

2021

The Moon's Heartbeat

Lauren Pauley
West Virginia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pauley, Lauren (2021) "The Moon's Heartbeat," *Calliope*: Vol. 33 , Article 28.
Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol33/iss1/28>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope by an authorized editor of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu.

The Moon's Heartbeat

Lauren Pauley

There were dreams--cataclysmic bursts of red, cloudless skies carrying devious grins, rips and tears and cracks in the face of the sun. I fell into nothingness, arms and legs flailing, encased by a symphony of screams that were not my own. Then I was awake, and she was there.

She sat on the windowsill, knees tucked to her chest. Her eyes were alert, watching the moon, the rustling trees, the shadows that crept in spaces only she could see.

How many times had I promised myself that if I could just see my mother one more time, I would talk to her of things I never said in life, things of life and meaning and love? Yet I seemed to lack the ability to form words or even thoughts. I was petrified, gazing at her in a sleepy stupor.

My mother's ghost didn't look at me, enraptured by the scene outside. Her soft body was still and smooth. She looked moments away from sleep.

With enormous effort, I managed to shove my blankets aside, heart pounding in my ears.

But when I looked for her again, she was gone.

-

I figured seeing your dead mother's ghost was something important enough to share with your best friend.

Jack listened carefully as he studied the lightning bugs floating around us. We were lying on our backs, the chilled grass tickling our bare calves. The moon, glowing faintly, floated into view.

“Huh,” he said, when I had finished. A lightning bug landed lightly on his big toe before soaring away again.

“You sure it was her?” he asked me finally, frowning up at the sky. It was rare to see Jack so serious, and I was filled with a rush of gratitude.

“I’m sure.”

Jack considered this. A breeze floated through the night, rustling the trees, allowing a moment of respite from relentless summer heat.

Jack’s mother earned her keep by washing the clothes of everyone in the neighborhood. Their backyard was a maze of clotheslines and hanging laundry, swaying in time as the wind and sun rendered them dry. In the daytime, the web of clothing was comforting, exciting, welcoming--Old Man Enton’s musty overalls, stained and stark; Ms. Huckleberry’s flowered panties, ballooning and collapsing with the breeze; the dozens of tiny, multicolored shorts belonging to Jack’s many brothers and sisters. But at night, the apparel swung ominously. The vibrant colors became a mesh of grey, and they hung loosely, without direction, without purpose.

They were ghosts in their own ways, I realized as I laid there. They carried the vestiges of people, smells and actions and sounds, until someone picked them up again to wear and returned the life to them. I thought of the sweater my mother had worn nearly every night, baby blue and soft with overuse. It was sitting in my dresser drawer, deep enough that my father would never bother to look there. It still smelled like vanilla and fresh mulch--like her.

“Maybe it was a dream,” Jack suggested. He turned to look at me, eyes wide with thought. Freckled, buck-toothed. Body twitching with unreleased energy and youth. My only friend in the world. “I been having weird dreams, lately, Bobby, ‘n it’s not just me, Stanley told me he had a weird one the other night too... maybe it’s somethin’ to do with the moon, even...”

“It wasn’t a dream,” I said finally, after trying to find a way to speak about feeling her presence again. Hearing her soft breathing and smelling her gentle scent and seeing the little habits that were hers: absentmindedly picking at the skin on her lips or twisting the bracelet around her wrist. She was a life force, living and breathing, inches away.

The laundry around us swayed again with the breeze as the moon looked on.

“Reckon you’ll just have to wait, then,” Jack said eventually.

“For what?”

“To see if she comes back.”

-

She did come back.

I was sitting at my desk, lazily sketching the craters onto a bleak portrait of the moon. The house was entirely empty--my father worked at the mill until 6--and the scratching of my pencil echoed loudly throughout my room.

I didn’t notice her at first, but out of the corner of my eye I saw movement, and turned immediately.

She was wearing a purple dress, floaty and loose, and gazed at herself in the small mirror on my wall. She touched her dress, running the fabric through her fingers. Cocked her head to the side, studying herself intently. Her hair was rustled and curly, like before.

My pencil fell to the ground.

