

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Will Tinkham
Roses

Sketch pad resting on her bare thighs, Beth sat in the lawn chair with the sun warm on her back. She roughly sketched the pool area, the hedges along the high wooden fence, the diving board.

"This is unbelievable!" Alan called from the edge of the pool. "Seventy-five degrees...in *February!*"

"You complaining?" Beth laughed, penciled her husband into the picture: sneakers, tan shorts, *Stanford* t-shirt.

"Who you kiddin'?" Alan gathered up a large hose and a pair of big, plastic containers, dragging them to the end of the pool. Tangling himself in the hose, he dropped both containers, the hose wrapping around his neck and across his chest to the pool's edge. Beth giggled, capped Alan's body with an elephant's head, her laughter causing her to stop sketching.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing..." Beth wondered whether his fervor over cleaning the pool had really caused him to overlook this being Valentine's Day or whether his silence was simply a ploy to cover some surprise.

Of course, the weather wouldn't hold and it would be a good two months before they could really use the pool. For that matter, in two months they'd be doing this all over. It was Alan's reasoning that if he got in one late night swim it was worth the effort to clean the pool. The nights were still cool but he claimed a few more warm days would make for a warm night swim.

To Beth, Alan's late night swims were his post-lovemaking swims. While sex eased her into sleep, it seemed to energize him. She could feel him slip out of bed, careful not to disturb her, sliding out of her arms, Beth too near sleep to pull him back. She enlarged the ears on the elephant head, wondered if he could have possibly forgotten Valentine's Day, replaced his shorts and t-shirt with a diaper and bow and arrow, smiled to herself at her elephant/cupid cleaning the pool and scrambled from her chair to answer the doorbell.

As she slipped through the porch door, the bell rang again. "*Coming,*" she said loud enough for only herself to hear and quickened her pace to the front door. She opened the door to a young, black-haired man in a white shirt and green pants. He presented her with a dozen long-stemmed roses, spoke in a musical accent—Beth oblivious to his greeting—as she pulled the roses into her arms, thanking him and closing the door.

A note poked up from the tissue paper: *Beth—Be my Valentine—Love, Alan.* "How corny..." Beth giggled, thought about hiding the flowers—play Alan's game till he wondered what went wrong—but, before she could plan anything, she found herself running out the porch door to the pool, throwing her arms around him, the hose crushed between them. She breathed in the smell of the flowers resting against the back of Alan's hair, smelled his hair, the scent of the roses and kissed his neck.

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The glow-in-the-dark Frisbee zipped through the small crowd, crashed against the sliding glass door, rattled on the cement step. "Jesus, Alan!" Beth laughed. "You could've killed somebody...or broken a window!"

Alan came into view around the corner of the pool. "Hate to break a window!" he hollered, slipped on the edge of the pool, saved himself from falling but spilled most of his scotch over the front of his shirt. Walking through the partiers, he pulled the soaked shirt away from his skin. "Could've fallen in the pool and been drier!" he yelled, pulling off his shirt to yelps and whistles from the women. Beth slipped through the crowd, hugged his bicep, feigned a coo.

"Not bad, huh," Alan began, "a week into March and warm enough to run around without a shirt!" He paused for a breath. "Go ahead, ladies, give it a try!"

With no damage done by the Frisbee and no one injured or drowned, their neighbors, Rob and Sally, struggled out the front door at nearly 2:00, the last to leave. "Thankfully they don't have far to walk," Beth mumbled as she and Alan made their way up to bed.

"Fabulous weather..." Alan sighed going through the bedroom door.

They climbed into bed, Beth warm and drowsy with Alan's breath tickling her neck, his lips cooling, his hands beneath her keeping her afloat. Still facing, they shifted slowly onto their sides, still holding, Beth fading, feeling Alan slide away, her fingers weakly calling him back.

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Beth awoke, the clock reading 10:30, she crawled across the empty bed, sat naked on the edge. Ten-thirty, she thought, now he's taking *morning* swims? Him and his damn swimming... She laughed though her head hurt. She had one arm in her robe when she glanced out the window. Her scream was like those in the movies: echoing, resonating; echoing about the room, resonating in her head even as Sally arrived from next door to help, call the police, slip Beth's other arm into her robe. The scream reverberated between her ear drums, buzzed like snares, would never go away. And the image of Alan—face down, hair fanned and gleaming, red halo fading to pink toward the edge of the pool—permanent as well.

