

The Year of The Dahlia

Part 1: Harvest

Part 2: Rotten

Part 3: Dormant

Part 4: Spring

Epilogue: Bloom

Part 1: Harvest

By Winnie Morin, free write workshop #1

Monthaven Continuing Education Center

Assignment: describe a memorable scene from your neighborhood.

They bloom at the very end of summer, when August has become tiresome and hot.

Everything else in the garden is long gone. With Autumn just around the corner, the last thing you expect is a field full of bright blossoms in every color. But that's the Dahlias.

They grow on tall, strong stalks. The dirt beneath them is rich, dark, and heaped into rows. Some of the flowers are tiny, tight Pom-Poms while others are the size of dinner plates. My neighbors make bouquets out of the pinks and purples, or sometimes fall colors like yellow, orange, or burnt umber. My favorite is made entirely of white.

The flower petals are soft, like the cheeks of a young child. The smell is pure green. If color had a scent, it would be the smell of Dahlia flowers and stalks.

My favorite thing about Autumn is these plants. I love the shocking bright blooms that come almost too late. They flower against a bright blue sky as the days shorten; their colors bursting in sharp contrast to everything else around. In the woods, yellow leaves fall from deciduous trees. In the yard, the grass turns brown. When I step outside in the morning, the wind picks up and mornings are chilly.

Yet still, the Dahlias bloom. They burst, untwist, show off. They Explode.

The last flowers of the year.

Olive (diary, September 3rd)

It's my birthday. I should be happy, but I'm not.

We moved to this stupid house in the middle of a dumb town called Selkah and worst of all, my mom and her idiot boyfriend Cal rented a house at the end of a dirt road, near a river, with one of the

pastures already full of mud and supposedly... according to the one neighbor I've met, the front yard will be flooded almost all winter. There are no other houses around within yelling distance, and I hate the school. So yeah, it sucks.

I've just grabbed Cal's big coat off the porch – it's only early September but already frickin' cold – and I'm walking out to the horse barn to throw hay before school, and that's when I see it. A tangle of balloons mid-way up one of the many huge evergreen trees that live in this godforsaken place. One balloon is a pink heart. The other one, silver, says *happy birthday*. I know right away where they're from. My sister Sophie. She's gone, but she leaves these signs everywhere. I turn and run back into the house.

“Mom, Mom!” I call. “Sophie's here again.”

She smiles, not looking at all surprised, and stands up with her coffee mug in hand. Her fingers shake just a little as she pulls on mud boots to follow me out. We walk down the gravel drive to the barn, and I point.

“Well... would you look at that” she murmurs. “I guess she's wishing you a happy birthday. Now, you can cheer up and get on with your goddamn day.”

And she puts her arm around me. It's funny with my mom. Her anger and swearing, then moments of weird forced love, totally surprisingly interspersed. I've gotten used to it during the last six months. Since Sophie died.

“Well, if you want me to get on with it, get ready to drive me to school!” I snap back. I'm supposed to take the bus, but if she drives me it's way faster. It's my birthday, so she takes the bait.

After the horses are fed... the three muddy, lonely horses from Grand Junction, Colorado, where we moved from, she's in the navy blue truck, waiting for me. Exhaust spews over the dewy grass, and the bright ember of a cigarette pokes out the driver side window. I walk toward the truck, but I stop and turn back to see the balloons one more time. *Thanks Sophie*. I whisper. *I'll try harder*.

Winnie (Journal, September 5th)

My goal: To write a novel. There. I wrote it down.

And I like to think, when my book is done, that I'll be interviewed by Terry Gross on National Public Radio. I just love her, and how she always has famous writers, or actors... and asks them probing and personal questions about their creative pursuits, or their process. Questions I love hearing the answers to.

