

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2014, First-Place Fiction Winner

By Alexa Norton

Wax Crayons

When I was small I regarded the nude Crayon as wasting colourful space. It barely had the ability to mark the page and left waxy residue on the outlines in the colouring book. Once, I foolishly decided to give it a chance. It mussed up Princess Belle and for that I was unforgiving. I did not think, what a strange colour for a Crayon. I only thought, what a ruined picture, what a boring waste of space.

It is strange to be thinking about colouring books right now. I am 23 and save for a few blunt-edged Crayons I use for Christmas cards I no longer have use for Crayola. I stare at the roof and count the tiles in the grid; I do anything to keep my eyes off the blank white faces staring down at me. I am laying on what resembles a king size bed but isn't. It is a hard piece of plastic shrouded by curtains and I am splayed out like a doll. Though my head rests on a pillow my body talks in feet and inches, numbers running up and down the eastern and southern ends of the strange bed. I am being measured for new garments and for this I am not grateful. I am, however, grateful that my face is not one of those on the shelf.

Like Princess Belle I was born with white skin, a nude crayon. For a long time I did not think about this. Growing up in my hometown in the prairies we were all nude crayons in a monochrome box, or so our gaze revealed. It was not until my twenties that I began to think about skin and colour and race and who was responsible for what and why things were the way they are. And when I did, it was from a safe place. Although I pushed myself to the steps of my brain with intersectionality and Critical Race Theory and Fanon, from the safe suit of whiteness I understood that I could never know. I would always be white and thus could never know and would never know and perhaps some would say to my naïveté, you do not want to know.

A burn ward is not for the faint of heart. It is a process just to be let in. You have to wash your hands and arms, sanitize, don surgical gloves, a mask, a gown. It smells strange, like flesh and antibacterial soap. Those aren't my words, just those I've collected from others. I don't remember the smell. I remember moaning and a large teddy bear that was brought to a small boy, no more than four. I do not remember hearing "one quarter of your body is covered in third degree burns," though I must have been told numerous times. My memory I think, was not so good then. I do remember the first time they removed the bandages and I saw straight through to the bottom, to bones and sinew-like tendon. It was like seeing to the floor of the Atlantic, a place you are not supposed to be.

When your skin is burnt there is little to think of but, where is the Fentanyl? You don't think, my god this looks horrendous. Even if that was your mindset there really isn't any skin left on which to base the judgment. And, strategically, there are no mirrors. So I think that

those days in the hospital were maybe some of the easiest. Sure it hurt, and it did hurt a lot, but I did not have to think: what will happen to me out there? What do I look like?

There are two incidents I can think of to tell you. The first happened in the locker room at the pool. As I did my best to dress myself and tie my hair up and attempt not to step in the water with fresh socks on, all while holding a protective towel shield, the woman opened her locker to the right of mine. The grafts covered her leg, and her shoulder, and her hands. Before I had a chance to stupidly stammer out some inappropriate or confused remark she walked nude to the showers. I was left standing with the clothes and the towel and the hair tie and in my socks. Speechless, like an idiot who didn't understand the concept of a change room.

The second story happens on a bus in Vancouver. The man had black skin and was standing while holding onto the rail. I was sitting and sweating in a bulky sweater, allowing my hair to cover the scabbed half of my cheek and mouth. The reason I was drawn to his face was partly because I knew what to look for and partly because his silicone dressing did not match the colour of his skin. It wasn't so off that others on the bus would have noticed. But I did, and it made me wonder: do scar garments not come in black and brown shades?

While laying on the "Burn Bed" (I assure you, this is not a formal title) I learn what it means to feel eternally grateful and devastatingly angry with the world. It's almost childish, the way your feelings tear you down the middle, as if you haven't already been torn and seared enough. Despite the kind woman's attempts to measure me with precision I am having a temper tantrum and she sees it. The fabric is itchy (it's not), it uncomfortably pulls across my chest (that's true), the legs won't stay up and make my thighs look like cocktail sausages (hyperbole). I lie to her and expect her sympathy too. I want her to feel uncomfortable and ugly. I also hope that I don't get my wish. And then I look up at the burn mask casts and am consoled in some terrible-to-describe way. I don't care if my face has been broken and damaged because it is still mine and I look like me. I still have a nose with which to draw air in and out, instead of slits.

