

The Blue Route

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Fresh Air

by: Audrey T. Carroll

Prue felt a pain from her stomach that was either the baby kicking or something she ate. Either way, her throat was constricting, and the shirt she was wearing suddenly felt too tight. Prue ripped at the ground with her small, metal hand-rake, pulling away the weeds and making the ground more hospitable, trying to release how overwhelmed she was. Green and brown stained the pink pastel shirt over her oversized stomach. She tried to brush it off with the back of her glove, but it only settled deeper into her clothing. Marissa smiled at her older sister as they knelt in the mum garden encased in cinder blocks in Prue's backyard. After a moment, she stared back down at the dirt, her short brown hair falling over her face.

"This is not funny," Prue said, attempting anger with each annunciated syllable but smiling nonetheless. "Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to find a half-decent shirt right now?"

Marissa cleared her throat. "You're right," she conceded. "I'm sorry."

Prue's mouth felt sour and puckered up for a moment, but only for a moment, and it passed. The sun was warm against her skin, comforting. Her body began to relax, as she let the hand holding the rake-like tool fall into the rhythm of combing dirt.

"I really am going to miss this," Prue said suddenly. Marissa looked up and tilted her head. "Pass me the shovel, please," she continued, extending an open hand. Marissa gave her the small, purple-handled metal shovel.

"What're you gonna miss? Getting dirt and shit all over your clothes?" Marissa took the tool by her sister's leg and started weeding the plots closer to her corner of the small, square garden.

"No. Being able to relax for two seconds." Prue felt her body tighten once she mentioned it again. She tried to breathe slowly, in some bastard knock-off of the pregnancy breathing she'd been taught by her mother. Just thinking about the baby nowadays made her panicky and anxious, and talking about it was even worse. She had wanted the baby, sure, but now that it was coming, all she could think about was what she would no longer be able to do.

"Oh, come on. It's not gonna be all that bad. I mean, I'd think it would be a lotta fun."

"Oh yeah," Prue replied, dropping the shovel. She picked the dirt from one of her long, heavy brown curls. "No sleep and spit-up and cooing all day. Sounds like a freakin' fiesta."

"Well... I think you'd be good at it, anyway."

"Thanks." Prue took the orange mums from their black plastic pot and stuck them in the ground, then started to cover the roots in dirt.

"Seems like you don't believe me," Marissa mumbled.

"I guess I'm just freaking out. I..." Prue hesitated. She thought about telling Marissa the truth, that she couldn't understand, that she was only eighteen with college and years of freedom yet ahead of her. But she stopped herself.

“I just want to be a good mom,” Prue decided to say, pressing the dirt along the base of the mums and taking a deep breath of fresh air. As she struggled to stand, the weight and pressure in her stomach grew.

The Disappearing Act
by: Savanah Mandeville

Like Jack who sat by Big Sur sea,
listening to her eternal story, drunk on the black silence of shells and sand:
I dissolve, I wilt. Seaweed, silt.

Like he who said I was the wind in a dream
now I am only steam. In this room and Japan--but how much more could I stand?
You only annoy me: fallacious flattery.

Or like black haired she who waits on the couch and
likes to be touched, but doesn't reach out. We don't stick with the plan:
We are darkness, heartless.

Or like he who paints and prints and reads
a lot things that I cannot believe. He says they are true, I promise I am too to some
degree:
He is indifferent and resistant.

Or like he who cracked open the world like an egg and
dropped it down onto my begging plate. I always force it as fast as I can:
I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am.

Or like the days that blur to one, dusk must mean a Rising Sun and
that there's nothing here nor there but space.
No eyes, no lips, no ears:
no face.

Before We Knew
by: Katherine Peirpont

The way we laugh, the smell
of our fingernails,
the slight movement
of the delicate v of collarbones
right before we inhale.
Cousins. Learning
what that word meant.
It was the happiest I had ever been,
when I was four.

Our faces are painted
in shades of pink and gray,
symptoms of the exacting
brush strokes
of a purple lamp.
The light makes maps
of the world in your hair.
Or at least as much of the world
as can be seen through the pinhole
of fifteen years.

You want cereal.
We stumble
into the kitchen,
like drunken deities,
smothering our pious chuckles.
They seep into the walls, infecting
the house. You snatch
some Captain Crunch,
tossing it up into the air.
It arcs down
into your mouth.

Down
towards pockets of flesh,
stretching,
crimson and swollen.
The tumors sit below the stomach
like bed-ridden birthday cake.

