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Bloom

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Tyler Mills

BLOOM

“Is this Tyler Mills?”

“Yes?” I would confirm, my voice upticking. The sound of my voice would surprise me: I thought I had flattened the questions out of my statements.

“We have information for you about your grandfather. He was a very skilled pilot, and the USAF wanted him to train for a very special program...” The voice on the other line would sound firm, clipped.

I would lean against the yellow wall in the kitchenette of the new apartment and close my eyes. *Finally, a confirmation that he was part of the mission.* It would be like I had reached into a thorny bush and twisted the stem of a single rose off inside of it.

Batman (not my husband/partner’s real name, as you could guess) and I had recently moved the afternoon of Halloween from the house we rented in a New Mexico ranching town to the small city of Santa Fe, an hour away. That day, the U-Haul Batman drove broke down in the mountains and one of the cats took a runny shit in the car I was driving. But as the sun disappeared into the trees and children began to put on skull masks, we settled into blankets swirling in the nests we made on the empty living room floor of our new home—exhausted but relieved.

A man had been stalking me at work, then appeared near the house where we had been living twice in one week. I filed a police report and documented evidence of what had been happening for the past three months, but Human Resources hinted that perhaps I had an odd fascination with the man, since I had a trove of information about his whereabouts. (How easily the narrative flips in a patriarchal system.) There is a whole other story in that experience, but for now, I want to say that this all

happened when the cotton cobwebs you can buy at Walgreens stretched over the bushes of the houses on the street. Plastic spiders commingled in the wheel-shaped webs the orb-weavers spun in the corners of doorways. The designs glowed in streetlamps, blooming with faint evening light—the real webs and the fictions indecipherable from one another. The gauzy scrim caught the light in chaos.

I had stepped into the murky stillness of the system that had put men in charge, and I mucked up the dirt. The more I tried to make things right, the more the cloudy liquid of it swirled around and around me in the water. I couldn't see my feet, or where to step next, though I did move away, finally. Even after that, I'd look in the rearview mirror as I drove to campus and from time to time see the man's truck behind me, tracing the lines my wheels made in the light powder of snow. *He's free to come and go. You can't prove this is about you.* HR's words echoed in my brain.

I would see the man every single time I left my office, left my classroom, left the building, walked to my car or walked home. He would key into my office without knocking when I was inside, give me earrings as I walked into the women's bathroom, fix his bicycle in the hallway during my night class, where I would see him every single time I'd be in the hallway, and then I'd see him again immediately afterward as he stood outside the building at 9 p.m. watching me get into my car. He would be sitting on the park bench I'd pass on my walk home. He would be in the parking lot when I cut through campus to grab a cup of coffee. Every single time my body left the privacy of my office or my home or my car, I would see him, cross paths with him. He became a part of my day, my pattern, the landscape my body trafficked. Six, seven, eight, nine times a day. I didn't see anyone else in my life that often, not even Batman, who was furious for not being able to do anything about it. After a while, I tallied the times I *didn't* see the man as though those were extraordinary occurrences. But most often, just as I'd note his absence, he'd appear right then, stepping out from around the corner of my street so we would cross

paths—just as the notation of his absence had barely begun to scrape the green chalkboard of my consciousness.

Moving on Halloween seemed symbolic to me in some way. I didn't need the world to pretend to be frightening. I didn't need to go to a party where people dressed up in masks and Jack the Ripper cloaks with scythes or Zombie [insert-politician here], or Zombie [insert-celebrity here]. Our first night in the new place, Batman and I ate Snickers out of a plastic pumpkin head. The head would glow in the dark, and the candy sat inside it like gray matter in a lobotomized skull. No children came to the door.

The new kitchen couldn't fit a table, and one of the stove burners coiled cold under pots of spaghetti. But I liked the openness of it all. The kitchen opened to the dining area, which opened to the living room. I had lived in so many apartments with a layout like this one that the oldest cat—who had been with me for more than ten years—strutted over the carpeting as though she were coming home.

But I began all of this with a phone call—an imagined phone call. The first version of the call would confirm that my grandfather *had* participated in the Nagasaki mission. The phone call would confirm everything—my grandfather's story, his whereabouts, his atomic cloud photograph. But here is the second version—the other possibility.

The phone would ring, and I would lean against the couch facing the westward windows. I would look absently at the snow-tipped mountains. The animal haunches of the slanting peaks would smolder in the late afternoon. The clouds above them would look like they burned into the cave of evening to show us something about our ideal world.

“Is this Tyler Mills?”

“Yes,” I'd say, punctuating the end of the word. I successfully flattened the uptick.

