A Sufficient Gift
By Jessica Forbes

“Music, such music, is a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness; why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music – not too much, or the soul could not sustain it – from time to time.”
-Vikram Seth, An Equal Music

Alba Watts wonders whether she remembered to pick up her grocery list from the kitchen counter. She is already halfway down the driveway, black boots hiking against pavement, husband waving from the grease-smudged window, when the smell of the lemon bush and the oak tree’s damp fallen leaves – which look like mushrooms roasted slowly until their edges curl and darken – remind her that she needs to go food shopping after work. It is November. A raisin of doubt forms under the small shield where her collarbones meet. She wills it away and starts her car, pulling from the curb onto 61st Street and moving through traffic towards the lake in the center of the city, and then up the hill to the high school where she teaches.

“Ms. Watts, did we have any homework last night?” Alba swings her yellow and black canvas backpack onto the stool below the whiteboard, and turns around to see who has spoken. It is early still, before eight in the morning, and it surprises her – even after all these years in the classroom – that some students come sit with her before class begins, looking for a quiet welcome.

“Yes, you had some. You had to write etymology sentences.”
Maya rolls her eyes. “Oh, yeah. I forgot. I didn’t do it.”

“Well – ” She leaves it at that, unsure whether to scold, encourage, empathize, or inquire into home life. It is easier to leave a fill-in-the-blank for Maya to complete.

Alba straightens her sweater, adjusts the neck – these early morning decisions pry into her private world and slowly open her up to the flood of teenagers who will soon swagger or sidle into her life and force her to be … there. Anywhere but elsewhere. As she reaches for the whiteboard marker, Alba feels her surge of irritation melt into a kind of sloppy gratitude for these freedom-seeking kids who find themselves within the four walls of her classroom, day after day. “There is a crack in everything/That’s how the light gets in.” Yes, Leonard Cohen, you were talking about these early mornings in the classroom. You were singing about how it feels to crack open your classroom door; to watch the clock crack its smooth face into minutes; to let the light into wells of patience dwelling so deeply beneath the surface of your conscious knowledge that they continually surprise.

She reaches into her pocket for keys, finds the shopping list instead. Alba folds the small paper rectangle in half and slips it into her purse, then looks at the clock, takes a breath, and unlocks a drawer to pull out her computer.

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When Alba was twenty-five she fell in love with smiling, fretful, dark-haired Isaac. Isaac knocked three times on her ashamed heart, and the third time, she cracked open the door. She thought that he was the love of her life, but he turned out instead to be a helper along the way.

He loved the word *mellifluous* because it contained the Latin root for honey (*mel* = honey + *fluere* = to flow). One morning, they spooned whipped cream over leftover peach pie and fried eggs with dinosaur kale from his backyard. In the Berkeley morning mist on the porch, golden egg yolks pooled around golden peach slices on her plate as Isaac told her that he would be leaving to go teach English in Ecuador for a year.

His voice was *mellifluous* with sadness, the golds on the plate *mellifluous* with sweet richness. Her heart played counterpoint to the melting and the softening by cinching its circumference, hardening and forming small perforations, as egg-white edges in a hot pan will do.

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It is later in the morning, and Alba sits on her tall chair in front of her tenth grade students. Her script for E.F. Watling’s translation of *Antigone* occupies her hands as she turns the pages and searches for the last lines. Finding the last page, finally, in this awkwardly stapled copy, she looks up at her students and says, “Let’s discuss the last lines of *Antigone*. We’ll read it aloud, together, because it’s the Chorus.”

Twenty students scramble for papers in their bags and binders. Seventeen white scripts appear. Fifteen pages turn, a flock of seagulls startled from their beach combing.

Sixteen voices read the last lines together:

“Of happiness the crown / and chiefest part is wisdom / And to hold the gods in awe / This is law that / Seeing the stricken heart of pride brought down / We learn when we are old.”

“Is it possible for 16- or 17-years-olds to have real wisdom?” Alba asks the crowd in front of her. She looks down at the floor, careful to act as if she doesn’t care whether anyone answers. To lock eyes is to need them to respond.

Kiki speaks up.

“It is, if they listen to old people.”

“And does your generation respect old people?”

“No.”

“Then how will you gain wisdom?”

“We have to learn it by experience.”

“Does everyone who has experiences become wise?”

“No.”

“What do you need to become wise from experience?”

“Some experiences can teach you wisdom quickly. Like a near-death experience.”

“Oh, you mean it can crystallize the value you feel for your life?”

“Yes, and for the people you love.”

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Isaac wrote Alba a birthday card that she read as he packed dark suitcases of clothes at his Mom’s house on the summer night of his departure. (She thought that being helpful would ensure love; all she had learned at twenty-five was how to make herself indispensable.) She brought over Gordo’s burritos, folded clothes, accepted without protest the large box of condoms that Isaac nestled in the corner of his suitcase (“The program told us to bring condoms because, you know, they’re really hard to get in Vilcabamba. I’m not planning to use them, they’re just good to have, to give to other people, to have around …” Both of their faces turned red), drove Isaac to the airport. On the drive home from the airport she sobbed and then felt suddenly ravenous, inhaling the burrito that she had barely touched earlier. She felt the guilt that only the heartbroken can feel when they find that they still have an appetite.

She saved Isaac’s card, at first for sentimentality, but later because of these words: Isaac wrote, “Who can say what will happen. But as our Jewish ancestors said at Passover – ‘If [God] only let me come this far – it is enough.’ Hope though I do for a future, you’ve already touched me in more ways than I would have ever thought possible at this time.”

