

EDITOR'S CHOICE

We chose “Body Art” for the vibrancy of its imagery and the underlying twistedness of its characters and story. Anna Cloud’s ability to hint at and develop darker themes without explicitly revealing them early on entranced us and made her story an easy pick for our Editors’ Choice.

Body Art

Anna Cloud

It was meant to be viewed from right to left. Most people looked all at once. The guard knew better. First: a baby, oddly elongated on a rock beside a group of adults. A yellow figure perpetually reaches upwards towards a piece of fruit, long and waving at the forefront of the painting like a piece of stretched cloth. Next to them: an old woman beside a depthless pool and in the background a blue idol glows in the purple twilight. A woman, hands held to her chest, looks away. What Are We? Where Do We Come From? Where Are We Going? The guard liked the title even less than he did the painting itself.

The museum had a few of Gauguin’s on loan and had set up a special exhibit for the occasion. Lots of advertising. Lots of foot traffic. The guard had done his rounds several times already and felt himself only half-waking. The warm walls and dim lights – tilted eyes and cheekbones and orange – were beginning to blur into reality: voluptuous figures in an Eden of palms, pomegranates, and nudity. Everywhere maddening brown eyes watched the guard.

It was the guard’s job to look. He studied faces (arched brows, pursed lips, and over there an impatient, twitching

limb eager to leave). He had to watch out for kids especially, couldn't have them touching the art. Did they think feeling it would make it real? Mostly they just whined and fell asleep on the cushioned benches. The guard thought they could be on to something: egg yolk lights (effusive, membranous) successions of images, platters of eyes, it was all like falling asleep. A shivering heat starting at the top of his head. In any case, it was better than the adults who never did much beyond slowing their gait (heel-toe, pendulum hips) and pausing briefly before each painting, then moving on and on and on, sometimes staring longer at their weakly reflected forms in the glass, feigning aloofness, each stop as meaningless as the last.

A few feet from the guard a girl drags lipstick across her fat, purple mouth before Gauguin's self-portrait.

There had been a few women. He had a hard time recalling how they looked, rather, in his mind all of them coalesced into a single image, an impression. How long ago was Josephine? Was it six years? Seven? The guard could not remember. Conjuring up the invented face, he saw the lips – he remembered those lips – her short black hair, maybe even her eyes.

He loved her in fall. When Josephine was a phantom before him. An idea in the cold and the fog and the stillness.

He met her in Florence, when they were both studying art at the university. The rhythm of patrons' boots in the exhibit reminded him of Josephine's against the cobblestones. He felt again the mist on the bridge, and everywhere lamplight until it was all an impression of yellow and black and cold and the faded scent of pepper on her clothing. Everything was good then. Art was still beautiful. She was beautiful.

They used to walk the city at night. She was always in front, each slow step thrust her hip out and in, out and in. He could just see the disturbances her movements made (ovals on the ground, parenthetical hips, beams of light from her swinging arms) he saw it all as a faint blue etch in the air. A haunting afterimage of Josephine. For a while, that was all.

Later, she led him up to her apartment. Squares of light hung in the windows while he felt for her footprints on the stairs. She never saw him. She left the door open.

That night was vivid in the guard's memory. The studio dissolved in color, painting eyes in the valleys of her hips and twisting dancers on her belly. Once, he made her a bright blue sky and clouds like sails ambled over her clavicle, soft inner thigh, round breast, consuming her fingertips and the birthmark on her forearm, so white it hurt – while he had her copy whirling Van Gogh's on his back, until it was all blurred and the yellow was in her hair and he was orange and everything smelled of pigment and chalk and wax.

A brunette in a red jacket eyed him. Sometimes, women looked. Occasionally, it amused the guard. Skittish eyes, their slowly rocking steps. But it mostly just annoyed him. None of them were really worth it. Not like Josephine.

The guard watched a tour group meander away from Gauguin's masterpiece. For a moment it was alone against the wall and the guard felt the blue – blazing, burning blue – from where he stood across the room. The idol was still there in the gloom and so was the old woman. She was curled inwards, holding her hands against her head. His eyes caught on the painting's hypnotic pool.

Sundays, they swam in the lake. And it was windy and the rocks slashed his feet, his legs, and his father used to hold him underwater, forcing his lungs to expand until he went limp and when he came up he saw the most marvelous colors, felt the painful and wonderful revival of his suspended body.

