay close from the other side. Like droves of others making the same choice for the same reasons, Hanna was determined to escape.

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I learn that Mark was once an accountant, a soldier, a father of two. His walls are dotted with photographs. A woman in a lacy white dress beaming beside a cobblestone building. A hoard of teenage boys with grass-stained knees cheering and hoisting Mark in the air. Tiny, toe-headed girls sitting cross legged on blue shag carpet and listening as their father reads them a bed-time story. Below the photographs lay Mark's creations, swirls of slow pink painted across kingdoms, oceans, meadows.

When I tell people that I work as a residential nurse for people with TBIs, I imagine that other images flash through their minds. Those of the motionless, the lost, the broken. While it is true that I often confront pain as I scrub bodies and change sheets, I know that lack cannot tell the complete stories of the people I have come to love. Though we try to categorize and understand the behavioral patterns of the injured, we are forced over and over to accept how

much we cannot know about our patients' inner worlds. Like everyone else, almost half of their brains are up of gray matter, full of blurred edges and lost distinctions.

After clocking into work, I walk past muted grey couches as fluorescent lights fill the hallways. There are no blinds on the big windows, no picture frames on the ivory walls. To my right, tired-eyed aids prepare breakfast while residents start their morning routines. Still new, I cross the hall into Mark's room and hope that I will be able to remember protocol for how to interact with him.

"Good morning," I whisper as I flick the light on.

"Hello," Mark says. "Where are the glass maracas?"

By now, I know that Mark's words sometimes get jammed in synapses. I watch his eyes widen and still as he tries to think of the right thing to say. He opens his mouth, then closes it and stares.

"Let's get you dressed, and start on some exercises," I tell him.

"Okay, but first can I tell you about my other life?" He asks. As if begging the listener to see him in his entirety, this is how Mark begins and ends most conversations. I nod my head, and Mark starts in. "Well, there was a tiny baby in a purple cotton blanket. She laid in a brown crib made of wood, and sometimes she cried" he says. I smile and squeeze his hand. All I know about Mark's history I have learned from reading his medical records and listening to his stories about his photographs. Neither I nor my coworkers have ever met his children. I wonder if it is simply too painful for them to see him in his new state, to wonder if he still holds them in the way he once did. "Can I paint it for you?" Mark asks.

"Later," I say. We begin the morning routine as usual; I stand at his bedside and remind him to walk to the dresser, the hard item to the left of his bed. From there, he needs to place his

right hand inside the indentation, the handle, and pull. I continue this step by step until Mark is fully dressed, often pausing to draw pictures when he fails to understand the words. Though his primary care doctor assures us that Mark had no artistic inclinations in his *other life*, visual art now seems to be Mark's primary language.

The entire mind—not just the affected area—reorganizes entirely in response to a brain injury. In Mark's case, doctors believe that the visual cortex and spatial centers bend to compensate for what's lost in memory and reasoning. In other words, Mark, the accountant who used to see the world in figures and equations, now only has access to pictures and stories. Perhaps this is why his paintings are so vivid, his attention to lighting and stroke so acute. It is as if his entire brain has reassembled to understand the world only in terms of beauty.

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Hanna emerged from the pine forest in the West Zone weary and shaken after following a group of fellow refugees into the wild of the East. With a deserted country road in front of her and no sign of life in either direction, she chose a path, suitcase in hand, and started walking. After days of stumbling alone through dense woods and tangled underbrush, she came upon the tiny farming village of Dettum in West Germany.

There, an aproned village matron spotted the skinny, stringy-haired girl and took pity on her. When the kind stranger learned of Hanna's status as an Eastern refugee, she took her arm and guided her to a farmhouse on the edge of the village.

The woman introduced Hanna to the Schneiders, a young family in need of a nanny and willing to look the other way at Hanna's illegal status. Hanna worked for them for four months, cooking, cleaning, and caring for their young son. I wonder if she thought of her own little

brother, Kai, as she cared for the boy. I wonder if the stew ever scorched her as she prepared it, knowing that six-year-old Kai so often lingered at the dinner table for want of food.

