Rabbit Cages

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol9/iss1/5
At one in the morning, Dawn Shafer and her friend and neighbor Jason Crans were behind her garage. They were sitting on a steel drum turned on its side, leaning their backs against the vinyl siding with their feet dangling just above the grass. Dawn had recently returned home from working at Fremont Cinemas, a two screen theatre where she sold tickets, made popcorn, and then swept while the credits rolled and the music from the final show of the night boomed through the fabric covered speakers overhead. Ten minutes earlier, she had taken the shortcut through a missing plank in the fence, and walked the three blocks to her neighborhood under streetlights without seeing a single car pass her by. And because her mother worked third shift at the factory behind their house, when Dawn returned home, she knew she could have Jason over anytime she wanted, even though, without fail, there was always a note left on the counter specifically telling her not to.

Her wire rabbit cages were butted against the garage next to where they were sitting, and the topic of discussion was Dawn’s new hairstyle. Her black hair, once all one length, was now cut short. It rounded to her scalp; it circled her ears and sliced diagonally at the ball of the neck. At her temples, the beautician had kept the hair long and in the moonlight it looked as if two feathers reached down, curled forward while tickling her collarbone with their tips.

Dawn puckered her lips to the side and stuck an olive colored cheek toward her friend. “Feel it, Jason,” she said. “They’re soft.”

Jason was wearing his white overalls and blue t-shirt. He reached over and gently stroked one of the well-conditioned feathers. It slipped through his palm like a ribbon. Dawn held her blue eyes toward the stars, letting him touch, and then Jason used the tips of his fingers to comb its back, upward and against the grain. Dawn shivered from the prickled feeling and Jason leaned in close. He whispered in her ear and she could feel his breath. “Can we put two rabbits in one cage?” he asked.

“Nope,” Dawn said, pointing her chin to the sky. “You’ve ruined it.”

“Why?”

“Are you kidding me? They’ll make babies.”

Jason giggled and said, “I know.”

“Why are you so weird?” Dawn asked. “I can’t have a million rabbit babies. Besides, no one buys rabbits. Not anymore.”

Jason smiled to the side because he couldn’t disagree. Dawn hooked one of the blades of hair behind her ear with a finger and asked, “Why do you have to do that? I wanted to tell you why I got my hair cut like this. All the way home I couldn’t wait to tell you because I knew I would see you. And now you’ve ruined it.”

His hand touched her leg. “I’m sorry. Why did you?”

“Nope,” Dawn said, pointing her chin to the sky. “You’ve ruined it.”

“Please.”
“Okay. Even though you’ve ruined it,” she said. “Well, you know how I work at the movies, right?”

“Oh?”

“Well, I get to see a lot of them. All of them, actually. But there’s this feeling you get after watching them. It’s when I’m in the theatre cleaning up and the music is still playing, that music the director or whoever wants to leave with you.”

“I’m following,” he said.

“You?”

“I am.”

“Well,” she continued, “it’s as if they leave you with this feeling that you’re bigger than you actually are. It’s not just one part, but it’s all of them put together. It’s that feeling you get—after it’s all done—it’s like you sit and contemplate life. It’s like it changes how you think for just a brief moment, as if you’re really big and the song keeps playing in your head reminding you to keep thinking larger than yourself. Do you know what I mean? And I guess that’s why I wanted this haircut, to keep reminding me that I’m bigger than this place. Fremont, that is. Do you know what I mean? I know this might sound silly.”

Jason stood up, ripped a clump of grass from the ground and walked toward the rabbit cages.

“What are you doing?” Dawn asked.

“Just feeding them,” he said.

“Oh. But do you know what I mean?”

Jason stuck the grass through the cage and held on while a rabbit tugged and nibbled. “Not really,” he shrugged.

“Well look,” she said. Dawn stood up, took Jason by the back of the shoulders, turned him toward an opening through the trees and pointed over a field where a church lay on the other side: a place where a large white crucifix stood spotlighted.

“Out there,” she said. “Past the field. Past the church. Past the cornfields.” Dawn rested her forearm on his shoulder and Jason looked down the length of her arm. She was pointing at a purple glow in the horizon as if a dark volcano erupted in the distance. “God’s out there,” she said. “I don’t mean in heaven, just where we haven’t seen yet.”

“God?” Jason asked. “I didn’t know you believed in a God.”