In a daze, heart in my throat, I crept toward her. She was frowning at herself in the mirror when she caught sight of me. Her gaze softened as our eyes met, the same shade of brown. People always said I had her eyes.

My eyes stinging with tears, I reached out to touch her shoulder, but my hand fell through the air and bumped uselessly against my side. The mirror was empty, save for me--clenched jaw, tousled hair, and thick ugly glasses.

-

I figured I needed to consult an expert, so I set off for Ms. Bumbleberry a few days later. The morning sun was already stiflingly warm on the back of my head as I made my way to the

large, green house at the end of our street, glancing anxiously behind me in case my father had, for some reason, decided to return home early. I passed Mrs. Dooley, already hacking away at weeds in her grimy apron, her two children running around her and screeching at the top of their lungs; Randy Hummings shot past me with a wild grin, yelling about being late to the mill. I shoved at my glasses and kept on, sneakers pounding against dirt and dust.

Ms. Bumbleberry was the wealthiest person in our neighborhood--even owned a car, which, to us, was like owning a spaceship--and her two storied house towered above the rest of ours. She was a gardener. Or, at least, *wanted* to be a gardener: her yard was overgrown with wild, untamed weeds and lifeless flowers clinging to the earth by sullen roots. Piles of soil littered the yard, fruitless, carrying the banner of failure, while yellowed grass inched upwards, desperate with thirst.

She opened the door after my first knock. "Well, looky here!" she said brightly. Ms. Bumbleberry was a woman in her mid-thirties, all tight-fitting flowery dresses and red lipstick and wide grins. I tended to avoid her at all costs; we all did.

She ushered me inside, past a bright, flowery rug and vases filled with fake flowers in her entryway. Her parlor wasn't much different: a violently yellow and green carpet, rose-patterned wallpaper, and dozens of portraits of her and Mr. Bumbleberry.

I sat awkwardly on the end of a stiff lounge chair. It wasn't until I had refused lemonade, sweet tea, coffee cake, and cookies that she finally sat opposite me, fixing her face in an eager grin.

I tried to form words, but was suddenly overwhelmed with embarrassment. Maybe I *had* dreamed it, after all--wasn't that normal, to envision your loved ones after they died?--and coming here, to the craziest lady in the neighborhood, was a mistake at any cost.

But her eyes were so wide and desperate, and I had made the entire trek here, and soon I found myself talking to her, letting both encounters with my mother tumble out of my mouth. I couldn't look her quite in the eye, so I moved between staring at my dirty shoelaces and a black and white photograph of her and Mr. Bumbleberry on the wall. Physically, she looked about the same in the picture, but her smile was genuine, as she gazed up at her husband in adoration. Mr.

Bumbleberry looked directly at the camera with a wide grin, the face of a man who had just won himself a mighty prize.

Ms. Bumbleberry, in the flesh, was quite a listener. She nodded at almost every word, widened her eyes at the most trivial of details, and kept a long, continuous mutter of commentary as I proceeded (“alright... okay... oh, goodness... yes, yes, exactly...”) The many Mr. and Ms. Bumbleberry’s in the room seemed to be watching me just as she was, quietly drinking in my words.

“... it might have been just a dream though,” I added sheepishly after I completed my story. The house fell silent; the distant screeches of Mrs. Dooley’s children drifted through a screened window.

I interlocked my fingers, unlocked them, sat on my hands, placed them in my lap.

“It wasn’t a dream, John Robert,” Ms. Bumbleberry said finally, sitting back carefully. She used my first and middle name, much to my surprise--I usually went by Robbie or Bobby.

“How do you know?”

She knew she had my full attention, and seemed to savor this. “Seeing her twice is no coincidence, John,” she told me dramatically, her eyes wide.

I waited, still finding it difficult to look her directly in the eye.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” she asked me in a hushed voice.

“No.”

“It means she’s trying to *tell* you something, baby.” she sounded close to tears; she clutched at her heart.

I was very embarrassed, but wanted to know more. “How--how do I--know what she wants?”

She gave me a tearful smile. “You just gotta listen, honey. Ain’t that right, Daniel?” she asked suddenly over her shoulder, to an empty doorway.

