

Columbia:

a journal of literature and art

A Place Not There

Author(s): Elizabeth Graver

Source: *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, winter 1996-97, No. 27 (winter 1996-97), pp. 141-149

Published by: Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41807354>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*

JSTOR

A Place Not There

A STORE. OR NOT EVEN a store. An arrangement of chairs, stools, tables in front of a two-car garage with the doors down. She sells furniture she has painted in overly bright colors. People do not buy it. She thinks it is because she is charging too much and no one has money now, but in fact no one walks by, and if they do, they are on duty, or they are not from this country and cannot carry much with them. And the furniture hurts their eyes.

In the back, behind the furniture and garage, a child, and in the child, a wish, and in the wish, a mother. Though she has one, right out front. She is not a pretty child, not the kind people would pluck up and squeeze. She is a square little girl with a sloping, weak chin and short fingers. She went to school once, before. She was quick at school. She can almost remember it, how she used to clap the erasers together at the end of the day, black felt pad to black felt pad, a cloud of white dust, the sticks of chalk like the bones inside her fingers. A taste without words now, a coating on her tongue.

She does not miss her father because she cannot remember him except in the vaguest way, although she pretends to, even to herself. Her mother remembers. A name: Arthur. A beard, reddish like the girl's hair. A mole in the crotch of two fingers, the fingers stained with ink. Breath sweet and pale as milk. Once her mother

decorated other people's houses part-time, made kids' bedrooms look like cities, circuses or jungles, detailed murals on walls and headboards and closet doors. Now she finds furniture instead, broken things people have thrown away or whole things they have forgotten, left or been denied. Sometimes she climbs through open or smashed windows on the block and lifts out a rocker or a wooden footstool. Getting the paint is easy, a hardware store at the end of the block gaping open.

She helps herself, paints all day, forgets to speak to her daughter. She paints one chair red, another blue. All primaries, no patterns. She paints in exactly the opposite way that she made murals and her husband made maps, no detail here, just the broad picture. She covers up the grain of fine woods—red cherry and knobby walnut and imported teak. The furniture flattens, begins to look like a drawing in a book. The girl keeps expecting her to go further, put tiger stripes on the yellow chair or a stoplight on the blue chair. Nothing feels finished to the girl, but her mother goes no further, just stacks the furniture in the garage, which is also where they sleep.

One day she remembers to scavenge a bed for her daughter—a white youth bed like something she would have bought in a former life. It has low bars on its sides, a cautious mix between a real bed and a crib. She leaves it white. She herself sleeps in a red rocking chair, sitting. Often, after the girl falls asleep, the mother slides her hand between her own legs and strokes herself. She is not seeking pleasure and she does not find it; rather she finds some sort of familiarity, a dim unfolding memory—not of being with her husband, but of when she was a girl not much older than her daughter and thought this gesture dangerous and did it anyway. Her old ideas of danger—electrical outlets near her kids, fast cars, strong tides, medicine cabinets—are losing air, turning flat and silly as bad jokes. Thinking of them comforts her and helps her sleep.

They have no blankets, but it is summer, and even in winter it is the South and the girl, somehow, has not grown thin through all this. Something is keeping her alive. Her mother is not sure what. They hardly eat, fruit from a tree sometimes. Overgrown lettuce.

They chew on chives, drink water from a spigot on the side of the garage, a green hose, the girl's mouth open, her head tilted back.

A twitch, then, every once in a while, from the mother, who remembers she loves her child, remembers the other ones—a second girl and a boy, this one's twin. Come here, she says one morning to the girl, and she strips her down and washes her with the garden hose and a clean paintbrush. The girl shuts her eyes. Her mother paints her with water. The child has no memory of being this happy and she is sure that if she opens her eyes, she will find herself behind the garage on a pile of cinder blocks, watching her mother through two sets of windows.

She does not open her eyes. Her mother paints her. The brush is yellow and soft on her arched back, on her flat chest and rounded belly and between her buttocks. She knows she is a twin but cannot remember the other one and does not want him back. No room. She will save Come here. And save the paintbrush and her mother's hands on her back and knees and tucking her wet hair behind her ear.

This is not the sort of country—these are not the sort of people—to have a war at home. These are not the sort of people. Once, the mother drove a nice car, with a metal grid in the back to keep the dog from jumping over the seat, and a box of toys and dried apples on the floor for traffic jams. The children had lessons and believed in things. Somewhere in the dim back of her mind, the girl knows that the middle note on the piano is C. She knows that once, in another world, her sister's tooth fell out and a fairy left a quarter and a book. She knows Head Up and Heels Down on the pony, how to hold on with both hands to the knob on the Western saddle as she is led around the ring. She was just getting old enough to loosen her grip on the knob and hold the reins herself—not too tight and not too slack.

Her mother remembers more. How once it was the Cold War, when she had three babies. How then, after that, it was a better time—for the world, that is. For her it was more or less the same time, though she made an effort to keep up. Walls coming down across the world. People voting. She saw it on the news and

smiled; she even got a little teary-eyed. A piece of paper folded. People coming on crutches, in go-carts, people crawling, almost, to the polls. Invisible ink. In some countries. In other countries the rivers got clogged with bodies. Parts of bodies.

