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Constance, Or

the Hideousness of Deceit

a mystery in verse

by Jon L Jensen

Thesis Advisor: David Groff
2 May 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the
City College of New York

Constance, Or
the Hideousness of Deceit
a mystery in verse
in process

This is a work of fiction. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious.
Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The Players:

(in order of appearance)

Beatrice Platte, born Kulpa, “Bea”: wife of the Sheriff, a retired schoolteacher, our narrator; unwittingly fated to be the Mouthpiece of Féa

Narsister: a burlesque “performance” artist at the Box; a convert to and leader of the Féans

Féa Villaine: a mysterious newcomer to the neo-burlesque world

The Féans: Féa’s devotees, known for their love of cardigans, razors and pilgrimages West

“Bruised” Rasmussen: a 39 year-old lab technician

Sheriff “Junior” Platte: husband of Beatrice, her former student

Deputy Erdman: the foul-mouthed, “bad” cop

Deputy Boyd F. Packer: the “good” cop, also Bishop of the Only True and Living Church on the Face of the Earth

Constance, the First: Bruised’s beautiful first wife, a nurse and adulteress

Constance, the Second: Bruised’s mysterious second wife; shares a name and no other similarity to Constance I; a surgeon; an incarnation of Féa

Butch Rasmussen: Bruised’s father, a cattleman and automobile aficionado

His wife: Bruised’s Snow-White haired mother, also a former schoolteacher

Shel: owner of the Pelt View Motel; Bea’s employer

Felix Kulpa, Bea’s Father: a widower and trona miner

Leah, a.k.a. Great Aunt Weary: a spinster sent to care for Beatrice and her father

Be: the owner of John’s Bar where Bea goes mornings to keep her diary

“Senior” Platte: a rancher, the sheriff’s father, Bea’s father-in-law

Pluto Papesatanallepe: a Basque shepherd, proprietor of the Big Bang

Ronnie Heller: Bruised and the Sheriff’s classmate

Zed: a carpenter and traveling man; the Sheriff’s lover

Samuel: Zed’s son around nine or ten years old

The Wheeler Boys, Daise and Cheyne: two adventurous travelers

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Instead of an Invocation

Imagine something terrible you lost,
some item from a nightmare you forgot
that you'd pay to erase whatever cost,
some deed you did, a shameful Thing you bought,
then could not be rid of try as you may.
And so you thought that Thing would always clot
the room your memories fill. It goes away
yet you don't know since everything you are
is tainted by that Thing you willed away.

But lo, She comes to each the Great Restorer.
She brings what you want least, this Dreadful Muse.
Slip, your identity comes back in horror.
It's shackled to you now—its blood red shoes;
She's called it back—that Thing you cannot lose.

Part One:

Constance, Or
Visionary

“Beauty is for amateurs.”
--William Matthews

The Gist of It: *Beatrice Platte, a retired school teacher and Wyoming native, begins her narrative. She introduces us to Narsister, a performance artist in a seedy, though pretentious New York stripclub. A rival appears at the club: the hideous Ms. Féa Villaine. How Féa gains followers; a homely group of women become her devotees. The women come to the club. Féa sees heaven in the face of an ugly child. Her followers attack. All this Beatrice Platte will narrate in rhymed interlocking sonnets.*

Detailing events that occurred some time in December 1994

i.

How Féa came to revelate
 from the stage at the Box undressed,
 I, Beatrice, wife of Sheriff Platte,
 will now try to relate as best
 I can. For I became embroiled
 in this matter, my hands soiled,
 late. In fact, this ugly business
 began out East where ugly business
 usually starts, that is in Chaos.
 And in the Chaos called Manhattan
 we begin, for in Manhattan
 was the Box, and in the Box
 there was a stage, and on the stage
 there was Narsister. All the rage.

ii.

But Féa's show was just hot air,
 and the Box's patrons' palates were
 trained on neo-burlesque fare
 more aimed to arouse than inspire.
 Once some gal had trained her vagina to breathe
 fire, hosts of oddities were conceived
 at the Box. "What next?" the jaded wondered.
 Then Wormwood took to hurling turd.
 Clearly a subtler take on shock
 was due. Was Féa it? She just spoke
 for most of her show but the smoke
 seeping from her temples left them awed.
 "Damn her," Narsister was heard to say,
 "Féa's made the orifice passé."

iii

“The trick’s the thinness of the skin,”
 so she thought. She wanted something simple
 to explain the smoke. She imagined
 holes, but you can’t pierce a temple.
 Narsister knew all the tricks. What was Féa’s?
 “Osmosis!” she proclaimed one night splayed
 backstage while a girl named Dirty tucked some
 chenille skirt up Narsister’s rectum.
 Her Dress-tease “It’s All in Me” was legend.
 But Dirty said, “Osmosis? Naw, she’s rigged.
 She’s got a smoke machine in her wig.”
 “That bald mess is real.” quoth the Legend.
 Narsister knew her wigs, ma’amsirs,
 she kept her go-go boots in hers.

iv.

You wouldn’t think ugly’d have a place
 in a club for exotic dance, but the Box
 is avant-garde. Any tittie bar can embrace
 a beauty and Ms. Féa Villaine was not
 a pretty girl. So no one questioned
 the December night she apparitioned,
 a turquoise bedsheet for a coat,
 nappy hairpiece for a muff. She croaked
 “*When am I on?*” though no one recalled
 seeing her, let alone hiring her to perform.
 Wormwood—the turd hurler—forced to transform
 into stage manager—seemed unenthralled.
 Still he worked her in. In turn she gave him
 the sudden roses filling her arms.

v.

Before Féa, Narsister was the rage.
 Celebrities flocked to her openings. Art
 historians theorized. Feminists raved.
 But these Wyoming eyes see what those smart
 bags overlooked. How they missed her
 insecurity, I wonder. How the mask Narsister
 wore shielded more than beauty from the world.
 For as soon as Féa's smoke trick unfurled,
 Narsister plotted ways to top her,
 pondering tender places, on her body,
 the inner elbow, back of the knee.
 Scheming schemes to stop her.
 For none but Narsister seemed to care
 Féa's act was just hot air.

vi

And she had made the orifice passé.
 Her smoke ring reached the wings, it circled
 'round Narsister. Dirty fanned it away,
 "You're right 'bout the hair, but her muff's a merkin."
 Narsister nodded. Dirty was pleased. "What she
 going on about?" No answer to what Dirty
 knew. Narsister'd hoped Féa would garner
 jeers & heckles. Instead the hag in her garters
 brought the Box, their gold-plated razzle
 cabaret to a Presbyterian quiet, quite unbecoming
 the sight of that fright, her ill-fitting
 pubic hairpiece, her bustier bedazzled
 by two dull rhinestones, Féa voice wild
 cracking: "*Heaven is an awkward child.*"

vii.

“Heaven is an awkward child,”
 (I, Beatrice, record verbatim Féa’s words.)
“Heaven—I saw her on the road—
an awkward child, frozen mild
the moment before she realizes hers
is not an ugliness that will pass,
is no gangly stage promised not to last,
hers is the homeliness spring never blurs.

Uncomely child the parent knows won’t outgrow.
The bucktooth, paunch bellied preteen who stares
on the road. I saw her. Her face
ever wrinkled by bedsheets. Never to know.
She’s the Hideous Unhidden, Reward Waiting where
you didn’t think ugly had a place.”

vii.

The sudden roses filling her arms
 her biting off their petal heads, their cruel
 blooms swallowed, thorny body remains,
 and the talk—Féa’s singsong sermon—drew
 Them in. I can’t say how They heard, but They came.
 First in dribs, always drab, mousy sweaters they swam
 to her. Gals—not the usual patrons of strippers,
 the bookstore kind, chatroom lurkers, coffee sippers—
 came to the Box.

Our Narsister could not
 have known. She was not warned, moreover
 that the front where tippers usually sit had been taken over
 by the girls other girls pick on. The First Crop.
 Self-despising devotees of Féa. Grim,
 easily tricked by the thinness of their skin.

ix.

Narsister hid her go-go boots in her wig,
packed in her mouth two ivory bracelets.
Bare, save a mannequin's sliced-off face
to the Whores of Snagnylon she sallied, unwitting.
Our Narsister was ten miles of leg, crossbeam shoulders
broad to bear two milk truck boulders.
She was high arch, wide hip, tight ass, smoothskin.

*“But Original Sin was not the first baby
born, She was the first Beauty born—
Cankersore of mankind all teeth can't help but bite
run a tongue just to bite, cringe again, never sate...”*

Narsister pulled a blouse from her womb,
while the girls watched mulling with razors palmed,
how Féa came to revelate.



I imagine Narsister days later waking, wrapped
 in elastic, bandaged head-to-toe, fluorescent hospital
 light leaking through to her through the flesh-colored
 Ace unwrapping slowly away from her eyes, a voice

singsong singing to “Frère Jacques” the words:
*“It does not yet, it does not yet
 appear what, appear what,
 appear what we will be, appear what we will be,*

not a... Voice unable, unwilling to rhyme. And as the last bandage fell
 from her eyes, I feel how Narsister felt the stitches
 tighten head-to-toe along the line where razors—
 one fateful night—cut her. She opened

her eyes and who did she see, standing above her, clothed
 in a doctor’s garb, coke-bottle lenses, haloed in blue? Why, Féa...



Part Two:

**Constance, Or
Newlywed**

***“Poor heretics in love there be
Which think to ‘stablish dangerous constancy.”
-John Donne***

The Gist of it. *Bruised is interrogated by the sheriff and two deputies about his wife who has been missing for two days. He recalls his early confusions with sexuality and first marriage to Constance One. Their sex life. How that marriage failed. How ten years later he met a doctor, also named Constance who asked him to marry. Their sex life. How that Constance disappeared. He is explained how babies are made. The shocking information he receives about Constance Two. All this and more occur in sonnets unrhymed, thank god, but which, for no good reason, swap first and last lines with other sonnets in the chapter.*

3 September 1995

i.

Why his wife was missing. Why they were asking him about sex.

“Yes, once,” he said. They heard him, but asked again:

“Did you ever have sex with the missing person?”

“She’s my wife. We’ve been married nine months.”

“Didn’t ask you that,” said the Sheriff.

“Yes, I said.

Once, I said.” A deputy cleared his throat.

“No need to be embarrassed if you didn’t. We got no business nosing around, but you can tell us the truth, Bruised.”

He looked down on his thumbs. He was a grown man.

He let everybody in Pelt Valley call him Bruised.

He had all his life. It was too late to change.

Been sleeping for days. Been drugged. Needed something to drink.

He slouched. The chair nearly folded beneath him.

“You sure ‘bout that, Bruised? You really sure?”

ii.

Put that way the Sheriff’s question made Bruised unsure since he was a man who slouched, which he knew meant he was prone to self-doubt. Even facts he should have been certain about, such as who he’d had sex with and how many times, he questioned—though there’d only been two, the two he’d married, remembering their names made easier by a simple coincidence: they both were called Constance.

Seven times with the First; with the Second just once:

not a number a man, even one they called Bruised,

could boast of. Six times with Constance the First

had been in the first week of marriage;

the seventh in the final days of their one year.

Each time with her had been a gift and humiliation.

iii.

He was struggling to focus on the wife in question.
 Not the ex-wife, Bruised, think of the Constance gone missing.
 He put his palms on the table in front of him
 to push himself up but Sheriff Platte sat,
 looked him straight in the eye, said,

“There’s been developments,
 a confusing lead on Constance, which means we
 got to get a detail or two straight about
 relations with—” he swallowed hard— “your wife.”

The two deputies leaning against the wall
 chose that moment to hitch up their gunbelts.

“A lead?” Bruised looked up at them, “Have you found her?”
 A pause. The Sheriff: “Some credit card charges in your name
 led us to Vegas—”

“I don’t keep any cards—don’t believe in them—”
 He said, then blurted out, “She got me drunk.”

iv.

“Didn’t know you drank,” said the Packer deputy.
 “I don’t,” Bruised explained, “It’s against my religion.”
 “We know that, Bruised. We’re from here too.”

And they were:

Packer, Erdman, Platte. They called him Bruised. He was a grown man.
 He’d known the Sheriff since Platte was a boy
 sitting giggly by Ronnie Heller, both hiding
 their hands in Sunday School, their nails
 painted pink.

He tried to picture that, but now Platte was Sheriff,
 married to their English teacher and Bruised was a man who slouched, saying,
 “It fizzed. What she gave me. It must’ve been champagne.
 I couldn’t read the label—Russian, you know, backwards.”
 The cops’ silence in the room seem to confirm something wrong:
 “I know. I knew it was bad—not a sin-wrong, just wrong
 on account of the babies.”

“What babies?” they asked.

v.

*On account of what babies Constance Too had asked.
 Oh those how sweet of him to think of them they'd be fine.
 Yes yes he was right she was the doctor but after all a little wine...
 How silly of her sparkly couldn't harm could it just look at her basket.*

*Poof! out of nowhere full of roses pretty foil-topped bottle.
 Card what card oh that well well better let her take it.
 Present from a pastlife man's job to open she'd be sure to break it.
 Pop like a pro! no wouldn't stain had to drink it fast mustn't dawdle.*

*That a boy bottom's up now where's her shears now snip.
 Not to worry roses edible freshen breath rest of the twelve to scatter.
 Not smoke incense for atmosphere what's a honeymoon without a trip.
 'Course! hadn't married for that but wifely duty how couldn't it matter.
 Twins? what those? no bigger than dots they wouldn't mind.
 Then again, she came to think of it, better take her from behind.*

vi.

Some minds in times of crisis
 go clear as glass and sure as science.
 Bruised's mother, for instance, was a wreck
 three sixty four of three sixty five,
 but given that day the world caves in,
 the woman could command an Apollo Rocket.
 He had a hospital job, was not a fool, yet when trouble hit, his brains
 recalled the inconsequential.

