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Castle Building: Contemporary Poetry and Flash Fiction from Appalachia

Sharolyn Shae Johnson
East Tennessee State University

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Castle Building: Contemporary Poetry and Flash Fiction from Appalachia
By

Sharolyn Shae Johnson

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Fine and Performing Arts Scholars
And
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East Tennessee State University



Sharolyn Shae Johnson

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Dr. Mark D. Baumgartner, Thesis Mentor April 16, 2021



Dr. Scott R. Honeycutt, Reader

April 16, 2021

Castle Building: Contemporary Poetry and Flash Fiction from Appalachia

Maybe all the secrets of life were written on the surface of leaves,
waiting to be translated. If I touched them long enough, I might be
given some information no one else had.

-Silas House, A Parchment of Leaves

Appalachia is rooted in the soil of a rich culture, and Appalachian writing reflects this truth. Writers in the region do not shy away from the truths of the people living near the old mountain ranges, whether the connotation of all of those truths are positive or negative. Focusing specifically on working class Appalachia, my stories and poetry cover a broad range with these truths being specific to families or generalized to the whole region. My own exploration of being an Appalachian writer has led me to discover the themes that I want to narrate; some are personal to me while others are more of an observation. Like any region, it has both positive and negative aspects. By highlighting the beauty and hospitality of Appalachia without ignoring the negative attention that the region receives for issues like poverty and drug abuse, I am attempting to celebrate the honest experiences of the Appalachian people.

Contained here is a short collection of poetry and flash fiction, and, although brief, each piece tells a story. The short form informs my ability to target specific moments or ideas in a way that longer works cannot do. In addition, such a short piece of writing also allows the entire story or poem to be saturated in imagery and poetic language without being overbearing. These aspects are essential to my stories and poetry because I often rely on the landscape of Southern Appalachia—my home—to set the tone, to display the passing of time, to create a sense of magic, and draw inspiration from. Although longer fiction can involve such elements as well, the compact forms of flash fiction and poetry allow me to target a specific moment or idea and to create a tightly bound box that needs to be probed and opened. These constraints allow me to

provide my reader with a brief moment that speaks to the larger beauties and struggles of Appalachian people and their home.

Flash fiction and poetry follow similar patterns. Flash fiction, also known by names such as the short short story or sudden fiction, is generally no more than 1,500 words long, but it is often as brief as five-hundred words or fewer. In the United States, one of the first notable flash fiction pieces was “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin. In most anthologies, the story is under three pages long, but it still contains character and plot development as well as hinting at the much larger story of Mrs. Mallard’s life and marriage. Like poetry elicits response from a reader about life and emotion and other extensive elements of the human experience, flash fiction provides a snapshot that serves as a window into a larger story. Both forms of writing have a brevity that serves as a constraint that longer works of fiction often do not have. However, both also still tell a story or share a message. Alice LaPlante quotes Joyce Carol Oates in her book *The Making of a Story*: “no matter its mysteries or experimental properties, it achieves closure—meaning that, when it ends, the attentive reader understands why” (154). Although many of my stories and poems leave the reader with some decisions to make for themselves, I have tried to follow Oates’ advice, constructing my work in a fashion that leaves the reader with an understanding of why the story or poem ended. A sense of closure is especially important for flash fiction because it is so short. I have the option to write so much more than I do, so everything I include must be critical in telling the story. As *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* explains, the idea of careful inclusion is just as essential in poetry: “When it comes to poems, too many extras, too much froufrou and falderal, can cost you a reader” (Kooser 22). Because flash fiction and poetry are written in such short lengths, they need to be tightly written and wound up in that box for the reader to examine.

The compression of writing in these forms can result in more experimental techniques and ideas since writing with constraints often results in one thinking outside of his or her usual patterns, which is true for me. For example, “A Cool Carolina Breeze Vs. An Entire Global Pandemic” (20) is a syllabic poem that I wrote at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and because of the syllabic structure my lines must be extremely compressed to meet my short seven-syllable count. I chose seven to match the seven days of the week that had begun to run together; however, this concise structure forced me to find new ways of expressing myself and telling the story of a girl who is distracting herself. New ideas born from constraints also happen in flash fiction. My story “Time and a Half” (24) is only three-hundred and seventy-three words long, but it still tells the story of a doubtful dad who is simply tired. Between the imagery and the dialogue in the story, I present a father who is feeling disconnected from his family life, but the constraint of striving to make the story under five-hundred words narrowed my focus in the same way my subject's focus is narrowed as he navigates a tiring, repetitive life, allowing me to better represent his perspective. In fact, if I had not placed these constraints on myself, I probably would have broken the “show don't tell” rule.

