



Grant Wood's 'Sketch for house in American Gothic' (1930).

Stillborn

Beth Walker

I

The doula warned my mama that even if God whipped me into this world, the Devil strangled my twin out of it before she could take her first breath. The umbilical cord wrapped twice around her blue broken neck. A sign, the doula said.

“Jesus, help me,” my daddy called out and snatched me free by my heel, my face more pruneblue than black. He held me up to the moonlight slivering through the window, where God’s big silver eye looked down on my birth. It was the only time my daddy ever raised a hand against me, slapping me on the back till I was done dying and I decided I might as well live. “Yes, a sign,” my daddy said.

But my mama wasn’t like that. After that night, she was a woman torn between two worlds. The house her husband made her birth her only child in was not a home but a blasphemy, a Baptist church gutted during the Battle for Union City, and so its baptistry became her birthing tub. Repurposed, my parents’ churchhouse rested uneasily on ill-gained land they sharecropped from Mr Harris, their nearest neighbour.

Everafter, this revenant house conjured forth so many griefs I couldn’t count them all. Some things my mama just couldn’t leave alone. Others, she just wouldn’t let go. For years, even after I grew too big, my mama made me sleep next to an empty cradle, painted blue for the baby who bruised my mama’s heart.

Somehow I sensed something lived on with me, tucked away in my dreams. “Shh,” I’d say, hiding teeny dolls twisted from cornhusks in the empty corners of its cradle. But, oh, how my mama raged when she found bloated cucumber dolls just starting to turn, all rigored ghastly yellow and greenyblue. Their tiny baby bonnets gagged so tight, their blanched necks didn’t bleed but oozed.

Still I made more, a fresh rage for every season.

“Shh,” I’d sing to the dead dolls, my hand on the rocking cradle.

“Something ain’t right. Something’s coming,” my mama whispered in front of the fire to my daddy.

“Well, it ain’t Betty,” he said, surveying His house, his handiwork. “The doula said she got the hand of God guiding her, just like he guided me.” He meant those blue streaks on my back, the ones there from being born. But in my dreams, it was my twin clawing and kicking me in the back for precious air, yet I would not turn to save her.

I grew too soon, and my mama and daddy did not like it, did not like how those boys watched me when I walked through the back streets of town, balancing laundry bundles on the crown of my head.

Town – this fairy-tale place where my daddy went for supplies, where my mama took me to knock on the ladies' back doors for the Friday wash. Town rocked me to sleep and bigger dreams. I papered my small room first with pictures from Sears Roebuck and later with newspapers I fished from back-alley bins and freshly wrapped linens. And in that way I learned to read, at night reading to the dolls till the rocking cradle stilled, conjuring Town up in my prayers and in my dreams.

Town. Town boasted a two-storey school and a marching band led by blue-eyed, yellow-haired majorettes. Town ran a movie theater whose screen loomed larger than the warped double doors of our churchhouse, and the perfect platinum hair on the blonde bombshells bloomed whiter than the sheets I blued and starched.

Once, my daddy sent me off to read myself to sleep. Through pasteboard walls glued stiff with old hymnal pages, I heard my daddy say, "I'm afraid to let her go alone. Folks talk 'bout her mark."

"But she's strong. She can tote twice what I can."

"I said I'm afraid."

"You know we need the money. We can cover twice the houses this way."

"She's twelve years old."

My mama begged my daddy to pray on it, so off I went. For two years, I knocked on back doors. I knocked and knocked. My knuckles turned stoneblue with knocking. I thought only God and the dolls knew what happened to me next. But instead of leaving my troubles with God, I cried myself to sleep over a rocking cradle.

Though I tried to hide it, my mama, she never could leave nothing alone. She saw fingermarkblue bruises inside my arms while we were wringing out some sheets in the old baptistry. Went behind my daddy's back for advice from Mrs Harris, who told her to go to the Law.

It was tornado season, and April couldn't decide whether it wanted me to sit in the house and mope while it cried blue sheets of rain all day or if it wanted to blow all my white linen and hard work into the greyday mud.

So that next day, one of old Mrs Cheany's best bedsheets ran off like a shied horse. My mama sent me after it. Found it clinging in terror to that old elm tree whose long black arm stuck over the back road like the Devil's own finger, beckoning lovers and losers alike, demons as well as dreamers, down to the paupers' cemetery. By the time I climbed to the branch where I had hung my daddy's favorite dreamcatcher, I saw someone had come to the house. A grocery truck sat parked out front, but my mama never sent for groceries a day in her life.

A white man I'd only seen once before came down the porch like he was really put out. But before he drove off, he stopped to light a cigarette out of the wind and stared a long moment, blowing smoke up at the blue-painted rafters.

I found my mama in the kitchen, tonguing her swollen lip and wrapping up her blueblack ribs.

