
Second Place
Prose Arbuckle Award

2009 - 2010: The Shell

Cory Coleman

I was irrevocably deprived, and it was the irrevocableness that hurt, that finally drove me away from any sensible adjustment with life to the position that dreams had to come true or there was no point in living at all. If dreams came true, then I would have my childhood in one form or another, someday.

-Harold Brodkey

Sic transit Gloria. Glory fades.

-Max Fischer

Mouse was the smallest creature in the meadow. He lived by himself in a little nook at the bottom of the tree, and he was always nervous. There was a hierarchy to the tree, with Mouse at the very bottom. At the top was Owl, and she was the main source of Mouse's anxiety. Owl was a predator by nature, and she killed off all the little creatures around the meadow for her own survival. She had already taken most of Mouse's family, leaving only a few cousins on the other side of the meadow, who Mouse had no real connection to anyway. All the creatures of the tree teased Mouse.

"You're going to be next," they all said. "She's coming for you whether you like it or not you're so small and worthless... Be a good little Mouse and sacrifice yourself for the rest of us."

Oh sure, thought Mouse. *It's easy for all them. She loves chasing after Lizard and Mole, but even they can get away, both up a tree and down a hole. Where can I go?*

Squirrel was the worst of the lot. She would scamper up and down the trunk of the tree and act like Owl was in the air. "She's coming for you, Mouse!" she would shriek. "Quick, run!"

And Mouse would run, but he always figured out soon enough that Squirrel was bluffing, and would turn back to see her barely hanging on a tree branch, laughing with her whole body. "Oh, Mouse," she would say, "You're so pathetic! Just what can we do with you?"

One night, darker than most, Mouse curled up in his little nook and lay awake, dreaming. He dreamt of a place that had no owls, had no bothersome squirrels, even had no indifferent Lizards. He dreamt of a place of friends, where he would be free to live and play and eat all the nuts and fruits that he liked so well. *It has to be out there, somewhere*, he thought. *I wonder what is out there...* Mouse had never ventured beyond the meadow before. In fact, he figured, nobody from the tree had ever left before, had ever seen anything beyond their own existence. *Oh, stupid little Mouse*, he thought, *There is no way that you could ever survive past the meadow. How could you even make it out of the meadow, with Owl always watching?* But then he realized how dark the sky was that particular night, how the moon did not shine all bright. *This would be my only chance*, he reasoned. *em>This night. Right now!* And with that he ran as fast as his little legs could take him. Fast, fast, fast, through the grass, away from the tree, left at the stream, and straight on to the horizon.

Mouse ran and ran and ran. After what seemed like his whole life had passed in time, he stopped. No hooting. No shrieking. No beating wings from above. Nothing, he heard nothing. Well, at least nothing resembling an owl. In fact, as little Mouse rested there in the tall grass nowhere near anything he recognized, he heard a low distant rumble. *em>Oh no*, he thought, as it grew louder. *Rain!* He realized all too late why the sky was so dark that particular night. As the booms and the rumblings grew louder, Mouse picked his tired little body up and ran with whatever was left in him.

The rain started. It was the worst storm Mouse had ever seen. The droplets were like whole apples falling down around him. He avoided them as best he could but he still got soaked, which weighed him down even more. The wind picked up, buffeting him this way and that, and he couldn't see at all where he was going. He was picked up into the air by the terrible storm, and tossed around. He hit the ground hard, but he was up again, and slammed again. While he was tossed about, he thought that he saw a pond near. For a third time he was slammed to the ground, but Mouse quickly got up and ran with all he had towards the pond. *Maybe oh maybe there's a rock to hide under!* he cried. But as he neared the pond, the wind picked him up once more and smashed him right into the rock he was looking for.

Mouse blacked out.

When he awoke, he just lay there. He didn't dare move his body. He couldn't even believe that he was alive. *In fact*, he thought, *I'm probably not*. Eventually he dared open his eyes, but his sight was immediately overtaken by the most wondrous light. He saw every shade of green imaginable, and some he hadn't ever thought of, mixed with blacks and blues and purples and a little orange. It was shimmering, shining, filling up his consciousness, and what with that presence and the sun beaming down, he couldn't see anything. Eventually he squinted so low that his eyes could take in just one thing at a time, and he looked for the source of the color. Before him was the most beautiful emerald beetle shell. The sun of the new day shone down on it and provided the spinning kaleidoscope that Mouse had been overwhelmed by. It was the most glorious thing Mouse had ever seen. He was so overtaken by its presence that he was surprised to finally see that he was inside an enclosure; what appeared to be a closed nest. *Oh no*. Mouse thought. *Owl did track me down. She's got me now!* And just then he heard the beating of wings at an open hole in front of him, and at the first sight of a scaly bird foot, he fainted.

He awoke to a beak in his face.