He dimly heard the woman in red ask him about his job. Did he like it? She had always wondered what it was like being a security guard. He watched her lean against the wall. She told him she was an art enthusiast. When he did not respond, she said that it must be amazing to be around these incredible artworks all day. He must love it. He was lucky.

The guard remembered his last show in Florence. His sculpture was still there somewhere. Splayed in pieces

across fifteen feet, the fragmented and larger-than-life wood body floating face up, strung from the ceiling. He had decorated her all over with colorful prisms and smeared handprints, but one could clearly see the muscles in the severed thigh, her jointed spinal cord and her grey brain displayed at the end of the hall. The critics had called it “wonderfully disturbing.” But that was after Josephine.

The woman smiled coquettishly. Her shoulder was still against the wall and the guard wondered if it was beginning to ache at all. She looked at every part of him, but her eyes lingered on his mouth. It was the same look his father gave to his mother. But that was when he didn’t hit her.

The guard’s mother had always told him it was impolite to stare and would cuff his head for looking too long at a person. He trained himself to stare at art instead. At mass, he would meander about the paintings while his mother prayed. Lofty, old imagery. He wanted to be their creator, to manipulate nature. He craved to twist and ravage the viewers’ emotions. Art fanned his desire for control. In the background, pews scraped against the floor, he heard whispered conversations and above it all the muted voice of his mother: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*

He remembered her trying to describe the idea of the soul, and now, just like then, he conceived of a sort of airy cavity at the center of the body. It lives inside of you, she said, but it’s not physical the way your body is. Of course he knew that wasn’t how it worked, but he couldn’t stop himself, becoming preoccupied with the frustrating reality that were he to excavate the body, beginning at the naval and slicing and digging beyond the burst stomach, the blood and the spine and were to come out the other side, he would find it was all merely bones and hot organs, layers of striped, steaming biology and nothing else.

Gauguin painted bodies yellow. Yellow like his mother’s bathroom, the same color as the eyes of her cat, blindly looking up at him through a sheet of water.

The guard regarded the brown-headed woman in front of him, feeling only a vague pleasure and an empty ache where he wanted his soul to be. This was no Josephine. He

grinned. The saliva glittered on his teeth. His smile was so wide his eyes ran. The woman shrunk a little. She said something and stepped away, fear on her face. They always did what he wanted.

He remembered afterwards plucking the grey hairs from his arm, watching the water and blood churn down the unstopped drain. Mother had always loved it more. He had fixed it. Hadn’t he?

The guard no longer cared to look. The paintings had become hateful to him. Eyes, eyes, eyes...nothing was good. All that nobility was unreal to the guard. It had all become color without feeling.

He was an exile. A detached observer. But those episodes, as brief as they were, he lived with a deranged intensity. At those times he was the artist. Consumed in bodies like Gauguin in Polynesia. The guard imagined the artist throwing off his old self, the whole grey of Paris, and everything blooming into fire of color and brown eyes. Mad, bizarre joy and orange until he forgot himself in a mirage of images – beauties in the sun – and somewhere in the warmth a sudden grief wherein the cries “Papa! Papa!” deafened him. There was Emile in her nightgown, still a child, crying because she fell and her face was just a little pink shell, and he wanted to hold her but she would vanish, like always, and then there was only moonlight and the sea breeze in the empty hallway and he sobbed and clawed his face, painting until the old joy came back just like before. Just like before. It will all be just like before. A voice was saying his name. Was it Josephine’s? His head throbbed. It must be the lights, it had to be the lights. Or the colors, the damn colors.

The guard slid into an adjacent room, a smaller one with gray walls and less people. How long had it been? He wasn’t in Athens was he? Or was it Berlin? Time moved differently here. He was in a hazy reality and afterwards he would walk home feeling blank and detached as he looked at the people passing by. So many eager, empty faces.

The guard sat for a time in one of those black, plastic chairs in the corner of the room, looking at women (Blue

hat. Stumpy legs. Josephine-esque legs) and at nothing, a presence in the back, a crow.

A pregnant woman wandered in accompanied by a man. He, handsome and well dressed, glanced vaguely at the paintings and, like most, his eyes would briefly absorb the image before going on until it was all a nightmare of bodies and color. The woman's eyes moved faster. But there was something different about it. She was looking for something specific. They were desperate, and when her eyes finally landed on a small panting off to the left, the guard studying her could tell that it was a joyless discovery. Her lovely features were masked by a hollow determination as she walked carefully over to the painting while her companion supported her elbow as she sat down.

"Such vivid colors. I can see why you like him honey."

