

Kestrel

Julie Gesin

## Agnes Unwound

The metal is smooth and warm under Agnes' palm. Mazy, always-sweaty hand is right below hers. They spin around a basket pole, chanting *pee pole, poo pole, pee pole, poo pole*. Once, when Agnes' class lined up by the pole and everyone was really excited, Mrs. Sommers said, "You people just can't stand still," and Agnes thought—people—pee pole, while across the court, the other pole became poo pole. Now everyone calls them that, as Agnes squints her eyes. The woolly clouds above twirl with her, and, as Agnes knows her eyes structure, under the California Live Oak (and Agnes knows its name while other kids don't even know that it's an oak and just call it there's Mom with Marble on a leash, talking to Mazy's mom to do division. Mom brought popsicles to class, hundred fruit. Lime is Agnes' favorite. Other kids' favorites are strawberry. No one else wants lime so there's always Agnes' recess. She was standing on the black-her palm, telling her third-grade pals how 1 beetles, can smell with their feet. Then, r up her finger and was just about to fly smacked Agnes on the nose, right w into a heart shape that her mom lit later, during reading, she forgot across her nose, from the cor cloud.

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It's a beautiful day, unlike yesterday, when Oliver ruined Agnes' recess. She was standing on the blacktop with a ladybug on her palm, telling her third-grade pals how ladybugs, who are actually beetles, can smell with their feet. Then, when the ladybug crawled up her finger and was just about to fly away, a lope-sided basketball smacked Agnes on the nose, right where a galaxy of freckles converges into a heart shape that her

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mom likes to kiss. Agnes cried at first, but later, during reading, she forgot about the bruise that now stretches across her nose, from the corner of one eye to the other, like a rain cloud.

Then, after school, when Mom opened the front door to the coolness of the house and exclaimed, “Oh Sweetie!” Agnes remembered her pain and humiliation. “Oliver threw a ball at me,” and she started crying again, even though she didn’t really feel like it. With Mom’s arms around her, Agnes stared out the open window at roses, hollyhocks, and morning glories swirling around the birdbath adorned with fragments of broken china, that Agnes made together with Mom at Donna’s Arts and Crafts. She inhaled the smell of lavender mingled with tomato soup, heard Marble barking in the backyard, demanding to be let in, and joy seeped back into Agnes, and even into the bruise.

Oliver hates Agnes. He hates how Mrs. Sommers always says, “Look at how Agnes is being a good listener,” or “Agnes is already done with her word problems.” Agnes is an asteroid that pulls his world into the wrong dimension while annoying him with her goody-goody nagging. “Be nice to spiders,” Agnes says, “pick up your trash.” Duh – as if he never heard that before. There are still three months of school left in this class with Agnes, who ruins everything, like yesterday, when he wanted to play basketball and there was no one to play with. Then he saw Sheldon, the Steph Curry of Lincoln Elementary, standing there with Agnes, listening to her talk about the stupid ladybugs, so full of herself like she’s saving the world or something. Whatever Agnes

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loves – Oliver hates, but Agnes loves a lot of stuff. And that ball the yard duty gave him at recess sucked. The ball was pretty useless for just about anything except for...

The shade under the tree feels good, but Oliver is bored. He can't even ride his scooter because one wheel is crooked and it pulls him sideways. This morning, when they finally had time to shoot some hoops, he was playing really good but Sheldon accused him of "blocking" so Oliver smashed the scooter against the poo-pole. That's how the wheel got messed up. He actually was aiming it at Sheldon's tall legs that make it so easy for him to be a good player.

His father's car is parked on the street behind him, by the curb. Father's bare foot is on the dashboard and his iPad is on the steering wheel in front of him. When his foot is like that – Oliver knows to stay away, because if he got into the car, his father would toss the iPad on the passenger seat, smack him on the back of the head and tell him to wait outside until he calls him. It doesn't really hurt, just makes him get a kind of a gross, tingly feeling in his throat, and then he has to hold his breath, as if the car got suddenly too small for the two of them. Oliver doesn't know what his father is doing, but he doesn't think he's looking for a job, like he says he is. "Looking for a job" is something his mom complains about to Aunt Marney and laughs. But it's not a happy laugh at all, it kind of sounds like teeth grinding.

Oliver watches Agnes and her stupid friend spin around the pole. Under the tree, Agnes' mom is back, now with a dog on a leash. Oliver wonders why she comes to school almost every day. Would his mom do that if she had the time? Lately, he only sees

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her when she comes into his room to say goodnight, and he's in bed and half asleep. Sometimes he hugs her and holds on to her, smelling her sweaty perfume-coffee smell. She kisses him in a hurry, unclasps his hands, and then he feels embarrassed for acting like a baby.

