JULIETA CÁRDENAS GRAFF

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Senior Category

This document contains two texts. First one is the Round 1 Finished Work Entry on the theme of “Opposites”. Second one was done on the day of the in-person final 8th June 2024, as a Freewrite/First Draft activity, associated with an Emotion.

ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

discovering voices

First Text: Round 1 Entry

Death and Mary Margaret

Death boarded the train under the name of Joan Magdalene and sat, no luggage, by one of the right-side windows. The vehicle only took off after a handful of minutes; she resented this, as she resented any kind of tardiness.

Age had presented her with a deep couple of crow's feet and an impairment of her vision. She set a pair of round, impeccable eyeglasses over her old gaze and looked through the window glass, unclean and scratched.

She let herself be lulled by the metallic rhythm of the train tracks below her pale, purple-blue feet. Duty awaited a few towns down.

"When you have all the time in the world at your hands, the best you can do is indulge yourself"- she thought, slipping a thin smile. To her comfort, the temperature had plummeted in mimicry of her bloodless body.

Only a few moments later that cold tranquility of the wagon would break with the scent of tangerines. Death placed her eyeglasses above her head, moved by a disgusted awe.

"Jesus, I cannot even seat myself without help anymore! Took me *ages* to walk down to this wagon, too, I'm a perfect mess!" - cried the voice of a young woman, bearing a wet, friendly smile as she let her body cover the velvet seat. She held her round belly with a mouthful of a sigh.

Death raised a thin eyebrow. The years had stripped her of patience for many things; among them were loud breathers, or all breathers in general, for that matter.

"I can see that."

"I'm Mary Margaret, pleased to meet you. What's your name, Madame?"

Death glanced to the dusty ceiling as if she hoped the sufficient resilience to forget the macabre talents for which she was known would fall onto her lap.

"Joan Magdalene."

"Lovely! Our names sound similar, don't they? Mary *Margaret*, Joan *Magdalene*, how silly!"

"Indeed, very *silly*."

Mary Margaret had come with a red leather suitcase as swollen as her waistline. She zipped it open and produced half a yarn onesie in an array of yellows, with a pair of wooden needles dug into it.

Death watched her lay the garment atop her belly to resume her labor with low, aviary hums. She thought back to her lust for self-indulgence and stretched her violet lips to a grin.

"When is it that you're due, dear?"

"Oh, the doctor says it could be anytime around next week! We couldn't be happier, really. It's all been wonderful. My mother's the most excited, that's for sure! As a matter of fact I'm headed back from visiting her."

Mary Margaret smiled with another thunderous exhale and set the bundle of yarn aside. Out of the suitcase she pulled out a tangerine, much to Death's indignation. Another of the things she had no tolerance for was watching people parade their eating around in public, shameless for the world to see.

"Say, I don't mean to intrude, dear, but I can't help wondering why'd they let you take on a train journey all by yourself, so near to your date…*any* number of things could happen in such a state, so they say."

"Oh, the doctor said I was in tip-top shape. My husband wouldn't have let me travel alone otherwise. Believe me, he is ridiculously careful!"

"You can never be careful enough!"

"I can assure you he is! And he's the greatest I could ask for, I'll tell you that."

Politely, Death looked away so she could roll her eyes to the back of her head. The game had grown boring too quickly. Mary Margaret appeared to be impervious.

"What about you, Joan Magdalene? Are *you* married too?- she slid a tangerine segment into her mouth and widened her eyes with curiosity."

"Me? No, dear, god *no*."

"And why's that?"

“Well, I suppose existence is too long of an eternity for it to be shared with another.”

“Hm, I wouldn’t say it’s an *eternity*…we all eventually have our time to go, don’t we?”

“Oh, like you wouldn’t believe, dear.”

Bored, Death had turned to the foggy window. Mary Margaret, beginning to feel ill, finished her tangerine before succumbing to a sudden drowsiness and letting her eyes fall shut.

A suffocated yelp tinted the silence. Dumbfounded, Death discovered the sight of Mary Margaret hunched over herself. For a woman who thought she had seen everything there was to see, coming across a novelty was no fun. Especially at her age.

"Please help me Joan Magdalene!”- called out Mary Margaret, beads of sweat sliding across her crimson-blushed face. Death was horrified, almost panic-stricken. Her sort-of-a-life flashed before her glass eyes as she attempted to conjure up the sufficient will to come close and help.

“I can’t, child, I can’t! This is just the complete *antithesis* of my line of work! I couldn’t!”

“Joan Magdalene! Come on! How *different* could your occupation possibly be?! I could *die* here, for God’s sake!”

“You are much nearer to Death than you know, Mary Margaret, I can tell you that. I apologize, this is simply not the job for me. It never could be!”

Mary Margaret clawed at the seat in resistance to a stir of physical distress and a monumental anger for the old bag of bones comfortably refusing to help her.

“God! Who do you think you are?! Where on Earth do you work, a *funeral home* or something?!”

Death’s alarmed features dropped to a stone-hard fury. She crossed her arms slowly, never having been so insulted once in her unmeasurable time on Earth. Then again, never had she interacted so closely and for so long with a breathing being to have opened the possibility to be insulted before.

“A *funeral home*, you say? Do you truly believe that I would take any sort of responsibility for those already *dead*? Do you imply that I *care*? You have a lot of nerve for someone so close to Death, young woman.”

Mary Margaret's gaze widened with fear. Death looked out the window with a calm grin before getting up to leave, straightening out her coat with a pretended sigh.

"I suppose I could do the rest of this route walking. You see, I'm not very fond of the circus. And again, this just isn't my field of interest."

