

NATURE

The Eighth Fold

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

One	Cora Lindgren
Two	Iris Beddoe
Three	Olive Kassen
Four	Sasha Loomis
Five	Priya Nair
Six	jmarsh
Seven	wordsbylena
Eight	Dan Okafor

Chapter

One

written by Cora Lindgren

The bird smelled wrong. That's what Marit noticed first, not the size of it or the way it stood too still in the shallows. She was down at the river skinning yesterday's catch, her hands slick with fish oil and scales stuck under her thumbnails, when the heron waded past the bent willow. The air changed. Went thick and mineral, like licking an old coin. Her mother would have said to turn around, walk back to the smokehouse, shut the door. But her mother had been gone three summers now, buried up the hill where the soil stayed cool even in August, and Marit was tired of listening to warnings from the dead. She kept working. Split the belly of a pike, pulled out the ropy guts, tossed them into the shallows for the crawfish. The heron didn't move toward the offering. Just watched with eyes that caught the morning light and held it, flat as pond ice. The membrane between its toes looked thicker than she remembered. Webbed heavier. When it lifted one foot from the water, silt ran off in dark streams and the mud underneath wasn't mud at all but something pale, almost phosphorescent. She could feel the cold coming off the bird even from six feet away. A cold that had nothing to do with the river. Marit wiped her hands on her apron. The cotton was already stiff with blood and river water, smelled like every fish she'd cleaned that week. She stood slow, knees cracking. The heron's head swiveled. Not the way a bird's head moves, all quick nerves and hunger. This was deliberate.

Measured. "You're the one they saw," she said. The heron blinked. Its neck was longer than it should be. She was sure of that now, seeing it straight on. The S-curve went too deep, folded in on itself one extra time, like something had been added in the middle. Under the gray feathers, she could see the shape of it, the way the vertebrae pressed against the skin when it shifted its weight. Marit's fingers itched. Not fear exactly. Something older. The same feeling she got handling mushrooms she didn't recognize, the ones with gills that bruised black. The body knowing before the mind catches up: careful here, this one's different. She crouched back down, reached into the basket for another pike. Kept her movements easy, unthreatening. The heron watched her split the fish, watched her scrape the kidney line with her thumbnail, that dark vein of blood along the spine. When she tossed the guts, they hit the water with a soft slap. The heron bent. Its beak went into the water and came up with something that wasn't fish guts. Something that writhed. Marit squinted against the glare. A snake maybe, or an eel, except it had too many segments, moved in a way that made her back teeth ache. The heron tipped its head back and swallowed, the lump traveling down that too-long throat. Then it looked at her again. Really looked. And Marit felt that gaze like a hand on her sternum, pressing. Her breath came shorter. The smell got worse, fuller. Wet stone and rust and something underneath like turned earth, except earth didn't smell that green, that alive. "Right," she said quietly. "You're not what left." The heron's throat flexed. Once. Twice. Like it was learning how to work the muscles. By the time Marit got back to the village, her apron was dry, stiff as bark. Her hands still smelled like the river but under that was the other smell, the wrong one, deep in her cuticles where washing wouldn't reach. She'd left the fish basket on the bank. Couldn't say why.

Chapter

Two

written by Iris Beddoe

The bell rang anyway. Not by human hands. Marit heard it later that night, lying in bed with the window open because the heat wouldn't break. A single peal. Then another. Slow and arrhythmic like someone testing the weight of the rope, learning how metal speaks when struck. She went to the square in her nightdress. Others were already there. Old Peder with his cane. The Holm twins, eight years old, holding hands. No one spoke. They stood in a loose half-circle, looking up at the bell tower, and in the moonlight Marit could see the rope swinging. Gentle. No wind. The door to the tower hung open. It had been locked since the herons left. Since the last summer the water ran clear and fish died belly-up in the shallows by the hundreds, their mouths working at air that wouldn't take. Since Jorgen tried to ring the bell to call for help from the neighboring valley and found his hands stuck to the rope, palms blistered down to bone. Marit's feet were bare on the cobblestones. Cold traveled up through her soles. She should go look. Someone should. But Peder was already turning back toward his house, cane tapping a rhythm that sounded like no no no, and the twins' mother appeared from a doorway, pulling them close, and Marit realized she was alone in the square. The rope had stopped moving. She thought about her mother's warnings. All those stories about the years before. When the herons were thick as crows, when they nested in the church eaves and