Ron Rash provides perspective on how poetry and flash fiction operate in similar ways, since he himself writes fiction as well as poetry. He also remains honest about the hardships of Appalachia while displaying the rich cultural depth and the lull the region has to draw people back to it. Rash writes syllabic poetry containing seven syllables per line, and he also writes short stories, including flash fiction. These restraints are the same ones I employ on myself, and as is the case of “A Cool Carolina Breeze Vs. An Entire Global Pandemic” (20), I am able to work within these constraints and still generate a poem or letter that has an end goal in mind. Using Rash as an example, his “Talking Down the Lines” tells the hardship of a poor Appalachia

community that has communicated with telephones. In other words, these “lines” know the secrets and trials of these families: “In those lines was the sediment / of births and sickness, deaths, / love vows and threats, all passed on / mouth to mouth, vital as breath” (8). Not only does the passage of time imply a generational poverty, but it also elaborates on the importance of storytelling, even brief snippets of stories. This is how one keeps memories, tradition, and culture alive. In my own writing, I explore differing techniques and reasons to write in the shorts modes of poetry and flash fiction.

One of the essential elements of my poetry and my storytelling is the landscape itself. For example, my story “The Shift of the Leaves” (35) is about the changes happening in the life and mind of a young adult as well as the changes happening in a small town; however, the landscape is what propels the story forward. The inspiration for the imagery is the county I grew up in, Hancock County. The story opens with a scene of nature taking back man’s progress: “Looking around her, she saw the gas station she barely remembers being in operation, kudzu vines consuming it right before her eyes. It looked like the vines would eventually pull it down into the mountain without a semblance of a fight” (35). The imagery here foreshadows what the reader will find out by reading the rest of the story: the relationship and the town are both dying. The college student has left only to discover larger things she wants to be a part of, and maybe her views have changed as well. The boyfriend no longer fits into her world. However, the town is also becoming smaller as the years pass and people leave. The image of the abandoned gas station overrun with kudzu, an invasive species, connects these ideas and foreshadows what is to come.

The Appalachian landscape can become a vital part of the storytelling process, and an example of this process can be found in Silas House’s *A Parchment of Leaves* (2002). The

landscape and familial location becomes just as special to main character Vine as her family members: “It was the worst feeling, to look upon the place of my childhood and realize that it had been swept away like the sand at the swing of a broomstraw” (239). Vine, a Cherokee woman, grew up in RedBud camp, but after her people were forced to leave the premises, the imprint of their lives no longer exists. The blank-page nature adds to the sense of grief that Vine feels as her home no longer exists. House integrates the scenery of Kentucky by weaving it into the homes and lives of his characters. It is important to note the scenery in Appalachian writing because the landscape of the region is often just as much a character’s home as the literal house and the people who live there, it is House illustrates the relationship people can have with nature in his novel. In fact, the forest is also a source of spirituality throughout the story: “Maybe all the secrets to life were written on the surface of leaves, waiting to be translated. If I touched them long enough, I might be given some information that no one else had” (70). House shows that Vine not only has a relationship with nature, but that relationship is just as complex as any relationship with a person. House displays both the beauty and the heartache of a Cherokee woman, but he relies on the beauty and heartache found in nature to do so, implying that these experiences are the ebbs and flows of life.

I explore similar relationships in my writing. In my poem, “Tubing at Paint Creek: Greenville, TN,” I describe the connection between people and the natural world:

Endless water, moving
 Rapidly into a
 Collective pool–H₂O
 Molecules connect while,
 Infinite lives endure

The grace, calamity,
and consuming essence
Of this sphere and its beings. (19)

While the situations people are in constantly change, like the swift movements of a creek, they still latch on to those they decide to call family the way hydrogen and oxygen bond to create water. In addition, our short lives are full of wonderful and horrible experiences, despite any efforts to control our outcomes; I use the waterfall at Paint Creek in Greeneville Tennessee to explore this idea. I combine it with my own experience at Paint Creek; however, the exploration of the natural beauty of the location itself adds a depth that the experience alone would not, such as the connection between people and nature. Furthermore, it recalls many other similar experiences. Although I am writing about one specific moment in time, my reader is able to connect with the poem by considering similar moments they have experienced or want to experience. In addition, it provides an indication of how the relationship looks and works as a whole even though only a single moment is illustrated for the reader.

A writer can showcase similar ideas through simple imagery as well: “Return” by Ron Rash, which can be found in his book *Burning Bright*, is a flash fiction piece about a soldier who has returned home. Rash uses the imagery of water to bring his character back home and to connect his character to the war that he has been fighting in: “He would follow that drop of water back to its source—first across the Pacific. . .and finally up Holder Branch” (128). Not only does Rash create a strong sense of home through this imagery, but he also proposes that returning home can be healing and redemptive. He addresses the idea of return through the water image as well when the returning character shakes off snow or drinks water from his family’s farm. This rich imagery mimics that of poetry because the short length of the flash fiction allows such rich

language and imagery to remain in a constant flow throughout the piece. By creating such a strong common thread throughout an entire story, a writer can easily illustrate aspects of Appalachian culture, such as a specific image or a family heirloom.