In the morning I struggle to remove my garments gently, remove the silicone pad from my shoulder, peel back the adhesive layers on my neck, arms, hips, and legs. I set them all on the counter sticky face up. This is an arduous task and it is not uncommon to end up in tears with silicone adhesives stuck to face and fingers. Sometimes I force myself to look in the mirror and laugh at this caricature of a human. Once I spent thirty minutes using the silicone to outline the province of British Columbia on my stomach. No, it's not all darkness and hopelessness when you're burned.

The first time I show my scars in public it feels like the presidential swearing of oath. That is, fireworks and a crowd of hundreds of thousands and a microphone announcing to the

world to Look This Way. In reality the response is muted. Gazes are averted and conversation is quickly ramped up so as to avoid any talk about what is obvious. This has the strange effect of making me feel like a visibly grotesque ghost. I chastise myself for removing the garments early, but not because I wasn't ready to let them go. I'm a walking public advisory – "Do Not Look This Way!" Save the kids!

One day on the Burn Bed I ask the kind woman if I can see the masks. I'm not sure what prompts me to do this and I don't wish to interrogate why. She is happy to talk about her job and brings out two, one which is visibly smaller than the other. I wonder if it is the small boy's before remembering the hush of the nurses and the intonation of their voice. It is not his. I touch them but am too afraid to slip one over my head. They are shiny and translucent and according to her, so tight it is difficult to imagine the pressure on one's head. Before ever having seen the man on the bus, the woman at the pool, I run my fingers over the plastic and think how easy it would be to wear one. With my pale skin you would see right through me.

I'm running and I'm pushing as hard as I can. My left leg drags behind me and my limp is more pronounced with every step. When I finally get to the ocean my chest bangs like a drum and my corroded muscles are screaming. As soon as I stop my skin bursts into flame, as if I've invited a convoy of mosquitoes and wasps to a very merry skin graft party. While my untouched flesh is flushed red with exertion the burnt pieces of me are varying degrees of white and purple. I look at the ships in the harbour and I scream and I scream and I scream until my vocal chords give up. Maybe the men on the ships hear me but I imagine they don't.

An apartment move is in progress and I'm packing my things into boxes. The linen closet is last and after I've removed the towels and sheets I see a trove of hospital treasure. Gauze, adhesives, tape, scissors, silicone, temporary garments, permanent garments in a revolving cast of peach, blue, white and tan. I stand and stare before grabbing the mountain and throwing it into the garbage bag. For some reason I stop before the peach suit goes in. The legs, knees, one-armed chest piece, dainty gloves. I remember something the occupational therapist said to me a few years ago. She was from South Africa and had an interesting way of seeing the world. "You are lucky," in her Afrikaans accent, "to be so white. If you were black your scars would heal pink for everyone to see. It is harder, much harder, to be a black burn victim." She pulled the peach glove up and over my hand. I looked at her and wished desperately that I were capable of dressing my own wounds. Is that it then? Even in trauma and fire, I wear a protective shell?

I no longer wear long sleeves in summer. Just like the therapist predicted the scars have faded and receded into the plains of my skin. If a monochromatic box of nude crayons so existed I would be, in a passing glance, undetectable. Closer inspection reveals pieces of flesh that are raised and varying in skin shade and some that are a confusing checkerboard pattern. If

it's cold they're purple and a few glasses of wine will colour them vibrant red. No matter how confident my stride and gaze I am conscious of the fact that there is something about me that is jarring, begs a second look. But just as my scars command a second glance they repel study. You suppose that you look away fast enough, but the truth is I notice you looking. I don't pretend to know anything outside of my white skin, that suit of armour I wear in the world. I do pretend to know something about what it feels like to interrupt the frame, to move just one second slower than you, to breathe just a little bit harder. But what I have learned from all this is that the nude Crayon was never about colour, it was about an idea, and it did not waste space but rather claimed it so that the other nude colours could not.