The woman had red hair. She was silent.

He tried again. "Really, his style is reminiscent of Van Gogh."

"Glad you read the guidebook."

He looked sad and offended. The guard in the corner stifled a laugh.

"You got me. But really, it was quite interesting. Did you know that they were roommates?"

"Who?"

"Van Gogh and Gauguin."

"Oh."

The man was wearing khakis and a white shirt. Blonde. Pale-eyed. He appeared unfinished. Like all the color had run out.

"It says here Gauguin may have contributed to his madness."

"Sometimes living together does that to people."

"Yes, but most people wouldn't just cut off their earlobe and give it to someone."

"Maybe some just aren't in the right mindset to do it."

The man tapped his foot hard against the floor. Across the room, the guard watched a young girl lift her head from her sister's shoulder.

"I don't think there was anything right about his mind-

set, honey."

"It was a physical manifestation of his feelings. Like this exhibit is Gauguin's. It doesn't have to be right."

The man's voice gained volume. The young girl turned and glared.

"You're being argumentative again. I told you, the doctor said —"

"No."

"Honey, it's normal for you to be more hormonal. The baby —"

"It's not the baby."

"I know you were hesitant at first—"

"That's not the problem, Paul."

The woman had not ceased looking at the painting. The security guard saw her eyes start to water. He did not know if it was because she was genuinely upset or if it was from looking wide-eyed at one place for too long. The guard watched the woman shiver. She worried a thread on her sweater, frantically unwinding the bright white knit.

The man grabbed her hand. "Stop it Monique! That sweater was expensive!"

The woman went still.

"I don't care goddamn it. I don't care!"

People began to stare. The man folded his hands and casually placed his elbows against his thighs. His foot twitched rapidly against the tile.

"You'll be happy when it's all over. Now, I'm going to go walk around the rest of the exhibit, give you some time."

He kissed her cheek and stood up. To the guard, he was a milk glass.

"I love you." the man said and walked away.

A few people still cast accusatory glances at the woman's back but most just filtered out. There wasn't anything there to hold their attention any longer.

The woman still looked at the painting, motionless and clear-eyed. The guard watched her sit there for a long time. Unmoving, her body was straight and her arms arched over her belly.

The guard edged closer, curious to see what it was about

this painting that captivated her. It was small, most people barely spared it a glance, instead gravitating towards the large and long, more notable paintings featured in the brochures. His first impression was of yellow. A hill of golden feathers in the sun. A distant shrine was perched at the top while gargantuan flowers bloomed along a winding fence that reminded him of a pattern on a dress. It was a surreal landscape, devoid of people, it was almost apocalyptic.

"You are supposed to be over there," he said, pointing to Gauguin's masterpiece. The baby was still a baby and the adults were still living. The old woman was in the same position but the pool was different each time.

"I was. I like it over here better."

"Too much for you?"

"No. They're all saying the same thing."

Her red hair reminded him of winter berries. For a moment, he saw them bright against the snow.

"What do they say?"

"Something spiritual, I suppose."

The guard felt shaky, the way he had when Josephine left. Weak-boned and thick-eyed, the certainty that everything had gone on without him. What Are We? What Do We Come From? Where Are We Going? He thought he had it once. Almost. It came as a shiver in his chest. But only for Josephine. He hadn't felt it since. He had tried.

The woman pointed to the painting. "I first saw this at a museum in Amsterdam, right after I married Paul."

"Most people wouldn't care to see the same work twice. You must like it."

"I wouldn't say I liked it," she said laughing, "In fact I would say it's the opposite."

She had shadows on the tender skin below her eyes. Her thin limbs amplified her swollen abdomen. It looked unnatural.

"Why? Why would you search out a painting you hate?"

"Just look. There is not a soul in sight, but it doesn't feel lonely does it? There are other things...spirits, I guess you'd call them. When I look at it, I can smell the grass and hear the wind. It's the perfect kind of isolation. I've never

encountered anything else like it."

The woman looked wistful. Her face showed a faint joy, but the guard mostly saw the blue veins in her hands, the burst blood vessels in her eyes.

She looked back at the man and began laughing. Brittle laughter that hurt and made the few people nearby turn their heads.

"Don't you just want to go in?" she asked, "Just go in and feel the feathers and the wind and the solitude? It's like a reminder. A terrible reminder, but if I let it go it'll be worse."