Now a part of him wants to go home, but another part knows it won't feel like home at all. In the back of the closet there's a dirty doggie toy made out of rope as thick as Oliver's wrist. Sometimes he takes it out and remembers Scamp growling and tugging on it with his old yellow teeth. It was just a game. Scamp loved him and never bit. If staring at the toy for a long time makes him want to cry. Sometimes he wants to throw it out but that wouldn't be fair to Scamp – it was his favorite toy. There are still tufts of fur under the bed, scratches on the door from claws. Without Scamp, Oliver's room doesn't seem to belong to Oliver. It feels like there's a stranger in it – and the stranger is a lack of Scamp.

At home no one cares about Agnes, and Oliver doesn't have to be reminded of how she always raises her hand to speak in class, how well she stays in her seat. What's so special about sitting? Today Oliver had to waste time sitting down, even though he had memorized the multiplication table long ago and it's just a boring square of numbers anyway, while outside, Sheldon's class started recess early and he could see Sheldon's sick spin moves on the shiny blacktop by the poo pole. The pee pole and the poo pole – the only worthwhile things that ever came out of Agnes' mouth.

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At least, under the tree on the edge of the field, Oliver does not have to listen to the weighty plop-plops of his father's soles, a sound that makes him think there's an intruder in the house. He remembers when his father's leather shoes clacked across the floor and he smelled like Oliver imagined the guy in the Old Spice commercial would smell. Since then, his father has gotten fatter and often went around all day in cut off sweatpants and barefoot, but always with the iPad. Still, at home Oliver can play Minecraft in his room – but even that reminds him of Scamp, warm and furry under his bare feet. Sometimes he almost feels that if he reached down, Scamp would be there, sprawled out under his desk. Oliver used to lie down next to Scamp on the floor, bury his face in the matted fur. He misses him so much now.

Under the tree, two kindergarteners are playing with Agnes' dog, Marble, who lets them shake her paw. Agnes' mom likes to talk to Mazy's mom, and Oliver thinks they're lazy, just standing and talking like that for hours, probably about stupid stuff. Would his mom want to stand for hours and talk to them? Probably not. But it might be nice having her there. Just knowing that she's kind of close by. There he goes being a baby again.

A ladybug tries to land on his pant leg. It hangs on to the fibers with its legs. These stupid bugs and snails, that Agnes loves so much, are everywhere, but one thing that made Oliver so happy is gone? He swats away the bug. How fair is it that Agnes' dog is alive and Scamp is dead? By his shoe, the ladybug is struggling to spread its wings, but they're bent and covered in dust. When things that Agnes likes die – it makes life more fair. Bugs die so easily and make Agnes cry. Yeah Agnes, wait till you find out what it

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feels like to see Marble dead. Of course Oliver would never hurt a dog – but an insect – that’s barely a living thing.

Behind him, his dad is in the same position, eyes stuck to the tablet, foot slightly twitching. Does he even remember that Oliver has been waiting here for maybe hours? He’s tired of being bored. Marble is licking the kindergarteners’ faces. Does it matter that the dog belongs to stupid Agnes? A dog is a dog, and his wobbly-wheeled scooter can still get him there fast.

Marble’s paws are on Oliver’s chest. Her eyes are the color of orange pebbles he once found in the creek. Now here’s an animal, not like those slimy snails Agnes carries around, “Watch me, I’m so cool, I’m holding snails.” But why think about that? With her head to the side, Marble looks like she’s smiling at Oliver, as if it knows him, as if she’s happy to see him and doesn’t even care that he hates Agnes. Scamp was old and didn’t jump like that anymore, but Marble is still like a puppy. Her butt waggles, and her tongue sweeps over Oliver’s nostril. Agnes’ mother lets him hold the leash. Maybe she’s not so bad, Agnes’ mother.

Agnes and Mazy run towards him. Agnes yanks the leash from his hands. “Mom,” she yells, “don’t let him touch Marble – he’ll hurt her!” Last night at dinner, Dad said it’s Okay to hit in self-defense, only in self-defense. Agnes’ fists are clenched; she’s ready for anything. Her drive to protect the things she loves knocks the breath out of her and she can barely speak. Once she saw Oliver rip a worm in half. He’s evil and ignorant and doesn’t know that the one half will probably regenerate. She remembers him



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punching Tommy, for absolutely no reason, while standing in line for lunch. She drapes herself over Marble, checking if she's still intact, and the dog stands confused, tail at half-mast, occasionally landing a sidelong lick on whatever part of Agnes it can reach.

