

Blemish

By Andrea Rowe

“A woman like that is misunderstood.

I have been her kind.”

– Anne Sexton

She crouches in the pantry, phone cradled in her hand as the bile thrusts up from within. She swallows, pushing it back down, but not entirely.

The sinkhole settles and she refocuses as the digital damning plays out before her, again, and again. The face framed in the mirror is familiar, as is the mirror, *and* the freckled hand curling around the phone.

Layers discarded, an artful toss of clothes clinging to the edge of the bath behind, like innocence drowning. The child’s strawberry blemish on her collarbone brands her. No cupid kisses from above. No, not now, just a stain that cannot be wiped, seeping through the screen.

Lacey feels the disappointment hollow her, and she traverses her history of mothering. A forlorn search to locate the fissure when the cracks appeared, subterranean at first, then puckering into a jagged chasm. Unwatched, this child, *her child*, slips silently, unseen, into the abyss.

She feels the pull of her own falling and wallows in their connected loss.

The dismay of her, the golden one. Yesterday Vi glowed in the kitchen, shimmering in the tuneless air. Air-pods in, music moving her between pantry and sink, a cheeky sashay as she popped grapes coquettishly in her mouth.

Lacey blushes at her unknowing admiration; she is yet to fail the test.

The screen pips and vibrates. A message. Another, and another.

Their world has woken now as they mark their space with economic emojis and a guess work of disconnected letters.

“Yasssss Queen”

“You slay sista”

“You. Did. Not.”

“OMFG WTAF???”

“Yo tits are melons”

“Me want some”

“Get your pants off”

“Hey @HameSk8 checkout this NIFOC”

“Nice Kitty and Titty”

“Gimme gimme”

“Skank”

“KYS”

The words hover, silent chatter filling the screen, competing for their inglorious turns.

Her daughter’s breasts drift before her, moistened mounds fresh from a shower, unveiled for the masses, or most likely the eyes of one only. But for now, for this, the eyes of all.

Lacey knows the damage is done. Shared, re-shared, saved, filed. The grubbiness of each realisation. Her parenting exposed as a new shame burns within.

“This is Vi’s mum,” she stabs at the phone, *“You are communicating with a minor. I have screen shots of all comments.”*

Press to send.

Sent.

Shadowy ellipses evaporate. They’re duplicitous in their silence, acknowledging nothing. Gossip ghosts moves unseen into new terrain.

Damage done. They both have reputations now.

Vi will never forgive her. Her well-intentioned defense misunderstood.

She places a hand on the bench, hauling herself up toward the sink as the gush of cornflakes and tea spill swiftly over piles of dishes.

“Gather yourself,” her mind cautions. *“Get it together. C’mon.”*

The mass of floating vomit mocks her as it settles. Her dismay feels too large to swallow. It builds in her throat once more and she’s shameless in its release, the bench falling victim to a fresh launch.

Lacey swallows, forcing a wet tongue onto her lips as the moisture wakens her into action. Her mind plays through calls to parents, Principal, family, friends ... who else? Her lips part, breathing out the withered phantom of conversation.

The conversation.

She fast tracks through the beginning and imagines herself perched on the edges of the crumpled quilt, mounds of sleep-pummeled feathers framing the sullen eyes. She hopes for a recognition of regret as they peel back each heavy word, spiraling into ... into what? *What* will they find there? Anger? Defiance? Penitence? Sorrow? Comparison?

Lacey’s limbs grow heavy with the memory of what she hasn’t yet lived. If she could crawl in under that doonah, close her eyes and cocoon herself in sleep she would. Not wake until an adult life stands sculpted before her, teenage traces retreating into a hazy outline.

She longs for the ripened conversation, years from now, when this girl-woman turns to her in knowingness. Released from disrepute, the tiniest of smears in history a fleeting postscript. But. Yet. Before.

She's ungainly underneath the weight of it. She must labour through, that's all there is to it. *"It's an uphill job,"* her mother's memory sighs.

She wondered at the vexatious comment at the time, thought her mother oppressive in her tone. But. Yet. Now.

Her toil awaits. Stripped back to an undercoat, the salvaging must begin. Lacy unrolls her spine, straightens up and steps away from the pooling sheen. Cleaning it eludes her.

Up the tiled hallway she shuffles, walls grin with the false cheer of framed portraits and school project collages, rousing her forward. At its end, the girl-child sleeps, sheathed in faded Christmas pyjamas, silk twists around creamy calves and taugth stomach. An assault of growth and impudence as she slumbers.

She falters and wishes again she had caught the passage of movement from bed to bathroom, girl groomed in bloom.

Limbs and flesh arranged in styled promiscuity. Slender arms stretched above, the studied circle of pout, a haunting of the pious lips that hover over summer ice-creams and dripping mangoes. Bra unclipped, breasts released.

Tarnished now.

Her notoriety building with the algorithms.

What else is out there? The fear migrates and outstares her.

If Lacey could pull the plug on the world of internet, she'd bloody wrench it, gauge the sockets from the wall and churn screens into grains of nothingness. Fuse their eyes closed, twist mouths tight with her sharp nails.

The screen brightens once again as she fingers the keys.

The words. What are the words?

How can she stretch a sentence to sums up the rage that lies beneath her ribcage? She itches to articulate and hurl this viciousness back. *There are no words.*

Just the strangled, spittle of a cry as she searches for the fault line, along the quiet corridor, outstretched fingers holding her upright through the chasm.

She has been her kind, but not in this time.

Lacey's knuckles pad hesitantly at the door, fingernail catching on a skate sticker overlapping faded fairies. The steel handle sure and commanding in her trembling hand as she pushes on it. Inside a

stale reek of rest expels, a salt lamp glows, and just crack of light, a schism of the morning intrudes through the curtain.

Vi's silhouette huddles in the bed, an unknowing, sleeping shadow.

Lacey moves towards the outline, her weight leaning heavily into the tumble of pillows and girl.

Arms stretch in the gloom, hands move through the nest of hair to cradle her head, grasping the beautiful form of her girl.

Rage regrouped, shame censured, she rocks the child awake.

To begin.