That fizz

for example, telling about it made him think of the first
 time he tasted Cokecola: *Ten years old
 on a visit Home (the capital H word
 reserved for his Mother's Enoch, Tex.),
 his cousin Debra coaxing a thin-waisted
 bottle to his lips saying, "Drink, it ain't a sin."*

vii.

*Uncapped the sodapop leaped, it teased
the tip of his nose, sneaked past the purse
of his lips before he could open to protest.*

*He heard his own mother's mouth surrender:
a couple of hours under Texas Gulf heat
her practiced Speech and Drama vowels
had melted into a sweet mash of sound,
had her y'alling and drawling gossip with her kin.*

*Where they lived in his dad's hometown, she spoke
their language. Hard and tooth-cracking cold
as the Wyoming water his father drank straight,
mouth to the tap. Keep from dirtying a glass.
But Texas was that Cokebottle puckered shut just to keep
ten brown, southern swallows from jumping to his tongue.*

viii.

*"Started stepping out," he heard his aunt say.
Then his mother: "In trouble? Five months already?"*

*Debra spoke low, "This girl we know. Has to get married."
They weren't supposed to be listening. "Pregnant,"
Debra whispered, but her ten-year old cousin was confused.
"A year older than me and you don't know Birds and Bees?"*

He barely got Cokecola. He'd better ask his daddy.

*But back in Wyoming, he asked his Mother, who sent
in Daddy, who sat silent the side of his bed.
"Even though people look better. With their clothes on,"
he began, "Someday you might want to see somebody else.
Without theirs. On. And if you're married. Then it's okay.
Understand?" At which Mother barged in, sent Daddy back out,
then read him reverently, You were Smaller than a Dot.*

ix.

What any of it had to do with Cokecola
was still mixed up in his mind because here he was
nearly forty, a grown man who'd misplaced his wife
still thinking about it—

or had he been speaking?

He was slouching so low his nose nearly touched
the table and he didn't even know what he'd said
aloud or just in his head and it was probably too late
he was probably humped already like old Helen Modell.

"Hello...Bruised? You there?" the bigger deputy, Erdman, broke through.
The younger one, Packer, asked, "You want something to drink? You eaten
since all this started?" Been sleeping for days on end. Had he eaten?
He said "Hawaiian Punch, please," though it wasn't what he wanted.
Left alone with the Sheriff, the light and the inconsequential were too bright,
and out of it came, "Was this where you brought those two boys?"

x.

"What..? Don't know what you mean," Platte answered with a face that
let Bruised know he had not liked the question.

"Those Lovebite boys," Bruised said, "the ones who cut that girl's br—
wore them to the bar on their boots like trophies."

"Oh, those boys! I thought... Wasn't working here then. Heck, must've been
twenty years, was a kid, we both were, Bruised.
Besides they're rotting in the Rawlins' Pen. Why're you worrying about...
Hey, now. We'll straighten this out. It'll all be okay."

Just some line learned in Sheriff Sensitivity School,
but to Bruised it said: you're too harmless to suspect, it said,
something bad has happened and something bad
is about to happen because you are about
to cry and not about the Bad Thing at Hand,
but a Long-Lost Bad, namely, Constance One:

xi.

*Maybe the flavor came from cane sugar or spice,
that or Mexican jumping beans, he joked. Constance One said, "No tricks
it's just old-fashioned and still laced with cocaine." That Saturday
in the city had been his idea, a last ditch
attempt to save them. Stupid to have thought
that mole (the chocolate kind) from a café across the tracks,
that imported Cokes he found them (in real bottles)
could solve things. (Nothing would.) They finished the bottles,
for no good reason, sitting cold on the curb. The tracks
winter leaves when it leaves at their feet. He thought
it did taste different than regular. Did she? They ditched
the city for the three-hour ride home. A Saturday
just like regular couples, they'd have sex, he'd know the tricks.
She'd come even. Tasting cane sugar and spice.*

xii.

*When the Long-Lost Bad, namely, Constance One,
left him anyway, it was a day shy of their first year.
A couple of her buddies from the regional hospital loaded her
things—all of them—in a truck. "You don't
have to take it all now," he managed to say.*

*"We don't need to talk this out," she said scanning
the bedroom a last time, "Nothing in here," she shouted, then,
"Let's just say we gave it our best shot, Bruised, what d'you think?"*

*Remembering it, he could imagine the fool
he must've looked, standing there, middle of the floor—
twisted like a cedar on the Dugway, clinging
to Wyoming rock—his eyes fixed on a makeshift
vase, its label in Spanish, the carnation still in bloom...*

"Don't—I know what you mean," Platte said with a face.

xiii.

And out of Platte came, “This was where they brought them boys—the Lovebite ones, I mean, probably was this very room.”

“What boys?” Bruised asked bawling and snorting, at which Platte went out mumbling something about Kleenex.

Minutes later the Packer deputy came back alone bearing tissues and Hawaiian Punch. He twirled a chair around and sat backwards by Bruised’s side saying:

“Let’s us have some one-on-one. What ya’ say? Gotta imagine me wearing a different sorta badge though—ecclesiastical. Since your folks are in my ward, by adoption, I’m kinda your Priesthood leader.”

At which the deputy, as Servant of the Lord, produced pad and pencil and began crudely to sketch the human anatomies to make clear, it seemed, how none of it had anything to do with Cokecola.

xiv.

Feeling smaller than a dot, Bruised paid reverent attention while the man known most weekdays as Sergeant Boyd now turned Bishop Boyd F. Packer of the Pelt Valley 2nd Ward of the Only True and Living Church on the Face of the Earth

expounded the Mysteries of Human Intimacy in N° 2 Pencil. And he talked as he doodled, saying: “Platte and Erdman out there don’t believe you’re as innocent as all that, (see the drawing, now, you and me got a set of these) but I told them, I said, considering the kind

of people you come from, (for the gals, I’m no artist, but it’s something like this) by kinda people I meant, the kinda tithe-paying, recommend-holding members your folks are, we should not, I told them, (see, us guys work our business in a gal’s business like so...) should not barrel in assuming worst kinda dirt, the guy might just not know, (then us guys are wham!) and considering what your mom says about that first Constance stepping out...

xv.

Bruised could swallow no longer the ten-mile brownstreak of filth that jumped off his tongue. Left, north, right and south, he cursed. Seemed he knew just what the Bishop and his mother had between their legs.

“Take my wife,”

the unflappable Bishop continued, “Why, Sister Packer our wedding night didn’t know what hit her.

‘You were raised on a ranch,’ I said, ‘never seen an animal get wood? What she think was between us at Stake dances, a cattle prod?’”

The ram-eyed glare of a husband wronged shut up what profanity could not. The Bishop stopped. He pushed a Kleenex back in the box.

“So what you’re telling me is that you effed that second... ‘wife’ a yours?”

Get in here, you two,” he shouted at the door. “We got trouble.” Bruised uncapped his flat red sodapop and sneezed.

xvi.

*“It does not yet appear what we shall be”
came a voice. “Beg pardon? Were you talking to me?”
“I said what’ll it be, pardner?” It came again askance,
its accent unplaceable. It came attached
to a labcoat, the end of a stethoscope dangled
from its waist pocket. Doctors don’t usually talk
to technicians, not in breakrooms, especially to ones who slouch.*

*He made his choice from vending and sat on a couch.
But the labcoat followed. She wants to mock
me, he thought. She sat. Coke-bottle lenses, facing him at an angle.
“Dr. Stoika,” she held out a hand, “but I didn’t catch
your name. You don’t say, what a pleasure, call me Constance...”*

“Three days after we met,” Bruised explained to them, “she asked me to marry.”
“Thought you said you didn’t drink,” said the Erdman deputy.

xvii.

“She got me drunk,” Bruised blurted back. “but that was later.”
 “You moved right? Living in the city then?”

“Yeah, working at Primary Children’s.”

The Sheriff said, “She never worked there.” But Bruised kept on:
 “We ended up in the breakroom at the same time again.”

“May I ask you something importunate?” She asked how old.

He told her. “And how many years since she left you?”

“Ten—but how do you know about that?”

“Tell me,” she continued, an uncut kindness in her eyes,

“How does one live to thirty nine and accomplish so little?”

He knew the answer right away and he gave it:

“You get up each morning and do what you’re supposed to.”

“Exactly. Time for the change. Do something for once you’re not supposed to:

Marry me, I’m in trouble. A husband is needed—you be him.”

Thus with little struggle, Constance Two became the Wife in Question...

xviii.

He raised his punch to his lips saying, “Drink it ain’t a sin,”
 but it was certain it was all outloud now. No doubt now
 ‘cause the Sheriff was saying something about there being
 no records of any Stoika, doctor or otherwise,

and the Bishop deputy was interrupting saying, don’t
 you hear, I believe him, he thought she was pregnant
 and the Erdman deputy was going cut the crap
 let’s tell the poor mo-fo what we know gosh already.

“I do know. It has to be about the babies. I couldn’t
 ask, and she never talked about them, just how there were two
 little problems and how she didn’t want to have to get rid
 of them, then how maybe it’d be better, so I bought bassinets
 to show her. Sorry I’m not making a good show of myself.
 My mind’s no good in times of crisis.”

xix.

“Giving gifts to the first one was just humiliation,
with this Constance, though, seemed every little thing I did nice
was like nobody’d ever. I didn’t know her, but she was so
sick mornings all those months who couldn’t help but—“
But somebody in the room was bent on stopping him,

“Dude—

there was no pregnancy, no babies, no morning whatever.”

“When she started to show—“

“Show what, dude, beergut?”

“Shut it, Erdman. Maybe Vegas screwed up.

Get out there and get them back on the phone—and wash your mouth.”

“Was it growing?” the Bishop asked, “Did you see her naked?”

“It was dark. I wanted to feel them kick. She’d said I couldn’t.
Night after I painted their room yellow I touched
the belly in her sleep, didn’t expect it hard and muscular.”
Yet putting it that way made Bruised question,

xx

.it made him remember taking her that one time from behind
it made him remember wanting her some nights in the bed
her back to him all night spine curved fetal the weight
and heat of her on the mattress as she clung to the wall

it made him remember how he dreamed the night she vanished
dreamed he spooned himself to her in sleep hungry for touch
a mother’s voice (or was it his) singing in his ear a fragment
when I awoke dear when I awoke dear when I awoke dear

when he awoke (or was he mistaken) he turned to see
her he pulled back the comforter too warm for them both
but beneath that was

a quilt and beneath that

a blanket and beneath that

all the blankets he had ever slept under,

but no wife,

just a strip of paper and written in her foreign hand the words,
“It does not yet appear what We shall be.”

xxi.

“What did Vegas say, Erdman? Are they sure?”

“Sure as sunrise.

Where was your Dr. Stoika s’posed to come from, Bruised?

Russia, right? Yeah, that’s a good one. Which city? Juarez?

Does the name Felix Espiritu ring a bell? Felisa Valdez, maybe?

No? or should we try on the other half dozen or so

names—‘cept most of the forty cards were in yours, Bruisey-boy—”

“Proves nothing, deputy,” Bishop Packer said.

“No shit, Fudgepack. Seems I also talked with the one did the stripsearch. Not much of a looker, according to him.”

Bruised couldn’t really make any of it out, seemed like he heard don’t that beat all don’t know asshole from vagina do you know a lawyer and Packer get his Dad over here and Dude you married a dude Hang on there bud...

He didn’t understand why they’d be saying these things to him, why his wife was missing why they were asking him about sex.



By the time the plastic surgeons came, Narsister had joined them. “Don’t touch the face,” she said. She stopped them mid-explanation. “Got it. Scars.

Tissue. Get out and take your vile Vitamin E with you.” Then the NYPD waltzed back in, told her again press charges, told her Ms. Villaine

had disappeared, asked her again describe her attackers. She nearly howled with laughter. The detectives backed from the hospital bed and leaving the room nearly stumbled

on what they looked for but couldn’t see: the cardigan-covered Féans on guard, manning Narsister’s walls.



Part Three:

Constance, Or
Nightstaff

***“And the hostile power comes—and the waiting dead
wake to go searching for their unhappy tombs...” -Dante***

Taken from the Diary of Beatrice, Wife of the Sheriff

The Gist of It. *We are officially introduced to our narrator prior to her becoming the Mouthpiece of Féa. She speaks in terza rima sonnets. In short, she rhymes a lot or when she gets lazy, just repeats a word. Beatrice works nights at the front desk of a motel. We learn about this job. How her earliest memory, her grandfather's death, is tied to a motel. Why motels hold a fascination for her. She reminisces about motels and her father. His sadness and failures.*

Day One: Saturday, 26 August 1995

i

When I have scrubbed the last of them as white
 as one could ever hope of porcelain
 barraged by decades of hardwater, shit
 and piss, when base and floor are freed of stains
 gunslingers leave who will not aim to pee,
 I take the paper band on which it's written:
 "Our Toil's your Sanitation—Guaranteed"
 and seal in holy union seat to lid.

This ritual satisfies a certain need.
 The owner, Shel, found out, but I'm not the maid.
 By 5 most guests are on the rigs, by 8,
 I'm done. Shel changed the sign for how I cleaned:
 "The Pelt View Motor Lodge Air Weekly Rates
 Cleanest Commodes in the Equality State."

ii

I must admit already I've been false.
 (No, not the sign. There on the intersection,
 Shel's praise hangs on in the West Wind.) The lie's
 those strips—"Sanitized for Your Protection"—
 is what they really read. I ought to send
 Hotel Supply Inc. a copy of my version,
 'cause, where's the play in theirs? Motels can lend
 themselves to tawdriness quite well without
 suggesting management is forced to fend
 off pestilence from bowl, tank, tile and grout.

