Red Georgia Clay

Every spring the white flowers of the Star Magnolia tree scatter across our backyard like the snow we don’t have. Our kitchen soaks up the smell of peaches because my mother knows to store the Georgia kind in a brown paper bag for several days before eating them. The back corner of the kitchen where we store our dry fruit displays the dampened paper bag like a weary prize- a tattered pot of gold atop the chipped white paint of our shelves. The aroma of peaches, so sweet and almost sickly, will fill the kitchen and tempt the entire household. If we wait one day too long to eat the peaches they rot. However if we catch them at just the right time the knife will slice through them like butter and the peach will fall apart in our mouths and the violent orange juice will slide down our chins and stick to the floor. Somebody will step on that later and somebody will be yelled at. But Southern mannerism dictates to do so in a voice as sweet as the peaches. Southern mannerism also dictates to ensure one feels the weight of a sin as simple as a sticky floor the remainder of a lifetime but to shove our real sins underneath our antique oriental rugs. Did you know the Star Magnolia tree also comes from Asia? It’s a very beautiful tree.

Later in the summer half the state will pile in a mid-sized something that likely will also be Asian. I come from the same city as Martin Luther King Jr. You wouldn’t know it besides the couple of streets named after him, only every city in the country heralds those. Georgians will drive out to Stone Mountain Park which on the flat side overlooking the big green space bears the carving of three Confederate generals. This park receives state funding. (This park is a confederate war memorial.) At nighttime in the summers the park offers a laser show and we sit on the grass and watch flickering neon lights dance across the side of the mountain to the most patriotic songs they can scrounge up. When they do ‘America’, the lasers will etch out the Confederate generals and on horseback they will gallop off in celebration of our freedom.
Mosquitoes run rampant during the summers, and we will spend the entire time smacking the blood-suckers. We will leave the park covered in welts as fireworks explode above our heads. But earlier, as we wait for the show to begin, we will sit on itchy grass listening to long vowels and blonde mothers screaming at the child not to throw the football like that and buzzing cicadas while sweat pools at the nape of our necks and wonder quietly why we bother coming back every, single summer.

When the next policeman shoots an unarmed black man the blonde mother who yells at her child on the side of Stone Mountain will remind that child of the world MLK dreamt of: one where people are judged based on the content of their character. She will tell this to her child because she knows MLK would be sad the unarmed black man stole a cigar and therefore has a bad character to be rightfully judged. She will not tell her child that policemen are not obligated to kill anyone or that they are obligated to protect everyone. She will fan herself in the ninety-degree heat and likely suck on a peach. Her child will one day bring their children back to the park to see the laser-ed face of Martin Luther King Jr. projected across the carving of Stonewall Jackson to empty music.

In elementary they asked us to write a poem about America including Georgian symbolism. I wrote, “She wears the red Georgia clay like lipstick,” and on that day America became a woman in my mind. If the Georgia clay serves as her lipstick then Florida must be one big tear. In the South most of the men you know remain institutionalized in their insanity and want to force you to bury your aborted fetal tissue. They come from long lines of hierarchy which becomes most dangerous when intertwined in patriarchy which is the sole form of leadership they understand to be true. At the age of nine the grown up ones will tell the little girls women cannot be president. The seatbelt will cut into our skin and the car will keep braking and
the sweat will make our noses slippery when they mutter the words “just too emotional.” They wear big hats and drive big cars and care for my opinion as long as I’m smiling. These men hold the wealth and the power and the same blood in their veins as yours, making dissent difficult, and if you dare, they make it seem infantile. They are the big white columns that hold up our capitol building. They use their spit to wet the pen that signs the legislation they claim protects family values the same day they cheat on their wives.

Many of the women I know think they dislike conflict and balk in the face of feminism. They were forced to internalize their fathers’ misery and fell prey to the female narrative their brothers wove for them without realizing Sleeping Beauty was the silliest story they ever heard—the brothers Grimm do not understand that men only think they own the spinning wheel. Women get in trouble when they spin but men get to write a story in which a pretty young girl is manipulated by women until a prince stumbles upon the situation and frees her. It wasn’t the prince’s kiss that woke up Sleeping Beauty so much as it was a fairy’s proficiency. If the women I know allowed themselves to believe that part of the story then they no longer would get to be a part of the boys club, a club they understand to gain them access and allowance. Too bad the entire South is a boys’ club.

When our mothers fan sliced peaches on their most precious china the men will grab them with hands that kill baby animals for fun and then they will call Sylvia Plath crazy and wonder how many drugs Salvador Dali was on when he created revolutionary masterpieces. When the A.C. shuts off they will take your mother’s coffee table book of female artists, flip through the pages and assert aloud that Frida Kahlo just should have plucked. They will pronounce Kahlo incorrectly, because it will be muffled by their drawl.
At Sunday school priests the size of giants will stand behind pulpits and preach at you. The walk to communion will feel a million miles long and our shoes go, "clack!"-"clack!"- "clack!" against the cheap linoleum floors. The people of the congregation will not like it when the lady preacher softly suggests the death penalty to be a moral abhorrence but they will weep over plastic Jesus’s body. They will like to remind you that the Jews took away Jesus and they will forever conflate this thievery with frugality. On Sunday the people of the congregation will nod their heads when the preacher preaches religious tolerance but on Tuesday they will call your father a Yid.

In my dreams everyone refuses tradition and drinks cream-less coffee. I imagine an ocean past Tybee that exists in pure anarchy to the indignation of the Southern waters. The coral stands sturdy, the sea pebbles lie still, but all the fish and creatures abandon-in tandem- the order of things, to exist selfishly and wonder to themselves for the first time in their short lifespans why they ever bothered to swim in schools anyways. In my dreams the Georgia red clay softens under our footsteps and peaches cut like butter without any prodding.