Oliver wants to punch Agnes, to punish her for her lies. There's Mazy too – hands on her hips, “He likes to hurt things. He's a bully!” Agnes lets go of Marble and stands between Oliver and the dog. “Go away!” She shouts. Oliver's fists are tingly, as if the muddled feelings in his head slipped down into his fists. Injustice makes his eyes burn, the same way they did when he found Scamp under his desk, his mouth open, tongue hanging out. Agnes will never know how he kept breathing into Scamp's mouth to bring him back, the way they do it on TV. But Scamp's eyes were turning whitish, like the eyes of a dead fish that his father brought from a fishing trip with his co-workers, when he still worked.

What if he starts crying right in front of them – it would be the worst, he'd rather punch. Agnes' mother is right there and so is Mazy's, and even though he knows he could probably fight them all – hurting a mother is almost as bad as hurting a dog. Still, if something was to happen to Marble, it would put such a satisfying crack in Agnes' perfect little life. He grabs his scooter, the one that can hit the poo-pole with such a heavy thwack, and wraps his fingers around the handlebars, pushing away from them as quickly as he can before they notice that his fists, his super-punchers, are strangely powerless in the face of – tears. That's when the faulty wheel takes over and the metal thing he's on smashes into a curb. A glimpse of sky gives way to the blacktop accelerating toward him



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– so close – he can see its gravely pores, the sparkly bits. Then there’s searing pain and Oliver wants his mom.

Oliver’s mouth fills up with blood and something in it hurts so bad that he’ll probably never talk again. He’s bawling and doesn’t even try to hold it back. Agnes’ mother is shoving her sweatshirt under his head, wiping the blood off of his chin with its sleeve, yelling, “Agnes, run to the office and get help!”

What if he’s dying and Agnes doesn’t get help? What if he’ll never see his mom again? The mother next to him right now, the not-his-mother, is cradling his head, telling him he’ll be all right, and for some reason he believes her and stops sobbing to catch his breath. By his feet, there’s Marble, sun shining though her fur, as if she’s made of gold.

Mazy can run fast but Agnes – even faster. There was an accident, there’s blood, and she’s been given an important task to tell the office. The sounds of afterschool free play turn to white noise inside her ears, her head is pulsing with “*get help, get help.*” Her mom is with her enemy. But she is Agnes: the protector of living things, while Oliver, the disruptor of class, the killer of bugs, is also a living thing. Though the sight of all the blood had made her a little shaky, now Agnes is filled with purpose. She grips Mazy’s moist hand and pulls it with more force. She will get help as quickly as she can, and she will save the day.

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Oliver's tongue is gushing blood. He bit it when his chin hit the blacktop. He's swallowing the salty stuff, while pain and hot sun make him feel like throwing up. It's as if the mother who's holding him knows what he feels, as she gently brushes the dark waves of his hair off of his forehead and keeps her cool, dry hand there, blocking the sun from his eyes. Mazy's mother puts a clump of Kleenex into his hand. A circle of children and parents is forming around them and the not-his mother tells them to back away. A narrow path leads through a grassy field to the street where his father's car is parked, and Oliver realizes he'd forgotten that his father's even there. The office must be calling him right now, if Agnes made it to the office. Will he be mad? He knows his dad would tell him not to ride the scooter until he fixes it. Then a tingly, burning feeling returns, pulling on his lashes, falling over him like a spider web, because he knows his dad won't fix the scooter, because dumb Agnes doesn't know he'd never hurt a dog, not even Agnes' dog – even if Scamp *is* dead and Marble *is* alive. His mom isn't there, but Agnes' mother is. It's as if Agnes is starting to take over the world around him. Everybody saw him fall, they saw him cry, and now they're watching him lying there with not-his- mother babying him. Oliver tries to get up but the effort makes him dizzy. He spits into the Kleenex and watches the thick red stain spread though the white.

The principal's white sneakers look funny below his black slacks. At the end of the day, he always walks fast around the field two times and says hello to parents and good-bye to kids. His feet are flashing white between the blacktop and the pant legs.

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Behind him, the office lady, Mrs. Wishbourne, (kids call her Wishbone) is trying to keep up in her high heels, a First-Aid kit and a walkie-talkie in her hands. Agnes and Mazy run ahead, and when the circle of on-lookers parts, Agnes sees Oliver's head in her mother's lap, her mother's hand on Oliver's forehead, her face bent over her adversary and filled with the same concern as when Agnes herself gets sick or hurt. And Marble stands there, her tail wagging, as if she doesn't even care what kid she's next to.