Hear that Hotel Supply Inc? And just who
 am I? Well, I'm some menopausal goat
 who does a maid's work she's not hired to do,
 who gets a perverse pleasure cleaning poo.

iii.

That's false too—rather, it's reductive. I
 am more than my love for the toilet brush.
 I sleep, have feelings, interests: I sigh
 quite apropos of naught, I pause my brush
 in hand, exhale a tone that might surprise;
 an unwarned passerby might think my brush
 has wronged me somehow. Anyone who's wise
 to me knows that my sighs free nothing, mean
 no harm, that moans are just a magpie's cry,
 that I'm no maid, I'm paid to watch, I clean
 to pass the hours before it's time to quit.

Then I come here just to unwind and lean
 against John's Bar, to write and breathe a bit
 a cigarette I keep downwind and lit.

iv.

Motels first got me hooked on nicotine.
 In childhood, family trips were funerals,
 but death's no cause to imposition kin—
 my father thought—and splurged on cheap motels.

My earliest memories are linked to one of these.
 The corpse: a Colonel Sanders' white, the hole
 my childhood fancy sawed straight through his chest
 to make the grown-up talk of cancer make
 some cartoon sense; the welcome rest the wheezing
 air conditioner gave; round ice to slake
 heat (my hometown—8,000 feet above
 the sea—could never reach); the plastic drapes
 the plastic sealed plastic cups, soap by Dove,
 the smell of others' smoke I'd come to love.

v.

I swear there wasn't anything inside
 a motel room my father didn't feel
 obliged to use: each towel, each rag, the bedside
 stationery (which, since taking's stealing,
 we had to use right there. We'd sit and scribble
 family letters, ivory papered, sealed—
 Best, Budget, HoJo, 6 or 8). The thimble-
 sized bottles of lotion he would rub
 with chapped hands on mine unworn. In dribbles,
 a coffeepot brewed complimentary cups
 he didn't drink, but whiffing's not a sin.
 He'd count to forty twice as we would nap
 on both sides of both double beds, then grin,
 say, "Better get our money's worth and swim."

vi.

I know that Granddad's body wasn't there
 inside the room with us—still memory likes
 it between the beds not outside where
 Arizona'd burn him crisp, just like
 bacon in heat like that, locked in a coffin,
 that's why my father left the state: he liked
 his desolation cold, his desert frozen.
 "A body in Wyoming ground can keep—
 like wooly mammoths or Walt Disney in
 his Snow White, glassed-in cryogenic sleep—
 till doomsday, save the Lord of Hosts on labor."

My memory re-writes that speech in the deep
 end of a motel's pool, not the belabored
 hundred times he said it for the neighbors.

vii.

But that's a fifty-year old's mind that stuffs
 itself still in that toddler's swimming suit,
 that splays those limbs night-skyward, taking puffs
 of air between Dad's chlorinated squirts:
 "See, Bea: my fist's a whale. My fist's its body.
 A whale spouts—whoops!" His daisy printed suit
 balloons around the cradle he makes his body,
 barrier between a daughter and a water's
 death. I'm 50 now. I know his body
 was buoyed that day, the deadweight off his shoulders.
 His white old man gone. Only memory cleaves,
 once children swim outside their Water
 Wings (*Age 2 to 3 years: Never Leave
 a Child Unattended. Never Leave...*)

viii.

Today I wish I'd power to confine
 all Father's memory to that motel pool.
 And not: him working graveyards at the mines;
 his days spent sitting on a kitchen stool;
 a glass of bourbon (just for whiffing) placed
 beside some engineering text; some rule
 of physics always fleeing his embrace—
 even at arm's length, drug store glasses perched
 at the tip of his nose; the stiff-boned grace
 his c-shaped back would take before he'd lurch
 back up away from sleep; the baleful look
 he'd give when need for bed outweighed his search.
 He knew that he was beaten by that book,
 despite its spine he broke, the pains he took.

The Gist of It. *Beatrice mentions what she neglected to yesterday, namely: Bruised is now staying at her motel. This strikes her odd, since his family lives right in Pelt Valley. We begin to hear the story of how she married the man who would be sheriff. Bruised's arrival reinvigorates questions about his parentage. The motel is laid out for us. The relationship between its 13th and 14th rooms. A sexual fetish is alluded to. Beatrice spies on Bruised. What she sees. Beatrice looks in Bruised's car. What she discovers there.*

Day Two: Sunday, 27 August 1995

i.

I realize that I forgot to say
 what's made my mind fix on my father so:
 that Rasmussen kid, Bruised, came yesterday,
 or rather, yesternight. I did not go
 and call him Bruised straight to his face. I say,

"Hello." And he says, "Mrs. Platte." "Please. No.
 Don't call me that. You call me Bea," I say,
 "What brings you here this time of night?" He needs
 a room, he says. He needs a double bed.
 "Motel beds don't come single. You got
 a credit card," I ask. No, doesn't have
 cards. Cash? Could he pay cash for the whole week?
 he asks. Pays plus deposit, doesn't have
 the nerve to look me eye-on. Never did have.

ii.

I can't remember the last time I saw
 the kid or any one time he stood out.
 That's by design, his blending in. I saw
 in all my years of teaching how kids shout,
 in every way there is, cry out: "Right Here.
 See. See? How smart, dumb, ugly, pretty? How
 dumbfoundingly dumbfounded cool we are?"

So praise, rage, clap or slap them with attention—
 The reader's known a teen or two, I'm sure,
 but may have missed my favorite class. Attention's
 their obsession too, but these abhor
 it. Never fail. Never excel. Attention
 must not be paid. Memories of this class blur:
 they smudge away all marks of who they were.

iii.

The genus, Please-don't-notice-us, includes
 Whatever-his-real-name-is Rasmussen.
 While most are species wily enough to elude
 nicknames like Bruised, I'd bet that no one in
 Pelt Valley knows just how the alias came
 to weigh his shoulders down. His posture's none
 too stellar, still he shrugged all but the name
 away. Such is the Unsung Zeroes' gift.
 Note: Even I, who track his kind, like game,
 who save a room for them, cannot unsift
 a single recalled grain about the boy...

Except his face, that he was once my student.
 Except his chin which miffs me with the cloy-
 ing notion that my father sired the boy.

iv.

The picture's further complicated by
 the fact that he's the same age as the Sheriff.
 R-Rasmussen must have been seated by
 P-Platte, my not-yet husband, would-be sheriff
 disguised in a Future Farmers of the U.S.
 baseball cap. Of course, I missed Bruised with
 a Platte, (docker of rams, lamber of ewes,)
 blocking my line of vision. I, the teacher,
 deluded Future Housewife of the U.S,
 mistaking mother hunger in a senior's
 eyes for lust it was until—it wasn't.

An eighteen year-old boy, nine years my junior,
 the papers made him out a child—He wasn't.
 And I—some nympho. Well, not like that I wasn't.

v.

For if they all could know how little sex
 their Sexcat née Ms. Schoolmarm Fantasy
 would ever have...Aw, heck, must let the sex-
 starved minds in Pelt indulge a bit. How many
 weekends viewing before they've watched the whole
 Sounds Easy Video Store?

They fantasize
 that I stopped teaching when I seduced "ole"
 Sheriff Platte, forget ten years their brats
 ignored my Nile of red on their dumb ole'
 English papers *after* we came back,
 when the town dared hire him as cop and dared
 to trust its young again to Beatrice Platte,
 who ten years later gave it up to stare
 at unsuspecting Pelt View guests. *Mon frère?*

vi.

I hand Frère Bruised the key to N° 14.
 He's all alone, like me. He's out the door.
 I see his brake lights inch to N° 14's
 slot. I feel some twinge about that door,
 the farthest from the office, near the gate,
 reserved for motel patrons I find more
 deserving my attention, which now breaks
 down on the implausible: A Pinto wagon?
 Ford Motors' answer to the paper plate?
 Stopped making them twelve years ago, I reckon,
 and his still running. Quiet too. He shuts
 it off. It's dark. I hear the wagon's
 slamming door, another door is shut.
 I strain my ears, but 14 closes hush.

vii.

And Gosh darn 14 for it. I've applied
 corrosives just to make its hinges creak.
 I've tried salt water, citric acids, lye,
 dripped Karo Syrup down the jamb. (No squeak,
 just flies.) I searched 13, suspecting Shel,
 of maintenance, thought maybe he had sneaked
 my WD-40.

Thank goodness Shel
 deferred to common superstition and made
 13 unrentable, a junk room catch-all
 for supplies, for worn-out furniture laid
 aside for charity by things still new:
 a queen-sized mattress (sealed, sateen) is made
 to age beside stained beds folded like traps.
 There where two walls ought to meet: my gap.

viii.

Before my eyes adjust to dark, the smells
 of 14 come through that chink in the wall.
 When someone's new, I can't discern their smell
 above the scent of someone gone: the gentle
 highway contractor who lasted four days,
 chain-smoking, sleepless by the phone, his Menthol
 Mediums stronger than he was. Four days
 have passed since he left and I smell them still,
 I think how that stench will be gone in days,
 how I'll miss Newports and I'm particular
 for a second-hand smoker...

Then I catch
 a whiff of *Eau de Something or Other*.
 14 is darker than its usual watch.
 I make out something but I'm not sure what.

ix.

In 14, what's to see should be distinct:
 Lord knows: I have a vantage on the bed.
 I see—but it's too dark—*two* figures linked.

If motel rooms were sentences, the bed
 would be the verb, (voice—active/passive; tense—
 past/now/soon). But 14's distinct: it's bed
 is turned, this twist makes all the difference,
 (if not in action, at least in how it's lit),
 its present/not now/then is spread out tense
 as hospital cornered muslin, headboard sit-
 uated in the window's streetlight glare.
 On dark nights, curtain drawn, its bed is lit.

But eye pressed in the wall, I see no glare.
 Into a nearly pitchblack room I stare.

x.

And still I think I see *two* figures linked.
 But I am just an eye inside the wall;
 Bruised is alone, the eye insists; it thinks
 that it can will some facts away. The gall
 and rancor I clench back boils up. A sigh
 escapes my mouth. Soiled. Old. Profound. A wall
 of stone could hardly mute my envious "Aye!"

But envy? Why? I sleep days when the Sheriff's
 body's nothing but the reason why
 the bed's unmade. This is my choice. The Sheriff
 wants, quote unquote, to reform. I don't.
 I don't see why. I told the Sheriff if
 he would not let me see the man I know
 take pleasure, I would watch the men I don't.

xi.

I've digressed. Oh, where did I leave off? Yes,
 I sighed... But luckily the clanky fan
 inside 14 was switched on high. (Excessive
 for this higher-than-a-mile waste, even on
 the warmest night this summer's bound to muster.)
 I hear a flap of fabric against the fan,
 then something falls. The streetlight's orange luster
 bathes the room. A blanket hung to block
 the light has fallen.

Bruised spoons a bolster,
 no body. Bunch of pillows made to look
 as if they were a body laid beneath
 my (dare I say it) brother's wing. The crook
 of his Bruised body curled around a cheat:
 a lover's warmth without the breath and beat.

xii.

Six thousand seven hundred and one feet
 above the sea, our semi-arid sky
 is empty. So day comes not by degree—
 no rosy-fingered harbinger in sky
 that empty—just a toenail small, a crescent
 thin, then the charcoal scrawled horizon's scythed
 by fire.

Outside the dawn is hardly nascent.
 It's dark still. I peer in the Pinto's windshield.
 The glass had gravel pits like moons in crescent.
 I hear gravel crunch behind me. The wind builds.
 I almost turn—that crunch of feet again—
 but lo: when morning's first light hits the windshield,
 I see. The Pinto's filled with baby things.
 Jam-packed with yellow pairs of baby things.

The Gist of It. *Beatrice is seen in broad daylight and at Church for that matter. How a failed attempt at reconnaissance led to this. How she may have been overheard in John's, but pays no attention. She recalls more about her father. How a spinster aunt was sent to take care of Bea as a child. We attend a service of the Only True and Living Church on the Face of the Earth and encounter an acquaintance we made during Bruised's interrogation. Beatrice hears someone she thinks is Bruised vomiting.*

Day Three: Monday, 28 August 1995

i.

I don't have a thing of use to report.
I don't know what goes on in town and that's
no accident. Now I've had to resort
to being seen in daylight by the Pelters,
to try to get a bead on what the hell
is going on with Bruised. Why he's in Pelt
and at our fleabag when he might as well
be staying with his folks is one question.

Then there's the pesky doubt of who the hell
his father is. Never you mind the question
why he drives packed to his tin-can gills
with baby goods in duplicate. I question
too: why care? Why I (I must be ill)
should need a local boy again for thrills.

ii.

This meddling locally defies an oath
I swore when we came back—when Platte insisted
we return—back to this place I loathe.
The years we spent away (at my insistence)
failed to yield objectives, which the teacher
in me set. A young man must resist,
and he was young. He learned vice Freedom teaches
but not the vice of liberated thought.
He blamed himself first, then he blamed the teacher,
and then he blamed the city where I brought him.
His city sins fed on a city's fast-
paced life, its warmth, its rot—or so he thought.

We ran away from Trouble, but alas,
Our Troubles' legs are long, our Troubles—fast.

iii.

I foresaw my repentant spouse's fall
 back out of grace, but finally constrained
 my own indulgences within the walls
 of Pelt View Motor Lodge. A guest's complaint
 about a spying clerk's the worst I risk.
 It's creepy, yes, but it would be insane
 to turn my eye on townies, run the risk
 of knowing all that I could know. For soon
 or late, I'd care and that's too great a risk.

If only Pelt, the Town, had its own 12 noon
 check-out time, I wouldn't have this search,
 would not have to confess last afternoon
 I did a shameful thing: put on a skirt,
 then went and let myself be seen at Church.

iv.

