

**Gracelyn Mitchell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

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## **Purgatory, Ascension, and Blood**

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### **ladybugs**

my cousin and I—eight and eleven—trample the newly/neatly trimmed lawn of my parents' expansive backyard, over floral weeds and flowers we've assigned whimsical names to with total disregard for botany. We race past the fence which divides my yard from the wooded dirt trail behind my home, which we are sure is populated with Heffalumps, who run and charge and leave giant impressions in the ground (the dry crater a few miles away, we insist, was formed by a particularly large one, despite my dad's attempts to inform us that it was the result of a lake that dried up years ago in a drought). We run in figure-eights around the two dead trees at the edge of the yard, which we believe have the capability to produce waterfalls of pixie dust (after watching *Tinkerbell*). We search the crevices of the castle my father erected for us when we were six and nine—the one all of the adults affectionately refer to as a *clubhouse*.

With a plastic hairbow container “borrowed” from my former-cosmetologist mother in hand, we begin hunting ladybugs. Except, we weren't really *hunting* them. *Rehabilitation* is what we called it. We would rescue the “injured” and “sick” spotted beetles, the ones “clearly in need of help”, and release them within a week. We promised. We filled the hairbow container with blades of grass, leaves, acorns, twigs, rocks. We collected dozens of ladybugs. We swore all of them had an ailment or defect. We let the smells of onion grass and foul-smelling ladybug secretion reek through our upstairs playroom in the name of humanitarian service.

The ladybugs suffocate and die of starvation days later. We scatter carcasses in the garden like red-and-black seeds. This is routine. Despite the results, we continue to believe that every time we capture a ladybug, we are doing them a great and noble service.

While we recall this memory fondly with laughter, I am well aware that we were not nurturing forces as we intended to be; we were murderers.

We returned the hairbow container to my mom. It still smells of grass and ladybugs' blood.

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### **birds**

my cousin and I did not just kill once. Our first experience with mortality came one cold, October morning when we found two birds splayed across the floor of our clubhouse— panting, barely-alive. A gnarled nest full of baby-blue eggs rested on a high shelf mounted to the wall. We screamed for our parents.

My grandfather cradled the birds in his palms, their wings draping over his fingers as they took too-shallow breaths. We kids, keenly aware of the birds' responsibility to their eggs and the possibility of survival insinuated by their weak gasps, begged our grandfather and parents to “help them live”. The adults, however, reached a general consensus that the birds were as good as dead.

My grandfather walks towards the gate to dig shallow graves for the birds in the wooded dirt trail behind our yard. We ask what happens to the eggs. We are told honestly. We cry.

We were told to lock the clubhouse door each night before coming inside for dinner. This is what ultimately caused the birds' starvation and suffocation. We feel guilty.

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### **popsicles**

sitting on the concrete steps of the staircase adjoining two tenants at my cousin's two-story, brick apartment building nestled in the middle of a humid-and-wooded nowhere, we suck pungent fruit juices out of icicles wrapped in plastic. Occasionally, the other's teeth crunch through the slender crushed ice with a *snap*. Our laughter fills the June afternoon like bubbles. The asphalt parking lot, filled with sun-bleached Ford Tempos and Couriers, wavers with

heat. The smell of linen fills the air, and we can hear the muffled rumbling of washing machines resonating from the apartments' laundromat. Pieces of chalk lay sweltering in the sun over hopscotch squares and outlines of our friends and random neighbors.

Grape juice from our popsicles paints veins down our arms, and we still laugh—bits of ice flying from our mouths and melting instantly in small puddles against heated concrete, our tongues stained maroon. Our tanktops, shorts, and flip-flops all smell of grass and heat accumulated from the monkey bars in the courtyard of the apartments, the ones we are told to leave after two kids no older than us pull cigarettes from their pockets and begin filling the summer air with gray snowflakes.

The grape stain veins become sticky and transparent. They fade.

June fades. Summers in the apartments vanish. I wish I could recall eating popsicles on the steps with greater clarity.

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### **makeshift heaven**

a frigid breeze filters through the screen of the open window in our new, ranch-style house. I lean against one of the legs of the dining room chairs, watching cars speed across the road which stretches in front of our home; watching as the four mostly-dead, lightning-stricken oaks sway in the wind; watching my grandfather behind the mesh screen as He becomes assimilated with the image of a higher deity, a Heavenly Father.

A dining room chair he pulled outside creaks as he leans back into it, a Rickenbacker guitar pressed against his stomach. He rests his abrasive fingers on the fretboard, contemplating. He lifts His right hand, raising a tightly-wound roll of paper pinched between His fingers (which seem to form a trident) to his lips. Plumes of silver smoke flower from His lips. Tendrils seep through the screen window, filling the house with the archaic and stark stench of flora, grass, and pine. I choke on the warm fog as though I have ascended to the sultry Mount Olympus.