left shells scattered on the graves, shells too large and the wrong color, blue-green like deep ice. When the river had moods. When you didn't eat the fish unless you knew who caught it and where. Her mother had been twelve when the herons left. Marit did the math sometimes. Eleven years gone. That made her mother twenty-three when they vanished, already married, already pregnant with Marit's older brother who died at two days old. Blue lips. Wouldn't suck. Things her mother said in fever, that last week: They took something when they went. We should have noticed what. Should have known they'd need it back. Marit walked to the tower door. The stairs spiraled up into darkness. She didn't have a lamp. Didn't matter. Her eyes adjusted and she could see well enough. The stone steps, worn smooth in the centers where generations of bell-ringers had climbed. Moss growing in the mortar. And wet. Everything wet, though it hadn't rained in two weeks. At the top, the bell hung silent. Under it, arranged in a perfect circle: seven fish spines. Not pike. Not anything she recognized. The vertebrae were delicate, almost translucent, and they gleamed with that same phosphorescence she'd seen in the mud under the heron's feet. Between each spine, a gap of exactly the same width. Room for one more. Marit's breath fogged in the air. Summer night and she could see her breath. She counted the spines again. Seven. Eight families had lost someone the summer the herons left. Eight funerals in six weeks. Her brother. Jorgen's wife. The Holm twins' grandfather. Others. The bell rope hung perfectly still, but when Marit reached out, not quite touching, she felt it humming. A vibration too low to hear. It made her teeth sing. Made her think of the heron's throat, flexing. Learning.

Chapter

Three

written by Olive Kassen

The fog came with dawn, but it came from the wrong direction. Marit watched it from her doorway, coffee going cold in her tin cup. Fog was supposed to rise from the river, drift up through the valley in soft layers that burned off by mid-morning. This came down from the hills. Thick and low, moving like something poured, and where it touched the ground, the grass bent away. She'd been awake all night. Couldn't stop thinking about the circle of spines, that gap waiting. Couldn't stop counting: eight deaths, seven spines. The arithmetic felt important. Felt like a message she was too stupid or too tired to read. By the time she reached the river, the fog had settled into the low places, pooled in the hollows between roots. The willow hung over water she couldn't see, its trailing branches disappearing into white. She had her knife. Had her basket, though she didn't expect to fill it. Habit, mostly. Her hands needed work or they'd shake. The heron was there. Exactly where she'd left it, like it had been standing in the shallows all night, waiting for her to come back. Maybe it had. Its feathers were dark with moisture, each barb distinct and separate, beaded with droplets that didn't fall. The light was all diffused, coming from everywhere and nowhere, turning the fog pearl-gray and luminous. In that light the bird looked almost normal. Almost like the herons she remembered from childhood, before. Then it shifted its weight and she saw the neck again, that extra curve,

and the way its eye didn't blink so much as shutter, a sideways slide of membrane. "There are others," she said. Not a question. The heron's head tilted. A motion that might have been agreement or might have been curiosity or might have been nothing, just a bird being a bird. Except birds didn't make the air taste like copper. Didn't leave frost on the ground in July. Marit set down her basket. She was thinking about the bell tower, about arrangements and patterns. About her mother's fever-talk: they took something when they went. What did you take from a place? What could a heron carry? She crouched at the water's edge. The river was clearer than it had been in years. She could see straight down to the bottom, to the rocks and weed and the pale shapes moving between them. Not fish. Too many legs. Too articulated. They moved in formation, maintaining exact distances from each other, and when one turned, they all turned, precise as a murmur. Her reflection stared up from the surface. The fog moved behind her, curling around her shoulders like hands, like breath. Like something checking her shape, confirming her outline. The heron watched. Waited. Marit thought about the eight families. Tried to remember: had anyone left? In eleven years, had anyone moved away, taken a loss with them, carried grief out of the valley? The Sorensens, maybe. Five years back. They'd packed up after their daughter drowned, went south to the coast. Said they couldn't stand the river anymore, the sound of it. Seven families still here, still holding their dead close. One family gone. Seven spines. The heron stepped closer. Its feet didn't make the right sound in the water. The ripples spread wrong, moved in geometric patterns, interlocking circles that reminded Marit of honeycomb. Of cells. She could smell that mineral thickness again, stronger now, mixing with the fog until she couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. "You're looking for it," she said. "What you left behind." The heron's beak opened. Not wide, just a crack, and the sound that came out wasn't a bird sound. It was wind through a narrow space. It was ice cracking on a deep lake. It was the bell's low hum translated into something almost like language. Marit stood. Her knees ached. Her hands smelled like old

