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Reveille

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Reveille

ZOË E. SPROTT

ENG 338 (American Literature Since the Mid-20th Century)

Mentor: Shawna Yang Ryan

Artist Statement

The same morning routine, the same conversations, the same surrender. Caught in a loop, how can you escape? The nameless narrator at the heart of my short story grapples with this question while standing on the brink of something larger than just another morning: change. Originally written for Shawna Yang Ryan's ENG 338 course (American Literature Since the Mid-20th Century), this piece is in conversation with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and this narrator is an echo of Esther, the novel's protagonist. Both characters are forced to confront their internal struggles—Esther struggles with depression, whereas this narrator must grapple with expressing her sexuality—as well as their mothers, who deny the existence of their daughters' difficulties. This piece not only creates similar characters, but also seeks to stylistically emulate Plath's writing. This can be observed most discernably in the recurring metaphorical imagery, which can be found throughout this story, from the mother's pimple to the lavender blouse.

Furthermore, the ending of "Reveille" mirrors that of *The Bell Jar*, where Esther moves from a passive role to an active one, deciding to begin recovery. The protagonist of this piece finishes the story with a confession that ends the passive aggressive battle between her and her mother. It is not said in order to shock or silence her mother, but rather to stop avoiding the subject and address it directly. In this sense, the confession is an exhale, a release of pressure and the guarantee that something—it is unknown what—will be done, will change. This ending is not only in conversation with Plath's novel, but is also important to me as a writer, artist, activist, and member of the LGBTQ+ community. All too often, members of this community are faced with tales of silence, but this is not one of those stories. Nor is it tragic or overly optimistic. Instead, it is real. It is not only reflective of my own experiences as a queer woman, but also the experiences of other members of this community whom I have had the pleasure of knowing. This was written with people—adolescents and adults alike—who are in the LGBTQ+ community in mind; it is difficult to explain the sense of relief I have felt upon finding depictions of my life, my identity, in the stories I have read, and I wanted to provide that for others.

Ultimately, this narrator is alone in navigating her own escape from the cyclical sameness that she finds with her mother. After countless mornings of silence, how can she speak? What can she say? I encourage you, the reader, to venture into uncharted territory with the narrator, to stand beside her at the mirror, and to endure with her a morning at the breaking point.



Born and raised in Wahiawa, Hawai'i, I grew up listening to the stories that my parents read to me each night and that my grandmother recalled as we sat beneath the stars. Now, I plan to attend graduate school with interests in creative writing, queer theory, and cultural studies and long term goals to work as a professor and continue writing. This piece was a challenge to write because my natural writing style is not very similar to that of Sylvia Plath, but this encouraged me to find a balance between these two contrasting styles. It was also important to me to incorporate part of my own identity in the story, which I did through the depiction of a queer character; thankfully, not every aspect is true, as my mother has always been very supportive of my identity and, when I came out, told me, "there's no need to come out... when you were never in."

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It was the gentle tug at my wrist that finally pried my dream-crusted eyes open.

"Time to get ready," my mother's voice cooed above me. Her lips tugged up at the corners, revealing a myriad of creases, budding wrinkles, lining the curves of her face. I wondered idly what it must be like to watch the skin you have become acquainted with begin to sag and resculpt itself. The urge to prod at my own face, inspecting for the same tell-tale caress of time, pulled at my gut.

Instead, I closed my eyes again and gathered the form of my sleeping cat closer to me, eliciting an exasperated sigh from the figure still towering above me. I listened as she marched back up the hallway, her footsteps receding into muffled white noise.

It was a morning ritual, a teasing dance, a leisurely duel. I imagine that our shadow-selves, the puppeteers tugging at our strings, are always braced for combat, standing at attention, rapiers poised in their palms, their eyes locked. One false movement and the other parries, pounces.

I knew that if I remained there much longer, she would throw the comforter off and thrust me into the blistered maw of the morning cold.

My pinched muscles keened and my bones tapped against each other as I pointed my limbs as far away from myself as I could, a concerto of awakening. The floorboards creaked beneath my tiptoes. Most mornings, I shift my weight from heel to heel before my closet, mulling over the challenge of dressing myself once again; today, I did not hesitate to turn instead to my dresser, withdrawing a t-shirt and padding into the bathroom.

My mother was leaning over the counter to study the pimple swelling on her chin, a blue dress hugging her waist. She looked as though she was willing it to pop—or, better yet, disappear completely—with the power of her fiercely squinted eyes. I forced myself not to fidget when her attention turned to me, then to the shirt in my hand.

"What is that?" It was not a question. She straightened and stepped closer to face me head-on. We were both short, but she seemed a giant to me in that moment, nostrils flared and eyebrows pointed in accusation. My voice did not come, imprisoned at the top of my throat. What could I say, even if I could speak? She had already decided what the t-shirt was: trash.

A moment of weakness: her shadow-self lunged as mine stammered.