I'll now attempt to reconstruct the chain
 of acts that ended with my darkening
 a chapel's door: I leave work, drive down Main
 the four blocks to John's Bar. Clouds darkening
 the sky forbode a day of rain, (although
 it never rains in Southwest Wyoming
 it only blows). I sit, I grunt at Bo,
 the owner of John's Bar whose name's not John.
 I sit to write like every day while Bo
 smokes Dunhill Lights for me. When I have done
 my writing, I think Bo, hardly the soul
 of discretion, might just have some dirt on
 Bruised. Bo might not know a thing about soul
 who goes to Church, still I give it a roll.

v.

“Which Bruised?” Bo asks, “Butch’s boy?” “You know another?”
 “What there to know?” “Don’t his folks live next door?”
 Bo looks outside the window, says, “Know his mother’s
 a crazy cuss.”

(His mother at our door;
 her voice’s crisp intensity; my dad’s
 pleas pushing her outside; our closing door:
 the memory floods in—that woman, my dad.)

John’s Bar’s windows are cut like poker suits:
 heart, diamond, club. The house Bruised’s dad
 built is seen through the spade. Its A-frame roof,
 its attic window where I swear I see—
 Her, hair dyed black as spades to hide the roots,
 her face caked Snow-White pale. “Other day she
 was carrying on,” says Bo, “like some banshee.”

vi.

“Bout what?” I ask.

“Who knows? Ain’t it enough
 I hear her all the way in here? Expect
 I write her words down too? That Butch is tough
 or just too goddamn nice. I’d a wrung her neck
 a dozen times already. Rather rot my life
 away in the State Pen or die lethal inject
 before I’d spend a day with her as wife.”

“Maybe their boy, Bruised, feels like you.” I say.
 “He’s sleeping in the motel. Been two nights.”

“Why’d he do that? His folks right down the way?”

“Don’t know. I thought you might. You seen him round?”

“Naw, but you have. Ask him yourself.”

I say,
 “Not seen him since he came. Hasn’t made a sound,
 it’s like he’s drugged in there or gagged or bound.”

vii.

I stop myself, look up, surprised to find that Bo
 is serving someone who’d come in, somehow
 I hadn’t heard.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“Don’t know,”
says Shel, watching the guy. The guy’s head’s bowed:
Busch Beer cap, glasses, covered face.

“What’s wrong?”
Shel asks, “Been years you ain’t said ten words now
you spying on folks, Bea?”

“There something wrong
with someone curious?”

“No—not unless
that someone’s you,” Bo says. “It’s been this long
what use is there in caring now.”

“Who says
I care? Not doing that just asking. Bored.”
“And here I thought that shit, that scribbled mess
you write is all you need.”

I say, “Good Lord,
stop with the questions, Bo. I’ll be ignored.”

viii.

So he ignores me. Starts talking ‘bout Bruised.
Not seen much of him, not since the divorce.
“Divorce?” I ask. “Who got divorced?”

“Got used
that boy did, gullible as cuss. Been worse
if she’d a stayed with him, I’ll give her that.”

“Who’s that you mean?” I ask.

“Well, Bruised, a course.”

“You saying Bruised got married?”

“Don’t you got
to ‘fore they’ll let you get divorced?”

“When? Recent?”

“Is ten years recent to you, Beatrice Platte?”

“Not good at here and now,” I say.

“Indecent,”

Bo says, “what she pulled. Heard tell she screwed
some guy in Bruised’s own bed. A whore that’s decent
would rent a room. A looker once, now you’d
not know her—all that booze and food and dudes.”

ix.

I ask Bo who.

“That Rasmussen kid’s ex,
 Connie they call her. At the Legion Hall
 I seen her year or more ago, all sexed
 up, hips big as a doublewide, her sprawled
 out on the bar.”

“Get back to Bruised, please, Bo.”

“Hell, Bea, do I look like I know fuckall
 about some Churchgoer?”

I assure him no.

“Some Southern Baptist least’ll sip a beer,
 not that Church. Even tea or coffee? No.”

“Think Bruised remarried?”

“Him? Always feared
 his shadow? How he married once beats me.
 Been living out a state is all I hear.”

The idea hits me.

“Where you headed, Bea?”

“Going to Church, Bo. Been an eternity.”

x.

I wasn’t fool enough to ask which ward
 the Rasmussens are in. Bo might’ve known,
 but he’d have made some joke about a ward,
 the kind Non-Members make though it’s well known
 a “ward’s” the Members’ term that stands for parish.
 (Tired jabs about the mentally sick they’d own
 as long as they do not seem Catholic.)

The Church connived a Sunday schedule such
 that one building makes do for four whole wards
 (perish the thought they waste that Quonset hut).

The Rasmussens’ car parked down the block; **STILL NOT SURE ABOUT
 THESE LINES**

Their ward’s not started yet. I knew that as much.
 I went home. Two hours later, donned in frock,
 I walked into the chapel. There was shock...

xi.

Been forty years since last I set my feet
inside the Church. A little less than forty.
It must have been one of the final weeks
my father lived. Yes, '56. Good Lord.

The old brick church still stood near the lodgepole pines
the settlers nursed from saplings. Struggling for
a hundred years, they reached the powerlines.
The day they did, Rural Electric felled them.
Nothing in town was taller at than those pines,
except the two-storied church house (now felled too).

Upstairs was a glassed space they called the Cry Room.
Dad took me there that Sunday and I felt him
cling like a baby taken there to cry.
The choir sang through the glass. Too soon to cry.

vii.

I recollect the face of Great Aunt Weary
staring back and up at us, mouth smirched
with disapproval.

We inherited Weary—
worn out little from the years she nursed
my Colonel Sanders Grandpa. As he died,
he sent her to his son. He knew it'd irk
my father who'd refused to take a bride,
refused to hand me over. Widowed men
could not raise kids, not even daughters. Tried
to take me. Said they'd give me back to him
when I could clean & cook. Be of some use.

He worried awful what they thought of him.
But little did they think what he could lose
in losing me, his one and only use.

xiii.

She didn't come at once, my old maid aunt.
 And she wasn't really "Weary." I called
 her that once I found out what "Leah" meant
 from the Bible Concordance. Me—she called
 Precocious—not for knowing how to use
 the Scriptures (I was in the 2nd Grade:
 that was expected). No, that I had used
 Roget's and quite a bit of irony
 for "Weary," (not the Bible's plain old "tired"):
 This was evidence. Plain and simple, she
 should have come soon as "Pa-Pa" died, not years
 later after Dad had made his last excuse,
 when troubling rumors reached the family's ears,
 when her grandniece had aged well past her years.

xiv.

She'd no idea just how much I'd age
 and soon, and how little avail her tireless
 efforts would prove in turning back the page.
 Despite—or rather in spite of the countless
 hours she'd spend schooling me in God, I would
 hold out four stubborn decades from the boundless
 lure of Church.

Did Weary watch this broad
 go back? The building's new, has just one floor,
 no Cry Room now. Was Weary up with God
 glassed in some heavenly room, watching the door
 rear of the chapel open to reveal
 her grandniece thinking folks were shocked by her?

When, I walk in the place is hushed and still.
 I feel a reverence much against my will.

xv.

The crowd seems dazed. But it's not me. I swear
the air inside is blue. Numberless newborns
in the ward are silent. All eyes stare
at the podium standing empty, forlorn.

Someone's just finished speaking. On the stand's
a stranger. Thick lenses. Scarved. She's bald or shorn.
Some cancer victim, probably, brought in to stand
up there. Make grownups cry. Scare babies. Bruised's
folks must not care for schmaltz: they both stand up
walk down the aisle to leave. No sign of Bruised.

His mom stares right through me. His "dad" looks back
as if to question why I'm there. That loser
Boyd—one of my husband's sidekicks—Packer
gets up to close what they call Sacrament.

xvi.

Boyd fastens up his suit across his weight.
The suit's tight-hipped, bell-bottomed, blue robin's egg,
three-part survivor of the disco age.

"It humbles me," the man begins. His leg
strains it pastel, polyester cage.
"Yes, humbles me to serve you. And I beg
our Heavenly Father each and every day
to help me magnify my calling—Bishop..."

I cannot hear a word of what he's saying.
I can't believe they made that wag a Bishop,
or that they couldn't have come up with something
else like Warden or Chief Loonie. The slop
goes on. He won't shut up his blathered, phony
King James *thou* and *thee*-ing "testimony."

xvii.

“That whosoever will may lay hold on
the word of God. It’s quick and powerful
which shall divide asunder all the cunning
and the wiles and the snares of the devil.’
This sister we’ve been privileged to’ve heard
this day’s a witness of the power of
The Most Correct of Any Book on Earth.
That’s all folks. Name-a-jesus-christ-amen.”

A chorister motions the obedient herd,
to rise. An organ plays. The tune sounds like
the Nazis’ *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles*,
only their words are “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken
Zion City of our God.” I laugh.
But laughing too is that sister in her scarf.

xviii.

Needless to say: got nothing out of Church.
But then again, Bea, what did you expect?
That Bruised would join his folks for worship?
He’s not staying with them, Bea, and you expect
to catch him wedged between them in a pew?
Ma, Bruised and Pa lined up while you inspect
them? Eyes shut tight in prayer, no doubt, while you
conduct a point-by-point comparison
of facial features? Keep count, one trait too few
for Rasmussen and...Proved: Not His Son?

But all I got was one mean stare from Butch.
No gossip even. Folks went on and on,
“A Miracle!” (just what I couldn’t catch).
“That Constance sure is something,” caught that much.

xix.

On little sleep I go and start my shift.
 I man the check-in desk, Hotel Supply
 Inc. order form before me, eyes kept fixed
 on Bruised's dark window. Midnight, want my
 8 a.m. second-hand smoke now. Slim chance
 of seeing aught, but then at 3 I try.
 I also check his car: not budged an inch,
 the gravel tracks the same. I think, hey, look,
 he might be dead.

That's when I hear a retch—
 the failsafe sign of life that's known as puke.
 Another retch. A pause. A light flips on.
 Soft voice. A Roman Banquet gush of puke.
 Soft voice. A mothering male tone drones on.
 He soothes himself. The light's no longer on.

xx.

I need distraction. Back at the desk I find
 this week's *Pelt Valley Mirror*. There I read
 "The Darndest Thing: a Weekly Column," mind
 already numb. The column's darndest lead's
 been circled in crayon:

Go West Young Cult!
North Omaha. Authorities agreed
to drop charges against a group resulting
from an encampment in a cemetery.
This cult of women came there to "consult
the dead" about their missing leader. Varied
reports claimed that the "Cult of Ugly" had received
"a sign" their "prophetess was in the prairie."
Police escorted them west...

How naïve
 most readers are! What lies they will believe!

The Gist Of It. *Beatrice skips work. She goes on a car chase. She nearly dies. How this reminds her of the last time she nearly died. How "Crime and Punishment" enamored a student. How "Lolita" and bad driving got that student into bed. In other words, how a certain Eastern European nation's Literature was misused by Beatrice at the beginning of a relationship. Back in the present tense, the car chase continues. How said chase leads her to a sordid business establishment. What and whom she sees inside said establishment. How a busload of women arrive at the moment Beatrice receives a surprising gift. In short, Beatrice has a very long night.*

Day Four: Tuesday, 29 August 1995

i.

I'm rounding Main, headed for the motel,
about to pull into the Pelt View, when
I spot a Pinto's taillights. (There's no telling
how I know a Pinto's taillights.) When
I see them, I act rashly: I skip work.

I haven't called out sick goodness knows when.
Just up and missed work—never. I'm berserk.
The Pinto turns off Main left, down the hill
the locals call the Dugway. At the Merc,
I pull my Bronco over, pause until
I've counted ten. I light a Dunhill off
the Bronco's lighter, now coiled hot. Stalk still
I hold the cigarette till its smoke wafts.
I lay it in the ashtray, then take off.

ii.

They cut the Dugway steep enough that even
Pintos can gain speed on the descent.
The road banks left away from town, leaves in
its dusty plunge the graveyard behind. Fenced
with barbed wire, our town's dead are kept from tumbling
off the butte like dried up weeds in wind.

As I descend I see its gate, assembled
from skeletal remains of wagon wheels.
Above the gates, an arch of horns climbs. Jumbled,
these antler boasts of beasts long dead still feel
for the sky. I see this horded mass
aglow in orange streetlight.

Grip the wheel,
bank left. Enough headstart, I hit the gas,
when out of nowhere, Pinto brakelights flash...

iii.

...Too late to brake myself, I'm forced to veer
 the speeding Bronco to the oncoming lane.
 A shock of gravel hits the truck. I steer
 back right. But there's the guardrail and I'm aimed
 to meet the cliff when...

Pardon me while I
 make a cinematic cut. Not to claim
 life flashed like some cliché across my eyes—
 I may have dwelt a nanomoment on
 Life's brute futility. But really why
 check out and navel-gaze when Death's head on?
 Survive near collision, outlive the brush
 with Death, then afterwards, indulge. Go on
 and have yourself a good ole-fashioned flash-
 back. Cast your mind back to your last near crash:

iv.

I last grazed by Death's hideous perfection
 an hour west of Laramie. We came
 upon a patch of ice. (That blasted section
 of the Interstate's as cursed as Cain.)
 The school car reeled into a dervish spin.
 Near twenty years, that night the Sheriff came
 to be my lover.

Not the Sheriff then,
 a zitty boy with football shoulders, dimpled
 rear. His Wranglers, bulged out by a tin
 of chew. My boy. My chap-lipped, hung-dog pupil.

Envious schoolmarm reader? How might you get
 yourself a prize like mine? The answer's simple:
 Nearly kill him. But not before you get
 him messed up in the head on Russian Lit.

v.

One might assume the Champion of the State
in Meat Judging impervious to a fat
Russian novel. Don't underestimate
the seductive power of guilt, which fat
Russian novels serve up by the pound.