coins. The fog pressed close, and in it she could almost see other shapes. Tall and still. Watching from between the trees, from the far bank, from the hill where her mother lay in cool earth. She left the basket. Left the knife. Walked back toward the village with the fog following, pouring down the path behind her like water, like it knew the way, like it had always known and was just now deciding to come home.

Chapter

Four

written by Sasha Loomis

The schoolhouse door was open though it was Saturday. Marit saw this from three houses away, saw the darkness inside that wasn't quite darkness, more like the space behind her eyelids when she pressed too hard. Her feet carried her there anyway. Feet knew things before the rest of her caught up. Inside, the desks were arranged wrong. Not moved, exactly. Just occupying slightly different air than they had yesterday. Each one had shifted maybe an inch to the left, or forward, or both, and the cumulative effect was that the room felt tilted. Marit put her hand on a desk to steady herself and it was warm. Body warm. The wood grain moved under her palm, concentric circles rotating slowly like water going down a drain. She pulled back. Looked at her hand. The whorls of her fingerprints had reorganized themselves into tiny spirals, all turning the same direction. As she watched, they slowly unwound, became normal again. Normal-ish. There was an ache in her fingertips like they'd been asleep. On the blackboard, someone had written the alphabet. Every letter was there, but the order was wrong. Not random. Deliberate. The spacing between them varied: some letters pressed close as lovers, others stood apart with room for two or three in between. She tried to find the pattern. Couldn't. Her eyes kept sliding off it, landing on the empty spaces instead of the letters themselves. Under the alphabet, a drawing. Simple lines. Could have been a child's work except for the

precision. It showed the valley, the river, the hill where the cemetery sat. But there were eight buildings where the village should be, not the twenty-three that actually stood there. Eight buildings, seven with smoke rising from their chimneys. One with birds perched on the roof. Too many birds. They overlapped each other, occupied the same space, a confusion of wings that her eyes couldn't count no matter how many times she tried. Marit heard the shuffle before she turned. The Holm twins stood in the doorway, backlit by fog that had followed her down from the river. They were holding hands still, but the wrong hands. Each gripped their own left hand with their right, forming a strange prayer position that made her sternum hurt to look at. "Teacher's not coming," the girl said. Or the boy. Marit couldn't remember which was which anymore. Couldn't remember if she'd ever been able to tell them apart. "She went to the cemetery," said the other. "With the Sorensens." "They came back last night." "Drove up in their cart but the horse was wrong." "Wrong color." "Wrong number of legs." They spoke like that, passing the words between them, and Marit realized their mouths didn't quite match the sounds. There was a delay, tiny but perceptible, like watching someone speak a language she almost understood through glass that was almost clear. "How many legs?" She didn't know why she asked. The twins looked at each other. Looked back at her. "Three," they said together. Perfectly synchronized now. "The horse had three legs but it walked fine. Better than fine. It walked like counting." Marit's coffee cup. She'd left it at home. Could still taste it though, bitter and cold on her tongue. Could taste other things too. Metal. River silt. Something green that wasn't plant or algae but something between. Her mother used to make her eat dandelion leaves in spring, said they cleaned the blood. This tasted like that but deeper. Like her blood was cleaning itself without permission. The twins stepped aside. Behind them in the fog, she could see figures. Seven, standing in a loose line. The height was wrong for all of them. The Sorensens, yes, she recognized the shape of Morten's shoulders even though his head sat six inches lower than it should. And there, that was old Peder, except he didn't have his cane and