The guard had the queerest feeling he was talking with the artist. He started to sweat, his head wasn't right and he wasn't quite solid anymore. The paintings expanded and he heard the palms and high laughter, there was singing and when he rubbed his hands over his face all he saw was the woman's body, small and bent, and Josephine walking away leaving nothing but a bucket of eyes and her black jacket. He gripped her arm. Oh Josephine...Oh Mother. He never wanted them to leave, but he had made them. But they were so cruel. But he didn't know! He didn't! A pair of yellow eyes blindly looked up at him through a sheet of water. His first. Maybe he had gone wrong then? But it didn't matter anymore. He would fix it. He heard a woman yelling but he couldn't remember to whose voice it belonged. Was it Mother's? He was sorry, so sorry. He felt claws against his arm, the same thrashing, the same pain.

"What are you doing? Let go of me! Let go of me now!"

The guard looked down just as the woman pulled herself away from him. The momentum pushed her backwards. She started to fall. The guard stood in a dazed trance. He saw her body thrown against the couch and her husband running from across the room to try and catch her. The guard could not move. And then she was folded against the cold tile, her red hair fanned against the white ground, and her husband was there, holding her and frantically asking if the baby was okay. Wide eyed, she stared at the guard, too shocked to feel pain.

"Somebody get some help!" the man called to the

stunned silence.

The guard felt something inside him lock back into place. He began running past eyes in stunned faces. He went straight through the exhibit and he heard distant shouting, bodies clawed at him, dropping from the paintings – was that the old woman lashing at his ribs? He dimly recalled a door but he thought it had a face and it was such a strange, celestial blue. All the colors swam in his head until he was lost, and his face was suddenly stinging and wet and he heard cars and the bell of a passing cyclist, and the first thing he noticed were the reds and whites of a poster reflected in a nearby puddle. It was evening.

Colors smeared in the rain. Yellows in the sidewalk, he stumbled past the river and the dark green shop stalls (locked up for the night) bleeding over the bridge, a woman's purple scarf defused before his eyes and for a moment the whole street went violet like he'd been punched in the eye. Where was Josephine now? Still in the river? He remembered her that night on the bridge, twirling and leaping like a wavering moonbeam, he remembered her kissing the man beside her – her lips must have felt like stars! – she had the radiance of last light, the fleeting beauty of wind over water. Water – she was like water. And then she had the woman's red hair. The guard imagined her in the man's arms, hurt from growing another set of bones, a body she didn't want because she picked this but the dancers were on her belly, her mouth lovely like Josephine's and it was wrong, all awfully wrong. She picked this. She picked him.

The world went violet like he'd been punched in the eye. But that was her gait! Past the fat man in brown, shoulders twisting as she avoided a passing umbrella, unhurried, hands in the pockets of her black coat. Her hood was up. It was her!

It was fall. The lamps were yellow and she was a phantom. The world reset and he remembered what it was like to hear voices in the rain. He was calm as he followed her. It would be the same now. She would make things beautiful again.

She walked through narrow, quieter streets. How unlike her, he thought, Josephine always loved watching the crowds.

This Josephine was smaller. Shorter perhaps, but he could live with that. He always preferred tall women but this one would do, he could hold her like a child and paint miniature pictures on her flesh, he already knew which ones – the dancers – she loved that, and yellows had always complimented her, his climbing rose. Water dripped off his hair, his nose, but he was feverish and did not care. Josephine! Josephine! He'd found one at last!

Her jacket was long but he knew how her hips swung beneath it, he had memorized their sensual path, all the arcs and the dips. He would have to get her a new coat. She was wearing boots – good girl! – and her thighs curved in a rounder, but not unpleasant manner.

Josephine was still unaware of him, brazenly sticking to the loneliest passages like she knew them, but the guard did not worry because he was there. She was safe with him. He studied the motion of her legs. Oh, how he longed to press his mouth to the precious backs of her knees!

Thank God for the rain masking his creeping steps. Just a little bit past this streetlamp...she was in the space between two ancient buildings now. No one was out for the rain. Thank God. It was dark. He reached for the sleeve of her soaked coat and felt her tiny bird bones beneath. She gasped and her breath was a cloud in the air. It was Josephine, the same yellow hair, her eyes (Were they blue? It didn't matter) – and the mouth! – he would not forget that mouth.

She had not screamed yet but he could see her magnificent throat working. He slammed his hand over her mouth and she bit him. She was struggling now, all her muscles quivering and straining like an unbroken horse. He had missed Josephine. Her parts. Her pulse. They would go to Tahiti. He would paint and she would love him.