I demonstrate a similar technique in my own writing, and one example is found in the flash fiction “Youth” (26). The driving image in my story is a peach. In the beginning, the peach is associated with the imagination of the boy: “He lays out on the horses back to eat his peach, especially ripe this time of year, and he wonders if he feels like Robin Hood stealing that fruit from the tree and other critters” (26). The peach here is seen through the eyes of the boy’s imagination, and the imagery surrounding it is ethereal: “Some moments pass before the sun dances through the waxy green, and a few curved leaves sparkle in the wind that knocks them to the ground” (26). With the image of the peach, I am also describing how the mother in the story sees her son: full of life. However, the tone surrounding the peach changes once the boy is removed from the equation; the sun begins to set, the peach is unattainable, and the magic is gone. This shift mirrors the change that the mother herself feels. Watching the world through the eyes of her son has reminded her that she no longer sees the world in the way that her son does. The peach is an important image in “Youth” because it acts like a fulcrum, allowing the story to pivot between two different worlds, two different perspectives: the youthful boy and the mother who wants to return to that youthful experience. The juxtaposition is likened to the drop of water that Rash uses to connect the soldier who is off at war to his home in Appalachia.

Another element to Rash’s story is the idea of returning home and doing so with new insight. The Appalachian landscape, as mentioned, can generate a sense of home, which is fitting since many Appalachian writers delve into this topic. Rash himself addresses returning home

with new insight during his 2010 interview with Gary Carden at the Mountain Heritage Center at Western Carolina University:

I think one thing about Appalachian people—which we always have to be careful about generalizations—but one thing I have seen that I think is true of a lot of mountain cultures, not only in the United States, but all over the world, is that there’s just an intense identification with the place. And because of that, when people leave it, there’s a sense of, you know, never being able to be comfortable outside. (Rash)

Identification with place is a common thread in Appalachian writing. Looking once again at *Parchment of Leaves* (2002) in which House’s main character returns to Redbud, the top of the mountain she grew up on, time and time again throughout the story, this identification with place is evident. House expands on the theme of returning home in his novel to include a return home to loved ones as well as a specific location. Saul leaves for work, and he returns home to find that his wife, Vine, has become overwhelmed with grief. Vine decides to leave home in search for peace after the loss of Redbud and after killing her brother-in-law out of self-defense. Saul, however, sets out to find his wife; once he does, she finds the comfort she required: “She felt that she might be lulled to sleep by the steady rise and fall of his chest. She could drift off in the peace of being forgiven. Forgiveness made up for all the evil in the world” (275). Here, there is a return to location but also a return to the people that identify with the location. Being forgiven allows Vine the strength to face the pain she feels she has put her home through by leaving Redbud and by killing her brother-in-law. The strong sense of home and identification with place is an experience that I can call my own.

In my poem “Sunlight on Aegean Carpet” (21) I explore the return to home in both a physical and emotional manner. My speaker, looking back on her childhood, has reached a

realization about her mother's depression after experiencing it for herself. I probe the contrasts of light and dark in my poem to illicit a deeper emotion: "How lovely that summer sun felt burning our crossed legs on the living room floor / while she laid in the dark created by her / blackout curtains" (21). The contrasts between light and dark allude to the emotional well-being of the speaker and her mother. However, it is also utilized to enforce that "return" to home, to the relationship that garners understanding and to the light that combats the harsh emotions that each are struggling to cope with: "Because now, when I'm surrounded by my own darkness- / head under covers at noon. / She carries me to the living room window" (21). The poem presents a return to the light and to the mother-daughter relationship, but it also presents a return to home and to the more pleasant memories, despite lurking negativity of the lack of resources that are present for both the mother and the daughter. I am able to write in a similar fashion in my story, "Youth" (26), drawing on the imaginations and observations of a young character.

Being an Appalachian writer means exploring both the positives and negatives of Appalachian culture and history as well as preserving and celebrating that culture. In an interview with Wiley Cash in July of 2020, Silas House explains his stance on the topic:

This is a southern phenomenon for one thing. This idea of the past and present coexisting. And I think we think about the past in a different way than a lot of cultures do. And I think that is multiplied by a hundred in Appalachia. Um, when you're Appalachian, you're sort of expected to always preserve and make sure the culture lives. You know, that it doesn't disappear because the whole world is telling you that Appalachia is disappearing, and a lot of times the whole culture is telling you that Appalachian culture should disappear. You're shamed about being Appalachia, or you're shamed about being a Southerner. (House)

In my own Appalachian writing, I deal with some of these themes that have been problematic in Appalachia: poverty, addiction/mental health, and LGBTQIA+ rights. However, I also highlight the strengths of the region such as the values of family loyalty, the regional landscape, and diligent work. Silas House employs these themes as well in *A Parchment of Leaves* (2002). Vine is a Cherokee woman who has married a white man; as a result, she sometimes faces racism when going to town or interacting with the “white man’s world.” However, adversity continues to plague the Sullivan family. First, the family is poor, which results in Vine’s husband Saul leaving for an extended time to keep the family afloat in the midst of World War I. While Saul is away, Vine is sexually assaulted by her brother-in-law. This same brother-in-law is an alcoholic who abuses his new wife, and in order to protect her daughter from his assault, Vine kills her. She keeps his death a secret out of fear for how her husband and mother-in-law will respond, but she is also afraid of how the racist public will perceive a Cherokee woman killing a white man. House generates tension with the issue of racism, poverty, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and the deep depression that Vine finds herself trapped in. He is honest about real issues that exist in the real lives of people. However, he contrasts the negativity with the beauty of Kentucky and the beauty of Vine’s and Saul’s loving relationship to generate a powerful story about forgiveness and loyalty to family and cultural ties.