One morning early, found him gazing at
a book. Surprising enough. Then I found
out what he read. Not some trim Ethan Frome.
Not to chifton Fitzgerald was he bound.
My "Outside Reading List" had shorter tomes,
but Platte had gotten into his head to read,
a giant. Messed up by it too: he'd come
to tell me what he'd gotten in his head:
He was like some axe murderer. He was bad.

vi.

Felt like an axe murderer. This boy was special.
And here I'd thought young Platte was just his thighs.
He'd mauled, dog-eared that book and stained it special.
He smudged that book and saw the world. He sighs.
He reads of senselessness and owns the blame,
(or so I thought). I took it as a sign.

I checked the library slip and my proof came
in two stamped due dates, record of the two
(and only) times that volume of World Bantam
Classics ever made it out and through
the check-out desk of Fort Pelt Branch.

I fancied those ink spots were us, were two
teenagers. Him—18, fresh off the ranch.
Precocious Me, 13 and starved for touch.

vii.

Between those covers, they—our alter selves—
 had met in Petersburg. The sun they buried
 rising after minutes from the shelf
 of the horizon, rested up and readied
 once again to haunt with them the fevered
 nightmares of their gentle murderer, married
 to him in their mutual shame and severed
 off by shame from everybody else.

The girl I'd been had read that fevered
 book as though there were nobody else.
 But Platte had been there too, his eyes ablaze
 from white nights reading with my teenage self.
 Wyoming kids escaping through a maze
 of Russian streets with block-long Russian names.

viii.

I thought all that malarkey and ignored
 the truth. My protégé was not that learned.
 Beneath his ignorance was something more,
 I thought. Something profoundly deep, gosh darn it.

As Teacher, I explained first: Dostoyevsky.
 (Yes. DOS- TOY- EFF –SKEE. No, Ms. Constance Garnett
 didn't write it; she translated what he
 wrote. Nope, not in English.) As a caring adult,
 I made sure that he knew that sympathy
 for killers in fiction could not result
 in jail time. As Friend, I bore him my soul.
 Began, as his Seducer, to consult
 more recent Russian fiction, which soon showed
 me I must contrive to get him on the road.

ix.

I was not the most obvious choice to lead the Future Farmers of America. Sure, but Skoal, the faculty advisor, needed leave to treat a bad case of cheek cancer. (Tobacco chews through more than pockets, boys.)

Still—why, why wouldn't I want drill team, dance or speech? asked Principal Groat, for my ploy aroused suspicion. The idea seemed (pardon his expression) queer. The boys just wouldn't hold me in the best esteem.

But Groat, said I, with basketball in season all able bodied males need aid the team—Go, Beavers! Groat agreed. (Be easy on her, boys!) Team spirit masked my actual reason.

x.

Thus with basketball in full dribble the future of our agribusiness was entrusted in Miss Beatrice Kulpa's feeble hands.

The scant few FFA-ers left were a motley lot. Short, clumsy, fat—unfit for even 3rd or 4th string hoops they were. Their rancher pas would rather have them sit and warm a bench, but they had little choice—most weren't even qualified to sit. Ain't nothing FFA could teach, but boys need extracurriculars more than school.

Why Platte was there, however, was by choice. His height was right for hoops, his hands were too. Young Platte was there to make his pa a fool.

xi.

Platte Senior lived for Fort Pelt High School sports.
 Thoughts of the Beavers (Rah!), the games they played,
 his memories of his own days on the court,
 these kept a mind that worried occupied.
 Football was fine, but autumns man can hunt.
 That lesser Cowboy State (called Texas) weights
 the pigskin highest. Bet you those 'pokes wouldn't
 with eight months winter nothing to do out
 but feed mend fences. That'd teach them runts
 to prize their b-ball. Why a good old rout
 the Beavs on top, those trophies on the shelf...
 What you expect a man to think about?
 The Mystery of Identity? The Self's
 desperate attempts to merge with other selves?

xii.

Naw. Man don't think a self. A man takes stock,
 be sure of that, but not of his own life.
 There's only so much time a guy can plot
 a neighbor's murder over water rights.
 He dreams, sure as hell not a retirement,
 but of the finest years in a man's life:
 the years his boy's in high school. Senior meant
 Junior to be a star. But 'tween son and pa
 the Knock Wood Laws of Jinx rule the tournament.
 Pa never mentioned it but Junior saw.
 Damn near 6'3" he grew, size 13 feet,
 he'd play center senior year, make his pa
 the envy of the Valley (no small feat).
 But Junior gave it up for judging meat.

xiii.

“What factors grades of USDA beef?”

“Hot carcass weight, percentage rib eye,
heart, kidney, pelvic fat—the answer’s F!”

“Correct, Young Platte! And now pray tell, whereby
the rank of ‘Quality’ for beef is proved?”

“By marbling, ma’am, maturity of carcass?”

“Aye!”

cried Beatrice pleased her Rascal-knock-off’s love
of slaughter ended not with Dostoy’s broker.
Hides, cut nerves, bones, what God forbade—the cloven
flesh of pigs: the heaps of info broke
most Future Farmers’ intellects. One foal
among them qualified for State.

Deals brokered

with the devil can be modest in their goals:
they needn’t cost a man’s whole soul.

xiv.

By man, of course in this case, I mean woman.

The School Board President gave the final nod:

As chaperone? Of course, they’d trust a woman,
in this case me, alone with such a ward.

Was weird Platte quitting b-ball, him a starter,
a stripling that one if only his ma’d

lived to see him grown big, Senior ought to
ease off, it’s not like the boy’s that fairy,

Ronnie Heller or that loser fart-all—

what’s-his-nickname Butch’s kid, not very
nice, right.? Quitters never win. Now what’s your...?

Missus Kulpa. Right. Miss. You’re not married.

Approved for 2 rooms, one night, pay by voucher.

You’re right, might blizzard, take an extra voucher.

xv.

I bargained on a blizzard, on bad roads,
 on an interstate shut down and gated,
 an act of God in the shape of a late March snow.
 But no snow came. Late Saturday we waited
 in JP's Big Boy, dinner done, we sat.
 He ate dessert, I ordered coffee, waited.
 My Lolita asked why let coffee sit,
 why get a drink I didn't drink? I tried
 between his questions to think ways to get
 that extra night in some motel, (I sighed,)
 away from other chaperones with eyes:
 my scheme depended on that extra night.
 Clueless he stared, beside him sat his prize.
 Both boy and trophy—shiny, oversized.

xvi.

The wind cleaned out the sky above Cheyenne.
 I thought of no darn reason we could stay.
 Against the wind, we headed west, Cheyenne
 behind, into the blinding end of day.

The whole way there we'd talked castration,
 boned up on grades of oysters D to A.
 But now my champion wanted elevation.
 "Miss Kulpa, tell me the end of our book."
 He clearly didn't want an explanation,
 he wanted literature, my mouth—his book.

Sonia, saint/whore, followed her killer/student
 to Siberia. She brought a book
 much like the Bible, only holy. Wouldn't
 Platte like to know what she read the Student?

xvii.

Platte said he would.

“Well, Sonia read...

the Recipe on How to Watch a Sunset...”

I wasn't sure where this all was headed
except where we were headed: toward a sunset,
a mile a minute farther from the only chance
I had to have him.

“Recipe for Sunsets?

that isn't in the book.”

“It is! See, Constance

Garnett cut it from the English text.”

He wondered why. Are there ingredients?

“Not exactly. As with most holy texts,
on What You Must Not Do, it's quite precise.
You give the setting sun the things that vex,
you mustn't hold back shame, dreams, lust or vice...”

...but that was when our school car hit the ice.

xviii.

It's not correct, but memory says we spun
one dozen times while day turned into night,
the guardrail turned a ring of platinum,
the blizzard post reflectors—gold-band bright.
It probably was just one three-sixty turn,
and probably it was already night;
the wreck we saw—wheels spinning, overturned—
was just an empty ditch we might have filled.

Our car stopped in its proper lane. We turned
and probably we spoke, but silence fills
my memory. We drove on. It was decided.
Next Services: 360 Miles, Food, Filling
Station, Lodging...It had been decided,
our near brush with death would justify it.

xix.

The truth about what came next I've not told,
not anyone, not him: It wasn't me.
I got two rooms, gave him his key and told
him go to bed. He followed me. And he
kissed first. Unzipped first. Took me on the rug.
I hid my blood: I was innocent as he.

I found him masturbating in the tub.
I came in. He kept on . "That's right, don't stop,"
I said. I stopped myself from going to scrub
his back. So hunched he was, head down, the drops
of water falling from his hair, I couldn't
tell if he was crying. Poor boy didn't stop
stroking himself, his tears as lubricant.
I closed the seat, sat, thought shut up but couldn't:

xx.

"Maybe you didn't know women had hair
down there, I mean. When I was small I didn't
know, thought they were doll-smooth everywhere.
My Great Aunt Weary watched me bathe. She wouldn't
let me alone. With nail clippers in hand, behind
parked down, she'd pee, whilst lecturing how I didn't
Know What Being Woman Meant, So Mind.
She'd wipe, leave me naïve, the bowl unflushed,
What Being Woman Meant was left behind...
I looked, my clue was hair in floating tufts.
Had no idea she trimmed without my catching.
'Hair!' I thought, 'Grown gals pee it.'"

His face flushed
red, not from shame: he came. He liked my watching;
more than the other thing he liked me watching.

xxi.

I came to realize the lunacy
of where we two had spent that night too late.
The obvious part of that lunacy
did not occur to me at all. At eight
I gave the voucher to the front desk girl.
“School trip, huh? You’re not far from home.” “Nope. Eighteen
miles,” I said, not recognizing the girl,
(the school board president’s daughter to be exact).
“Little America thanks you,” said the girl.
That’s when I realized the less obvious fact
Little America, Room 104
(two doors from where we stayed to be exact)
was where one Felix Kulpa, the narrator’s
father, went to spend his final hours.

xxii.

End of flashback the narrator led
the reader to think she had swerving death.
Mid-swerve, I’ll have the reader know, my head
was free of thought. I barely took a breath.
It came so close I grazed the guardrail, sparks
flew off the Bronco’s fender. One hair’s breadth
and I’d have given off far more than sparks.

I fullstop at the bottom of the hill.
Up the Dugway behind me in the dark,
the rearview mirror shows the Pinto still
in park, its headlights off, it holds its place
a moment, then starts backing up the hill.
This cat’s been had; the mouse has got the bait.
I flip the Bronco round. Begin the chase.

xxiii.

Through Pelt View, down through neighboring Bench we race
 down through the valley, up past the Fort.
 Bruised's old jalopy keeps a lightning pace.
 I see him pass by Homestead Trailer Court.
 He has a mile on me and he is highway-
 bound. He's gaining speed, but I know a short-
 cut through the trailer park along a byway
 frontage road. I'll beat him, be in wait
 there at the eastbound onramp to the freeway.

I get there, time to light that cigarette
 again, but get an inkling in my head
 he's somehow beat me to the Interstate.
 On the horizon I see what I bet
 are Pinto taillights three miles up ahead.

xxiv.

Before the state line one must cross a plain,
 it's clay, baked gray under a cold hard sun.
 At night the land's so dark, eyes try in vain
 to apprehend some tree or mountain, some
 feature of the land besides the void—
 the vacuum eyes reject. Without the sun
 to tell the eyes there's nothing, they avoid
 the emptiness, paint scenes, imagine landscapes,
 meadows they knew, groves, lakes they dreamed up, soil
 rich enough a flower might grow. They hope
 these visions on the chaos blank that lurks
 beyond the highway's dotted lines. Eyes hope
 until they see, all lit up bright as church,

Big Bang Booze Adult Video Fireworks.

xxv.

You should've known that the Big Bang was coming:
in the light, signs warn its imminence
half dozen times.

It's Commmin!

You A-Comin?

Next eXXXit:

POW!

Big Bang

All Buck, Less ¢ent\$.

Alluring though they be, these billboards mask
themselves at night thanks to tightfistedness.
See, Big Bang's owner/operator is Basque.
A shepherd he was born and shepherds save.
Off mutton, then off smut his wealth amassed.
His signs went dark when he made cuts and gave
up thinking Rural Electric deserved pay.
Since then this scrimp has been called plenty save
his given name (which, given, is a lot to say),
it's Pluto Papesatanaleppe.

xxvi.

The power cut, no sputtering fuse of signs
prepares night drivers for Pluto's explosion.
Much local speculation whirls 'round why
the lights still shine on the emporium.
Surely the skinflint hasn't paid for light.
Some say he steals it, others—he extorts,
while many claim Big Bang self generates.
My favorite theory holds that Pluto's sockets
are powered by his sheep...

But I've lost sight
of Bruised. His car has vanished. Big Bang's exit
the sole possibility. Did we
race all this way 'cause Bruised craves bottle rockets?
Would he brave that den of iniquity?

A sheepish boy like him in there?

Well, maybe.

xxvii.

But I think: Why, Bea? Exit's in one mile,
 but you don't have to take it. Just drive on.
 Don't need to follow him. Just let that mile
 pass and then another. Bea, drive on
 away from this, this slumped-down boy
 who's not a boy and, while you're at it, on...
 Leave husband—doesn't want you just wants boys.
 Leave off this chase, this scene, escape this state.
 You've left already, Bea. You're not a boy.
 He doesn't need you. No one in this state
 needs you. You're not your dad who couldn't shut
 the door. You're driving now. There're other states.
 It may be only Utah up ahead, but
 beyond are other ways to be. Drive. Out...

xxviii.

