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Western Sanctuaries

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"From a splintering wicker chair on our screened-in porch, I watch the thunderheads rolling off into the West, leaving only the soft patting sound of rain falling on dirt. Trush lies next to me, head high, ears falling back, sniffing the soaked air. I smell it, too---cowboy cologne. At least, that is what my mom calls it, and every other western romantic. It scents this desert after every rain. It's derived from the earth, from a plant called sagebrush. I have never smelled it anywhere else."

Cover Page Footnote

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MINDAE M. KADOUS

WESTERN SANCTUARIES

From a splintering wicker chair on our screened-in porch, I watch the thunderheads rolling off into the West, leaving only the soft patting sound of rain falling on dirt. Trush lies next to me, head high, ears falling back, sniffing the soaked air. I smell it, too—cowboy cologne. At least, that is what my mom calls it, and every other western romantic. It scents this desert after every rain. It's derived from the earth, from a plant called sagebrush. I have never smelled it anywhere else.

I watch Trush perk up his ears to the distant bark of our neighbor's Great Dane. The hairs of his rust-colored coat are lifting slightly in the wind . . . I was in second grade when I went to pick him out. The litter was very small—just him and his brother. I remember the family we bought him from. They lived in a trailer park on the southwest side of town. I think there were maybe six or seven children, some were missing shoes and others shirts. They all just stood there and watched me, trying to decide between the two. When I got down on my knees, Trush came running over to me. His brother just huddled next to their mother laying by the door. I could tell he did not want to go, but Trush, Trush was different.

He starts to whine and scratch at the floppy screen door. He is restless, he wants out. So do I. I lean over and nudge the door open, watching him go down the steps and towards the palo verde tree. He loves to lie at the base of it and roll around on the cool ground after a rain. I tie my running shoes a little tighter and walk out on the glossy gravel. The late afternoon sun is pushing its way through the clouds, tinting everything in the same light. Though I have tried, I cannot describe the color. I have never seen it in a box of crayons, or any prism. I know how it is made though—mixing a warm southern rain with a setting western sun.

I pick up my feet and begin to jog. I jog around the side of our house, past the tall pine trees. I can hear the wind sifting the needles, a sound that exists only because of Christmases that we felt the need to plant. I start to jog faster down the back slopes of our four acres. Past our empty stables, past old, hollow riding jumps whistling as the wind tunnels through them. With strong steps, I dig my way up dirt banks lining the wash, all full of seasons that have been dumped. The small rocks and dirt collect around my ankles and slide down between my socks and skin. As I make my way down the other side of the bank, sticks and weeds are tangled to my laces. I kick them off and keep running through the heaps of sand dunes and the sagebrush that covers the wash and snags at my socks and bare legs.

I am running past houses, pools, barns, silos, and fences: I am running past backyards. I can see rusted metal chairs and tables turned upside down. There is a yellow truck tilting without a left front tire. It sits next to an old, wooden barn that is

worn and black, splintering up at all ends. There is house with a pool full of floating rafts and foam noodles. It has a blue slide that curves toward the water. By the back gate, a cracked, green hose coils up in the corner, and a shovel lies next to a newly dug hole. I am running past two old bikes with cards stuck in the spokes, a deflated basketball lying in a puddle, a tire swing hanging from a mesquite tree, and a garden thriving of bottle brushes and gerber daisies.

There is white fencing lining a ranch full of horses that are kicking up the fresh soil. A backlight turns on. A woman's voice calls out to a young boy that it is time for dinner. The boy sits on the ground crying and yelling out to his mother that he cannot find his cap gun. I am running past an overgrown yard full of tumbleweed and catclaw and piping that has been stacked up against a maroon and white horse trailer. Next door, a white-iron table and chairs cover a huge porch, and a chiminea sits off in the corner of the deck. A golden retriever is digging in a sand volleyball court that is set up a few yards down from the porch.

“ . . . sanctuaries fastened with ornaments, layers of information about our lives and who we are. ”

I think to myself that this is it. Backyards filled with rights and wrongs, hobbies and dreams, hopes and sorrows, pride and laziness—sanctuaries fastened with ornaments, layers of information about our lives and who we are.

It is getting dark out and I can feel the hot breath of the Southern night on the back of my neck, and my shirt is beginning to feel damp. I climb back up the dirt banks and onto our property. I slow my jog and lighten my steps. I walk towards my house, trying to cool down. Over to my right sits an historic silo that crumbles a little more every year. Historians dated it back to the days of the Cowboys and Indians. My brothers used to dig out bullet shells in its clay walls. Now, every once in awhile, my parents find teenagers hanging out in it, lighting bonfires, drinking, and making out.

I walk around the side of my house, past my mom's garden where a wooden windmill creaks and teeters in the wind. As I approach the screened-in porch, Trush sits up from under the palo verde and starts to flop his tail from side to side. I call him in with me and he trots over, covered in loose dirt and burrs. We sit on the porch together. Carefully, I pick off what's gathered on his coat; his wet nose and tongue push up against the back of my leg. I know it is the sagebrush that he smells.