

## ***When Are You Coming Home?* by Bryn Chancellor**

In *When Are You Coming Home?*, Bryn Chancellor compiles nine short stories to explore the themes of identity, loss, and of course, finding one's home—even if it may not traditionally fit within the sphere of home as one would know it. Employing a myriad of literary techniques, from experimental character perspectives and authorial persona to illustrate personal experiences, Chancellor's collection is simply poignant. Every title correlates with a mood: "Meet Me Here" is best consumed with a glass of wine and your cell phone turned off as to avoid calling up your mother, while "Water at Midnight" is perfect for a summer evening where you cannot decide between moving forward as an adult or staying static within your youth, even as time does not allow you to pause, keeping you up late into the night; "This Is Not an Exit" has you worry about your mortality, taking deep breaths to reconcile fantasy with reality, and "All This History at Once" leaves your phone off again, denying the pangs of ex-lovers and possibilities, contemplating the past, and whether what you have is truly what you wanted. Overall, each piece is a journey, and it is not until the reader reaches the end that you realize how far just a few short pages have taken you. It leaves one with a wistful feeling, like the lens on life has widened by a fraction and suddenly there is so much more to see. The fact that Chancellor's writing craft only further empowers the heart tugs of the plots she weaves together merely promises that this collection will be read over and over again.

It is very difficult to choose a favorite piece, as so many ring true and real on so many levels—but if I had to choose, it would be "At the Terminal." I will openly admit that main character Francie is an amalgamation that I wholeheartedly relate to, from the frizzy hair to the anxious disassociation to the cigarette cravings to the identity crises. By placing her within an airport terminal, too, I feel Francie's constant pulls between this place and that, surely done on

purpose by Chancellor to emphasize Francie's conflict all the more: Where does she fit in all of this? Francie likes her house, a "one-bedroom guest house, where she stayed in on weekends, listening to the same CDs for weeks at a time," and she likes "the dark, grassy backyard, from which she could see stars and planets. . . . She'd sit out there with some Johnny Cash or Steve Earle on the stereo, and she felt safe, happy even, looking up" (70). But, it is not enough—at least, according to her older sister, Jean, who gifts Francie an internet dating subscription so she can get out of the house. Francie questions how unromantic it is, "like Jane Austen on speed . . . Like Simone de Beauvoir to Sartre, but not" (71). Yet, when we meet Francie at the airport terminal, her relationship with Clive, the product of the dating subscription, has ended with him dumping her after sex. Francie is a mess, volatile in a literal location that she cannot claim as her own, bursting from within as she emotionally cannot connect, and she comes across as man in a wheelchair and begs him for a cigarette. In a subversion of most literary moments, where the kindly old man offers his ear and imparts some age-old wisdom, the man tells Francie to go to hell. This leads to the strangest interactions in the collection, in my opinion, where Francie steals his pack of cigarettes, locks his wheels, and demands he tells her "something good. Something. Lie if you have to" (82).

Overall, their exchange borders on violent. There is a dark undercurrent that emerges as she threatens to push him into the street, "a shaking, blind anger [radiating] off her skin," and it is clear that the man has his own devils to contend with as he tells her, "Go for it" (82). Still, Francie and the wheelchair-bound man happen to connect on this strange level of disconnection, where neither fit in their lives yet are somehow expected to keep living. Perhaps that is the reason why they immediately do not get along—they see themselves in the other and *hate* that recognition, because who wants to be some sobbing girl in the rain or some bitter guy in a

wheelchair? Yet, by identifying the likeness in each other, vitriolic though it is, Francie does manage to reach some plane of acceptance; she releases the wheelchair, returns his cigarettes, and as he goes to leave, he does tell her something: "It's not you, honey" (83). It is up to the reader to determine whether this is *good* or not, as it echoes back to how Clive broke up with her—but by being on her own again, maybe this is the opportunity she has been needing, to see that this person at the terminal really *isn't* her. As Francie recounts herself, this is merely a moment: "Tomorrow she would wake up . . . and that old lousy day would come to her as she stepped off a curb somewhere, the faces now nothing but flashes of light, the details muted fragments: the flick of a lighter, the glow of a planet, the soft hair of a stranger, an old self who struggled with the new, who loved and lost, who wore sunglasses in the rain" (83-4). Arguably, identity is not definitively formed within a second, but it continues to take shape, messy and malleable, as time inevitably goes on.

Overall, *When Are You Coming Home?* is so pure sometimes that it makes you ache. Yet, Bryn Chancellor's talent for writing guarantees that nothing is so simple—the memories of your past, the relationship with your parents, the closure with your former loves, and the vast unknown of the future are still constantly being ruminated, lingering, as each time you approach the collection, you feel differently before and after. In literature, *When Are You Coming Home?* fits in the canon of the short story, yet it also serves as a definitive reminder that the short story is not merely a detraction of a larger idea; there is nothing restricted in these pieces, let alone in how the reader responds to them, each one resonating just as strongly as a full-length novel. Ultimately, *When Are You Coming Home?* proves that short story collections are not just an easy middle ground for writers to fall back on when unable to produce more, but are in fact strong

pieces of prose that demand to leave an impact, every word crafted with absolute purpose and not to be taken lightly.

#### Citations

Chancellor, Bryn. "At the Terminal." *When Are You Coming Home?* Ed. Kwame Dawes.

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