She'll say, *you are listening to Terry Gross. I'm here with debut author, Winnie Morin, who has crafted a story that is so unbelievable and heartwarming, it's been a New York Times bestseller for 12 weeks. It conquers topics that we all feel deeply, but it's original – in a beautiful, unconventional way.* And then she'll turn the microphone to me (or do they do it all over the phone?) and I'll say, with my voice confident and clear, not shaky and hoarse, and old-sounding, like it actually is, that the story was always inside me and I just needed the right time for it to come out.

But that's impossible. The truth is, I'm afraid that there is no story inside me. Everything I write ends up being a truthful, thinly veiled story about my own experience, and most of it just annoys me when I dig it up and re-read it. The genre even has a name: *personal essay* or *creative non-fiction* or some crap like that. I worked on it for years.

Now, I'm *so* over it. I want to write something that is *not* real! I think I need to write fiction, to break out of the constraints of my own mind. I want to *be* someone different, to see the world through new eyes. It's like... I want to be re-born.

Is that even possible?

I mean, I have been over and over myself, examining my thoughts and feelings from every angle. From all the maudlin nature poetry I wrote when I had my first job out of college (insert: ferns and filtered sun, road trips with an old boyfriend, towns I'd like to forget), to the early morning writing which mostly included crappy, scattered journaling when my kids were born two decades ago (insert: diapers, lack of sleep, no time for myself, I suppose it was sort of a pity party, etc.), to the *Start Eating*

for Good! pieces (S.E.G. for short), my blog about healthy vegetarian eating.

Add to that some miscellaneous personal reflections about college and experimental drugs at certain parties, and a memoir about my short stint as a camp counselor and crush on the camp director... oh *god* it just goes on and on.

So much time has passed, as I've written all of those pieces. My kids are gone, they are living their own lives. My 50th birthday is coming up, in just a few short years. How did time move so quickly? It all seems hopeless. Or somehow, too late.

I need to get *unreal*. Away from my own thoughts. Into a new scene.

I need to practice, right? I'll practice every day. Maybe I should start short. Do I need an outline? Do I need to pick a genre first? Maybe get into young adult fiction. That's hot right now, I've heard. Or, murder and crime? Mystery?

Sounds like a tall order. And I don't mean the size of my latte. Though I'll definitely be drinking a latte during most of my future writing sessions, if I can arrange that. My favorite drink right now isn't even a latte; it's called *London Fog*. Earl Gray tea with steamed milk and vanilla. Highly overpriced.

Terry Gross, I'll get there someday. I know you want me on your radio show, talking about my finished product – the amazing fictional narrative I somehow pulled out of myself. I have a feeling that someone wants to hear what I have to say.

I just don't know how to begin.

Mike (Class journal, September 6th)

I'm an 8th grader at Elliot Middle. Part of our assignment this fall in English class is to do a writing journal. Our teacher, Ms. Morin, laid out the job pretty clearly on the first day, in her slightly strange accent – she's Canadian I think? But it's been a little weird. I've never had a teacher give me such an open-ended assignment before. She said at the beginning of every period (I have her third period, so I'm not super tired but I'm usually already getting hungry), we have to take out these

notebooks (from our school supply list, just plain spiral notebooks, college-rule line height, and mine happens to be black) and free write for 15 minutes exactly. It was a little hard at first, but now I'm finding that I really don't mind it. The best part is, she doesn't even read them at the end of each week, she just flips through to make sure we're writing in English and not repeating, like, the same word over and over again. Like, in *The Shining*, where Jack writes over and over again: *all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*. God that's a great book. And movie. What that makes me think of right now, though, is the other person in my class who loves Stephen King.

Olive. She's new this year and I've never met anyone like her. She is quiet, and serious, and I can already tell that she's like a totally straight-A student. When she gets called on she always knows the answer, and she talks with this strange confidence, like she's just above it all. I also have math with her and she's in the most advanced algebra table group. She seems older than the rest of us, maybe because she is so quiet and aloof? But on the other hand, she looks really young. She wears all black every day, but she has this surprisingly blonde hair, usually tucked under a hat, and her eyes are light blue. So light that it's like that lightest blue crayon in the pack. Or like the color of water in the river, where it's so shallow it's almost translucent.

