

# Breathless

I am riding on a horse through black marshland. We are trotting slowly inside a field of tall brown reeds. The dark earth is soft beneath us. When I look down, I see small things hopping from small mound to small mound, keenly escaping the shallow muddy waters. The opaque waters sit motionless, blocking the reflection of the midday sun hovering above me.

My horse stops suddenly. I squeeze my knees against her body, but she will not move. I squeeze again, harder this time, yet she remains still. Annoyed, I sigh softly. I cannot dismount because I am not wearing shoes. I had lost them in the scuffle days ago when I had escaped from the sheriff.

Since then, my bare feet have been dangling on either side of my horse for two exhaustive days. My legs, once dark-brown, have now crisped to an almost blue-black. *Too dark for me, he had said once. Blackie, he had called me. His angry eyes had shot fire at me, choking me, burning into my soul. I think I had cried then. That was the only time I cried in his presence. He had hated to see me pathetic and yearning. So he left, only to return later that night intoxicated with the nostalgia of broken dreams.*

My stalled horse neighs now. She neighs passionately, huffing forcefully through her nose. I lean forward, straining to see what she sees. I see placid trees in the distance. I see smoke billowing from structures in the distance. I see some semblance of refuge in the distance, but that is all.

# Breathless

“Come on, horse,” I whisper. She stands stubbornly under the intense sun. I tell her loving words of encouragement and peace, but she ignores me. My lips crack and bleed when I speak. My tongue feels like a foreign cloth in my mouth. I had last tasted water two days ago, before I left, right after the shots were fired.

A breeze now taps me on the shoulder. As I turn my sunburnt face towards it, it kisses me on the cheek. I feel it grow in fullness as it blows, invading my dress which is tattered and ripped in many places. The breeze is patient and cradles me in its movements. I close my eyes unexpectedly cherishing this unexpected treat.

My horse shakes her head vigorously, awakening me out of my repose. What is it? I wonder. The breeze answers me by delivering a smell that nudges my lips into a smile. It is the smell of roses, strong pungent sweet roses. My horse eagerly turns me towards the source of this delightful scent.

In a cleared field ahead of me, I see something drop from the sky like a line. When we reach it, I see that it is a green rope. I reach out my hand to touch it. It is furry and thick. The rope is as thick as my thighs. *Too thick for me, he had said once. Thunder thighs, he had called them. No matter. My too thick thighs had saved me from his voracious tyranny many times and eventually carried me away for the final time.*

I curiously grab the rope's knobbed end with both hands, clawing my fingers into its flesh. The rope bounces softly, then lifts me from my horse who seems astounded as she watches me ascend into the hot sky.

# Breathless

Oh, the deliciousness of the air! The insatiable sweet scent grows stronger the higher I rise until I feel I am a rose myself. Then the rope stops and I am suspended in the sky. I am not afraid, but intrigued. I feel drunk with this aromatic sweetness filling my nostrils.

Weightless, I hang. My hair tosses about as I slightly sway with the soothing breeze. *Nappy head, he had said once. Snap-naps, he had called me. Yet, it was this hair that spoke strength to me when I was too weak to plead for forgiveness.*

A large petal suddenly flounders from the heavens, then dips down close to me. While still holding the rope with my other hand, I swing myself closer to the petal, pulling it down sharply. To my surprise, more petals emerge, gigantic petals in the shape of an enormous bouquet, the size of a small city.

I gasp at the glorious sight. Each petal is arrayed in colors I have never seen before. They dazzle under the sun like strange rainbows.

I swing into the center of the rose and breathe deeply, taking in all the perfume that makes me dizzy and giddy with foolish joy. As I swing I hear movements from the heavens, here a petal, there another.

I swing to each one, grabbing the oddly colored flesh then pulling my body into the crux of its beauty to absorb the sweet-scented nectar. Oh, my soul is alive! I swing, dazed, crazed, from petal to petal like a rapacious animal. I do not care what this could be, how such beauty could be suspended by invisible eternity.

# Breathless

My arms should be tired and sore, but they are not. They remain strong as they support me in this salacious escapade. *Your arms are too big for me, he had said once. Arms like a man, he had called them. But these arms had cradled his limp body when he lost his hope and skillfully deflected him when his nostrils flared.*

I am now fully intoxicated with the aromatic flora. I decide to envelope myself in a rose petal that resembles the color yellow stained with the hue of purple sunsets. I let go of the green rope and wrap myself in the petal.

I rub my hands along on its smooth lining. This one is especially sweet like vanilla extract carelessly spilled from the bottle. The scent reaches into my lungs and fills my hungry stomach with its promises.

I close my eyes and lay still. *I forget the years when I had bit my lips to keep the shallow peace. I forget the months he had marched through the house shooting words like bullets, crushing my artistry and blackening my fingers. I forget my once-filled womb that had emptied itself of the spark I so desperately needed to love. Too expensive, he had said once. Burdens, he had called them.*

*I forget the nights he had laid on top of me, taking more from me than I had left to give. Cursing me. Slapping me. Caressing my face after spitting on it. Too fat for me, he had said once. Fatso, he had called me.*

I forget all this as I try to sleep in my new bed in the sky. I wrap the petal tighter around me, wondering if I could disappear and return to the invisible roots these heavenly flowers must have sprouted from.

# Breathless

I used to bring such beauty home, too, when I had extra money. I would place them in the only glass vase we owned – the sole wedding gift we had received. And for a time, for a day or two, a splash of color warmed my heart before it went cold again. *Get rid of those things, he had ordered once. A waste of time, he had called them.*

Oh! This sweet slumber does not last. I soon hear rumbling emanating from the heavens. The sky begins to gray and I see the petals around me retreat to their mysterious garden above the clouds.

The petal I am in gently shakes me. The green rope swings near me now, patiently waiting for me to grab on. Reluctantly, I do. I watch the petal I was lying in slowly fold back into the heavens as I am lowered down to the solid earth.

My devoted horse waits for me as I gradually dip down and perfectly plop onto her back. She neighs, signaling for me to hold on to her long mane, which I obey. Then my horse breaks into a gallop moving east. She races fanatically through the sloshy ground. The reeds whip against her body but she is oblivious to the pain.

The rhythm of her gallop is my heartbeat. *But my heart was beating even faster when he had grabbed me from behind and slid his arm underneath my chin in a grim headlock and his sour breath had churned my stomach while he tried to whisper something to me but I was tired of his sour whispers and I was tired of his meek efforts and I was tired of his calloused hand stinging my face over and over again and then my heart had started to beat faster, then faster, then faster as I reached behind, clawing, scratching, catching his skin underneath my fingernails, catching his gun in my hand while he had yelled and cursed me and tightened his*

# Breathless

*grip and I was panting and I could not breathe then my heart beat boom-boom as the shots fired causing him to release me and fall back and my fingers trembled with the death still in my hands that I later threw out somewhere in the woods that night while the hounds howled after me and the voice of the law called me out of my name...*

My horse is racing now. I lean forward to stabilize my body as we take flight. I look down to see the top of the reeds, then the fields, then the top of the trees. We rush through the air, faster than the birds, faster than the rain that is now coming. My horse perseveres until a whirlwind swallows us whole, leaving me breathless.