Suddenly Ms. Bumbleberry gave a little shriek, bouncing in her chair. “*Daniel!*” she chided, though she was smiling wildly. “Not when we have company!”

She leaned in towards me, shaking her head, as red-faced and giggly as a fourteen-year old girl. “I’m so sorry about him, honey, he’s got no manners at all.”

I couldn’t help but look at a portrait on the far wall depicting a young man in a green uniform, carrying a gun haphazardly. He was tensed, as are all in military photos like those, but there was a smirk playing on his lips, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “*Daniel Bumbleberry*”, the caption read. “*2nd infantry. Vietnam.*”

I decided it was best for me to leave. Ms. Bumbleberry asked if I wanted to stay for lunch, or at least for a cookie and some tea, but I managed to extricate myself, muttering excuses about homework, though it was the middle of July.

“Tell him goodbye, Daniel,” Ms. Bumbleberry said, nudging the air next to her as though it were someone’s ribs. She stood at the top of the steps, beaming and waving a farewell to me.

I forced a smile and hurried down the steps, feeling Daniel Bumbleberry’s sly eyes following me past the dead grass and into the world beyond.

-

We lived in a pocket of Kentucky, forgotten by most. At fifteen years old, I had only seen the dirt streets of our tiny neighborhood, the pitiful schoolhouse about a mile away, and a tiny collection of stores that made up “town”—notably a miniscule supermarket, clad with stained linoleum and stale cereals, and a post office, ran by one man. Both were overshadowed by a large American flag waving high above on a flagpole. In the opposite direction, about two miles off, was a lumber mill, the seat of employment for every man that resided on our street.

The summers following my mother’s death were endless. Suppressing heat and relentless boredom, tinges of anxiety creeping in around the edges at the thought of my father’s return

home. I savored the moments spent without him, but there was always a dull, grinding reminder, a headache at the base of my skull--distant, consistent worry and anticipation of his presence. I wiled away the days in my bedroom, sketching, writing, thinking. Some days I spent with Jack, when he wasn't busy with his six younger siblings.

I thought of my mother often. It wasn't intentional; in fact, the mere thought of her filled me with such a longing despair that I tried to fill my thoughts with absolutely anything else. But her death was so recent that it lingered on the minds of nearly all my neighbors. I could scarcely leave the house without seeing someone, Randy or Mrs. Bloom or even Jack's mother, all of them with the best intentions, but all with comments, concerns, memories of my mother.

"She was such a good woman," Mrs. Rooney said one morning, hands dirty with soil, sticky faced toddler clutching her calf. I was on my way to Jack's, walking as quickly as I could without bursting into a sprint, but she had spotted me and called me over. "You look just like her, you know. How's Fred doing?"

I found I didn't have much to say on either of the topics, and was equally speechless when Jack's mother greeted me at the door with "Oh, honey. How's it goin'?"

The two visits from her didn't help, either. They had happened in such a short span of time that I thought for sure she would return, but it was many weeks before I saw my mother's gentle face and soft hands again. In the days leading up to it, I thought of her endlessly, and even convinced myself that I saw her a few times-- Was that movement outside the swish of her dress? Did her presence wake me up in the middle of the night?-- but was disappointed by the reality of a dirty rabbit outside, the wind rattling the panes of a musty bedroom window.

I had convinced myself that both apparitions had been a dream, entirely the creation of my own mind, just the manifestation of my desperation of seeing her again, until she reappeared.

Jack and I were in his backyard again as the night blanketed itself over the sky. Jack had managed to steal a pint of moonshine from his mother's secret cabinet, and we had drunk three quarters of it before she caught us.

“Stay out here til it wears off,” she had ordered, but there was a twinkle in her eye as she wagged a finger at us. “Don’t want y’all rubbin’ off on the littleun’s.”

Everything was dizzy and weightless and wonderful. We danced and ran around the yard, Jack screaming at the top of his lungs. I couldn’t seem to stop laughing, and eventually I laid down, felt the grass rise to meet me with a surging love.