These more difficult themes are just as essential as the uplifting themes in Appalachian writing since they are an important element in the stories of Appalachian people. These themes can be found throughout my work, even if they are in the foreground. For example, “A Moment of Castle Building” portrays the strain that poverty places on a family. Here, a mother is watching her children play, and she is hurt by the fact that she does not have the time to participate in their games, “Most of her interactions with them were after dinner, so it was too

late in the evening for them to be out like this: yelling, running, laughing” (23). The theme of poverty in Appalachia is relevant because the rate of poverty in the region is higher than the national average. As the Appalachian Regional Commission's research that ranges from 2013-2017 shows, “Appalachian poverty rates range from 6.5% to 41.0%. The Appalachian average is 16.3%. The U.S. average is 14.6%.” There are numerous reasons for the uneven wealth distribution, but real people, like the mother in “A Moment of Castle Building” (23), must concern themselves with the immediate: the children relying on them, the effort to stay afloat, and sometimes the guilt for not providing more or “doing better.” In addition, high poverty rates often garner other issues due to lack of resources; my stories are and poetry is also influenced by these factors. One of these factors being mental health. When adequate resources for mental health are not provided in a region that is already dealing with the stressors that come with poverty, there are people who suffer greatly. House’s *A Parchment of Leaves* (2002) demonstrates this with Vine who is suffering after killing her brother-in-law. However, it is also seen in the brother-in-law because he is lacking the resources to help him with his addiction to alcohol; he is lacking the resources to help him overcome his mental afflictions. Looking back at “Sunlight on an Aegean Carpet” (21), I delve into the complexities of generational mental health problems. By isolating the mother and daughter in one location without any outsider influence, similar to a bottle episode, I generate a feeling of being stuck. The uneven distribution of resources has a major role in the negative lens Appalachia is often viewed through, and it can contribute to the development of hardship and themes of unjust treatment in Appalachian literature.

Nevertheless, inequality of resources and support filters out into other aspects of Appalachia as well, which I explore in “The Shift of the Leaves” (35) My main character is

leaving her hometown, which is a necessary move for the lifestyle she wishes to live. Not only is my character making an attempt to break the cycle of poverty that she has seen by attending college, a massive endeavor for a low-income student, but she is also dealing with her changing sexuality as presented in the dialogue,

“My friend Casey texted.”

“Sounds like a boy’s name”

“Or a girl’s.” (35)

The dialogue here is important to note because Appalachian culture specifically is ridiculed for creating a stigma around the LGBTQ+ community and other minority groups. The tension created between my main character and her boyfriend, contributes to the distance that is generating between my main character and her hometown. When Silas House says, “You’re shamed about being Appalachia or you’re shamed about being a Southerner,” he implies that the lack of inclusivity and support for minorities is part of the shame placed on Appalachia as a whole. Appalachian literature is continually growing into a more inclusive environment with writers who are addressing these issues. For example, House addresses conflict between the strong prevalence of the Christian Church and the LGBTQIA+ community in his novel *Southernmost* (2018), which is about a pastor who decides to help a gay couple. As a result, he is shunned by his congregation and wife. He then kidnaps his son to search for his gay brother who he previously shunned. House tells a passionate story about love and bravery and acceptance, but, most importantly, he addresses the disastrous elements of Appalachian culture and how generational prejudice can and has been overcome.

Although my story “She’s Gone” (28) is farther removed from Appalachia, it still looks back on small town life in Tennessee. Furthermore, the distance also speaks to the differences in

the culture of Appalachia versus other regions in the United States without avoiding the negative attention the area receives. My main character, Emily, has moved to New York City, and while at a diner, she is reminded of her small Tennessee home when she sees a woman named Shannon. She is reminded of a girl who went missing. I implore my readers to consider all of the abusive situations that are overlooked by the “good ol’ boy” mentality that is prominent in the region: “...the next day Shannon and Mr. Matson weren’t at school” (33). By implying that Mr. Matson has taken Shannon, I hope to draw attention to all the warning signs throughout the story, such as the writing on the bathroom wall and Shannon’s warning to Emily. My story is about an abusive relationship and an abuse of power dynamics, but it is also a story to draw attention to the fact that so many problematic people and situations are overlooked in more rural Appalachian towns because of small town politics. Emily left for this reason, and there are many people leaving close-knit communities for the bad representation they have. Although there are so many positives to these towns in the region, there are negative representations that are driving people away or resulting in the shaming of Appalachia as a whole. Whether it is the callousness some people have for minority groups, the high drug addiction rates, the lack of resources for mental and physical wellbeing, or simply the local politics, the region as a whole has been viewed in a negative light.

