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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

The Holding of Violence

By Erica Williams

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The Holding of Violence

by Erica Williams

I have to tell a story. Tell it over and over and *overandoverandover* again. Its story made of violence. Violence living underneath my skin. So close; it is muscle. So close; it is bone. It reaches through flesh bodies to connect their genealogies with weepy bloodstuff or bruises.

I could trace it like a bloodline running through so many bodies. See; my stepfather was raped by his swimming teacher. In the sweat and chlorine bathrooms of the public swimming pool, his body was pulled to pieces and put back together. It was the wrong way to arrange the body of a young man. A diagnosis of schizophrenia was mumbled and fumbled with. There was some words to explain the parts of him that went

missing

In his empty places, violence nestled. Itching. Itching. Later, his body collided with mine and made some kind of permanence inside it; the story.

I sit between Mum and my new stepfather. His name is Toby. It's a funny name. Soft and round and easy. *To-by, To-by*. I sing in time with the song playing from the radio. Mum concentrates on driving. The old Land Rover rattles and chugs. Toby has his window open, and hot dry air whips my hair around my head. The wind makes me feel crazy and excited. Outside, the bush is rushing past in frames. My eyes flick back and forth, trying to keep up. I am singing singing singing and then pain. Warm, prickling, spreading out from my nose, up to my eyes. For a moment, I can't see or speak. I think maybe there's been a car accident. Warm blood-stuff trickles into my mouth and I spit it onto my white shirt. I open my eyes and watch it spread, like food colouring in milk across my hard chest. It is difficult to

breathe. The world curls away from me. I am trying to tell Mum to stop the car, but speech won't climb out of my throat. I'm sucking words inwards instead of spitting them out. Toby says, *shut the fuck up*. His fist is curled in his lap. I realise he has hit me. I'm not sure what it means to be hit. *Shut the fuck up*. He says it again. I shut the fuck up. Later, he pulls out his wallet. *I'll give you 100 bucks if you forgive me*, he says. I take the bribe, guilty at my unforgiveness, already growing like a tumor in my chest.

a bribe and choke
on beginnings
sick swimming teachers
the way violence spread
up through bodies
self-propagating
where did it come from
the thickness of it
around the tongue
i can't speak.

Speak; in summer, Toby itches. The fat bulges underneath his skin. He bloats. A red rash breaks out in the creases of his elbows and the backs of his knees and in between his toes. The blacks of his eyes are small, like they have been poked in by pins. Something makes scratching sounds inside his ears, he says. He says there is a cricket brushing its wings against his eardrums. He cocks his head to one side and drives the long, tobacco yellow fingernail of his pointer finger deep into his ear. He does this so often that there is always a red tongue of blood curling out of the black holes in the sides of his head and

dribbling or drying on his neck. Sometimes, he goes outside to stand on the edge of the property. He stands there for a long time, and the rain soaks through his clothes, so they cling to him like peeling skin. I watch him from the window of my room, wondering.

when I turned twenty
he said Happybirthday
on the phone
a Familyman
I just thought it was strange
how age is *turning*
like a circle
like the same thing
again, again, again,
change without change

And I thought of this story; late at night, I creep into the bathroom and find Mum there with a purple bruise spreading up her spine and out across her ribs. It looks like purple dye dripped onto white silk and I want for a moment to soak her and wipe her and wash off the bruise. I want to watch the colours stain the water. I want to watch the water spiral down the plughole. I want to tuck her small body into a warm bed and stroke her hair and explain to her all the places we could go, if we left, when we left, we are leaving. I want to swear in the way adults swear in the middle of their sentences. We are fucking leaving. I'm saying it now, we are fucking leaving. I'm saying everything. Breaking everything with my voice. I begin to scream.

I scream for a long time. I scream the dripping wet world into darkness and I scream myself out of my body. I scream Toby into two long strips like ripped paper, then four, eight, sixteen – too many to count. I scream mum’s arms around my body. I scream my head onto her chest. I scream her soft words explaining the world back into understanding. I scream until the rain stops. Toby throws a glass at me and it smashes on the concrete floor. I run across the yard, to where the grass breaks into wet muddy earth and the earth slopes down into the valley. The leaves on the trees are fat and swollen from the rain. I can hear the creek rushing, and the sound of it passing from one ear to the other, left to right, in the direction that the water flows. Mum yells. I think she is running after us, across the grass. I slip on the mud and fall into soft wet ground.

His on-the-phone-voice spoke

of therapy, and the long

recovering

from violence

it itched him up

inside out

out out out

to make blood

bruises and power

power; not invisible

there’s a thing to it, and bodies

are soft as plasticine

I remember. Toby drives his steel capped boot into my ribs while I lay with my face in the dark dirt pretending I have already been killed. I climb out of my body. There is an exit somewhere and I slip up through it. I hang above myself and sever the thin strings connecting me with that face-in-the-dirt person and the toe of the boot coming down again into the gentle cage her ribs make. It doesn't hurt - that's the truth of it. But the other truth is that of course it does, I mean it must have. How am I to know? I have been dangling somewhere up in the sky, watching the violence through the steam still thick in the air after the rain.

