



Booth

Volume 4 | Issue 7

Article 2

7-13-2012

Limberlost

Kelcey Parker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth>

Recommended Citation

Parker, Kelcey (2012) "Limberlost," *Booth*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 7 , Article 2.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol4/iss7/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Booth by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Limberlost

Abstract

Here's what I tell myself: I'm a mime and this town is the invisible box that I only pretend to be stuck in. Its boundaries are wherever I press the flat of my hand. Look, I'm trapped! Look, now I trace a window with my burglar gloves and peek through. Now I lift the window, climb through, and escape. Now I'm juggling. Now I'm dancing. Now the invisible box disappears. It never existed. Ha ha ha.

Keywords

imagine, pretend, camp, teach, childcare



BOOTH



A JOURNAL

July 13, 2012

Limberlost

Fiction by Kelcey Parker

Here's what I tell myself: I'm a mime and this town is the invisible box that I only pretend to be stuck in. Its boundaries are wherever I press the flat of my hand. Look, I'm trapped! Look, now I trace a window with my burglar gloves and peek through. Now I lift the window, climb through, and escape. Now I'm juggling. Now I'm dancing. Now the invisible box disappears. It never existed. Ha ha ha.

Or: I'm a crow, one of the screeching thousands that perch on the bare tree branches along the river like quarter notes on a skewy treble clef, then fly away in melancholy chords. Just passing through.

These are the things I tell myself when I'm trying to sort it all out—how I got here, why I stayed. Because the fact is, I'm not even from here. I came from somewhere else, voluntarily. I came for the Ph.D. Lots of people get here that way, to get them or give them. We say we're just passing through, but we're all still here when the birds return the next year.

The high schools are named after a president, a saint, and a poet. My neighbor, whose sons attended the poet high school, named his dog after the high school. I don't think he knew that he'd named his dog after a poet. This is something you find funny when you're getting a Ph.D. in the humanities. Until the neighbor's poet-pet, leashed to a tree even as the temperature sinks and sinks, barks and barks while you (I) try to write a dissertation. And every (woof!) other (woof!) word (woof!) is (woof!) woof. Then you

(I) realize it was never funny to begin with.

I didn't get the Ph.D. I got pregnant.

Winters are hard here. Long, cold, snow. He was warm. He had an actual functioning fireplace in his apartment, and merlot by the boxful. No dog woofing outside. Books all over his shelves, his kitchen table, his nightstand. And records! With sleeves and needles, A-sides and B-sides. How we talked and read and danced and drank and and and. Oh, the humanities.

That was over a decade ago. It's more like something I read about than something I did. A minor chapter in a long novel.

He was gone by the time the baby was ABD: All But Delivered. November arrived and so did my Mia. Spring semester began in the deep of winter, and I became an adjunct teacher in the department of Sure, I Can Teach That. On the first day of class my main goal was to select a babysitter from among my students, and to woo her. The problem was that I needed babysitters during class time, so I had to find multiple sitters. Fortunately, my main adjuncting gig was at the all-girls Catholic college, which is positively loaded with maternal instincts.

That's where I met Becky. She was not the first person you'd select to care for your infant daughter, and she was not the first person I selected. I chose Front-Row Rose. French-Braid Rose. Four-Point-0 Rose.

Would Rose be willing to watch Mia while I taught my other classes? Oh, totally. Did she understand all of my instructions about heating the bottle in hot water? Yeah, totally. Did she think Mia was the cutest baby ever? OMG, totally. Did I trust her? Totally.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

[← older](#)

[about](#)

[archives](#)

[news](#)

[shop](#)

[submit](#)

© 2012 Booth, A Journal

follow us
[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)



BOOTH



A JOURNAL

[← older](#)

July 13, 2012

Limberlost

Most of the students at the college, including Rose, are from Elsewhere. From good families and good pasts that seem to promise even better futures. Becky, on the other hand, is from here. “From here.” That’s how she said it when we finally spoke. Purple-Nailed Becky. Messenger-bagged Becky. What’s-In-Your-Head Becky.

She reminded me of Elnora Comstock from the Limberlost novel, set a hundred years ago but not too far away from here. It was one of many books from my own youth that I had arranged on a bookcase to read with Mia. We would read them together and then someday we would travel to the actual sites, places like Limberlost and the Laura Ingalls Wilder home. That someday would be now.

Becky reminded me of Poor Elnora, who arrives at school with old clothes and no books and thinks, “it was all a mistake; this was no school, but a grand display of enormous ribbon bows.” Ribbon-Bow Rose. I was projecting of course, but it made me sympathetic to Becky, curious.