In conclusion, I am an Appalachian writer who seeks to be realistic about the negative attention Appalachia receives, while still drawing attention to the beauties of the region and the culture. I strive to be a voice calling for change while also acknowledging the positive qualities of Appalachia and its people. There are many techniques involved in this process that I am still expanding on in the flash fiction and poetry form. Presented here is a short collection of poetry and flash fiction that utilize the constraints of these forms to tell the full extent of the truths of

Appalachia. I tell these stories by drawing on imagery that is inspired by the mighty landscape and mountain ranges, addressing the richness of Appalachian hospitality, presenting the attraction to the region, and by being honest about the prevalent problems. I tackle this task by exploring the techniques demonstrated by other Appalachian writers, such as Ron Rash and Silas House.

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Tubing at Paint Creek: Greenville, TN

His curls were pulled down flat
by the weight of Paint Creek.

I saw the reflection
of the falls in *my* round
sunglasses that *he* wore.
Endless water, moving
rapidly into a
collective pool—H₂O
molecules connect while
infinite lives endure
the grace, calamity,
and consuming essence
of this sphere and its beings.

And I—

I want to know this boy
with his freckled shoulders
and open canvas mind.

A Cool Carolina Breeze Vs. An Entire Global Pandemic

The world is getting smaller
with each breath of deep south air.
What is going on out there?
Asked from inside the safety
net that screens the third-floor porch
where you paint on a drunken
afternoon, hearing the news say
don't go outside, *not at all*.
The world is getting smaller,
and you help by dancing with
a boy you knew from back home
in his adult apartment:
result of his new job.
But when will it be your turn
to make a place for yourself?
You ask, begging to melt in
his kiss as he moves you to
the soothing beat of Ocean.
The world is getting smaller,
but you still distract yourself
by walking with him, noting
the kids are still on their bikes,
and you still have Miller Light.
You'll drink it together while
you eat dinner, watching yet
another movie you can
talk about in length all while
the world is getting smaller.
Stay in and don't think about
why. His hands run up your sides
like the water breathing up
the golden sand: low tide.
Yet, muffled by the lull wind,
you hear the resonant sound.
The world is getting smaller.

Sunlight on Aegean Carpet

Only the sparkle radiating through the breathing curtain was real.

We sat around the glitter and pretended to be

fairies

pirates

artists

adventurers.

We waited for that golden glow to stream in, coating our vision with magic

while down the hall our mother cried.

How lovely that light radiated.

How lovely that sheer curtain drifted over us with the susurrus of the hot breeze.

How lovely that summer sun felt burning our crossed legs on the living room floor

while she laid in the dark created by her

blackout curtains.

If I had known, I would have scooped up some of that golden light,

carried it to her and poured it down her mouth like a savior in the desert.

If I had known, I would have brought her onto the blue carpet that was heated by the afternoon.

If I had known, my wet cheeks would have been for her and not for my desire

to step outside that luminous window.

Because now, when I'm surrounded by my own darkness—

head under covers at noon.

She carries me to the living room window.

Stuck

Morning glory wraps around, constricts.
Fence post contained in fragrant purple.
Grass nipping at your ankles, as you
walk to the car door, engine rattles.
Flash of red, empty.
Looking through dingy windows,
their faces glare out at you: constricted.

A Moment of Castle Building

She watched out the window as they took turns swinging each other, getting one or the other to soar high enough to run under. Sometimes they would try to kick off a shoe while they were up that high and whoever was in the line of fire would shout out an elementary school insult. Jason, Everly, and Paxton: she often said their names in their birth order. Soon they would run inside asking for a snack, and she would tell them they'd have to wait until dinner. In the back of her head she would count down the days until her next paycheck.

It wasn't very often that she got a full day off of work, and she knew she should be getting the chores she had been putting off done, but it had been so long since she had just watched them play in the yard. Most of her interactions with them were after dinner, so it was too late in the evening for them to be out like this: yelling, running, laughing. She leaned into the doorframe, pressing her head into the screen when a breeze came through and all the hairs raised on the back of her neck. At this same moment, her youngest ran to the door to ask for the snack. Reluctantly, she had to turn him away like a cold queen.

He didn't seem to mind when she told him it was because he needed to play outside as much as possible before dinner when he'd have to come in and do homework. That was all it took for him to run off in the other direction, trusting every word she said. Pulling the hair tie out of her hair with her thumb, straining her neck against the tangles, she watched him pull Jason back toward the swings to "do it again." When he said no, Everly stepped up to the plate like the helper she was. Hands on her hips, she walked past the reluctant older brother with a stare. Inside the doorframe, she laughed at her children. They heard, and the youngest called his siblings' attention to the sandbox because they had a castle to build for mom.