his spine was straight as a young man's. And others. All of them slightly off, slightly adjusted, like the desks. "They want to show you something," one twin said. "At the cemetery." "Where the last spine goes." "Where the circle closes." Marit's heartbeat felt external. Like it was happening next to her, a separate event she was observing. The schoolroom's walls were breathing. In and out. Slow and steady. The desks were doing it too, all of them expanding and contracting in unison, and the breathing made a sound like wind through reeds, like the heron's almost-language, like her mother's voice from three summers back saying careful here, this one's different. She walked to the doorway. The twins parted for her. Their eyes were the right color but the pupils were shaped wrong. Hexagonal. Honeycomb. The figures in the fog waited. Behind them, taller shapes. Herons, maybe.

Chapter

Five

written by Priya Nair

The cemetery hill looked closer than it should, like someone had folded the distance in half and tucked the crease into a pocket. Marit counted her steps anyway. Thirty-two. Last time she'd climbed this path it had been two hundred at least. Her breath came easy. Too easy. She should be winded but her lungs felt enormous, like they'd learned to hold more air than they had room for. The graves were fine. That was the first thing she noticed, and somehow the worst. No disturbance, no dirt scattered, no stones tipped over. Everything exactly as it should be except for the seven people standing in a circle around her mother's plot, and the fact that her mother's stone had grown six inches taller since Tuesday. "Hey," Marit said. "So. This is weird, right? We're all agreeing this is weird?" Peder's straight spine turned. His face was his face but the expression on it belonged to something that had only recently remembered what expressions were for. "Marit. Good. We need eight." "Yeah, I've been getting that vibe." She looked at Morten Sorenson, who stood with his wife's hand in his even though his wife was definitely dead, Marit had seen the body herself, had helped wash it for burial. Except here she was, breathing. Sort of. Her chest moved but her dress didn't, like the breathing was happening to her instead of in her. "Morten. How's the coast?" "Wet," Morten said. His voice sounded right but came from slightly left of his mouth. "We brought her back. They

said we could if we brought her back." "They being?" "The ones who need to count us." The fog had pooled inside the cemetery fence, ankle-deep, and things moved in it. Geometric things. Marit watched a shape glide past that might have been a fish skeleton or might have been something teaching itself to be a fish skeleton, trying on the concept for size. Her feet were cold. Had been cold since the tower, since the riverbank, since probably birth if she was honest about it. Some people were just cold-footed. Her mother used to say that. Used to press Marit's icy soles against her thigh in bed and laugh. The stone had her mother's name on it. INGRID HALVORSEN, BELOVED MOTHER. And beneath that, new letters. Fresh-carved. Still weeping stone dust. Marit crouched to read them. SEVEN THAT STAYED. ONE THAT LEFT. ONE THAT COUNTS. "Oh," she said. "Oh, we're so stupid." The Holm twins had followed her up the hill. They stood at the cemetery gate, still holding their own wrong hands, and behind them the herons. Marit could see them clearly now. There weren't seven. There weren't seventy. There was one heron in seven places, or seven herons learning to be one thing, she couldn't tell which and suspected the difference didn't matter. Its neck curved in that extra fold. In the fog-light she could see there was something in the fold, caught in the bend like a kink in a hose. Something moving. Trying to pass through. "You can't count to eight with seven," she said to no one, to everyone. "That's the problem, right? You left and something broke. Some loop. You took your own number with you and we kept trying to close the circle with what we had left but seven doesn't close, seven leaves a gap, and gaps are where things leak." Peder nodded. His neck made a clicking sound. "The herons held it." "Held what?" "The number of us. The shape we made. Then they left." "Migration," Morten's wife said. Her voice was beautiful. Like bells, like breaking ice, like nothing Marit ever wanted to hear again. "But we forgot to migrate with them." "Didn't forget," Peder said. "Chose not to." "So you stayed broken," Marit said. "You stayed seven things pretending to be eight and the herons came back to fix it. Except they don't know how to count our way anymore. They learned something

else while they were gone. Brought it back." She looked at her mother's stone. At the gap in the circle of spines up in the bell tower. At the seven people who'd lost someone and the one family who'd left, who'd taken their grief south to the coast and released it into different water. "I'm the one who counts," she said. "Because I'm still learning. Because I lost her but I'm not done losing her yet." The heron stepped forward. All seven of it. One. Its beak opened and Marit saw down its throat, saw the thing caught in the fold of its neck, saw that it was trying to teach them a better way to be eight, a way that didn't require eight separate bodies, eight separate losses.

