

Bone Black

written by Guest Contributor | January 25, 2019



Dad ashes his cigarette in the freshly washed, plastic black ashtray beside the recliner while working through his daily crossword in *The Oregonian*.

To make skin tones, I start out by mixing alizarin with cobalt blue first, then another pile of cadmium red with phthalo blue to make two different purples. I push out a little cadmium yellow with some yellow ochre next to it and then a huge dollop of titanium white. When mixing complimentary colors, shades of browns are born. The varying shadows and highlights reflected on our flesh holds other colors that are more prominent than we realize. My skin is pale ivory with hints of reds and tiny whispers of violet. The lines in between my fingers when I press them together have a purple tint to them. Many of the humans in my paintings mimic this strange tone I see in myself.

When painting a landscape, I always start with liquid white to create a smooth, wet background.

“You better wash that off your skin right away.” Dad says as he walks by my bedroom down the hallway. The smoke from his recently extinguished menthol still hovering around him “And crack your window too while you’re at it. You need good ventilation when you use that stuff.”

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Alizarin is an organic, non-toxic color derived from the madder root (*rubia tinctorum*), referred to by painters as Rose Madder. It’s a red that tends toward the violet spectrum as opposed to the yellow/orange spectrum. Other pigments in this category include yellow ochre, and umbers.

The color of oil paint is derived from small particles of ground compounds that create pigments; they are then mixed with carrier oils that of which include linseed, sunflower and safflower oils. Common pigment types include mineral salts such as white oxides: zinc oxide, titanium dioxide and cadmiums of the red to yellow spectrum, which are highly toxic and require thoughtful

use. Newer, inorganic pigments have been created through the years that have been developed with strong light-fastness, but still the toxic pigments particularly remain the most vivid.

During the “age of discovery” (white European colonization) new pigments were introduced in Europe. This is primarily when organic variants were created, such as alizarin (crimson) and Indian yellow. In the eighteenth century the developing science of chemistry intended to expand a wider range of pigments. This led to the discovery of Prussian blue, a synthetic blue accidentally created while trying to make a red hue, and of which is used as an *antidote* to heavy metal poisoning.

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Prussian blue begs to go on first.

I swoop on the dark space it creates.

My heart flutters as I feel myself there
and it in me.

A dry brush blends it into liquid white,
fades down, an almost daytime sky.

The setting sun gifts me new songs
every night from the front porch of my parents’ home.

The dead trees that gave me beautiful
sharp silhouettes

have since been erased from the land,
but the maples my dad planted
are large and frame the west now.

Alizarin glides on next,
just below the almost daytime blue.

The bright pink hue this paint creates
mixed with liquid white is a special thing
that doesn’t happen every night.

The sun is already down,

past the horizon by a bit,
so no yellow or orange allowed here.

I brush on the horizon line,
bone black.

The straggly dead trees
bone black.

Beautiful against the vivid but darkening sky,
revealing bursts of stars
one by one.

*

Bone black is made from bone char, which is created by charring animal bones. Once the bones are burned, they are put into a bone pulverizer. This pigment has a strong tinting quality, has a deep dark hue (not too brown or too blue), and is translucent but doesn't require too many layers to become opaque.

*

I often wonder what poison will end up killing me. I inherited Dad's love for drink and smoke.

I discovered oil painting as a freshman in high school. We had a new art teacher who'd replaced the grunty, bitter Mr. Swenson. The timing couldn't have been better for me to have a new medium for exploring my inner visions. I was burned by bullying daily and blindly becoming one myself.

Mrs. Kincaid passionately showed us techniques to become better artists. I fell in love with her immediately. I'll never forget the first time I brushed turpentine with alizarin crimson onto a board to paint a sphere. I finally enjoyed being a student in that small town school and finally had something to look forward to. After that I brought paintings home and straight to my bedroom because all the work I showed Mom made her worried about my state of mind. Dad always said "mmhm, looks good", but I didn't think he cared. After a couple months of this I found a few tubes of paint in my room, along with a canvas, some paintbrushes and a small container of odorless paint thinner all inside a Michael's craft store bag. I was so excited that Mom knew what to

get without asking me, and I wept at this surprise. But then Mom said it must have been Dad. I ran to the living room and choked up as I thanked him. "Wasn't me." His intense green eyes said *you're welcome*. This happened on and off with genuine "You're welcomes" and "I want all your paintings." thrown in there throughout my high school years.

