

Summer 2018

A Cryogenic State

Garrett Biggs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr>

Recommended Citation

Biggs, Garrett (2018) "A Cryogenic State," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 27 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol27/iss1/4>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

A CRYOGENIC STATE

Garrett Biggs

Sheryl did not hear the sparrow strike the window glass. Or rather, when she heard the collision, she mistook it for something inside her body: a gooey limb kicking at her pelvic region, sudden but half-formed; that moment her mother told her about, where, with a single motion, she would become aware of all the different children gestating inside. She set a hand to her waist, then left the room to vomit. Only after she returned to her office, when she saw the sparrow's broken wing, did she realize that there had been no kick at all, but a bird attempting to fly in.

This was the thirty-fourth week of her pregnancy, on an unusually cold day in September. Before returning to her office, she had spent the early morning walking out to the pier, her hand set beneath her stomach, searching for some trace of her child. As it had been explained to her, during a first pregnancy, it was not unreasonable for some mothers to wait until the fifth or sixth month to feel the baby move. This time frame had passed though, she had yet to detect even a rumbling, and sometimes, when she stared at her round and bloated body in the mirror, she wondered if she was filled with nothing more than air—whether a wind had slipped inside her uterus and been mistaken for a child.

When she first asked the doctor whether this kind of wait was normal, he glanced at the ultrasound, and said there was nothing to worry about: her baby was just a still thing. It was an offhand comment, muttered softly beneath his breath, but Sheryl misunderstood the phrase “still thing” for stillborn, and she immediately burst into a bout of tears that left the doctor red and sorry.

Now, she stood above a bloody wing, and her chin was beginning to twitch in much the same way. She opened the sliding glass door and reached outside. The bird was jerking forward, smacking its beak against the brick floor. Sheryl knew this kind of thing shouldn't disturb her—*far more disturbing sights every day*, her mother might say—but its eyes were wild and its ribs were undulating, and she worried that if the bird flailed long enough, its beak might tear a kind of hole in the fabric of the universe. She imagined a cruel and dark tendril from another world,

slipping down her throat and through her uterine lining, forcing the child to finally move.

What kind of fantasy is this? she asked herself, but before she received an answer, the bird's wings steadied. Its heartbeat slowed and its eyes closed. She slid the door shut.

Recently, Sheryl had taken to eating out at the local Irish pub. She ordered only the onion rings. The pub was staffed with a single waiter, Marv, who wore horn-rimmed glasses and did not know how to work the television remote. It had become typical, in these months preceding the child's birth, for Marv to ask Sheryl to change the television channel for him. She would stand on the red-leather booth, arch her back, and when she finally changed the station, Marv would applaud to an empty room. Before long, it became transactional: find the right angle for the remote, and get paid with a second round of onion rings.

They always tasted better the second time. Earned, rather than bought.

"Why do you always choose that booth?" Marv asked. He was standing behind the bar, spraying a bottle filled with neon blue fluid.

"The lights in this corner are dimmer," she said. "It hides the rash on my arm."

"I once had a rash," he said, chewing on a pistachio. "I thought it was in the shape of an iguana, but my wife said it was just the shape of a rash."

Sheryl stood and walked over to the bar, where the light bulbs hung closer to the floor. "What shape is this?" she asked.

She lifted her arm and set it on the bar between them. Marv inched his glasses down his nose, and closely examined her arm.

Sheryl felt the same way about rashes as she did pimples: she thought they were disgusting. She remembered, when she was young, standing in front of the mirror at her mother's nail salon. It was in a local shopping complex, down a hallway of offices with the store names written in Vietnamese. While her mother sat with her bare feet above a peeling gray sink, selecting colors of polish, Sheryl squeezed pimples off her face, wiping their pus at the bottom of the mirror. To her, this rash was much the same. Her doctor said this wasn't his expertise, but the rash

probably resulted from a change in diet. He said to try and stay away from the onion rings.

Marv spun her arm under the lights as if they were dancing. Sheryl laughed, forgetting what she had asked, and told him to be careful. She didn't want to give the baby whiplash. She paid the check at the bar, and tipped Marv an extra dollar than usual. She returned to her booth, put on her blue windbreaker, and made way for the door.