“Who was that man?”

“Who do you think? The father of one them boys.”

“What boys?”

Of course, I knew the slap was coming. My mama had slapped me a dozen-times-a-dozen just for being born. When she tore down my shift, my telltaleblue bruises and bite marks were all the proof she needed.

“He said you been lettin’ them white boys have a peek for a penny. A pinch for a nickel! A poke for a few bits more. You, Betty Burns, the town’s ten-cent whore!”

Now, I had heard that word plenty, but it wasn’t until that moment that I knew its weight and its worth. How much was it worth to sit in the coloured section for the Sunday matinee? A nickel? How much was it worth to eat in the back of the tearoom where you could wear your best white gloves and not have to wait on nobody? A quarter? And the tea was so good and cheap in the loveliest little chinablue teapots you ever did see.

Yet my mama would not let it go. Again she went to the Law, but this time with me in tow. She showed the sheriff her lip. She showed the sheriff’s wife her ribs. Then she made me show the sheriff’s wife the usedblue bruises between my legs, and me crying all the time trying to explain that it all started when those boys kept pestering me to show them the birthmark on my back. Since my mama had to go and do something, the sheriff had to do something. And the sheriff’s wife shrugged to the sheriff, then went telling all the town. Like a dry field ablaze, news spread that my mama had charged the greengrocer with assault and battery.

My daddy sat up three nights on the front porch, his chair tipped against the front doors so long ago scored by fire, his shotgun in his lap.

But it was the barn my daddy used for sharecropping that went up.

“Betty, run get Mr Harris!”

“Don’t!” my mama said, pulling on his arm.

Already down the road, my daddy called back, “The mules and pigs!”

“At least leave me the gun!” my mama shouted after.

I cut across the back fields, but Mr Harris had not waited for me. I heard his truck taking off toward our barn. Behind the treeline, the blaze from the barn tainted the sky as red as April’s blood moon. That’s when I heard a shot, then another and another.

In the front yard I found my mama, tied upside down to two saw horses, stripped to the waist, whipped with a belt, past knowing anybody. My mama’s raw back steamed in the moist night, laid open like a side of bacon. It took her days to die.

My tongue thick and dry with gagging, I ran blindly toward the gunshots to the cemetery. Shouts. "Jesus help me." "Help me Jesus." But not my daddy's voice. Mocking voices. A half-dozen cars and trucks roared off, leaving Mr Harris cursing and flailing after them. Then he jumped in his truck, backed it under the elm tree, and hopped in the bed. The red moon backlit the tree like it too was on fire.

When Mr Harris caught sight of me running down the road, he hollered, "Betty, stay back! Don't come down here!" He was struggling with something that I couldn't make out, trying to heave it over his shoulder like a sack. But I knew what I knew. I could feel my daddy choking, though Mr Harris later swore my daddy was already dead, shot three times for measure, swinging from the Devil's Finger.

II

Only two white men, the two Mr Harris knew by sight, went to trial and county jail. And they paid a hefty fine for burning Mr Harris' sharecropping barn. But two poor black folk went into the ground in the paupers' cemetery, and they're still there.

Mrs Harris said she tried right by me, tried for two years. God only knows, Mrs Harris said. Let me sleep in a room behind her kitchen. Let me ride in the truck with Mr Harris to a coloured school in town. Let me keep my washing and let me keep the money. Tried hard. But everywhere I walked, the singing and the whispers dogged me:

Who Could It Be Knocking at My Door? It's Betty Burns: The Town's Ten-Cent Whore.

When it wasn't whispers of whoredom, it was whispers of witchery: cross Betty and see what happened. Now Town said that women who slept in the sheets I washed either had bad luck or good, bad babies or good, bad men or good, depending upon how much they tipped me and how much I liked them.

Thing is I never liked nobody. Mrs Harris, who was as high-toned of a Christian woman as you could find in Tennessee, finally had enough of the Town sniping and said one day when I was washing up the supper dishes, "Betty, you're sixteen now," in that final way of hers. And I said, "Yes'm."

And that's how I came to find the blue paint peeling from the porch rafters, though my daddy had always kept it so bright and shining. The blue trim on the window sills had turned black with rot, and all the windows were busted out.

I picked up some of the seablue bottles from the bottle tree lazing around in the front yard, and knocked them, half full of dirt doppers' nests, against my knees. The rest of the bottles had gone missing, no doubt the reason for the busted windows. Off to the side, no one had bothered to drag off the two saw horses,

rusted black with my mama's blood. Mr Harris had told me it was best to stay away. For two years, I tried.

Now I heaved my weight into the warped front doors and stepped across the threshold. "I'm here," I said.