Chapter

Six

written by jmarsh

The throat was architecture. Marit saw chambers, arches built of cartilage and something that resembled bone but bent like green wood. The thing caught in the neck-fold pulsed, translucent as an egg held to candlelight, and inside it moved shapes that might have been her mother's hands, or might have been the memory of hands, learning to exist without the flesh that had once given them purpose. She could smell wet feathers and underneath that, yeast. The scent of bread rising in a warm kitchen. "No," she said, though her throat shaped the word strangely, as if her mouth had begun to forget the mechanics of refusal. The heron's beak closed with a sound like pages turning. Peder's clicking neck swiveled toward her, and Marit saw that where his collar gaped open, the skin had taken on a faint hexagonal pattern, each cell distinct as frost on glass. "It doesn't hurt," he said. His voice had harmonics now, layered frequencies that her ears wanted to separate but couldn't. "After the first folding, it doesn't hurt." "The first folding," Marit repeated. Her coffee-taste had returned, stronger, and with it came understanding she didn't want. "You're not seven people anymore. You're seven attempts at one thing." Morten's wife smiled. Her teeth were perfect, which was wrong because Marit remembered helping to wash the body, remembered the broken incisor from when she'd fallen on the dock steps. "We're learning efficiency. The herons know it already. One bird

in seven locations, or seven birds folded into one position. When you stop insisting on separation, the mathematics simplify." The fog breathed. In the cemetery, stones exhaled moisture that rose in thin streams, and each stream bent toward the heron in the center, feeding it, or being drawn from it. Marit couldn't determine the direction of flow. Both, perhaps. Neither. The question assumed a linearity that no longer applied. Behind the graves, the valley spread below in the strange compressed distance, and she could see the river from here though that should have been impossible. The water moved in patterns she recognized from the schoolhouse blackboard, from the spacing between letters in that reorganized alphabet. The pattern was a word. The word was a number. The number was the shape her mother had become in the fold of the heron's throat, learning to count differently. "What happens to the eighth spine?" She needed to anchor herself in specifics. Her fingers found her apron pocket, closed around something that hadn't been there before. Stone, smooth, vertebrae-shaped. "You bring it," said one of the Holm twins from the gate. Or both of them. The hexagonal pupils made it difficult to determine if they were still maintaining the pretense of being two separate children. "You've been carrying it since the bell rang. Since before that, maybe. Since she died and part of you folded inward to hold her shape." Marit pulled the thing from her pocket. It was translucent like the others, shot through with that blue-green phosphorescence, and it was warm. Blood-warm. It fit her palm the way her mother's thumb had fit the hollow of her collarbone when Marit was young, when fever dreams had made the walls breathe and her mother had pressed that thumb there and counted, one breath, two breaths, anchor yourself to the rhythm, find your way back from wherever the heat is taking you. The heron extended its neck. The extra fold opened like a mouth within a mouth, and Marit saw the chambers dilate, making room. Saw her mother's hand-shapes reach toward the surface of the membrane, pressing from inside. The fingers were longer than they should be. More articulated. As she watched, they sprouted additional joints, became something that could count past ten without

returning to one, could hold numbers the way water holds stones, surrounding them completely. "If I complete the circle," Marit said, and her voice had harmonics too now, she could hear them, "what counts as me afterward?" "The same thing that counted as you before," Peder said. His spine clicked again, adjusting. "Only more efficient. Only folded into the proper shape at last." The cemetery grass bent away from her feet. Seven people who weren't quite people anymore waited in their circle, and above them the herons that were one heron watched with eyes that had learned to hold light instead of merely reflecting it. Marit looked at the spine in her palm. It had begun to pulse in time with her heartbeat, or her heartbeat had begun to match its rhythm. Either way, the synchronization felt inevitable.