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Clouds appeared during the funeral and it rained that night. Someone had seen to all the arrangements. Someone had had the pool cleaned. Beth assumed it was Sally, thanked her for her trouble as her neighbor warmed some soup for Beth's lunch.

"Don't even think about it," Sally said with a wave. "God, what're friends for? I mean, if it happened the other way around, you'd be helping me through it."

Getting through it, Beth thought, I guess that's what it's all about. Funeral like a dream, the whole thing some sick nightmare, but she was getting through; her own scream waking her last night, tears fading to sleep but she felt stronger this morning.

"Have you given any thought to spending some time with your folks?" Sally set the bowl of soup on the table.

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"I don't think so... They're just across town if I need them and, really, I think I'm over the worst of it."

Sally left her with her soup, little vegetable cubes bobbing on the ripples from her spoon, warm down her throat and the steam felt good on her face. The doorbell rang, a black-haired, young man—white shirt and green pants—stood on the step. "Hello again," he sang with that accent.

Again... Beth thought, *yes, when?*—and a dozen roses swung into view. "What—what's this?" she managed.

"The card will explain." He backed away. "Have a nice day."

Slipping the card from the tissue paper, she opened it and dropped the roses. *Beth—Have a dozen roses...on me!—Love, Alan.* Beth stared at the note, the flowers spread across the front step. "This...some kind of a joke?" She looked up, the delivery truck pulled away. "Son of a bitch, you..." she yelled feebly. "This some kind of a-a joke?" She choked on *joke*, stepped back to sit on the stairway, leaving the front door wide open and the soup growing cold.

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Rain rattled on the roof, darkness heavy around the house as Beth made some tea. Sally had come by earlier, twice. First, when she'd noticed the flowers strewn across the wide-open doorway, then later after Rob recalled Alan having once mentioned thinking of giving Beth roses every month for a year. The florist's name was on the card, Sally had it in her hand when she left. She said she'd contact them to cancel the deliveries.

Beth sipped her tea, pulled a chair up to the sliding glass door and looked out at raindrops diving into the pool. She thought how things would be if the weather had been rainy and cool when it was supposed to be, allowing for no winter barbecues and no late night swims. She brought out her sketch pad and began drawing the night, the rain slanting through, little splashes everywhere. For darkness, she nearly blackened the entire sheet but couldn't bring the raindrops to sparkle, couldn't bring life to the night.

Moving into the kitchen for more tea, Beth decided it'd do her well to visit her sister, Renee, down in Santa Barbara. At the funeral Renee had encouraged her with the thought of the two of them collaborating again. Beth had illustrated two children's books for Renee in the past, thought it would be nice to get into that...and away from here.

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"Look at that tan!" Sally yelled as Beth climbed from the car. "Did you do anything *but* lay in the sun?"

"Hardly..." Beth pulled her bags from the trunk.

"Three weeks on the beach..." Sally crossed from her yard into Beth's. "How was it?"

"Fabulous." She accepted Sally's hug without setting down her bags.

"You must've brought the sun back with you," Sally laughed, gazing up to the sky.

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"More than you might think," Beth responded with delight and welcomed her neighbor into the house. Digging into one of the bags, Beth found her sketch pad and showed Sally her early sketches for the new book. "It's the story of a friendship between a child's lost beach ball," Beth said while flipping pages, "and...*the sun!*"

"A beach ball and the sun..." Sally began without enthusiasm, then feigned some: "How cute!"

"You'll see...when it all comes together," Beth reassured.

"I get first look at the finished product," Sally said as she left. "And nice to have you back!"

Beth sat down before the sketches and wondered about emotions: sadness, joy, fear, loneliness—she knew them all...but how to convey them through a beach ball? She had taken to noticing round-faced babies and toddlers—all eyes and goofy grins—and recalled baby pictures of herself that would fit that bill.

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The eyes, she decided. Three days and half a sketch pad full of beach balls. *The eyes*... Its own colors—bright when his friend, the sun, was out and subdued when the sun went down—were fine for showing the range of emotion but *the eyes*...had to bring the children to feel. Beth looked out at the rays of her own sun cutting across the pool and knew the powers it had.

