

Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing

Volume 14
Issue 1 4/01/2016

Article 35

2016

Unspoil

Zach Sheneman
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder>

Recommended Citation

Sheneman, Zach (2016) "Unspoil," *Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 35.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder/vol14/iss1/35>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Unspoil

Voices, mostly. At least at first. Words muddle through whisper-thin drywall and chipped plaster. Irascible anger in the chafing rust of his sharp-tack voice.

—

Play it over again in your head. Spot the transgression.

Left a light on, sat in front of the four-channel television, set the soap-marked fork on the wrong side of the plate. Calculate the cardinal sin. You spoke up again. You talked back. You looked in his eyes and dared to defend yourself.

Now find your misstep. Backpedal.

Apologize for whatever wild crime you surely committed and take a step back from wherever you stand, conditioned to withdraw, to retreat, to be aware. Too slow. Should have left faster, jumped farther. Grabs your arm and wrenches it towards him. For a single instant, you fly. You're small. You're nine. Just a palm frond in a hurricane.

He tosses you into your room. You knock your right knee against the antique hope chest. When she cleans your room to alleviate your dust allergies she puts your animals in the worn brown box at the foot of your bed. Your knee crashes against the corner of it, the cracking echoing within its hollow chamber. Your animals stare unblinkingly at you from their perch on your waterbed. They rise and sink slowly on the plastic sea on the wave of your seven-year-old impact against the chest, chest against the bed. You grab your stuffed gorilla from the bed and bite your chapped lip. He wears a blue latex police outfit. You watch your own reflection in his lidless eyes.

Voices, mostly, then movement from the kitchen. She says something quiet. Maybe a protest. Hall door slams against the register, rattles it like a crumpled can of Coke. You hear the crash, imagine his pace, start counting. Six seconds and that bedroom door with the broken lock will fly open, slam into your white wall. One of the silver stars she painted around your room has dented from one doorknob too many times. Four seconds. Hall carpet, floorboards groan under his weight. Still wearing his work boots. Timberlands. Heavy leather shoes. Scuffed and

tarnished, older maybe than you. Two seconds. The clank of brass, the slither of black leather through denim belt loops. The door knob twists, the hinges creak, the leather shoes land heavy on the hardwood floor.

Play it over again in your head. Spot the transgression.

You can't remember the first time. Can't remember the smarting sting of the open palm against the plaid of your shorts. Can't recall if it started before the wedding or after. You do remember to lie still, no matter how bad you shake, no matter how loud you scream. Once you'd struggled, cried out, shook free of his grip and kicked your leg out. Your bare thigh caught the full force of his hand and left a smiling red welt for days. Brace yourself, squeeze your eyes shut, listen for the smack. You hear it before you feel it. You flinch, then do it again.

Now find your misstep. Backpedal.

Never should have cried. Never should have begged, pleaded, bargained with the man. You're young, but you know he just wants to win. Never should have let him win. He stops when you finally give out, finally start sobbing. The first time took one blow. The more used to it you grow, the longer it takes to break you down.

It's God's will, he asserts. Spare the rod, spoil the child. The rod's spared, but not the paint stirrer. The extension of his right hand, until he split it years ago over your backside and moved to something sturdier, heavier. More reliable. You prefer the hand now. Compared to the ladles and spoons, the hand only hurts so badly.

Sometimes she stands in the doorway, just breathing, watching, waiting. Maybe she's powerless to stop him. Maybe he threatens her the way he threatens you. His God is a just one, and maybe she can't defend herself from his justice. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Savior of the body. His favorite verse to quote. Sometimes, when it's bad, you wish his Christ would save you.

—

He bends you over the frame of your bed, your ribs heaving uncomfortably atop the finished wood. You watch his shadow as it is cast on the wall. He folds the belt over. He stretches it taut, places his rough electrician's hand on the small of your back. You brace yourself, squeeze your eyes shut. A sharp crack, then the teeth of the whip. Tears well in your eyes. You glance up at your animals, at your gorilla. Another crack, and you

blink. Your gorilla just watches, just stares. Won't acknowledge. Maybe he is threatened, too.

He cracks again, repositions his hand, wails on. All needles at first, then the low burn, then needles again. The tears run down the sides of your face. You smear them on your comforter. You don't have much left in you, but you're not ready yet. He strikes you faster, harder. You instinctively flex your legs, but they won't flex. They sting too much.

The door creaks from somewhere behind you. A sliver of light pierces his shadow on the wall. Between the blows, in the space between two moments, it doesn't hurt. Maybe she's finally had enough. Maybe she'll stop him, leave him, promise you're okay, how much you're loved. Maybe his God will understand, just this once, that you're a good boy. You try so hard. You're small. You're only nine.

Then the teeth bite again, again, again, again. The incandescent hall light disappears as the door closes shut, leaving you and him and the red of the set sun. Your animals watch you twitch. You can see him in their artificial eyes. Maybe she doesn't blink, either. Maybe she watches, eyes wide, as he unspools the child. He pushes on. The cracking reverberates from the silver stars she painted on your white walls.

—

Now find your misstep. Backpedal.

When you turn ten, eleven, twenty-one; when he's long gone and she calls and wonders where you've been; when you spend so long trying so hard to forget that you wonder it yourself; when those women who are strangers ask how many children you want to make, to have, to father; when they ask you about your relationship with your family, your parents, someone else's God; when they ask you what you're so afraid of every time they leave, every time they close the door; when they beg, plead, bargain for you to stay, ask you how you could just stand in silence, staring unblinkingly, as the woman you love falls to pieces before you; you apologize for whatever wild crime you surely committed, take a step back from wherever you stand, conditioned to withdraw, to retreat, to be aware. Always too slow. Should have left faster, jumped farther. Grabs your heart and wrenches it towards them. You're old now. You're twenty-five. Still a palm frond in a hurricane.

Play it over again. Spot the transgression.

For a single instant, you fly.