

THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD

“I wish I could leave you certain of the images in my mind, because they are so beautiful that I hate to think they will be extinguished when I am.”

—Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

My relatives from Ohio have always loved the curves of land in Tennessee. The hills and slopes around every turn add a comfortable, roaming softness. There are no edges here, no corners, just bends. Though beautiful, the arcing of the landscape caused my family some problems when we were looking to put in a pool. We live on one of those hills, right at the top before it flattens off and rises again. The only piece of our yard that is even close to flat enough to house a swimming pool is one green corner lorded over by a tulip poplar I'm sure is older than I am.

We put the pool in beneath that tree, and shade from its branches lowers the water temperature considerably. On cooler days, I like to prop my feet up on the edge of the pool while I float on my favorite inflatable, my plastic summer throne, so I can read without drifting out of the sunlight. One good gust of wind will send five or more of the tree's blossoms, lemon-drop with a creamsicle stripe, thumping down into the water where they will either clog the filter with more flowers than a bowl of potpourri or sink to the bottom and bloat with chlorine and sunshine. The flowers of a tulip poplar generally remain hidden among the tree's branches, so I feel honored when these shy blossoms are willing to drop down for a swim and saddened

that waterlogged petals prevent them from floating with me longer.

The summer after my freshman year of college, I found myself reading Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* in the water under our tulip poplar. The book had been assigned in one of my classes the semester before, but I had never gotten around to finishing it. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to leave the story incomplete. The book has no real plot. In its entirety, *Gilead* is one letter from an elderly, dying reverend to his seven year old son, but I think it says something remarkable about a novel if it can survive without much action. The striking language of the book and the relatable vulnerability of the narrator make topics that are typically unpleasant teem with beautiful vitality.

Throughout *Gilead*, Reverend John Ames speaks often of his faith. Normally, I wouldn't be interested in reading about religion. Growing up in our southern home, I've had my fair share of Sunday school and guilt, but the way this book handles the discussion of faith is refreshingly honest. When he speaks of grace, it is like a stream of water flowing gently, unceasingly. He makes it clear that he is a man not only in need of grace, but also of forgiveness. Ames is in no way afraid of admitting his faults to his son: "I say this because I want you to realize that I am not in any way a saint." He does not mean to leave his son any picture of himself other than how he actually is. He knows that every piece of a person has value. In order for his son to truly know him as a man, he must document his faults.

In Genesis, Gilead is defined as being "hill country" almost every time it is mentioned. If I were from Kansas or Ohio, I might miss the significance of this. There's a softness in a hill and valley that promises to cradle a body hunched with regretted transgression. There's room in its dips to main-

tain dignity while we lick our wounds, but there are also hilltops to sing of our transformation. I think the people in Tabor, Iowa, the town from which fictional *Gilead* is based, can speak of this too. A town steeped in the history of abolition knows that you can't speak of freedom without admitting that there was once captivity. For hills, there must be valleys. For water to cleanse, there must be something to wash away.

A person is an amalgamation of feelings and reactions, both positive and negative, towards everything he or she encounters. Art is a way to preserve that unmatched mix, a way of ensuring that someone might remember some small piece of you that will bring back the rest. Even if the person experiencing your work never knew you on a personal level, the fragments that can be glimpsed through your art help them fill in the blanks. In a painting of an elderly woman, the crease between the corner of her mouth and the fullness of her cheek speak of a lifetime of joy and upturned corners. The sound of music that builds and builds only to drop and build again sings of astounded adversaries and fingers calloused with hopefulness. The language of a story that makes pain taste like rainwater is the hand of the author holding mine. While reading *Gilead*, I was given a chance to know Robinson while Robinson gave Ames a chance for his son to know him.

Art primarily consists of stories. Some are best told with visual images, but some images are so profound that only words can capture their deep purity. These are the stories that were too lovely in their moment of brief actuality to cease existing. Something about them pleads to be kept alive. Ames includes in his letter a description of a young couple walking through the street after a heavy rain. The sun had just returned, and the young man “on some impulse, plain exube-

rance,” jumped up and grabbed a branch, dumping water on himself and the young woman beside him. A downpour of rain water, incandescent with the new sun’s shining, drenched the two. While the girl tried to feign aversion to her sun-water bath, all Ames could think was that “water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash,” or maybe in my case, swimming.

I’ve never been able to focus when I pray. My mind meanders, and I can never quite evade the childish fear that God won’t be able to follow my jumbled stream of thought. Ames tells in his letter, “for me, writing has always felt like praying.” There’s something intimate in writing, a sort of innate holiness. If ever in writing my faith seems to waiver, know that it stays strong because I am still writing. As long as I am writing, I am still searching for that hopeful connection that is worth swimming through the pools of briny tears and soggy petals.

Reading *Gilead* in the pool at my parents’ house, floating on my own tears mixed with chlorine, made me want to live and to write. It made me want to live because art reminds you that the world is so full and that you have the capacity to be filled all the way up with watery experience until it drips out of your hair follicles covering you with sodden life, all the while just giving you one more story to tell. *Gilead* made me want to write because it made me feel alive, and if there is anything I can do for anyone, I want to make them feel alive in this world where it is so easy to wonder, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” In this world where healing and holiness are foreign and laughable concepts we reserve for the sick and senile, I find my hope in art. There is a balm in Gilead. I found it one Tennessee July baptized in pool water.