How after the Cold War it was the Middle War. Her husband made maps and he was always busy, redoing. She knew some of his trade secrets. The way, to set a trap for the plagiarists, he always put in a place which was not there. A small, dead-end street on a city map. A little made-up island on a world map. He had named one such island after her. If these things showed up later on someone else's map, you caught them red-handed. He had the best sense of direction she had ever seen, must have had a brain like the globe of a compass, jiggling in water. A patient man. Meticulous. Spidery green lines, pale yellow lines, dark black. In ink when they first got married, then later sometimes on a screen. He would show her since he worked at home. Come see, after the children were asleep. Where is it? she might ask, but it did not matter. She wanted to see the colors and how small the world looked, like something you could plagiarize.

Later she found out that the world was full of secret alliances and blurry borders, ones not put on any map. She had felt like an idiot for having believed that because they held each other at night, she could read her husband's mind. He had known; she is sure of it now. He had drawn his maps like intricate patchworks—look, hon, so many tiny countries in the world!—but he had known all along that the little countries were actually one country pretending to be many. Or something; she still wasn't sure she had it straight. Fake countries staging wars between each other while they gathered their forces underground, pretending to speak many languages, when really they spoke one. Fake translators, fake borders, fake maps, fake wars. Until this one. It surprises her, thinking back, that people had the energy for double lives. She no longer cares about much. Care has been leeches out of her, though in the beginning she found it all exciting. Finally something close to home, her city on the news. Soldiers. A sense of living history. She had been brave, gone out at night through

the dark streets to bring canned food to people in the rubble, like Joan of Arc or Mother Courage. Stupid. She had been stupid.

When she got back, only the little girl was left. She did not know if her other children had gone off and were living like mice in the debris, or if they had been taken away. She did not know where her husband, the mapmaker, had disappeared to, or her chocolate labrador dog. She knew her husband had secrets, ones he kept from her, about ways to draw the earth. She remembered a story they had read together once, about an uncharted space, a diamond the size of a mountain, kept by its owner off the maps. Not so far-fetched, he had said, but he would not tell her more. When she returned to the house to find him gone, his computer was missing, too. She had noticed that, though she had not noticed much.

Just grabbed the girl, who was asleep in her room, grabbed their passports, left a note, stood in a snaking line and tried to get money from the bank machine, which said Out of Cash in amber letters. Sorry Please Come Again. Not logical; it would have been smarter to stay put in the house. She had gotten lost, had never had a sense of direction and anyway nothing looked the same. She had needed to look for them. A year ago, maybe, by now. Two years ago, maybe, or six months. For a while she had kept track on the garage wall, marked days in matchstick lines like a prisoner in a movie, but then she had stopped and painted over the lines in a fat blue swathe.

Perhaps he had gone somewhere uncharted with the other children. In the beginning the thought had comforted her, to picture them away and safe. Then it had begun to make her angry—to have been left behind that way—and she had imagined smashing in his computer screen with a hammer and biting teeth-marks into the fine brown film you could see when you slid the metal back on his diskettes. At some point her daughter's teeth had started dropping out like rotten fruit. Baby teeth. At first it had appalled and amazed and excited her, that those teeth would drop and the other ones, in the midst of all this, would find the energy to push through.

Then she stopped noticing. Mindless as a tooth, as a sharp canine. She pushes through, too, now. Not well, not lovingly, but like an animal who gets up and looks for food because it has a heart muscle twitching in its chest cavity, and a stomach spitting acid, and, at its side, a smaller version of itself. A peach found on the corner of the street, bitten in two, half swallowed, the rest handed to the girl. The furniture, which she does not paint with pleasure, though it looks bright. Something to do. A way to earn a little or pretend she might. A way to simplify the room inside her head.

In her other life, she made children's bedrooms look like the big, wide world. What do you want? she used to kneel and ask the children. What do you like? Then she would give it to them. She painted walls so thick with foliage they made the room hang moist and heavy as a rainforest. She covered walls with skyscrapers' jagged tops and golden windows—and tucked between their shapes, the starry blue dome of a mosque and tiny matchstick people leading good and pleasant lives. She tried to make the rooms go on journeys and take the children into the outside world. Now she does the opposite, though without much thought. She wants, in her gut, to live inside a children's book where everything is flat and countable—red, yellow, or blue—and the stiff pages can be washed clean at the end of the day.

People come by occasionally, journalists from other countries mostly. Don't know, she says when they bend down to ask her questions. Don't remember, don't know. If she had ever been able to imagine this before, she might find some words now. She had given it no thought. Almost no thought. Only once, on the news, she had seen a man running from sniper fire wearing Nike sneakers. Nike sneakers, the curved, wave insignia on the side. A war on the other side of the world, but he was a man in a blue windbreaker and she recognized his sneaker brand. A tiny shudder then. An ear cocked toward upstairs: okay, the three of them, all right. Sound asleep. The twins just three, then; the older girl almost five. In sleepers. She had zipped them shut. A brief, untoward fear. Just that. It did not last long. Even once things had begun, on the other side

of the city, she had carried cans and felt the bright, sharp sap of bravery as she handed out beans and corn, but she had given it practically no thought.

