San Antonio Review • San Antonio Review (Issue 2 | Winter 2019)

Virginity

Jeri Griffith

Published on: Aug 28, 2019

Updated on: Aug 03, 2020

DOI: 10.21428/9b43cd98.3db3c5ec

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1.

“Are you a virgin?”

The two boys leer at me. Their silly grins hide something that, to me, is inscrutable. I don’t know if I’m a virgin or not.

I’m not sure what I should say. I feel there’s some trick here. If I say yes, I might be caught. They will know I’m not sure what they’re talking about. If I say no, that could be the wrong answer. Heads or tails? Yes or no?

I pause to squint wisely, gazing across the school ground where other children are playing kickball.

“Sure,” I reply, “Sure, I’m a virgin.”

Donnie Mayer rolls his eyes and turns to Larry Kaminski to laugh.

Image: “Liberals,” Liberals Arts Building, The University of Texas at Austin, 20x16, acrylic on canvas, [Brianna Keeper](#)

With the thumb and index finger of his left hand, he makes a circle. Then he sticks the middle finger of his right hand inside it, moving it up and down through the hole. He smiles again, a slightly evil smile, then snorts through his nose as if this were the funniest thing in the world.

My face must register a blankness I wish I could hide. Larry flushes and looks away, seemingly embarrassed. I stare down at the ground wondering exactly why they are picking on me.

That afternoon, Donny passes me a note during the geography lesson. I LOVE YOU is printed in big, crude, irregular letters. I turn my head to glance at him. He’s pretending not to notice me. I stuff the note into my geography book.

The next day, I get another note. This one is from Larry. Again, it says I LOVE YOU. Inside the paper, I find a ring from a Cracker Jack box. I recognize it as the same prize I got two weeks ago.

More happens.

Larry and Donny begin walking me home at lunchtime. They wait outside on the street for me. After two or three days, they have a fight. They walk down the block and tussle in the tall grass next to the railroad tracks. Larry seems to have won because, when they reappear, Donny's face is scratched and bleeding. They're fighting over which of them is going to marry me. When they return from this exchange of fisticuffs, they seem to have agreed to disagree.

Donny says "screw." He says it over and over. "Screw you. Screw."

Both of them seem to think this is very funny just to say the word again and again. I don't get it. Why are they picking on me and what do they want? I honestly don't know.

2.

In *The Wounded Angel*, Finnish artist Hugo Simberg depicts small white flowers blundering forth under a steely sky. A shrub in the background shows yellow buds, but there is little sign of greenery so it must be early spring. In this 1903 oil painting, two boys utilize a makeshift stretcher to transport their cargo—a child angel with flaxen hair dressed in radiantly white clothing. The angel's drooping head is bound with a cloth that partially hides her face and covers her eyes. Her cream-colored wings, rendered useless by some invisible wound, drape listlessly.

The young lad at the front of their procession has donned a black suit and derby. His dark shoes look too large for him. With eyes intent on the path, he exudes an exceedingly somber demeanor. The expression on his cohort's face could be construed as a mixture of guilt, sadness, and anger. There's some sense here that, although the boys rescued the angel, they might also be the ones who wounded her.

Barely able to support herself in an upright position, the angel seems ready to go wherever the boys are taking her. The scene is sad, and the boys seem penitent. We don't know what has happened in the last hours or what the future might hold. The angel is injured. Some fall has occurred, and they are all three of them deciding what to do about it.

3.

I am an eleven-year-old girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. I am not an angel. I'm earthbound, and more often than not, instead of dreaming of flying, I dream of falling. The same dream recurs to disrupt my sleep. Granted bird's-eye vision, I peer over the edge of my mattress to see a crisscross of roads and farm fields far below me. Still high in the air, this bed is a safe berth, but the pull of gravity is inexorable. I plunge toward those fields. I'm going to die. My life as I have known it is about to end. Waking, I pant with fear, but I don't know what I'm afraid of.

4.

