

4-15-2020

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Recommended Citation

Jackson, Kat (2020) "But Not Quite," *The Oval*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol13/iss1/8>

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BUT NOT QUITE

Kat Jackson

My name is not Cassandra, but it might as well be. Might as well call us all Cassandra, us who swat at wasps, because truth is a commodity we do not possess. The tide is coming up and up and up, and in the distance the grey-green water laps at the grey-green sky. I always get distracted when I walk, but who can justify driving such a short way?

Should probably get milk. We're almost out, and the kitty will be slighted if she doesn't get her tablespoon tonight. Also mushrooms, onions, garlic. For me. God granted humans the ability to eat just a little poison, might as well utilize it.

-Pappy, do you believe in God?

-All seven and one that doesn't even exist, kid.

I think, so I exist, and thinking is my fighting, but how do I justify fighting for anything if I can't justify the belief that anything outside my own consciousness exists? If only I knew Jesus.

-I think he's in prison, my mother tells me. I hear a lot of people find him there.

A woman walks by. White hair, ash-blond at the roots, and chopped to the nape of her neck. Eyes grey-green and searching without finding; she doesn't see me. I ache. I fall in love a little. Scatter the grace, tenth muse. But words are not immortal, not anymore. She said someone in another time would remember us, but who can remember us if we are the last generation of our people? Who will remember all the women I've loved and immortalized within myself, my work? Virginia, Francesca, Sylvia. They die with me when I am shot or choke on smog.

All around the world it seems that things are looking rough (as a woman I have no country), *but the Jackboot only jumps down on people standing up*. A few months ago, anti-homeless architecture went up outside the library where the lady used to sleep. So sweet, little green ducks, if she freezes when winter comes, it's on you. And me maybe, too yellow to take action. How shameful to obey unjust laws.

I sidestep off the path to avoid colliding with the man walking towards me. Did he notice we were playing chicken? Didn't seem to. He

knew I would step aside, never doubted it. Shame is all we teach little girls, and little boys often escape without any it seems. Bratty, fratty little boys. Well, actually, they say. Well, actually.

Well, actually, I'm so bored of beauty. Ogress, unseeable. Queen of the Eyesores. We used to let kids be ugly. Ought to blame Instagram, I reckon, though I risk sounding like a crone. If you can be pretty, you can be famous; if you can be pretty, you can be rich. And that's the American dream, baby!

Coins clatter in my pockets. Original sin. Self-sufficiency is the only road to salvation. I really do believe that and I don't believe anything. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Pale, cracked earth. Can't grow anything. That will be the biggest problem. If it matters, if we make it that far. Maybe the only right we're born with, the only right granted to us by Nature, is the right to die.

This is where I ought to pray, right? But—it's all mythology to me. If there is a god, I suppose her name is Entropy. *Why is God? To shape the Universe. Why is the Universe? To shape God*. Have you heard the good news? The Demiurge lives! Divine craftsmen with their holy triangles.

Almost out of yogurt too, and maybe grab some avocados if they look alright. Maybe chicken for dinner. *Behold, a man*, says he who lives like a dog. True virtue, if you ask me, not that anyone ought to, though if they did I'd tell them I hope to deface currency as well as he did.

-Who died and left Aristotle in charge of ethics anyway?

A beat. Blasphemous.

-Plato.

I squawk to myself. There's something to it though: the moral purity of pooches. All the hounds of my youth have been heroes. Mutts mostly, mixes of heelers and bird dogs and collies. There's no such thing as an American purebred.

But at home, it's a cat that waits for me. Felines are bad at object permanence, and I fear she thinks I stop existing when I step outside. Precious creature, perfect predator, but too small to be lethal (lucky for me). What would our games look like if we weren't hunters? They say my generation treats their pets like children because we can't afford babies.

So what? No use making new humans when the planet is dying and us along with it. What sacred hearts we give to easy love. Almost a sacrifice, but not quite.

The wind picks up and I turn my collar against it. Where I come from, it never quits, howling with the hound dogs, ancient music. Rocky

Mountain Gothic, can you see it? Barbed wire and willow trees. One state south, they strung up a man for singing about the lack of pie in the sky. The mine is going bankrupt again, and the beetles won't let the trees alone. Ghost towns get made the same way you go broke: *slowly and then all at once*.

(As a woman I have no country) girls are ghosts before we ever hit the grave. Written out of history, expected to relinquish our name, our body, our personhood. Call me bitter. Call me Cassandra. Call me slut. It's okay; it doesn't mean anything to me. Never thought I'd love a man, and maybe never will again. Momentarily thought it was a moral failing—imagine that! Caught between. Much too queer to be straight. Not quite queer enough to be gay (I have no country). To my right, the water weeps against the rock. To the left, a group of children plays, their voices carried to me on the wind:

Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?

Oh no, said Merricat, you'll poison me!

Merricat, said Constance, would you like to go to sleep?

Down in the boneyard nine feet deep!

That's not really what they sing (they're not even singing; they're listening to Spotify, I think), but there's something attractive about that story, right? So suffocating, but also something attractive. Maybe not unless you've had your eye put out, and even that is a process. Inconclusive analysis. Cat stories always start the same. *My mother, who was the first cat, told me this*, they say. What Jonas said to Merricat, what mine says to me. Precious creatures, perfect predators. Easy loves. The tide is coming up and up and up. I saw the movie. It was okay, but doesn't do justice; never does, does it?

Eggs? No. I think I'm good on eggs. Though if you break one in half, you're left with two empty crowns or something like that. Pity about Cordelia. Is that how it always goes? Performance over substance? Is this how I loop back around to Instagram? Oh, hell. Goddamn influencers. Sounds like the kinda job you could have in a Lois Lowry story, no? Givers and keepers. Parasites. Selling diarrhea tea and skin bleach so you can be prettyfamousrich and happy! A terrible, wicked thing. Coins clatter in my pockets. Original sin. Useless, unproductive sin. Waters boil. All around the world, waters boil.

Tea! I'm out of peppermint. Told myself I'd remember. Mint will

grow just about anywhere, through anything. A hardy herb. Respectable. As a child with my mother, our knees in the dirt, we cleared the weeds to find a patch of it. Let it be. It earned its place. Never so natural as when in the dirt. Beneath fingernails. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Lovely, holy worms. Lovely, holy bumblebees. What's the point if not to coexist? To take care of each other? Sometimes, I can't believe it. The way we chased precious metals to the ends of the earth. The ends of the earth. Ghost towns get made the same way you go broke.