

2021 WINTER WRITING CONTEST ENTRY 25

"One Parlor's Parrot"

I am bound by propriety and respectability. The whispers of my mistress and her sisters are meant to keep me in my place, quiet and demure. They must know that I am listening, but have fooled themselves into thinking I am deaf. Their world turns most smoothly if we all labor under that pretense.

I bend over my needlework, making the tiniest stitches with vermilion thread. The body of the parrot slowly forms before me, a vague outline of shape and substance. I add accents and fill in details, marveling at the beauty of the strands of celadon and cerulean. Periodically I glance up and stare at the living parrot in the golden cage that sits in the corner of the room, next to the piano. *Our little Beethoven*, mistress always jokes whenever the parrot squawks gibberish in a confusing blend of French and English. How she can equate his vocalizing with actual music is beyond me. One only has to open the windows on a Saturday night to hear the strains of the orchestra at the Opera House just a few blocks away to know the difference between Beethoven and his feathered counterfeit.

My skirts rustle as I cross and uncross my legs, listening to the ticking of the clock and counting the seconds until we can go for our morning walk. Me, always just a few steps behind my mistress. First she will argue about putting on her pattens until I kneel before her and buckle them on myself. Then she will flounce along the wooden sidewalk outside of her father's townhouse and will relish crossing the muddy streets, not quite pulling her skirts all the way up so that they trail in the dirt. I think she gets satisfaction knowing the extra time I will spend scrubbing at the muck and manure that will stain the hem. Or maybe she doesn't think about the washing, or me, at all. My mistress looks at me, asks me questions, stares into my eyes, but I only see myself mirrored back. There is a wall between us that I will never hurdle.

Just as the clock strikes ten, thunder rumbles in the distance. I go to the open window and step out onto the balcony. Hawkers push hand carts and carriages roll by. Women with tignons balance baskets of fresh produce on their heads as they gracefully navigate the broken boards of the sidewalk and the noisome piles of trash. The shopkeepers are preparing for the oncoming deluge, throwing straw in front of their doorways and rolling down their awnings. My heart sinks as I realize I will have to spend the next few hours trapped inside.

I look down at my needlework and up again at Beethoven. He cocks his head and stares at me with one beady eye. He paces back and forth on the bar suspended by chains from the cage's roof. For the first time I wonder if he feels as trapped as I do. I've never really thought one way or another about the feelings of caged birds or chained dogs. They are merely creatures in a world created for men. But I am beginning to realize that I have much more in common with the captured animals than the masters and lords that rule this world.

I stand up and stretch my arms over my head. Without looking at my mistress, I walk to Beethoven's cage and slide back the lock on the brass door. I reach my hand towards him but he scoots far away from me, squawking in fear as I try to grab him. His black talons scratch my hands and fingers but I finally get my hands around his body. He is much smaller when his bright plumage is quashed in my grasping hands.

My mistress has finally looked up and is watching me with much curiosity. I bring Beethoven to the open window and we look out together. My mistress joins us. Rain falls down in sheets and splashes on the floorboards of the balcony. I maneuver my hands so Beethoven is balancing on my right wrist. He has calmed himself and cranes his head from side to side as he takes in the rain, breeze, and activity of the street below.

Go, go, fly free, I silently urge Beethoven, But he only walks further up my arm, away from the open window. Escape is unfathomable to him.

“Lucretia, you didn’t tell me you were training Beethoven,” my mistress states, seeming hurt that I have kept a secret from her.

I look at her, and look at the dumb bird on my arm. I walk back to his cage and he hops off of my arm and onto his perch. I lock the door of his cage and return to my embroidery.