

THE TURKEY VULTURES

Shelby Tisdale

Third Place—Short Story Competition

I watch them picnic. They take turns thrusting naked heads into armadillo guts and sitting on the shed. The hound throws a hissy fit against the back door as I watch. The turkey vultures would love me. They could love me at least, not the way I love a burger or my husband, but the way a soldier loves his country. They're God's clean-up crew fighting beak-and-talon for a corpseless society. I want to be a skeleton. When I'm a skeleton, the sky will blacken with turkey vultures, picking at me like remains of the last stripped and crispy drumstick in a Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket. They make the world smell better. I regret to say that I've never worn perfume and my daughter, Kendall, thinks I don't know how to be a woman. I only own tennis shoes, and I don't actually care whether I look good, but at least I don't smell like I'll smell when the turkey vultures come to take me away.

Kendall doesn't love me like the turkey vultures would. I lean out the window like a cheerleader for a team that hasn't won in fifty years, telling my little friends they are doing a fantastic job at clearing the hound's prey. "Mom," she says, and I don't listen. She wears nice shoes, and that is fine, but they clack against the faux wood floors like an obnoxious and irregular metro-nome, louder than the hound's claws and jingling tags. When the turkey vultures come, they won't take Kendall's shoes. Kendall may not have shoes. What if we died like armadillos, naked and buried by dogs under magnolia trees or booted by pickup truck tires? Shoes wouldn't matter then. What if they left us on the side of the road, and people stuck their necks out of car windows when they smelled us to figure out if the turkey vultures were eating a skunk or a possum or us? I wonder where they would find me.

Kendall is beautiful and says I'm eccentric, but I don't think ladybugs are beautiful like she does. I think turkey vultures are beautiful and have much more purpose than ladybugs ever will. We look like turkey vultures when we're born and we look like them again if we die old—wrinkled, hunchbacked, beautiful hags. Beauty is meaningless, and turkey vultures know that, which makes them wiser birds than owls.

"Mom," Kendall says, and this time I respond. She says I'm blocking the dishwasher, so I thrust my hip to the side and make room for her to sift through the plastic plates. Once, when Kendall was smaller, we watched the turkey vultures pick deer meat from the median. She believed me when I said they were beautiful.

"I need you to listen to me." Kendall seems sad, but she doesn't love the turkey vultures, and they're misunderstood. I pick at the mosquito bite on my arm and a small stream of blood trickles into the sink. I remember being misunderstood.

I like to remember, and I remember everything. It makes Kendall uncomfortable. She says I don't know when to stop talking or what not to talk about. I told the supermarket cashier about her depression, and she gawked, but she didn't tell me not to say that. She looks at me like I've done something wrong and leaves the kitchen. She doesn't think the turkey vultures are beautiful.

I hold a dishrag over the mosquito bite blood now, and Kendall isn't here anymore, but she hasn't left the house. She doesn't. The armadillo carcass's stench ruins my blueberry muffin, and there are only two turkey vultures left. The smaller one, a female, perches on the shed, and I smile. The male dodges maggots on the dead bone. Armadillos run in circles, dig sometimes, and die. The hound helped because he wanted praise. My husband drives a truck with a ladder on top and someone else's name on the door. He's like an armadillo, and he's not home. Maybe I'm an armadillo, too.

If I'm an armadillo, the turkey vultures will eat me when I die, which is better for the rest of us. I want a cheap funeral, and I want Kendall to sing a hymn. *I'll fly away, oh glory.* I don't want to die old.

I like to remember, and I remember everything. I don't hear Kendall's shoes. My muffin smells like blueberries again, and the mosquito bite has scabbed. I like to remember. I remember everything. I remember the turkey vultures, the armadillo getting smaller and wreaking. Black wings. Loud shoes. Loud shoes and loud hound and Kendall speaking. The turkey vultures are beautiful. The turkey vultures are gone. △

"I like to remember, and I remember everything."