Mazy, the Principal, and Mrs. Wishbone rush ahead, but Agnes stops with a disturbing thought: what if they all love Oliver as much as they love her? Oliver the bully; the nasty, prickly thorn in her otherwise-good-life. How did he get to be in her place? The next time he picks on her, can she just hit him in self-defense? Can she be in his bully place, like he is now in hers? Sometimes, when Mrs. Sommers reads aloud (and Agnes just can't get enough of books), Oliver gets fidgety and taps two pencils on the desk like drumsticks. When he's told to stop, he leans back in his chair and pounds the pencils even harder, and Agnes wants to push him backwards in his chair. But she is Agnes – she's not supposed to do that. Now there's her Mom (who knows how Oliver hit Tommy in the stomach before lunch so hard that he threw up, how Oliver's black sneaker crushes snails until there just greenish goo left on the pavement) now cradling Oliver as if he were her baby. If only she didn't go get help – maybe he would die – then her life would only have room for the good things, happy things. Unbroken snails shells, uninterrupted stories, Mom, Marble, Pee and Poo poles one can spin around without evil balls bruising your face.

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Oliver is coloring the cover of his report about flies. He wanted to make it about basketball, but it had to be about a life cycle of something, and when he read about where flies lay their eggs, it sounded kind of cool. Agnes is at the desk to his left, coloring a picture of a caterpillar for her report. He tries not to look at her. She saw everything that happened yesterday. Probably all proud of herself for getting help. He sees her freckled nose up in the air and his throat gets a gross, tingly feeling. He's fine now. Just some bruises and scrapes on his chin and knees. His tongue has a big blue streak across it and he still can't feel the tip, but probably by the end of the week, everyone will forget the incident, and things will go back to how they were before. But there's just this one annoying thought that he keeps popping into his mind. Maybe something did change. Agnes *did* get help and her mom *was* nice. He wishes none of that had happened, but at the same time, he remembers all the blood in his mouth and being scared, and then the cool hands cradling his head, wiping his face, making him not want her to let go.

Oliver draws the poop where the fly will lay her eggs. He needs some grass around it to make the picture look more real, but there's no green pencil on his desk. Agnes' caterpillar is big and green. The pencils she's sharing with Mazy are sharp and neatly arranged on a white plastic tray. A brilliant idea pops into Oliver's head and he snatches a green pencil off of Agnes' desk. She looks at him in disbelief, then reaches out to grab her pencil, but he quickly breaks it into two perfectly even halves and runs to the

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sharpener, so he can show the whole class the solution to the old I-need-that-pencil-and-I-don't-want-to-wait-for-you-to-finish problem.

Mrs. Sommers is getting up from Tommy's desk where she was helping him spell metamorphosis. Oliver must act fast, before Agnes can tell on him, before Mrs. Sommers tapes more red circles to his paper plate, filling it up with warning cookies again, so that he has to sit in the office during recess. He'd just invented a way to multiply all the pencils in the classroom by two, so everyone will have an extra. Half of the pencils will have two ends to color with, and during class there'd be less kids in line for the pencil sharpener too!

Agnes jumps out of her chair so fast that it falls down hitting her metal lunch box on the floor. The shika-shika sound of pencils and markers stops and all eyes are on her. She freezes up, because she'd never, not even in pre-school, caused so much commotion during class. Then it comes flying at her, a thought she's been hiding someplace in the back of her brain, in the occipital lobe (let's call things by their actual name, she tells herself in her mind, as if it's really important at the moment), a thought that maybe, after being held by her mom, Oliver might change. After all, at that moment, it was almost as if he was – her brother. But instead, like a tuft of mold on bread, or a brown spot on an otherwise perfect apple, Oliver's contact with her mom, with Marble, threatens to spoil the things she loves the most. She wants to make more chairs fall down and bang on things. She doesn't want to cry – she wants to hit.

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“Oliver!” Mrs. Sommers’ voice booms in the strangely silent classroom, and then the broken pencil half is in the sharpener – a satisfying vibration in Oliver’s hand as the thing chews off the wood from the other side. He sees Agnes, moving towards him quickly, face so red – you can’t even see her freckles, a tomato rushing towards him and then he’s on the floor, next to a trash can. Pain like a side-stitch in his side. Agnes stands with her hands still balled up into fists, as if she doesn’t know what to do with them next, and Oliver wonders if he likes her better now that he punched him or if he hates her even more.