Venus de Ohio

Jessica Anthony

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss58/9

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
VENUS DE OHIO

THIS MORNING I WOKE UP and screamed because my arms were stuck to the sheets. Gerald piled me into the car and drove me to the hospital, right into the Limb-Cutting Unit. They knocked me out and sawed off my arms. I didn't feel a thing, so they told me. But I beg to differ. Even in my drugged state I felt the saw jerk my torso around. I heard a distant hemming and hawing, like the sound a lumberjack makes in the forest. The nurse sprayed Ogvil Powder Mist around my face. Later I found out that Ogvil Powder Mist is really a feminine freshening product. This is Collard Greens, Ohio.

It was acute gangrene, the doctors said. My guess is that those scratches from hooking up the oven in our filthy new apartment were a big deal after all. But the doctors said that even if the oven thing was true, it was just about the most unlikely case they ever heard. They also said that if they had not cut off my arms, it would have spread to my chest, stopped my heart and killed me. I was pretty darn lucky, they said, and should be grateful for modern medicine. Yes, I thought, staring at the stumps bulging out from my shoulders—I am one grateful, lucky girl.

When Gerald brought me home from the hospital we were nervous. With my career as a massage therapist pretty much kaput, we were both unemployed. "I'll find something," he said. "Don't worry, Babe." So we had sex. But Gerald didn't know where to put his hands and I didn't know where to put anything. Love without arms, I discovered, was not love at all.

"I'm ugly," I said. "Ugly, ugly, ugly."

It has been two years. We have not had sex since.

Gerald and I were married on a military compound in eastern Ohio, near Youngstown. Gerald spent three years in the service, in a scientific testing ward. He had big dreams about being a scientist. They had the rodents and the test tubes and everything. We had a house with a front yard and a back yard that the service practically gave us. Things were going well until they were not going well. Gerald finished his three years with
the test tubes and didn’t pass the exams to Level Two. So they discharged him from the army and us from the house. I like to think that it’s not his fault, but it’s hard to downsize your living space and then have your arms sawed off.

The apartment is a room with a kitchenette. We share the dresser. We scrape by. I spend my day here while Gerald is at the new job. Gerald’s father worked behind a perfume counter for forty years. When we got married, Gerald said he would love me as long as he never had to sell any goddamn perfume. Currently Gerald is selling perfume, door-to-door, for LadyWear Cosmetics. He only started doing it to save up enough money to move out of this apartment and into a house. But it’s been awhile. Longer than we thought. Now we know that perfume can’t buy houses anymore, at least not in Ohio. Now we have a new plan.

We want the house around the corner, Lammy’s house. Lammy is about a billion years old. She can’t have much time left, we figure. The house is for prostitutes and she’s been running it for ages. It used to be a hotel called “Regina,” and still has the oval welcome mat at the doorstep that says so. It has a dozen rooms, these velvety peach-colored drapes and a winding staircase with a brass banister. A millionaire named Henry Jodphur Street built it about a century ago for his new Russian bride, Regina, freshly ordered from a magazine. Regina liked that Henry lived in a small town, but made a stink about Henry’s house when she arrived. It was a house that his family had lived in for three generations. A house with a grassy field and a horse farm. So Henry, stupid with love or something like love, built her a freaking hotel instead. A palace in Collard Greens. He bought all these exotic herbs that she’d read about in European magazines, like lingwort, wild onion and scammony, to replace the American bushes. He ordered flat stepping stones from India. And he built bulbous spires on the roof that were painted gold, “to look like Moscow,” he said. But Regina, without any marketable skill other than smiling pretty at a camera, ran the place poorly. Henry’s money sank like lead in water. Regina, pregnant with Lammy, divorced him. Henry drowned himself in the bean-shaped swimming pool.

Lammy hasn’t changed a thing. In her room there is actually silk on the wall. Silk! There used to be a boar pelt hanging above
the fireplace in the dining room, but she gave it to us after Gerald started selling lilac perfume there. She was so grateful. "No one else ever comes near the place in the daytime," she said.

The idea is to warm up to Lammy and get her to leave us the house when her time is up. Gerald goes over twice a week with the perfume box. I go over twice a week with a sad little story to tell. I say things like, "I couldn't buy lima beans today," and sigh. I shake my head. "They were too far back in the freezer and my stumps couldn't reach them."

"Oh darling," Lammy always says, her eyes squinting with sorrow.

During the days, Lammy and I will sit on the rocking chairs in the front pagoda and sip cherry daiquiris. Last month we were out there, rocking in the pagoda, and I asked Lammy why she does what she does. She looked at me, her white hair piled on top of her head like wedding cake, and said, "Men are wonderful." They seem to think she's pretty wonderful too. Even though she's ancient and God knows what she does for them, they go back again and again. They come from all over the Tri-State Area. Once a man came from Florida. Another one came from France. For her entire life, Lammy's had this problem of practically every man on earth wanting her. Now she has this problem of us wanting her house. We're both trying so hard, but Gerald's the one doing most of the legwork. He wants me to become a more active participant. "Call her," Gerald says. "Call her again." But he's the one who hasn't fixed the showerhead or the creaking board on our front stoop. We're beginning to crack.

