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The Pale Town

Heather D. Rumsey

When I think of home, I think of a place that I needed to leave. Today is the end of summer and the return of fall. Outside my window, nature sings as the temperature plummets. Where I come from the seasons don't change. Instead, they resemble each other in air and shape, returning on time with an absence of expression. The buildings and beaches disguise the desert as something habitable. I remember dry grass, polluted water, and hot yellow, unending days.

This morning I think about all the peculiar things that had to happen for this moment to exist. Here it is living and here I am invading its space. I drop the needle on the hard wax. "I've Just Seen A Face" plays to the wind. I leave the front door open and sit on the steps. Shade covers the house and the cold air clings to my skin. I stick my feet out to reach the only spot of sun, shining among the shifting shrouds of pale white and blue. Along comes a spider charging towards my foot, but when I move, it folds its body in retreat, falling. Its furry black legs face the sky, stone still, stopped in time. I sit still staring at it for a few minutes and then whisper, "I know you're alive." I wonder how much of a spider's life is spent pretending to be dead?

As I stare at its still body, I can't help but think of my lifeless life, of the apartment I grew up in, small and tacky. The walls all white, the town all white, my friends all white. Catty girls, deeply judgemental, unaware of their own biases, easily interrupted by men, and blind to their crudeness. Not that I was any different.

Where you're from shapes who you are. When you're young you soak it all up until it becomes the standard or until one day you change and grow from it all. But most of the people I grew up with stayed the same. The hardest part about going home is seeing the people who were once such a huge part of my life, the same as when I left. At some point, I really thought we would make it out together. The past stores these identities that are inescapable and

when I visit home they come back to haunt me.
The nostalgia is like a hand to my throat, squeezing.

Suddenly, I'm seventeen again: riding around in a big truck with friends on our way to a party to drink cheap alcohol and act as if only tonight matters. Living in those memories are a group of white kids surrounding me, listening to hip hop and rap music, appropriating and misunderstanding a culture.

The same kids who would get a girl wasted, talk about her body like it was objectifiable, get themselves laid, and then shame her later for the lack of consent.

When I go back home, buildings pass my car window where those women once were pitied. In the stores and around town, I see those boys who are now men, staring back at me with familiar eyes. As a young woman, I was taught that my appearance was the most important part of me. Every day I'd get up early, paint my face, and brush every single strand of hair into place. But it wasn't enough, I was still teased for the way I looked.

When I was seventeen a group of guys, who claimed to be my good friends, wrote a rap about six girls. I was one of them. The rap bashed our looks and our bodies, going into private detail about what they looked like and why they were ugly. One of the girls couldn't go back to school for a week. I forgave them. I accepted their excuses for degrading us as some kind of joke. Like we, "shouldn't be so mad they were joking." This is the place I came from, and I believed it would never hurt me.

That same year my girlfriends and I were getting ready for an event at my house. Erica walks out the door and says to one of the girls, "Damn you look great! You look so beautiful! I'll meet you all there." She closes the door behind her.

"Do you think she's a lesbian?" the girl says laughing. "I'm pretty sure she is."

"I can just tell by the way she like looks at me sometimes. And I don't think she's ever had a boyfriend." The rest of the girls start laughing.

"Let's go." I say.

I decided at that moment to never come out about my sexuality. It was easier to lie to myself. It didn't help that my mother physically cringed at the sight of any non-conventional sexual intercourse. There weren't people in this town that I could look up to. Provided to me was an empty understanding of the world, one that favored heteronormativity and pale skin. I spent my life beating myself up for being different than this. Behind my smile was someone who was planning a way out, someone who had to leave home to find home.

I was curious about life at the university. In college, I went to a party that was hosted by fraternity men. On campus I felt mature and sophisticated, but socializing with men from campus was entirely different. That night my girlfriend and I painted ourselves with makeup and wore revealing dresses; mine tiny,

black, and riding up my body every five minutes. We approached the gates, large intricate arches, and were greeted by a man.

“Who do you know here?” he asks, looking us up and down.

“We know Tanner,” my friend says.

“Fine.” He opens the gate.

The place was crowded. A gaggle of girls in little to no clothing came swarming out. They were shitfaced, discoordinated, and stumbling towards a group of guys.

“Where have you bitches been?! We’ve been waiting out here forever!”

Behind them, the home looked like a giant hotel. There were two stories of rooms, about fifteen to each level. We walked upstairs to find our friend and stepped into the first room. In the corner was a bar. A shirtless guy stood behind it handing out shots of vodka, the cheap plastic handle kind. The music was so loud I couldn’t hear anything and everyone was touching each other. A single black light was emanating from the corner.

A guy falls into the side of me, and I spill my drink.

“Hey!” he says. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.” I say.

“Want to make out?”

“No thanks.”

“Then why are you here?”

I threw the black dress away the next day. It was cheap and had a hole.

That place, those nights, taught me to hate men. I didn’t trust them not to be like those men, like my friends who rapped about me, like my classmates who pounced on anything that moved or didn’t move, like the boy who wanted me for my body and didn’t care about the rest.

I’ve been closed off to my sexuality ever since those men cornered me, and shaped my world to their standards. I cover my body now with old and shapeless clothes because I’m scared of being looked at by those men again. Who I was then, what people told me I was, is nothing like I am now. I did things that went against everything I believe in.

When I go back to where I came from it feels like I’m standing in front of this old version of me, my finger firm and shaking angrily at her face.

I lean in slowly and whisper, “I am not you anymore.”

She looks back at me, smirking, “I know you’re still alive.”

I left that town when I was twenty four. My old life behind me as I drove the desert roads north, passed the buildings and people I try and fail to forget. I still scroll through their lives filled with fantasies I know are not, cannot be, real. It’s suffocating. I pretend to care, liking and looking at what they are doing or how they are living. I guess a part of me still cares about that stupid town no matter how shitty it is, no matter how far away I’ve gone or how much I’ve

grown. It has a place in my heart. It's still home, in a way, as fucked up as it may be.

I look back into the door of my new home. It's time to flip the record. The sun gets higher pushing its rays up my legs. The spider lies still, folded, lifeless. I blow on its body, and it does not move. Is it still acting, still alive? Or have I killed it? I stand slowly and stare at my new town, nearly a thousand miles from the old one. I go back in to the house, and flip the record.

When I return the spider is gone either of its own volition or carried by the wind. I do not know.