When I got Becky’s first paper I still hadn’t heard her speak in class. What would she have to say? It turned out that she had to say exactly what she was told to say in exactly the way she was told to say it. And yet she revealed nothing at all. This was Composition. Put these two texts in conversation with one another. Make an argument about how they connect, how they diverge. It was brilliant, really, how she was able to satisfy the assignment, write more than a thousand words, and say nothing.

Soon it was time for student conferences. Winter had settled in, the long hard snow of

it. A year earlier I'd lived in a world of music, merlot, and maps for a dissertation. Now my life was Mia and Composition. And Reliable Rose, whose conference took place at my kitchen table over cinnamon tea. Becky arrived at my office late for her first conference. Mia was nestled in her pumpkin seat at my feet, and each of my students oohed and aaahed over her, asked about her age and sleeping habits, and stared at her through most of the conference. Except Becky, who hardly acknowledged her at all.

I didn't need to discuss Becky's paper, which would get an A. So I asked where she was from, hopeful to piece together some of her mystery.

"From here."

It took a moment to register her meaning. Maybe because it was the first I'd heard her voice. But suddenly something, everything, made sense. "Which high school did you go to," I asked. "President, saint, or poet?"

She didn't miss a beat of what I thought was my own private joke. "President."

"Jefferson," I said. The worst of the schools. Yet somehow she'd learned to write perfectly meaningless A papers and get herself into this college.

I imagined the rest of the Limberlost details of her life: spurned by her own mother, unable to afford better clothes, eager for an education. This made me reach out to her, talk to her over coffee in the Student Union (where I learned details worse than Limberlost), and root for her. But it did not make me ask her to babysit.

Until the afternoon Rose had to cancel. Rose was a new member of the Student Government committee and they were hosting a campus event, a comedienne (and I only recall this now because the image of that woman on the poster with the date and time remains in my mind like the last bits of baby food that you can never quite scrape from the inside of the jar). Rose had to be at the event. She told me after our class together, and by that time Becky was the only other person in the room. My options were limited: I could either cancel class—a dicey proposition for someone whose contract expired at the end of every semester—or ask Becky to fill in. I liked Becky; I trusted Rose.

I looked at Becky. She looked at the floor.

Pages: 1 2 3 4



BOOTH



A JOURNAL

[← older](#)

July 13, 2012

Limerlost

We could both feel the request in the air, and the fact that I wasn't asking it was embarrassing us both. *Oh, for God's sake*, I told myself. *It's just a fill-in. It's just one time. Everything will be fine.* So I gave her my most assured smile and said, "So, do you want to make some extra money next week?"

Becky arrived at my door wearing her usual oversized black sweatshirt and military messenger bag. Pins lined the strap that crossed her chest, and I thought of her as a decorated Girl Scout. You see what you want to see.

"Let me show you where everything is," I said, leading her to the table where my papers were piled up for grading, and where Mia was mounted on her bouncer seat like a Thanksgiving turkey. I started to say something about Mia's favorite toys, but Becky was looking at the wall. "What are these?" she asked.

On my walls were framed antique maps of far away places that no longer exist. Places with new names and new borders, places I tried to write about in my dissertation.

"Those are Plan A," I said. "Funny, huh? I came *here* to become an expert in those places." I unbuckled Mia and picked her up. "And this is Plan B, Plan Baby." I lifted her to my shoulder and pressed my lips to her ear. "Aren't you, Mia? Plan Baby Mia." I kissed her a hundred times, breathed in her baby scent. God, I hope I did that.

"Are you going to finish?" Becky asked. "Your degree?"

I consulted Mia. “Are we going to finish? We don’t know, do we?”

“You should finish and leave,” Becky said. “Or just leave. Get out of dodge.”

I rocked Mia, patting her back. Becky had told me bits about her home life, her brother’s meth problem, her parents’ fights about it.

Then she said, as if the idea had just come to her, or as if she wanted it to look that way: “And you could take me with you.”

“What’s that?”

She spoke in a sudden rush. “You could leave and take me with you. I could help with Mia. You could finish your degree.”

Her tone was pleading, and her request was too intimate, of course, totally inappropriate and certainly disproportionate to our relationship, but it stirred me because it was something I’d wanted to hear. I gazed at the maps on my walls. It was what I had wanted Mia’s father to say to me.

But my sleep-deprived mind was on more practical matters: the semester, the cost of diapers, the class I was about to teach.