Time and a Half

5:45. That's fifteen minutes earlier than usual, I thought as my tires hit the gravel of my driveway. I took the key out of the ignition and gave my home a good look over. It was that pale yellow you know someone's wife picked out, and the purple flowers in the front gave it a home and garden feel. The shutters were white to match the wrap around porch, and a few toys were scattered across the yard. Since I wasn't really supposed to be home for another few minutes, I just sat in the heat of my car and made guesses about what flowers my wife had planted around the porch. That's the kind of thing I should know.

I caught a glimpse of something in the window. Ben. I knew I had better head on inside because, if he came outside, it would be a fight to drag him back into the cool of the house. He beats me to the door and immediately starts questioning me through the screen. As usual.

"Dad? What's your favorite movie?"

"I don't have time to watch movies."

"Will you watch a movie with me now?" he jumped up once, feet smacking the tile.

"No."

"Why? I bet I can pick your favorite."

"I just said I didn't have one."

"Nu uh. What about when you were little like me?" he laid his head on his own shoulder and looked up through the corners of his eyes.

"I didn't watch TV."

"But a movie."

"Movies are for people with more time."

"Do you have time to watch a movie with me today?"

“No.”

I looked down at the small version of myself because that last word, the word kids hate, came out a little harder than I expected. I could see something in his eyes, but I wasn't sure what I was looking at. He looked away then clicked the TV on to watch the same movie he has already finished again. I wonder if that was what he wanted me to watch with him. I know the plot by now. It's about an animal who finds himself and his purpose in life after leaving home and overcoming every possible obstacle. The hero's journey.

Youth

He runs past the tall grass that washes over him like a wave crashes over the shore, contrasted by the mountains in the distance. His mother, watching through the window, loses sight of him and she accidentally drops the soapy dish back into the sink. His head bobs back up through the grass--relief--and the family horse greets him at the peach tree. He climbs up on the horse's back to reach a peach for each of them, and she has to prevent herself from rushing outside to tell him: "Do *not* do that again. You don't wanna go to the hospital." The horse doesn't seem to mind as long as it gets something out of it, and she watched her son give the horse the first pick of the bunch.

He lays out on the horses back to eat his peach, especially ripe this time of year, and she wonders if he feels like Robin Hood stealing that fruit from the tree and other critters. Some moments pass before the sun dances through the waxy green, and a few curved leaves sparkle in the wind that knocks them to the ground. She should take a picture, but she worries that he might move. She decides to just watch him instead. As he turns his back to the house, she wishes she were small enough to explore the world like he does, with a film of adventure covering his eyes. Pausing, he scrunches his nose up in the air like a dog on the hunt. He must sense that someone is watching him, she thinks.

He climbs down from the horse. His universe has been compromised by a looming adult presence. As he walks to the back door, he pretends to have a bow and arrow, firing as if a major battle is happening around him.

"Mom? Can I get some Sprite?"

"Sure." It's past 6:00, but she gives it to him anyway.

It's just for this one day she thinks.

Returning to her household duties, she listens to his retelling of today's adventure as the shadows crawl toward the house. The horse is trying to figure out how to reach more peaches without his own personal Robin Hood, and the wind has gone to bed for the night, putting an end to the ripples in the grass. By the time she finishes cleaning the rest of the kitchen, he has gone into the living room to watch tv and the moon has illuminated the gray ground. "I wish the world would stay magical," she whispers to herself.

She's Gone

Emily watched the yellow taxis drive pass the checkered black and yellow dinner. There was never much room on the road for them to drive fast, whipping around curves, like the cars did back in Tennessee, but they made up for that with the amount of times they honked and scratched to a halt. You had to be a bad driver to survive up here, she thought. That was her problem. She couldn't drive a taxi because she let everyone go first at the stop signs, but she couldn't hold a job because all she thought about was taxis. Somehow the two went hand in hand to her.

"Want some more?" a waitress with a little apron holding a steaming coffee pot was standing right over her. "No, thank you." Coffee was coffee. She'd drink it black, with sugar, or with cream. Sweet tea was what she really wanted though. That's how she knew she didn't belong up here. No one knew what a real glass of iced sweet tea was, and that was the problem. On campus, her accent gave her away, and she was sure the sweet tea had done it by coating her esophagus with the sugary, honey colored liquid. "Ready for the check?" the waitress had made her way over again. Her name tag said "Shannon."

She went to high school with a girl named Shannon. Shannon was one of the cheerleaders, so she wore a black and red miniskirt every Friday night. Emily always wondered why the cheerleader uniforms didn't have to follow the dress code. She pulled her hair back tight with a scrunchie, pinning it in place with glitter, but the last thing she did to get ready was to put on her lips before the game. It was a shade of red so bright it reflected off her teeth, giving them a pink glow. She pulled her skirt up a little higher than the rest of the girls, and she dated the mascot. This seemed out of place since the whole football team wanted to see under Shannon's

skirt, but she didn't seem worried about it. The part that threw everyone off though was that no one knew WHO the mascot was.

