

AGES FOURTEEN TO EIGHTEEN

The Nightingale Quilt

The kind of cold that only bites on clear nights bared its teeth as Gayle walked back to the house, carrying a single firefly in a mayonnaise jar. The toes of her untied tennis shoes were soaked from chasing her now-captive firefly through the wet grass and her unzipped jacket rustled over her thin pajamas as she walked. She slipped back into the house, using her jar to light the way, closed her bedroom door and sat on her quilted-bed in the dark, among her well-loved stuffed animals, and held the glowing jar up to her eyes. The firefly tapped against the plastic as it tried to fly away.

The sound of Gayle's parents arguing pressed through the wall and pushed its cold hands down on her shoulders, wrapped its fingers around her chest. Gayle felt a puncture of regret and sadness seeped into the hole it had caused. She couldn't keep the bug imprisoned, captured and confused. She knew the feeling all too well, which was a fate she would never wish on anyone.

Gayle tried to block out her parents as she unscrewed the lid and lifted the firefly out. The bug's globe of light shined on her hand and she could see her skin was dark and damp. Panic made her leap up and switch the light on, forgetting about the firefly that was flying about her room, throwing soft shadows around like scarves.

Her hand was coated in slick and translucent black. She couldn't feel it, or smell it, but her fingers slid across her palm as if oiled. Small brown feathers stuck out of her knuckles, her wrist, and she felt them in her skin when she pulled on them. Fear's fingers closed over her mouth and she looked up from her feathered-hand to the jar sitting on her bed, still filled with the night she had unknowingly caught. Stars drifted in its darkness and moved slowly, as if by currents. A splash of the night had dripped down the side of the jar and pooled on her blanket, like a patch sewn into the quilt. The firefly, drawn to the spill as if it was a window, flew through the fabric and up into the sky.

Gayle picked up the jar, which weighed nearly nothing, and after a moment of hesitation, poured it out onto her bed. It rolled out like honey and she spread the stars out over her quilt, her hands fledging as she did so. Something broke in her parents' room and she breathed hard and cried quietly as they brought her name into the argument. The guilty hands pressed harder, condemning her to think she deserved blame. She pulled the night-soaked blanket off her bed with shaking hands, wrapped it around herself and huddled on the floor. She wished to leave, to take her fragile self away and bandage her brittle heart, wished for just one night to cry alone and far away.

She felt feathers sprout from the bedspread and she pulled the fabric tighter around her body, letting it become her skin, and herself become the bird she so desperately wanted to be, the bird with a sturdy soul and song. Gayle knew she would never forget how to be weak, but if the feathers would only last until the first sunrays melted them apart, she could maybe learn how to be otherwise. She flapped her wings, enjoying the sensation of tendons pulling in new directions, and flew up into the light cast by the waning moon, embroidered with silver thread upon the sky.



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Nightfall in the Mire

Hunter-children in the dusk

Scrambling into world weary boots

As they linger on the porch

A weak light beam links them to the marsh

And then they are swallowed

By uneven pasture ground

And a chorus of tree frogs

One girl waltzes with

Air that's clad in shadows

Other small boots jump from

Hummock to hummock

Each a sparsely reeded isle

In a puddle sea

Then

An unsounded call

Brings the young

To business

All turn gazes to the earth

And crouch, intent

In the beat of an owl's wing

Cupped hands find their prey

And holding their prize

Up to the flashlight

Palms open to form

A slimy bower for a

Single

Emerald

Frog



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