Chapter

Seven

written by wordsbylena

The pulsing was not random: eleven beats, pause, eleven beats. Marit counted three cycles before she understood. Her mother had been gone three summers. Three times eleven made thirty-three months. Marit had been thirty-three years old when her mother died. The mathematics were insisting on themselves, forcing pattern where she had previously seen only sequence. She examined the spine in her palm. Length: approximately four centimeters. Width at the neural arch: eight millimeters. Weight: impossible to determine because it seemed to shift, becoming heavier when she thought about her mother's body in the ground, lighter when she remembered her mother's hands kneading bread. The phosphorescence concentrated at seven points along its surface, each point corresponding to one of the figures in the circle. She was the eighth point, the dark spot, the place where light hadn't learned to pool yet. "How many herons left?" she asked. Specificity. Hold to specificity. The Holm twins answered in unison: "Seventy-seven." Marit counted: seven times eleven. Of course. Seven village families, eleven years gone. The multiplication had been waiting there all along, obvious as hunger. "How many came back?" "One," said Peder, and his clicking neck bent at an angle that would have broken a normal spine. "One that contains all seventy-seven. One that is learning to contain eight villages, eight valleys, eight ways of being separate until you fold and become

part of the single migration pattern that continues across all available space simultaneously." Eight villages. Marit's chest tightened. Not just here, then. Not just them. She looked at the stone in her hand and made herself count what she saw: five translucent layers, each one a different density. Twenty-three hairline fractures spreading from the central canal. Fourteen flecks of something darker suspended in the phosphorescent gel, each one shaped like a letter from the rearranged alphabet on the schoolhouse board. The flecks were moving. Slowly. They were spelling something in a language that required you to read all fourteen letters simultaneously, from fourteen different angles, each angle revealing a different word that was somehow the same word. The word was a number. The number was eight. Marit's fingers had gone numb. Not cold-numb. Folded-numb. The sensation of a limb that had been compressed too long, blood flow interrupted, nerves trying to remember their pathways. She counted her fingers: still five on her right hand, five on her left. But the counting felt wrong, as if five was a choice she was making rather than a fact she was observing. The heron waited. Its throat chambers continued their slow dilation, patient as rising bread. In the membrane that held her mother's hand-shapes, Marit could now see other objects: a wooden spoon, its handle worn smooth. Her mother's wedding ring. Three buttons from a blue dress. Not the objects themselves, but their shapes, their shadows, the spaces they had occupied in her mother's life now learning to occupy space without her. "What did you take?" Marit asked the heron. "When you left eleven years ago, what did you take from us?" The heron's eye shuttered sideways. Morten's wife answered instead: "The ability to migrate. The knowledge that staying in one place, in one shape, was a choice and not a condition. When they left, we forgot we could leave too. Forgot we could fold ourselves into smaller, more efficient configurations and move through the world as something other than fixed points on a map that was lying about what maps can show." Seven graves behind the circle. Seven spines in the bell tower. Seven people standing here whose bodies were learning a new geometry. And Marit, who had never left,

who had stayed and counted fish and cleaned them and thrown the guts to water that was learning to count back. She looked at her mother's stone. SEVEN THAT STAYED. ONE THAT LEFT. ONE THAT COUNTS. Her mother hadn't left. The Sorensens had left. But the stone was about her mother, and stones didn't make mistakes unless someone carved them wrong. Unless the categories themselves were wrong: staying, leaving, counting. Unless those were three words for the same motion, three angles on the same fold. Marit closed her fist around the spine. It pulsed: eleven beats, pause. Her heartbeat answered: seven beats, pause. Between them, the gap where eight should be, waiting for her to understand that numbers were locations you could inhabit, that her mother was a number now, that she was being asked to become a number too. "Show me," she said to the heron. "Show me how to complete the circle.

