

Beauty

Best of Nonfiction

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This is Danville, Illinois. It's the summer of 2003—June, to be more specific. The sky is blue, so bright it looks almost white, and it's the annual Arts in the Park festival. Heat waves shimmer just above the tar-black pavement of the streets, and the whole of Lincoln Park is filled with the noise of brassy bands and chatter, the scent of burnt popcorn and popsicle juice. I am sprawled on the sidewalk, an array of chalk before me and my tongue stuck out as I try to sketch out my masterpiece with childish hands that grip thick stalks of chalk in tiny fists.

I'm baking in the sun, bare knees chafing against the grainy sidewalk when I color and shade at the top, and getting indented by emerald green grass when I move to work on the bottom. I'm chalk-streaked. I'm in the zone.

I have lost the competition once again.

There is a girl three sidewalk squares down who has recreated the American flag. It stretches from one side of the sidewalk to the other, and she's gone over each of the thirteen stripes so many times that the red of the flag actually looks red, not just the dusty-pink-gray that is the closest sidewalk chalk can approximate to my favorite color. All fifty stars are evenly lined up, and there is no sign of the cement under her flag. It's boring. It's unoriginal.

It wins.

Flies are buzzing around my forehead, attracted by the sheen of sweat all over me. My square of the sidewalk is not a bastion of color against the street. The lines are not clear, and the judges say when they think I am not in earshot that they do not know what it is.

I had been practicing for the competition for months. This piece of the sidewalk, it's the epitome of my art. What I colored was a map of my fantasy world. I tried to bring to life with pale pigment on the ground the world I played in inside my head. It was comprised of lush, rolling, green hills, thick pine forests, a clear, blue river, and fantasy-red fruits. In my head it is gorgeous. On the sidewalk, it looks like scribbles even though I am six and much too old to be scribbling.

Even then, I know it's not good. But still I am heartbroken when the judges do not call me for first, for second, for third, or for runner-up. I cry on the way home, my hands still covered in dust in every pastel shade Crayola could make.

This is not a story about art.

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This is Indianapolis, Indiana, sitting on the edge of my seat waiting for my classmates to say what they thought of my story. It's autumn of 2017, but it's so hot and muggy outside that the air conditioner is blasting all through the classroom. There's an institutional chill in the room, and the nervous tapping of my feet on the linoleum floor makes a horrible plastic-slapping noise.

"All I had to say was 'damn,'" my new favorite person in the class says.

"Well, that isn't a very helpful critique," my professor says.

The class full of kids masquerading as adults in the classroom goes around in a circle as they take turns vivisecting the story on the classroom floor until it bleeds out and dies. Defenseless, my story is torn to ribbons. It is too confusing, it's too long, it's not long enough, it's showing and not telling and it's telling and not showing and the paper is bloodless, pale as it gets carved up with markers and pens.

"The real problem is that there's no moment of reckoning," the professor says. "This is a good story, but how does it come together? You've got to narrow your focus here."

I don't want to take my story back home with me anymore.

This is not a story about writing.

This is Urbana, Illinois, wearing my best velvet dress and listening to the symphony in Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. My best friend and my mother flank me in the plush, fold-down seats that start to hurt by Act Two.

The symphony is otherworldly. Instruments weave together like the tapestry of the fates. When I close my eyes, I am not in the crowded concert hall with 2,000 of my closest strangers, struggling to stay awake under the dim lights. I am back inside my mind, running through the lush forests that refused to be committed to paper, or I am swimming through a crystalline ocean that could not be conveyed with pens, or I am flying through the sky—I am a connoisseur of skies because they are different every day, even in my mind, even in make-believe.

My fingers on my lap try in vain to find where the notes should go, but I do not know these notes. The chords and the melodies do not sound like scales, and my hands fall flat as I give in and let the music wash over me, crashing in waves of sound that soothe and excite, calm and bring life.

"I wanna do that," I think to myself when the music stops. "I want to make music like that. I want to make people feel like that."

My mother speaks before I say any words out loud.

"You could do that, you know," she said. "If you practiced your

piano everyday like you're supposed to, you could sound like that."

Piano practice sounds nothing like that. I can hear new songs in my mind, folding and crashing and dancing like rivers. Music that sounds like water or adventure or love, I can hear, I could write it, I know I could.

But she's right. I can't play music. I can barely hit two notes at a time on piano without crying in frustration.

This is not a story about music.

This is an old beige Toyota with the windows rolled down, kicking up dust as it blurs past forests and mountains down the old dirt road. Rap music pounds out of the speakers and fills up the car. It should be drowning us, but just enough sound leaks out of the open windows that we can still breath in the musty summer air.

She sits next to me, cool and in control in the driver's seat. Her makeup is perfect and unsmudged. Her hair blows around her face but never tangles up or gets in her mouth. Her waist is trim and her eyes are smoky. She loves me, sometimes, but not as much as I love her.

"You're perfect," I say, in more words, words that come out bitter and accusing.

"I try harder than you," she says in more words, words that sound like biting classroom insults, words like "lose weight" and "don't be a slob."

She is a whole human being, and I can't hold my shape at all. She is solid and I am liquid. She is disgusted by me because I'm not trying, and I can't tell her I am trying because if I'm trying and this is as good as it gets then that is so, so much worse.

This is not a story about love.

This story is me trying to say something and never having the words to, never having the guts or the balls or the brains to pull something to completion and not really trying to. It's a story about letting all the stitches show in your clothing, having a life that isn't seamless and art that's riddled with mistakes. It's about sending letters that aren't thought through all the way because it's better than agonizing over them forever and never saying anything at all.

This is a story about Kintsugi, the art of filling in the cracks of broken pottery with melted gold. This is about beautiful damaged goods.

This is a story about the mosaic I made when I was very young. It was made of pieces of broken glass pressed into wet grout, and it was supposed to be a sunset, but it didn't look like anything but colored broken

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glass.

But when the light hit it, it didn't matter.

No one knew what it was, no one knew what it meant. No one knew it came out the way it was supposed to, and it didn't. But no one could deny that it was beautiful.