It is evening, with a hot wind that makes the screen door on the apartment rattle. Gerald should be back any minute. I use the quick time to read some Hemingway and aerobicize. I peel off dinner with my mouth and cook it with my feet. Then I sit upright on my knees and feet on the boar pelt in the center of the space we call the Living Room. The pelt isn't soft, like dog or mink; it's coarse and greasy. The hairs stick up sharp and tickle my feet. It's good for meditation. It keeps me focused. My eyes are closed. The only movement is in my chest. I am breathing. I concentrate on nothing. Only when I concentrate on nothing does it happen: it starts when I feel the blood moving through
my body. The blood pulses like crazy when it comes to the stumps. And slowly, my arms grow back. They are long and thin and pink. Wrists bend. Fingers dangle. I become beautiful again.

Gerald says meditation is weird and unnatural and unscientific. Gerald is also an atheist. He says things like, "You're believing in the peanut butter without the peanuts." I am learning to pick up his voice with my imaginary thumb and forefinger and flick it into a corner of the room. It occurs to me that if he were here, I would not be doing what I'm doing.

"Babe? That you?"

His voice sounds far away, like a bell on a Christmas tree. I haven't moved. The screen door slams shut.

"There's a TV movie I want to watch. What's for dinner?"

"Frozen cods," I say.

"Yummy," he says. "How are you, Babe?"

"I'm meditating."

He sidles up to me: his feet by my butt, his knees at my stumps. The indefatigable lilac in his clothes.

"But I'm home now," he says. He puts down the box of perfumes and stares at me while I stare at nothing for a while.

"I've been thinking that maybe you should get a job doing something else. You can do so much with your feet. I saw a special the other day where there was this girl who cooked an entire spaghetti dinner with her feet. Garlic bread and everything. You could do that."

I open my eyes and look at him despairingly.

He shrugs. "You made that baked apple once."

Gerald is tall anyway, but since the arms went, he looks even taller. A giant. He wipes his forehead. Dark half-moons are spreading under his pits. Heat gets to him.

"Did you talk to Lammy today?" he says.

I nod.

"How's she feeling?"

"She's gotten weaker. Dropped a teacup when we were on the phone."

Gerald sighs and tosses the mail on the dining room table, right next to the kitchenette, smack dab in the place where the mail goes. The fact is, no matter how much time we spend at Lammy's, we don't know if either one of us has gotten close
enough for her to want to leave us the house. And we don’t know how long she’s going to last anyway. Maybe a month. Maybe a decade. Nothing is for certain.

“Come on, Babe,” Gerald says. “I just want to sit on the couch and cuddle and watch the TV movie.” He puts his arms around my stumps. “Is that okay? We’ll think about our dream house.”

“Okay,” I say. I’m no monster. I get up with my knees and back and move to the couch. Standing up, I am a tree with no branches. Gerald doesn’t let go of my stumps. In fact, he practically guides me with them. We both sit down on the couch at the same time. It is faux leather that squeaks. I am wearing jeans and I have to hang onto the couch with my butt to keep from slipping. It turns out that the TV movie won’t be on for another half-hour. Meantime, we kill thirty minutes watching a show that sells houses.

“That one, right there,” Gerald says. “That’s a beaut! What do you think?”

It’s a colonial with broad front windows that gleam behind the girl real estate agent. Wild green shrubs tackle the base. The black roof slopes like a turned shoulder.

“I don’t trust it,” I say.

“What are you talking about?”

“It looks mean to me.”

“How on earth can a house look mean?”

“Look at it,” I say.

He looks. “So someday, when we have the money, you won’t live in a house because you don’t trust it? Come on. If the roof is falling in, then you don’t buy a house, but that house is great. Look how it faces the sun.”

“I want Lammy’s house,” I say. The lace doilies. The golden domes. I have never said this before, but I say it now. “I deserve that house.”

“I know you do, Babe,” he says.

I look at my husband. I wonder if I should tell him what I’m thinking: I’m thinking that there’s a fine line between beauty and ugliness. I’m thinking that I want to tell him about how rotten I feel every day. Rotten like: if I don’t get out of this apartment, the other limbs are just going to start dropping off until all that’s
left of me is a belly and a face. I'm thinking that if Gerald went in and spent some real *quality* time with Lammy it might be a different story. It's been months and months and we hardly even know her. Who is to say that *we* are in any position to get the house when she has a dozen beautiful girls and a multitude of men who see her *every single day*? And in such...extreme circumstances?

Yes, I believe I *will* tell him.

"I think you should have sex with Lammy."

His face goes stone. His arm feels like cement on my shoulder. Everything in him is telling me no, and everything in me is telling him yes. A thin tear starts out of my eye and I can't stop it. I do not, in fact, even try. Gerald sees me and his jaw starts popping. He hates it when I'm upset. We watch the show this way; silent except for my snuffling and Gerald's nervous popping jaw. We do not say another word about it. Then, suddenly, Gerald stands up. He looks around at the apartment: the peeling sink, the uneven floorboards, the yellow stains on the wall. Then he looks down at his half-wife, slouching on a plastic couch. And he says he's going out to get fries for the cods.