Chapter

Eight

written by Dan Okafor

Marit looked at the heron with a wry half-smile on her face, as if she were addressing an old friend rather than a strange creature. "Show me," she repeated softly, almost to herself. The heron's eyes blinked once in acknowledgment, and then its neck began to move slowly, as if it were stretching before it took flight. Marit watched intently as the extra fold in the heron's throat opened wider, revealing the chambers within. The translucent membrane stretched taut, forming a series of arches that seemed almost delicate yet robust. Inside this folded geometry, Marit could see more than just her mother's hand-shapes, now they were joined by other small objects: spoons, rings, buttons. These items were no longer merely memory but something more tangible, as if they were becoming part of the heron's body in a new way. "Are you sure this is how it works?" she asked, her voice tinged with skepticism and curiosity. "That we need to fold ourselves into these shapes?"

Peder's neck clicked again, adjusting slightly. "It's a choice," he said, his words layered with harmonics that made Marit feel like she was hearing them from inside the chambers of a bell. "You can choose to stay in one place or move through different configurations. Each configuration is more efficient than the last."

The heron extended its neck further, inviting Marit closer. She hesitated for a moment, then placed the spine in her palm on the surface

of the membrane. The warmth of the spine seemed to pulse with each heartbeat, synchronizing with the rhythm inside her own chest. "Alright," she said, taking a deep breath. "I need to understand this completely." Marit closed her eyes and focused on the sensations within her hand, the pulsing spine, the rising warmth, the memory of her mother's touch. She felt the familiar ache in her chest, a yearning that had been there for years but was now mixed with something new: acceptance. Opening her eyes again, she looked at Peder and the others gathered around them. "Show me," she said more firmly. "What do I need to do?"

The heron's eye shuttered sideways, and its throat chambers dilated further. Slowly, a hand-shaped formation emerged from the membrane, extending towards Marit as if it were reaching out to guide her. The fingers of this shape were longer than normal, more articulated, almost as if they were learning to count beyond ten. "Take my hand," the heron seemed to say through Peder's voice. "Let me show you."

Marit hesitated for a moment before gently placing her own hand on top of the heron's hand-shaped formation. She felt the spine in her palm vibrate against her skin, and the warmth spread through her fingers. "Now," said one of the Holm twins from behind the gate, their hexagonal pupils almost indistinguishable. "Fold."

Without thinking, Marit began to fold herself into the shape that the heron was offering. Her body felt as if it were compressing, her joints adjusting to fit into this new configuration. She could feel the shift in her perception, a change in how she understood space and time. "Focus on the gaps," Peder's voice echoed inside her head. "Fill them with your essence."

Marit focused on the spaces between the fingers of the hand-shaped formation. As if by magic, she felt her own body filling these gaps, merging with the shape. The spine in her palm seemed to grow longer and more complex, becoming part of this new configuration. "Now," said Morten's wife, "complete the circle."

Marit took a deep breath and let go of everything else, her worries, her fears, her doubts. She felt herself folding completely into the shape, her fingers interlocking with those of the hand-shaped formation. The spine in her palm began to pulse faster, syncing perfectly with her own heartbeat. “Eight,” she whispered as she fully immersed herself in this new geometry. “I am eight.”

The heron’s eye blinked once more, and it seemed to acknowledge her transformation. Marit felt a sense of relief wash over her, she had done it. She had become part of the circle. In that moment, Marit realized that the gap where eight should be was no longer just an absence but a presence. It was a space filled with meaning and understanding, a place where she could finally find her place in this new world. “Thank you,” she said to the heron, as if it were a friend who had taught her something profound. The heron’s throat chambers began to close, signaling its departure. The seven people gathered around her watched silently, their bodies still learning the geometry of folding and unfolding.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Cora Lindgren

Eight steps to find my place.

Iris Beddoe

Eight hearts beat as one tonight.

Sasha Loomis

You are never truly alone when you carry part of them within.

Priya Nair

Complete the circle and let the gaps guide you.

wordsbylena

Eightfold wisdom, sevenfold love.

Dan Okafor

Eight steps to find your place.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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StqMy](https://relaywriters.com/read/17?t=Ao3KJTz8nLAmg-Do_XCpwwk26ZtStqMy)