



Beauty Grenades

by Jenny Severyn

Day after day, beauty grenades fall around me,
flung from billboards, magazines, TV
by bodies curved like hourglasses
topped with shimmering blond curls
spilling over thick, black eyelashes,
bodies carved from *David's* marble
with smooth, hairless chests
and bulging pectoral muscles,
bodies perfect and beautiful.

The grenades explode into
shrapnel that hones in on
my paleness and pimples,
thick thighs and frizzy hair, and
pierces these flaws, makes them ache,
forces me to see them all the time.
The explosions thunder with advice:
“Buy lipstick, hair gel, tummy tucks
to heal those bleeding flaws and
become perfect and beautiful.”

Day after day, I try, but
I can't escape these beauty grenades.
I search for refuge, fearfully
suck in my breath, which
draws my chest and waist in
like a corset, and brace myself
for more shrapnel. I can't escape...

...until one summer day

when I stumble upon a refuge
in a surprising place
most have never seen, never will,
a beautiful place where a
green grassy hill is coiled
by gravel sidewalks leading to
a rubber yellow swing
and red plastic slide
that stand beside a

wood and stone pavilion
dotted with picnic tables
covered by children's camp crafts:
beige and brown papers
splashed with red and blue paint.
The craft-makers
chase each other through the grass or
silently paint at picnic tables or
push each other for a turn on the swing.
One is a girl with eyes too close together,
limbs too short, some words
slurred beyond recognition; another
is a boy who won't look me in the eyes,
slaps his hands on his thighs,
hums and grunts to himself; a third
is a girl who moans instead of speaking,
with knees that quiver as she walks
so she unsteadily sways.

I watch these children, sickened
to realize that they
are the people most harmed by
the beauty grenades, yet the grenades
never touch them. These kids
suffer a fate far worse than my
corseted breath and aching flaws.
They suffer invisibility.

They don't look like perfect
bodies, but there are
no grenades exploding around them,
no shrapnel attacking their flaws
because, the perfect bodies say,
these children are so broken
they can't be fixed. They
don't even deserve shrapnel
digging into their skin. They
don't even deserve
to be looked at.

They are made invisible.

This summer day, I rally
my troop of preteens.
I tell them we're moving
to the next activity.

The archery range is
at the bottom of the hill.
One boy needs more help getting there
than the rest: Kyle.
His thin brown hair covers a
dent in his skull, thick glasses
cover straining eyes and freckles,
chapped lips cover crooked teeth,
striped T-shirt covers gauze that
covers a feeding tube, cargo shorts
cover small legs that hardly move.
He is ever fixed in a manual wheelchair
and he does not speak.
He only grunts, squeals, or coos.
To the beautiful bodies, he is
irreparably ugly, and, as I seize
his wheelchair handles,
this thought makes tears sting my eyes.
I pity him.
I take him down the hill
at the back of the pack of
kids ambling, dashing, hobbling
down the pathway.
Kyle looks towards purple flowers
bobbing in the breeze
playing with little white butterflies,
and he says nothing.
I don't know if he sees
the purple flowers
as I see them.
I don't know if they make
him feel calm and happy,
as I feel.

The archery range is manned
by a fellow counselor who
puts three sets of bows and arrows
against a horizontal wooden post
that separates the archers and the targets.
My kids settle onto the old wooden benches
surrounded by crooked trees
that let only some sunshine slip through
their old, leafy fingers.
I stand with Kyle to the side
as the other counselor explains
the rules of the archery range,

and Kyle blankly looks at the sunlight
and dandelions and other kids.
At last, the other counselor asks
who would like to shoot first, and
several hands are thrown into the air.
Three at a time, they proudly
step forward, prepare the bow,
and rhythmically shoot arrows at the
ragged
red-and-white bulls-eyes.

Kyle does not volunteer himself to go.
He sits quietly.
When it is his turn, I lean down,
smile, ask, "Ready to shoot, Kyle?"
But I scarcely wait for a reply
because there will not be one.

I wheel him to the post and
pick up a dull-tipped, blue-feathered
arrow to plug into the matching
blue bow. Kyle sits,
playing with his fingers,
bending them at funny angles
and placidly looking to the trees
and giggling kids beside him.
"Hold onto the bow," I suggest.
He does not move.
I bend down to him,
pick up one of his little hands,
brush it against the bow.
He turns to look at it now
and clutches the bowstring,
studying it. "All right,"
I say. "Three...two...one... Shoot!"
We pull back the string
and release.
Our arrow thwacks the bottom
of the target and bounces away
into the weeds and grass.
Embarrassed, I hunch my shoulders.
My restricted breath pulls in
all the more. I feel like
I cannot escape
judgment.
I must do better.

Yet...

suddenly a grin breaks out
like dawn
on Kyle's face,
slowly appearing, slowly spreading,
then brilliantly erupting.
He spreads his fingers
and claps his palms together.
He squeals, he giggles.
Pure joy, celebrating
a victory when I had
only seen a loss.

Warmed by the daybreak
shining from Kyle's small body,
his crooked teeth,
his dented skull,
I ready the second
dull-tipped, blue-feathered arrow.
I stand taller.
"Three...two...one... Shoot!"
We pull back, we release,
and the second arrow misses the
big target entirely,
crashing uselessly into the
brush far behind it.
I wince, yet Kyle
squeals, claps, beams.

Somewhere outside this camp,
there are people
slinking around with
shrapnel poking out of their skin
in the form of eye shadow
or cologne or designer jeans,
people hunched over toilets
throwing up their lunch
while explosions echo
outside their homes
saying, "You're too fat,"
people turning against each other,
laughing at this person's wrinkles
and that person's greasy hair.
Somewhere outside,
there is a war on,

and there are bomb-throwers
and there are victims.
And here I am,
preparing a third arrow, shoot,
a fourth arrow, shoot,
a fifth arrow, shoot,
and none hit the target.
Yet I don't think it matters.
I have discovered
something much better than weapons.
Kyle laughs and claps and squeals,
and my heart pounds with love.
I release my breath at last
and sigh and smile.

I wonder now if Kyle's face were painted
across every magazine,
billboard, and TV ad,
that resplendent face
mirroring the perfect joy which
flowers inside him,
would the beauty warfare end?
I wonder now if everyone could see
Kyle's grinning, freckled face
as I see it now,
would they set down
their grenades and surrender?
Because I know Kyle's
light touches me now
that I have chosen to see him.
Because I know the beauty warfare
has ended for me
to the sound of claps and laughter.