Anyway, she doesn't even know who I am, I don't think... except this thing did happen last week. We had an assignment in class, where we had to write down one of our favorite books and a bunch of notes about why, and both Olive and I had Stephen King. We were the only ones. I had *The Shining* and she had *Carrie*. After class we walked out together, and we had this short conversation. It went like this:

Me: Oh so hi, did you just move here?

Olive: Ya. Should I read the shining?

Me: what?

Olive: is it good. Should I read it.

Me: uh, ya.

And that was it. It wasn't the most eloquent (that word is from my vocab list) few moments of 8th grade so far, but she looked me in the eye for just a second. And, she's going to read *The Shining*. At least, she asked me about it, so I think she will. I decided to get *Carrie*. And then next time we talk, I can tell her that I'm reading it.

The problem is, I haven't gotten my copy from the town library yet cause my dad never has time to take me. The school library doesn't have any Stephen King. So when I get the book, finally, I'm gonna have to totally *plow* through it. Maybe I could do a few all-nighters. It'll be worth it though, I think. It's so crazy that old books are still so good. I mean, these books are from like the 80's, and here we are in almost the year 2000 (well, 1996). Everyone else in class is reading Judy Blume and Harry Potter and stuff. Kids books. Stephen King is the real deal.

But I'm not scared. I can totally handle it... uh – time's up.

More tomorrow.

The Hunter

He is ready to bleach the doe's skull.

He will boil it for hours in his big, cast-iron pot. It's the last piece of the animal. He's skinned and butchered the carcass, taking what he can use for summer sausage or jerky, and a few steaks, then burying the rest behind the shed under big heavy flagstones so the dogs can't get at it.

This feels different. He's never killed a doe before. The bucks, with their long, graceful antlers (two, three, four, or even once, a five point), are stark white and hang perfectly in the big showcase room downstairs. This one is markedly different. Every bone is more feminine, every step of putting the animal to rest has felt more intimate. He looks down at his hands, which were covered in her blood just a few hours ago, and he feels sadness for the first time. The doe was a mother – she had a fawn, he saw it off in the brush before the shot that did her in. Maxy's shot. But he didn't have a choice. He had to protect his crop, protect his own family.

He sends a brief prayer to God, or the universe, or maybe his wife's dead mother, really to whomever or whatever is listening. He says sorry. And, he says *thank you*. Thank you for the meat of the doe, for the land he owns, for the next breath he will take. And then he places the skull into the pot of boiling water.

Afterward, he scrubs it, dries it, and hangs it up in the trophy room with the others. He chooses a spot in the middle of the East facing wall, moving the three point into the opposite corner. But the skull looks naked and too petite, so his teenage daughter, Maxine, adds a rainbow-colored lei from a costume party, draping it gently from the jaw, to the holes where the ears would have been, and over the bare crown without antlers.

Now, you are the queen deer, he tells the skull proudly. And even as he promises to never shoot another mother, he looks forward to his next hunt.

Winnie (journal, September 10th)

Maybe they'll make my book into a movie, when it's done. I took a writing class in the city once and they said that – you have to think of your scenes the way a director does. So you should start in real close, maybe zoomed into a scene around a kitchen table. There is fresh orange juice in a glass pitcher, and some childhood artwork around... clutter on the counters, and syrup stains on the table cloth. A couple is arguing. He is dressed for work – a tidy gray checkered shirt tucked in, hair cut so short it's almost not there. She is in a green bathrobe; she's just done the morning routine. Gotten the kids to school after feeding them, dressing them, packing their lunches.

