

What people are saying about

This Is All He Asks of You

A tender story about human connection that shines with compassion.

Jenny Downham, award winning novelist, author of *Before I die*, *You against me*, and *Unbecoming*.

This story collection celebrates the joyful intimacy of being alive. Anne Egseth writes from her heart and her words simply flow. This book is a treasure!

Johanna Baldwin, writer, producer and author of the Dr. Raymond Moody inspired novel, *All (Wo)men Desire to Know*.

This lovely book is delightful, funny, and at the same time genuinely profound. Wisdom runs through the narrative like a vein of gold through quartz, evoking an inner sense and capacity which is both real and desperately needed in our troubled, heedless times. An authentic voice, a story which lingers in the mind like a fragrance.

Lucy Oliver, *The Meditator's Guidebook*.

In *This Is All He Asks of You*, author Anne Egseth unpretentiously weaves symbols and images together to create an alluring, luminous tale of a young woman's search for understanding and meaning. It is an all at once haunting and captivating reflection on relationship, not just with others but with the self. Written in a classic, quiet Scandinavian style, it distills great wisdom and the redemptive energies of grace and acceptance, so urgently needed in our world today.

Dielle Ciesco, author of *The Unknown Mother: A Magical Walk with the Goddess of Sound*.

Seldom have I read such an extraordinary and thought provoking *This Is All He Asks of You* tale as Anne Egseth's debut novel, *This Is All He Asks of You*. This is an enchanting and imaginative story that will engage anyone of any age, a book that drew me in so completely that I just couldn't put it down.

Veryan Williams Wynn, author of *The Spirit Trap*.

A poignant tale of despair and hope, traced through the eyes of a young girl, *This Is All He Asks of You* delves deep into the psyche of 12-year-old Luna, who is somewhat "different" or so she believes, to her peers and friends. This warm and complex story of tears, laughter, friendship and love, explores the devastation that so often occurs when sensitive souls have to deny the very core of their being. Is Luna the only one who understands the light? Or, as we grow, do too many of us lose it somewhere along the way?

Ashley Costin, author of *Emajen*.

This Is All He Asks of You is as an evocative account of a young woman's struggles to reclaim what we've all lost "the day the light went out" as I've ever read. You will never forget Luna, and hopefully she will help you reclaim that light as well.

John Nelson, author of *The Miracle of Anna*

This is a simple, yet deeply moving story about the power of love and light in our lives. Spiritual at heart and authentic in form; this is a slow-paced account of the importance of our connection to the natural world and to each other.

Anne Synnøve Simensen, author of *The Woman behind the Nobel Peace Prize: Bertha von Suttner and Alfred Nobel*

This Is All He Asks of You is a very poetic and intriguing book that will make you mull over where your own life has taken you.

B.R. Wilkerson, author and winner of the 2018 NY Big Book Award

This Is All He Asks of You

Anne Egseth

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For Olivia

Is not this, perhaps the secret of every true and great mystery,
that it is simple? (...) Proclaimed, it were but a word; kept
silent it is being. And a miracle too, in the sense that being
with all its paradoxes is miraculous.

C. Kerényi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*

PART I

The Parcel

Tromsø, Norway, November 2018

For three months now, instead of studying for my exams, I have been sitting at my white desk, alternating between staring at the ghostly landscape outside and sifting through the words of a twelve-year-old me.

Now that the words are here, they fill the space and crowd my head as I look out of the window. The snow is black. It was pure and soft, and now it is hard, dirty and icy. I know that this grainy, black snow will line the streets outside for many months. Slowly, I will forget that warmth and sun and spring are possible. Every year, I forget. And then suddenly, as if out of nowhere, the ice will melt, the mud will stick to my shoes, and new life will be revealed. You should know this, as you grew up here as well. Or have you forgotten what it is like when the sun goes away for months on end, and the short glimmer of light at noon is too weak to carry the slightest hope of spring?

The words came in a parcel that arrived on my doorstep a while ago. A shoe-box filled with letters, poems, homework: snapshots of a girl I had forgotten, from a time when miracles could coexist with mashed potatoes, gray asphalt and science homework. It was mailed by an old friend, who kept it in his attic for ten years. It traveled across the ocean, all the way from Washington, D.C. to Tromsø. I didn't remember that I had given it to him, or even that it ever existed.

I look at the crumpled papers as I transform the wiry and scattered handwriting of my younger self into the orderly, black rows of signs on my computer. This is my attempt to create chronology, continuity and coherence out of a time I had wiped out of my memory. I don't claim this is exactly what it was; this is me weaving a net of words, trying to catch this elusive,

slippery voice from the past. I am following the thread back to a frozen girl buried deep inside my body; a twelve-year-old who disappeared the day the light went out. As I write I remember, and as I remember, I create.

Her words were meant for you.

You were her companion.

You held her hand and saw the world through her eyes.

There was something in her that always remembered you, felt a longing for your company, like a deep foghorn of a ship sounding in her chest, piercing through the gray, calling for you. She felt your presence and knew you were waiting for her. Then she lost you. Forgot. She almost became normal.