Every game people looked around trying to guess who it was by marking absentees and snapchatting everyone who appeared to be at home. Four years, and nobody could figure it out. That didn't stop Shannon from prancing over to him during every game to peck the fuzzy, sweat stained cheek that concealed whoever was inside. No one dared ask her any questions about her mystery man. Besides, she wouldn't tell you anyway. She said it was no fun that way. Instead, Shannon would giggle and throw back her ponytail as a form of protest against the accusations then rush toward the other girls to get into formation.

Emily had P.E. with Shannon who always changed right outside of her locker while everyone else took turns corralling in the showers and bathroom stalls in an attempt to not be seen. This is why Emily thought she was in serious social trouble one day when Shannon followed her into a stall and leaned against the door to hold it shut.

“You should be careful,” Shannon said.

“Wha---”

“With him,” she drew the word out.

“Him?”

“Just watch yourself,” Shannon walked back out of the stall, blowing Emily a kiss as she walked away.

Emily finished getting dressed, taking extra time to read the writing carved into the back of the door. “Kate + Evan 4 Eva,” “Ash is a bitch!,” “Mr. Matson is a freak? (with a list of reasons why written by multiple girls)” She always thought the ritual of writing bathroom names on stalls was dumb, but she couldn't help but to internalize every comment written about Mr. Matson. Emily's

arrival to the court was announced by her sneakers that squaked with every step. Shannon put the basketball she was bouncing on her hip and glared at her, biting the inside of her lip. She couldn't tell if Shannon was upset or not, so she backed down from the stare-down with Shannon and checked her phone:

“Do you want to meet up?”

“I have theater today,” Emily responded.

“What about after that,” her phone glowed in her hand for a moment.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I'll pick you up around six in the back,” his response came immediately.

After theater, the club president began orchestrating a trip to one of the family owned restaurants in town for milkshakes--the usual hang out. Emily began her escape. “Come on, Em, you never come with us,” the president rolled his eyes. She made up some excuse about having too much homework and needing to finish some chores, and he shrugged it off. Everyone looked directly at her as she gathered her things, and the room was silent until the door shut behind her. As she walked toward the back of the school, Emily thought about Shannon. *How would she know about him? Maybe she doesn't and is just jealous.*

There he was, window down to let the smoke roll off his breath and into the high school campus air. He offered Emily one, even though she always said no, and pulled out before she even had a chance to buckle up. They sat in silence for the ride, and for the first time she felt nervous around him. Turning her body away from him she stared at the town that was racing past her eyes in the window. There were so many empty buildings, and she tried to focus on the stories her parents told her about a once thriving town. He must have sensed her unease because he clicked on the radio, and a Trace Adkins song she hates was on:

I never knew, I had another side

But girl with you, I'm Jekyll and Hyde

She felt his hand on her thigh, but shrugged it off. This was normal, and she didn't know why Shannon's words were getting to her like this. He seemed to notice something was off in Emily's mood because he moved his hand back to the wheel. Emily tried to focus on the blurry buildings outside, she had never noticed how many churches were in the middle of town.

With a woman like you

I'm a dangerous man

"See You Soon." When she saw the sign, she looked over at him, waiting for him to tell her why they were leaving town, but he didn't. Eventually, they pulled into the motel parking lot right outside of town, and he produced a bottle of wine and a pizza from the back seat. "Good, this would be a relaxing evening," Emily thought. Her favorite nights were when they watched movies and ate take-out like this, and she was right. He kissed her when they got into the room, pulling her close so he could dance her around the room, occasionally stopping to hum and reach his hands around to her ass or thighs. She let him move her body around like a kid dancing with a broom.

It ended after a few spins and dips, and she was grateful when he put her on the bed and put a movie. She pulled a pillow to her while he uncorked the wine and dug out a slice of pizza. Around this time her mom called, and Emily told her she was spending the night at Jason's as the theater kids often do after Friday afternoon practice. Her mom told her she loved her and to be safe, and when Emily noticed him looking at her she paused for a few seconds and told her mom she had to go. He looked away from her for a few minutes before gulping down some wine and

kissing her once on the neck. They finished a couple movies when Emily said she didn't feel like doing anything else tonight. He groaned.

The next day he dropped her off at the gas station next to her school. Shannon drove by as she was getting out of his car, and Emily could see the disappointment on her face. *So she does know then.* Once she made it to school, she tried to find Shannon, but she had already gone to class. Emily spent every class wringing her hands together, it felt like her heart was filling her stomach up with blood every time it pumped. Finally, after school, she spotted Shannon. She was in sweats and a tight T-shirt today, her hair still pulled back into a ponytail. Emily approached her, pulling her away from the gossip circle she was in.

"Emily, I don't know what more there is to talk about," she said.

"You can't tell anyone."

"Don't worry about me telling, just worry about yourself," she said then snapped her head away, throwing her hair up.

