

## Beauty

I see Her. She steps out from behind the stars, Her dress blowing like soft breeze across my cheeks. I hear Her over the speedboat's idling engine, Her silence stifling the night that blooms around me. She is the space between each star, the deep, endless black of the water that blends into the endless black trees that falls into the endless black sky, smooth as black silk. Stars bleed into the night, fluttering across the water, falling from the sky into my open palms. Her hands are warm as they cup my cheeks, the hair on my arms prickling. My voice, small but reaching, thrumming inside my throat with the words –

“–Sarah, are you okay?” a voice says, someone in the boat. It's enough; I search the sky for Her, but She's disappeared behind the stars, swallowed up by the blackness, and with Her, She takes the words thrumming in my throat. The stars still shine up from the bottom of the lake, dancing in the trembling wake kicked up by the engine. When the boat hits the dock, I feel the world fall away from me.

Soon after, my Papaw disappears. I find out in a Walgreens parking lot that he's in prison for child molestation. An arrow, the first, slices into my chest, my heart straining to make room. I remember him, the Papaw I knew, the one who ate cookie dough out of the bowl with me while I sat on his lap; who snored in his recliner, Jeopardy on mute; who wore a fake beard as Santa Claus at the local mall one year, and I didn't even recognize him. I don't recognize him; these memories belong to someone else. I watch them fade in the rain that pounds the car as Mom drives, watching as the memories tear and curl in on themselves, falling away with the houses we pass. I reach out of the window and scoop a handful of the soggy memories, putting them in my pocket for later.

I see Her again, stretched over my backyard like one of Grandma Faye's quilts, veiled in white. Snowflakes fall on my eyelashes, melting down sticky, wind-bitten cheeks. My feet, weighed down by too-big brown boots, are fixed to the porch step. She reaches with long fingers, slender and cold like the glass branches of the weeping willow. I reach back, falling forward into the yard, running, kicking up snow into my eyes as She laughs. I stop, spinning in slow circles until I flop onto my back in the snow, winding my arms together, apart and back again, pressing my body into Her.

"Sarah, it's time to come in!" my mother yells from the back door. She holds hot cocoa in her hands. I stand, surveying the barren land. Beauty hides among the piles of snow, Her veil tattered and torn, shreds hanging from the rusty wire fence.

The last time I see Her, She is kissing the salty eaves of the pier. Her breath is sticky on my cheek, the sea air making me feel too light to stay anchored to the sand. She whispers to me, Her voice cresting with the waves that roll over my feet, churning seaweed and sand and shells. I bury my toes in Her, feeling Her sigh slip between the slats in the pier's sun-faded wood.

"Sarah, we're leaving now," my mother puts her hand on my shoulder. Beauty lets the hungry tide and licking waves pull Her under. I let myself be pulled away, stealing glances at the frothing waves, hoping I'll see Her in the shimmer of sun on deep blue horizon.

My step-dad is an excellent marksman, emptying his quiver of arrows at every family portrait that hangs on the walls. I watch as they shatter, glass and wood and fragments of photos, of moments when the only darkness I knew was the long winter night. An arrow ricochets off the wall, plunging in to join the other already lodged in my chest. When he drives away, Mom doesn't pick up the pieces; she sweeps them off the front porch with the dust and pollen. She watches them hang in the air for a moment, just long enough to rekindle hope that his headlights

will swing back into the driveway, but the fragments hit the ground and she pushes the door closed, listening for the latch to slide into place. I'm alone with the burning bits of us simmering in the warm June night. I scoop a handful from where the ashes came to rest in the gravel, putting them in my pocket for later.

I fall hard for an older man – too old. We tell each other it's only us, that no one could ever understand. We hide ourselves away from the rocks people throw. We're foolish at first; we want to get married. We hold hands across the divider of his car, fingers squeezing. I memorize the vein patterns on his hands because I don't know how long it'll be before I'll get to hold him again. I feel the edges of my heart lift a little around the arrows when he looks at me, but his soft blue eyes turn hard, and I see my mother. I feel myself look away. We break it off because the third arrow ripping through my heart, more metal now than flesh, is easier to swallow than the fistfuls of rocks gathering around my feet. I bend down to pick up a handful, putting the rocks in my pocket for later.

Interstitial Cystitis finds me already crumpled in the dirt. Far away from home, a fourth arrow careens into my chest as my bladder sends shooting pains up through my spine, making me arch and hiss like a cat. Laying there, I wonder if I'll ever be able to get back up again. I see the images of the life I want to live, of backpacking along the seaside in Greece; of becoming the first step onto which my children will climb; of feeling the rose of champagne bloom in my cheeks at my wedding. I rip the images – nothing now but dreams - up in a fury and throw them at my feet. Another echo of pain, I bend down to scoop up a handful of the shreds, keeping them in my pocket for later.

