

Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950

A Short Story By Sarajane Snyder

The edges are what do it for me, what keep me coming back. I don't know about the others. The woman listening to the Mets on her Walkman stares for a good thirty minutes. She goes close and then stays behind. Around the two of us, strangers, is the silence of a funeral parlor or a museum. Is there a difference? I come always on a Sunday, for the obvious reasons. This is religion, but it is not church. For awhile I visited Paul's room first, but I can't bear to any longer. I have regained my focus. I remember what's going on.

For three hours I watch her watching Paul. I watch the black fabric of her shirt move against her back as she breathes and stares up at Paul. Is she drawn to his left or to his right—to the spring or to the fall? How did I end up in this room? Have I been missing this figure of hope the whole time? Her arms are folded across her, resting in her lap. Her right thumbnail painted silver sticks out from under her left arm. She sits and I stand behind her; not too close. People come and go. I watch her and I do not watch Paul; he is hers alone. I can feel this without asking her anything. I want to count the tiny whispers of hairs tangled in the cord of a necklace on the back of her neck. I want to find the traces of dried oil paint that would sew her to me, that would make us sisters or lovers in this world too. All of this would make me want to touch that soft still skin, though, and I cannot do that. Not here. Not while she's with him. She's dressed all in black but is no city-streets commoner. I can see her scalp's paleness through the part in her short dark hair.

"They keep making out by the Motherwell." I hear a woman next to me complaining. I look over toward the scene of the crime and see two women. No, it's a man and a woman both with long flowing silver hair. The comment wasn't in reference to them. They know what's going on. They smell the paintings and wrap their brown hands together. For a moment I remember envy.

After three weeks of me watching her with Paul, she is gone. After three weeks of the same motion, after days patterned after each other, it's a ritual isn't it? Was someone watching me watching her? He would have to be a regular to realize the strange echo that he was witnessing. That black security guard—I can't remember his name—the young one with the straight spine and polished black shoes. He's very much like a Doric column. If he watched it was a secret pleasure, I'm sure. He never looks at me. A wheezing old woman walks around in Paul's room. She walks around in his lover's space; the space between me and Paul that is now empty. The woman is old and poorly dressed in a bright ugly skirt that fits her sloppily. She wheezes heavily and talks to herself. I think she is crazy and I want her to leave me and Paul to mourn the space. Mourning makes me remember you—one floor up and over.

A group of three youngish women and one man sits too close to my sanctuary. They carry brown paper bags from the hard rock café and thick obnoxious southern accents. I expect to hear them snort about how their 17 year old sister's five year old son could have painted that.

You are a lamb at your darkest, I think. You hush the others. They laugh and then become silent around the corner. You don't say a thing to them, but they know it.

A cute couple, all skinny and dressed in greys, smile in her empty space. They stand and examine and smile where she sat. They do her justice. I've waited for a week, but she is gone. I blink and lean my head against the wall. These girls are the closest I've come to seeing her again. They know what's going on, but they don't appear to know that they know. I don't remember life like that. Was life ever like that? After the Redgreen and Violet-Yellow Rhythms, the tall girl slips her slender arm around the other's waist. His girl is gone, but her spirit is in the whisper that passes between the lips and ear of the couple. Paul is right there. I hope he can hear it.

I am sitting in my church that is not a church, praying with the added rock of truth. You are my mantra, my river flowing up the wall. I sit in front of that wall that is your frame. Your huge planes let me see each grain. I want to know where they—those who didn't make it to this room—where they are now. Your edges are so fine and tense and delicate; those who didn't make it are martyrs to that perfection. Those bits of yourself drying fast to the dirty floor at the end of a good night's work. He was so right, you know. You are the end of autumn, the last day before it snows. You are the cold chaos of branches and silence that allows people to sleep well. You are not the desolation of winter, though. I couldn't stand it if you were. I don't like to come to church so often in the winter. It's my job, though. I come and sit devoutly. Don't think I don't mean it.

"Let's lay down in front of it," I hear a man whisper to his lover. They don't notice me and are absorbed in their own delinquent world—or rather your world. Normally people hush and gaze and walk past and that's as far as you touch them.

They don't want to listen to your dips and crevices. These men heard, though. They obeyed and looked up at you from the floor, stomachs shaking with held-in laughter. That was a good day. I laughed with them as I watched and said thank you thank you thank you.

Louis, a five-year-old, just sat and spoke with me. He was very good. I talked with him about the woods. Home. I miss it there and I told him that. I hadn't thought about it in a good long while. He was born in Australia. His face was painted yesterday and stained today. You say his name "Louie" but you spell it with an "s." He squirmed and sat next to me on the broad windowsill in Paul's room. He looked out and wanted to be in the park and the sun. I didn't ask him if he could hear the paintings. I never asked a kid that before. Maybe I should have, but I didn't remember to. His grin was so wide. He's the first person to speak to me in about a month. For a moment, Louie made me forget her, made me forget Paul, even made me forget you. We talked about dog bites and birthdays. Then his mum came. She told him to 'say good-bye to the lady.' 'Thank her for talking with you,' she said like an Australian and took his little hand. She, I knew, was grumpy today because she didn't sleep well last night. Louis is very fond of her.