The doorbell rang, startled her. She stood, stiff from sitting too long, and stretched. She skipped to the door and opened it. That black hair, that voice, white shirt, green pants, twelve rose buds, tucked and pink; Beth looked from the flowers to Alan, back to the flowers, breathing them in, her lips on Alan's neck and the blood watered pink to the pool's edge.

"Bastard!" she cried, swinging both hands across and knocking the roses away. "You *bastard*..." She fell against the doorjamb, covered her face with her hands. "What're you doing to me? *Why me?*" She stumbled back, swung herself onto the stairway, hitting the edge of one step and jolting down to the next, breathing in the scent of the roses, blood pink and shimmering. "You bastard..." she cried weakly. "*Why?*"

Beth lay back on the stairs, through tears saw Sally at the doorway conferring with the delivery man, both waving arms and shrugging shoulders. Beth tried to break in, to get an answer, but choked on her attempt.

"God, Beth, I'm sorry!" Sally closed the door. "I don't know how this happened..."

"I *thought*," Beth struggled for a breath, "you'd canceled those."

"I thought so, too! I mean, I canceled *somebody's* order..." Sally massaged Beth's shoulders. "I swore it was taken care of."

Beth rubbed the palms of her hands across her eyes, sniffed loudly. "Well, maybe it's just somebody's idea of a sick joke!" she snapped, looking away from Sally.

"Hey, come on..." Sally grabbed her by the arms. "I talked with the kid. He feels terrible. It's just a mistake, an honest mistake. He promised to

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make sure his boss cancels the deliveries and he apologized. He gave me the number and I'm gonna call and cancel the order myself. Again." She looked Beth in the eyes, smiling. "I'm sorry you had to go through this..." She patted Beth on the shoulder and moved into the kitchen.

Beth righted herself on the stairs, paused at the hall mirror, thought about the beach ball and her own eyes and what people could read from them.

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The pupils had to be dull, almost blurred, at night when the ball was lonely, then sharp and bright when his friend, the sun, returned. Two and a half weeks on a pair of eyes, Beth thought, but they had to be just right. The book itself had to do more than the others, more than just depict the action, the illustrations had to tell the story, beyond words, make the children feel the real emotion. This morning, over the phone, she had tried to explain this to her sister.

"It's a children's book," Renee said. "I don't think they'll be able to get that much out of it."

Beth argued her case but knew it was more for her own sake; she'd worked hard at the emotional aspects, felt she had to get them down. She admitted this to Renee, who said it'd probably help the kids as well, sure couldn't hurt, said she'd be sending Beth the final draft in a few days.

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She had it down; the beach ball's eyes spoke true feelings—better than words—punctuated by *a little bounce in its roll*, Beth thought and chuckled. It would mirror the loneliness of children reading by themselves, they'll cherish the happy times, she thought, and better understand the sad.

She had read the final version several times over the last week, paged through her latest sketches of the beach ball and the sun, felt she was ready to move on. Pulling out a new pad, she began with the seaside, beach ball bobbing on the tide, a cliff jutting into view and the sun—distant, yet warm. The doorbell rang, Beth's pencil slipped on the pad. "*Damn it!*" She grabbed an eraser. The doorbell rang again. "Go away..." she muttered and again the doorbell. "*Jesus...*" Beth shoved her chair back, took short, quick strides to the door.

A man with red hair—curled wing-like from under a green baseball cap—stood smiling. He had a nearly orange mustache, countless freckles, white shirt, green pants. "I was afraid you weren't home," he said. "Here you go." He handed her a dozen roses. "Have a nice day."