"It's alright now, friend," said the beak. "You're okay now. Had a bit of a scare there, I'm afraid."

"OOooooohhhhhh, my head," moaned Mouse. "Well, Owl, I guess you got me. Take me now. Make it quick."

"Owl!?" screeched the beak. "Kaawhaawhaawhaahaa, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I'm no owl!

Kaawhaawhaa!"

"You're not," said Mouse. "Then where am I? Who are you?"

The beak stepped back a little bit to reveal a whole creature. "I'm Bird," it said. "And this is my home."

It really was a stunning bird. He had a perfect mixture of black and brown feathers and a handsome red chest that stuck way out. He had a very happy and proud face.

"Nice to meet you, Bird. I'm Mouse."

"I can see so, Mr. Mouse. You had a nasty time of things last night. How about some breakfast?"

"Oh that would be fine," said Mouse. "So you saw me last night—"

Mouse stopped short. As Bird had moved away to gather some food from the side of the nest, the emerald beetle shell emerged from behind him, resting exquisitely on the wall.

"Oh yeah, you were picked up and tossed about like a feather. It was really awful to watch," Bird explained. "So what would you like? I got a few berries here or an almond maybe?"

"So it wasn't just a dream," Mouse muttered.

"Pardon?"

"I woke up and saw that shell, and I thought it was all a dream. It was so beautiful."

"Oh, that old thing? I've had that forever. Got it off a poor fellow who found his way underneath my beak one day. I couldn't bear to just leave it there though, it was shining so nice. Now, how's about that breakfast?"

But Mouse was barely listening. He sat staring at the shell. It seemed to be staring right back, beckoning to him. All of Mouse's dreams seemed to be in that dazzling, shining emerald surface. With it, he wouldn't have to be the laughing stock of the tree anymore. He could start anew, not be so cowardly anymore. Yes, with a shell like that, he'd be a whole new Mouse.

* * * * *

In the days to follow, Mouse and Bird came to trust each other more and more. Mouse relied on Bird to show him the lay of the land and where the best places to gather food were. Bird was glad for the new friendship that Mouse provided, and the frequent laughter. Bird thought Mouse was a funny little thing, scurrying here and there, so eager to please his rescuer that he didn't look where he was going and would fall down holes or into plants as he was looking to and fro. Bird laughed even harder when Mouse would ask him question upon question about that glittering beetle shell. Bird would let Mouse wear it whenever he wanted, fastened to his back with a blade of grass. It was theirs to share, the way Bird saw it. He had found it one day, and to him it belonged to everybody and yet nobody. Everyone should be able to enjoy the natural beauty of the precious jewel.

Bird became concerned, however, when Mouse would not let the shell out of his sight, always wearing it when they went out for food, sleeping with it by his side. He noticed Mouse getting more and more covetous looks in his eyes whenever Bird requested the shell be put back against the wall, or when he wanted to show it to some of their neighbors. He noticed that Mouse started to hide the shell from him, claiming he misplaced it somewhere. But Bird would get up in the night to see it held tightly in Mouse's arms, a look of quiet triumph on the little creature's face.

Bird decided that it was time to get the old Mouse back.

Mouse woke up one morning to discover that his shell was gone. He panicked. He began scurrying around, frantically searching under food, in between the twigs of the nest, in his bedding, but to no avail. He could not find it. Mouse began to breathe gasping breaths.

Then he saw Bird calmly walking towards the opening hole in the nest.

"Bird!" Mouse hailed his friend. "Bird have you seen my beetle shell? My glorious glittering green beetle shell? It seems to have slipped away from me during the night."

"Oh yes," replied Bird, "I know exactly where it is. It's right here." And Bird turned just a little to reveal the emerald jewel gleaming under his wing. Bird could see that Mouse was distressed, but Bird acted like he was just taking a morning stroll with it. "I just thought that I'd take it down to the pond and wash it." And with that, Bird leapt out of the hole.

Mouse scampered after him and landed hard on the ground, which thankfully wasn't that far from their nest suspended in the tall grass. "Bird!" Mouse called. "Bird hold on!" Mouse caught up with his friend. "I just thought that maybe you would ask me if you wanted to borrow the shell. It gave me such a scare when I woke up and it wasn't there."

Bird put on a confused face. "But Mouse, why would I have to ask permission? Is it not ours to share?"

"Oh... Well..." Mouse looked startled. "Yes, yes of course. Ours to share..." He trailed off.

Bird continued to walk through the tall grass and reeds, towards the pond.

"But, you know something Bird, I've been meaning to talk to you about that." Mouse said politically. "I was thinking, and you know, I do believe that I should have the shell myself. I mean, I think it's much safer in my hands than just lying on the ground in the nest," Mouse implored.