I left you for awhile. You know that it wasn't his form I was after. It was his disciple. Paul is not mine. It wasn't a rejection. I thought of you while she looked at him. You kept us apart. Is that fair? In a way it is. You are my lips and my hands now. She would cringe at my touch, at the tangles and barbs and knots of emotions tattooed there. They are yours and she is his—and suddenly flashes are exploding. At least three people with cameras start shooting, assaulting my sense of stillness and silence. Security guards shout stern warnings. A baby starts to cry. A camera rewinds. A cell phone rings. The security guard shoots me a look; he knows I am always here. He sees me among the visitors, listening and watching with you. He sees the beginning of my private vespers as he secures the wing against trespassers for the night. We both care deeply. I don't know what is happening to this space. He looks again at me and I look to you; the edges are all I see. The severed planets floating in that nothingness, the force of explosion has given them peace. A tiny vibration of a voice parts my lips as I pray, holymary, and I feel a hand grip my shoulder. I look up at you from the floor. I come back and it is silent again. The security guard helps me to the bench; he knows compassion.

Cleaning the museum is easy. Art is clean and still. Mostly. You are not. You are mine. Your mess is migrating toward my brain. Is it (I don't even need to ask, I know) is it okay if I memorize you? I only ever touch your edges. I touch them though, and I learn and feel your core. Most glance, I study. I've kissed your border, your flecks of peppery shrapnel. I've been with you in the quiet dark of a closed museum, the spindly figures of my dreams are dancing in your guts. I laugh at them. Your insectile crawlers whipping at the white space also lash at something in my chest and throat. I've allowed myself to breathe your dimensions. I smell the humanity in you and the transcendent. A woman with a foreign accent asks of you one day. I can't remember what they call you. I call you energy and life and passion. Religion. Essence. She asks someone else when I say nothing, when I blink at her and then stare at you. She asks someone else and they tell her you as is known to them.

I've lived in the tan junkyards and skyscrapers of your city. I lie under the phlegmy foam trains of the clouds. The landscape is razed; hard burnt stalks of corn, static and yet alive. That's the dizziness. The smell of it is skinscraped by sand, rubbed first smooth and then gritty hard. Your witches and their voodoo masks hide in these fields, coming out at night to dance out their mad whirling cravings. The city is their floorplan like the blues of your river is my pulse. It is faint and unnoticed. It is everywhere.

She loved Paul. His geometry is her heart. He painted what her dreams were sprung from. He was the liquid in which she was suspended, the walls between them permeable and fleshy. She didn't know what it was about, but she felt it like fire. A slow wide fire. She didn't know. He did. I did. No one is that still save death. She was looking into the pool of her own enlightenment, transfixed and displaced. Just watching her sent me into the timeless joy of re-entering innocence. I love you like she loves Paul; you feed me and comb dirty ragged fingers across my neck and belly. He is her geometry, you are my chaos. My cosmos.

An old man and three Asian boys sit next to me. They range in age from 4 to about 70. The young one says 'it's ugly.' The middle brother does too. The old man says, 'it's very dynamic.' He explains your pattern to them and I love his old pipesmoke voice. It comes from the throat. They read you like kids. The young one does not like it but he is engrossed. He walks

up to you, nose nearly on you, breathing into your face. You breathe back, I know. He'll dream about it tonight, that breath in his mouth, and that keeps me alive. Soon after this kiss he forgets you and he runs over and punches his brother. They fight like a four and a six year old should fight. Horseplay. Andrew and Brian. He breathed you in and fought against his blood. That's how it works. He'll wake up and want to cry. 'Very dynamic,' the old man said.

The white of your clouds is the white of hundreds of broken bones. It's the white space of empty sound after the report of a rifle. The white of doves falling, church steeples toppling. The altar before the priest wakes up. I live in the grid of your post-apocalyptic city. I live between a missile and a thorny crown, down the street from a graveyard gone sour. The black of those planets, forgive me, is the black of her hair.

What if I took you out of here? What if I took you with me back to the woods and out of this sterility, away from these people and their blankness? We would escape—

Hair matted to the side of her face, wet with sweat and the passion of the devoted. A woman whose unconscious has seen the black wing flapping a silent plague. She gasps in your knots, cries at the dissonant earthy smell of your revolt. Her fingers bleed on broken glass and I am lost between the two of you. The web of your abstraction in my palms and my presence captured her. I look over and she is next to me on the bench, staring, engrossed. She hears nothing. She is sitting next to me. Her heartbeat is panic. Did I lure her here? Did you will me to do this as I danced, trailing fingers, celebrating your massive decadent heaving breaths? She is sitting next to me. And she holds like cold death on to my hand. Her silver thumb against my foreign hand. Her bones, terrified, against my bones. She is all in black, she is rigid, she is trying to escape. I look, I look at her face for the first time in front of you. I look at her sitting next to me, Paul's girl with the milk blind eyes.