

### Prisoners of the Patriarchy

In his book, *We the Animals*, Justin Torres considers the adverse effects of patriarchal expectations on men. Whereas women are regularly recognized as victims of patriarchy, the consequences for men are often ignored. Because the book centers around a latino family—in which machismo ideals are pervasive—the author’s critique of toxic masculinity is complicated by cultural ties. Machismo ideology can be delineated as a particular brand of patriarchy where concepts of masculinity are inextricably bound to primal instincts: physicality, sexuality, self-reliance, etc.. Torres graphically depicts the psychological symptoms of patriarchal oppression experienced by men, as the three brothers in his story struggle to fit society’s mold of masculinity. Specifically, in “Trash Kites” (Torres, 82), Torres illustrates the brothers’ attempt to escape the patriarchy, and the repercussions they endure as a result. In this essay, I argue that Torres employs setting, symbolism, and personification to suggest that men are prisoners of patriarchal expectations.

In “Trash Kites,” Torres uses setting to illustrate life in and out of the patriarchy. Nature represents a place of freedom—free of societal expectations—while the brothers’ home in the city falls under the patriarchal umbrella. Overwhelmed by notions of masculinity imposed by society, the brothers venture outside the realm of patriarchal norms: “We were sneaking out; we were finding freedom” (Torres, 82). In nature, the brothers are unfettered. They are able to enjoy each others company without the underlying disposition to prove their masculinity. “We ran, slipped, the knees of our dungarees all grass stained, we got up, ran, choked ourselves half to death with laughter, but we found speed, and our trash kites soared” (Torres, 82), explains the narrator. However, their peace is inevitably disrupted when their father’s “Big-Dick Truck”

(Torres, 61) comes “crunching down the road with his high beams on” (Torres, 83). Torres’s use of perturbing language in this passage including “crunching” and “hunted” (Torres, 83), portrays the father and his truck as agents of the patriarchy.

Because patriarchal structure relies on the compliance of individuals, the brothers’ escapade is perceived as a threat to societal stability. Therefore, society seeks to punish the boys, and the father—as head of hierarchy in his family—assumes the role of punisher. Being the oldest, Manny is severely beaten. The use of physical punishment refers back to machismo concepts of masculinity. The father’s own masculinity and position as head of the family has been undermined by the boys venture. Therefore, he attempts to use physical violence to substantiate his role in society. The father literally assaults Manny’s masculinity by striking his groin: “He beat Manny bad; punched his face, punched his crotch” (Torres, 83). Manny’s sanity begins to fracture as a result of his punishment, emphasizing the psychological toll of patriarchal expectations on men. “I could tell he was holding himself tight, every little muscle tight. I thought he might cry, or scream. I thought he might climb on top of me” (Torres, 84), the narrator explains. However, due to their ignorance of other social structures, the boys themselves assume patriarchal identities in youth. This becomes especially apparent in nature’s reaction to the boys presence.

Although the boys seek solace in the outdoors, Torres’s personification of nature depicts an unwelcome setting. Nature is traditionally associated with femininity. Therefore, the conquest of nature can also be perceived as the conquest of femininity and vice versa. Because men are historically the conquerors, Torres portrays nature warily when the boys enter the landscape: “. . . naked branches stretched into shadows and the sky deepened, wrapping itself in a shroud of

dark purple. It was getting colder . . .” (Torres, 82). Together, the boys form a symbolic patriarchy. The “We” which Torres references throughout the book represents brotherhood on an individual level, but on a societal level it speaks to a coalescence of social elements benefiting the needs of men. Just as the brothers protect one another and stick together, patriarchy protects the needs of men by means of enforced conformity. Of course, the brothers struggle to comply with patriarchal notions of masculinity, motivating their escape to nature. Yet, Torres emphasizes that the boys do not belong in nature. Nature retreats into itself upon the brothers arrival: “. . . daylight fully buried itself into night and all the light sank back, except for the stars, and a toenail clipping of moon, and the kites disappeared, black upon blackness” (Torres, 83). In this passage, Torres highlights the paradoxical nature of patriarchy. As products of the patriarchy the boys do not belong in nature, yet they suffer in society.

Throughout *We The Animals*, Torres explores the consequences of patriarchal expectations for men. In “Trash Kites,” the true cost of toxic masculinity to individuality is revealed. Utilizing setting, Torres defines nature as a place of freedom, and civilization as a place of constraint. He employs symbolism to illustrate the scope of the patriarchal expectations. Finally, Torres personifies nature to emphasize a patriarchal paradox: men suffer from toxic masculinity under the patriarchy, yet cannot exist outside of it. Thus, the cost of patriarchal protection is the constant psychological struggle for individuality.