

THE NAPE OF MY NECK

Keira Shae

I was scheduled to be naked at ten in the morning on Saturday.

This was a conflict with my uber-religious community and my lifetime of body shame. I drove to the studio anyway.

The artist greeted me at the door, and his surroundings were chaos. Wrapping from large blocks of clay, several canvases leaned against a wall, frames with nothing to showcase, and in contrast, Jesus staring down from the adjacent wall.

I tried to ignore all of that while clutching my robe.

He led me to a screen where I was instructed to fully undress, then I was abandoned as he went in search of fresh clay.

I had been naked many times before. Doctors had examined me. My husband had ravaged me. Children had interrupted me.

But I had never been simply a work of art.

I stared down at my lumpy, striped body with evidence of its seasons all over. There was a line between my eyebrows that grew deeper with each stress a new child brought. The thousand sleepless nights bundled up underneath my eyes. In my winters, I frowned in my agony so many times, it created canyons around my mouth. The shine left my hair but there were silvery streaks along my haunches and flat buttocks from my swollen summers. My powerful arms had held the world up, and they were chiseled, but in contrast, my stomach was doughy. I really hated my dead-fish breasts, its eyes facing the floor.

I was determined to disrobe my shame as well, and so I left it behind the screen and stepped out.

The artist did not glance up from his clay. I was relieved that I was normal for him and dismayed that I was normal for him.

He explained the pose and then, after looking at my frame once, packed more clay. I ignored Shame, who was tweeting from the corner about that.

My fellow worker had told me that he would ask me about myself to make me more comfortable. Apparently he was shy and easy to simply talk at.

I loved shy people. It meant I had a maze to solve before the puzzle unlocked and they shared their beautiful inner lives. I was a very warm and charming person.

He instructed me, then fell silent.

I jumped at the opportunity. I asked him where he was from. What his wife thought of his work. Why he chose to do these sculptures. I searched his studio for clues.

I saw Jesuses lined up everywhere. “You paint the Lord a lot,” I offered.

He nodded.

“Do you paint from personal experience, like you sculpt women’s bodies?” I teasingly mused.

He snorted a laugh. “No, I would have to be a much better person to do that.”

I had thought that, too. An answer from God was all I had ever wanted. No amount of praying, begging, serving, rebelling, meditating, or theorizing ever changed that. It was a realization that broke my soul. I could challenge him that no one really merits a visit from the divine. If they did, surely I would have had answers to my prayers long ago.

I also thought about commenting on the degree of holiness in sculpting a woman’s creative body. It could be akin to a visit from Jesus.

I decided to give a sermon on neither and fell silent.

He offered to play some music. I requested a favorite song, and once it finished, other similar songs flooded his studio. One especially favorite one came on and I groaned with happiness.

“How appropriate.”

“What?” he asked without looking.

“This song. It’s called, ‘To Build a Home.’” I offered. He glanced at the device before returning to his work. “When you’ve been homeless, you learn that the only home you really have is your body.”

He stopped sculpting for a moment at that. I didn’t want to meet his gaze anymore. I gazed around at all his works.

“And these bodies are so beautiful, aren’t they?” I asked.

He said nothing, back to his work.

I was winning. I swallowed some water and returned to my pose.

“Have you ever posed?”

He nodded. “My wife is an artist as well. She and I have posed for each other in poorer days.”

“She must be glad to be relieved of the work,” I joked.

He laughed in agreement. Conversation just like that filled our Saturday.

I warmed him up with questions about his children.

“Are any of your children . . .” I searched his face and met his eyes, “artists, too?”

He rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand, clay coloring his palms brick red. “Maybe Maddy, it’s too young to tell . . . but Mikey, I think he’s genuinely interested.”

He paused before mentioning their names, already slipping by saying one of his sons was named after him. Privacy in this day and age was expensive. I knew—but he did not know I knew—that he was a split identity. He had a pseudonym for his statue work and another name for his religious work. He was risking his family’s religious reputation, large home, and income just to follow his true passion. All of this I knew. Even if I didn’t, I could smell it in the sweat on his skin.

His real name was Michael.

He tried to turn the conversation to me and failed at seeming authentic.

He asked me the name of my only son.

