

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

*Jennifer Lorene Ritenour*

### **Under the Friendship Bell**

Iggy stands against his locker between second and third period. His hands are in his pockets and he's looking up at the ceiling, bored. Something bops me on the head. It's Anthony Jensen and his rolled up blue folder. He laughs at me and runs down the hallway. Last week during lunch Iggy and I were in a deep discussion about the song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" when Anthony Jensen came up behind me, lifted my heavy backpack up into the air, and then dropped it. Down to the asphalt I went with a chorus of hahas all around me.

Iggy walks up to me and sighs.

"To the portal?" I say.

"Please," he responds.

We make our way to the back of the school near Leland Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Behind the bungalows is a padlocked chain link fence with a cut out hole so that we can sneak out and ditch. This is the portal. We stand before it while Spanish sounds from the bungalows behind us. Iggy acts as a lookout while I climb through. My flannel gets caught on the fence and I have to tug it free. He steps through, like a ballerina, feet first and en pointe. With one run of his hand through his hair we're off.

We make our way to the bus stop and ride all the way to the Korean Friendship Bell.



Iggy and I share grunge music on our broken headphones from the bus stop to the entrance. We stop at another chain link fence, with a round dome of concrete in front of it, next to the open gate that leads to the bell. People graffiti this concrete spot all the time even though there's already a fine work of art on it: a three-eyed-fish.

"The artist must repaint Blinky in the middle of the night," he says.

"Who is Blinky?" I ask.

"He's the fish," Iggy points at the mural. It's not tagged today. "Where have you been?"

I shrug and light up a cigarette and then hand one to him. We smoke and admire Blinky. The first eye looks forward, the middle eye looks up, and the last eye looks backwards. I tilt my head to the side, trying to understand the meaning of the mural.

"The eyes move when the artist repaints it," Iggy laughs.

"I think it's trying to tell us something about time," I say.

I take out my can of warm Coke. I crack it open and hold it up to Blinky's image.

"For Blinky," I say. "May you watch over Pedro across the past, present, and future."

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"May the next person who tags you be cursed until a lesson is learned," Iggy adds.

I pour a bit of Coke on the ground. I take a swig and pass it to Iggy. He takes a swig. I down the rest, crush the can on the cement block, but not on Blinky—that would be disrespectful—and then put the can in my backpack to be recycled later.

We enter the gate and walk up to the hill until we reach the bell. No one is here in the afternoon on a weekday. It's windy, and I bet from far away I look like a pink flame with my Manic Panic-colored hair. Mom, Dad, and my brother Nick and I used to come here on windy days and fly kites for hours. I had a She-Ra kite and Nick had a He-Man one. My mom would fuss over my hair by putting it into a French braid so it wouldn't turn into a "rat's nest." Mom never flew any kites. She would just watch us and sometimes take pictures.

Dad flew his own kite, plain orange, and he'd have this calmness about him, but awake and present, unlike when he'd nod out on the couch after spending too much time in the bathroom. I peed my pants once because he actually nodded out in the bathroom. Of course, I didn't know what nodding out meant at the time and just thought my Dad had a problem with suddenly falling asleep. But some part of me always knew that those fried egg brain on drugs commercials applied to us. He's still alive but gone. It's just me, Mom, and Nick now.

The bell is under a wooden roof pinched into a pyramid with twelve pillars holding it up. On each pillar is an animal from the Korean zodiac and its wood is painted in cinnamon and teal. There's a wooden beam, roped up, on the outside. The beam is used to ring the bell by hitting it. Ignoring the roped off sides, Iggy and I crawl underneath the bronze bell.

"Hello!" I say. My voice echoes.

"It's like *The Bell Jar*," Iggy says.

It's the first book Ms. Alma made us read when the school year started. The part of the book that stuck its hook in me was when Esther Greenwood stared at the fig tree, saw all the amazing things she could be, a poet, a mother, a doctor, and because she was stuck, afraid to make a choice, all the figs fell from the tree, the possibilities rotting in the ground. Ms. Alma wanted us to make a choice, or at least to think about it, because we will be eighteen in a few years and even though it feels like a long time to us freshman, Ms. Alma said it goes by like that and she snapped her fingers.

Iggy was pretty much born with a fig in his hand.

We sit down and I pull out my pipe prepacked with weed. Nick packed it for me before he left with his girlfriend for the weekend. Cheyenne was getting an abortion and Mom went with them. I'm sure mom is hitting up the mini fridge in the hotel they're staying at and chain smoking. Mom didn't want me missing school, yet here I am ditching, because of Nick's mess. That's what she called it, a mess. It was one of the few times I saw my brother almost cry. Maybe part of Nick did want a kid, just not in Senior year.

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"When did you know that you wanted to be a poet?" I ask Iggy.

"I always kind of knew but it was solid in the last couple weeks," he says.

I take a hit and pass it to him. It burns, but I hold it in.

"Elaborate," I say. I cough a cloud of smoke.

Iggy takes in a breath and closes his eyes.

"There's a bluebird in my heart that wants to get out," he recites, "but I'm too tough for him. I say, stay in there, I'm not going to let anyone see you."

"You read ahead."

"So?" Iggy takes a hit.

"Nothing."

Bukowski is our assignment after Plath. Our teacher, Ms. Alma, is having us read *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* and the assignment is based on his poem "The Bluebird." Ms. Alma gave us a sheet of paper listing the exercises for the whole year and by the end we'll have a complete chapbook of our lives that we can continue to add onto and expand. "What are we in the end but our memories?" she'd asked us. "It's what we take with us and what we leave behind." I totally wrote that in my notes in class. Ms. Alma is my favorite teacher by far.

I want to let my bluebird out but I don't even know what my fig is. Iggy and I pass the pipe back and forth.

"It's not enough though," he says, tapping the ash out from the pipe and onto the cement ground.

"What isn't enough?"

"Writing," he sighs, "I want to sing it."

"There's open mic nights at Sacred Grounds. I'll go with you."

He shakes his head, "I'm afraid."

"Iggy."

"Ryder," he says, "don't tell anyone I'm scared. It'll ruin my image."

I laugh. "Iggy, we're the outsider cool kids."

"Exactly, and we have a reputation to maintain. I can't go up there and fall on my face. I have to make sure what I make is good."

I sit back, confused, I was kidding. I mean, who cares what anyone thinks? That's what actually makes you cool. I wanted to tell him this is not what Bukowski would do. But I didn't want to get into it.

We spend the rest of the day running around on the grassy hill that surrounds the bell until it is time to go home. We made a good memory today.



I stand in front of my empty house and get my key out to open the

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door. The phone in the living room is ringing. I hear a crow rattle. I turn around and look up. There it is on the telephone wire, right next to a brand new pair of shoes.

“Caw, caw, caw,” the crow sings.