

Writing | Symposium 2022

Impression, Woman by Anna Kieseewetter

When you wake up, it's as if someone has doused the world with ether and smeared its runny colors into an Impressionist painting, a Monet-esque blur with a touch of Whistler's darkness. You slap the nightstand once, twice. It tinkles in response, Celexa pills rattling in their cages, plastic bracelets and brass keys clinking against one another. Your hand roves over wads of gum, balled-up tissues, crinkly candy wrappers crusted with sticky residue. But no glasses. You sweep through once more, the bristly crumbs of a day-old croissant leaving tiny indents in your palm. Nothing. Your breath tastes sour as you hoist yourself up. The faint electric glow from your charging toothbrush is enough that, when you squint, you can just make out the bathroom door's frame. Leaning heavily against the bed, you feel your way forward, a moth drawn towards light. When the icy tiles slide beneath your scabby toes, you let out a breath that's somewhere between a sigh and a shiver. The bathroom light comes on, your clothes come off, and in you step. This, at least, is a familiar scene. The shower controls and tins of soap are always a blur. You smile a bit at the friendly colors: the cinnamon smudges of your feet, the pink traces of mold beneath them. Sometimes, you feel like the art of compensation is at work here. Surrounded by myopic haze, every other sensation is magnified. As the fragrant steam envelops you, you bask in its tangy orange-blossom scent, the tingling of bubbles unfurling across your skin. Too soon, it's over, and you're doing that fumbling half-dance of edging your leggings back onto your dripping legs. Finger-combing your hair, you bring your face an inch away from the mirror until you can finally see her staring back: a little girl pretending to be a woman. The leftover pudge of childhood hasn't gone away; neither have the remnant pocks of acne scars, although moving your head back works beautifully to blur out these offenses. You do this a lot, actually: peering at yourself through the filter of high myopia, admiring this smudged portrait. Monet called his painting *Impression, Sunrise*; you suppose you could call this *Impression, Woman*. When at last you grow weary of your own reflection, you find yourself in the hallway. You've been living alone for too long; even with the world faded, you can navigate by memory. When you reach your living room, you know where they'll be; nestled in that tiny alcove where you always fall asleep reading, the rug worn from hours of time-wasting. And you're right. Here they are: round frames that are supposed to look distinguished but instead accentuate your immature features. You prod at them, dust them off with your t-shirt; then, finding you've run out of ways to stall time, you slip them onto your face. Suddenly, this apartment feels stiflingly small. Like you're a child trapped within a toy block. Or perhaps you're a ballerina in a snow globe, only it's a brick made of plaster with only dust in place of snow. With your glasses on, you can see every corner, the limits of the four walls enclosing you. You venture back through the hallway with growing dismay. Unpaid bills litter the floor, wilted plants drooping from the windowsill. You can see flecks of mildew staining the dingy walls in stark detail, months of grime and neglect infesting this pretense of adulthood. It's more of a Bernardi still life than a Monet: in this painting, every rampant flaw is crystal-clear. As these details conquer your vision, all at once, it's too much. You're a child again, huddled in the hoarded remnants of your last episode. When you wring your hands, you can see the raw flesh hanging off your cuticles, the uneven curve of bitten nails. It's disgusting, yet you find yourself nibbling just like before, the surrounding disorder seeping into your skin. So when you reach your bedroom, you squeeze yourself back under the covers, place your glasses in their rightful spot on the nightstand. As the room blurs back before your eyes, that fuzziness like a welcome blanket, you let out a breath. Perhaps like this, the world will cease to matter. Like this, the walls will extend a little wider. Your head sinks into the pillow as you decide to hold onto this impression of womanhood. Just a little while longer.

By Anna Kieseewetter

volcanic

(content warning: dermatillomania)

i'm at it again.

tearing off frayed ropes of skin,

mouth tasting of salt and metal.

then i take my fingers from my teeth

and set them on the table.

my hand is fissured:

barren earth. skin flaking

like a thin layer of permafrost.

lava oozes out from

blackened flaps of volcanic flesh.

i gaze at the raw cuticles,

nails bitten to stubby ridges,

fingertips picked at and

eroded to white calluses.

then i stuff hands

back into pockets.

dormant until the next eruption.