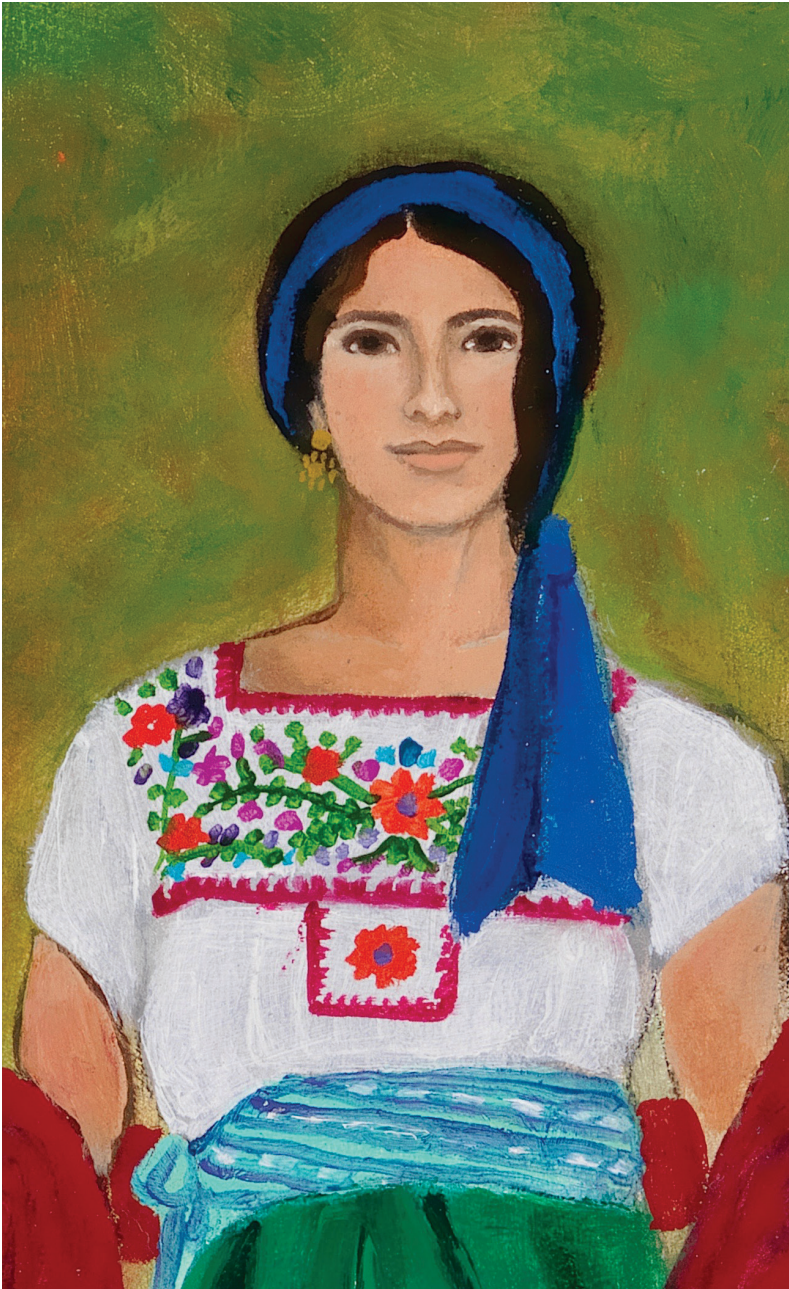
“It’s Michael.” I looked him straight in the eye.

He sat stunned for a full few seconds. He hunched again.

When he finished, and I dressed, I shook his hand and looked him in the eye. He did not meet my gaze.

How strange, I thought to myself. I was not the one naked today at all.

KEIRA SHAE {keirashaeauthor@gmail.com} was born in 1988. Keira grew up in a poverty-stricken family in Provo, Utah and encountered abuse, drugs, prostitution, and family separation in the shadow of the temple and the LDS Church’s flagship university. Shae experienced kindness from an LDS foster family as a teen, which changed the trajectory of her life. Through police records, lifelong journaling, and court documents, she built a narrative for her transcendent true story. After Leonard Cohen’s lyrics, Shae titled her debut memoir *How The Light Gets In*.



Michelle Franzoni Thorley
Family History and Temple Work (detail, central figure)
oil on canvas