Gaea

Daniel Cameron
Concordia University - Portland

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They took the family Bible as evidence against Warren and the others. My brothers, sisters, and I were evidence as well. Living, breathing evidence.

Together, we and four hundred other children were abducted from our homes and driven in black sedans to several state run shelters in West Texas. During the trip, officers chatted over walkie-talkies while we huddled close. Rumors were that some men in the camp might go to jail. Normally I loved studying the little subtleties of landscape, but on the ride I thought only of Warren. It is hard to imagine the desert as being anymore barren than it already is, but the day we separated it was an absolute emptiness.

The young ones cry as they are being dressed. Our female caretakers try to comfort them unsuccessfully. They shush them and slick back their long trains of hair, wet with tears and sweat, so everyone can see everyone else's face. Most of us older girls are too disturbed to explain that red blouses are forbidden. Red belongs to Jesus. That is why they are panicking. Some girls my age even throw fits, which is worse than hysterical four or five year olds because they have the responsibility to stay strong. Of course it is difficult to remain mad at them. Sometimes I want to say, I don't care if you cry, as long as we cry together.

Tomorrow they want to take our blood, test it. Secretly, I have been sick since we got here, and the idea of a needle is too fantastic that I rush toward the toilet to wretch.

An old female caretaker, brutally tan, with stone gray hair like creamed wheat, files in behind to hold my hair and massage the tender parts of my spine. She speaks over the disgusting sounds I make. Her words are soft and slightly curious.

“When I was fourteen,” she says, “I was still pestering my dad for a horse that I would never get.”

My face is blister red. A gross film of sweat collects in the nook of my neck. The rest of me is in the toilet. Luckily there comes a respite in which to cool down. I turn to see the woman standing in the doorway, her arms crossed and her head simply shaking.

The sun is a gold barrel cactus flower, lovely and untouchable. It's noontime in the shelter, and the quiet is commanding. I have recovered a bit and chose to take stock of where I am again. Girls sit with their backs to the cots, walking their fingers across the wooden floorboards and populating the open valley between their legs with vague, fleshy hand-animals. Outside a dry wind whispers. Yellow flecks of sand flare up on the windowpane. At first my palm takes in the warmth of the glass, then my entire face presses against it. I feel the hot pulse of another person nearby, the fluttery kick of a second presence I've grown so accustomed to, though now it is just my own dumb reflection staring back.

I miss the ranch. My family. Warren and his big wagon wheel eyes. In the end it will all be okay, he had said. But right now I am homesick, stuck remembering what I never thought I could lose.

Sometimes, on days when you could see the heat waves bend, the desert light would hit the cross that sat atop the limestone temple in the middle of the ranch. It hurt your eyes, the fracturing of light was so bright. Still you kept watching, because you had the feeling that behind the sharp luster marked the appearance of something blessed.

Once last July a giant wren materialized out of nowhere. Watching it trace an arc in the sky, I grew transfixed over the idea of flight. Every tiny movement was so terrifyingly free. That was power, I thought. Power that, though it is enticing, corrupts. I kept my eyes on the bird as if it were guilty of I don't know what. Self-assuredly, it had launched itself into a mild updraft and from there let the air decide its course. Gone in the current, fueled by the Earth's tireless breath, I wondered about its family and about mine. I wondered how it could be so solitary with all of creation surrounding it.

The government had come and stolen our mothers and fathers, and we as children wept. They refused to understand our closeness. We could not understand their formal reasons as to why we had to leave the camp. Confronted with hasty guns and hastier goodbyes, four hundred fresh hearts, at once and
for the first time, asked themselves the impossible question – how could you not share life?

They say it will all be over quickly, but I still make a pact with myself – I will never be motherless. I will be mother-more, mother-full. Aware of my duty before God and my husband. I will serve Warren and he will cherish me. Together we will raise a family that puts love first.

The mental picture is beautiful. I hope it will happen soon. I am almost positive it will, but today is nonetheless a hard day to believe in anything. My prayers trail off further and further like the bird when it flew into the horizon alone. There was nothing to accompany it. Due to the whistling bowl of Texas sand, you couldn’t hear whether other birds were calling to it, or if it tried to amuse itself with its own chirrup tune. Truthfully I didn’t know if it even could sing, but if could and did, I bet it was a lonely song. A soft aubade that floated alongside as it gently wafted over the crowns of the bur oak and Western soapberry trees, and became a single gray-blue dot that, I suppose, might resemble anything seen from far enough away.

That same July, a thirteen-year-old girl vanished from camp. The men were all nervous, yet they did nothing but angrily talk amongst themselves at the temple. Warren came over a lot then. We’d sit on the bed and he’d grow serious, holding my shoulders firmly in place as he asked if I ever had the urge to runaway. The furiousness was unlike him. Usually our time together was relaxed and more romantic. We’d spend hours discussing what would happen before, during, and after our wedding ceremony, but at that time Warren was so preoccupied. His other two wives were having problems and he was worried I would misbehave. He was skeptical about why I was so fond of exploring the outskirts of the compound alone. I told him I loved the desert, but he insisted there was more to it. Then he said he trusted me. Acting rushed, he apologized again and again about the constant interrogation.

“It’s a hungry-dog world out there,” he said, tugging at his receding hairline. Large loose teardrops had begun to bubble in the corners of his eyes, and his rounded, toadstool nose started to leak. I clutched his wrist, while he wiped away a curtain of perspiration from his forehead, and then leaned the newly shined surface onto my chest. “You deserve a nice safe place like this,” he said.

By then he had finished crying. His neck was still craned in my lap; his eyes shut. Blindly he stroked my stomach where a small crease of baby fat eternally protruded. When he found the slight bulge, his hand retreated a few inches and hung like a thick atmosphere above the area as he divined the belly with wishes for what would come next.

Cleaning the kitchen after supper one night, I asked my mother if she ever had the desire to escape the group. Mama quit scrubbing the dishes and answered immediately. She said the name of our town, El Dorado, meant the City of Gold. “So why in the world would we want to leave?”

Evenings at the shelter were docile, except for when my insides played tug-of-war. My bouts of sickness were unpredictable, but the gray-haired woman who had stayed with me in the bathroom made me swear to find her whenever I felt ill.

The night before the Church’s custody trial, my body was hammered with pain. All the girls in the back room were asleep. Quietly, the woman led me to the toilet with a flashlight. I was backed up and could produce nothing, so I rested my head on the porcelain. My chaperone waited patiently, her thumb and forefinger rubbing her chin quizzically when I asked her if she knew about the story of El Dorado.

She shook her head and we waited longer. The bulb of the flashlight flickered.

“I lost a daughter to drugs,” the woman said suddenly. “There’s no way around it. You will lose them somehow.”

Her voice dropped near the end, realizing we may have less in common then she assumed. Our eye-lines met. She appeared ashamed. Her caramel colored eyes melted into sticky, sorrowful puddles, then they diverted to the ceiling.

My organs hurt. There was a brief fit of gagging and panting, then silence. After a minute of calm, I asked how she felt about the name Wren, for a boy or girl.

“It’s pretty,” she said in a slow sad tone.

I thought so, too. At my station, with my head heavy as monolith on the rim of the toilet, I just hoped Warren would like it.