Dad always scolded me for getting paint on my skin. "That shit's poison," he'd say, and "Don't ever get it in your eyes or your mouth."

He gave me stickers from the chemical plant he worked at, the classic image of a skull and crossbones with "POISON" above it. He also made me custom sticker labels that said "Aquarius is the shiznit" for my art case, his old fishing tackle box, when they got a sticker-label-maker at work.

All of this opened up new conversations with Dad. We'd sit in the living room and he'd ask me what we used for paint thinner at school, if there were any other artists in my class, or school for that matter. Since we were introduced to oils there were a few of my peers who'd discovered they *were* artists. It's a phenomenal experience to watch an almost adult peer shift in that way, realizing they have this ability, this power that's been hiding within them all these years. I could feel my Dad's ability to see this with me and oils. I knew he was proud of me. I knew he loved every twisted image I painted.

"You can't use turpentine. That shit's poison. It'll kill you," he'd said.

"I work all day with chemicals; I think I know how they work."

He added after another long drag from his menthol.

*

Tobacco smoke causes oxidative stress so that insufficient oxygen is supplied to the skin resulting in tissue ischaemia and blood vessel occlusion. It reduces innate and host immune responses, and induces metallo-proteinase, an enzyme that specifically degrades collagen.

Uneven skin coloring can occur resulting in yellowish or grayish tones, and most common are small, visible blood vessels which are broken capillaries, called Telangiectasia and have a reddish/purplish hue.

*

Dad is one of the smartest humans I know. I often wondered why he worked at a chemical plant instead of at an accounting office, or as an actual chemist.

He preferred the solitary work those places allowed. Only one person can fit inside a tanker that holds industrial strength weed killers, soda ash, and corrosive materials. The first one he worked at in North Portland was right after my big sister was born. The plan was to have another baby soon after. The plant eventually shut down and moved. I was conceived right after that, after he'd left that place, born seven years after my sister.

What kinds of poison were swimming inside of me as I was created?

I convinced Mrs. Kincaid to replace the turpentine with odorless paint thinner.

My bedroom always smelled of fresh paint. Lead, cadmium, mercury, cobalt and barium were all my new home, along with the smell of linseed oil. My drug of choice. The thick vivid pigments brushing onto the canvas and blending with ease grounded me tremendously.

I painted the vibrant, toxic sunsets that I viewed from the front yard, across the neighboring cow field to the west. I painted the trees Dad planted over the years, the clouds I believed I was born from and lived in.

Dad later admitted he bought me the painting supplies because both my sisters had braces which cost him thousands of dollars, and I didn't need them. "I'll never buy you thousands of dollars' worth of art supplies." He said with a smirk and one raised eyebrow, just in case that comment got my hopes up.

*

I try to mix brilliant gray with my fine hair brush
to paint the canvas,
but my hands are wet and blurry.

I try to sweep my sharpened number 2
across the smooth Bristol,
but my eyes are wet and blurry.

I try to process pain through my body
but my brain is wet and blurry.

All I want is
to make love to the paper.

I try to kiss my lover's neck
in the crispy morning
but his eyes are wet and blurry.

I try to caress my lover's thigh
in the sweaty afternoon
but his brain is wet and blurry.

All I want is
to make love to his body.

I try to write a song for my sorrow
poetic lyrics flowing
but my eyes are wet and blurry.

I try to hum a tune with the sparrows
in my silver maple
but my throat is wet and blurry.

All I want is
to make love to my heart song.

I try to eat the violet blackberry
buttercream scone
but my stomach is wet and blurry.

I try to walk amongst my neighbors'

golden mums and maples
but my legs are wet and blurry.
All I want is
to make love to mother earth.

I try to soothe my mother's honey blooded
crackling splintered heart
but my arms are wet and blurry.