“We're calling on behalf of the US government regarding your story,” the voice would say. “There are no records that your grandfather was part of the atomic missions in any way.”

This phone call would mean that my grandfather didn't tell the truth, or that he had misled me by accident, or that I incorrectly listened to his story, piecing the wrong patches of the past together. *Write true fiction*, he had told me once, at the end of his life. What did this mean?

To enter my the new apartment complex, you have to punch a code in a box with metal numbers that feel pleasing under the fingertips—like flute keys. You can slip around the fence on foot, as I often did to head out to the Arroyo de los Chamisos Trail on my run.

“What is the gate code?” my friends would ask.

“The year World War II started,” I'd text back,

“Then #.”

★

It is tempting to think that historical events become part of a global brain we can tap into with a few keystrokes, our fingers pressing down on the letters that would tell all the databases and search engines to open the world up for us like a bulb.

Inside, the petals would reveal the hip and anther. Inside the swirling corolla of the rose, you'd find nutlike seeds. You could warm them in your palm. Then you'd put them into soil. These seeds will rehearse for you the story of our making and unmaking: bulb, bloom, then seed again. Bulb, bloom, then seed again. Again. Again.

The problem with my story is that I feel like I hardly have one.

“It doesn't matter,” Batman would say, sliding out of the black sleeves of his track jacket. “And you do have a story.” His shape would cross the threshold, the shadows melting off of him and into the stairwell. The LED bulb in the frosted dome on the wall gave light to his form. He would take off his hat and become himself again. I became less and less of myself those days I spent creating myself on the page.

★

The Manhattan Project still evokes redacted declassified documents—so much so that the image itself is almost a cliché. I

might never find the answer to my question about my grandfather because it might never have even been recorded and archived. Why was my grandfather stationed in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where the Trinity Test exploded the first atomic bomb the world has known, before he shipped out at the end? Why did he say, “This was classified,” when he gave his album of photos to my mother that contained an atomic cloud? Why did he say he was there that day? Why did he say he was interviewed to fly the mission? What happened—or didn’t?

I’ve been rehearsing the possibilities for this story in a pink notebook covered with fuchsia roses I bought at Walmart my first month in the Southwest, in the little ranching town where I had been living. Some of the blossoms look like they’ve been stenciled on. Some look like a teenager decoupage’d the swirling petals on the cover. They bloom pinkly all over it. Inside, I would handwrite sentences like this:

I wanted to put my story—fragments, ruminations—about nuclear tests in a notebook like this one, I suppose, so I could have the luxury of feeling like a hobbyist—which to me always implied picnic baskets filled with sandwiches and wine and a box of watercolor wells and one paintbrush wrapped in cheesecloth.

How funny that my brain went right to Manet paintings. How privileged this seems—art as leisure. For some reason I connected the idea of a hobby with a pre-twentieth century bourgeois ideal. I could sit in the park with my hot-pink spiral notebook and scribble my thoughts about the atomic blast (though I never did). “Free time” so often means picking up a second or third job—like Batman and I did for our debt—or sliding into the Technicolor baubles of gif memes on the cellphone screen, or checking work email, or closing your eyes and finally (*finally*) falling into sleep.

★

Choosing a notebook for a dollar or so has been one of my favorite ways to escape reality since I was twelve, when I would

wander the aisles of the now-defunct Ames (Kmart's twin). The purple, blue, cartoon-colored, wire-bound, or sometimes sewn, notebooks in the "Back to School" or "Paper Goods" aisle (depending on the season) held what seemed like a discovery, especially in the rural town in upstate New York where I spent half of my childhood dodging buckets of ice melt seeping from the ceiling and dripping down into trash cans in the halls of my school.

I bought notebooks like my new one covered in roses with babysitting money. At twelve, I bottle-fed infants parents dropped off at our house. I coaxed three-year-olds to pee before putting their boots on to play in the snow. I made \$3 an hour from one family until I got the courage to ask for a dollar raise. I cared for other children, a child myself.

Sometimes the notebook pages would stick together in the store, and there, the florescent light tinting the aisle with a religious aura, I'd crack the books open and flip the pages. *Blank, blank, blank, blank*. I'd put the nothing-yet back on the metal shelf after I had split the lark of it open.

*Split the Lark—and you'll find the Music—
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled—¹*

These notebooks, the ones where I would plan poems and short stories about women fighting their way out of the evil king's lair, needed lines that shone perfectly blue like a jay's cerulean wing. The spacing couldn't be too wide or the words would become too bubbled. Finding "college rule" paper with thinner, blank spaces between the lines, required patience. Stores always seem to carry fewer of these notebooks.

