

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

A.M. Gwynn
Archipelago

SHE LEFT WITHOUT WARNING or words of emergency. She just picked up her pocketbook one day, lit a cigarette, and walked out the door. It was a Saturday morning, the cartoon marathon blinking faintly on the small black and white - baby Marcel snuggled up next to me. Summer's heat-wave had curdled the milk in his bottle and my breakfast cereal.

The heaviness of her silent watching from the corner of my eye pulled me around to look at her - the upward curl of smoke from the tip of her cigarette a question mark above her head. I should have known what she was going to do. I should have felt the goodbye whistling along the fault line of our connection. She didn't smile, just whispered, "Show me beautiful."

It was all a lie, from my tilted head and thin smile to the hand on my hip in smug self-confidence in her love for me. Within that deepest part of myself I knew I would never see her again. My heart should have burst. It should have leapt out in a bloody scream then and there, but I turned back to cartoons, barely registering the screen door shutting quietly behind her.

Daddy didn't waste time parading new mothers around the house. Some of them stayed for a while - none past a few weeks of diapers or drunken fights. "I don't want you here," I evil-eyed them. "This is my mother's house!" They would storm out like the one before, and Daddy would climb back into the bottle because only the whiskey was able to carry the weight of her absence.

I left home when the whiskey no longer had control but a strong-willed, slip of a woman who had decided no one would run her off, not once Marcel had called her Mommy.

I went outside that morning I had decided to go and sat on the porch-steps for a long time, my eyes packing the photographs of my childhood and its people. I knew I would never come back as I knew that day my mother wouldn't - there was no hesitation, it was time.

I stood up and started walking. Then I ran. I don't know if it was the wind in my ears or the echo of footsteps running after me that made me pick up speed - run for your life! But I ran until the sweat of the sadness pressed into my youth had baptized me. Until I was no longer an orphan, until my fists unclenched and I discovered the mink-soft palm of an open hand.