

PRIMITIVITY

STORIES

AMY SAYRE BAPTISTA



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Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

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Book and Cover Design: Amy Freels

Cover Art: SplitShire on Pixabay

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-870-9

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Published 2018 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

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Bait

A man knows what he knows. Call it gut. Instinct or what have you. First thing I think when I see him coming up the lane: he ain't no count. Could tell by his walk. Number two, he's ran hisself outta gas. His shifting gait says he never learnt it's as easy to drive off the top of the tank as the bottom. As the only house on a ten mile stretch, this old road invites our guests. Let's hope this stranger is all July has to offer.

"Borrow some gasoline," the man says.

Add thief to lazy, else why you ask to borrow what you got no plans to return.

"Where you stopped," I ask.

He looks across the yard, taking his time to answer. Watching Emma carry a bucket to the sheep pen. She ain't but fourteen, all legs and long, dark curls.

"Daddy," she calls. "I'm gonna feed the spring lambs." The stranger watches her direction too long.

"The bridge," he says.

"It's out," I say.

"Came on through," he says. Eyes bright, unblinking. A timber rattler peering outta the coil.

"Local traffic only," I say.

He don't reply, just watches when Emma heads back to the barn, and I shoulder out his view.

“I got a gas can in the truck bed with enough to get you to town.”

He looks at me for a slow moment and rubs his chin with one hand. Homemade tattoos decorate his fingers. Him getting on his way is worth more to me than a few dollars in fuel.

“Alright,” he says. He glances around and follows me to the truck.

This old road is a ghost; two small plot cemeteries fenced like a crooked grin hold horse thieves that ran the stagecoach road and travelers that met death before destination. Bandits shot for robbing a man blind. Shot for doing the things men do in the dark.

I think of Emma at home. Nothing but trust and screen door between her and every misfit the road coughs up. She called out as we left but I just waved, not wanting to draw attention. Last year, she wanted a German Shepherd pup. I should have said yes.

Coming up on the bridge, he’s watching me. Cutting his eyes. I keep mine steady but notice the scars on his knotty forearms. He’s fought more than one man over who knows what.

“If it’s fuel injected, we may need to prime it.” This close I see he’s built strong. Maybe stronger than me.

“She’ll run,” he says. “Hard to hold down, more’s the pleasure driving her.”

He wipes both hands on his thighs. I’ll never reach the pistol under the seat if he’s carrying.

“You from around here,” I ask.

“Nope,” he answers.

“Just passing through,” I ask.

“Never sure,” he says.

His car is a dirty blue Chevy Impala missing front plates. After I empty the gas can, the car starts as easy as if he’d just shut it off. I think about traps and how they spring. I turn to speak, and he guns the engine. Headed back the direction we came, mouthing something through the window. I don’t regret his taillights, but my stomach stays hollow. I’m halfway home before his words connect. *Later, Daddy.* Him repeating the words Emma called out as we left. I floor the gas pedal, swallowing down panic and asphalt.

Spirit Transcript #41: Liberty Briscoe, retired madam, death 1882

Dirty men want a clean woman but never care to return the favor. When I took over the Floating Lily, the brothel barge run from Beardstown to Peoria, I changed all that. My girls don't need a pound a dirt on their sheets adding to the rest of the foul. Besides, I made a little extra off the bathe and shave, and if any girl wanted to scrub feet or backs, or help wring the filth out of a man, I let her keep the tips.

Working girls never shed a man's skin. You can wash his scent from your sheets. Wash inside and out, but the next thing you know, you find a hair in your mouth, or a torn fingernail stuck to your thigh. The dirt and the stink of him caught up in your corners. Your insides weeping steady with the sludge he left inside you. You swallow it. Like you swallowed him. He don't pay nothing extra for all you had to keep.

You want milled soap, a dress soaked in sun, and a bed no one but you ever laid in. You'd take even one of those for a day. But what you got is a miner's desperate sweat and horse shit smeared by a careless boot. The seeds men sew grow misery. All of it sunk into your pores. You been covered in someone else so long, you wouldn't recognize your own scent. Dirty men want a clean woman, but a whore wants nothing, 'cept choice.

It weren't always my way or nothing. The early years was just learning to breathe. What men will ask for when there's nothing stopping them turns a girl cruel and clever. Cruelty has to be tempered or it shows in your face, and men pay for softness. Even if they want to slap the spring day right off of you, they still want you soft. Trust me, I survived a lot of years with nothing but talent for repeat business.

Landed in Beardstown in 1821. Weren't but ten years old, and thought what gods there were had deserted me. Madame Charlena bought me in New Orleans from the Sisters of Saint Monica Orphanage. The sisters never sold the white girls, but the mixed all

had a price. Mine was five dollars. My mama left me cause my blue eyes was making her Mistress uncomfortable. Mama never said she was coming back, never said she loved me, just, “Where ever they send you, do good. Remember what I taught you. You free, and I done that if I ain’t done nothing else.”

She never said she was coming back, but the day Madame Charlena came for me, I fought the nuns until they boxed my ears to bleeding. I never stopped fighting, just learned to outsmart most fists. Weren’t no shortage of those in my life. So I practiced and I practiced.

These days, blown through and hollow as I am, I think about what I *might* have become. Circumstances being different. I think about Mama, moving graceful round a white man’s kitchen. Teaching me what I didn’t even know I was learning. Pinch of sugar. Salt that. Rag wrapped around her hand for the scalding pans. Ran four boiling pots, a hot oven, and nine children like a general. Neither the children nor the food was allowed to burn, she said.

Madame Charlena promised the nuns to raise me right. But she never told the truth a day in her life. It was only good fortune and my cooking that convinced Madame to keep me outta the trade until I was twelve. My grits and sweet potato pie won me two years of childhood. I still thank Mama for that. Seeing as they was her recipes.

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment to the editors of the following journals, where stories from this collection first appeared, sometimes in slightly different form.

SmokeLong Quarterly: “Bait”

The Toast (The Butter): “Lard, or the Origin of Remedy”

Corium: “Pike County Feminism” (also selected by Braddock Books for *The Best Small Fictions 2017* anthology)

**82 Review*: “The Fire Bringer”

Ninth Letter: “Transcripts of the Revered & Disreputable Dead” (featured artist, Fall 2016)

“Pike County Consilience” won the Sundress Academy for the Arts Summer 2015 Flash Showdown (selected by T.A. Noonan) and was published by Sundress online.



Photo: © Khyran Boyd

Amy Sayre Baptista's writing has appeared in *The Best Small Fictions* (2017), *Corium*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Butter*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and other journals. She was a SAFTA fellow (2015), a CantoMundo Poetry fellow (2013), and a scholarship recipient to the Disquiet Literary Festival in Lisbon, Portugal (2011). She performs with Kale Soup for the Soul, a Portuguese-American artist's collective, and Poetry While You Wait (Chicago). She is a co-founder of Plates&Poetry, a community arts program focused on food and writing. She has an MFA in fiction from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and teaches humanities at Western Governors University. She lives in Illinois and can be found online at amysayrebaptista.com.