



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2019

Article 6

5-22-2019

Outside the Lines

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Class of 2020

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Joyce, Meghan (2019) "Outside the Lines," *The Mercury*: Year 2019, Article 6.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2019/iss1/6>

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Outside the Lines

Author Bio

Meghan Joyce aims to complete an English major with a writing concentration as well as a Biology minor. She has enjoyed writing since she wrote a Cinderella spin-off play in first grade and has continued this passion throughout her academic and non-academic careers. Though a lover of all literature, Meghan is often found devouring any prose-based or novel works she discovers.

Outside the Lines

MEGHAN JOYCE

Ellyda caught the scent of salt brine as indigo struck skin. It was scarce, barely a whiff, but it sparked a decade old anxiety. She glanced at her palms, their once aqua color morphing into a squash yellow while her twin sharks swam with frenzy, twisting and turning around kelp beds. Their eyes bored into Ellyda, almost confronting the poison leaking into her stomach, her heart, her breath, her blood.

Almost.

The twins were some of her best work, moving with such grace and power one could forget their dyed existence. Practically identical, save for Lamia's withered fin and Apua's feather-like gills, the two christened the shop. The first tattoos Ellyda bred within her own walls. She agonized for days and weeks on the style, spending nights scouring stores for the most vibrant ink. In the end, Ellyda decided on the Haida. It was the most her, with its abstractions bleeding together like black seeping out of a ballpoint pen. Combined, these shapes form an image, a meaning. An animal, or animals, symbolizing the owner. Offering protection. When she fashioned her guardians, no time was spent on pain or nerves. She thought of life, the ocean, shallow breaths. She recalled sand trapped in toenails, salt coating the tongue. Ellyda sketched and sketched until fingers creaked and her eyes were as unblinking as her creations. Even in their simplest form, Lamia and Apua lived, weaving through a personal sea. As Ellyda marked her skin, she scattered destiny into every line. Lamia would be her muse, passion's embodiment, while Apua remained a warrior, protecting his mistress. The sharks did not speak. They were sharks. Not human. But they were Ellyda's confidants. Her friends. Though a bit sad really, that she felt closest to her own illustrations.

An ahem interrupted Ellyda's panic, focusing her attention on the woman sitting in the too-old artist chair. The customer was about a week short of ancient, her skin lined with crooked wrinkles resembling a toddler's "straight lines." Still, her eyes flickered with a subtle tenderness and her lips twitched ever so slightly, as if a smile was just waiting to burst. Adorned atop her forehead was a horn the size and color of a baby carrot. Ellyda wondered whether the woman dealt in foresight or perhaps intellect. Most head and face Tell's were of that sort. Or maybe persuasion. Probably not, after all she was in the shop and her sincerity seemed real enough. The woman cleared her throat again before speaking.

“Excuse me dear. I don’t mean to pry but I believe your hands were blue before, yes? Is everything alright? I can come back another time if you need a break.”

Ellyda released a breath hoping the woman would mistake the relief for exhaustion. The air smelt only of antiseptic wipes and metal.

“Oh, I’m sorry ma’am. Sometimes I think too much, gets me nervous. My hands will be back to blue once I calm down a bit. Nothing to worry about, happens all the time.”

The old woman offered a nod, her hand grazing Ellyda’s wrist. A slight but gentle gesture. Cradling the tattoo iron Ellyda decided. It was a risk certainly, something she rarely did, but this woman had been kind and Ellyda repaid kindness. Her hands and mind worked in tandem, the same melody played in different keys. The forefinger memorized every crevice of the woman’s arm, studying its geography with a scholar’s frenzy. The right palm cleaned the canvas, wiping the skin raw. Then metal struck flesh and indigo overpowered cream.

The picture was simple: a turtle lazing in a seaweed bed. Not the most complicated design, but the woman had adored the sketch’s clumsy movements, the flippers wobbling every which way. To Ellyda, the turtle resembled a tipsy ballerina. To the woman, it was endearing. Maybe she had a penchant for broken things or just thought the turtle was funny. Ellyda didn’t ask.

For once the tattoo’s simplicity did not irritate Ellyda, the needle dancing across flesh as the mind wandered, dissecting memory until one moment remained. She had been five, maybe six, kicking sand into the air and feeling the summer snow latch onto her eyelashes. A mixture of caramel corn, taffy, and hot dog was caught in the air, snuggling its way into Ellyda’s nose while she laughed and laughed over nonsense, something only a toddler would understand. Kneading her toes deeper into the sand, Ellyda’s piggy toe brushed a leathery surface, smooth yet fragile. She had knelt down, chubby legs swaddled in sand, and cupped her hands around the object. There was a strangeness about the object, the color of spoiled cream but resembling a bleached stone. With wonder she had brought the stone to her lips and breathed a kiss. Maybe, she had thought, it will come to life. She could make a friend solely for herself. Even then, Ellyda twisted creation. A slight peck then another wracked Ellyda’s treasure until shards cascaded to the ground, revealing the creature within. Its skin was greyish-green except for the back, a shell-like tree bark replacing skin. Ellyda remembered the eyes most, dark and innocent.