"A spaceship," Marv said.

"What?" Sheryl said.

"Your rash," he said. "It looks kind of like a spaceship."

Sheryl's mother had a different opinion from the doctor's, something Sheryl had not considered. She believed, in her heart, that the baby was a stone.

Her mother lived an hour south in Salinas, where she had purchased a yellow house with a mostly-rotting avocado farm in the back. Sheryl called her sometimes, only when she felt anxious, but all her mother ever wanted to talk about were this child and its variations.

"I don't mean to be gauche," she said, "but I heard about this when I went with your aunt to Thailand. You will not believe the kinds of babies they have out there. Agate, basalt, obsidian. The tour guides, they were telling us about these poor women: they go, get knocked up, and then the next thing they know, they're giving birth to a stone."

"Obsidian?" Sheryl said. This sounded almost nice to her.

"Yes! Obsidian! Is that not the most miserable thing you've ever heard?"

Sheryl didn't answer. She hated questions like this. Instead, she turned the television on mute, while her mother continued to talk about stones, then avocados, then the leaky faucet that she had installed last week. Sheryl flipped through the channels. She watched the beginning of a movie she had never heard of, titled *Dark Star*. She made popcorn on the stove and burnt the kernels at the bottom, and she told her mother she had to go, but was glad they got to talk.

“Wait—one more thing,” Sheryl said, before her mother hung up the phone.

“Something happened yesterday.”

“What kind of thing?” her mother said.

“I was working at my desk and then some bird smacked into the window. Now it’s lying dead on the patio. What am I supposed to do with it?” she said.

“I don’t know. Bury it? It’s a bird,” she said.

“Thanks,” Sheryl said.

She hung up the phone. Outside, the sun had set. The shore was glowing blue, lined with fish spines and phosphorous.

Sheryl stood through the final minutes of *Dark Star*, staring outside at the sparrow. She could not bring herself to bury it yet. She tried to forget about the animal, stepped into her bedroom, and threw her shirt in the laundry basket. She made another batch of popcorn half-naked, this time not burning any kernels. With night falling, the kitchen window turned into a kind of mirror. Sheryl watched her shirtless reflection, and began to trace the outline of her baby. Then she tried to remember the last time someone had held her waist. The second batch of popcorn was a mistake, she decided. Her chest began to sink. She was doing it again: falling into that desolate region of the ocean where no light could reach. She imagined her unborn child as a slab of limestone, cradled in the doctor’s arms. She imagined all the horrible things her child would eventually say. She imagined what would happen if the child never crawled out of her. Her baby starting to decompose, wrapped in a layer of moss and larvae like the branches of an ancient tree.

In the living room, another viewing of *Dark Star* began to blare. She resolved to turn off the television, but instead, at the sight of the screen, she turned up its volume. She sat down with the empty bowl. She watched the movie again.

The next morning, Sheryl woke from dreams about a scout ship in *Dark Star*, how they kept the dead commander alive in a cryogenic state. She tossed around in bed for a while, and when she finally opened her eyes, she found her rash covered

her entire forearm. She scratched at it with her fingernails until everything was hot pink.

Then the phone rang.

“I’m coming into town today,” her mother said. “It’s the only place where I can find pesticides that won’t kill the avocados.”

“Do you need a place to stay for the night?” Sheryl asked.

“No, I’ll just drive back later in the day. What about lunch?”

It was decided that they would meet at the pub thirty minutes before noon. Her mother said she needed enough time to find the right pesticide, and then drive halfway across town. On the walk to the pub, Sheryl saw a one-armed boy throwing a frisbee on the beach. The frisbee had a smiley face painted at its center. The sun was bright, and she could feel pools of sweat gathering under her armpits, but she kept her long sleeves rolled down in an effort to conceal the rash. She put a hand to her stomach, hoping this heat might force her baby into even the slightest uncomfortable wiggle.

