

Paint Baggage – Leyi, Year 12, NSW

*You slip away. I raise my crop and fly
the moon-boned strait, this sudden gate and sweat-
flanked crest; this stretch of disappointed sky.*

- Felicity Plunkett, 'Venery' from 'Vanishing Point'

It was the day the carnations started rotting when you got the phone call.

You sank to the floor, banged your head on the kitchen island and a trickle of blood slid down the side. You then sat on the steps of the house, overlooking the cul-de-sac with a bottle of vodka, downing the entire bottle over the next four hours. You remember the wind that bit into your face that day, taking chunk upon chunk until it took so much the pain subsided.

On Tuesday the next week, you refused to wear black. It wasn't because you knew he never loved you (you didn't hate him for it) but because you refused to believe how swiftly life had changed. How one week you had caught him in a motel room with his step cousin and the next he was gone.

When you got home, you remembered chucking a blank canvas across the living room, then picking it up and setting it down onto the easel. It stood alone in the great room; the furniture all moved to the attic for you couldn't stand the smell of his cologne that lingered on the armchairs and rugs. Acadia stood in the hallway watching you; she tried to pacify you, but you pushed her away and she ran from the room crying and the worst part was you didn't even feel bad. You didn't feel anything.

You hung onto his Valentine's Day gifts though they weren't for you. The new paint set—five hundred dollars, you discovered, after searching up the price online—had taken you by surprise. You sat on the floor and wondered how his cousin could possibly use all eighty four colours. You took out the colour tornado and painted a giant one in the middle of the canvas.

You cried for seven days in the bathroom and after the week passed, your bags were packed and labelled Misery Bay, Michigan.

At the airport bookstore, you watched Acadia read *The Fault In Our Stars* and you took out the amaranth from the paint set because you had lost all the other shades of red. You painted a huge question mark through the tornado. It looked so out of place that the man next to you started chuckling and you didn't know what was so funny.

It's contradictory, he said.

You gave him a puzzled look.

If you were in a tornado, you'd be running for shelter, he smiled. You seem as if you wouldn't know what to do. You okay?

You held the tornado and question mark the entire way to your new flat. You put it in the basement where you slept and spent twenty two hours of all your days.

Soon, Acadia went to high school and in the car on the way home, she'd update you on all the town gossip and you would pretend you were fascinated. You knew that she knew you were pretending. At home you'd cook dinner, shut yourself in the basement and gaze at the painting until you woke the next morning. You would wonder how time had travelled so quickly and why there were five bottles of beer on the ground. You quickly hid them under the bed.

You saw the dark circles under Acadia's eyes and the acne spread across her face and the way she only took two bites of the lasagne every night. You wanted to say something but before you could even muster up the words, she was packing her bags for university in Europe.

Over the next two years, you painted carnations all over the painting until there were so many that the canvas was beginning to form holes and you would pretend to not see them and keep painting. The painting soon looked like a dog had ravaged it and flung it across the Atlantic Ocean.

As the painting disintegrated, you'd tape the fallen pieces back on. As the largest chunk of the canvas peeled off, you got a phone call. Acadia was pregnant and unmarried and she said she wanted to visit you.

During Thanksgiving, she turned up at the house and you took her to the park where the trees stood lifeless against the sludgy snow. You thought she looked like she had been on a round trip through hell until you caught your own reflection in your neighbour's front window. You asked who the father was and she said she didn't know. She would put the baby up for adoption, but you advised against it.

She stopped and looked at you with dark eyes. Why should I have a child when I know I won't be able to love it?

Her under eyes were the same shade of grey as the sky ahead. It wasn't the sky, you later realised, because it was moving in a fast circular motion at a rapid pace towards you.

Your neighbour screamed at you from his front door. The warning was left until the last minute.

You grabbed Acadia by the arm and ran towards the house. You reached the front door and Acadia bolted inside and you stopped; you had left the painting outside. You scanned for it frantically. You felt dizzy.

It was gone. You started running away from the house because you had to find it, you had to find it, you had to find it.

You felt stupid as you sat in the basement next to the stairs. You sat with ointment covering your arms and bit your lips as you felt the ointment do its thing. Acadia joined you and held your hand as you started to cry. You felt the heat radiating from her palm to her fingers and into yours and so you held her hands tighter. Soon, both of you fell asleep with Acadia's head against your shoulder.

When your eyelids fluttered open, two parallel shafts of light coming from the basement window lit both your faces up. Involuntarily, your mouth turned upwards and then Acadia woke up, smiled back at you and placed your hand on her belly.