The creaking of the rocking cradle woke me on the first night, then the second, then the third. On the ceiling over my shucked mattress, a bloom of fungus gaped like a gangrened wound big as my mama's back.

"Shhh. Shhh," I said, without turning. "Shhh, shhh," I said to the newspapered wall.

The cradle rocked all night, every night. Finally I went out to my daddy's fields under a blood-red moon and dug around for some old corncobs, stained brown in the cursed dirt.

I knocked off what hulls the crows had left behind, brought the cobs back into the house by lamplight, fetched my mama's scrapbag, sewing basket, and button jar out of the mouldering chifforobe in the front room, and set to fashioning some tiny clothes.

First I made my mama, then my daddy. I made the pockmarked cobby faces come to life with some sootblack, sewed on some white button eyes, and painted on some hair with cornsilk and shoebblack left behind the night the undertaker came, a futile effort to grease over the shotgun holes in my daddy's face and chest.

I propped my mama leaning over the cradle. I sat my daddy in a broken-backed three-legged chair, tipping it on its back leg so he could watch the last of the blue paint peel off the porch ceiling.

But the cradle would not be still. It rocked furious-er and furious-er. "Shhh, Shhh," I said. "Shhh."

I put back the bottle tree. I hung dreamcatchers in the trees, and from every porch rafter strung windchimes dappled and crazed from my mama's most colourful buttons and broken pottery.

"Shhh. Shhh."

But my daddy's charms had gone untended too long. Death had spread through the house.

I tried washing it away. I tried whitewashing. I tried pasting fresh pages torn from the Sears Roebuck. Soon the whole house was papered with every catalogue and newspaper in town. Still, no matter how much I scrubbed and washed, bleached and salted, blackishblue blooms of mould appeared, always at night, like the moon making its window-rounds.

In desperation, I began to rip the paper away, down to the unpainted, unfinished pine. Down to the re-hewn pine. Down to the burnt pine. I ripped and rubbed till my fingers bled on the wood. Till spores of silver, char, and ash salted my hair. I felt old, older than my folks, older than my churchhouse, older than its lintel, its hearthstone. My black hair turned blue, with a sheen older than the roots of the earth.

In time to the rocking cradle, I breathed in the foul air – the ash, the spore, and the dustcloudblue paint – and nodded, “I’m here.” As long as those men still walked above on God’s green, as long as their boys sang their blasphemous songs and thumbed their dirty silver into my path, as long as I walked in the back lots of Town with their knickers and bedsheets on the crown of my head, I was breaching two worlds. Instead of beautiful bright blue days, full of tea cups and fancy-button gloves and white linen sprinkled with lavender, something, dreamer or demon, would beckon me back.

“Shhhh. Shhhh,” I said, patting the unpainted walls with my bloody palms. “I’m here.”

One night not long after, the cradle stopped. I opened my eyes in the bluegrey morning to hear someone breathing raggedly just inside the doorway. I lifted my head and got punched blind in the eye.

“You dirty bitch,” the greengrocer hissed as he pounced on my chest. “Think I was gonna spend two years in jail and just forget all about you? I know what you are. You haint! You whore!”

I fought, I kicked, I clawed under my mama’s thin blue crazy quilt, but he sat on top of me like a mountain. His knees bore into my lungs and his thumbs twisted into my neck as if I was no more than a wild thing caught in a snare. And I knew I was dead …

… That’s when she slapped me. Hard. She kicked and punched and screamed her silent screams. But I would not turn. I would not be moved. Her hand on my shoulder, she whispered if I was done with living, I might as well …

… And that’s why our daddy always wanted to keep the blue so bright and shining. But this Tennessee humidity will melt the horns off the Devil himself, much less make the paint weep right off these revenant walls …

… And that’s how a girl becomes a ghost. It’s not just the dying. Like my mama and the numberless nameless women before and after, I was born to haunt my own life, forever grasping after stillborn hopes and dreams. Who else but a Haint could count them all?

When I tried to touch the happy, storied days of my future, they always moved beyond my reach – like buttons in a jar just on the edge of breaking, chimes on the wind just before twisting, dreamcatchers swinging in silent witness from the Devil’s elm. So here I must remain to watch everything I ever loved fade, like the last moments on a movie screen, till even their names become nameless shadows at my back. All because …

… Some things I can’t leave alone. Others I just won’t let go …

… When those white boys from Town dare each other to come woo me – and they always come – they slide a dime under the front doors. They’re almost always warped. But when the right boys knock, they get to see me standing there, arms wide.

My blue lips and blue eyes and blue transparent skin shine so bright the silver moon passes through. So bright you'd think it was the bright eye of God tracing that scar down my back, and not the Devil's claw.

"Shhh," I whisper, as my bluecold fingers stroke their trembling lips.

Tightblue around their white throats.

"Shhh."

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