

2024 ADULT ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

A Bold Lip

By Raegan O'Lone

Raspberry Glade. Bamboo Pink. A Different Grape. These were shades my mother pulled from her purse when I asked her what lipstick she wore. Mom never left the house without hued lips. Every trip in sweatpants from our trailer to the corner store warranted application of a shade of red. The lipstick itself had armor—a hard case with a narrow mirror affixed to the inner lid. Mom always checked proper lipstick placement before entering my grandmother's home. Nan preferred things just so. Later, when Nan, whose memories were escaping her with greater frequency, moved in, to go out, she insisted on her wool coat, pillbox hat and a bold lip.

I resisted wearing makeup, thinking it a diversion I couldn't afford, separating myself from the lipstick-clad women who had made me.

When my brother suddenly fell ill, I flew home from Boston, where he had led the family caravan to take me to school a few years prior. The day of his funeral, I drove with Mom and Nan, both of their lips vivid when everything on my body was dark. We stepped out of the car in front of the funeral home, and as we trudged up the walk, Nan stopped, lines of worry deepening across her face. "Who died?"

My bare lips could find no words. My mother's garnet mouth summoned the strength to tell Nan that her grandson had died. Nan's lips twisted with the realization, again, but for the first time, that we were burying my brother. Mom held out her arm. Nan straightened, pressed her lips together in an impenetrable line and hooked her arm in Mom's. I followed as they pushed the door open. We laid flowers in my brother's casket, his lips rosier than I could accept for the

coldness of his skin to my touch. Next to his grave among those gathered, the boldness of Mom's words hovered, a beacon sheathed in red against the dense fog of my grief.

Avoiding colorless days that snowballed into a haze, nights became a haven, the flatness of the dark obscuring at least pieces of what was missing. Pawing through boxes of memories, I found a lipstick someone had given me that I'd tossed aside. I covered my lips in a vermilion glaze, preferring a small mirror to evade my own eyes. Then again and again, hoping the color might bleed into the day. To brave the convenience store, burgundy-stained lips complemented my sweats. I dared to venture on longer walks, the daylight buffered by my reflection in storefront windows, lips intense, leading. I poured myself into work, lips increasingly coated, wielding a deep brick to defend the thesis I dedicated to my brother.

My shade now is raisin. Another different kind of grape: one exposed to the elements, toughened, composition concentrated after what it has lost. Applied to my lips in layers and for every occasion. Pairs well with sweatpants and grit.