

Going offline to preserve the precious resource of attention

Yes, it's another year-of narrative. But Esther Emery offers a moving story about the possibility of change.

by [Isaac Anderson](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

In Review



What Falls from the Sky

How I Disconnected from the Internet and Reconnected with the God Who Made the Clouds

By Esther Emery
Zondervan

On a winter night in Southern California around the turn of the decade, Esther Emery was pulled over for reckless driving. Emery and her husband, Nick, were at the time temporarily estranged. Her career as a playwright and theater director was soon to unravel. She was pregnant with her second child. Late to meet a friend, Emery entered the freeway and pressed the car's accelerator until the needle slid past 100 miles per hour, then 110. She recalls laughing when the police officer asked how much she'd had to drink. Her problem wasn't alcohol. Her problem was runaway ambition, or fear, or fury. Her problem was a taste for perpetual acceleration, "the only thing I had really been trained to do." Her problem was she was not wholly sure what her problem was.

That story scene opens Emery's wise, lyrical memoir of a year spent without Internet, a semi-improvised attempt to remedy the fatigue and "creeping numbness" of a life lived at untenable speeds. During this year, Emery reawakens to parts of herself lost amid digital distractions. She finds her soul being reconfigured by silence and an unforeseen hunger for God.

Year-of memoirs—or *annualism*, a term coined by the BBC in 2009—have a history in American letters dating back to Thoreau, who collapsed his two years, two months, and two days at Walden Pond into a single calendar year for his venerated opt-out narrative, *Walden* (1854). Stories of yearlong experiments in unconventional living have been so plentiful of late that readers could play a mean game of Jenga with titles belonging to this subgenre. (Google the Goodreads list of "A Year in the Life" memoirs and imagine publishers trying to place one more Jenga block atop the rest. It's mildly amazing that the tower has not toppled.) Given this craze, I admit approaching Emery's tale of her year without Internet reluctantly, steeled against the year-of game.

But Emery is savvy enough to overcome a reader's resistance. Her story disarms, in part because it shuns easy epiphanies. "I do not suddenly remember that I have precious things to hope for," she writes after receiving that driving ticket. "I do not suddenly regret everything that has happened or feel in any way encouraged for the

future.” Growth and insight occur as often by accident as by design, and while her memoir is carefully crafted, it is Emery’s willingness to show how tenuous is her search for a different way of being—not to mention how skeptical she has been regarding the Christian faith—that gives these moments their ring of authenticity.

Like Thoreau, Emery calibrates her narrative to the four seasons, taking cues from different weather patterns: rain, snow, sun, and fog. Chapters are constructed from brisk, interlocking vignettes—Emery is a practiced blogger—each adding color and narrative density to a highly eventful year. Aside from the work of weaning herself off screens, there is the work of salvaging a marriage in the aftermath of infidelity. There is Emery’s relocation from California to Boston with her family, the timing of which coincides with her choice to go offline. There is Emery’s reckoning with the ghost of her deceased mother, who was an architect of the modern homesteading movement, and with the crucible of motherhood itself. There is the apparent death of Emery’s theater career.

Broader critiques of a Web-dependent, Web-afflicted culture remain judiciously tethered to the author’s own experience. An “elder child of the Net Generation,” Emery finds that, sans Internet, her main stage and spotlight, her venue for curating and performing a beguiling image, has been struck. She becomes aware of a vanity threading through certain ambitions, as the idea of spending more time outdoors or hosting people for dinner becomes less attractive the moment no one is watching. Emery is candid about how blogging and social networking have often fed an appetite for validation—and, when she goes Internet-dark, about the emptiness and angst that fill that void.

Still, as the year unfolds, Emery’s discomfort gives way to a deeper rootedness, a new alertness to the natural world and to her neighbors. (“I watch the neighborhood the way I used to watch my Facebook feed.”) A yearning for the sacred materializes. Time for leisure—for reading and new hobbies and sex—expands. Emery notices she has less performance anxiety; also, absent the temptations of e-commerce, more financial control. She enters a new dispensation. She begins to feel her life again. One word for all this, one of Emery’s words, is *healing*. It is a word that may strike some readers as too exultant. It would surely be too exultant were Emery not so baffled by its truth.

What Falls from the Sky turns out to be both an ode to simplicity and an affecting story about the possibility of change: part *Walden*, part *The Moth Radio Hour*.

What it is not, finally, is an argument for a wholesale retreat from the Internet. Emery goes back online at year's end, though she approaches the experience differently than before. The need to be shrewd when dealing with alluring technologies is implicit throughout. But if the book argues for anything, it is for clearing space in one's brain and body so that something unexpected might fill it. It argues for stewarding more intently what advertisers and purveyors of click-bait know to be a precious resource: the ever-fragile force of our attention.

Perhaps this is why year-of narratives are so compelling. They remind us that while we may not have the freedom, desire, or courage to adopt a writer's unconventional program, we can still seek to alter our default settings. We can invent our own quiet experiments and follow our own impulses to live deliberately. We can try and fail and try again to be more conscious, here and now.