Death walked down the corridor to the train's door. Mary Margaret stood up holding onto the seat before her. Cold sweat licked her forehead as she watched the old woman's bony hand over the golden doorknob.

"You're going to die"- wailed Mary Margaret.

Death looked over at the young mother, one shaky arm cradling her anxious belly. The door swung open with the railway's fierce wind.

"Dear, I feel as though I've told you this before, but aren't you being a little too self-important for a soon-to-be mother standing just a few feet away from Death?"

She leaped to the sound of Mary Margaret's cries. Having stepped off the train tracks, Death dusted the sides of her boots.

"A *funeral home"*- she snarled to herself, raising a pearly chin before walking ahead. She was certainly not fit for the emotional rituals of birth and grief. The antonym of her, if there ever was one.

Second Text: Free Write / First Draft 8th June 2024

"SONNETS FOR AN ARMCHAIR"

(Love)

"Please, Seymour, won't you eat something? Look at the state of you!"

"No eating for me, Edith, I never really did need it. How about you be kind and read to me? Literature, now *that* I do need it."

Edith fell to her brother's charm with a chuckle. She walked over to the bookcase and thought there were two things the illness could never take away from him; that handsome self-assurance and his love for those old books that she could never understand.

Books couldn't love Seymour back, so Edith did. They had left the city for its outskirts; she hoped for a sudden recovery, he wished to get away from the object of his addiction. Edith tended to him with the devotion of someone who believed in miracles; though she would've much preferred to spend her time keeping their small house impeccably clean, she agreed to read out loud his dusty Russian novels that she found truly grotesque to both the sight and the mind.

Seymour's senses of sight and hearing underwent a progressive deterioration. Edith knew from their doctor in the city that it was expected from his illness to diminish his senses as the nervous system slowly failed to function. This knowledge compelled her to scrub the floor even harder, leaving her palms and knuckles flaky and red from the soap.

Instead of her own, Edith made a priority of keeping Seymour's drying skin as soft as possible. The doctor had also spoken of possible irritations and cracks, which she feared, mostly out of the pain they would cause for her brother. The state of his skin was a particularly sour point of

discussion for the sibling; Seymour would argue that it would crack anyways, that it had already begun to turn red as soon as the lotion dried atop it, and this would make his sister cry with resentment. She couldn't understand his resolution to be sick.

The truth was that the state of Seymour was worsening overall, not only in the condition of his skin. A month after they had moved to the outskirts Edith noticed that, though he didn't say, he could only make out primal shapes of what was in front of him and the only way for him to hear her was if she raised her voice slightly below a yell.

His skin was hardening too, and it began to plague rapidly with small, surface cracks similar to those in worn-out leather goods.

"You look like a handbag" - had joked Edith on one occasion while tending to their lotion ritual, but Seymour had stopped speaking a few days back. What pained her the most was that she couldn't remember the last thing he had said. It pained her often to think that one day she would forget about their old times, too.

Eventually Seymour ceased to move in what Edith thought was an act of his old defiance. His arms and legs were strangely positioned, causing him to resemble an armchair. The skin on his body and face had turned a different colour, and it began to produce a fresh, material scent. It took days for Edith to put a name on it; her brother's skin looked exactly like tan leather.

Though she was disturbed by his uncanny appearance and she found his stiffness unsettling, Edith did her best to carry on as usual with her cleaning of the house and her tending to Seymour's odd body.

"I love you, Seymour, I really do"- she would repeat day after day while attempting to slide his prescription pills into his cold mouth.

One morning, Edith woke and walked over to Seymour's room as her routine entailed. She opened the door half-asleep and half-aware.

"Good morning, Seymour."

As always, Seymour said nothing. Edith rubbed her eyes as she walked to his closet, where she picked out a yarn sweater and a pair of wide-legged trousers for him to wear.

When she turned to the bed, the small pile of clothes fell from her hands. She let out the scream of an animal, terrifyingly deep. Her body collapsed onto the ground towards the tan leather armchair, standing beside Seymour's bed.

It took nothing for Edith to realise she was facing what was left of her brother. She draped her arms across it, weeping, letting her tears wet the leather and breathing in its smell with desperation.

"Oh Seymour! Whatever happened to you!"

Wailing, she looked up from its surface and stared at the armchair, blurry behind her tears. As she traced her fingers across its dark, wooden legs, a terrifying thought overcame her.

"It can't be you…no, it *can't* be you! Where is Seymour? Where is he and what did you do with him?"

Edith punched the chair between agonising screams and furious cries. She clawed at it with her fingernails and bit its arms. She kicked its legs hoping to break them, hoping to break the whole thing open and find her brother sleeping, sickly, inside it.

One of the legs broke off and the armchair tipped over, revealing its underside. Bubbles of sweat burst through Edith's cheeks as her vision cleared and she came to see what was under the broken armchair.

The golden Boy Scout badge, the same one that Seymour had worn all throughout his time at the rehabilitation clinic. The one that had been pinned onto his jacket when they found him near to death in an alley and revived him by mere luck. The one he had been given as a clean, healthy nine year old boy in a ceremony where his teary older sister hadn't ceased to smile for a moment.

"Oh, my brother…"- muttered Edith, tracing her fingers over the badge, stuck to the armchair a few inches away from where its leg had been kicked off. It was then when Edith thought that Seymour was definitely not coming back, not as she knew him.

"I suppose memories will have to suffice, won't they?" - she grinned sadly, reaching over to the crafts table he had never gotten around to use during their time in that house. Edith did her best to remember a few sonnets out of her brother's favourite to hear, those that he would plead her to repeat over and over during the coldest nights. She recited them at a whisper, spreading the glue like she would spread lotion over his cracking legs and thinking of a corner full of light to keep her brother in her pristine, spotless apartment back in the city.