...but Wyoming is four lines, ruler straight, drawn
 on paper, as if mountain passes, creeks
 and badlands don't form boundaries of their own.
 State lines are arbitrary as pick-up sticks,
 and ink on paper can't sink into soil
 deep enough to change the land—a creek
 does more, you'd think. Whoever reads these soiled
 pages knows though, I stand by the power
 of contrived and rigid boundaries. So I'll
 swear: those lines are walls, our unseen border
 walls us. Wide and empty as Wyoming
 seems. You grow up, make a run and pow—you're
 back. The border claims, "You can't outgrow me.
 The sky's your only out. You're in Wyoming."

xxix.

I park in a far corner of the lot,
 but where the Pinto's well within my scope.
 Must be inside, I think. I haven't thought
 this through. I chased not thinking what I hoped
 to prove/accomplish/do. I entertain
 a notion I'll waltz in and find him, open
 arms, cry "Bruder!", weep while fireworks rain
 down. No, first: check his chin. Then choose: embrace
 or stab or better—hang him. Entertainment—
 the larks I used to have inside this place.

A man leaves face obscured, back to his wife...
 Disguised.

That's it. I'll sneak in. See his face.
 In baseball cap, I look more man than wife.
 I don a hat, a flannel shirt, another life.

xxx.

"Bay-uh-tree-chay!" a voice croaks rough as rocks.
 I hide my shock. "You won't disguise from me!"

Pluto's body's a cedar tree of knots;
 the runt moves with a snake's fluidity.
 I tuck the flannel right to hide my breasts.

"Get out a here," he says. "Your cop not see,
 so scat!" He waves his paw, in Living Platex
 Glove, before my face. He waves would looks
 to be a sex toy. Waves it near my breasts,
 but I don't flinch.

"You smell that, Bay-uh-tree-chay?
 I fish it out a dumpster, wash new, sell again.
 Some Church boy buy, use in lot, throw way.
 So guilty, huh? Don't guilt know Waste a Sin?"

I brush past, walk in like I'm home again.

xxx.

The door closes on the sound of Pluto's voice.
 Inside fluorescent light hums, women moan
 in adult picture pitch. Still—Pluto's voice:
 "No lurk allowed! You watch, you pay!" More groans
 are heard behind the curtain at the back—
 grown women making fake in girlish tones.
 Men grope toward these sirens, bound to wrack.
 One man exits through the curtains, face a smudge.
 He mumbles, "Fucking ugly," shakes a sack
 of 90-second tokens, unspent grudges
 he holds 'gainst videotaped eternal bliss.
 The curtain hisses off a smoke blue smudge
 of light. I reach. No "Live Girls" here, just this—
 on nonstop loop a lie to stroke and bless.

xxxii.

A heavy rubber curtain separates
 the adult wares from those more juvenile
 amusements, booze & bombs. The curtain splits
 and yet its weight is so substantial
 pushing through's a labor. I recall
 how we'd come together—Junior and I.
 Ten minutes after he'd go in I'd follow.
 I'd know which booth he'd gone in from the smell
 of the cologne he's worn since high school.

An opening's cut waist high in the wall
 between each booth. It's how I'd watch
 him with his strangers. Through that thin rectangle
 I'd frame the shot—a high gloss ease I'd want
 to make into a sadness it was not.

xxxiii.

I stand beyond the curtain in the world
of Big Bang's backroom. A box made of boxes:
cases for on-sale VHS, all curled,
worn, empty (cassettes kept at checkout); locked
in chicken wire cages VCR's
on constant play, pause or rewind; sealed boxes—
her or his genitalia cast in rubber
(Just Like Jenja's!

Long John's duplicate!);
the clapboard buddy booths are fed by wires
John and Jenja—taped live, piping hot.
A sign reads, "Buddy Booths—one person only."
Someone, my cap and flannel duplicate
checks out a box of Jenja—spread, her phony
breasts bracket the title: "For Your Eyes Own Me."

xxxiv.

As a wildlife biologist describes
gorillas through a mist, so I, Bea Platte,
with detached reverence make out the species
indigenous to rural porn shops. Primates:
that whaleship captain of the modern age,
one Trucker (body—hirsute, manner—sedate);
one Rigger (thin-boned, oily, filled with rage).
One Reptile local; two out-of-staters: Birds.

But Bruised is not like any in this cage.
I cannot see him. On a ladder perched,
a guard keeps watch. He looks oddly familiar.
Above the noise, a singsong voice is hear.
The guard listens ear in. Sure looks familiar,
I think, then realize, damn, it's Ronnie Heller.

xxxv.

I think: Ronnie won't know me in this cap.
 I shove a buck in the token machine,
 four slugs fall out. "Is that you, Mrs. Platte?"
 I think: why not just own your men's size jeans,
 I-ain't-a-missus-man ignore the boy?
 "Yoo-hoo, Ms. Platte?" I turn from the machine,
 a scheme is hatched inside my mind, I face the boy.
 "It's not me, Ronnie. I'm not here, you see?"

He nods, leans in as if he gets my ploy,
 "But he's not here, Ms. Platte..."

"One: call me Bea.

Two: not the Sheriff. Bruised. I tracked him here."
 "Bruised Rasmussen?"

"Which booth? I need to see..."

"But ma'am, I've been on shift all night, I swear,
 Bruised hasn't (and he wouldn't) come in here."

xxxvi.

Above the din of porn, a voice is singing,
 "I roast my beef with carrots, roast my beee.."
 Feels like the place is getting smokier. The singing
 stops.

"Not here?"

"I'm sure, Ms. Platte."

"It's Bea."

A booth door opens. Someone in a Busch
 Beer cap, thick lenses, parts curtains, leaves. "Roast beef."
 "You under cover?" Ronnie asks. I blush.
 "That's right," I say and leave.

The Pinto's gone.

By time I rush outside, a can of Crush,
 and fresh, green antifreeze leaked on the ground
 are all that's left. I look around, I feel
 like someone's watching. I've been conned.
 A yellow bus pulls in, its fan belt squeals
 I don't ask why a bus. My body reels,

xxxvii.

I turn and go to leave, unlock the truck,
but sit on something strange. I reach beneath
me feel: it's smooth and warm. I jump out, look:
it's chocolate pink. I touch again: so smooth.
The cab light's dim, I cautiously inspect.
I can't resist and slip a hand beneath
it, lift. It's heavier than my hand expects.
I'm just about to sniff it with my nose,
when I realize exactly what the object
is—a toy vagina. There's a rose
shoved (deep red) in its rubber cavity.
I drop it, look up: 'gainst the bus's windows,
pressed like flowers, I see a row of ugly
women's faces staring down. At me.

The Gist Of It. *Beatrice works a dayshift. Ignores her husband. Answers a gynecological question whilst making a discovery. One of her flashbacks ensues. She ends it, walks outside and finds a puzzling note.*

Day Five: Wednesday, 30 August 1995

i.

Back at the motel—Pinto parked per usual, what's not per usual is the cop car parked beside it and the uniform parked tall behind the Pelt View check-out desk...But hark, what light! My yonder husband-sheriff speaks:

"Where the hell a you been?"

(Diamonds sparkling
are the jewels he lets drop from his lips!)

"Shel's freakin' callin, all freaked out and gripes can't freakin' leave Mary and that...that..."

"Freak?"

I offer.

"..freak a theirs alone at night."

(Observe, Mesdames, what influence two decades of marriage to this English marm hath wrought. Time wisens most men's speech, at least a tad; Time fades men's beauty—not, alas, my lad's.)

ii.

Some men are born with features meant for faces in middle age. Note, the most handsome men (or women) were once homely kids; their faces in school pictures marred by noses men alone should wear; through eyes too wide they squint until their faces crackle like the thin glaze finish on a kiln-baked pot; the glint in their eyes is too bright for youth; their mouths too full for the gaunt smiles youth invents. Age builds on jaunty frames of boys uncouth a noble architecture—stone, brick, wood. Time casts this ilk as leads and they turn out to play the roles of lover, boss, rake, Robin Hood, or Sheriff...Guess I'm saying, Platte looks good.

iii.

Exhausted as I am, I find his looking good
 a most unwelcome fact. I want his breath
 to stink, his cheeks to lose their color, blood-
 drain gray. I want him jowls and flab and breasts—
 unsexed, a steer. But damn the spot, my want,
 frustrates the more it fades with wear. His breath
 brushes my hair the way that victims haunt
 their perpetrators. I elbow him back,
 take my place at the desk. He says he wants
 to know where I have been. He backs
 toward the door. I force myself to face
 the whole of him, sum total, not just badge,
 not just a shoulder, the scent he leaves each place
 he goes. Not just the tale I trace, re-trace.

iv.

He looks at me straightforward like he cares,
 and I, not one to fuss about my looks,
 feel suddenly ashamed about my hair.
 I wish I had the cap left in the truck
 to hide beneath, although his caring could
 not give two shits about the way I look.

My anger wants to be a tower, cold
 and white and lovely. I want his concern
 to hit a gorgeous wall which no man could
 breach, climb, attain or mount. His warm concern
 touches upon my body in no way,
 and yet I feel it there. Body won't learn,
 which means that I say, "Hey" when he says, "Hey."
 "Are you alright?" he asks.

And: "I'm OK."

v.

“Up³ to the old⁵ stunts⁴ runnin’ out there¹, huh?²”
he asks.

¹His “there” implies the Interstate.

²The statement, made a question through its “huh,”
assumes assent and, ³via the unstated
subject “You or We,” a pre-existing
connection—casual or intimate—
between the speaker and the listener.

⁴The interlocutors’ shared history—
suggested by “stunts” (noun)—may preexist
(⁵see modifier “old”) merely as a story
or shared experience. But what compels
the speaker—censure or co-misery?

Oh, reader, are you with me? I can tell:
I know he’s up to the old stunts as well.

vi.

At least I think I know until I meet
his eyes. Not that there’s anything to read
within his gaze. It’s simply that they meet
at all—his eyes and mine—and on his lead.

Whenever we’ve discussed the “Topic,” it’s
been at my instigation. Him—the steed
I’d spur him to the edge, the cliff of “It”—
the muddy gulch that was our singular
sex life, as if our sex life could be “It”—
pronoun, non-human, neutered, singular.
The “Topic” he could ford or leap across
long as he not be forced to look at our
“It” in the eye.

So why is he across
the room looking at me plain, no shame, no loss?

vii.

I must be wrong. It's only me who's running.
 "Please, look at me," he asks. "I asked you what
 is going on."

Should say, "been out there runnin',"
 'fess up, instead I keep my hard mouth shut.
 I open up the motel register.
 I run a finger down the names to shut
 him out. There's the first man I registered.

"I'm still in the room. Don't act like I'm not,"
 my husband says.

It's never registered
 to me: the date I started working nights
 was the anniversary of Daddy's death—
 no, one day shy.

"Gonna call it a night?"
 my husband asks. I touch the name. "Not night,"
 I say...

When I look up he's gone from sight.

viii.

I trace that first guest's name, Tim Sand,
 the sole impression he left in ballpoint pen.
 "2/15/91" I wrote. My hand.
 "Arrival: Late." I page through all the men
 who chanced to check in under my grim watch.
 and see that I am like the ballpoint pen,
 tied to this desk, a flimsy chain, I've watched
 while transient lives flowed by, seemed each grew younger,
 except that I'm the change. (I check my watch)
 I've aged. (I'll call up Shel) Just five years younger,
 (I'll take his shift) I slept and fancied then;
 (I'll work a double) thought one of these strangers
 might snap the chain. Last page, the entry when
 I reach B—something scribbled Rasmussen.

ix.

I call, but Shel is angry. “How is Mary?”
I ask.

Fine thanks; he wants a damned excuse
why I missed work.

“And how’s that monster baby
Mary made?”

The monster’s fine. What’s the excuse?
“He starting school?”

Not yet but he can read.

“The little genius!”

Shel thinks so, thanks; excuse?
He needs the tired old lie to be appeased:
“’Twas Woman’s Trouble, Shel, a real bad case.”
Well that’s too bad and all but still a person needs
some warning, can’t just leave a guy...

“This case
was unexpected.”

Oh, he says, surprised
that there is Trouble gals can’t count in days.
“Ain’t it the Dickens,” I say and—surprise,
B— Rasmussen stands right before my eyes.

x.

“I’ve got to go,” I say. “A customer...”
I say, “I’ll work a double shift, Shel. Bye.”

Bruised says, “Don’t hang up. I’m no customer...”
“Of course you are!”

“Shel’s sick?” he asks.

I lie:

“Yes, sick.”

“Me too, I think, been sleeping—umm—
You working for him?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then, bye.”

He turns to go and I’m relieved and numb.
Been chasing after him for days and here
he is, and right away I want him gone.
I feel a wave of shame; don’t want him near.
He stops before the door and in a slim
cracked voice he says, “Ms. Platte?”

I say, “Bea, dear...”

“I’ve got a question.”

“I’m all ears, dive in.”

Bruised talks. But I am focused on his chin.

xi.

“Embarrassing to ask, but you might know,
you know, ‘bout pregnancy, right?”

“Never been,”

I say.

“Apologize, I should have known,”

he says.

“No problem,” I say, “never been,
but never wanted it, to tell the truth.”

Of all the times I’ve claimed that it’s never been
a lie ‘til now, and decades of the truth,
of wanting nothing more, dawn on me now.

“You are a woman though,” Bruised states.

“That’s true,”

I say.

“The cramps and morning sickness—how
long does that last?”

“The first three-months,”

I say. “Why do you ask?”

He’s worried now:

“Not in the ninth?”

I say, “No. First three-months,”
But I am focused below his mouth.

xii.

I let Bruised walk right out the door before
I ask the obvious: Who the Sam Hill’s pregnant?
This doesn’t matter much to me, of course,
for I’m still processing his chin. The flagrant
proof is there: the Kulpa Bullethole.
No one could deny a thing so blatant,
not even old Aunt Weary. Rest her soul.
The Kulpa family trait is quite distinct.
No dapper Cary Grant would wear the Hole.
No Dudley Doright this: it’s blunt, succinct.
Shave off the charm from Kirk or Michael’s chins,
and Douglas Clan to Kulpa might be linked.
The Bullet scars a chin that’s anxious, prim
and tough; it carves into a jaw that’s grim.

xiii.

