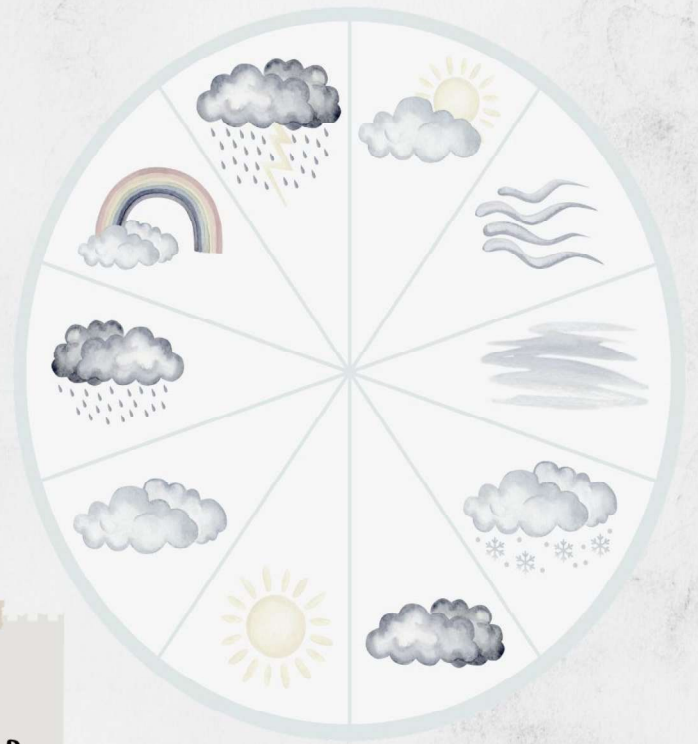


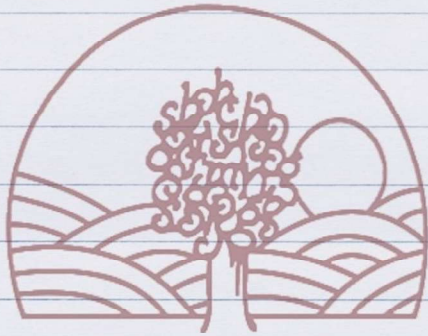
MAY 2026

Keep Writing.

OLEAN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
SHORT STORY CONTEST  
MAY 2026



THEME:  
WEATHER



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KEARNS, CHRISTINA VINSON, AND ASHLEY TILLY.



It's  
always  
a good  
day to  
write.



**OLEAN PUBLIC  
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**SHORT STORY  
CONTEST**

**MAY 2026**



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## Acknowledgements

This zine was a labor of love that would not have been possible without the cooperation and participation of both patrons and library staff.

Thank you to all writers who sent in submissions. It was a joy to read your work.

Thank you to the Director, Assistant Director, and Programming Librarian for authorizing the creation of the Short Story Contest.

Thank you to the Library Assistants for the time and energy they dedicated to advertising the contest, judging the submissions, and designing the zine.

Thank you to our patrons for their continued support and dedication to our library.

We are so grateful for our vibrant, creative, and wonderful community.

Without you, none of this would be possible.

