

WINNER OF THE SMITH/VERSACI EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD FOR POETRY

THE SOFTENING JOELLE SCHUMACHER

This is the time you went to the meadow when you were six (six is a wonderful age). Tiny flowers. White. Pure. Clean. You picked them - did you know it was murder?- and left them in the grass.

You think about your mother, your brothers, your grandparents. Their two story homes, their tangled web of rage. Your kindergarten yearbook photo and a hole from a fist side by side in the living room.

You never went to a meadow.

You wrap yourself in the earth's crust and go to sleep to turn the lights off.

You want to escape the jar. You touch the mirror. You are both the moth and the light.

You don't really need a plane ticket to run away, but you need at least ten bucks and something to smoke out of.

What the fuck are you looking for?

Something you don't even have a name for.

Something that probably isn't even real.

Your mother reads your suicide note for spelling mistakes and tells you she's seen better. "Put a little more heart into it," she advises.

The first rehab you go to, the counselors place bets on who will get high first.

They give you sixty days.

You trade war stories like badges, trophies, prizes.

The Time You Crashed Your First Car.

Being The Most Fucked Up Girl At The Party, Six Years Running.

Baby's First Drink.

Baby's First Overdose.

You compete with each other. Who was worse? Who was better? Who can tell the better story?

You debate Charles on the merits of sobriety over a cigarette.

"Are you going to smoke weed again?"

So you're a train, and not a station, and the cities start to blur together.

New Haven. Manhattan. Chicago. Tucson. San Diego.

You float, from one place to another, from one bed, one roommate, one therapist, one shower to another, one personality, one boyfriend, one tragic backstory to another. Running, running, found. Look how beautiful this pain is now. Look how profound all these broken hearts.

You stay for your mom.

For your grandma.

For your sanity.

You stay for your six year old self, your eight year old self, your thirty year old self. Your sixteen year old self: stumbling, Lolita lips red, red wine, truth or dare: thumbprints, sirens, the word "no" caught in your throat like a bird. Like a canary. Like a miner's warning.

You stay for her. You stay for a better life.

You find your body on the freeway at two and a half years sober while you're driving to a 5:00 shift one day. You realize to your amazement that it still works, that you can feel all of it at once; that when you talk you can feel your jaw vibrating in your ears.

You wonder if you died, if the white Toyota Pilot you swerved to narrowly avoid had actually hit you. If this is the afterlife: driving down the 5, the ocean to your right, your whole body alive.

You call your friend Lacey, concerned. Tell her you can feel your entire body for the first time in your waking life.

"Am I crazy?" you ask her.

"No," she says, and blows out a ring of cigarette smoke. "Welcome to your meat suit."

Your last time in, you go to rehab with some sixty other people who filter in and out over the course of three months. Less than two years later, only two of you are still sober.

You keep a graveyard of your teenage years.

You try to keep a garden. Try to build a tree of memory. Try to inhabit your body, to enunciate, to surround yourself with deer. You practice speaking to strangers. You play pretend. You practice playing real. You pray for deliverance, but it's too small, or it's too infinite. Either way, you're on your knees.

"Definitely. Are you?"

"Yeah. I think so. I don't think I have a problem. I'm only really here because my mom overreacted."

"Same dude. For some reason she's allowed to drink every night but I can't do it without getting locked up."

"Fuck that," you laugh, stomping out your smoke on the wet sidewalk.

"She's just projecting her problems onto you."

He's dead eight months later.

You know you need to stop. You know you're living on borrowed luck now, that when they read your eulogy, no one is going to be thinking about how much fun you were when you blacked out. They're just going to wish you had found something in yourself that was more important than what was at the bottom of the bottle.

Anya, who is blonde and looks like she punched her way out of a gothic fairytale, has been playing with your hair and day drinking with you for the last ten hours.

When you make it to your parents, you are drunk beyond redemption.

Your mother cuts you off.

You debate what to do.

Try to devise the precise formula to not stop doing drugs but appear as though you have stopped doing drugs so as to retain your financial backing.

You wax poetic to your roommate over your last bottle of gin about the particular heartbreaks of being a True Poet.

"Bukowski can suck my dick," you tell her, and then you throw up.

You walk the whole city, blasted in red.

A homeless angel takes your hand.

"Baby girl, baby girl," he cries. "You're too young to hurt this bad."

In the end, he still sells you four bags.

These are the days that suck the yolk from your soul, but the next day the sky usually spits it back out as the sun.