In the tattoo parlor, miles from the ocean, Ellyda held to that memory, recalling every emotion, every thought. Hold on to that, she told herself, hold on to the beauty and the wonder. Remember the love, the heartbeat tripping beneath your palm, the new eyes against an old world. Pick every-

thing apart and find the simple. What defined the memory? She knew before switching from indigo to green: hope. Hope and possibility. Ellyda decided to add both. As the iron once again penetrated skin, Ellyda willed feeling into the ink, painting future into the budding turtle, hope passing into the shell, possibility into the flippers. A pleasant warmth filled Ellyda's fingers, her hands morphing from the blue to her favorite pastel purple. Please, she thought, may this woman gain her purest desire, nurture life, view a world free of cynicism. With a final shading, the warmth vanished and Ellyda's hands returned to blue. All was the unchanged, save for the indigo sea turtle wobbling down a wrinkled arm.

The old woman grinned, each wrinkle forming its own unique smile, as her turtle flopped into the kelp bed, rolling around in a satisfied display. Tears pricked the woman's eyes and she studied Ellyda's, the carrot-shaped horn glowing a subtle sunset. A spark of fear wheedled into existence. What if she knows, Ellyda wondered. What if that's her Tell, knowing others? What if she turns me in, lets them know what I can do, I can't go there, can't taint these hands can't taint these wishes I can't I can't I can't I can't....

"Thank you."

Ellyda's neck snapped back, a wave of whiplash crashing against her temple. The old woman was looking at her with a grin beaming like tumbled crystals. Her horn no longer glowed but seemed shorter by about a centimeter or two, the color dimmer as well, but the woman appeared livelier than before. A hand hesitated then inched its way toward Ellyda, the textured hand meeting the smooth.

"Thank you," the woman repeated, "I don't know what you did exactly but I can tell, whatever it was, it was important. So, thank you, for what you did and for my turtle, he's beautiful. You have a precious gift. Remember that."

Ellyda offered a nod only. She didn't trust her voice. Extending her arm to the woman, Ellyda helped her customer out of the chair and over to the cash register, finally waving farewell after the payment was settled. Customers like that woman were rare, people who appreciated the tattoos, not for their movement but for their life. Those were the people who received something extra, the ones that deserved it.

A clang interrupted Ellyda's pondering as a man paraded inside. Ellyda recognized him; he had arrived earlier in the week for consultation. The man was striking, like a frog disguising poison with color, though he possessed no visible Tell. His complexion was that of powdered milk, his nails filed to bladed point. His eyes, however, garnered the most attention, both a crackling green which flickered intensity. Ellyda didn't like him. To be fair, they'd only met for a few hours, but she could sense a sliminess about him, a tendency towards the cruel. In a manner suiting a prized peacock, he strutted

towards Ellyda and stuck out his hand for what appeared to be handshake. Ellyda grasped his hand with a single pump before releasing the grip, her hands now a soot grey.

“Hello Misssss Ellyda”, the man said, exaggerating every s, “Could we make this quick, I’m sorry to say I have a very important meeting tonight that I cannot be late to. You understand, I assume?”

Ellyda replied, “Yes sir, I see, but you must understand my work takes time and a great deal of patience, especially with a design as complex as your own. I’ll need at least.... four hours or so.”

“Four hours?! You can’t be serious. I know your tattoos are different but that does not excuse unprofessionalism. I’ve read enough to know tattoos should take just two hours or less, but...fine I’ll accept it. For the record, you should tell your clients about the time restraint before they arrive. It’s only courteous.”

A scream clung to Ellyda’s throat like a vomit, begging her for release. Of course, she had told the client about the wait time during their consultation but he must have ignored her to focus on more “important” things. The tattoo he chose was complicated as well, a foot-long snake painted in amber and yellow scales, wrapping its body around a burning branch. Snakes weren’t too difficult but the flames were troublesome, the shifting colors and shapes difficult to perfect. Pointing to the artist chair, Ellyda semi-forced the man to a sitting position while fighting the urge to groan. As she loaded the tattoo iron, drowning out the man’s self-righteous droning, a thought slithered into existence. She couldn’t or at least she shouldn’t. Adding kindness was one matter but something.... darker. The idea was more than tempting, and as in all things, desire overshadowed sensibility.

Fingers poised to draw, Ellyda remembered. She conjured back a zoo field trip in the third grade, watching the snakes weave through the brush. Ellyda had thought they were graceful, beautiful even. Then, an eyelid viper had wrung a mouse’s neck, honeyed venom seeping into the rodent’s flesh. There wasn’t much beauty in that. That’s what I’ll give him, she decided. Fear. Sudden, short, but oh so real. A reminder of what he has to lose. Ellyda’s hand glowed lavender as she worked, stitching fear into a single scale, one out of three hundred and sixty-five. One fearful day out of a year’s worth of happiness. Not too bad when she thought about it. Completing the snake’s elastic tongue, Ellyda escorted the man out who, to his credit, mumbled appreciation for her work. He paid then hurried out the door.

Once nine o’clock rolled around, Ellyda closed down the shop and started cleaning, careful to sterilize every needle. Channel Four news echoed in the background while Ellyda worked, providing some much-needed entertainment. A barely in her twenty’s reporter stuttered on screen, summarizing the day’s mundanity.

“And in recent news, a body was discovered along the riverside by three teenagers. The teens immediately alerted authorities and the body was taken shortly after. No foul play has been noted nor has the body been identified. If anyone has information concerning this man’s identity please call the number below.”

Apua and Lamia gnashed their teeth as Ellyda sank to the floor, her eyes transfixed on a set of amber-yellow scales.