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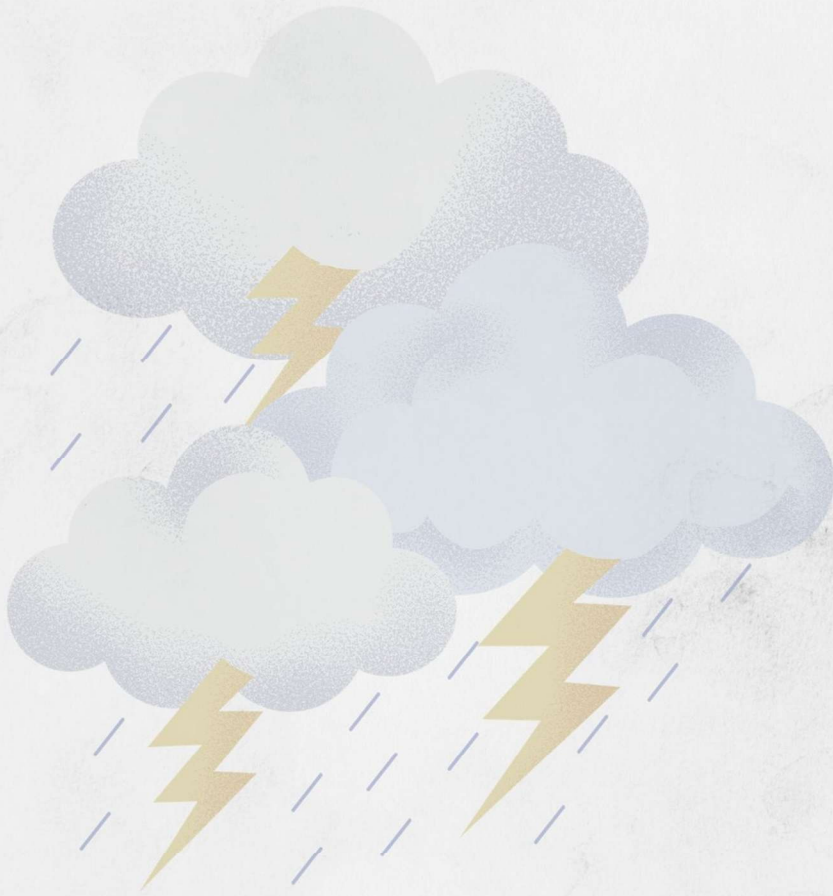
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# View Of Mount Hermanns

Katie McMullen

I laid the baby down for his nap and stepped out front to feel the sunshine. The cut grass smelled pleasant enough, but immediately the din overwhelmed me. Adult life, I swear, is the perpetual, grating sound of a lawnmower. Or three.

I breathed deeply into my stomach, trying to sense each individual rib expanding. My eyes settled lazily on the slope of my own unkempt yard. There were three or four patches of folded-down grass where some deer had slept. Dandelions were gone to seed, tall enough to graze my knees. Blades of grass reached up through the slats of the Adirondack chairs. I smiled.

Even with neighbors on all sides operating machinery—mowers and weedwackers and leafblowers and probably, somewhere, a chainsaw—it was a treat to be outdoors without that stance of constant bracing vigilance required to prevent a large and mobile baby from running directly into the street.

“Woah, woah, woah!” I would say to him, daily, in a tone of false astonishment. “Does Joey go in the road?”

Without fail, he would giggle and shake his head, wiggling his little eyebrows at me, the picture of his dad. But without fail, as soon as I released him from the restraining grip of my hug, he would teeter wildly down the driveway again.

I shook my head, thinking of that wild boy, just as a neighbor turned up the drive. Billy was quite your average guy and wearing, of all things, a tank top. His little yellow mower was approximately half his size. It chortled mightily as it achieved its unlikely ascent to the top of the driveway.

It sounded like a gail of the mightiest wind. It sounded like a woman full of rage and grief. “I gave you forests,” she moaned. “You burned them.” Lightning split the sky over every continent. “I gave you oceans. You poisoned them.” Entire ports vanished beneath waves. “I gave you animals. You hunted and exploited them to silence.” The rain intensified as if deeply weeping. “For centuries I have warned you gently. Drought, Fire. Heat. Storms. Never to extinction.” Her voice trembled, not with grief but a consuming rage like that of a mother whose child had been threatened. “You answered with greed. It was not I who promised to never flood the Earth in its entirety ever again. That arrangement was with someone else and now I believe it is my turn to start over but I will not make the same mistake of hoping humanity can change.” The final words came as the power cut out and the world drowned.

Michael and Kristin survived the initial drowning mostly by accident. Dark humor being their way to cope, they had jokingly crafted a raft and even drawn a face on a tennis ball and named it Frank. Now it was the reason they were still alive.

Time became meaningless beneath endless gray skies. The world was nothing but water now. No buildings. No trees. No people. Just an ocean so wide it felt infinite. Sometimes they floated over places that used to be cities. Kristin once saw the top of a church steeple beneath the waves, disappearing slowly into darkness. They mostly drifted in silence. There wasn’t much to say. Kristin sat with her knees against her chest while Michael lazily dragged his fingers through the water.

Then came the sound.