Remember: Daddy's arms, his face above;
 the pinky I would single out to poke.
 Into the whiskered recess, I would shove
 my little finger in, hear while he spoke
 of Granddad (Colonel Sanders) and the dimple;
 how the old man Kulpa told a joke
 so many times all folks believed the dimple
 was a war wound from the Meuse-Argonne
 where Kaiser German shot him, plain and simple;
 a Kulpa's head's so hard the shot had gone
 right in and stuck; how dad, who'd never seen
 a Kaiser much less fought in Meuse-Argonne,
 took one look at his own chin and believed
 that scars were handed down right through the genes.

xiv.

And he was right. Yes. Battle scars are passed
 on son to daughter, son to unclaimed son.

When he was born—the boy my father guessed
 was his, that's what the Snow White woman
 beating on our door had claimed, enraged
 and raving months before, she swore: his son—
 my father sat Aunt Weary down and waged
 a quiet battle with his haggard face.

The brittle Weary waited, her face—sage
 and calm.

No, let Bea stay, his daughter's place
 was there and not asleep, was all she said.
 "Daughter, behold thy dad," proclaimed. Her face
 went calm again, while his flushed shame-torn red.
 And he confessed...and I wanted my bed.

xv.

He never used her name and so I never
 knew it, never saw the face, just coal-
 black hair Snow White's. Years I doubted it ever
 happened, thought the memory was a coal-
 black apple Weary'd planted in my head
 to poison what little a ten-year old
 who'd lost a dad could salvage of the dead.

I'd stand while church let out and search the sisters
 for the face to match that Snow White head.
 I grew up, and the game turned, "Pin the Hester."
 Though the Scarlet A only fit one dame,
 "Not Her," I'd think. "That one is no one's mistress..."
 And so I'd play again, deny her name:
 For Truth and Fact are always trumped by Game.

xvi.

But Play was not Aunt Weary's suit. Great pains
 were taken: the adulteress' name was hushed,
 for gossip too is vice. But let the pangs
 of this iniquity be shown, the crushing
 price of sin must serve as parable,
 the Lesson learned:

Sex is Terrible.

"Sex," she would quote, "'is a river of fire
 that must be banked and cooled' (So flammable!)
 'by one hundred restraints, lest it' (dread fire!)
 'consume in chaos individual and group...'"

But this came later, Weary saved her dire
 warnings. One day soon they'd play on loop.
 Meanwhile, she was staid and gathered proof.

xvii.

For Weary, Dad's confession wasn't news.
 Reports of the liaison somehow'd reached
 the Family. The Family always knew
 he'd come to naught. He'd always overreached,
 struck out alone. When a car accident
 took his wife, they'd hoped it would teach
 Felix to honor Family. Then he went
 and flat refused their help. The motherless
 infant he'd raise himself. No accidents—
 just God's rebukes. Too bad the motherless
 girl had to suffer for her father's pride.
 A man and child alone—ridiculous.
 Up 'til the rumors came, they'd stepped aside,
 but Immorality they'd not abide.

xviii.

The Immorality was caused by books,
 or rather, by Dad's mighty love of them,
 matched only by the effort that it took
 for him to read. No one expected him
 to read well—just a miner, raised by farmers,
 who needs books? His useless love of them,
 however, he inherited: his farmer
 father (Colonel Sanders' double) was
 a learned man, knew Scripture well as farming,
 quoted Milton and stuff. Too bad that it was
 only a love of reading, not the skill,
 he handed down. My daddy's struggle was
 a lone one he fought Man to Book until
 he hired Someone to teach him Reading Skills.

xix.

Sometimes my father'd ask to watch me read,
at least that's what my memory likes to think he did.
"Aloud?" I'd ask.

"No, silently."

I'd read
and think how proud he was...But, bested by a kid
just out of the first grade, he must have hurt.
His father used to take a switch, whipping would rid
the child of obstinacy. But the hurt
would only make the reading harder. "Quit,"
his father finally said, "Just go and work.
You don't need books for that."

"Don't ever quit,"

my Dad told me in turn. His answer back:
"Reading makes living matter. Master it,
then teach me," he told me...Then behind my back
he hired a teacher-gal with hair—coal-black.

xx.

"I'll go inside and check," Aunt Weary said.
"I'll see if what that woman claims is right."
She opened the truck door.

"No, stop," he said.

"It's me who should go in. It's only right."

But Weary said, "What's right and what is wrong
is something you can't judge—your vision's blighted."

"But how can I trust..." Dad stopped and paused long
enough that she said,

"Don't trust me? Then the girl..."

You trust, Bea, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, "I'm wrong."

Bea, go in now. Be my eyes. There's a girl,
and scooted me across the yellow seat,
out of the pickup into a November swirl
of snow and hold-out leaves. My feet
stumbled to match Aunt Weary's tireless beat.

xxi.

Inside the Pioneer Children's Hospital,
Aunt Weary asked, "Where do you keep the babies?"

"Why, ma'am, our Pioneer Children's Hospital
is four floors full of nothing but the babies,"
explained a smile in peppermint.

"Newborns,"

Weary returned her smile reserved for babies
and grown women.

"Premies—ground. Newborns
on two," explained the smiling peppermint.

Toward the newborn floor, its pathway worn
we went. I trailed not knowing what it meant,
this errand we were on. A sign said,

No

Visitors 12 or Under Past This Point.

We passed. I feared this place where kids could go,
be born, get sick or die, but visit—no.

xxii.

That no one stopped me on the climb upstairs;
that no one said, "Hey, 10-year old, get out;"
that maybe I looked older, those upward stares—
that adults always gave that made me doubt
my visibility—did not mean I
could not be seen but just that I'd missed out
and wasn't 10 at all; that maybe I
had napped too long and missed it all and somehow
was old as my old maid aunt, deaf to the cry
of newborns more than a double-pane glass window
separate.

We had reached that mythic spot
of recognition, but the Nursery Window
was too high for me to see. I'd thought
we'd get there, I'd be grown up, I was not.

xxiii.

A plastic wall, steel handrail, Weary's jaw
 were all that I could see from down below.
 Old lady hairs the tweezers missed. I saw
 the line where her foundation stopped its flow,
 where flesh tone make-up ends and flesh begins,
 where lady necks turn onion skin and show
 what tended faces should not: time, veins, tensions.

Aunt asked the nurse if she would show a child.
 "Are you a relative?"

"Don't know. Depends
 on what I see," said Weary, to whom the child
 behind the glass was shown. From down below
 I watched the Maybe Aunt's face and the child
 I was asked what she saw. The Bullethole?
 "Lift me up. Let me see."

"No," she said. "No."

xxiv.

Back to the present. Step outside. It's day.
 I miss my morning smells: the beer and smoke.
 The ever constant West Wind blows away
 the morning. Two trucks drive past. Diesel smoke—
 their wake. A boy, a bike, a poker card
 hooked by a clothespin clicks against the spokes.
 Next door, Phil Argent curses out the Lord.
 A magpie lands. A busy day in Pelt.
 A tumbleweed goes by, an index card
 trips to my feet. It's written on in felt-
 tip marker. I pick it up—puzzling
 writing, loops from some place far from Pelt.
 I look left where it blew from. Someone sings.
 But then inside the office, the phone rings.

xxv.

I go in, answer. "Sheriff on the line."
 "I know your voice," I say.

Says he forgot
 to give me a heads-up, things should be fine,
 but last night while he was filling in, he got
 strange visitors, a busload full of broads,
 wanted to rent the whole motel, things got
 a little weird, he run 'em off, real odd...

"Yeah, uh huh, uh huh," like a stammerer
 I say, distracted. "Got you, bus of broads..."

*"Assess why Dostoyevsky's murderer
 is beautiful."* The 3 by 5 card reads,
"Beautyismurderbeautymurderher."

I flip it over and read: *"1 John 3:
 It does not yet appear what we shall be."*

The Gist Of It. *How Beatrice stupidly misplaces her diary. How she comes back to work a day after working an uneventful double shift. She sees an eye and reads a light composition—written, of all things, in prose!*

Day Six: Thursday, 31 August 1995

i.

My brother, Bruised, is not alone. Someone else is in 14. When I drove in at midnight, through 14's vinyl curtains a light shone along the seams. Go right to 13. Might observe how he behaves alone. I've thought he was alone since first I caught the sight of him spooned up against those pillows. But when I get to my peephole, all is black. He's gone to bed, switched off the light, my thought. I check outside. Lights on. So I rush back and look: the peephole's dark. Someone has plugged it. Not the maid. Not Shel...I think. Look back. I'm sure, Bruised found my secret out, he's plugged it. But then I see: an eye. I hear: a chuckle.

ii.

I jump back. A steel bedframe cracks my shin. I grope for light as if I didn't know each piece of junk that crowds that room. My chin against the mirror, squinting for my eyes to grow accustomed to the fluorescent vanity lighting, I force myself to look. My brow, age spots, crows feet, anything not to see that blackness. Beatrice, I say. (But the blackness watches.) I flip off the vanity lights. Sanity, Bea: it's that boy, that mess of fears, near forty, still can't stand up, look a person head-on. ('Cept perhaps in darkness...) No nerve to turn and look, I hold the sink. Behind my dark reflection, a light blinks.

iii.

Behind my leaden silhouette, it blinks again. Then nothing. Outside I hear a car start, fan belt squeals and backs away. I think it's gone, but shudder still: that eye. It's far away now, Bea. You're fine. Just let go of the sink, splash water on your face, the towel bar is empty...pat face dry, then take a drink of water from your palm, wipe hands on pants, then step outside.

The Pinto's gone. A wink: its taillights down the Dugway, gone. I glance behind me, jump...for at the window, Bruised appears through parted drapes. He rubs eyes, glances my way, waves, turns. Drapes close. End of Bruised. Who's in the car? I think, the Eye. Not Bruised.

iv.

I want my diary to figure all this out. This morning when I got off work I went to John's. I sat myself to write, found out the thing was gone—not in my purse. I went back to the Bronco, looked—it wasn't there. I emptied out my purse, the one I spent good money on only to have somewhere to put that diary. For years I've carried it around, not written shit, just stared at the blank pages mostly. Too much buried, nothing to say...Then Saturday, the words came scratching out. So long. How much I carried.

I called up Shel. Must've left it at work. Shel said hold on, he'd look. I waited. Words...

v.

...my own words finally filing out in lines,
no where for them. Shel came back, "It ain't here,"
he said, hung up. I sat there, held the line
till the new dial tone ran out.

"Not here—
what did I tell you?" Shel said when I came
back to the motel office full of fear
and searched the place myself. I tried to tame
the panic. Shel said, "It'll show. Go rest."

Went home. I tried to sleep but no sleep came.
The bed my husband slept in gave no rest.
"Write someplace else, just let the diary go,"
I thought. "No, not to write at all is best."

I kept that thought, I slept, came time to go
to work, my writing doesn't matter. I let go.

vi.

But now I've seen that eye and I want nothing
more than that old diary. Wording traps,
predicting rhymes. Go to the office. Nothing
anyone would read, I say to no one, slap
body to chair and on the desk I find—
"Sanitized for Your Protection" wrapped
around its cover—my diary. I unwind
the paper strip, open the book and there
I find a 3x5 card note inside:

"Dear B,

*Most generous of you to share
the outpourings of this diary.*

*In gratitude, my brazen pen has dared
today's flashback—no, not in Poetry
not yet. Give me two days...*

See you soon,

C."

Boy Blue:

[Note to Editrix: Pls proof for style and errs. Names changed to protect the guilty.]

Deatrice Flax took the boy in at her husband's lover's request.

It wasn't as if they didn't have the room. There were only two of them in their split-level and she cooked enough for Coxey's army anyway. Her husband was always saying it.

Deatrice took a certain joy in her husband's pleasures.

They had long been past the point where either of them wanted the other. Therefore she was best when Sheriff Flax (at that time a mere deputy) went a-whoring. She told him this as plainly as she could. He told her to watch her language. He couldn't abide her talking like a sailor or, for that matter, one of her Russian novels. But he followed her directions. He spoke little of his pursuits and never explicitly. On occasion, however, he was generous enough to bring a conquest home.

Deatrice was disgusted at the happiness she found in cleaning up. Stripping his bed of its linen. Untangling a late night dance. The chemical smell of Spray and Wash against the stains of her husband's pleasure.

But she was not some submissive, long-suffering helpmeet. Unlike the women of her religious Wyoming community, she was not the victim of some patriarchal order, hair in a permanent to prove it. She bore no resemblance to the Sisters of Castor Valley, Bearing Offspring and Testimony to the Truthfulness of the Gospel.

Deatrice Flax was not selfless.

The perversions of stay-at-home housework were not hers by obligation. And despite what anyone said in Castor, she was not forced by scandal into early retirement by the School District. Neither had Flax wanted her stay-at-home. Quite the contrary. Why he'd married her at all might be a mystery, but he certainly hadn't wanted a housemaid. He cooked and cleaned better than she did and she knew it. He wanted her, to what degree he wanted her, because she was occupied, busy, cool and distracted; he'd fallen in love with her for the hungry way she ignored him.

His fears about her retirement had been ungrounded. Having time on her hands had not turned Deatrice Flax into a fussbudget. She did a good job at pretending to ignore him even then. She kept out of his way as she had always done. The only marked change in her from the teaching years was her schedule.

Deatrice Flax kept ungodly hours.

Stayed up all night with her books. Slept a little mornings after he left for work. Each night he came home, she had dinner ready—that had changed. When they were both working, they cooked together. Those had been his favorite times with her. She'd prep, chop and wash while he concocted some dish they'd have to drive five hours away from Castor to get in a restaurant. Now it was casseroles and stews. Biscuits from a can and leftovers, far more than he could ever consume despite the jam-packed Tupperwares she'd send with him for lunch.