On Christmas Eve, the Schneiders took Hanna to church. Surrounded by strangers, she stared at stained glass windows and listened to the gentle vibrations of the organ. When "Silent Night" played, a screw tightened in Hanna's throat. A year ago, she had been home with her family, where they celebrated the holiday in spite of Soviet threats to punish those who did. She thought of her old house, decorated with fresh pine and wooden ornaments, and of the soft carols, whispered so that the neighbors would not hear. She thought of how her mother used the last of the families' sugar and flour rations to bake cinnamon clove and honey cookies. Hanna did know then that the holiday would be the last she would ever spend with her family. She did not think to savor the soft, crystalline snowflakes and red ribbon laced straw. Now, less than seventy miles, the ache of the separation overcame her. To the utter embarrassment of the Schneiders and the annoyed looks of other worshippers, Hanna wept.

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Back at the biosphere, I watch as butterflies land on shoulders and palms. I am entranced especially by the glasswing; a clear butterfly adapted to hide, to protect itself. It seems so small, so delicate, but in actuality, it can hold more than forty times its weight.

We walk to the back of the dome to a wall lined with cocoons. There, a little girl taps Reyna's shoulder and asks if caterpillars are becoming butterflies inside. She replies that the caterpillars have always contained the DNA and hormones to become butterflies, but that inside the cocoon, those parts must dissemble and rearrange. As I stare at the home-spun silk of the pupas, I am reminded of how much unseen pain lines the process of metamorphosis.

Before making a cocoon, a caterpillar feels a suffocating pain in the neck and lungs. Somehow, the larva knows that the only way to soothe the sting is to crawl up a wall or a tree trunk. The caterpillar must then hang herself from a silk patch. And then comes the first test; The caterpillar must shed its own skin.

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By the early 1980s, Hanna lived in Kansas with her husband and five children. Though letters from the East were scarce and often intercepted by Soviet officials, she framed a message once received from her little sister, Heidi, now an adult, who sent Hanna a photograph captioned “please do not forget me.”

Hanna replied, but letters from home hushed once more, and her only source of information about the East soon became news reporters who berated the USSR for failing to provide food and shelter to its citizens. Knowing news outlets in the West despised the Soviets, Hanna sometimes allowed herself not to believe and to instead imagine her family with full bellies and warm sweaters. Still, she carried the heft of all she did not know. Try as she might, Hanna could not enter the world she once inhabited.

While her husband Eddie climbed through military ranks, Hanna dedicated her days to teaching her children Mozart and Math, but rarely about their origins in East Germany. Though animosity between The USSR and the western world was gentling, the smog of the red scare still hovered. Americans remained hyper-alert about Soviet spies in their midst and Hanna must have feared repercussions should her children reveal too much.

One night in Washington DC, Hanna attended a gala for US intelligence officers with her husband. Beneath a sparkling chandelier, and amid tables covered in white linen and stemmed glassware, I imagine local politicians’ wives made polite dinner conversation. Between

discussion about Moscow's dangerous ambitions, they must have spoken of teenage years in Louisville and La Fayette where they dressed for dances and cheered for teams. At seventeen, Hanna had been harvesting carrots in a garden where soldiers watched, promising to shoot if she ate without permission. I imagine she remained quiet through the night. Toward the close of the dinner, one wife asked Hanna where she grew up.

“East Germany,” Hanna replied on instinct, to which the alarmed woman gasped.

"You're a communist!?" That outburst brought the table to a sudden silence and from that point forward, Hanna knew she could not claim her life in East Germany.

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To shed skin, the caterpillar twists and jolts, extricating its arms and legs from the very patch of silk that holds it together. Upside down, dangling, it then leaps from the silk-patch and attaches itself by a hook at the top of its body. Then the caterpillar liquefies. Now separated from the very thing that once held it together, the pupa starts to reform. Cells thicken to become disks, orders of veins assemble, patterns of wings embedded in DNA start to come out. That is, for the lucky ones., Pre- packaged, immobile, and full of nutrients, wild chrysalides often become convenience foods for birds and lizards. And what is a chrysalis to do in the presence of a thrasher or a thunderstorm except to stay still, silent, intent.