On the phone, he said he was sorry, but I thought he was just asking for permission to feel okay. Okay.

my partner and I fucked

for the first time

my body curled

remembered, sorry,

remembered,

the way bodies do

sorry I shook

eyes clamped

shut. my body clamped shut. shut. shut up. sorry

Sorry I remember around and around this thick memory thing; this Toby climbing into my bed one night. His hand is over my mouth before I can scream. His skin is salty sweet. Sweat and rotten fruit. His body is damp and sticky against my skin. The bed is small and I am pressing myself up against the cool wall and he is pressing his flesh against my

body. No longer mine. I vomit. The vomit seeps between his fingers and he takes his hand from my mouth to hit me with it. I don't mind – the vomit makes it stop.

I don't like the *my*
of memories
are they are my hands?
my legs?
the inescapable thing
of me?
can I pluck them out
like feathers
make a memory scarf
for cold winter? No
you cannot undo
yourself. You cannot.
neither can you, okay? This is not
permission

Fear-memories are like music, like the stuckness of some songs, old songs, they come when you aren't expecting. I think it's because they are stuck in the folds of your brain and the marrow of your bones. But you can sing them. Like this; I run down into the valley. It's dark and wet and I can feel the ground slipping underneath me. Leaves writhe underneath my bare feet like maggots. Maybe that's what they are. I'm not sure – the truth hasn't caught up with this moment just yet. Anything can happen. It's a ball of string

unravelling faster than your hands can catch it. I run, feeling my way through the trees, half falling towards the sound of the creek until I am in the creek, up to my neck in it, trying to scratch around for something to hold onto. When I am still for a moment, the water is warm and gentle. If I stretch my body long, I can feel the cool stones underneath my feet. I look up through the trees and see the lights of the shed. I remember when my mother took me to church and made me say a prayer before bed. She has since become angry at God and sometimes, when Toby isn't home, she smashes plates and screams up at the sky, look what you've fucking done. Now, I close my eyes and pray.

When I turned twenty I turned and turned. Inside my grown body, memory vessel, I was my worst self. Cornered and embarrassed. Wielding a kitchen knife. Unsure how to attack myself quickly enough. Cold, everywhere,
c o l d c o l d c o l d.

the memories tried to explain it, but

my tongue was too fat
in my mouth
to make memory words
come out.

They wriggled
back down my throat
like worms
explain yourself, the why-thing of you.

Why? I was remembering; police coming
down through the trees, into the valley with torches, pulling me out of the creek. The

policewoman held me like I was going to fall apart. Sometimes my partner holds me like the policewoman held me, so that I won't fall apart; this is the opposite of violence.

violence goes
in circles. it turns
like a birthday

Proof:

My gentle mother, gentle, gentle, hit me. Gently split the soft skin below my eye to pieces. Gently made it bleed, bleed, gently cried, was sorry for her gentle violence. I think it was the topaz ring she wore that made the wound. I think it was the sharpness of the ring more than her own fist. I think this because the topaz ring was his. A promise. I wonder how, how to let the violence out, if not with violence.

I am long twenty now and reaching out, out, out. My skin prickles in the rain and the hot wind. My memories begin to stretch,

something touchable,

holdable,

not just

mine

I remember the shed we lived in. The shed is a concrete slab with walls and a roof made from long stiff beams of wood, tin, and plasterboard. It is a patchwork shed some greying hippies flung together in the eighties. The roof is corroding and the garden has begun to creep its tendrils inside. The valley behind the shed is a deep crease in the earth, and the bush is folding in on itself down there, crumpling like a wet sheet. The mossy

shoulders of grey rocks as tall as my small body brush against one another softly, softly.

In the deepest parts of the valley, the rocks are smaller and made smooth by trickly creek water. The creek is mostly just a lick of wetness spreading over the rocks and stones. Damp pools of silty mud and leaves from the fig trees mix to make a thick sludge in the cracks of the creek bed. In the summer, the creek floods. The summer rain is viscous, like it has mixed with the grime in the atmosphere before landing, pat, pat, pat on the dusty tin roofs and dry skin and crackling bush. The water tanks open their corrugated mouths, exposing their tongues to the sky. Rain always gets inside – in the house, in your eyes, through the pores in your skin. We live in a halfway place, somewhere between breathing air and choking on water, so that I think we are developing gills just under the chin, where the bone of the jaw slopes up to the papery lobes of the ears.

I remember this story; my stepfather is teaching me how green ants form their nests from curled leaves and spiders webs. He tells me *they make hanging houses*. He tells me *when they sting they are just afraid or protecting something*. I'm quiet and serious. Somewhere, a dog is howling. I remember, *overandoverandoveragain*, curling words around violence, so it can be held outside my flesh body.

twenty years of me, inside
a hanging house
ants nest, nestled, folded
in amongst the wet webs
bent curled. hot scurry
of a thing that is a girl,
that is a woman,

that is a violence,
that is a gentle lesson,
it is story, it is a story
to be held with hands
tasted, tongued around
in the crook of an arm or
held, held, held outside
the body.

(2236 Words)