When she stepped inside the pub, Sheryl saw her mother was already there, with a floral scarf wrapped around her head. She asked if her mother minded moving to her regular booth, but when her mother’s eyebrows arched in confusion, Sheryl decided it wasn’t worth the battle. The rash was hidden underneath her shirt, anyway.

“And why do you frequent this place?” her mother asked, flipping through the menu.

“I started going once my maternity leave began. It’s the only place nearby open breakfast, lunch and dinner,” Sheryl said. “Did you find the pesticides you needed?”

Her mother put a straw between her two purple lips, and took a large drink of Diet Pepsi. “I’m afraid I wasn’t honest with you,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Sheryl asked.

“I didn’t actually come to town for pesticides. I came to ask a favor of you,” she

said.

As it turned out, pesticides would not have begun to fix her problems. The way Sheryl's mother told it, buying the house was a giant mistake. She had purchased the house last May with the promise of owning a farm, only to find she could grow nothing but rot and yellowed fruit. First, she tried buying more fertile soil. Then she installed a sprinkler system. She figured it was money well spent—that the farm would return her investment. But the trees would still not grow and the fruits would not fall, and now she owed more money than she had ever seen at once.

“Long story short,” she said. “I'm in debt. Worse than I can ever remember. And you know I wouldn't come to you if I didn't absolutely need to, but what else am I supposed to do?” she asked.

Sheryl didn't believe a word of it. She looked over her mother's shoulder at Marv, who was cleaning her usual booth, pretending he couldn't hear the conversation.

“How much do you need?” Sheryl said.

Her mother took a piece of paper out of her purse and scribbled a number in purple ink. She passed it over, face down. Sheryl lifted it from the table and considered the number. “That much?” she said. “I don't know if I can.”

It was true: Sheryl had not checked her bank account in months, and she wasn't going to make promises so easily. Her hesitance didn't spring from a place of bitterness so much as it did a genuine fear that she might not be able to fulfill the task. This was not the first time her mother had asked to borrow money, and she knew it would not be the last. It had been like this ever since she graduated college, since she took scissors to her mother's credit cards, since she was named partner at the law-firm. Since she moved to the beach and built the new house. It was a rare constant in her life, and yet it surprised her every time.

After her mother left the pub, Sheryl went into the bathroom to vomit. She emptied her stomach, all bile and venom, and exited the restaurant, forgetting to pay. Outside she saw that the one-armed boy was still throwing his frisbee. The sun was elongating his shadow across the sand, and onto a stretch of beachrock. She was suddenly determined to see her doctor. He had not responded to her voicemails in days.

“Tell me,” she said into the receiver during one desperate call. “How can you leave a patient alone like this? How can you let her rot away?” And then in another: “I’m not feeling well, doctor. You said the nausea would go away months ago. My waist is expanding but I still feel empty. It’s like a parasite played backwards. Call me, please.”

By the time Sheryl arrived at the clinic, her shirt was soaked through with sweat, and the rash on her arm was burning. She stepped towards the receptionist’s desk and explained she did not have an appointment, but needed to speak to the doctor immediately. The receptionist said it would be only one more moment, and to take a seat in the waiting area. She frowned and tried to look away from Sheryl, one hand with a phone against her ear, and the other holding a finger outward as if to say, *Will you be quiet please?* The phone made a miserable beeping noise. Sheryl began to pace around the waiting area. Searching for any distraction she could find, she placed her attention on a plastic terracotta pot, empty and resting on a stack of magazines. An older woman sat behind her.

“Would you like room to sit?” she asked, lifting a *Health & Fitness* magazine from the seat next to her.

“That’s all right,” Sheryl said. “Thank you, though.”

The woman set the magazine on the table next to her. “No, really,” she said. “You look tired. I insist.”

Sheryl smiled politely and took the seat. She examined her neighbor. The woman had long tendrils of gray hair and a crooked mouth, and although she couldn’t have been any younger than Sheryl’s mother, as Sheryl’s eyes sank down the woman’s body, it was apparently obvious to her that she too was pregnant. Upon this realization, she made eye contact with the woman. There was nothing appealing about her. She wore ragged yellow maternity clothes and smelled vaguely of soured milk. “Do you know what this pot is for?” the woman asked.