Several days passed with no word from him. She sent him a couple of texts, and the "seen" symbol mocked her every time she tried to check her messages. Frustrated that maybe he was annoyed with her or that she had done something wrong again, Emily decided to go to the game to get her mind off of it. All the usual things happened: Shannon kissed the mascot, the crowd yelled when the cheerleaders told them to, and the smell of popcorn and hotdogs filled her nose with a slimy film. About three quarters into the game, Emily wanted a break from the crowd and headed for the outdoor entrance. That's when she heard him: and then heard Shannon. She hadn't seen the mascot or Shannon when she left the gym, and she thought she was going to be sick. Emily forced herself to stay and listen anyway:

"You need to leave her alone, she can't handle it," Shannon said.

“You need to mind your own business, sweetie,” he responded.

“What if she breaks down and tells someone? You’ll be done. We’ll be done.”

“She won’t. Why? Are you jealous?” he asked.

“I just don’t think you should be toying with her,” Shannon’s voice went high.

He laughed.

At this point Emily ran back to the gym, waiting for them to come back to the game, but she went home that night in tears. *I guess Shannon was right, I should have watched out.* Emily spent the entire weekend in her room, she kept her volume at its max, and she stared out her window waiting for his car to pass slowly by--it never did. Finally, on Sunday night when she couldn’t stand the thought of facing them anymore, she sent Shannon a text: “Hey, so you’re with him too?” Shannon didn’t respond. Emily waited up all night for that response. It didn’t matter anyway though because the next day Shannon and Mr. Matson weren’t at school.

The sound of a bell brought her back to the dinner. People were so impatient here, but so were the superiors. Emily could understand the frustration the waitress felt. A line had begun to form at the register, and people wanted their coffee and bagels with more speed. Things move so fast up here, Emily thought. You could tell by the force they exerted on the tiny silver button and the way they looked at each other that the poor waitress wasn’t getting any tips. Oblivious to the stress they were inflicting on the poor girl. Emily began making comparisons between this girl and the girl named Shannon she knew in high school. Both had that spunky walk where they almost bounced. Their hair color was different, but with a ponytail, the waitress still reminded Emily of Shannon. For the first time, Emily noticed the hint of a dark circle around her left eye, then they made eye contact. Shannon stopped amidst the chaos to look back at Emily, and then

put down her apron. She backed away from the counter. The patrons didn't even notice the look on Shannon's face before she slipped through the back door and disappeared down the alley.

The Shift of the Leaves

The breeze caused her hair to tickle her shoulders as she looked out over her corner of East Tennessee from the abandoned gas station on top of the mountain to Over Home. Looking around her, she saw the gas station she barely remembers being in operation, kudzu vines consuming it right before her eyes. It looked like the vines would eventually pull it down into the mountain without a semblance of a fight. The leaves had all turned to orange and brown by this point in the year, and they would soon fall off. This isn't what she remembers though as she looks at the Smoky Mountains foothills and the houses dotted in the distance. The sun hit the mountains in a way that reminded her of the shading little kids draw on mountains: gray pencil zig-zags.

She remembers the first summer coming back from college. Green, thick foliage making it a little harder to see the landscape, sweat tracing the curve of her neck after pooling at the base of her hair. Occasionally, he wiped it away with the back of his hand. Their backs rested against the hot wall of the vacant building. His truck was parked in the front, and she knew everyone who drove by would make assumptions about whatever trouble they were getting into behind the building. She'd never cared about it before, and she wondered what was making her care now. They had been silent for awhile: him wiping away her sweat and her tensing at the sound of every oncoming car. She felt a vibration through the dirt and checked her phone that had been face-down on the ground. She saw him shift his weight from her peripheral vision, so she leaned and cupped her hand over her phone, pretending the sun was making it too bright to see. Surprised to even get a text out here, she read: "Casey: GIRL, I miss you. Come hang ou...."

Not clicking on the message to see the rest, she put her phone down. The stillness of the moment had been broken, and he hung his head.

“Have a new fella?”

“No, Jason,” she simply stated.

“I used to know your password,” he looked up with his eyes, keeping his head down.

“My friend Casey texted.”

“Sounds like a boy’s name”

“Or a girl’s.”

With that, Jason stood. She watched him rest his arm against the wall like he wanted to push it down. He stared down and shuffled his feet, and they stayed like that for several long moments. Finally she looked away from him and up at the sky, head resting against the wall.

“Come on, I’ll take you home,” he said.

Standing, she dusted off her shorts and stood on the balls of her feet to stretch out her legs. Jason had already walked to the front of the abandoned gas station before she started walking, and he switched on his ignition the moment she emerged. Continuing her walk to his truck, someone from the road honked at them. She could feel the burn creep up her neck and to her face. She knew she matched the color of his truck, so she got in quickly. He put the truck in drive, and she looked over at him, his eyes staying strictly on the road. They didn’t speak for the whole ride.

She wasn’t sad anymore, just relieved. As the wind blew through heavily, throwing leaves around her in a chaotic swirl, she breathed in deep. And here she was a few years later coming back to the same heartache town that reminded her again and again why she has to leave. “Next summer, I won’t come back here.” The words left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth, and she tried to focus on the scene around her to stifle that unwanted guilt. Turning to walk back to her car, she noticed the number of cars leaving the county rather than heading in, and stood for a moment to count them 4..5..6.....9..10..

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