She tries to stop imagining him
walking
through
the
door
but her heart is wet and blurry
All I want is for him to make love to her
Once more.

*

Tobacco pesticides contain some of the most dangerous pesticides used in the United States according to the government accountability office. These toxic chemicals can cause acute poisoning, cancer, nervous system damage and birth defects. Over twenty five million pounds of pesticides are used in tobacco production in the United States per year. Tobacco ranks sixth among all agricultural products in the amount of pesticides applied per acre. At the turn of the 20th century Paris green was used as a pesticide on tobacco to control budworm, until the 1960s. It's called Paris green because it was used as rat poisoning in the sewers in Paris. It's vibrant, emerald coloring was prized among artists for decades, and has now been eradicated because of its fatal toxicity.

*

Dad made the best blackberry pies. His crust was the most perfect pie crust I've ever had. I only ever ate *his* pies.

In between spray years my sisters and I would have to pick blackberries in various places of the slanted two acres we lived on. I remember the last time we did it. We threw a large piece of plywood in the middle of each bush. Dad gave us the idea so we could get in the middle where the juiciest berries thrived. We were very careful and wore long sleeves, pants and gloves, but those angry branches would bite us as we picked them as if they were protecting their precious babies. The most luscious, bulbous, black ones slid off the vine like retreating from the most gentle kiss. Four or five hours and several adolescent cry-fits later, with burning bloody arms, we had enough to make a couple pies, then freeze the rest for more in the winter. I'd always wondered about the poison in the berries. "Doesn't the crossbow stay in the roots and grow into the new berries once the plant comes back to life?"

The answer was always either "No" or "that shit's in all the food we eat." After that last time though, I may have made Dad think more about it and he started getting berries from local farms to make pies. Or maybe it was just all the complaining from my sisters and I for having to succumb to torture for a slice of pie!

I invited my friends to come have a piece of my Dad's famous pie. I was so proud of his talents as a baker. My friend Linda admitted to me that her parents wouldn't let her come over anymore because she came home smelling like an ashtray, and the second hand smoke wasn't good for us.

Poison always lingered on my clothes, in my skin, my lungs, my stomach, my blood. I often wonder if I started smoking cigarettes in high school because I was already addicted from the second hand smoke. Both my parents smoked indoors until they got new carpet a few years ago.

*

Emphysema is an extremely painful way to die. Symptoms include shortness of breath and the inability to breathe comfortably. Pursed lips during exhalation, severe chest pain, increased while coughing. At the end stages, even with oxygen, it is impossible to catch a deep breath. The inhaled air gets caught in the larger pockets of air that have grown on the lungs, so it's much more difficult to exhale that old air in order to draw in new air. It takes a very long time from when the first symptoms show up until death. Many patients lose their desire to live.

*

My Father's love lives in his green eyes.

I hold his still-warm head in my hands
His purple flesh returning
to living color

but the milky schlera

has already

bled into the iris

of his eyes.

I watch as my mother and sister take turns
pumping his chest.

We're all screaming,

begging

for his return.

Come back! Don't go!

But he has gone in the trees
and I can feel him everywhere
around us

just not in his body.

The children are sobbing, my mother is wailing
the dog is stuck in a room inside.

My big sister cusses at the phone

as we hear the

sirens

miss the driveway.

He will lay on the concrete for five more hours
with my mother by his side.

Did he ever feel the pain

of losing a love

as deeply as we have?

*

The body begins to lose about one and a half degrees per hour after the heart stops beating. The blood begins to settle within twenty minutes without the heart to circulate it, it's called pooling. Rigor mortis creeps in anywhere from 2-6-hours after death. Livor mortis is what turns the skin a reddish or purplish color.

The eyeballs deflate quickly after death. If a viewing is decided before cremation, the half spheres morticians insert for an embalming are left out, so the caved in effect is more apparent.

*

Dad never went to the doctor after he retired in 2014.

