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'Paper Birches' and 'In the Grass'

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Prestigiacomo, Rachel, "'Paper Birches' and 'In the Grass'" (2015). *CLAS: Colby Liberal Arts Symposium*. 272.
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October 7, 2014

In the Grass

I see a grasshopper!

It had been going about its meditative insect business, sitting in the grass and probably staring at a good number of things- compound eyes being what they are and all. Perhaps it was watching me, lying prone, oblivious to the itch of the grass, the pressure of the ground on my elbows, and the indecency of my splayed legs as I worked. I was building a castle of twigs, leaves, and bits of useless, unidentifiable plastic that had become vital structural and decorative components of my masterpiece. It was a work of creativity, imagination and impermanence, with significance ascribed to it by me and made valuable only by my emotional and temporal investment in its construction. To anyone else, it was just a small perturbation of the ordinary detritus found on the fringes of a soccer field.

Of course, the clearly apathetic grasshopper thought none of this, and it sat with me in the sun, unnoticed and undisturbed until I noticed and proceeded to disturb it.

I caught it!

My speed and coordination were remarkable, really, and my aim was good, as I was armed with a summer's worth of experience in insect capture and domestication. I imprisoned him between my hands, in a dark, padded cell that must have frightened him, though it seemed cozy to me. I took him, I made him mine, and I relished the chance to exercise some portion of control over a life smaller than my own.

I caught him! He is mine.

The grasshopper fought me for a very short while, which proved that I had, indeed, successfully caught something, and then he settled into stillness. Whether it was exhaustion, resignation, shock, or contentment that folded his wings back against his delicately formidable body, I could not imagine, much less be sure. Therefore, as in most cases, I chose the answer most convenient for me. Imagining that some form of kinship bound me to my fellow from the grass, I gave the grasshopper a gender, a name, and a primary place in my thoughts. I chose not to consider the brevity of his presence in my life. Ephemerality has no meaning to one who lives in only the present (and maybe in the short intervals before and after which define the present as such).

I have to show him to Mom.

A flying creature tamed. A capture turned into kinship. A chance taken into captivity. I was proud. And the only way to make my accomplishment worthwhile was to ensure that it was real, and who better to prove to me the worth of my grasshopper-catching endeavor than the one unequivocal authority on truth? I ran to my mother, who happened to be absorbed in a conversation with Mrs. LaRosa further down the field. Seeing my mom in the midst of a conversation, my steps may have faltered. However, the swelling tide of my elation rose above the reality's ragged cliffs, and I ran on.

“Mom!”

She glanced down.

“Mom!”

And looked back up.

“Mom!”

Her hands floated vaguely, blindly, lifelessly in my direction, only becoming the familiar, animated hands I knew when she allowed the radiance of her attention to fall down onto me. These moments were fleeting, like the sharply sunlit edges of the world before the clouds return, before everything softens into a coalescence of gray.

“Mom, I’m talking to you!”

I was angry. Her hands floated towards me again, and I wanted to grab them, pulling, tapping, squeezing; insisting, demanding, pleading. In reality, my hands were otherwise occupied, forming the cocoon in which I held my charge, and I could only touch my mother with my voice. And as in so many other endeavors, try as I might, I couldn’t reach.

Mom, I caught a grasshopper.

A glance. A gesture. And I let him go.

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28 October 2014

Paper Birches

Why do birch trees do that? Shedding their bark, I mean. Paper bark in sheets, sheaves, a sheath discarded. Your outer layer, your protection, your distinctive color, it just flakes off. And there is bare skin underneath, soft, tender like when you strip the skin off a chicken wing, or when you shave a really hairy dog. But that's kind of a loose metaphor.

Revelation isn't a bad thing, just unexpected. I love seeing things from different sides; I just kind of forgot that the inside counts as another side.

And maybe if I did the peeling, or if I were the one that said "open up, say aah!" I'd be ready for a revelation. But birch bark falls off on its own, and circumstance is a master, never a slave, so when the inside wants a turn to breathe, better let it.

Trees just aren't supposed to do that.

Just like mothers aren't supposed to cry. I remember she went out on the porch, sat down in one of our deck chairs—she didn't even care that it was wet—and she cried, forehead against the back of the chair as if it were a shoulder. I remember fear and fascination; I remember helplessness. I remember wondering if her tears made the chair any wetter. I remember wondering if I could cry for her instead— hands pressed against the sliding glass door, heart pressed against the force field she had made—I have tears to spare, to spare you from tears, to share mamma, see? How could I make her let me in without banging on the door? Please, I'm here, let me help. Please, please, pleas.

Pleas, pleas, please.

Please, kittens aren't supposed to die. Your zeal always extended farther than your whiskers did, past your being's binding. So much stemming from such a small self. I was holding you, the doctor was almost finished, we were pulling you back, you were breathing, when did you stop breathing? It's so much harder to feel a void than a presence. But then I should have felt death join you, as an escort from my hands. I glanced at the EKG for a second, and you took your leave, turning off the pilot light in your eyes as you went, so quietly I didn't even hear you go.

I didn't even hear it coming.

Suppose panic attacked, even though panic isn't supposed to attack. She was trapped under the ice of a pond, within reach but unable to break through, resigned to letting the ice melt. It would release her when it was ready. I remember watching her—how she had nothing, there was nothing, nothing to do but to let the panic seize her, ravage her, and leave her, leaving her, left her curled and shaking.

Her body had let her down.

People aren't supposed to just pass out in the middle of a sentence. It was her body letting her down, unceremoniously dropping her to the floor, leaving her unconscious, inanimate. Her face shouldn't be touching the cold, dirty tile, it's too clean and too important to me. She had always been present, asleep sometimes, but never far, and even when she was gone, her voice, her smell and her bed were still there. Now I call her and for the first time she doesn't pick up, pick up your head! I couldn't pick her up, but I could come down to meet her.

Down to meet him.

Friends aren't supposed to break down. Him, lying on his bed, so soft and young, but older, so wise, but hurt. Worried that he is not enough, enough for the world, enough for me.

Then comes his hand, floating towards me, not guided by sight, only by chance and lucky guesses—what does he want but comfort, another satellite in the empty vastness of this close closed space—who said ships in the night pass unnoticed or unnoticed? If they only paid attention each would feel the other. If they only called, each would answer the cry. Hold his hand, tell him it will be all right in a language too articulate for words. Don't cry my dear, it will only dry you out and make you brittle. Your tears are bits of yourself, too precious to simply squander in dampening your pillow. Save them.

Save them.

I wish I could. Birches will drop bark, and people will fall apart. Somehow the people last and somehow the trees live on. I suppose this is just the way things are. But still. Trees aren't supposed to do that.