“Right now I do have to leave,” I said, “for class. I’m going to put Mia down for her nap. You ought to have an easy time; she should sleep until I get back. Won’t you, Mia-Moo? Say hi to Becky.” I held up Mia’s arm and waved it.

“Hi, Mia. Bye, Mia,” Becky said, a bit dejected, as I carried Mia to the room we shared.

It’s too easy to think it wouldn’t have happened if Rose had been there. But I do, I can’t help myself. When I returned home after my classes, Becky – Blameless Becky, It’s-Not-Your-Fault-But-I-Blame-You-Anyway Becky – was on the couch watching TV. Mia had been dead for at least an hour.

My Mia. Sweet Mia. Sudden-Infant-Death Mia.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

[← older](#)

[about](#)[archives](#)[shop](#)[news](#)[submit](#)

BOOTH



A JOURNAL

[← older](#)

July 13, 2012

Limberlost

Limberlost was named Loblolly Marsh until the night Limber Jim got lost and never came back. Limberlost is a real place, an enormous swamp preserved by the state. I've never been there, but I have memories of it from reading the book as a kid. Mia would be ten now, and we would be reading it together and planning those trips now. In my mind, though, we've already gone a thousand times. My memories are of a place I've never been and events that never happened. My mind is its own Limberlost – a swampland full of moths, dragonflies, and Indian relics. A place to search for treasure, to get lost, to drown.

I saw Becky the other day. What else could make me go on like this now?

Grocery-basketed Becky. Highlighted-hair Becky. Baby-Bjorn Becky. I instinctively hid my face and tried to hide from the moment. Was it her? Unmistakably. Would I reveal myself? Make her see me? Make her see me see her baby? Even if I wanted that, I wasn't sure I could do it. The grocery aisle became a swampland beneath my feet. I might sink into the ground, and would she notice? Would she stop it from happening?

I hadn't seen her since that day. Someone took over my classes for the rest of the semester, and Becky disappeared. Maybe she found a way out of this town. Maybe she returns every year to see her patchwork family. Or maybe she only came now because of the baby. Her baby.

“What's her name?” I said. I don't recall making the decision to reveal myself, but I was suddenly standing beside her, sinking really, as she surveyed rows of pasta sauce.

The baby strapped to her had a pink hat.

“Hmm?” Becky looked distracted but prepared to tolerate a stranger’s pleasantries. I remember so clearly. How the faces of strangers were never kinder than when Mia was with me.

But when Becky turned to me, her distracted expression transformed to something else, something as apt and empty as her Compositions once were, as cryptic as the buttons on her messenger bag. I’m sure my own expression changed upon seeing her so close, these ten years’ hence, the scent of a newborn between us.

Winter was once again settling into its deep chill. “Home for the holidays?” I said.

“Yes.” She covered the baby’s pink hat with her left hand. “I live out east. Boston area.”

Not only did she have new hair, tasteful makeup, a new town, a baby—she had a wedding ring, a big one. Some do make it out of this town, apparently. Some do get their happy ending. Who would have thought it would be Becky? But at the end of the Lamberlost novel, even Elnora Comstock marries the man she loves and finally gets her mother’s love, her happy ending.

“You look well,” I said.

She winced, as if her bounty hurt her more than it hurt me.

“You’re still here,” she said in a low voice. It came out a question, one that I felt compelled to answer. But neither of us wanted to hear about how I couldn’t leave Mia, and how, even if I’d wanted to, I had nowhere to go.

Forget all those things I told myself about mimes and crows. Here’s what I finally knew: I’m a ghost. A woman who wandered into this swamp of a town, got lost, and never made it out.

So like a ghost, I disappeared from the store, leaving my half-filled cart in the aisle, leaving Becky there with her baby and her ring and her life.

But first I looked into Becky’s eyes and found an answer I could give her.

What I told her was this: “I’m from here now.”

Kelcey Parker is the author of *For Sale By Owner* (Kore Press), winner of the 2011 *Next Generation Indie Book Award* in Short Fiction, and the forthcoming book, *Liliane's Balcony*, set at Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house. She directs the creative writing program at Indiana University South Bend, which is just a couple hours from Limberlost Swamp, setting of Gene Porter Stratton's novel, *The Girl from Limberlost*.

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

[← older](#)

[about](#)

[archives](#)

[news](#)

[shop](#)

[submit](#)

© 2012 Booth, A Journal



follow us

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

elsewhere

[Booth](#) | [Butler MFA](#)