

The Girl in the Poems

By Kat Heiden

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I found her in the poetry class I took last summer. The Girl in the Poems. She made herself known more than once during that class, popping up in the works of men whose experiences do not at all mirror hers, or mine, either. And yet, the poets, the Girl, and I can still relate with one another thanks to that universal, unnamable thing that happens to us all when we experience poems or art of any kind—the visceral, deep-in-the-gut feelings that it can evoke with its imagery and vivid descriptions of the world around us all, of feelings like loss and grief and love that matter to every human and are why art exists in the first place.

Nonetheless, the Girl in the Poems is a minor character, unimportant to the narrative, ancillary in all the ways a person can be. She is white and privileged and she's actually bummed out about it because she is confident that means she doesn't have anything good to write about. She's also the character I relate to the most in those poems, and oh, am I ashamed at the truth of it. I'd be dutifully reading for class and then there she was again. Next thing I knew, I was hanging my head, wringing my hands, terrified to offend, to be a shitty ally, when often I am tempted, so tempted, to lean into my privilege in all the worst ways—that is to say, to completely ignore the horrors that poets like John Morillo have witnessed firsthand and brought to bear on a country full of readers like me. Readers who let it happen when we shove our white hands over our eyes, peeking between fingers only for a second, because seeing what's real for our friends and neighbors and fellow citizens is painful and sad and confusing.

There are too many bullets involved in the world John has told me I live in. I don't want to look at them, nor the bodies they have pierced. I usually don't have to. I am privileged. By the color of my skin, the

people and place I was born to. I am part of the American Dream, the kind sold by and to conservative white men like my father, to whom the concept of their privilege is something to scoff at.

How dare these liberals say we had it easier when we worked hard too? The sentiment oozes off my dad even when he doesn't say it. Even when he doesn't realize it.

"Dad," I say, "Remember those times you warned me about the speed traps on Trout Brook Drive, right after I got my license?" He says he does.

"Aley's dad gave her a talk when she got her license, too. He said, your job is to never have to interact with the cops. Ever."

"Well, sure," Dad replies, "no one wants a ticket."

I explain that my dear friend Aley's dad wasn't teaching her about speed traps and avoiding tickets. He was teaching her how to avoid death. Because this man, American in a way that my dad and I are not, with sun-browned Apache skin, is treated like an enemy in his own land. His daughter is, too. She was in the car when her dad pulled into their driveway in Whittier, turned off the engine of his Mercedes, and got out to face the LAPD officer who'd parked right behind them, ready to catch the Brown thief in the car he surely couldn't afford, about to rob the house that surely couldn't be his. What the cop was really investigating was how this man could have the audacity to be that successful in that skin.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, I got pulled over in that speed trap on a road named for a fish, shed a few tears because I was scared of getting grounded, and was sent on my way to keep living

the American Dream. I was born to be a product of that myth and to perpetuate it, or at least that's what its founders hoped. I have been the Girl in the Poems, lamenting a comfort I was born into, resenting the safety of the skin I drive around wherever I want. She is embarrassing, naïve, and yet part of me—probably always will be.

But she's not all of me.

And she doesn't have to be the part that holds the pen.