Bird acted taken aback. "Have it for your own? I don't see why we can't share it." Bird and Mouse had reached the edge of the pond now, and an overcast sky reflected in the clear water.

"Well, my dear Bird, I just... I just think that I look after the safety of the shell more than you do, and that it's, well... safer. With me."

"But, my dear Mouse," Bird turned to say, "This shell really doesn't belong to anyone. It never will. Its beauty was meant to be enjoyed by everyone." Bird smiled and patted Mouse on his little head.

"You don't understand," said Mouse, as Bird began to bend down and wash the object. "I just need it, and I need you to not have it."

"I deserve it..." he added under his breath.

"Kwaahaahaahaa, oh Mouse. This is all some joke, isn't it?" Bird played it off kiddingly. "It's not really worth anything, this shell. Kwaahaahoo, I see your tricks, haahaahaaw. That was a good one, friend!"

And with that, Bird turned his back and continued his washing.

Mouse was overcome, he was blind. All he could see was Bird's back.

He Jumped.

His little claws sank into Bird's feather back. A cry was let out, but Mouse kept on, fearing no one. His teeth went for the side of Bird's neck, and the warmth leapt out and the taste was in his mouth. Bird tried to spread those glorious wings, tried to jump and shake Mouse off, but he couldn't now; he was too weak. Mouse held there until his friend sank to the ground. Mouse slowly got up then, and he could feel Bird's life in his paws and on his teeth. He didn't really want to touch Bird while he was lying there, but he lifted up one wing and saw his prize laying there in the mud at the pond's edge. Mouse picked it up gingerly, getting red mixed in with the brown, all covering the dull green. He went to the water, washing it all away. After he was finished at the pond, he walked back to the nest with the shell, leaving Bird laying there, his beak in the water.

* * * * *

Lizard had ventured far away from the tree. Life had become tough around there. After Mouse had left and Owl had eaten up the rest of his cousins, the big hunter came after more of the other creatures. Lizard had found himself alone without his family, and so he had decided to venture out just like Mouse. *If that little thing could make it, so could I*, was his rational thought. After what seemed like forever, in which he came upon no food or water, he eventually came upon a pond. *This is where I shall rest*, Lizard thought. *This is a perfect place to start over*. Just then Lizard heard rustling in the rushes to his right. He panicked and couldn't run anywhere. But then, who should hop out of the reed stalks but Mouse, his old neighbor.

"Lizard!?" exclaimed Mouse. "Where did you come from?" He seemed happy enough to see the poor reptile.

"Oh goodness, Mouse, you about scared me to death just then." Lizard exhaled finally. "I got sick of living around that awful tree, so I decided to look somewhere else for a home." Just then, Lizard noticed something shiny and green on Mouse's back.

"What is that, old friend?" Lizard queried.

"Oh, my jewel? Yes, isn't it wonderful! I just found this laying around the pond one day. Some poor fellow must've dropped it or something."

"Well, my my," said Lizard, "It really is a wonderful thing. Would've loved to have seen the beetle it came off of. Must've been delicious." Lizard licked his scaly lips.

"Yeah, well, you're free to look around for some more," said Mouse. "In fact, you can stay around here if you want, I don't have many neighbors, and there's plenty of food to go around."

"Well, I do appreciate it, Mouse. I think I'll have a look around and stake my plot."

"Sounds good... neighbor, quaaheehzee," Mouse giggled. "Feel free to holler if you need anything." And Mouse ambled back through the rushes.

"Will do!" yelled Lizard. "Will do. Well now, let's have us a look around."

Lizard proceeded to make his way around the pond, looking for some sort of shelter that was suited to his tastes. There did seem to be a lot of good food around here, he saw, and no one in sight! *Whoeeee*, thought Lizard, *this is gonna be easy living from here on out!*

As he was making another pass around the water's edge, Lizard saw something curious. What appeared to be the remains of a bird were lying in the shallows. He saw some feather spines sticking out of the mud, some wing bones here and there, and a handsome orange beak, just sitting there.

Huh, poor sucker, thought Lizard. *Met the wrong side of somebody. Too bad there's no meat left. Would've made a decent first supper. Now let's see, I think I saw a nice rock over there a-ways...*

And like that, Lizard settled in this new land. In fact, many creatures from all over started wandering in, and word spread that there was an area promising prosperity if you came from hard times. Mouse was the unsung hero of the pond. He showed all the newcomers exactly where the best food was and dealt with them if any of them were terrorizing other neighbors. He did all this with that glorious beetle shell on his back. At first, it was cumbersome, always slipping around, and getting quite heavy and hot in the summertime. But Mouse never took it off during the day, and never let it stray from his sight at night. Soon it became like just another part of his body, comfortable resting there on his balding and grey back. All the creatures of the pond respected him and marveled at his shell's beauty. All was well in the new land. All was well.