We are so microscopic, so zoomed in, that we see a blueberry stain on the sleeve of her green robe. We notice the crumbs of dried toothpaste on the corner of his mouth, or maybe a tiny drop of blood from the shaving cut on his chin. We hear their angry, sharp words. The sun is coming in through the triple-pane window, shining in right from their beautifully manicured front yard, but from within this classic family scene we need to learn about the tension, we *need* to see action, probably through

some dialogue.

But then, that's always been my issue. The dialogue.

I need to make them real in my mind. I need to know them, feel them.

And they can't be my friends. That's too intimate... it comes back to writing about my own life.

I'm trying to make something up, goddammit. Why does it always come back to me?

The couple in the kitchen, well, the kitchen I've never seen. I definitely made that up. Although now that I think about it, I believe it takes cues from a babysitting gig I had in college. But the couple – they just aren't made up. They are most definitely Becca and Christopher, our good friends who moved out to the Midwest for his job four years ago. They are the only ones I can picture, and now that I saw them there, I just can't imagine anyone else.

I don't know if they argue in the morning, I don't even know if they see each other in the morning. I'm also not sure if she owns a bathrobe, come to think of it.

And, I just wrote “*our* good friends” but I can't say that anymore. The divorce was made final just last week. This house, the real house that I actually sit in, is empty. There is no sun streaming. There is no mess of child artwork or syrup on the table or a stack of dishes. The children are gone. Larry is gone.

I'm alone with my mind – memories swarming and mixed with something I want to write, a feeling I want to get on paper, because I want to write myself out of this. I want to, but I can't write myself out of this mess. Because I've never been able to write a goddamn piece of anything that isn't based on my own experiences, my own situations. And the reality is, my life is somewhat derailed at the moment. I've made a bunch of mistakes and I know I can't go back in time to fix them. I don't know where I went wrong. I'm lonely, and I feel completely lost, even though I'm almost 50 years old, and I'm too scared to start working on something I really want to do. I can't even tell anyone. I don't even know how to begin. What I really want is to write a story.

Instead, I'm just sitting here alone and fantasizing about how, once the novel is written, maybe

someone could make a movie based on it. I'll just skip ahead to the part where I've finally accomplished something. Will that fix things? Will I feel better? I don't know.

Whatever, I'm so totally sick of thinking about myself. I'm just so OVER it.

That couple, the imaginary couple in the sunny kitchen – arguing – what are they arguing about? His plans that night, or their son's private school and the expense of it, or whether to have another child or not, or whose responsibility it should be to feed the dog every night. Or, even deeper. Why she never hugs him anymore. Why she won't get a job. Why he stays late at work every night. Why he talks in a condescending tone to their children, reminding her of her own father. A tone of voice like nails on a chalkboard.

But if it's going to be a movie, it can't just zoom in. It also has to zoom out – the camera has to pull back. We need a larger scene. A manicured neighborhood, two matching yet slightly different SUV's in the driveway. One black, one gray. Or maybe they should both be gray, but slightly different shades. People are walking dogs, and maybe we see a lone jogger. A mountain range is in the background, the top half white with the first snow. I see a street sign, but I can't make out the letters. A lone oak tree with leaves turned colors for fall perches on the corner.

A small, rural town, parked right up in the Northwest. Or maybe the Northeast. No, it should probably be the Northwest. I know nothing about the East.

But I know the rainy season – a very wet time of year – is just about to begin.

Sophie

It's strange here. It's not dark, but it's not light. I feel weightless. I don't notice temperature at all, just that I'm surrounded by tendrils of matter. I don't remember any bad stuff that happened... only the good. When I open my eyes, it's like I'm underwater. When I close them, I see everyone back home. Olive, Mom, the horses.... James. *Home* meaning, in life, but Mom and Olive and my step-dad Cal have moved to a new house. They are moving forward in time.

I'm stuck here, but I'm not sure why. I'm floating, but I don't know where.

