

Jennifer Lesh

### The Vineyard

With her arms folded about her, she walks around her mountain home. This was the home that Richard found for the two of them. It was to be a fixer upper and a place to contain their dreams. Everything is still here, except him, just as he left it. He first started on the interior of the house, ripping out all of the old gray carpeting and starting to lay down stone tiles. Having completed half of the living room he stopped and then began to work outside planting a vineyard. After six years, the vineyard was finished but the house never was. Gwen now lives with half tiled cement floors and half painted rooms.

He calls, weekly, to check on the half done things. The monuments to his changing moods and inclinations but never the life he has left behind. He makes sure that she is watering his vineyard. He makes sure that what little he has done is being maintained, pending sale and distribution. “Are you OK?” It never passes his lips. Her aloneness, within the house that he bought, does not concern him. She awaits the day that none of this matters. The day when some one else decides to buy a “fixer upper”. She awaits the day, when every memory and every emotion, that came with this place dies along with the vineyard.

She watches now as the birds eat the grapes that she would not. She lets them wither into the raisins that are what is left of this life. Some of the vines have died. The leaves are turning brown, shriveling up and dying long before it is time.

That's when she decides to take a walk around the vineyard, and notices the weeds and grass around the bottom of the vines. "Water them more," her ex-husband suggested, when she had called to tell him that his vineyard was dying. She did, but some still died. She hadn't even thought of offering to weed the vines. It hadn't even crossed her mind because he hadn't suggested it. Plus, she didn't want to be bothered weeding his vineyard and dealing with the goat-heads, and tumbleweed. It felt good to let some die, as a sacrifice for his neglect and his breaking of the back gate upon departure. He never looked back. Not even in the rear view mirror.

She dyed the gray out of her hair a week after his leaving. And now she kept it long. Long hair always made her feel younger. Maybe, she will visit the dermatologist a friend had recommended, knowing she really can not afford a face-lift, knowing she really would never get toxic injections in her face. But it helps her to think about the possibilities of erasing the lines that are there in her face, the lines that show her where she has been, every time she looks into the mirror, instead of where she would like to go.

The mourning doves live on the roof of her ex-husband's "art" studio. They swoop down and pick at the grapes, before perching upon the wire that supports the vines. She remembers that when they had first come to live upon the mountain; one of the locals had said that having mourning doves living on your roof tops was a sign of luck and prosperity. She wanted to ask this weathered looking local what it meant if you also had a band of pigeons living on your roof as well and what it meant when every morning she would find one of them half eaten by some predator.

Her friend Anne, the one that suggested she start thinking about Botox injections, just got large amounts of neurotoxins injected into her primary chewing muscles. The injections are supposed to slim the jaw line. Her friend also suggested an electric facial to help make her face appear plumper—“youthful fullness is all the rage,” she clucked, as she continued to lecture about now was the time to consider a filler session in the attempt to regain some of her youth. But, what if she didn’t want her youth back? What if she wanted to try and grow old, gracefully? If that meant she was never going to find love again, well, maybe she didn’t want to invest so much money into the game of finding it again. Why couldn’t she just let time take its course, and deal with it? Her friend had whined. “You will die alone and unhappy and nobody wants that.”

She didn’t take her friends comments seriously. She knew that this was Anne’s way of dealing with “emotional crisis,” a term she had pegged years ago, when her husband had died prematurely at the age of 45 from a heart-attack. “Not doing what he loved”, she had joked, but working late at the office when he dropped dead.

After the anger had settled and the remorse set in, Anne had tried talking with a therapist about her fear of growing old without finding love again, but all he wanted to do was load her up on anti-depressants. She had yelled at him, “Of course, I am fucking depressed. My husband just dropped dead.” She didn’t need a therapist to tell her that she was lonely, heartbroken, and sick with the need of finding someone to hold her. Wasn’t that enough to justify depression. The therapist had suggested a long vacation and some valium. Anne took both and then found her dermatologist, who introduced her to a plastic surgeon. She had confessed that she is feels better with each injection. She feels that each surgical procedure erases some of the memories, which, in her mind, helps with the grief.

She made an appointment with the plastic surgeon. It would cost \$4,500 to have a mini-lift and the results would last for 15 years. She would be back to work within two weeks after the in-house procedure. The thought of someone cutting into her face and possibly making a huge mistake terrified her.

She decided that, instead of a face lift, she would start to weed the vineyard.

That was also after Richard called to tell her that his new wife was pregnant.

She wonders now, as she examines her face in her bathroom mirror with the cell phone pressed to her right ear, talking to the man who always made her feel so sexy, when did her jaw began to sag a little? When did the lines around her eyes appear? And when did she begin to feel so alone with herself?

The creases around her mouth make her feel old. They make her feel as if she is running out of time. When had they formed? Why had she not noticed them until now? Or is it just that she hadn't bothered to notice them until her ex-husband confessed to her that he wanted out of their marriage because he had fallen in love with someone else, who could give him a baby. "You know, Gwen, I've known Beth for some time, and we both want the same thing," he had said flippantly while standing in their unfinished living room, not looking at her, but folding and unfolding his hands. A trait he had when he was nervous, and something she always found annoying.

"And when did you contact her?" She demanded, not really wanting to know. Just something she thought she should ask, more out of formality, fighting the numbness in her heart. He never answered. Three days later, he was gone.

She laughs now, as she listens to the man on the phone who is not her husband, but a man from her past, a man that she had contacted more out of curiosity than loneliness.