In Paul Gauguin's painting, *The Loss of Virginity*, a naked girl-child lies exposed in the foreground next to some gray rocks. A reddish-brown dog sports a rakish, almost human expression as he presides over the girl's body with one paw placed between her breasts. The girl's pale, prone form echoes the shape of the landscape. Why is she unclothed and exposed in this forlorn place where red earth meets a sky of thin clouds? There's something ominous going on here. By title, the painter tells us that the image is about the girl's loss of virginity. Faceless villagers in a distant line wend along a dirt road. The girl's connection to these fellow humans is unclear.

22.

Finally, the falling dream reaches its conclusion. I am lying on my back in the middle of a cornfield. I have come down to earth and I am not dead. The dizzying descent is over. I have my first menstrual period. Nothing has changed and yet everything has changed. Boys become a part of my life. In high school, I go steady with a different boy each year. I wear class rings wrapped with yarn to make them stay on my finger. I go around in my guy's letter jacket. I stay out until the wee hours on the night of the prom. I experience all the drama and excitement of fighting off advances while making out in the back seats of cars.

All these cultural markers eventually lead to the day when I lose my virginity. I'm no longer a girl living at home. I'm away at school. The boy has been pressuring me for months. It's what he wants more than anything else. On my part, I am just tired, tired of putting up resistance. I agree. We use a condom, and it's over very quickly.

The next day, I find myself walking across the college campus in springtime. Huge trees spread their leafing branches above me. A robin hopping on the grassy lawn cocks its head to listen for the telltale worm. I feel proud of myself, as though I've passed some secret milestone that no one else can see. Inwardly, I smile. But did I conquer or was I merely conquered? I don't know. I feel the indifferent villagers in Gauguin's painting walking wordlessly away.

Soon after, I end my relationship with that boy. The following spring brings a major update. I've fallen for someone new. He's a writer. We read books together. We talk about feelings and about everything there is to talk about in the world. And we don't have sex. We make love.

6.

It's May and the redbuds are blooming. I'm headed toward the house of Winifred Van Etten, a professor emeritus from the small college I attend who has become a friend. She's in her seventies and retired now, but she taught English at the college for decades. Years ago, in 1936, Winifred won the *Atlantic Monthly* prize for her book *I am the Fox*. It's a novel, yes, but in many ways, also a feminist text.

A redhead when she was young, Winifred must have equated herself with the fox, the terrified object of the hunt desperately trying to escape the hunters. She did not wish to be pursued and subdued by any man. She did not want to be demeaned or held back because she was a woman. In Ben Van Etten, she found a companion who treated her as an equal. He allowed her the freedom she needed to be herself. They had no children.

I find Winifred sitting on the walkway next to the stone house she and Ben built all those years ago with prize money generated by the novel. She's combing out her long, white hair, drying it in the sun. Usually she wears it up so I've never seen her like this before. Now she is old, and she's no longer the fox flashing red in front of the hounds. I approach to sit on the stone stairs beside her.

Winifred is not like other people. She sees no reason to make conversation when there's nothing to say. Sometimes, we sit silently for twenty minutes and then she'll comment on a bird or tell a story about her dog, Jolie, who is long dead. She has survived two cancers. She has known two world wars. She is for women's rights and opposed to all kinds of violence. Sometimes, she sighs dejectedly and says reflectively: "Ah, well, the men will have their toys and they must play with them." By this, she means weapons. She means wars.

I think Winifred knows I am not a virgin. But we don't talk about that. She touches the stump of the grapevine that had to be cut down last year. It was becoming unmanageable and overgrowing the path. The grape wood was thick as my wrist. When burned in the fireplace, it gave off of a particularly bright and intense flame. All things burn in the end. The grape vine is cut down. The girl-child loses her virginity and her innocence. The hours of an old woman's life waver like a candle flame. Winifred continues combing her white hair.

"I have to go now," I say. "I've got studying to do."

Writer and artist Jeri Griffith lives and works in Brattleboro, Vermont, after stints in Boston and Austin, Texas, but her childhood was spent in Wisconsin. These disparate places each feel like separate countries to her, with landscapes, seasons, and ways of being that influence both her art and her identity. Jeri has published stories and essays in literary quarterlies. She is currently working on a memoir and a collection of short stories, as well as organizing exhibitions of her art.