

The Darkroom

by Jocelyn Johnson

On the homestead, before the accident, I remember being so slender I could slither through fence posts; so lithe I could amble up any tree; so full of myself that my shouts could send ripples across Cherokee pond. And when I sang sweetly I would draw the enormous carp to the edge of the water, where you, little sister, fed them bread crumbs.

That morning I saw you in the meadow, seven years old and dressed only in tights and an old apron. You were collecting seedpods in the folds of cloth.

“Let’s go and check on Mama again,” you hollered, bringing a twig to your strawberry mouth like a cigarette.

Our mother smoked real cigarettes in her darkroom, a low squat workshop nestled among wayward pines and poison ivy; so that we had to risk oozing pustules just to get near to her.

“Okay, but you go out front and scout this time,” I said.

Barefoot, you set out on the narrow pathway that led to our mother, your nimble footsteps cutting through the litter of leaves. I watched the triangles of your shoulders blades jut back in reticence.

“Shhhhhh,” you warned as we drew near.

The darkroom had a heavy oak door and you pressed your ear against it. “I think I hear her breathing in there,” you whispered.

“I definitely hear her smoking” I said, but maybe it was just the wind in the trees. We had no hope to spy on our mother properly as she had sealed all the windows and even the key hole against the summer light.

As you listened I plucked a daddy long legs from the porch and flung it at you. Its threadlike legs radiated out as it sailed towards your bare chest, and you screeched in surprise like an old screen door.

We did not wait for the darkroom’s door to blunder open and our mother’s face to come into the light. The sound of her heavy footsteps was enough: we sprinted.

This time I was out front, running back along the narrow pathway, darting beneath prickly boughs of pine. You struggling to keep up with me, and I could hear you huffing. Pine cones crunched beneath your bare feet.

I halted at the clearing to catch my breath, but you were younger and you kept going; your narrow chest pumping in earnest, your tiny shoulder blades becoming wings. You looked terrified and I laughed at you.

I was still laughing when I heard them: a series of screams so sharp and high that at first I didn’t understand that they belonged to you. I ran towards that awful sound and found you crumpled behind the old barn beneath a rusty protruding nail. A deep puncture marred your narrow shoulder. Blood pooled in the delicate crook of your arm.

“*MA MA MA MA*,” you screamed.

When you opened your eyes to find me hovering over you, you went silent. In unison we turned back towards the woods.

“I think I hear her crunching leaves,” you rasped.

In the end I was the one who helped you. You leaned heavily against me the whole way back to the house. I told you to walk right, that you'd be alright, but in truth I understood your unsteadiness. Your small deep wound permeated me too somehow.

I couldn't get your shoulder to stop bleeding so I phoned our closest neighbor, an old farmer who lived a few miles down the road. Moments later we heard his pickup rumbling in the gravel driveway, a trail of dust billowing behind it like a storm cloud. He entered briskly, a first aid kit under his arm.

At the kitchen table, he stained a cotton ball orange with some tincture that smelled like alcohol. You winced in anticipation, but he said be still now, you were gonna be alright. I watched you bite your lip and swallow a lump of mucus as he dabbed at you. Then, coarsely, he wrapped your arm until the blood stopped seeping through. The bright white bandage on your narrow arm seemed like a lie to me, the way it covered so neatly. It glowed against the darkness of your skin.

“You better go and get yourself a tetanus shot, young lady,” he warned before he left us.

I noticed that he did not ask for our mother. After those first desperate cries by the barn, neither did you. But I kept looking out the screen door, growing angry at its stillness, its empty framing of the meadow and the woods.

It was later than usually when our mother finally did come. We had already eaten supper and were in bed, playing Rummy under the covers by flashlight. From the road we must have looked like ghosts.

I clicked off the flashlight when I heard her footsteps in the hallway and lay back under the shroud of sheets. You took my cue and murmured as if you were dreaming. Through squinted eyes I watched our mother pause at the thin opening of our bedroom door.

Part of me wanted to bolt up and tell her everything: the strange and desperate way I had heard you screaming, the wound at your shoulder where the blood wouldn't stop, the new smallness I felt in the world. But another part of me knew better. The story of the day was like fading ripples on the water, or a fragile branch that could not hold my weight.

I could feel our mother wanting something too. Perhaps just to nudge the door open and see her wild daughters feverish with sleep. I watched her stand in the shadows for a moment longer, then she sighed and tiptoed out of view.