I watch in confusion and awe as my grandfather lowers the roll of paper and starts stroking the guitar strings with His gnarled fingers, letting random bursts of slurred lyrics escape His cracked lips. He shouts and strums loosely, freely, the clouds He formed still hanging in a halo around Him. He has created a heaven on Earth, one that burns my nostrils.

He stops playing when the clouds fade. He stares out onto the busy road for a while, then extracts a candy cane He took from my parents' Christmas tree from His jacket pocket. He leans his guitar against His slumped chest. With a smoking blunt in His other hand, He twists the candy cane in his mouth for several minutes, sharpening it to a point before sliding it out of His mouth with a wet *pop*. Translucent, red, peppermint dye drips from the corner of His mouth like watered-down blood.

Blood. Like the blood that stemmed from him, the blood he used as shackles to bind us.

he forms more clouds. he is good at creating makeshift heavens.

But he is no god in my eyes.

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### **porcelain**

I am told my grandmother died in a bathtub before even the slightest notion of my existence was made. When my mother was eight, and her sister was ten, and they were home alone with cassettes of *Moby Dick* and *Anne of Green Gables* that their truck driver father had recorded for them so that he could still read them bedtime stories while he was gone.

She had a pre-existing condition, an ugly and relentless one that caused unexpected seizures: a silent killer. She wasn't found until hours later when my grandfather came home.

I am told the funeral was traumatically depressing. I am told that was the day my grandfather became like an oak tree: calloused and gnarled, emotionless. I am told that Florida became bubbling acid that drenched my grandfather's soul; this is why they moved to Chicago, followed by any other place where he could escape his grief after it began seeping through the cracks of each new home.

I am told, countless times, that my grandmother was a beacon of light in my grandfather's world. My grandfather never says this, but his face turns into an eclipse anytime a relative suggests it. She was a woman that smelt of lemongrass and sunlight; a woman who wore flouncy, floral blouses and could knit and play clarinet and the harp; a woman who pressed flowers into scrapbooks and wrote grocery lists in the margins of her pocket Bible; the definition of benevolence. She had strawberry hair and porcelain skin and cherry lips: she was nature and glass all at once.

She drowned in an olive-green, porcelain bathtub, but her soul is far from engulfed. It has resurfaced. My mother's aunt tells me that I am her sister reincarnated. I am not certain I am.

Grandmother, I am so sorry. Being "the beacon" in this family is a heavy burden to bear. Yes, I have filled such

dark rooms with an abundance of light—but it hurts to burn. I am melting. Grandmother, I am porcelain as well. The fragile glass is growing unbearably hot from hosting this flame. My body has become a kiln. I am incandescent. Fissures are forming within me. I will implode just as you did. I am so sorry. Our family's souls have only dimmed since your heavenly light was extinguished. I am not a good—or even *adequate*—replacement.

I still wonder what it would have been like if you lived...

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### **tickets to the stars**

my cousins and I are bundled in puffy winter coats, fleece-and-fur-lined hoods pulled over our ears against the harsh North Carolina cold. Our exposed fingers are numb, the tips the color of the mountains, as we grip fluttering, metallic gold tickets.

We board a warm, mahogany-and-crimson train, bound to our mothers' waists.

Sometime within the hour-long train ride, we shed our winter coats, exposing our footie pajamas. We dance around our compartment, giggling and tapping each other back-and-forth on the shoulder repeatedly every second in a very confined game of tag. We hold long, slender tubes filled with layered stripes of flavored sugar in our hands. Rainbows stain our mouths and lips.

We are told we are going to the North Pole. Where we will see the Northern Lights and Santa and we will hear the sound of bells if we believe. And we believe. And we are kids. And we are happy, and this is the essence of who and what we are.

Oh Lord...take me back.

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### **german blood**

my uncle has german ties. This, he says with pride and conviction. Many times. His father, who is responsible for the rich, inherited blood gifts him several family heirlooms carried from their immigrant ancestors, which fill my aunt and uncle's houses like humble trophies. *Salz* (salt) and *pfeffer* (pepper) shakers; an old spice rack labeled in painted, German calligraphy. I remember one heirloom with intense clarity: a series of delftware plates hanging on a zigzag of brass vines mounted to the kitchen wall. Each plate displays one scene from the process of making a pie, as though an invisible hand is baking the pastry and illustrating each step: a leafy branch drooping with the weight of clusters of glistening berries; a woven basket overflowing with freshly-picked berries; a rolling pin sticking out of a lump of dough powdered with flour; a golden-brown pie with a lattice, dough cover draped over a berry filling still wavering with heat.

My brain stumbles over the placement of the plates. My aunt arranged them "incorrectly". They sit completely out of order on the grapevine wire. For years, I stare at the pieces of china, becoming agitated—even *angered*—by their misplacement. I strain each time I sit at my aunt and uncle's dining room table, willing myself to gain telepathic powers so that I can rearrange the heirlooms to their *correct* order.

Perhaps this is how I invert, analyze, examine my family—it is not right, and I do not have the power to correct it. Sometimes, this frustrates me to the point of tears.

