

Sketch

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Lavendar

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Lavendar

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I bought three gallons of Clorox bleach, each with a purple label. Lavender. I'm not sure what lavender is supposed to smell like, but the flower on the label looked nice. Simple. With my three gallons of bleach, one giant canvas board measuring ten feet by twelve feet, and a container of industrial-sized staples, I approached the checkout lane. I handed the cashier exact change directly out of my pocket. And on the three-mile trek back to my loft, canvas overhead, bleach and staples in my backpack, I wondered about lavender.

For thousands of years lavender has been adored for its brilliant violet hue and calming scent. The flowers have ancient roots, their use documented by the Greeks around 1000 B.C. Perhaps millions of years ago the plants grew amongst other vegetation consumed by *Stegosaurus* and *Triceratops*. Purple icicles could have popped up around woolly mammoths and *Smilodons*. The Aztecs could have used lavender to cleanse the body before a sacrifice to the gods. Lavender could very well predate human existence.

My worn, black sneakers felt wet and heavy with sweat. I laughed to myself, thinking they could probably use some lavender to eliminate the odor. I placed my supplies on the stained wooden floor and opened the moth-eaten curtains surrounding the window. No sun out today, but the sky was bright gray, promising rain. I looked down at the fire escape as little drops formed and slid down the metal to the rungs below. I set the canvas against the adjacent wall. It didn't even reach the ceiling. A vaulted loft had its benefits. I sat down on the floor and took off my clothes.

Humans have found many ways to prepare lavender flowers. It is used in many European dishes, often paired with goat cheese, fruits, and ice creams. It is a popular additive in many teas and herbal supplements as well. The relaxing scent makes lavender a candidate for aromatherapy and perfumes. The oil can even be used as an antiseptic. When dried and crushed, the flowers can be made into a relaxation drug. Purple sniff.

The canvas was wide and long enough that I could stretch out my legs and arms completely without reaching the edges. I centered myself on the canvas. It was slightly rough against my back. Still sweating, my skin stuck to the fabric. I pulled away, making a tearing sound that echoed throughout the loft. I was so used to being on the other side of this project.

The artist, never the muse. My other canvases stood around the loft, the muses perfectly preserved. I reached for the bleach, fingertips quick to twist open the lid. I deeply inhaled. Chlorine laced with sweetness. A floral honey, not quite like roses or lilies, but enveloping. I kept breathing until everything around me was hazed in purple.

Lavender is actually lethal to humans in high doses. The oil is cytotoxic when placed on skin. The cells shut down and die, causing the skin to turn black and hard. If a concentrated batch was placed over the entire human body, it would turn to charcoal in a matter of hours.

Bleach contains sodium hypochlorite, a chemical compound that burns skin. Breathe in the bleach and it tears through the mucous membranes of the nose and throat like white fire. Pour bleach on skin and it burns through the epithelial layers, eats away at the muscles, and leaves nothing behind but freshly whitened bones.

I pour the three gallons of bleach into a large bucket, splashing little puddles around the floor. I grab my large paintbrush and slowly dip it into the bucket, letting the bleach swirl around my hand with each brush stroke. My nose starts to itch, a deep irritation that won't go away. I cough. The paintbrush drips on the canvas as I paint my body with the lavender scented bleach. It tingles, an eruption of needles from under the surface of my skin. I keep painting until my entire body is coated. I inhale again. The sweet smell lingers, and I swear even my brain is lavender scented. I lie down on the canvas and with my industrial-sized stapler begin attaching myself to the fabric. The metal pierces right through my skin. It doesn't work everywhere though, some skin is too thick or taut. I leave one arm free, mainly because I can't staple it to the canvas when my other arm is already stapled down. But I also need this arm to reach for more bleach. I slide the bucket over to me and pour the rest of it over my body. The cold waves lap against the canvas. I feel like I'm at the beach.

I close my eyes and picture fields of lavender growing alongside a stretching expanse of sand and rock. The sun is peaked overhead, burning down with rays of white onto the flowers, the waves, my face. A light wind picks up and blows against the lavender. Suddenly, the flowers erupt into white flames. The fire spreads over the fields. I can feel the heat, covering my body, melting my skin. Blood is dripping down the canvas. I take a breath. Another. And another. But all I can smell is lavender, its scent relaxing me to sleep.

Caitlin Levetzow loves animals. She loves writing. That's about it.