Soft, at first. Tiny taps against the wood. Kristin closed her eyes and whispered, “no.” Michael looked upwards. Rain. Again. A few scattered drops darkened his jacket before the sky opened wider. Kristin looked at him and started laughing. Not happy laughter. The kind that comes when your mind gets too tired for sanity anymore. Michael stared at her for a long moment while rain struck the endless ocean around them. That stupid look appearing on his face, “We really needed the rain.”

# A Mother's Tears

Ashley Tilly

For forty days, it rained without stopping. At first, people joked about it. Social media flooded with memes before the streets ever did. God making the famous promise but crossing his fingers behind his back. Videos of submerged driveways, umbrellas blowing down the street like urban tumbleweeds, reporters standing knee-deep in intersections pretending to smile through the storm.

Michael and Kristin joked about it more than anyone. Every time thunder rattled the windows or another flood warning flashed across their phones, Michael would get this stupid grin on his face and Kristin would know what was coming next. "We really needed the rain." He knew how much the old saying annoyed her. It became automatic after a while. A ritual. Their way of laughing at something neither of them could control.

But the rain kept coming.

Storm drains failed first. Then rivers climbed over their banks. Entire highways disappeared under water overnight. People kept saying it would pass. That it was a once in a lifetime event and continued on with their everyday lives as best as they could. Then the oceans rose. Not slowly. Violently. Tides swallowed coastlines in hours. Cities vanished beneath black water while millions fled inland, only to find inland disappearing too. Satellites stopped transmitting, isolating a world now so dependent on constant communication. The world became eerily silent with the ever present white noise of rain hammering against roof tops.

Then came the voice.

"HEY AMY!" Billy shouted, "Y'WANT ME TO MOW FOR YOU?"

My pulse quickened instantly, my body inexplicably registering this harmless offer as a threat. I cleared my throat.

"NO THANKS, BILLY," I shook my head theatrically. "NOT YET. TRYING TO LEAVE IT FOR THE FIREFLIES."

He just stared at me then, and I noticed a cigarette tucked behind his ear. I hesitate to admit how I rather enjoy anyone stubborn enough to still smoke a cigarette, these days. Some piece of me, barely buried, recognizes the simple urge to light something—anything—on fire.

Still, I was uneasy as Billy kept on sitting there.

"THE FIREFLIES!" I repeated with an exaggerated shrug, as though this gesture fully conveyed my ambivalence toward lawns and captured all my vaguely-held notions about ecology.

A great crack of thunder sounded overhead, and a sudden chill whisked up the road. Billy looked in its direction, then began rolling away, apparently finished wasting gas on me for the time being.

I looked across the valley at Mount Hermanns. This unassuming little fringe-Appalachian is among the oldest mountains on Earth. Its humble stature testifies to all it's seen. Glaciers, floods, fires. Ages, epochs. A parade of species unfolding, improvising, reaching and reaching towards life. And, in a series of recent, frenetic blips ... Seneca ancestors treading lightly over its deer trails. Such trifles as New York, Pennsylvania, and a famous Swiss opera singer purchasing the enchanted hillside and leaving it with his name. The influx of lumbermen and the sight of formidable virgin forests bobbing down the Allegheny towards Pittsburgh. The influx of oil men, the short-lived merriment of Cloud Nine, the odd (to a mountain) little comings and goings of our city down below.

My other neighbor, also called Amy, came by later. Our various children whirled around us in the wet grass, happy tornadoes. We were discussing the challenges of making new friends.

“I wonder,” she ventured, “if it would be easier in a bigger city. Don’t you miss it sometimes? The opportunities? The food? All the different weirdos?” We giggled.

I surprised myself, and told her then how I dream and dream of that old forest. Its silence, still full of the chatter of leaves, the trilling of frogs and birds and insects, the soft creak of massive swaying trunks. Its damp smell of mushrooms and of deadfall slowly returning to the earth. Its filtered light and its time worn round.

Amy studied me for a long moment, then looked to the south. “Yes,” she said, “Maybe it takes a certain special type of weirdo to appreciate the . . . Ancient Tinies.”

“The Ancient Tinies!” I cheered, grateful.

At that moment, dear Billy fired up his yellow lawnmower once more. We two Amys met eyes. I wandered inside and put some water on for tea.

Just...balance.

She reached for the forces that had always defined her, but the sky had absorbed them, softened them, spread them thin until they lost their edge.