The girl has come to thought during these two years or months, her teeth wiggling, loosening in her mouth. One hanging for days by a little pink thread. She collects them, though no one has told her to. She saves them in the hollow of a cinder block along with orange rinds, peach pits, dimes (useless now) and other things she finds but cannot identify: a cracked computer diskette with a lime green label. A diaphragm with a rubbery soft center and wiry edge, smelling of salt and talc. Some bent nails. Her teeth. Six so far, small and yellowish. She remembers how to count, though she does not remember learning in school.

One two three. Four five six. In the early days she had sat with her mother, but one day she kicked some paint by mistake and spilled it. Her mother had slapped her with a hand covered with cracked, drying blue. Still, the girl came back. Squatted. She had learned, already, the gestures of a streetchild: how to squat among her mother's many chairs, how to cup water in her hand. Sometimes in the beginning they sang things: Got two eyes, one two, and they're both the same size, one two. Or one about I love trash. Songs she now forgets most of the time. Then her mother had started saying Quiet quiet. Started eating the whole peach sometimes, leaving the carved pit on the ground. The girl found the stack of cinder blocks on the other side of the garage and the parallel set of windows so she could see through to where her mother was.

Now the child gives it nothing but thought: How to live in this world of hers, how to climb up and over, find, hoard, gather, beg. Not quick, not invisible. She walks like a peasant woman, up and down the streets. She walks up to soldiers, journalists, whoever is around. She puts out her hands. She does not remember how it was before. She is not pretty enough to turn heads, but this also helps her; they do not touch her too much, only a pat here and there, only one man, once, who put his finger in her. She stood still while he did it. She clenched. He gave her beef jerky—salty, thick like leathery skin.

Mostly things are quiet on the streets, not a lot of people, more soldiers than regular people. Not a lot of danger. It is a quiet aftertime. More journalists than soldiers. Some people carry an oily yellow lotion which they put on their skin so that they always look slippery, glossy, like their insides have come outside or they are something about to be cooked. The girl and her mother do not have any lotion. The child does not know what it is for, and her mother has not noticed it.

What if I didn't come home? the girl wonders. Home to the garage. Would she notice?

But she always does come home, is coming home as she thinks about it now. After an hour or two, following the streets, trotting like a dog, all of it arranged in her head so that she never hesitates—left turn, right, straight, across a railroad bridge, left again, left and then right, to where her mother, this time, is painting a table yellow.

She steps up and watches, and her mother's gaze flickers toward her. The girl has two apples and a banana in the pockets of the man's shirt she wears as a dress.

She might walk up to her kneeling mother, hold out the fruit. Oh, her mother might say.

Something might wake up in the girl, flutter forward from the back of her head where, if she grows up, she will try to find things and be unable to most of the time: before before. Something might click. One of these things is not like the others, she might say, and remember dancing animals with skin like bath towels. One of these things just doesn't belong. Can you tell me which thing is not like the others, before I finish this song? Her mother might look at her.

148 Hi, her mother might say. She might touch her daughter's brow. I'd forgotten that one, she might say.

The girl puts down the fruit near where her mother is painting.

Once a day her mother notices her, or once every few days. She bathes the girl with the hose, or asks where she went when she wandered away, or hands her a piece of food. Not often, but the girl is storing things for if she grows up and has to remember

her mother, who she knows, even now, will not stay long in this world, if any of them do. The girl does not remember the Cold War or Middle War, but songs keep coming to her out of nowhere: Minnie and Winnie slept in a shell, Sleep little ladies, and they slept well.

Her mother finds more and more chairs and speaks less and less. She never leaves the sidewalk in front of the garage except to walk half a block up or down, looking for food or furniture. But the girl has a sense of direction and new, strong, jagged front teeth, and when a journalist stoops down to ask her questions, she answers in clipped, clear words: In a garage. My mother. I don't know. Can I have an orange? I don't know can I have an orange please?

Until the journalist gives it to her; they always have fruit in their pockets. They write down her words on thin, creamy pads she wants to grab and hide inside her cinder block. She is not surprised by how often she crosses paths with these people, or by how flawlessly they speak her language. She is not surprised by anything. At night she does not dream, her sleep too brief and heavy. Mostly she lies awake and slyly watches things—shadows on the ceiling, or her mother fingering her own flesh in the chair or sleeping with her head flung back.

If the girl were able to, she might dream of what her mother dreams. She is on a flat road in a small, clear country she does not recognize, a road no one knows about but her husband—who invented it to trick the plagiarists—and herself, and their three children, who are strapped on her back like water bottles, their eyes still shut, their gums still hiding double sets of teeth.