"Give me that," she demanded, wrenching the shirt from my hand before she had even uttered the last syllable. I was a statue, feet planted on the ground, capable of doing little else but watch as she left the room with my t-shirt, listen as she rummaged about my bedroom, and let her shove a lavender blouse into my hand upon her return.

"There." She returned to her station in front of the mirror and began brushing her hair, her eyes flitting between her reflection and my paralyzed form. "Come on," she command-

ed, exercising no effort to veil her irritation. "I'll be late. You'll make me look bad."

My head bobbed in listless agreement, even as my shadow-self was tending to its wounds.

I sidled up beside my mother. My reflection stared back at me, and I tried to see the threads of my mother in my face. Nothing. I tried to see my father. Nothing. I held the mental portraits of each family member beside my drowsy reflection and saw only a stranger. I wondered if this is what they saw, too: a sheepish vagabond who somehow stumbled into every birthday, every Thanksgiving, every Christmas, every family gathering. Even if they didn't, I did.

I could feel the scalpel-stare of my mother on me, but I did not meet her eyes in the mirror. Instead, I pulled the hem of my night-shirt over my head and let it fall to the ground. Satisfied, my mother tucked the last bobby pin into her bun.

"I don't understand why you're so reluctant to wear the nice things we buy for you," she ventured, her tone a forced casual, speculative as a razor's edge. "You look so pretty when you dress well."

I felt my head nodding thoughtlessly. I slid a peachy bra over my chest, unhurried by the inevitability of the next few minutes. We stand here every morning. My mother reflexively handed me her clinical strength deodorant. I lifted my arms only to hug them closer again as a tendril of icy wind wrapped around my waist.

"Oh!" It was a practiced exclamation that didn't quite reach the fledgling crow's feet at the corners of her eyelids. "How are Martha and her boyfriend doing? Still good?" Perhaps I would answer if I knew she would hear me. "They are just the sweetest. Cutest couple I know, really."

This was not the end of the tangent, I knew. In fact, it wasn't even a tangent. My mother was a seamstress: sewing seemingly individual pieces into the conversation before ultimately threading them together to form one, cohesive message. I slid a pair of blue jeans over my hips and waited.

"You know," she began conspiratorially, "I don't mean to sound... well, anyway, Martha is a sweet girl, but"—her eyes slid in a dramatic arc to meet mine—"you're much prettier."

I knew that I should have let the impression of a polite smile curl into place on my lips the same way I knew when I woke up that morning that I should have chosen the lavender blouse to wear. Instead, I looked at the button of my jeans as I fastened it into place. She sighed as though I was a child who couldn't understand the subtext of her words.

"What I'm saying is that you could find a really handsome boy easily, if you just, I don't know, made more of an effort." Her words were too bitter to accompany the sweet lilt of motherly advice. I could hear the slide of skin on hilt as she prepared for another round. There would be no end to this conversation; it had started years prior and showed no signs of dwindling.

"What about all the makeup we bought? All the nicest brands, matched to your skin tone. Do you remember how

much it cost?" I did. It was the birthday present I received nearly two decades later, an apparent punishment for her 38 hours in labor.

The lavender blouse was staring up at me, spread on the countertop, a gentle reminder of my mother's place in the room. I wondered where she had put the t-shirt.

"You know, your aunt never married because she couldn't attract a husband. She didn't have the money or the resources. You do, but you choose the same fate?"

The pimple on her chin was glowing an angry red now, a white layer crowning it. Just a little more pressure and it would erupt. I wanted to tell her to keep going. She might get what she'd been struggling for.

"Are you even listening to me?" The mask was off. Her inquisition was losing composure, becoming a shrill scolding that I'm sure even the neighbors heard. My father was asleep across the hall, but he could sleep through anything.

"I just don't understand why you can't live up to your potential. You have everything—we *give* you *everything*—and you appreciate nothing!" This was her move. Her shadow-self was going for the kill.

Belatedly, I realized that I was still standing there in just my bra. I registered a sense of distant cold licking at my skin, but it no longer bothered me. I had adjusted, I supposed. My gaze, trained steadily on the movement of my mother's lips

until this moment, flicked down to the lavender blouse, waiting patiently for what it must have perceived as the inevitable response from me—pulling it over my head and letting it settle over the curves of my torso. Perhaps it would have been correct to assume this course of action on any other day. Today, however, my shadow-self snapped.

It was in the haze of sudden clarity that I turned away from my mother and quietly returned to my bedroom. The t-shirt was in a wad on my bed. I went to stand before the closet.

A myriad of expensive fabrics and brilliant colors was clustered on hangers, floating gracefully above the floor. I shifted from heel to heel, mentally inventorying the contents, searching for just one item that *I* had found, that belonged to *me*. My mother was still speaking from the doorway of my room, but I heard none of it.

Instead, I grabbed a bunch of hangers, their clothes holding on for dear life, and threw them to the ground. My mother was shouting. I threw another pile down, and another, and another, until my closet was empty, free to refill. I pulled my t-shirt from off the bed and put it on. My mother had gone silent. She looked so small. I knew my gaze was just stony determination now.

I let my weapon fall, done with the fight.
"I'm gay."