For the first time, she did not need to grow stronger to exist.

And in that stillness, she realized something.

She was not only the storm.

She was also the wind before it.

The air after it.

The breath between.

And afterward, when the pressure finally broke, when the heat thinned and the cold retreated, she would weaken. Her spinning slowed, her form stretched and unraveled, her body dissolving back into wind.

And when she faded, she felt it:

Silence.

Not peace. Never peace. Just absence. A hollow where the roar had been.

So she wandered.

Through skies that did not remember what she had done. But she carried it, the echoes, the fragments, the weight of things she never meant to take.

Then, something changed.

It was not another storm.

It was the sky itself.

She had always been part of it, but never aware of it as something separate.

But this sky felt...different.

Steady.

Endless.

Unafraid.

As the familiar pull of pressure and heat tried to build her into something violent, the sky did not tighten around her.

It did not feed her imbalance.

It held.

It stretched beyond her reach, giving her space without resistance. Nothing to grab onto. No sharp contrast. No violent push and pull.

# Wildfire

Avery Emerson

How miserable she was to hold the weather inside her body.

Weather prediction is at best an educated guess, as even the meteorologists say. For her, however, the weather patterns could be easily anticipated. When her partner hurt her with intimate insults, she knew the rain would fall. When he loomed over her, raised his voice, and asserted control, the cold frost would settle in. And of course, when he promised changed, each time more fervently than the last, her earth would temporarily relax under sunshine and warmth.

Recently, the weather had stagnated for more than a few days. She knew, however, that he thrived in the chaos her weather caused; her confusion and overwhelm brought him a smug serenity. So while the week had so far had been calm, she could feel the tension building, like humidity rising.

The altercation would always start quietly and followed the same cycle: a rational presentation and moral superiority before the attack was launched.

"We have our issues. And I'm trying to change," he began. "But you are part of the problem. What are you going to do for me?"

She kept her eyes focused on the floor, unable to answer.

"I asked you a question," he pressed. "This isn't one-sided. You don't get to control our conversations."

His fists and jaw clenched as she remained silent. “You need to answer me,” he said tersely.

She felt the winds of thought picking up speed through her brain. Swirling, thrashing, winding. She closed her eyes to quell the storm, tempering her voice as she reminded him that she didn’t want to engage in an argument.

“This isn’t an argument. You owe me,” he countered. “You hurt me, too, so you owe me something.”

The tornado consumed her mind, uprooting the boundaries she had planted to protect herself. Clouds formed around her feelings.

His voice escalated. “You can’t just walk away from me. You could at least say something nice to me. But no, you’re just heartless. A robot. You psychopath,” he spit.

As the barrage of blame continued, she waited for the rain to come. Once it fell, she knew he would back down; he always needed to make sure he could control the weather. Instead, however, the familiar pressure behind her eyes dissipated. A warmth replaced it. And suddenly, the water began to evaporate in the heat.

At first, she thought an earthquake was pushing through the fault lines as had happened two or three times before, a devastating breakdown that would destroy much of herself that she had desperately been trying to rebuild. But no—this time, the warmth was not an internal breaking of chaos.

It was an inferno.

She felt the heat rapidly widening, spreading through her core and surging to her fingertips. Her temperature quickly escalated, redness rising in her cheeks. She lifted her gaze from the floor to her hands, and then the door, realizing that she could scorch her path.

He could see this change in her, the embers glowing behind her eyes. “Oh, are you feeling empowered?” he asked with sarcasm. “You go, girl. You choose you.”

They called her dangerous.

They did not see curiosity or wonder. They saw threat.

And so, without meaning to, she became one.

Her funnel stretched from cloud to earth—her body, her spine, her existence made visible. Trees bent toward her, houses groaned, roads disappeared beneath her turning shadow. She did not choose to take these things. They were simply...pulled.

Everything came closer as she grew stronger.

And strength, she had learned, was inevitable.

Storms gathered around her like companions that never spoke. Thunderheads rose, towering and heavy. Lightning stitched the sky. Rain fell in sheets, and she stood at the center of it all, consuming the tension that others released.

Inside her, there was only noise.

A constant roar. A pressure that never eased. If she slowed, even for a moment, the imbalance returned. So she did the only thing she knew how to do.

