

turned it in her hands, feeling its smooth weight. “Correction!” He slapped the side of his head. “*God* made it. I found it. The wood was already nice and dry. See here where I smoothed it out?” He pointed to nubs where twigs had been snapped off and the bumps whittled down and smoothed. “And there.” He pointed to a band of filigree carving near the top. “You see that? I did that. I made it up out of my head. Like vines, see? And that’s where you put your hand, right where I done my best work.”

“My, my,” Pru said, her voice quavering between fear and gratitude. “A walking stick.”

“There’s more,” he said.

He dug in his pocket and opened his hand. A round wooden button wobbled in his palm. Pru’s hand flew to her vest to find the missing spot. He delivered the button to her, pinched between two calloused fingertips, then motioned for the staff. He nodded toward the road. “Now you watch! This is a lesson.” He walked with exaggerated movements, tapping the stick, moving it in rhythm with his opposite limb, going slow so Pru could keep up, and looking back to make sure she was paying attention.

She followed him down the driveway and back toward the end of the road, her mind frozen in fearful wonder. Suddenly he stopped. “Show me,” he said, handing her the staff.

Pru took the stick, its weight reminding her that it was also a weapon. Closing her hand around the staff, the boy’s carved vines felt live against her palm. A deep breath and she ordered thought away. Attention only. Just walk. Reach, step. Reach, step.

And soon she came to the guardrail where the road broke apart into weed-choked chunks of asphalt and old concrete, and beyond where it disappeared into a track of high weeds and stiff brush that stretched on beyond sight. Something glinted among the bleached branches and thorny scabble. Not from a single source, but a multitude.

The boy motioned her to the end of the guardrail and took the staff from her to part the shrubs. Pru stepped past him into the weeds and made her way with short steps down the narrow path to a small clearing from which other paths led further off into the brush.

On the packed earth before her, mounds of broken glass were heaped, some separated by color, others mixed for effect. There were piles of small metal scraps and

bright balls of foil, papers and wrappers weighted by rocks, and a small collection of yellow foam captured by a bit of bird netting.

The boy unshouldered his knapsack and began adding the day’s catch to his piles. Something about the care he took with his strange passion lightened her fear and she felt something expanding within her. A dilation, strange and exhilarating.

She turned to look back through the brittle bushes at the road. Who could imagine her here, come all this way? She was hidden, yet out in the open; alone but not alone, standing amid glittering piles gathered by someone who knew his world—a world—intimately.

And Pru there, ready now.

Vicky Mlyniec draws inspiration from the Santa Cruz mountains where she lives, writes, and edits. Her essays and short stories have appeared in venues such as *North American Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Chicago Tribune’s Printers Row* and *Brevity* and have earned her the Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction. Her short story collection, *Accordioned Life*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Flannery O’Connor Short Fiction Award.

FRANK GALUSZKA

Greta in the Green Dress, 2015

Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36 in



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