The feeling reminds me of a family reunion, a long time ago, when some of us went swimming in the dark water with phosphorescence. Do you know what that is? It's underwater creatures, the tiny ones, that light up when you move them. So my cousin Ricky dared me to jump in. It was after midnight. He'd been drinking, I think, looking back on it now... but I was only 12 and hadn't started up with that yet. Those were the days of good clean fun.

We had all walked down to the dock – his friends, some of my other cousins, even a few of the more adventurous parents. Mom wasn't there, she was probably off with Cal, it was that time when they were first together. When they actually seemed to like each other.

Ricky went first. There was almost no moon and when he dove into the black water, you could see a green glow around him. The water looked so cold and I was scared, but I wanted to seem tough. I'm the oldest kid in our family, two years older than my sister Olive, and so I always have to be brave. I still had my swimsuit on under my clothes, from playing in the water all day, so I pulled off my jeans and sweatshirt, took a deep breath, and dove in – I'd only learned to dive a few months ago. The water was so cold it snatched my breath away and all I saw was the darkness behind my squeezed-shut eyelids. But then I opened my eyes, and it was all around me. This light, glowing, green, streaky stuff. When my hands pulled the water in front of me, they woke up the threads, into their green glow, as if I was stirring a witches brew.

My sister was so mad when I got back and told her what I did. I don't know why – I don't know whether she was worried or just felt left out. I ran into our cabin dripping wet and laughing, and she was reading in bed. All she ever did was read back then. She scowled at me, said “don't drip water everywhere. *God* Sophie, you always make such a mess.”

At the new house, Olive still reads a lot, but she also has to take care of the horses and help my mom keep it together. I'm watching them, in my own way.

My mom is having the worst time. I don't understand why, because all she and I did was fight

when I was alive. She should be relieved I'm gone. She said the meanest things and so did I... I even told her I hated her. Over and over again. She tried to control me but she couldn't, of course she couldn't, and it made me so mad.

I guess she was just trying to protect me. I see that now. And I wish I could tell her... I feel like... I'm so sorry. I want to find a way to tell her I'm OK, but my resources are limited here in the phosphorescence. That's what I'm calling it for now. Sometimes, if I focus really hard, clearing my mind and just feeling the green streaks around me, I can make something happen in their world. Like the other day with the balloons – that was pretty cool and I know it cheered Olive up.

Mom's harder. She's drinking and smoking a lot, and she seems depressed most of the time. She lays in bed watching old movies, and forgets to feed our dogs and the cat. She left the parakeets on the porch one night when it got down to like 40 degrees. It's cold there, I can see that. I can imagine what that feels like, because Colorado was cold, too. But it also rains a lot at their new house, and it's surrounded by evergreen trees, and they are at the end of a dirt road, surrounded by mud. It's nothing like where we came from. Well, where *they* came from – I guess I don't exist anymore really? So I probably can't include myself.

Anyway, I want to tell them I'm sorry and that I'm OK. I feel no pain, I'm floating in some kind of a magical glow, more beautiful than air. More alive. More fleeting. Like my life, before it ended.

Olive (diary, September 11th)

After school I have to clean stalls. The house is empty when I get home so I throw my stuff down in our tiny entryway, and head back to the barn. Sometimes I hate all the chores I have to do but secretly I'm glad, because it gives me an excuse not to make friends. It gives me time alone with my thoughts, to think about back home in Colorado, where we lived before we landed in this total shit-hole. In Colorado – Grand Junction to be exact – the horses were turned out all the time, in our big field, where they had acres and acres to run and play. All we had to do was throw them hay in fall and

winter, and fill their water troughs every day. And Mom usually did it. When we moved here, we brought the horses with us – since the house we're renting has a barn and a pasture – but it's totally different. It's *tons* more work.