“It’s Dayenu,” Isaac had said as she read the card.
“Dayenu?”
“What, you’ve never heard of Dayenu?”
He sounded surprised.
“What kind of Jew are you?”

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Later that morning, after her first two classes of the day, Alba sits at her desk (her desk is tiny and she must get rid of it – she can barely fit her knees underneath, and it wobbles like a surfboard, back and forth across her lap as she tries to type, its crumpy particleboard surface moth-eaten and powdery) and waits for the bubble and click that will signal that her boiling water is ready to pour. She thinks back over the morning, noting that Ramon sat listlessly in the back of the classroom but that everyone else had seemed excited – or at least willing – to grab a marker and write on the eight posters that surround the room. Eleventh graders, she reflects, are so ready for Ralph Waldo Emerson. “I put ‘imitation is suicide’ on my Instagram last night!” Corneisha Godfrey had proclaimed that morning.

Alba recalls one of her favorite lines from Death of A Salesman, a play that her students read earlier in the year: Biff says to Willy, “I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and the time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and I thought, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be . . . when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am?”

This line sounds in her mind as she plans the next few days of Transcendental literature. Alba scribbles some notes in her teaching journal: What would the Transcendentalists say about ... Standardized testing? Smoking marijuana? Using cell phones? Start class with those questions. Already discussed philosophical stance, views on authority and conformity, Emerson’s “imitation is suicide” and selection from “Self-Reliance.” Began week by
generating definition of Transcendentalism using Calvin and Hobbes comic strips w/ topics like nature, free thought, non-conformity, non-materialism.

For her Thursday learning target, Alba writes, “I can .... Act like a Transcendentalist.” She is afraid. She adds to her journal notes: My students dislike authority, but like safety of seats; complain about rules but thrive within structure; when they read Antigone, most of them disagree with Creon’s worldview but don’t hesitate to say would rather live in world where everyone had to follow all rules all time, than world where no one followed any rules, ever. They hate police, but understand that any society will create rules and people to enforce them. As she looks back at the notes for her lesson, she thinks through what she will be asking students to do, how they will react, what will be out of the norm, and therefore, uncomfortable, and therefore, merit resistance and negotiation.

She will: 1) Ask students to relinquish their phones. 2) Ask students to leave the classroom and go write outside for 20 minutes. 3) Ask students to talk to no one during this time.

All three of these requests seem deftly misaligned with the teenage ethos. And yet, twenty minutes into the lesson, she is walking in large circles around the campus, watching – with disbelief – her calm, focused students, tucked away into corners and perched on edges, observing nature, and writing about it. Even on this mostly concrete campus, students are finding squirrels and tufts of grass, pinecones and trees, puddles of water and small birds, to write about.

They come back to the classroom calmed, kinder, turning to each other with more gentleness than Alba has seen before. The easiest lesson that she has ever written – the least effort that she has ever exerted – has lead to this sweet reflective mood, and rather than complaints of confiscated cell phones, multiple requests to “do this again.”

Students share their journals with each other, then with the whole class. They speak about the quick movements of squirrels and the way the grasses grew under the tree. Alba listens from the front of the room, hands crossed on top of her closed journal, and thinks about how their nature writing would be even better if they learned the names for the trees and the grasses they observed. Yet she is able to enjoy the easy flow of her students’ descriptions, the fleeting connections they have made with the all of the growing and crumbling life that is happening right outside of the sheetrock walls.

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When Alba attended her first Passover dinner in the spring of her first year teaching, she found this definition of Dayenu in her friend’s Haggadah: “The name of this beautiful prayer is Dayenu, which means ‘it would have sufficed’ or ‘we would have been satisfied.’ Perhaps ‘grateful’ would be a better translation. Dayenu is the song of our gratitude. A Jew defines himself by his capacity for gratitude. A Jewish philosopher was once asked, ‘What is the opposite of nihilism?’ And he said, ‘Dayenu,’ the ability to be thankful for what we have received, for what we are.’”

Dayenu – when she remembers it – gives Alba some peace.
Happy Hour under a pair of redwood trees at Sunset Camp in Big Basin (“this is the living room,” she proclaims) and Alba sits with her husband, drinking single malt highland scotch from an eighteen-ounce plastic mug. It is July. They are telling tales: Alba asks questions and leans back into the soft bark of the redwood tree as she listens to her husband talk story about his Southern family.

“Did I make that one up, about Anise making your house shake? Didn’t you tell a story about her?” she asks.

John smiles, shifts his back closer to the redwood he is leaning against.

“You didn’t dream it,” he says, grin warm and ready for the telling. “I came home one day from school and the house was going *Ka-wumph, Ka-wumph*” – here he shakes his whole body, as if registering an earthquake. “And I crept downstairs to see what was happening – I peered into the basement, where our T.V. was – and there was this exercise program, the first television show to broadcast exercise programs, with that presenter’s voice – Jack LaLanne was his name.”

John sips from his blue plastic mug, swallows a sip of scotch.

“It was one of those old T.V.’s, a big wooden box with a tiny oval screen” – he holds up his hands in the shape of a small rectangle – “I peeked around the door and she was doing jumping jacks in the basement. Every time, the house shook. She was going” – he raises his hands above his head, brings them slowly back down to his lap, raises them up again – “one – two – one – two, but she could only manage one for every five times Jack LaLanne said ‘and-a-one, and-a-two.’”

Alba laughs as John mimics quickly sneaking back out of the basement doorway to leave Anise to her calisthenics. They both settle into the story, as it moves from Anise to snakes to squirrel hunting in a swamp. The mosquitoes land on Alba’s forehead and hands, and she swats at them here and there. She leans farther back into the redwood tree, anchored by the feel of the book resting on her lap, the comforting weight of the pages.