I seek Her in my desperation to be whole again. I watch the New York skyline get closer and closer from the train window, searching for a glimmer of pearly white teeth against the steel

and concrete. All I see is an umbrella of smoke snuffling the cries of babies never to be comforted by their mothers. I see a girl with mahogany boots, hear the tinkle of their metal buckles. I look under each rise and fall of her foot against damp grass, searching for a wisp of Her hair among the dewy blades. That night, I see the girl's boots on the news sticking out from a ditch where they've just found a body, naked, except for her boots. I change the channel. I look away. I lay crumpled up between my flannel sheets, desperate to calm my burning bladder, feeling guilty for wishing it on someone – anyone – else.

The rocks fall from my pockets to the floor as I pull the crumbled, water-stained and burned memories from my pocket, scatter them at the end of the bed. I search for Beauty in their shape, the way they curl around the corners, fade into one another. My step-father's eyes smiling at me from across plates of chicken and rice are black. How did I not notice Papaw walking away from me, leaving Mimi to button my jacket? In all the pictures of me, lips parted in a smile, I see a darkness peering at me from the spaces between my teeth.

I hold my legs to my chest, remembering what it's like to feel safe, protected by the shield of my mother's hands, the flit of eyes that look but don't see, fingers too busy contorting the arms of my Barbie to hear the Adult Talk slanting under the door like poison darts. I try and escape from the memories captured in the photos at my feet, feeling the arrows swell deeper in my chest, hot and searing in trying-to-mend layers of flesh. I recall the scent of pumpkin cupcakes and the cold, moldy smell of a Midwestern fall, the warmth of the orange walls of my childhood bedroom. Hash and eggs, Sunday morning Pine-Sol, dust still floating in the orange glow of the sunset pouring through the open back door. I remember Her stepping out from behind the stars, veiling herself across my backyard, whispering to me through the sea air.

I pull myself out of my bed, loosen my sweat pants around my waist, and zip my jacket up. I move slowly, scared to feel the arrows slice deeper. I pull the door shut behind me, feel the winter sun pull at the corners of my mouth. I walk up Maple Street, slowly pulling my shoulders from their protective hunch, and turn right past all the houses with ivy growing around their windows; trees with canopies that hang down, rustling in the wind like the soft crinkle of tissue paper. Snowflakes blow with the gusts that lick bare cheeks, snow clouds shaped like funnels chasing each other down empty back-roads. Views of Lake Champlain, a sheet of ice that reflects the glow of the sun. A golden lake. Mountains stretching out to the horizon, dips that curve with my finger as I trace the land. With each step, I feel the arrows shrinking; I barely notice them. The cold presses itself all around me like heat from a fireplace does. My teeth are chattering, but I'm not cold. I can feel Her hiding behind every bare bush and pine cone wreath I pass. She doesn't come out; this time, I'm not disappointed.

I crawl back between my flannel sheets, settling into the soft night that hums outside my window. Another pain shoots through my bladder, fists clutching my comforter. I kick at the pain, sending the broken bits of memories at the end of my bed into the air. They float down, twisting and turning over themselves. One piece lands on my cheek. I pick it up, see my step-father's black eyes. But in the corner, I see a flicker in the weeping willow, its twisted gray branches and wispy green leaves; seeds of ash and smoke, rebuilding what has burned. It's Her, tugging the focus of the photo away from his trap-eyes, a reminder that light and darkness are two petals of the same flower. They grow from each other. They grow *because* of each other.

I sit up in bed, the bits of photo floating off onto the floor. I remember Her dropping the world into my hands with every star that fell from the sky that night years ago. Water like black silk, the speedboat gliding. The murmur of faraway voices. My throat thrumming with unsaid

words that caught, waiting, growing there as I watched the world move between dark and light, moon and sun, cresting arrows and Beauty's veil. The whirl of the speedboat's engine pulling *forward forward forward* pushing *back back back*, and I know I'm going to see Her again. I don't know when; it doesn't matter. She's out there. A thread from Her dress hangs down, sweeping through the blades of grass, swishing through the leaves. It's something I can cling to: hope.

I pull the bloody arrows from my chest and let the words thrum out from the darkness:

*I am going to be okay.*  
*I am going to be okay.*  
*I am going to be okay.*