The Second Time
by: Katherine Peirpont

My own
goddamn sheets
that Mom got me. My
thighs start to go
numb, piles of sticky
insect feet crawl
on my flesh.
The Beatles
stare back at me.
John and Paul
blank expressions etched –
hands hustle up the curves
of something that was
me,

before
I stood in the Target
parking lot saying
no
to cement dividers and yellow
lines between cars. They forgot
to tell him when he touched
the dip of my lower back.

They forgot to tell
him when he slipped into my
room. They forgot
to tell him when he laid
his weight
on me. He grabbed
my arms. He pinned
my legs. He took
my shirt.

Now, I'm telling
Paul and John, who won't say
anything. They might tell
Ringo and George. Then maybe
somebody will speak.
Then maybe –
“Hey, Pretty Girl. Look into my eyes. I didn't cross the line.”

They Used to Talk about Burning Cities
by: Scott Sherman

My parents used to talk about a burning city at dinner
as a metaphor for my brother.
The legs of the glossed wooden table rose up in four points
and made the oaky outline of a battered cornered coffin.
The horizon was on the other side,
but it would always roll back towards the sink.

I heard my mother and my father talking.
I can't remember how sick anger made me,
or if the medicine was strong enough.
I wanted to think about their ability to forget him,
and how their stone faces pushed mercury up my thermometer,
but the grinding of my teeth and a mortar and pestle drowned out my thoughts.
In children's classics they shipped medicine to cities that were in trouble.
The medicine never made it to cities that burned in the night.

Everyone forgot about the city.
I wanted to run through its departed streets,
to laugh at films that never stopped playing in empty theaters.
Mannequins in ruined buildings, avatars for dust and charcoal skies.
Burnt out dance studios where beautiful pink people had pirouetted.

My father would go to the sink to wash his hands after dinner.
He scrubbed his fingers and palms to the point where the red, raw flesh looked like blood
creeping out sore skin.
I knew what he was trying to wash away.
Nobody else ever noticed, they had forgotten about hands and the city by now.

I wish I could visit, but the subways don't run there anymore,
the routes were all crossed out with permanent black ink pens.
Those pens always had a crimson tint when they dried.
They took the city off the map, they said:
You need to forget him.

It was only when my sickness got worse that the hallucinations began.
I saw the city, but the buildings, parks and people were back.
Laughing, I ran and crashed into him like a pile of leaves.
He scattered on a dusty breeze,
the same way that wind takes ash when everything you love
burns to the ground.

Something That Can Make You
by: Elizabeth Sterr

We are past the point of counting
freckles, but our love is unlike
two potted plants.

It is a plucked guitar and two patient bikes,
tube socks and a tangled microphone,
a flushed toilet.

It is the stew simmering on the stove.
You have seen me through, stripped
down to my longest

underwear, singing the Reverend's song.
We've been scarred, held hands
in fields of bee bushes, but you are unlike

a lion's roar. You are a swell
fellow with swinging hips,
a gentleman of logic, a boy who leans

forward when he speaks. A man
with the good grace to love
like a frog in mud.

Contributors

Audrey T. Carroll is a Creative Writing major at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. Her work has previously been published in *Sphere* and *Variance*. She is co-editor of *Variance* this year.

Savanah Mandeville is a second year student at Missouri Southern State University. She is a Literary Studies major and hopes to become an editor or a publisher someday. She is an avid collector of antiques, incense, and unusual jewelry and scarves. Her favorite era of music is the early '90s. She is fascinated by the Women's Rights Movement and hopes to be a force in pushing for equality of the sexes during her lifetime. Despite this, Charles Bukowski is her hero. She loves cats. She gets bored easily and likes to get out of town as frequently as possible.

Katherine Pierpont is currently enrolled at Ursinus College, as an English History double major, with a double minor in Spanish and Creative Writing. She grew up as the youngest of five children and is thankful for that every day. This is her first submission to a literary magazine, and it was inspired by an especially insightful poetry teacher for whose class many of these works were written. All of her poetry is inspired by life and the various experiences she has had.

Scott Sherman is a junior at Ursinus College. He's currently working towards his English major and film minor, and he laments the death of any kind of frontier.

Elizabeth Sterr currently lives in South Philadelphia, where she eats, plays with her dog, and stays up too late drinking bourbon and writing. She owes her continued passion for poetry to the great professors at the Community College of Philadelphia. In the Spring of 2010, she won first prize for poetry in the Judith Stark Creative Writing Contest. Two of her poems, titled "Romulus" and "You Don't Say", can be read in the next issue of *Alba*.