Beth took the flowers in a limp hand; they swung left then right and fell against her chest. She breathed in the fragrance of the roses; the delivery man moved off, a truck started up and drove away. She buried her face into the flowers, into Alan's neck and the scent of Alan's roses. A small envelope slipped from the tissue paper, fell to the floor. Bending to pick it up, the flowers resting against her cheek, she opened the envelope, fragrance of roses and Alan's hair against her cheek. *Beth—Love you always—Love, Alan.*

"Alan," Beth whispered, breathing in the flowers. She cradled the buds,

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stroking lightly with her fingers, inhaling the scent. “Alan...” She moved through the living room, on by her drawing table, out the sliding glass doors. She stood at the pool’s edge, hugged the flowers...and Alan, the scent of the roses and kissing his neck. Easing herself down to the warm poolside, the sun shone directly overhead and hot on her neck and arms and Alan still sending her roses, still loving her. A couple of buds seemed to reach out for the sun, others just as eager to bloom. Breaking one from its stem, smelling it, stroking Alan’s hair, the smooth petals against her cheek, Beth sent one then another diving, somersaulting into the pool, allowing the sun to bring them to life.

“Beth...Beth!” Sally called from the porch door. “What’re you doing? Your front door was wide open.”

“They came again...” Beth gestured toward the pool, twelve roses floating, blooming in the afternoon sun.

“Alan’s roses?”

“Yes, from Alan...”

“Damn, how did that happen? I’ll call them right now and find out what the hell happened!”

“No, no, it’s okay.” Beth turned from the pool. “It’s okay, now I know he’s still—I mean, I can still remember him.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, yes, it’s fine... It’s nice to look back on what we had.”

§

Beth sat at her drawing table, laughed to herself at the elephant/cupid she’d drawn from memory, looked up at the wall: drawing after drawing of Alan surrounding one large sketch of his face—the curl of rose petals substituted for hair. Carefully tearing the elephant/cupid from the pad, Beth paused and, in her best script, wrote at the bottom: *Love you always.*

The phone rang, it was Renee. “Hi, Beth, how’s it coming?”

“How’s what? Oh, *the book...*”

“Of course, the book. Anything wrong?”

“Well, I’ve just had some trouble getting going...” Beth ran her fingers down the glass door.

“Trouble getting going? Beth, I told the publisher July first. You do realize this is June?”

“I’m quite aware of the month, Renee.” Beth glared at the phone. “I’m sure you’ve suffered from writers’ block in your time and well, I guess I’ve got a little...*drawing block.*” She looked up at Alan and saw no reason to explain further.

“I didn’t mean to jump on you, Beth. It’s just that you seemed so confident about having it done by now.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll get it done. It’s been too long already.” Setting the phone down, Beth sat at her drawing table, dug around for the pad with the seaside sketch in it—the only drawing she’d done for the book. Finding it, she was disappointed again by the eyes, began touching them up and sud-

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denly found small roses growing out of the sea. She laughed and smiled up at Alan.

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The clock read noon, Beth pushed herself out of bed. Shifting the strap of her nightgown back onto her shoulder, she glanced out the back window at the gray-brown petals spread to the edges of the pool. She sat on the end of the bed, her reflection in the dresser mirror staring back: eyes dull, vague, had been for days. Turning away, Beth saw out the side window as the florist's truck turned the corner.

"Alan..." she gasped and jumped up. Throwing off her nightgown, she slipped into a pair of shorts, buttoned on a blouse. The doorbell rang. Beth ran into the bathroom, splashed water in her face, ran a brush through her hair. The doorbell again, Beth could smell the fragrance of the roses and Alan, holding him, the smoothness of the petals... Making her way quickly down the stairs, the doorbell rang once more. "Coming..." she sang lightly.

She opened the door to an older man, balding and with a huge mustache. "Beth Ryan?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes!"

"I'm Mr. Marvin, from Blooming Florists." He pointed a thumb toward the truck. "I really don't know where to start...except to apologize for whatever pain we've added to your already tragic situation. Um, I can only say how sorry I am about your husband and—though we normally don't do such a thing—I thought, what with the circumstances and all, I should refund you the rest of the money." He handed her a check while continuing with an apology that Beth paid no attention to, staring as she was at the check in her hand: PAY TO THE ORDER OF BETH RYAN...and then some dollar amount, all nicely spelled out for her.

Beth swung the door shut, let the check fall to the floor, forced a laugh and walked over to her drawing table. She opened the sketch pad to the beach ball at seaside, *they're going to feel it*, she thought, *they'll understand*. With the eraser scratching on the paper, one flower then another disappeared from the water's edge. Beth blew away the eraser's reddish crumbs but traces of roses remained. She looked into the beach ball's eyes, tore off that sheet and started in on the next.