“I can’t say I do,” Sheryl said.

“I saw you looking at it kind of curious,” the woman said. “I wondered if you might know why they’d leave an empty pot in a waiting area.” Sheryl shrugged her shoulders. “You made quite an entrance there,” she laughed.

It hadn't occurred to Sheryl until now how her arrival must have appeared: a rash-covered, sweaty woman, eight months pregnant, slamming through the doors and demanding to see her doctor. A pang of embarrassment split through her. Her face burned red. "The doctor hasn't responded to any of my phone calls. I couldn't stand to wait any longer," she said.

"Well unfortunately, I think we are both here to be disappointed. The lady over there just informed me there were no more openings for the day."

"Then what are you still doing here?" Sheryl asked.

"I thought I would finish reading my magazine," she said, holding up another copy of *Health & Fitness*. "It's really the only reason to come here anyway," she winked. Sheryl looked away from the woman to find that the receptionist had gone missing from her desk. She tried to smile at her, but she could feel her chin beginning to twitch. She was sinking again, thinking about the sparrow and the baby and her mother's money, a place in the ocean so desolate it could collapse a human skull.

"Are you all right?" the woman said.

Sheryl didn't move. "Can I ask you a question?" she said.

"Of course," the woman said.

"Oh my God, I sound insane," she said, running her fingers through her sweat-stained hair. "But if a baby is, let's call it, unnaturally still—you don't think there is any chance that she's a stone?"

"She?" the woman said.

"What?" Sheryl said.

"You said 'she,' not it," the woman said. "I don't mean to sound regressive or what have you, but I don't usually think of most people ascribing genders to stones. And you seem like most people. So if you're having a daughter and you're calling her a daughter, then I would assume she will be a baby. Not a stone."

Sheryl sat there silent.

"I'm not wrong, am I?" the woman said.

“No,” Sheryl said. “Thank you.”

The receptionist returned to the women, and explained that she was sorry to keep Sheryl waiting, but the doctor had no availability for the remainder of the day. She said to call again tomorrow. On their walk out the door, Sheryl waved goodbye to the woman, and then turned the corner, smiling a little.

When Sheryl arrived home that night, her mailbox was spilling over with unwanted coupons. She cradled the stacks of paper in both her arms, and tried her best to unlock her front door. The house inside was dark, except for a single reading lamp, flickering in the corner. Sheryl set the mail on her counter, took her checkbook out from a drawer, and turned on the television. It was playing a rerun of *Law and Order SVU*. She scrolled through the channels to see if *Dark Star* was on, but she soon realized it wasn't, and figured the marathon was a one-time thing. She opened her checkbook and wrote a check to her mother. Then she crumpled the paper. She wrote another check, and crumpled that paper too. This went on for a while. She was performing a ritual, bathing herself in the blue light of the television. She stood from her chair, stepped into her office to see if she could bring herself to bury the sparrow, and it was here, staring at a dead bird lying on her patio, where she felt the full force of a baby's foot strike her from the inside of her waist. She stood silently, and reached for the phone on her desk. Unsure whom she would call, she set the phone back down. Her insides were churning, but outside she remained still, squinting her eyes and craning her neck to see if it was only a bird.

But it wasn't. It was a kick. It was a girl. It was a fetal mess of limb and bone. And after paying for the previous day's meal, she told Marv every detail. She told him about the woman at the doctor's office and the blue light on the television, and when she threw on her coat, he asked where she was going, and she explained she had to go bury a bird. On her walk outside, past the pier, Sheryl listened to the sound of waves. She wondered if everything fell to silence, whether she could hear the sand and stones erode. She promised herself when she saw the sparrow, she would do just what she had told Marv. And later at home, when no one was looking, she did.

GARRETT BIGGS'S work has appeared in *CutBank*, *Nashville Review*, and *The Offing*, among other publications. He is managing editor of *The Adroit Journal*, and a MFA candidate in fiction at the University of Colorado Boulder.