

Nefelibata by Mia Greene

Exactly one century ago, I was painted into existence by French artist Percival Beauchamp and thereby trapped, forced into a fixed position atop the prickly shards of precisely curated hill grass, for eternity.

I am confined within this space, only a mahogany wooden house behind the hill I lie on to accompany me. There is no world beyond me. No means by which I can escape from this endless solitude, watching the onlookers of the art gallery from the other side scrutinize me as if I am some extraordinary species.

“Oh darling, doesn’t she just look so poised and beautiful, laying in that delicious blend of green grass?” They say.

“I do believe Percival Beauchamp captured her curves splendidly.”

The sound of his name from the mouths of observers makes my teeth grind in fury. He trapped me here, and because of his deceased status, I will remain an ever so elegant spectacle to the hungry eyes of Parisians, who will never look past my seemingly relaxed figure to the male face that is blended among the rough planks of the house. They shall only identify the painter’s muse, blades of grass embedded into her thighs, strands of her hair frozen in place, yet still with a grainy smile, etched upon her face.

One might assume that, in my position, I’d have learned to grow accustomed to my conditions. It would not be false if I said I hadn’t tried to do so. A few spontaneous times when the art gallery had closed for the night, I found myself wandering about this compact painted space. There is no way to enter the door of the house, I have discovered, though I am not fond of finding a way into the house anyhow, due to the mere fact that Percival Beauchamp’s vivid colour burst of a face stares back at me when I linger.

I now seldom leave my allotted placement atop the grass, even when nightfall looms through the arched, gilded obsidian framed windows of the gallery, and a void of silence begins to fold between the bristles of ancient paint brushes.

Today is no different from all of which I have existed. People peruse the gallery and stare at me as if they understand me. I do not see much of what these humans look like, for my creator painted me in such a way where my face is tilted to the right, gazing at a stark, white textured wall; the left side of the canvas to someone looking in. But of course, to the eye of the beholder, the beauty is the palpable assumption that I am surveying an alluring meadow just yonder, sparkling with daisies and tulips.

When I sit in the leisurely stretched-out position I was painted to be in, I find I cannot move a limb unless omitting the inquisitive presence of onlookers. Today that seems to change, for when I spot a seemingly male-gendered figure rendering its way into my peripheral vision to observe me, a deep, unfamiliar hum courses through my bones. My neck strangely turns itself to face him.

His sharp features. His black, brushed moustache. His pinched expression. It is one I know all too well, and one that immediately sends sparks of vexation throughout me.

Percival Beauchamp.

I understand that his stare is like no other onlooker the second my eyes meet his between the world of paint strokes and the tangible one he stands in. Images begin to flash through my head of my painted explosion into existence. I feel the roughness of the brush, the concentration on Percival's face as he cradles me and roots my body to the earth of the painting. I feel as though the life has been sucked out of me, and yet replaced with a surge of power all at once.

But how can this be? Percival Beauchamp died long, long ago. How is it possible that he is standing on the other side of this painting, as the artist inspecting his creation, his muse?

A trickle of blazing strength runs through my body, undoubtedly from the indestructible bond between us. My rage is a writhing ball of fire that lifts me into the air, detached from the small dent my legs have made in the terrain. I have never felt stronger, enduring such a thing with great fortitude. I have never felt this feeling at all. But oh, how I want more. I stare into Percival Beauchamp's soul through the painting, closer and closer to the syrupy taste of freedom I have longed to relish.

I watch the sudden movement of his face, his bushy eyebrows furrowing. He shakes his head, as if to tell me no. No freedom. No escaping. Not today. The second he walks away, I am choking. The surge of power I felt moments ago dissipates just as soon as it arrived, leaving my malleable paste of bones hollow and aching. I gasp for air as an invisible force drags me back to my designated spot. I cry out against it, hot red with a tinge of vantablack seeping into the sides of my vision. I sense my once smooth rose painted lips cracking. A fine cloth being swept across my curves, wiping away the mess of paint that I am.

No.

I will not let this be how it ends.

I will not accept this fate, stuck in this painting, watched and critiqued and commented on by *every single human* who strolls by. Century after century, am I to simply sit here, playing the muse, the *doll*, the *beautiful woman* of the oh-so talented Percival Beauchamp?

The answer is no.

I have to dig deep to find my own strength—not the one given as an indication of my connection with him—yet I know it is there. I suppose it always has been, under layers of paint, hidden between shades of ivory and chartreuse and prussian.

I may have been some twisted fragment of Percival Beauchamp's imagination in which he put forth onto canvas, but more importantly, I am a woman who will fight for the freedom she deserves.

Who will fight strenuously, paint leaking through her pores, and still remain poised all at once.

I leap from the confinement of the painting and enter the raw world.

An illness of sorts creeps down my spine, coating my veins. I am not used to the stark contrast between this world, but rather the harsh brush strokes of my own. No one notices me as I shove my way through them, eyes trained on the man who might have created my figure, but fortunately not my mind. I spot his dull grey suit, finally close enough for me to reach out and touch him.

He turns. Surveys me. Smiles an unsettling smile that doesn't look human.

It is only when I notice how refined, how sharp his features are, how textured his skin is, that I understand he, too, is composed of painted brush strokes. A painted fragment of his human life form, standing before me with a pinched, hollow smile.

Time waits for nobody. Not even paintings, so it seems. Percival Beauchamp, my creator, begins to melt into a viscous, squelching puddle of paint before my own wash of amber-swirled eyes. If I look close enough within the melange of incongruously combined colours of paint, I can still make out his facial features. An eyebrow. An eye. That unsettling smile.

I turn away, looking back at the painting I was trapped in mere moments ago, the hall empty without me. The golden plaque with Percival Beauchamp's name carved into it shimmers, enticing me to return.

I will not. My time being a muse is over, just how it always should have been.

I know what I shall do. A silver-handled paint brush on display catches my eye. I steal it without bothering to note where it came from and indulge in its importance.

Hesitation fears me.

With the paint of my dead creator slathered among the primitively rough surface of the paintbrush's bristles, I begin creating my own world to reside in.

Each stroke becomes something new, something stimulating to explore. An open field. A bustling village. A glittering lake.

The paintbrush clatters to the ground after my last stroke. I smile when I hear the confused chatter of the gallery onlookers, wondering where the woman in Percival Beauchamp's painting has gone. I enter the world I've created for myself, a long stretch of field ready for me to walk across and explore.

Everyone will wonder, has already begun to wonder, for quite the little matter, where the woman in the painting has gone. How she has seemed to simply disappear.

They shall never come to know the truth, those humans. The truth that she was once being the muse.

Or maybe the end of this eccentric story is that she never truly existed.

She was a painting, after all.