

WOVEN: Rose Garden

written by Guest Contributor | May 8, 2019



WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN [here](#).

Reread the [archives](#), always.

Image Credit: [Ivo M. Vermeulen](#)

My thirteenth birthday had just passed. Mama never even mentioned it. As I gnawed the last of the stringy boiled chicken, I asked her when I was born. She was off by one day and one month.

A bronze cockroach scurried down the damp kitchen wall above the yellowed porcelain sink.

When I finished eating every last bit of chicken, Mama picked up the drumstick and cracked it open.

“You always remember Barry’s birthday,” I said. She didn’t look at me as she sucked out every last bit of marrow.

“In Europe we didn’t know birthdays.”

“You always give Barry birthday presents.”

“He needs socks and underwear. You have plenty of clothes.” That was true. I got a lot of stuff from charities. Mama never bought me anything.

“You always buy cake on his birthday.”

“Welfare doesn’t give money for cake. Be glad you ever get it.”

"Why do you always forget my birthday and not his?" "Shut up," Mama stood up and scowled at me.

"No, I won't. You're not fair."

"Shut up, or else I'll throw you out like Sadie Robinson!" Her lower lip was trembling like it always did before she hit me.

"You're mean," I shouted. "You favor Barry because he's a boy."

Mama walked out of the kitchen. She'd never walked away like that before. She usually beat me with her shoe or a belt if I argued with her. A minute later she returned with my brother, Barry, who was over six feet tall. They frequently ganged up on me. I struggled as they pushed and dragged me across the dirty linoleum. "You can't talk fresh to me," Mama said. "You're getting out of my house."

"I'm not going," I cried, hanging onto the kitchen doorway.

They shoved me out the apartment door and slammed it behind me. They'd never thrown me out before. Alone, in the dim hallway, I pounded on the wooden door. No one came.

I curled up on the cold tile floor, hoping the neighbors wouldn't see me. I started to cry. Standing up, I rang the doorbell and knocked on the door gently. Mama still didn't answer. I'd just become Sadie Robinson, the bad girl whose parents threw her out. Mama had warned me for years that I would end up like her. Nobody took Sadie in and she lived on the street and never had any clean underwear.

Slowly stepping down the three flights of stairs, I wiped my tears with the back of my hand and thought about where to go. At the bottom of the stoop steps, I turned left to avoid the gossiping neighbors sitting on wooden folding chairs. These old ladies would always stare at me and complain to Mama about my screaming. They threatened to call the police to take me away. Ashamed, I didn't want them to see my tear-stained face.

Just past the empty lot next to our building, I saw red roses climbing wildly over the deserted two-story house on the corner. I decided to go to the botanical garden to see the gorgeous display of row upon row of roses. The Bronx Zoo was across the street, and the gardens just beyond it. I had roamed the zoo since I was nine years old.

I walked up Bronx Park South toward the zoo entrance. Old people sat on the long line of benches. A giraffe peered through the trees, as lonely as me. I could visit the gorilla again, stare into her sad eyes and commune with her about our shared sorrow.

I quickly tromped across the huge zoo, through Sunday afternoon crowds, barely noticing the ducks, birds, elephants, monkeys and seals. I decided not to visit my gorilla friend because I didn't want to cry. After passing the flock of pink flamingos, I exited, crossed Fordham Road and entered a dense forest in the Botanical Garden.

My brother had led me along this path, through meadows and across the river to the trail to the rose garden. He'd also taught me which plants were edible. I was sure that I would find my way even though I'd never been here alone.

The Bronx River flowed swiftly below me. If I lived in a cave, I could wash myself in these waters like the Indian maidens did long ago. I pulled up a long blade of grass and chewed on a sweet onion.

Startled by a sudden loud rustling, I froze. According to Barry, bears lived in some of the surrounding caves. My heart pounded. Then I saw a grey squirrel staring at me with big dark eyes. I hurried down the hill to the paved river road.

Across the stone bridge, the dirt path was soft and thick with pine needles. I started singing, *Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside.*

Voices came from behind me. Turning around, I saw boys in white shirts and dark blue pants, uniforms for Catholic school. They looked like they had just gotten out of church.

I was scared to walk deeper into the deserted forest with this pack of boys behind me. I turned back to the bridge and walked toward the boys, heading for the paved road where there might be other people. On my block, I'd been hassled by boys who threw ice balls at me. On Halloween, they swung at me with stockings filled with flour and rocks.

The six boys approached as if they didn't see me. I walked straight ahead. Then they blocked my path. They looked about my age, but they were all shorter than me. I stood up to my full height, pulled my shoulders back and acted as confident and grown-up as I could.

A blond boy shouted, "Look at her!"

A boy with a freckled face yelled, "She's got tits."

Another pushed me. I started to fall but caught my balance.

"Get her!" the redhead commanded.

I started to run. One boy grabbed me, ripped the rubber bands off my pony tails and another squeezed my breast.

"Get your filthy hands off me," I screamed.

The redhead laughed and tore at my blouse. Infuriated, I kicked at his wiener. Scratched his eyes. Someone else came at me. I kept kicking and scratching. Blood flowed from the redhead's eye.

Suddenly, they all gathered around him and hurried away. I was still screaming, "Help, help!"

I raced away down the pine needle path. After tripping on a rock, I came to a

roughly paved road. I ran further and slipped in mud, but kept going till I was out of breath. Shaking all over, I felt tears soak my face and blouse. After a moment, I raced on again, holding my torn blouse together.

Thunder rumbled. The dense forest darkened. I was lost. Where was the path to the roses? I knew people would be there to protect me.

Once outside the forest, I saw the rose garden. Breathless, I sat down on a white stone bench. My heart pounded as I buttoned up my blouse. Two buttons missing. Mama would be mad.

Men and women dressed in their Sunday best were bowing to roses. Smelling roses. They looked at me with wide open eyes and turned away. I knew how I must look.

At the far end of the garden, I found the fountain. A drink of cold water calmed me down. I washed my bloodied hands. I shuddered and wondered whether I'd gouged the redhead's eye out. That's probably why the boys had fled.

Rather than retracing my steps through the zoo, I walked home along Southern Boulevard as close to the curb as I could, not wanting to be seen by the people seated on benches. I stared down at the rip in my old brown loafers where my little toe had pushed out. I hoped that Mama would let me back in. I didn't want to live on the street like Sadie Robinson.

I knocked on our apartment door. Mama opened it. She barely looked at me. I walked past her into our shared bedroom and changed out of my ripped clothing.

That night I soaked in the warm tub for a very long time.



Beulah Amsterdam grew up in the Bronx on welfare. She worked as a waitress, clerk, telephone operator, dental assistant, and psychiatric technician on her way to becoming a clinical psychologist. She has published poetry in her chapbooks, *Black Frogs That Fly* and *Visit* as well as in various journals. Her memoir stories have appeared in *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy*, *Gravel*, and *Dime Show Review*. She lives in California.