Her arm relaxed. “I don’t,” she said. “Not really. There’s just something telling me that I’m larger than where I stand. And when it’s dark and quiet like this, when I’m walking home at night and those songs run through my head, I’m just reminded of it. That’s all.” She took her hands off his shoulders. “—sorry,” she said. “No,” he said. “That’s great.” Dawn turned toward her door and Jason reached out. He took her forearm with the tips of his fingers and they slid over her cool skin to her wrist.
“Stop that,” she said pulling away. Her eyes softened, “—please? I just want you to know how I feel sometimes.”

“I get it. Sure. God is where we haven’t seen yet. I know that feeling,” he said. “We all do.”

The latch on her aluminum door clicked as she opened it. “Do we?” she asked.

Jason followed her up a set of wooden stairs and into the kitchen. Her hair dangled down as she reached for the dimmer switch just above the sink, and not turning it on all the way, the overhead lamp gave the room a pinkish hue as Jason’s footsteps creaked over the linoleum. From the cupboard Dawn took two glasses. She opened the fridge, knelt down, and filled them from a box of wine.

“What are you trying to say?” Jason asked. The kitchen table was next to him. He pulled out a chair and took a seat. “Are you leaving again?”

There was a torn piece of notebook paper on the counter, a note from her mother. Dawn crumpled it in her hand and threw it in the trash below the sink before handing Jason his glass.

“No,” she said. “I just feel so,” she clenched her fists and her arms shook, “…cooped up sometimes. It’s this town. It’s this house. It’s everything, you know.”

In front of Jason was a small stack of books, Dawn’s mother’s daily Christian literature: small pamphlet-sized books with pictures of waterfalls and orange sunsets on their covers with titles like *Today* and *Our Daily Bread*. Jason took one, opened it and flipped through its pages.

“Have you been going to church?” he asked.

Red wine ran down the side of Dawn’s chin. She caught it with her palm before it dripped. “No,” she giggled. “Why?”

“Well, I’ve been praying for you,” he said. “Why not? You could be a model, you know. I know you want to leave.”

“Jason?” Dawn sighed. “It’s just not in me. I’m not the type.” The small book still lay open in Jason’s hands. Dawn stepped closer, slid it from his fingers and set it down with the rest of them. “But what do you mean by—‘for me’?”

“Just that—I hope you do good,” he said. “Because, the way you talk sometimes reminds me a little of this service my mom took me to the other day. About wanting to leave.”

“Service?”

“What the preacher said.”

“Please, Jason. This is the kind of stuff I’m talking about. Fucking Fremont,” she said. “I can’t believe the shit they force down your throat sometimes.”

“It could help you, though.”
“Fine,” she said, and then plopped in a chair somewhat disgusted.

“Well,” Jason started, “he was talking about these pillars of salt. Those things we worship. Worldly things. Like our big screen televisions, our jobs, our girlfriends and boyfriends—money. He was saying how we’re so worried about those things we take away from what’s most important. He said we just gotta sit back and enjoy what we have, and then let God worry about those troubles we can’t control. And that’s why, like when I hear you talk about leaving, like when you say, *God’s out there,* that I think you might be worried about those pillars of salt too much. So when you said that stuff outside, that stuff about heaven being out there, that’s what I thought you meant.” He drank from his glass of wine and put it back down. “Maybe we should be happy with what we have. Be content, ya know.”

“Pillars of salt?” she asked. “The church is the pillar of salt. But Jason, this heaven is outside. That’s what I was trying to say. I feel it when I walk home in the dark. When it’s quiet. Don’t you? When the moon is really bright and I’m just looking at it. I love that feeling. Like when I’m in the sun and I’m helping and talking to people. This God—or whatever you want to call it—is down by the beach when I stick my toes in the water. I don’t need anybody else to tell me that.”

Sinking down, Jason said, “But, don’t you think that always believing the bigger thing is out there is just another way of running?”

“No. Not at all,” she said. “I think staying in one spot for too long is hiding. And I think it’s really easy to hide here—inside a church,” she rolled her eyes, “inside Fremont.”

A grin sliced across Jason’s face. On the stove, there was a digital clock and its green numbers blinked 2:26. Jason leaned around Dawn and looked at it. Sitting back, he asked, “Where do you want to go?”