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my uncle is bipolar. This, my aunt tells me in persuasive whispers. Several times. Each time, I am meant to accept this explanation as some form of apology, an excuse. I always nod when my aunt asks if I can forgive him.

Yes. I forgive him. For calling me an idiot after I drop a bowl of crushed Oreos and spill the tiny, black crumbs all over his kitchen floor (when I was nine). For telling me to "grow the hell up" after I express my desire to become a writer (I was still young enough to believe "Hell" was a "bad word"). For telling me that he would "smack" me after I load the dishwasher, in his words, "incorrectly". For making me stand outside in the cold after I refuse to drink the milk leftover from my cereal.

I can even forgive him for telling me outright that I would "fail miserably" in life and for watching (a bit too closely) as my cousin, my sister, and I play *Just Dance* on the Xbox, the same Xbox we begged him to move into the living room so that we would have more space to dance. We were met with instant refusal. We are unable to understand why until years later.

I can even forgive him for giving me a small wash rag that offered little coverage and fit tightly across my prepubescent body after I yelled through the apartment, post-shower, that there were no towels under the sink. I am also able to forgive him for smirking from the kitchen as I scurried through the hallway in the revealing rag, into the safety of the guest bedroom.

My aunt looks at me, her eyes pleading, "He's bipolar, sweetie. Can you forgive him?"

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my first clear suicidal thought happened just a few months before I turned thirteen. After my uncle accused me of

“being dramatic” while I was in the midst of having a panic attack in his car ( a panic attack which he triggered). He yelled at me for the remainder of the ride to church. As soon as we came to a stop in the gravel parking lot, I leaped out of the car and tore through the dank sanctuary, immediately locking myself in one of the stalls when I reached the restroom. I cried, knees to chest, leaning against the wall for several minutes until my shallow breathing became even again. I choke on remnant sobs, lifting my head slowly. Then, with tears dripping down my neck, a thought slips into my mind like a sliver of silk or a haunty whisper: *you can end all the pain if you want...*

Just a few months short of thirteen.

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it isn't until after turning fifteen that I learn not to accept the “he’s bipolar” excuse from my aunt. I steel myself against persuasion after learning that my uncle groped a minor. I refuse to give anything but renouncement to this phrase after watching my aunt force her daughter, Ann, to talk with her “father” after Ann made it clear she disowned him. He is not her father; he is not my uncle.

I have bipolar friends. None of them are pedophiles; they are bipolar, and bipolar alone.

“Your uncle did something *really* terrible that he regrets. He was probably having a manic episode. Can you forgive him?”

I do not respond. I glare in disdain. My silence is deafening. It sends a tremor through the years spent suffering my uncle’s torment and renders them to ruins and dust. It makes the very thought of my uncle crumble to dust.

He initiated Armageddon. This is Judgement Day; I am judge, jury, executioner.

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### **prayers**

my cousin, Ann, and I rattle the midnight darkness with our muffled giggles. Impulsively, we grabbed a handful of markers from my desk drawer, and now we are writing random phrases and words and doodling absurd drawings on the vertical, wooden beams that support the top mattress of my bunk bed. Softly-glowing stars shine on the popcorn ceiling above us, and our souls only intertwine more with each laugh, as though we are sharing the same reservoir of happiness, clinging to kinship.

Not many people know this, but I used to pray that I would never die. That I would live as infinitely as the God who supposedly watched over me. As though God would select me—or *anyone*, for that matter—to live indefinitely in this very definite world where mortality sustains legacy and purpose and value in genuine experiences. This prayer usually encompasses my family—my mom, my dad, my sister, my dog, Ann. I never embraced anyone else in this prayer. I never offered immortality, granted by this grace that only I was aware of, to anyone except those I subconsciously decided were worthy of my plea to the Lord.

This prayer was typically inspired by paranoia and superstition. When a kid at school pointed a finger gun at me, I imagined a real, loaded pistol and lifted my head to the sky, praying my prayer of immortality over myself and my family, as though even just seeing a gun’s *likeness* would increase my chances of being shot in the future.

Perhaps I feared that my family would be exposed to the dangers of this world, and that the results would be fatal and irreversible. Perhaps my solution was to pray them unconquerable and immortal.

Lying on my back, scribbling nonsensical future memories and gazing at artificial stars with Ann, the night suddenly feels virtuous. We fall back laughing, our arms draping over each other. Our beaded friendship bracelets become interlinked rosaries with our names curving across our wrists, spelled boldly letter-by-letter across individual beads.

Hallelujah. *Hail Mary.*

May we live forever in indifference of the darkness.

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### **Anastasis (Ανάστασις)**

I have seen an infinite number of stained glass windows because I have been in an infinite number of churches. And when I see those depicting the Resurrection, I have to wonder—did the blood in the tomb dissipate upon Christ’s ascension?

And if I achieve righteous adversity—will the blood nailing me to my cross vanish upon *my* ascension, granting *me* hallowing relief?