

2021 Wind & Water Writing Contest  
Honourable Mention  
NON-FICTION/FICTION

sleep, an account in ten parts

By Halliday Reynolds (Fiction)

1. she wants to drink all night long. awake again after an hour's rest, she nurses for almost as long as she slept. she likes to be cradled, so mostly you're sitting up in bed, pillows propped around you like an armchair overflowing, doing exactly what the doctor told you not to do. you lean your head back, but it's too easy for your eyes to close. you're afraid the doctor is right, that you'll let her slip and fall, so you try every other way you can think of: lying on your side, then on your back with her balanced on your belly. she won't have it, she knows what she wants and at this hour you'll do whatever you need to, whatever works.

in the end you're sitting up again. you keep your eyes open, trying to make out her face through the darkness. you can only feel her, warm and compact like a loaf of bread, and heavy against your chest. you lay her back on the bed once she lets you go and curl in beside her.

2. she's crying. she rolls into you, legs flailing like a beetle trapped on its back, her mouth wet against your chin. you follow her into consciousness and seconds later she's in your arms. she latches, she drinks, and for a few minutes holding her feels better than rest.

3. you sleep and wake again; an hour feels like a minute. you've stopped looking at the time. you've stopped researching "three month old can't sleep" on your phone in the darkness as you break all the rules and let her nurse to sleep because you don't understand how to do otherwise. every minute counts. losing any scrap of sleep trying out a theory feels like too great a risk.

you can't be sure, but you suspect you're not yourself, though you can't say exactly how. you don't know how to get back, or how to move forward. instead, you sleep.

4. now she's turned and her feet kick you awake. she drinks, sleeps, then wakes up again as you shift back down the mattress, unfold your arm from beneath your head. it's been half an hour and now you have to start over.

5. sometimes you spend all night sitting up. for a few months there's adrenaline to help you, enough to keep you awake while you hold her through the night. enough to feed you into the morning, because even then she needs you. day or night, it's all the same to her.

in the morning he's there. he helps when your arms get too heavy, when you need to put her down. sometimes she rests in his arms, other times she screams until he hands her back sorrowfully. you couldn't do without him, yet he's peripheral now, and you forget where to look, who you're speaking to. you know him, but he doesn't know you anymore, the creature you've become. her creature.

6. your eyes open and you're ready, you know how to lift her, how to hold her just so. sometimes you feel like a battery running, running, running, and never needing to be recharged. other times you feel so soft, bending and wilting throughout the day. tears spilling out of nowhere, at nothing, the sight of her face.

7. sleep—you used to spend so much time sleeping. so much you felt guilty, you felt unwell. sleep was a way of healing, but it used to be heavy. now, when there's so little of it, it's light, easy. as soon as she's asleep, you are too.

8. you're awake—did you sleep at all? her crying is louder than usual, she can't settle, you can't relax. your neck, shoulders, wrists hurt all the time, needles and tremors in the night. she kicks again, needing space, needing to stay close. she doesn't know what she wants. even when you want to be apart, the two of you only want each other.

when the adrenaline runs dry the change is sudden: it's emptiness. one day about five months in you realize you're angry all the time. how long has it been this way? you can't remember ever feeling any different. the anger is always there, except at night when you're alone with her. with her you can never be angry. you funnel it toward everything else: the shower, for not being hot enough. the breast pump, for being so hard to use. mostly you send your anger toward him, to wherever he's got to in the background of your mind. you can barely see him but his presence angers you. why? because he's strong, he can take it, and you need to be angry with someone. all night long you are tender, you hold her, soothe her, feed her. in the mornings you are all out of tenderness. you can barely speak, but you can't rest. the sun is up and your baby is awake and you need to be near her. every minute you're away from her—in the shower or on the phone—she's in danger of forgetting you. you're in danger of losing her. you can't think about anything else. you hold her all day long. hold her to cook, sometimes giving up in the middle of heating up your dinner. you breastfeed on the toilet, as you hurry to get the door, as you try to explain to a friend what it's been like.

9. loving her so far has been physical, contained in your fingertips, your lips. your nose where you smell her neck. your cheek resting against her curls. love is bathing and changing and nursing. it's knowing her hunger and fatigue like they're your own. you've never loved someone like this, in the doing. there's no room yet for the idea of her, there's only the fact. the weight of her body on yours, your arms imprinted with her shape. she's so new you're afraid you'll forget her if you step away into the next room. the fact of her hasn't yet taken

root inside your head.

you want to keep it that way for as long as you can. while she's in your arms she's safe, but inside your head you can't be sure. someday you will hurt her, but how, and when? she's so small and so vast. she demands everything, but doesn't yet know how to judge. you want to live inside her gaze, where you are perfect, where you can always provide. you want to keep life slow, one decision at a time, so that you'll know when you start to go astray. you'll catch yourself starting to invent her, describe her, prescribe to her who she is and who she should be. but life won't slow down. it's measured in minutes on minutes of crying until you realize that months have gone by. months—and you still have no idea what you're doing. you still don't have a plan; all you have are theories, good intentions, promises you won't be able to keep.

10. so you put her back down on the bed. you wait for her to settle, then quick, you close your eyes. sleep comes back for you, it always does. how long this time? not long enough for dreams, but enough for her breath and yours to find their rhythm. enough for you to lose yourself in darkness, and rest knowing she's with you.

at night, in sleep, you are still one body. when she wakes again your body will know what to do.