

Gone Lawn

a journal of word-things

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Gone Lawn 55
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Chrissy Stegman

The Girl Who Went South

Featured artwork, *Lost for Words*, by *Andrea Damic*

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Vanity was a liar. She came out of the womb telling lies. First she told her mother that she was a living soul, a baby with a black shock of hair. But that was a cold lie from the start. Vanity came out bright blue, blue as a wave, blue as glacier ice. Not-a-sound blue. So quiet, she was the color blue itself. Her mother cried and cried, face turning red. Red like the sun falling into the night, red like anger but this was sadness. Vanity was ripped away from her mother's arms and carried to the NICU by the nurses. A few hours went by. In a state of inconsolable grief, Vanity's mother wept until her weeping soaked the cotton of her hospital gown. She eventually fell into a fitful sleep, wrapped in the damp embrace of tears. But the doctors brought Vanity back from wherever it was she went. This time, her hair was a shock of red. Her face was bright red, her skin had red warmth. Her mother cried again but this time the tears came from grateful peace and release.

The child would live.

The years went on and Vanity survived like any child. She grew tall and lanky, that red hair trailed down to the backs of her knees. Her mother made her pancakes, served her orange juice, and helped her to the school bus stop. Taught Vanity how to toss her hair into a bun. Time ticked on. Vanity didn't tell a single lie again until she was age 7.

This time, she told her mother she could fly. She jumped out of the third floor window of the apartment building, her red hair and body falling faster than the wind could keep up. Vanity landed on a pile of laundry left out on the fire escape by the tenant of the apartment on the first floor. The sheets were covered in dirt from Vanity's penny loafers which had dragged into the side of the building along with some blood on her knees which she collected on her way down against the stone wall. The neighbor screamed when she saw Vanity and that made Vanity cry and laugh all at once. When the neighbor saw Vanity's mother coming down the fire escape, she told her to get her daughter. She said something was *very wrong with her*. Vanity's mother, her fingers wrapping tenderly around her daughter's hand, guided her upwards with a gentle pull, ascending the fire escape stairs to their apartment window, where a solitary tear, born of relief, fell down her cheek.

Free of lies for a time, Vanity went on to become the brightest student at her high school. Everyone adored her. Her footsteps through the corridors could

draw eyes like moths. Adoration was her shadow. This was when Vanity's mother came down with that bad word: *cancer*. Vanity's mother had an aging body, so cancer came in as it does for some, asking death to knock at the door or leap into the room, forcing us to exit stage left without so much as an applause sign.

Vanity knew her mother was dying and she didn't like it one bit. So she decided she would take the bus, south to the old village, near the forest where the creek was said to rise and wash the whole town away every full moon. Vanity went there sometimes to think. She found it by accident one day when she took the bus to get away from all the kids at school pleading to be her friend. The bus placard simply read *SOUTH*. She knew she wanted away and that's where she went. *SOUTH*. But soon, Vanity found out this town was peculiar. So peculiar was this town that the bus wouldn't drive her all the way to the bus station. Instead the driver dropped her at the forest's edge. That morning, the bus remained empty except for Vanity. The driver gave her and her red hair a dark glare.

The bus driver pulled up to the outskirts of the town and looked up in the dwindling daylight to see that the moon was just shy of a full waxing gibbous—99.8% was his guess. He fumbled for the handle to open the door, hesitantly creaking it into the air like he was opening the gates to Hell itself. Vanity thanked the driver with a grin and jumped off the bus, her penny loafers shining with the two bright pennies she had placed there that morning. She pulled her sweater around her wiry frame, wrapped her red hair around her neck like a scarf, and marched down to the village's cobblestoned streets. Only one shop owner came out to see who might have come. Another called out from behind the darkness of a closed door, "Hey! You, get out of here!" But Vanity kept walking.

Meanwhile, at home, Vanity's mother was tossing and turning in her bed with the sweats so heavy, she was soaked through like the first day Vanity came to tell her lie of life. Her hair was wet from sickness and it stuck to her face which was pale like a full moon in a clearing in the middle of the night.

Now, Vanity walked a few more steps and stopped at the door in front of the town stables and farrier.

She called through the Dutch door, "Hey, Mister! Are you here?"

Silence filled the air for a time, but eventually, some shuffling sounds and an old farrier came around the corner shifting his weight with a limp. He came to the door and looked at Vanity, her face hopeful. His eyes were like two slits in old leather but he nodded and walked back to the shadows behind him. From there, Vanity could hear the man hammering and a metallic ringing sound. As she waited, the wind began to pick up. The sky threatened rain above her and a storm started coughing up sounds of thunder. She stood resolute. The farrier came back and grimly handed her a black velvet bag. She nodded and took the pennies out of her loafers and handed them to the farrier. He shined them on the arm of his worn wool jacket and held each penny over his eyes while nodding his head in thanks.

Vanity ran back to the bus stop now. The storm chased her and nearly got a lick of her skin with its rain. She waited and waited. The bus finally did its ambivalent circle near the outskirts of the forest and stopped hard. The driver nodded vigorously to Vanity who then ran the rest of the way to get on. The bus ride home was as silent as a pin in a dead man's boutonniere.

Vanity called out to her mother as she came up the stairs to their third floor apartment, running past the first floor neighbor's door. She could hear the old woman scuffling away from the peephole, muttering about the devil and the rain.

Inside the apartment, Vanity's mother was coughing and sweating and shivering violently. No medicine could save her now. Vanity ran to the kitchen, grabbed one of the two chairs at the small wooden table where she ate every meal with her mother. She dragged the chair hard against the floor to the front door. Next she ran to the old junk drawer in the kitchen and started moving things around.

Her mother called out with a trembling voice, "Vanity? That you?"

Vanity replied quietly, "Yes, Mama."

Now, she found the hammer and slammed the drawer shut. She ran back to the chair, her penniless loafers scuffing the hardwood floors. She climbed the chair and pulled out from the black velvet bag, an iron horseshoe. She took three shiny silver nails from her pocket and placed them in her teeth. With a furious grunt she ripped out three clumps of her red hair which she wrapped around each nail. With the hammer in her hand, she held the horseshoe up above the doorway and pounded the nails into the holes affixing it to the threshold. When she was done, she spat in her palm and wiped her spit across the door frame, paying close attention to the horseshoe which she kissed three times at each nail.

Vanity jumped down from the chair and closed her eyes. She breathed deep and opened her eyes again, looking up at the horseshoe once more. The strands of hair surrounding the nails had turned black as coal in a coke oven. She then ran to her mother's room. Her mother was sitting up against the headboard. She screamed at Vanity. Coughing as she cried out, "Your hair is as black as tar." Now, Vanity's mother's face went blue like a lie you'd tell when holding your breath. Blue as a wave, blue as glacier ice. Not-a-sound blue. So quiet, she was the color blue itself. Vanity started to cry and cry, her face turning red. Red like the sun falling into the night, red like anger but this was joy.

The mother would live.

Chrissy Stegman (she/her) is a poet/writer from Baltimore, Maryland. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Rejection Letters*, *Gone Lawn*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Poverty House*, *Stone Circle Review*, *Fictive Dream* and *Voidspace Zine*. She is a 2023 BOTN nominee.