My words needed to loop like electrical wire around each horizon line the page offered. The sentence can skate over, and dip into, each new division of heaven and earth, sky and soil—
down and down the page.

★

The horizon guides pilots in flight and helps keep them from

wiping out, even though instrument readings are crucial—often more crucial.

When thick clouds arrive, that is when disorientation becomes dangerous—even deadly. According to *The Killing Zone: How and Why Pilots Die*,

Clouds and low visibility by themselves are not dangerous. But humans are not adapted to the loss of sensory perception that takes place inside a cloud. The challenge of instrument flight is to substitute the visible horizon with instruments that portray the horizon. While using instruments a battle rages inside the pilot's body. The proprioceptive and inner ear senses will continually try to convince the pilot's brain that motions and accelerations are taking place that do not agree with the flight instruments. The pilot must ignore what the body is saying and trust what the instruments are saying—but this is very hard to do.²

I think about what this battle between the body's sense of the world and what the instruments convey to the intellect might mean for all of the people who train as pilots and die during practice runs.

Fear is so often subjective, based on bias and misunderstanding.

I think about what an atomic bomb looks like when it lights up the lid of the sky, stealing the horizon, whiting it out, destroying the creative act that, in the tradition I grew up with, shaped the world.

Then God said: 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.' Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so.³

And it was so. It *was*, says language. *Was*.

As a child, I remember thinking it was important to draw the horizon line on the page, behind the house and the trees, so the sky and the land, the sky and the water, separated.

*

Bloom suggests life, opening, and fertility. I am not a gardener, though I hope that can change. I have let many tomato plants scorch into pulpy husks on the fire escape of our apartment in Chicago. But I recently planted seeds in planters, measuring the dirt with a pencil so I wouldn't bury them too deep. I have been waiting, hoping, to see sprouts peek out from the soil I have been keeping moist.

About roses, what I do know is that you need to deadhead the plant for more blooms. You “thumb prune” the bush, I read, so you get the big blooms, sacrificing the side buds that might be perfectly healthy. You cut away any downward-growing buds. You trim off the stems that cross one another as though they conveyed conflicting information. What survives? The moneymaker—yes, soft, sweet, sensual—that gathers the light in its petals and wins awards at rose shows. (Rose shows? Yes, rose shows.) In reading about roses, I've learned they're bisexual, that they bloom in strong sun, and that they can grow from seed in shallow trays after they've been cooled to break their pattern of dormancy. I've learned that many things can stress them out: mites, darkness, wind, and animals that rub the branches or pee over the soil that folds over the roots like chocolate cake batter.

When I was thirteen, a boy gave me a rose. I would put my lips to the bud and close my eyes to the lightly sweet scent. You feel like the inward curving petals are little lips kissing you back.

*

If you accidentally stare at the sun when you're driving and have nowhere else to look—

try as you might to block the orb with your free hand—the

afterimage you see looks like a bloom. A dark blotch that looks reddish to me, even velvety.

I took the wrong exit to our new apartment after driving through the mountains home one evening. As the sun set, the sky became a tangerine peel, the blue clouds pulling through it. Part of the drive leads you directly west, so the coin of the sun glares at you, into your eyes, and the road lights up all orange, all gold, and you can only see a few feet ahead of you.

Finally, I thought I could turn off the highway and see the road ahead—how this was quickly becoming a metaphor—but the exit numbers blotted out, and the wrong ramp looped around to another road that beamed me directly into the low sun again. I tried to cup it with my left hand while I steered. But jellyfish blotches started floating into my vision: indigo blue, blooming all over the curtain of my sight.

When I pulled into the parking lot, eventually, and switched off the engine that kept ticking in the dimming light, I could still see the shadow flowers the sun had burned into my eyes.

*

Here is the bare fact of a bomber in a black-and-white photo. The pacific light is so bright the men squint. They stand around it in the shadows of the huge metal body as a team. Together, they become a part of history for the person in the distance who holds the camera up, the lens glinting at them for a moment in the sun. My grandfather stands with them, darkness in his eyes. The shutter clicks.

I assume my grandfather gave this person his camera and asked for the photo so he could include it in the album where he kept his story: the tents where he slept, his friends—one kid in particular who looks even younger than my seventeen-year old grandfather, and homesick. My grandfather stands with him protectively in a few shots.