"I'm happy!" He had a good heart, liver, blood pressure and appetite. "They'll just tell me to quit smoking and I'm not, so don't start." he told us over and over while becoming immediately irritated with us. His demeanor had changed since retiring. He was released from the 40-plus years' daily grind of putting on a heavy full body suit and washing out tankers that held various poisons. He could finally sit in his new favorite chair on the back porch all day and watch his trees tell each other stories in the wind. He teared up when I told him I was getting a coloring book published and when we told him our oldest daughter was buying her own home. His green eyes were wet and blurry when my sister Heidi put on her Heidi's Restaurant Dirndl and headed off to work on a holiday. He smiled big when my little sister said, "Dad, I'm going to give you a grandson someday!"

"Yeah, sure," he'd said, choked up.

Lighter energy took over him. He was loved and knew it; he showed us how

happy we made him.

Simultaneously, we watched his breathing get heavier, deeper, louder. During the Eagle Creek fire in 2017, he sat out back and inhaled forest fire plumes while smoking for days. Watching the trees send burnt messages from miles away on blackened leaves that disintegrated when they hit the ground. He didn't want to abandon his home, and feared it would be swallowed up by the east-wind powered flames.

He and Mom finally evacuated to my family's house in Portland. That was the first time I cried in fear for him, hearing that deep struggle to breathe. That's when he sounded like a breathing machine, loud and pained. I'd also never seen him so frightened. The genuine possibility that his entire life's work could be ashes in just a few minutes terrified us all, and those firefighters! The only thing he cared about saving, he said, was a painting I did that hung on the wall by the fireplace. Purple skies, purple clouds, a wisteria tree standing alone without support, next to a stucco cottage, a gentle path disappearing into varying tree lines in the distance hiding behind layers of low-lying fog. "It's my favorite" he said.

I realized how much wood stove and cigarette smoke had seeped into it over the years, so I kept it when they returned to their still-standing home to clean the residue off as much as I could.

"Bring my painting back." He didn't even look at me because he was so mad that I'd had it too long. I meant to bring it back that day, his birthday, but I forgot.

I want him back. I beg for him to visit my dreams, and he has. Several times now. I want him to show me how to make pie crust for the umpteenth time. I want him to see my paintings one day hanging on a gallery wall. I promised him I'd do it. From now on, every beautiful thing in my life will have tiny dark holes where the loss of him lives.

*

The body is placed in a cardboard box (\$200) then inserted into the cremation furnace. All items of clothing must be removed from the body. Pace makers must be removed from the body. In any case it isn't removed, it will cause the body to explode and ruin the entire crematory.

Once the body is completely burned and has cooled down, the bones and what remnants of ashes are left are removed from the tray. The bones are then put into a bone pulverizer, which is like a giant industrial blender. The bones are crushed and then ground to create the "ashes." The pigment is a coarse grind with larger pieces of bone shards. They have no flavor.

*

Blend yellow ochre with sap green for the iris.

Add sapphire blue for the muscular fibers.

Take a break while tears dissipate.

Brush on bone black strands

the curly rat tail he grew

for two years.

His strong French nose juts out just below the eyes

slants down, strung to his mischievous smile.

The denim uniform of daily life.

Brush on cobalt mixed with

White, with a tint of

Bone black.

His beautiful hands, creases a purplish hue

veins perfectly crawling over the knuckles

and through his cared for man-fingers.

Roger Waters begins to sing

“Is there anybody out there?”

The violin rises

complimenting acoustic guitar strings,

transforming my gut.

The energy moves through my body

and out through my hands.

I integrate some of him

bone fragments.

This pigment mixes well
with the linseed oil
adding gray to his
pristine black hair.
Or dissolve in another hue
to transform what's left
of physical him
to visual him.
My Dearest Dad.



Katie Collins-Guinn is an artist, mother of blood and non-blood children, designer and writer, wifey, flower gardener, art teacher and lover of the beautiful, of the female brainwaves and form. She has been a contributing writer for *The Portland Mercury*. Katie's adult coloring book, *The Stoner Babes* (celebrating intersectional empowerment) was recently published with *Microcosm publishing* in 2018. She's part of the corporeal writing family, which has changed her artist self significantly, birthing a voice that's been hiding in her lungs, liver and heart for years.