“Gosh. Anywhere,” Dawn said. Her chin was pressed inside her collar. She slouched with her glass of wine held in her lap and Jason looked at the clock again.

“You know, that clock’s wrong,” she said.

“I knew that,” he said. “I knew that. What is it, about one?”

“I don’t know. One thirty.”

“Oh—that’s what I thought.”

They sipped from their glasses. On the wall above the microwave was a green fabric painting with three white geese on it. Two of them were standing in similar positions, head straight, feet flat and wings cupped. The other pranced with its head pointing upward and its right foot taking a step.
Dawn looked forward. “Would you come with me if I did?” she asked.

“If you left?—Maybe.”

She picked at the glass with her fingernail and said, “That means no.” Then she peered at him under tensed eyebrows. “Why are you so scared?”

“What do you mean? Like after high-school?” Trying to think, Jason paused. “I don’t have any money. I’m not scared.”

“Me either,” she said. And smirking she said, “God will provide for us.”

“He would,” Jason assured her. “He would.”

The small stack of books in front of Jason tumbled. He straightened them by pressing their sides with his palms.

“Then I don’t see what the problem is,” Dawn said. “He really would provide for us. Whatever it is that’s good in this world would provide for us. We can stay with a couple friends of mine—from work. They live in the country. You know. Where God is. Where you can actually see Him. They have this big field and forty acres of woods that just keeps going. Then, we’ll just keep going, keep searching. I just don’t want to be caged up anymore, Jason. People around here have gotten so used to it they end up staying for their entire lives. My mom. Your mom. That can’t be me, Jason. It just can’t.”

“Dawn, God is inside of us—no matter where we go.”

“Who told you that? Your mom? The church?”

“No, Dawn,” Jason said. “I told myself that. Besides, you’re being a hypocrite right now.”

She laughed. “How?” she said.

“You have rabbit cages,” he said. “You’ve taken something that’s supposed to be wild and put them in small cages. And you feed them. It goes against what you’re telling me.” He rolled his eyes, “About being free—out there.” His glass of wine sat on the table and he turned it with small flits of his fingers.

Dawn’s eyelids pinched and she watched him. “You’re right,” she said. She stood and the wooden chair rubbed over the linoleum. She snapped down the steps.

“Where are you going?”

“Freeing them,” she said.

The aluminum door clicked and hissed. Dawn marched outside. Jason left his glass, scooted his chair behind him and followed.

Outside, Dawn’s thin figure could barely be seen in the dark as she marched over the grass and behind her garage. Crickets chirped and Jason’s eyes adjusted to the blue light of the moon. One by one, Dawn was opening each pen. The hinges squeaked. She pulled out a white rabbit with red eyes. His feet dangled, his nose wiggled and she set him gently in the grass. Then she went to a flop-ear she’d raised from a kitten. One ear slumped down; the other stuck out to the side. She set him comfortably next to the white one. A pure black one was next.
“What are you doing? They’ll get eaten,” Jason pleaded. “They’ll get run over. They’re domesticated.”

Dawn wasn’t listening. She reached in and grabbed another—a white and brown, spotted dwarf bunny she’d once been offered five hundred dollars for. And then the last, her favorite, Miss Violet Ray. Dawn kissed her between the ears and plopped her down as if to jumpstart her hopping. She came to a quick halt next to the flop-ear and lay down.

Standing, Dawn raised her arms in a V and the rabbits sat clumped around her feet. She held her palms flat, upward to the sky and those two black, feather like locks of hair rested on her shoulders. She tilted her head back, closed her eyes and said to the heavens, “You are no longer the citizens of Fremont.” The rabbit’s noses wiggled. They lay on their sides and chewed at the grass. Dawn pumped her elbows once again and said, “You are no longer the citizens of Fremont!”

Jason watched her with her arms held high and her smooth face lighted blue from the moonlight. The rabbits ate. But just then, the black rabbit saw something under the fence, a set of green eyes blinking in the dark through blades of grass. The rabbit lifted his front foot from the ground, sniffed, stared at the set of eyes, wiggled his nose and ventured a single hop.

“Look, Dawn!” Jason said, pointing underneath the fence. “Would you look?” His head titled. “What is that?”

Dawn smelled the air. “You can’t scare me, Jason,” she said. She kept her eyes closed, took a deep breath and blew out. “You know,” she smiled, “I’m just not scared anymore.”

— William Derks