I think of the side buds of the rose trimmed from the plant so the main bud can bloom fully. I think about narrative, how we fit history into it. I think about how my grandfather enlist-

ed in the USAF too young, so he used a cousin's name for a year. This confuses the records. There are two versions of him in a database. I once wanted to "solve the puzzle" through my poems. But this was not possible—and not what poetry *does*, anyway. (Not for me, at least.) I think about how random archival information can be: what was saved, and why? Why was one manuscript not lost in the fire that destroyed all the others? Why was one record preserved and another shredded? Why was one event recorded and another not recorded? One trek into the past showed me that my grandfather was stationed in Germany for a time, even though he wasn't. He was stationed in the Pacific Theater. Did I have the wrong number for his team? Who miscopied it down, and when? Or was it mis-recorded from the beginning?

You trim off the stems that cross one another so the bloom grows bigger and bigger against a backdrop of leaves that almost frame it: inside is the thick green foliage of a past that was or never was.

How do we regard this past—this foliage thick with shadow and tight buds? What do we pinch off in service of a still life? At what point do we pluck the bloom we carefully made and lay it out on the butcher-block table next to a warm glass of white wine, a pewter candlestick tipped over, some green olives that look like they've been sucked on and spat out on the plate with their nutty pits still un-bit from the center? Does what we make become like a Dutch Golden Age Still Life? (*Never!* I imagine a snarky reader answering, as this imagined reader always does.)

But I mean this: at what point are we peeling away the leaves from the thorns of history and composing something utterly symbolic from its materials—letters, a half-remembered story, a photograph, some incomplete or even mis-numbered records—and framing it for our purposes? When I write an essay, I aim at the truth like a hawk hunting the sandy brush for a mouse. I see them looking, these birds of prey, when I'm out running on the trail. We know that Michel de Montaigne titled his genre-breaking 1580 collection of nonfiction *Essais*,

or “attempts.” What are we expecting from nonfiction as it promises us a representation of reality, or the presentation of facts? The self holds all these things together and has to knock at the door, again and again, hoping the address is correct this time—but perhaps later, scribbling it down wrong. Perhaps you were never even exactly there to begin with when you wandered around lost in the rare rainfall that comes quickly in the desert. Maybe the rain never came, but was supposed to, and you could smell it like iron in a mineral spring.

Naming and metaphor intertwine: one suggests the literal, a label. The other suggests a transformation. But how does one become the other?

It wasn't until my grandmother—my pilot grandfather's wife—died that we learned her middle name, Rose, might not be Rose.

And my grandfather, when he met her, didn't give her his real name.

They met young, in a dancehall in North Jersey shortly after the War. Was it springtime? Did the dancers dip ladles into bowls of punch floating with sliced oranges and scoops of pink sherbet? How did the red, white, and blue streamers twist through the exposed beams of the ceiling? What did the live band play on their trumpets and trombones? Did they dance first—or did my grandfather make some wisecrack when he walked up to her? Did she walk up to him and his friends while they stood outside smoking cheap cigars? What did they say, or not say, as they waited for my grandfather's friend to pull up in the car that my grandfather owned but pretended wasn't his? Was that when he told her his name was Roger, when it wasn't, because he wanted to seem like someone else? Where did “Roger's” friend take them all in the car my grandfather bought with his electrician's salary? Was he proud to own something so ostentatious after wearing his older sister's cast-off shoes all through school? As he sat in the back bucket seat, did he put his arm around the woman he would marry? Did they hold hands? Did they look in opposite directions out the windows? Did he tell her his real name after they kissed? How

many times did they kiss that night?

And why did my grandmother think her middle name was Rose? Was it really Rose, or was it the different name printed on my mother's birth certificate? After my grandmother died, my mother wore a little rosebud on a chain (in rose gold) for her.

Pink, yellow, white—so many colors—of roses appear on seed packets and in the gardening books I would look at in the library. But why did my mother's birth certificate list another middle name? Why did her brother's birth certificate list "Rose" as his mother's middle name? What happened with these records? Why did it look like he and my mother had two separate mothers? My mother called the Department of Health in New Jersey to request a corrected version.

"Prove it," they said. "Prove that wasn't her name."
She couldn't.

★

"Prove it," is what I keep hearing in my mind.

In one version of history, something happened. In another, it didn't—or not quite the way we can imagine, but rather in some murky area where the Manhattan Project cast rays of light over the road ahead so all that could be done is put one boot in front of the other, box up one more gadget to be shipped out, go on one more mission the day the sky explodes.

Photographs of the first atomic cloud at the Trinity site look like blossoms, blooms, but also jellyfish, cauliflower, cotton candy.

The cloud becomes these forms, and then a brain, before it dissolves.

¹ From Emily Dickinson's poem, "861."

² From Paul A. Craig's *The Killing Zone: How and Why Pilots Die* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001): 37–38.

³ Genesis 1:6–7 (The Holy Bible, New King James Version).