I walk down the wet gravel road and the horses are standing together, on one high spot out of the mud. It's so muddy here and it's barely even fall. The leaves are turning to brown fast and making a soggy carpet under my feet. I find Stormy's nose and touch it – our paint gelding, the one mom and dad got first. He's looking a little skinny and he hasn't been brushed in months. I continue into the barn to grab the wheelbarrow and pitchfork. The scent assails me, ammonia and not enough bedding. The horses can go in and out of their stalls anytime but they always seem to find a way to shit and piss inside, even though Mom keeps forgetting to buy new shavings.

When I push the wheelbarrow through the gate the horses move aside and then follow me. Rosie is nudging my arm and looking for treats but I shoo her away. I'm not in the mood for her today. A stout palomino pony, she is technically mine. We used to trail ride together all the time – there was a trail right off our property in Colorado that was amazing during spring and summer. It's so dry there, you can ride almost all year, except when there's a lot of snow.

Standing a little distance away is the dapple gray mare, Molly. She has been moody and depressed since we moved here. She was Sophie's horse. *I know girl, I miss her too* I think to myself and imagine that the horse can hear my thoughts, as I walk over to give her a pat. This is the nice thing about the horses. They don't talk or ask questions like the counselor my mom made me see last week, some old lady named Linda. Or the teachers at school that always ask where we moved from. Whenever anyone asks me about back home, it takes my breath away, because I just think of Sophie and how much everything has changed, and how much I miss her. But in the barn, with the horses, I can just be alone with my chores to do.

I wander around with the pitchfork, picking piles. The mud is deep in places and I can't help wondering what's going to happen in a few months when we get more rain. The days are getting shorter

and there is a chill in the air. Halloween is coming up before too long. That was Sophie's favorite holiday. I let my mind wander to last year, when she wanted to be a french maid. Her and mom screamed at each other, slamming doors, Mom swearing she'd never let her get out of the house wearing that outfit and Sophie picking up the razor blade, threatening to cut herself, if Mom didn't let her. Dad was long gone by then, and Cal hadn't moved in yet. I wasn't worried about Sophie. I thought she could handle herself. If she was the wild one, I would be the smart and quiet one. Mom was totally obsessed with Sophie, always worried about her, and I knew it.

Sophie went out that night in her slutty costume, and then later sneaked into my room, through the ground floor window, before dawn. Her makeup was streaked and she reeked of cigarette smoke. "Where were you?" I asked drowsily, surprised to see her in the half-light. She shoved blonde hair out of her eyes, took a deep breath, looked like she was getting ready to level with me. To share a secret. "Nowhere." She finally said, with a shrug. "Go to sleep."

Stormy walks over, jerking me from my daydream – or nightmare – he is restless and knows it's almost dinnertime. I push the wheelbarrow around the back of the barn and into our ever-growing manure pile. Why did we even bring these horses, I think to myself for the millionth time. Nobody is ever gonna ride again. Dead weight. Like me. I feel like dead weight. All anyone does is talk about my sister. I'm basically invisible.

I throw dinner hay, rubbing my hands together to ward off the cold air and prickly alfalfa stalks. One more time, I look at these three horses. Our horses. They are muddy, have burrs in their tails. Bridle paths have grown out. Feet are long. Are they bored? Or happy to be ignored. I don't know. I feel the same way – I can't tell how I fit in anymore either.

Chores done, I head back to the tiny brick-red house. Avoiding Cal, who is staring at his computer working on some programming crap, I slink up the stairs to my room and close the door. Homework was done hours ago at school. So I pick up my latest book, an early Steven King. It's from when he wrote under a pen name, *Richard Bachman*. Funny, I think, since his name sounds so cool,

why would he need a fake one. Anyway, the book is called *The Long Walk* and it's scary and dark... I love it. When I read this kind of stuff is basically the only time I can forget about Sophie, and Grand Junction, and everything we left behind there. I can finally block out the last few terrible months.

In the book, almost everyone is dying. It makes my situation seem somehow less weird and tragic. I'm halfway through and already sad about the day I'll finish it.