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CHEDDAR MOON

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BY ALEYNA RENTZ

My first crush killed a man in Ohio. His name was Taylor; the crush, not the man, whose name I do not know. One Halloween, my mom laid out a buffet of body parts, bowls covered by sheets like dead men on gurneys: we plunged our hands into spaghetti intestines, strawberry viscera and sausage link fingers. While the other boys traversed the haunted forest behind my house, I let myself grow bold: I took Taylor's hand and led him onto the back porch. He was ten; I was nine, the moon above us an ancient wheel of cheese. I did not yet know how to identify an isosceles triangle or recite the Fifth Amendment; the words photosynthesis and personification still sounded like spells from a book of magic, the words of witches. But I was like that, a kind of magician, privy to the secrets of the universe. I squeezed Taylor's hand, lifted one of my mother's sly kitchen towels.

In the forest, an owl hooted, or maybe it was just a boy.

All murderers were once somebody's schoolyard crush. The scene of the crime had no gum-sticky desks, no Mercator projections posted on the wall, stuck with bright, hopeful pins: here is Paris, here is Mozambique, here is Ohio—a small town whose name I can't recall, a dive bar off some forgotten stretch of highway. A man has too much to drink and a gun in his pocket, is escorted out by heavy, tattooed arms. The man gets angry, pelts a beer can at the window, and the bar owner chases him into a dark alley.

Look, I said to Taylor, it's only spaghetti.

Then there was Frank, a high school affair that never transcended shy smiles and strolls through the aquariums of our local pet store. We delivered funeral rites for upside-down goldfish, admired our own reflections in the warbling glass, thankful we were right-side-up. But Frank

had a gun, too, only he turned it on himself.
This was much later: another October,
another ghost story, a year when I was too old
for haunted forests and death feigned for fun.
I was nineteen and the boy I liked to kiss
on hushed campus sidewalks had red lines
tallied on his delicate wrists, quantifying
his sadness, all those times he'd longed for
a little less life.

But let me work some of my old magic:
let me make you believe those boys
still roam the woods behind my house,
howling at a cheddar moon.
Let me tell you those wrists were sliced
like birthday cake, topped with ice cream
and those trick candles that
never blow out.

Aleyna Rentz is an MFA candidate in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University and an editor at Moonglasses Magazine. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including Blue Earth Review, Hobart, The Collapsar, Deep South Magazine, and elsewhere.

Tags: Halloween, Barrelhouse of Horrors, Aleyna Rentz, poetry

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