She walks around her house that now holds only memories. Her childhood trinkets line the shelves. Pictures of a life before marriage line the walls of her living room. She listens to her old friend, Ray tell her about

his life over the last twenty years. They fill in the blanks of time and yet she does not really care about what he has been doing for all of those years. All she really wants to know is if he has ever thought of her in the last two decades. Or, if he ever stopped, from what ever he was doing, and thought of their first encounter. Did he ever wonder about her, as she had wondered about him? She does not ask. She would rather that he confesses it to her. But as he rambles on about his life with his music and how he never got married, she knows by the tone of his voice that he is more shocked that she called, than any interest in commiserating about their youthful past.

Why had she called? Was it to reconnect to something that she thought was so very special? But now, she knows time has passed them both by. The lines of age that have begun on her face have put the events that once held so much promise, into mediocre perspective. It meant nothing to either of them. It was a moment, a space in-between. It was nothing that would have equated to longevity. And yet, as she listens to his voice, she tries so hard to remember what it was she had held on to for all these years: the possibility of something?

There was no real explanation of why she was talking to Ray at that moment in time. Maybe she was bored, lonely, or searching for his voice to bring back that specialness that can only be created when two people have nothing better to do than get it on and enjoy the moments of youthful glee. No worries of house payments, divorce, or fatal illness. What were their worries back then: To get through college, to get laid and possibly find a summer job? She smiles to herself as she remembers what she was like back then. So self-assured and so knowing of what she wanted out of life. She was going off to England to study at Cambridge. She was going to get her Ph.D. She was going to write books and marry an Englishman. And Ray: what were his big plans? He wanted to have his band touring out west. He wanted to be a Rock star. And did he become a rock star, and did she marry an Englishman when she studied at Cambridge? No, he still does music but has “a real job” as he said on the phone, with a laugh.

She had not married an Englishman, and never completed her Ph.D. in English history because she had fallen in love with an ordinary guy whom she had known most of her life.

She knows, too that her recent obsession with her sagging jaw line and its sudden appearance has to do with her divorce. When she was with Richard she didn't care much for her appearance. Richard talked of beauty only as symmetry of lines, because he was an artist who looked at faces as if he were breaking them down into important segments instead of appreciating their beauty. She never worried about her face and its imperfections, when she was married. She was pretty but not beautiful. He told her that her eyes were "striking". "You have movie star eyes," he would joke.

He could never really draw her face. He never got it right. She complained to him that he made her nose too large and her face too round. She wanted him to soften her look on canvas, to make her appear prettier for posterity. Because in her mind, later, when she was old and wrinkled, she could look upon the paintings of her youth, think back and believe that at one point she was beautiful. And she would always be beautiful on that piece of canvas.

And yet, the only painting that Richard has ever done of her hangs in the spare bed-room. She likes the full lips that he has given her in that painting. It is a pastel. She is smiling with a whisper of her youthful face. There are no lines of despair. The dust of color softens the truth. Her eyes are shaded, wanting the viewer to know that something, at least for the moment, was captured for posterity.

Weeding the vineyard each morning after her morning coffee has become a ritual. She dons her big sun-hat, puts on a long sleeved shirt and layers her face and neck with sun screen. Richard had always said he never wanted to be married to a weathered-looking wife. He never wanted her face to turn all leathery and brown like an old,

worn out horse bag, like most of the women in the southwest. The sun here dries the face, neck and arms to match the brown sand. It sucks all moisture out of the pores.

On her knees she pulls at the weeds. She likes the smell of the soil, the juniper and fermented grapes. The doves are purring above as they watch her progress, at the base of the vines. Her body feels good stretched or bending. A youthful suppleness is still there.

She pats the soil smooth, evoking memories of when Richard had begun to plant the vines and tried to explain to her the different types of grapes that would be produced. They stood out in the middle of this stark land, hugged by the foothills of the Sandia Mountains, and she had asked him if grapes would grow in such infertile soil. “Anything is possible,” he said continuing to dig his holes. She had not been interested in knowing back then what types of grapes he was planting, but now as she looks at the brown vine so rooted in this poor soil, she wants to know what it will produce next year. She wants to know what makes it so tough to take root in infertile soil, and yet produce something so beautiful. She wants to know the secret and then transplant it into her own body.

Standing there together, neither she nor Richard knew that she could never bear a child. Months later, with another failed attempt, it was explained to her that she had a double uterus, and that is why it would not be possible for her to have a baby. She felt relieved at first, that it was not her fault. And when she asked what it meant to have a double uterus, the doctor had explained that there was a membrane through the middle of her uterus which caused the division. Like a vine, she had thought, like a strong grape vine, except hers was unable to bear fruit.

The heat of the day is upon her back. She feels a sense of accomplishment from tending to the vineyard. She checks the irrigation lines to make sure all grapes will get their needed water supply, so next year they won't wilt and brown before the end of the summer. She thinks, when she was younger, it was all about how love intruded upon every moment of her waking hour and how she lived off the intoxicants of falling in love. She laughs at

herself for calling Ray and she laughs at herself for thinking that she has the power to stop time from making little notes upon her face. At her age, her belly is still flat, and her breasts are still firm. She has strong shoulders and arms, and her butt still looks good in a pair of faded blue jeans. Let the lines on her face tell a story. Let the lines be her coat of arms, her vineyard to herself, a testament to her journey.