Luna.

Thick, Golden Air

Washington, D.C., USA, July 2007

I swim in the air.

It's thick like water.

I lean forward into it, and it carries me.

The air holds me and moves me.

It is in me and around me, and I swim-fly in it.

I used to do this a lot before we moved to America. In the forest by the cottage, down by the beach, in Sigrid's garden, in the park, and in the countryside where Grandma lived.

Here in D.C. there are not so many places to swim-fly. This makes me sad.

I used to be able to wander off by myself and find a spot by some trees, or on the beach, or anywhere there was a particularly good feeling, and then I would make myself merge with that, and do my swim-flying.

There isn't much nature around our house here, apart from the trees in our little backyard, and I'm no longer supposed to wander off by myself. This is particularly annoying now during the summer vacation. My friend Geraldine has gone to visit her grandma in New Jersey, and I don't want to do another summer camp without her. We did an art and writing camp together before she left.

I have decided that it is good to use my time writing instead of being bored. It makes me think about things. Often it makes me think about you, Dad. And about Sigrid. I don't know if that is good, but that's what happens when I am stuck here with the babysitters. It doesn't seem right to call the people who watch me babysitters, as I am not a baby, obviously. I would not be writing

this if I were a baby. I will soon be a teenager, to be precise. But that's what they call themselves – babysitters. But Mr. Evans is different from the others. He is a schoolteacher. He doesn't want to be called a babysitter. He says it is a term associated with young girls, and that he wants to be called a tutor instead. He comes to my house three times a week. I have to study with him for three hours before we go to the swimming pool.

Adults seem strange to me. I can see what they are thinking and feeling, and I know that most of the time they do or say something completely different than what they really mean. If I point this out, by asking questions, they don't like it, so I have learned not to say anything. I wonder if you are like that too?

I told Mom that I could swim in the air.

She said I must have dreamt it at night, and went on nagging me about my studies and spending more time with other kids, taking up cheerleading or volunteering or something. Anything but being by myself so much. She says being alone takes me away from the real world, and then strange fantasies come.

I still wonder if the people I meet can swim-fly in the air.

You see, through the thick, golden air, I know everything that is going on, behind me, above me, in front of me. I feel like a fish who knows it is living in water. I can see and feel the waves created by other people. Those waves move me. I know who the others are, not their names or what they like for dinner, but the particular feeling there is in the light they have in them. Sometimes I meet someone who also knows they are being moved by the golden air. Then it is possible to swim-fly together. I think that must be what love is.

Some days I wonder if Mom is right, though. About my imagination being too strong, and that I should focus on being in the real world as I grow up. "One day you will need to pay rent and save for retirement!" Mom says. "That day will come sooner than you think!" she says. I'm not sure if she means the rent or the retirement, but Mom says it's very important to save

for the retirement, so I have started putting some of my pocket money in a box. Just in case. When I start thinking like that it's not so easy to swim-fly anymore. I get this heavy feeling, like a buffalo is sitting on my head.

I admit that it has become a secret project of mine to look for people who can swim-fly with me. Particularly adults, because maybe, if there are adults who know about this, and who still go to work, and make breakfast, and mow the lawn, and wash their cars, then I will have more proof that Mom is wrong, that she simply is blind to the possibility that swim-flying is as real as what she believes is real, like macaroni and cheese, or the bird poop on the car windshield in the morning.

I wonder if there is a job I can do when I grow up where I can swim-fly in the air. This is what I am trying to figure out, and it's also one of the reasons why I am writing to you, because you know what I am talking about, don't you?

When you read this you will feel the thick, golden air behind my words, and you will know me.

I shall continue writing to you until I find you. Because I need to meet you, and to have a long conversation with you about life and how to be in the real world and also be able to swim-fly in golden light. I would like you to show me that this is possible, before it is too late for me. And I would like you to tell Mom that this thick, golden air is real, and that she is in it too.

It would be really good if you drove a car and had learned to do parallel parking and could also fill in forms and have a job, and still be able to swim-fly. You see, I get the impression from Mom that you couldn't do any of those things when she knew you. She tells me you were a waste of space, a useless wannabe artist and a crazy-maker, and that you avoided driving a car because you were no good at parallel parking.

I wonder if you still live in Greece, on that small island, or have you moved to London? Mom said she thought you might be in London, but then she also said you probably never managed

to get your act together and leave.

I have seen a photo of you, and I must say that you looked rather golden, and I wouldn't be surprised if you knew exactly what I am talking about. I am scared that I am a waste of space too, so I am doing my best to figure all of this out before it is too late. And I am trying not to be a crazy-maker, but sometimes Mom calls me just that. Maybe that is what she calls the people she loves. She says she did love you a long time ago, before she found out just how useless you were.

Will you please write me a letter?

It is getting urgent. I will tell you more later. I will include an envelope with my address and a stamp on it and send it to the little island, hoping you are not in London. I don't know what street you live on, but if I write your name on it, I'm sure the postman will find you. Your island must be very tiny. On the photo Mom showed me you stood next to a donkey.