

the way it is | Kierrin Schaefer

I grew up in a world too beautiful for my own good. It was a world full of Hindu mythology and Catholic saint stories; a world full of princesses with gold nose rings and prophets in Technicolor coats. The brown, worn shoes in front of me reminded me of adventure, not danger. The large feet captivated me, and I did not look up.

The shoes nudged my tiny legs that sat pretzel-style on the sidewalk in front of the store. After a moment of staring and no movement, they kicked my shins with more force. As I was dragged against the building, I watched the heat work itself off the baking brick. It hypnotized me and made me feel unnaturally light. I did not resist; I did not run.

Behind the man in the worn, brown shoes were cartons upon cartons of fruit. Apples shone in the sun, and I imagined that their juice must taste sweet and warm. Bananas sat perfectly balanced, their scent hovering over the whole alley. A few peaches had tumbled out of their wooden basket and looked so beautiful that I thought emeralds must be hidden in the center of them. Pushed behind the building, my favorite beaded shirt was stretched out by tugging. My blue jean shorts were pulled down swiftly. His glimmering crucifix swung side to side, just above my eyes. All too pretty and distracting—I never looked at his face.

A silver watch dug into my right hip. For a moment, I could feel the tiny second hand beating against my skin. With each thrust, I bit my lip harder, and slick blood dripped off my mouth and down my chin. The four faces that passed by, behind the man on top of the little girl, barely eight years old, were the most gorgeous people she had ever seen. Their hair blew in the hot wind, and they had eyes like gems in a cold stream, gleaming and hard. It was beauty she couldn't touch, and she never reached out for them.

As the man finished, the apples winked at me, swearing me to secrecy, and the sun got hotter, washing him off me with a shower of sweat. As he stood, my small trembling hands pulled up my blue petaled underwear, which stung me, settling in between my legs. My brick-rubbed arms pulled up my jean shorts, which felt stiff and unforgiving against the bruise that spread across my hip. He strolled over to the fruit. I could not cry.

The heat waves coming off the side of the building now made me dizzy. The faces that saw and did nothing seemed to sneer in my memory. The fruit began to give off a decaying stench. Taking his worn, brown shoe, the man stepped down on one of the loose peaches. As he did this he said, "That's just the way it is, kid," in a quiet voice that sounded like my own. He walked away leaving a pulpy peach that revealed not an emerald, but a rotting brown pit.