She intensified.

She tore through fields first. Then barns, fences, lonely roads. But the world does not remain empty forever. Eventually, there were towns.

Order. Stillness. Lives built carefully, without room for something like her. And when she approached, the air changed.

Walls splintered. Roofs lifted. Windows shattered into glittering storms within her storm. The louder the world became, the louder she became in return, until everything blurred into a single, violent motion.

They called her Category 5.

# The Tornado

Christina Vinson

She did not remember being born—only forming.

At first, she was nothing more than a gentle breeze across an empty sky. Warm air rose, cool air pressed down, and somewhere in that invisible argument, she became.

She learned quickly that she was made of motion.

She chased grasses into rippling waves and teased dust into dancing spirals. In those moments, she was small, a wandering gust with no name, no weight, no consequence. If she had been a child, this would have been her laughter.

But the world around her was not always kind.

There were places where the air tightened, where pressure built like unspoken anger. Heat pooled low and thick, while cold currents sliced down from above.

When she passed through those places, something inside her responded.

She began to spin.

At first, it was subtle, but she could feel herself gathering, pulling threads of air into a slow, deliberate dance. It felt...good. Like being seen. Like becoming more than a whisper.

But the more she turned, the more the world fed her.

Warmth rushed upward into her core. Winds leaned into her. Clouds lowered, darkened, heavy with something waiting to break. She did not understand it yet, only that she was growing, and growth, to her, felt like purpose.

They named her.

But the sting of his words was vaporized before it reached her. She relinquished herself to the righteous anger blazing in her bones and walked toward the door.

“You don’t get to do this to me!” he yelled. “No! The conversation is not over!”

Her courage billowed, faster than he could control. She turned her back to him as his voice diminished in the roar of flames.

How powerful she was to hold the weather inside her body.



# Helga's Lament

Heather Kearns

Helga stood rigidly straight under the hot July sun. The blisters on her fingers throbbed as sweat trickled slowly down her face, stinging her eyes. Her long apron hung limply over her long work dress, both covered in the dust from the grave. The prairie stretched for miles in every direction, nothing moving as far as her eyes could see. Faint wagon tracks the only sign of where they came from, or which direction to go.

She had always known that she would marry Eli Wickham. Even as children they were inseparable. She had envisioned a life as a farmer's wife, happily raising a brood of children in the bustling town of Smithton, Virginia.

Eli had come to her late one August evening, head full of dreams and a heart beating for adventure. Gold had been discovered in California. A fortune to be had, if only one were willing to work for it! He argued that if they moved the wedding up, they could leave by the end of the week, thus securing their future among the wealthy.

Oh, why had she let him talk her into all that! Of course she loved him, but if they had only been able to see the future, neither of them would have attempted such a foolhardy scheme.

Love has a way of blinding a person though. Two days later Helga and Eli stood before family and friends, promising for better or for worse. For a bit, everything was wonderful. Their cross-country trek seemed like nothing more than a camping trip, just the two of them enjoying those first blissful days of married life. Even the jostling of the wagon couldn't dim their spirits.

When Eli fell ill, Helga tended to him like the good wife that she was striving so hard to be. They were many miles from the nearest people, and Helga wouldn't have known which direction to go to find them, even if Eli had seemed to be sick enough for a doctor.

And now, here she was, a widow at 19 years old, standing over a fresh grave. Exhaustion and the midday heat finally gave way to tears. As she started to sob, the sky opened and rain began to pelt down, as if the whole world was crying with her. A whisper rose and grew into a roar as the wind began to rage across the prairie, laying the grass flat across the thirsty ground. Small rivulets began to form as the rain fell faster than the earth could swallow it, the mud sucking at her feet as she walked to the wagon.

She lay on the makeshift bed in the wagon box, the rain thrumming against the canvas. It seemed as though there were voices in the rain, encouraging her, soothing her, and pushing her to go on. As she listened, her fear subsided, replaced with a resolute will to finish what she had started with Eli.

As the deluge abated, Helga peered out of the wagon. The sun was just beginning to peek through the clouds, creating the most magnificent rainbow. She turned her face toward the warmth, resting her hand on the tiny bump of her belly, and knew that somehow, she would be alright.