We both know what that really means.

When the screen door slams behind him, I am instantly unnerved. I go to check the oven. It just sits there—large, like an uninvited houseguest. I open my mouth and bite at the string that dangles from the handle on the oven door. I pull down and get pummeled by heat. The cods are crisping and the smell is pretty awful. So awful I gag. I go to the window for some fresh air. I stand on the stool and try to push the latch up with my chin. It swings around and slaps me in the face. In the army house, we had sliding windows that I could have moved with my butt. Not here. Here I get bruises on my face. Gerald doesn't like those bruises. As if missing arms weren't bad enough. The man washes my hair in the morning and wipes my ass at night.

I cannot open the window. The hot oven has made the room boil. I change into a tank top, which I never wear because it shows the stumps. Even though the purple went away a good six months ago, they still look weird. Tan and knotty. Like torn dough. I lean against the oven door and cry a little, but not real crying, just feeling pretty lousy about it all. So I go to the Living
Room, to the boar pelt for another round of meditation. I sit down on the pelt and close my eyes. I try to concentrate on nothing. I start looking for the place where arms grow. But all I can think about is what I have done: I have sent Gerald off on his first foray into whoring. And this makes me a monster.

I do not want to be a monster. I want to be beautiful.

I turn off the oven with my big toe, pick up the keys with my mouth and drop them into my hip bag. I bust out of the screen door and hit the pavement running. I am all knees and no elbows. Breathing hard and turning corners. Then, there it is: painted in three shades of blue and in great shape for a Victorian. I stand before it for a second, because the bigness has made me stop. This house. This beautiful house. All our hard work to get it, and I am about to give it away.

When I go in, girls are everywhere: slinging over settees, hanging potted plants, dancing to Jesus Christ Superstar. When they see me, some of them wave and some of them whisper. They look pretty sharp. The one with curly blond hair knows me and Gerald. When she sees me, she seems to know what's going on. I turn all red, and thank the girl as she runs upstairs to tell Lammy that I'm here. Waiting, I lean against the wall that wraps around the living room, a real living room, and rises three stories to the next that's shaped like the skyline of another world. I press my cheek against the wall, dizzy with love and perfume. Gerald's lilac, everywhere.

Then Lammy appears. A shiny vision in gold lamé. Her favorite. She sways for a moment, then grabs onto the banister. Twelve women lurch forward.

"It's all right," she says. "Lammy's just fine."

The room sighs, collectively.

"Oh darling," she says to me. I look around for Gerald, but all I can see is Lammy, stepping down the stairs with the precision of a movie star poodle. Eighty pounds descending: nearly a pound for each year of her life. Impossible to take my eyes off her.

"How are you?" she says, brushing her hand on my cheek. My body relaxes. She is coated in the lilac and it makes my knees buckle. She smiles. The white hair is not piled tonight, but draped over her shoulders like a shawl of clouds. I hear the girls whis-
per my husband's name. I feel like breaking down right there. The heat on my neck. The lump in my throat. I do not deserve this house. I do not deserve anything at all.

"I am a monster," I say, all choked up.

"You're not a monster," Lammy says. She lifts her arm and the robe glitters. "May I?" She opens her hand. Speckled with melanoma, delicate as a dried leaf. She touches the stumps. They throb back at her. Then she says something that I can't believe. Even when the words come tumbling. She says something we had not at all considered.

"I would like it very much if you and Gerald would move in with us."

And I am amazed.

"I'm old," she says, "and maintenance of the house is just getting out of hand. Every time Gerald comes to the house to sell his perfumes, he fixes something. I've been thinking that it would be nice to have a man around. A man like Gerald. So I asked him, just now, if you would move in with us. But he said that he would have to ask you first. He is a wonderful man."

"Yes," I say. "He is." I look up at the ceiling where the bedrooms are. "How is he?" I say.

"He's waiting for you," she says. And I don't have to say another word about it. She looks at me like everything is going to be okay. It's okay that Gerald and I have love without arms. That is what we have. And it's going to take some getting used to.

Lammy holds my waist with one hand and the banister with the other. We walk upstairs, joined this way, and she brings me to her room. It's dark in there, but I can see a long, tri-paneled mirror and a bed. Lammy sends me in and closes the door behind her.

Gerald sits up. He's been lying underneath the covers, tight as a board. "You came," he says.

"Yes," I say.

"We can move in," he says.

"Yes," I say. I wiggle out of my tank top and stand in front of the mirror. I turn my naked torso back and forth. The stumps are aligned with my breasts. I notice that my stomach has become incredibly strong. The muscles seem to trip over each other.
A warm wave moves through my hips as my eyes adjust to the darkness. Gerald watches me, still and twisted in the vanity, and gets out of the bed. He moves close to me and runs his hand down my stomach. I bend and curve.