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Heatwaves radiate above the pines; the mountain a space of light where slow moving rivers wander, carrying the orb of the sun with them. “Close your eyes and think of willows,” the yoga teacher says, “think of strawberry fields, of almonds, of the breath that keeps you alive. Think of all the blessings you have.” On exhalation, I send up gratitude for legs that hold me and words that spill out of my mouth with ease. I also feel a sprinkling of guilt for these gifts as I

notice wheelchairs and word-charts around me. I knew when I suggested it that taking nine TBI patients on a field trip into Alpine Canyon was going to be a challenge, but I hoped that the stillness of the saltbush would help them ease their racing minds.

So far, we have not made it five minutes into meditation without being interrupted, usually by an overstimulated Mark, who cannot help but comment on the fading purple of the Rocky Mountains and the falling petals of woody asters. My supervisor asks me to take Mark on a walk so that he does not distract the others. Sketchbooks in hand, we shuffle through the forest and listen to meadowlarks whistle yellow holes into the air.

“Can I tell you about my other life?” Mark asks.

“Of course,” I tell him.

"Well, in my other life, when I was a child, I used to live here in these mountains," Mark says.

“No, you did not,” I correct him, “you were born and raised in California.”

"No!" He interjects, "I was born here. I think my father was the first one to discover this place, and it was so ugly, and I helped him plant the grass and the flowers, and I made it so awesome," he says.

Doctors now tell us that Mark is getting worse. With a mind like a slideshow, they worry that he's beginning to insert himself into every image he sees and paints. They say that he's fabricating memories.

Looking into the shimmer in Mark's eyes, my instinct is to agree with him, to congratulate him on creating a mountain, to allow him to stay in the safe woods of his other life. But I understand that I work at a recovery center where the goal is nursing patients *back* so that they can once again return to the before; the version of themselves that existed before the trauma.

I answer on script and begin a line of questioning to gauge where Mark is and guide him back to reality.

“What’s your name?” I begin. Sensing my tone, Mark’s face drops.

“Oh.” He says, coming back. “Was I making up stories again?”

"I think you were," I say, "but they were beautiful stories." We walk back to the rhythm of jolting wind, pausing only when Mark spots bristle brush. As we approach the group, Mark turns to me.

“Hey nurse,” he asks,

“Yes?”

“How can I tell what’s real?”

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In 1990, Hanna, now sixty-three years old, boarded an airplane to Frankfurt. Like the rest of the United States, she heard the news from Peter Jennings that the Berlin wall would soon tear. When she called her sister Heidi to celebrate, Heidi told Hanna she did not dare to believe that the Soviet occupation would end. Unlike Hanna who had crossed oceans, Heidi’s entire life had been spent east of the iron curtain and she could not now imagine another world. Perhaps Hanna worried then. The Soviets so often framed Westerners as war criminals and heathens and Hanna must have wondered whether family members would still accept her. Touching down in the East, Hanna saw her brother Manni, only thirteen when she left and now in his mid-fifties. She noticed the fade and mellow of his once striking features but recognized his smile even as he cried. Manni greeted Hanna with an embrace and a bouquet.

On the drive home, Manni and Hanna must have spoken about the death of their little brother Kai who had been lost to a rare blood disease, and about the way their father was

institutionalized late in life for speaking out against the regime. For Hanna, I imagine it was as if the bombs the world so feared had at last descended. Sitting alone in the back of Manni's white Trabant, she must have longed to reach through the curtain of time and mourn the losses with her siblings.

When they arrived at Manni's house, Hanna saw her brothers and sisters again and learned their occupations and the names of their children. I wonder how many feelings gathered at once as the family reunited. Beneath wonder and grace, there must have been a primal pain for all that had been lost. The weddings and funerals. The quiet Tuesday nights and dinners of bread and beets.

That night, they walked their cobblestone streets and for a while, Hanna's life in the West felt like a dream. The schoolhouse she attended as a girl still stood; the bright white paint now withered to a slow gray. The larch trees her father once planted for her remained and now reached the fading amber of the dimming sky. They stopped to lay cornflowers at their parents' graves and I imagine Hanna listened to Manni and Helga's stories. The ones about their father at his granddaughter's swim meets and the ones about their mother's Chamomile garden. Having not seen her parents and decades, I imagine Hanna had little to add.