“I love the grass,” I told Jack, who was jumping, pumping his fist into the sky. “I love the grass, I love it.” And I did. I felt united with the earth and sky and the heartbeat in my chest. The heartbeat pounded through me and into Jack and into the grass, all the way into the moon, a beating communal life force.

Then I sunk into the ground and fell into a dreamless slumber.

I awoke to Jack shaking my shoulder. “Wake up, Bobby, wake up.”

I sat up too quickly; the world spun. I managed to smile distantly at Jack, but he looked stricken, his freckled face inches from mine in a strange, surreal way.

“You gotta get home, Bobby, we fell asleep, your Pa, your Pa’s gonna be real upset...”

My stomach dropped. Distant yells and shadows rang in my ears and I lost focus of Jack’s face. I leaned over and puked, felt the tranquility from before exiting my body in a rush.

“You all right, Bobby? You all right?” Jack kept saying, grasping at my knee. “Shit, Bobby, shit... Your Pa... shit...”

With his help, I managed to stand, knees knocking together. In the pale light of the moon, I saw his face more clearly: white and ashen. Everything seemed dark and cold and eerie.

We walked back to my house together, clutching at each other like little kids. I felt small and insignificant, the tiniest, weakest speck on earth. How cruel it is to see the light, as we had, only to be reminded of the dark with astonishing force. I hated the moon, suddenly.

We reached my house. Jack’s hands were like ice against my bare skin, but once he pulled away I felt a distinctive loss of heat.

“I’ll go in with you,” Jack offered. His eyes were wild, darting every which way. He was shaking slightly.

“No,” I told him, though he already knew the answer.

“Maybe he’s asleep.” Jack was whispering, so quietly that his words seemed immediately swept away with the breeze.

“Maybe.”

We looked at each other. Suddenly, Jack grabbed me and pulled me into a fierce hug. I felt his heartbeat in his ribs as our trembling, scrawny bodies pressed together.

Then he released me, and disappeared into the darkness.

The screen door creaked as I entered, echoing like a shotgun through the house. A single light lit the cramped kitchen; shadows lingered in the corner.

He was sitting at the table. Beer cans, some crumpled, some dripping with excess amber liquid, surrounded him. He laughed, his scornful bark of a laugh, when I walked in.

Things were remarkably still and solid. I felt numb, unreal. I hung my head. Waited.

“You tryna walk out on me, son?” he asked me. Calm, collected. He gazed into his beer can, one eye closed in concentration. I stared at the cracked, scummy linoleum.

“No,” I said to the floor. It was a croak.

He laughed again.

“I was with Jack. Fell asleep.” my voice sounded false and strange, echoing through the room.

He finally looked at me. His eyes were small and cruel and piercing. A fresh layer of stubble was bursting out in spurts along his face, as though he had shaved erratically, without paying any attention. He was slumped back against his chair, but when our eyes met, he straightened, letting his empty beer can drop to the floor with a tinny, dull crash.

I couldn't meet his eye for longer than a moment, and studied the floor again. But in a flash, he was moving, shooting across the kitchen with speed I didn't know his intoxication allowed.

He grabbed me by the hair. Leaned in so close that I could count the hairs on his chin, felt the hot beery breath seep into my mouth, into my lungs.

I grabbed at his hands, whimpering uncontrollably, but he yanked harder, and I saw stars.

He was staring at me with a look full of loathing. Repulsion. "You're a fucking freak," he told me, and then I was falling backwards, linoleum floor slamming into me, cold and unforgiving.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. He traipsed back to his chair and opened another beer, acting as though I wasn't there, wasn't in a crumpled heap on the floor steps away.

I scrambled up and away to my room, chest heaving, body aching, world spinning.

I threw up again, this time on the dingy carpet of my bedroom. Tried to catch my breath.

The moonlight climbed through my window and crawled to me so that my toes were bathed in a sudden silver light.

And there she was, baby blue sweater and all, her hand on my back, guiding my breathing back to regularity, her fingers on my cheeks, wiping away stubborn, relentless tears. She sat with me until the moon disappeared and brilliant, harsh sunlight flooded the room.

Then she was gone.

