



AWE (A Woman's Experience)

Volume 8

Article 22

2022

Shoulders

Joseph Rowley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rowley, Joseph (2022) "Shoulders," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 8, Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol8/iss1/22>

This Poem is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *AWE (A Woman's Experience)* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Shoulders

Atlas, the sky—and I? I hold the weight of my world. Which burden is heavier? An atlas charts everything known—I live in the uncharted, the unknown. Which task is greater? I am not Atlas. A Titan tale, told into existence, he trembles in his prison yet he is never crushed. His curse? He's just strong enough. Defeat would be escape, oblivion: ecstasy. But Atlas shoulders on.

I am not Atlas, but I am trembling. Am I strong enough? Do I want to be? The chemical mind is an atmosphere, thick and stifling—sometimes crushing. I walk with sky heavy on my shoulders. The sky falls with the gravity of earth, a soul falls with the gravity of birth. Fallen, like an eagle from its nest, too egg-fresh to know how to fly. . . . My shoulders make an awkward wingspan.

Still, I am not Atlas. I am not earth-bound. My life is neither myth nor map. My struggle has an end—my horizons, endless. I raise my shoulders in defiance, I shrug off fear in hopeful silence. You who wrote the myths and drew the legends; know that Atlas now has been set free. Earth is not in battle with the heavens—life is not a prison cell to me.

Author's Note:

I wrote this poem for my sister's 25th birthday last September. I was exploring the idea of Atlas, the Greek mythological figure, and the way that the myth exemplifies unhealthy ideals, particularly for women and men with mental health challenges. In short: Atlas endures the punishment of shouldering a burden that is almost, but not quite, too heavy for him.

He endures—he can't quit, and he can't escape his burden, and because of that, we (the mere mortals) are free to walk beneath the distant stars. If the myth was created to explain why the sky stays up instead of falling to the earth, there is something there that resonates with the false feminine ideal of the "Angel of the House" who suffers in silence and continues carrying all that weight so that others don't have to.

I wanted to communicate that burden . . . what it feels like to endure under pressure . . . and then to shatter the illusion. Atlas is a myth. Somewhere along the line of history we made it up, telling ourselves that ultimate strength lies in holding up unbearable weight. I wanted my sister to know that I love her for all the weight she carries every day—the burdens that others don't see—and yet at the same time I wanted to convey the truth that such endurance is not a fate carved in stone. No one is truly condemned to shoulder the sky until they simply can't take it anymore. There is hope to be found in shaking off that myth and letting go of unrealistic and unnecessary expectations.

Whether or not I succeeded in that endeavor. . . I'll leave that to the reader to decide.