Settling back into the house, Hanna heard a final knock at the door. Heidi, the sister Hanna had not met in person but had not forgotten, stood. Her had grown into a tall and statuesque woman, but all Hanna could see was the face of the little girl in the photograph on her wall. Despite Hanna's fears, Heidi extended her hand and did not let go for the rest of the afternoon. For Hanna the linking was an assurance that some part of her was still home.

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As I watch the still silk chrysalids, I imagine that most people do not take the time to mourn the dissolved caterpillar because they believe it has become something better. I, however,

am saddened by the fact that the caterpillar is defined not by what it is but by what we expect it to become.

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People often ask me if I think that my patients will ever get “better.” For this, of course, I have no answer. Studies have shown that it is possible to re-grow brain cells. I am not sure what the implications of that are for someone like Mark. Would his vanished memories and math skills return? Would he retain his art skills? Would he become like a blind man who had sight restored and then felt overwhelmed by yellows and skies? Regardless of what the future holds, I am grateful to have known been a part of this particular life of Mark's. On my last day at the center, I stop by his room. His is the last goodbye I have to say, and I breathe in, trying not to remind myself that this our last moment.

In the two years since I began my work here, Mark's memory and reasoning has deteriorated and now, we usually assume that he is never oriented to all three spheres. His art pieces, on the other hand, look like complete masterpieces. The severity of his disability evident in his reliance on shape and color to ground him in the world. I peer over the same pictures of his family hanging on the walls. They are freeze-frames that keep his wife from leaving him, his team from losing, his daughters from growing up. I hand him a picture of the two of us and wonder whether or not I should say a sad goodbye that only I will remember. Before I have to decide, Mark interjects.

“Can I tell you about my other life?” He asks.

“Of course,” I say.

“Well, I think I had a kingdom of frogs.” Looking over at his bookshelf, I notice a *Frog and Toad* book and try not to laugh.

“Tell me about it?” I ask, and Mark’s face pulses with excitement.

"Well, I lived on the riverbank and cooked flies for them," he says, "and I protected them from hunters and snakes," he says.

“It sounds like you were a wonderful king,” I tell him.

"I was," Mark says, "and guess what else? When I lived there, I had a tiny baby in a purple cotton blanket. She laid in a brown crib made of wood, and sometimes she cried.”

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Notes:

Page 1: All identifying information about Mark including his name, the location of the center, and his age have been changed in accordance with HIPPA guidelines. The timeline of my relationship with Mark has also been changed for further protection and anonymity.

Page 2: *Vladmir Nabakov once said...*: Sharman, Russell Apt. *An Obsession with Butterflies*. Perseus Publishing, 2003.

Page 3: *In August of 1948*: Willner, Nina. *Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall*. Abacus, 2018, p 54-58. Most of the information about Hanna's experiences, thoughts, and feelings come from this book, which was written by Hanna's daughter, Nina Willner.

Page 5: *Almost half of their brains are made up of grey matter*: Mercadante, Anthony A., and Prasanna Tadis. "Neuroanatomy, Gray Matter." *National Institutes of Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 31 July 2020, www.nih.gov/health-information.

Page 6: *The entire mind*: Kilcullen, Walter L. *Brain Injury: Living a Productive Life after a Stroke or Traumatic Brain Injury*. Walter L. Kilcullen, 2013.

Page 6: *Hanna emerged*: Willner, Nina. *Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall*. Abacus, 2018, p 67

Page 7: *On Christmas Eve*: Ibid p 69

Page 7: *Chrystaline snowflakes*: Ibid p 39

Page 7: *The glasswing....can hold more than forty times it's weight*: Gupta, Himanshu, et al.

“Butterfly Diversity and Effect of Temperature and Humidity Gradients on Butterfly Assemblages in a Sub-Tropical Urban Landscape.” *Tropical Ecology*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2019, pp. 150–158.

Page 7: *Before making a cocoon*: McDonald, Graham. *Butterfly Gardening*. Butterfly and Other Invertebrates Club, 2005.

Page 8: *By the early 1980s*: Willner, Nina. *Forty Autumns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall*. Abacus, 2018, p 175

Page 9: *You're a communist*: Ibid p 235

Page 9: *At seventeen*: Ibid p 21

Page 11: *In 1990*: Ibid p 330

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