She used to complain about school, her struggles to crack open minds, the idiocy of her co-workers, but now after dinner, she'd turn silent. Occasionally she'd ask him the question that was behind the silence even if she didn't ask it, namely: was he going out. Some nights he didn't want to; he'd go anyway, just 'cause he'd feel obliged. Obligated to change out of his police uniform, despite the advantages it might have given him in picking up. Going out meant he had to wear clothes he'd never wear on a day off or trip to the city. His civilian look was as pressed and starched as any high-paid engineer at the mines. But that wouldn't get him what he wanted. So he'd struggle into Wranglers, an undersized flannel shirt, Cowboys (Wyoming, not Dallas) baseball cap pulled so low you'd never make out his eyes. Going out—to the hidden world where he went out, for the reasons he went out—required a high level of discretion.

Undercover it had to be. In fact undercover was how it had begun: sting operations he was sent on in California when he was a cadet just out of the academy. The whole idea of going to those places, pulling folks in like that, had appalled him at first. The more he'd complained about the duties he was sent on (late nights to parks, public restrooms, deserted beaches), the more Dea had asked for details. It had seemed as if finally she was taking an interest in the career she'd never wanted him to choose. The more he verbalized his disgust at it, the more he wanted it. The more she wanted him to want it.

She had finally been able to understand what she had always needed to know about him. It even explained why he'd made the implausible choice to become a cop. They would continue to be sexual for a time. Soon, however, her questions and his answers insisted themselves into their lovemaking. She would never doubt that he had been attracted to her. Her memory was far too good. But after he'd begun the raids, she would stare up, or rather, down into his face with recognition. They shouldn't be talking about this, he'd insisted. He didn't want to talk about it.

Moving them both back home to Wyoming, to their native Castor Valley, had been his idea. She hadn't wanted it but she didn't resist. Once when she was young, not long

before she'd met him, she too had decided to go back. So she'd let him think that it would solve the "Problem"—by then not his alone but hers as well. It would make him stop, it would make her stop and it did. It worked. For a while.

A couple of years probably passed. Without her having to refuse, he stopped making advances. Instead they both got angry, though they weren't the kind of couple to make anger turn words. Frustrated, she'd brought the subject up again, one night she'd begun asking him: did he think those shenanigans went on their neck of the woods too?

What shenanigans?

She answered, and he cut off her crassness.

No. And besides where?

Didn't know where. How could she? But maybe just beyond the county line, she'd replied. Out on the Interstate, maybe?

He dropped the subject for she was right. He couldn't believe he, a cop at that, hadn't been aware of all the activity before. It didn't take much thinking to see the clues. There it was: a world, albeit small, of goings-on pious locals wanted to believe was restricted to the godless coasts. Its players were men, like himself, that the brightly feathered stereotypes utterly overlooked. There it was: pulsing along I-80, aorta through the Heartland. A few days later he told her he was thinking on taking a little ride out to the Flying J. The slightest of smiles spread across her stoic face.

Each time he went out, she felt like she shared some part of it with him. It wasn't surprising then when he finally brought someone home. Turned out his range of tastes were not that much different than hers. The quiet, tortured and hairy. The burly and boisterous. Deatrice stayed up late enough that she'd get to see them. Occasionally one would stay for breakfast. But it was rare, her husband bringing a tryst back to their place. Some people had a hard time understanding. They just did. You had to explain things to them, sometimes several times.

Yes, the wife knew.

No, she wouldn't get upset, that's ridiculous, if they only knew her.

And no, a thousand times no, she did not want to participate. They had their own bedrooms for gosh sake.

It made her glad when one would agree. Deatrice Flax knew that the things her husband most enjoyed were best done not in a stall or booth. Not even the cab of a semitruck would do. His pleasures were best taken in a proper bed.

Because of the transient nature of the Interstate, the lovers he brought home seldom if ever made a repeat appearance. Zedekiah was an exception. The odd carpentry job he picked up on the long trek he made back and forth between Nebraska to the east and the city to the west brought him back in their part of the country. He began to make regular appearances. Deatrice liked his austere politeness, one of the vestiges of his Mennonite upbringing. She liked how he let his moustache grow thick below the corners of his mouth. It reminded her of the 70's. Of musk-scented men. Of college days. She saw soon enough why he grew it: to hide the scar of a harelip, to mask a grin he wore even when his manner seemed the most stern. Zed was clean and earthy. Unlike the extremes of the "trade" her husband was forced to deal with, he was neither unkempt and brutal, nor powdered and ethereal. He knew how to treat a lady, and Dea—for all her Wyoming toughness and colleged skepticism—appreciated that in a man.

Ms. Platte, he called her. One day he rang.

--Yes, Zed. I'm fine, Zed and I've told you, it's Dea. He's not in, Zed. At court all day in Evingston. Domestic abuse case.

He said oh, he figured Flax was working.

He wasn't headed out their way, was he? she asked, then caught herself, asked, could she pass on a message to Flax for him?

Said he'd actually called to talk with her. Had a favor to ask.

That was when he explained about the boy.

Dea knew Zed had a past, a life he was running from. What men her husband slept with didn't? All of them lived in deceptions. No matter how cut off they were from kin or community, they fabricated lies and lived in their fabrications. Any who didn't, who lived in the open, had moved the coasts long ago, had walled themselves in a fortress like Castro or the Village. Sure, it was 1990, but their rectangled state had survived the so-called revolutions of sex and civil rights untouched. While the world jetted on overhead, they hung on stubborn as badgers and sagebrush. These habitués of truckstops, and rest areas were men you'd never know and knew not to bother trying to know. That was one of the reasons she liked them.

It wasn't surprising to hear Zed had a son. He, like her husband, was the marrying kind. But unlike her husband, not the staying kind. Deatrice envied his wandering. Wished she could. So it did surprise her a tad that this handsome rolling stone would bring a son

along for the ride, especially considering what she knew of the man's libido. Seemed like it would be more convenient to keep his contact confined to Western Union wires, cashiers checks from Little America, a call from a motel on birthdays.

--Zed's headed our way, she explained to her husband who came in from court and cuddled up behind her at the sink, hands around her middle. She squirmed inside when he did that, but she let him. She tried to stay, but even this time, she was the first to pull away.

--He's coming, huh? When? he asked with feigned apathy.

--Tomorrow, probably, provided the snow doesn't hit. Staying the night in Rawlins, she told him. Oh, but get this: he's not alone.

Flax stopped stirring the stew.

--Huh, he responded, pause. Why's he bothering to swing by here then?

--It's not that, Dea said. He's got his boy with him.

--Boy?

--You didn't know about that?

--Course, I knew, he answered.

Dea wasn't sure he did know or rather: was he not telling her all that he did?

--Well, he asked if I minded watching the kid for a few days while he did a job up in Ten Sleep. Told me some sad story about the boy's mom. You know about that?

--Heard tell, Flax said. His jaw hardened.

--How'd she die? He told me a fire.

--Well, that's the word.

--Wasn't their house was it?

Flax said he guessed it was a shed or a barn or something. Freak accident. Nobody was too sure what happened.

What a thing for a kid to live through, she said.

He said that ain't the half of it.

--What do you mean? Deatrice asked. The grandparents? Are they his parents or hers?

--Dunno. What do I look like? The crime bureau?

She said she was sorry and that she hadn't meant to pry. Just wanted to understand why it was that he thought it'd be better to have the kid traipsing across the badlands instead at home with the grandparents who'd been taking care of him.

--What are they? Monsters? she asked.

--No. Mennonites.

--Think it's that?

Of course, he did. Freaks, he called them.

She hadn't needed to ask; she knew how much he hated all religions, especially ones like Mennonites, that Latter-Day Saints were mistaken for. Even though he'd been the one running back to Castor Valley the minute he got scared of who he was, who he was sure as heck wasn't his parents' Only True and Living Church on the Face of the Earth. He never said it outright, but she'd come to see how he blamed most of his oddities on his own Latter-Day Saint upbringing. He believed somehow that everything would have been different if he hadn't been raised in Castor with its own brand of religious wackos. Without them there wouldn't be the kinks. She'd sometimes felt he had a picture of that life he imagined for himself—one as mainstream as any the Church he loathed preached, espoused and cultivated. He would have lived up to their Ideal. If only they hadn't asked it of him.

Still he didn't think taking the boy in was a good idea. He told Deatrice.

--Why not? You don't have to worry about me, if that's your angle.

--No, Deatrice, he said (and he rarely used her name). I don't know we should get ourselves all messed up in this.

She figured Flax was worried about his own feelings. Maybe he didn't want to turn babysitter to a kid whose dad he fucked for thrills.

--Well, if you're worried about getting too tangled up in Zed, she said, don't. Doesn't strike me as one you can tie down.

--Darn straight, said Flax.

The next day when Zed arrived with the boy, she found out things were as she'd surmised. The father explained how wanted his son away from his strict Mennonite parents. Wanted him in a place where the boy wouldn't be fed with lies about his own father. When the community found out about Zed, they'd shunned him. After that they wouldn't even let him see the boy.

Deatrice wanted to change the subject. She asked about the roads, whether he'd had to put on the chains.

But her husband came back to the subject of the grandparents. He asked about custody. Sure, it was fine the boy was away from those zealots, but was Zed sure the grandparents weren't his legal guardians?

That seemed no question to ask a father, Deatrice thought, and she told her husband so.

All the while, the boy clung to his father's denimed thigh. Zed asked could they sit down?

--Of course, the husband and wife said, how stupid of them. Standing around talking about the boy as if he wasn't there.

Samuel he said his name was. And Deatrice knew in the way he said it that Sammy or plain old Sam would never do.

Samuel's father assured the Flaxes it was just for a few days. Once he finished the woodwork on the house in Ten Sleep, he was settling down with the boy. Had a lead on more permanent work in a lumberyard in the city. He'd have enough cash saved up by the end of Christmas vacation to put down a deposit on an apartment and get the boy back in school. Since it was already December, it wasn't like Samuel would have to miss too much.

Deatrice took the boy in. Recently he'd lost a front tooth. Must be about was eight or nine. She knew that much about children and not much more. Teenagers had come natural to her. Any child younger was an utter mystery. Any human who couldn't use reason to argue against Deatrice was suspect. She wondered would it be okay to challenge the kid. She hoped he liked to eat.

They ate stew. Dea apologized it was just leftovers and nothing special. Samuel ate and finished his bowl. He clearly ate more out of obligation than relish, looking up at his father between spoons. Zed politely asked questions. Asked Deatrice about her health, the recipe. Asked Flax about the trial. He answered Flax's queries about the drive from Ohio, about Ten Sleep, about the lumberyard in the city. The boy asked could he have another biscuit. His dad smiled at him.

--Jam? asked Dea.

--No, he said and he ate the crusty top. He began peeling back each layer of soft white middle. He stretched out each transparent layer against a forefinger before he'd eat it.

The Hungry Jack kind are the only ones that peel in layers like that, Deatrice thought. Sometimes she ate hers that way too, but she didn't tell the boy.

Samuel's father and Deatrice's husband excused themselves from the table. She heard Flax's bedroom door close upstairs at the end of the hall. She watched to see if Samuel would react, but he didn't, even though he'd clearly seen Flax grab the back of Zed's hand before they left the kitchen.

She showed the boy to the guest room in the basement. She got his bed ready. Unpacked his things and put them in the dresser Flax had bought that afternoon in Pamida on his way home from the court in Evingston. Didn't want the boy feeling like he was living out of a bag.

Did he have pajamas? He was probably tired. That was a long ride, she bet and said goodnight and left him for the living room.

She was excited for the night. Above and below her the house was full of life, and it thrilled her. What's more, she'd just received a copy of the translation of Tolstoy's journals. She'd had to order it through Interlibrary Loan all the way from the University in Laramie. It had taken weeks for it to come. It was heavy and had an extra plastic cover on its hardback. She began to read, listening all the while for sounds in the house. The first sound she heard was the scrape of vinyl feet coming up the stairs. It was Samuel in footed pajamas.

--Those are too small for you.

--I know, he said. Dad says he'll get me a new pair when he comes back.

--Feet are about to grow through.

--I hope so, said Samuel. My feet get itchy.

He sat right next to her on the couch. He had hair like alfalfa honey. She saw how it would darken as he would age, how his father's goodlooks would ripen and afflict him. But for the time he smelled like a child's sweat—all summer grass and horseplay.

--Like to read? she asked.

He nodded.

--Any good?

He nodded and looked at her page. Reading was his favorite subject.

She thought about telling him how she used to teach kids not that much older than he, but she didn't.

--Not this one, she said turning her heavy book facedown on the couch.

She went to the bookshelf and pulled down a worn copy of Andersen's Fairy Tales.

--Would these do? she asked, but she understood already they would.

She'd expected him to turn right away to the pictures, but before she could get through another of Tolstoy's entries, Samuel was thickly engrossed in a story.

--Which did you choose? she asked and looked.

He was reading "The Little Matchgirl."

--That one's not much of a bedtime story, she told him. What about the Ugly Duckling?

He knew that one. So she asked him which one he wanted as she turned to the table of contents. He chose "The Snow Queen."

--It's long, she said, but it was clear that didn't matter.

A hobgoblin, a real demon, forged a giant mirror that shrunk everything good. It distorted beautiful things and made them hideous. Jubilant in his own creation, this devil flew towards Heaven his evil mirror in his hands. But just before he had reached the angels, it slipped. It fell. It shattered over the world. The shards full of ugliness scattering all over the globe.

She read to him aloud but soon began to hear her husband and the boy's father in the bedroom. Samuel didn't seem to notice, but the noise intensified.

Usually this was the moment Deatrice Flax waited for. The moment when, if she was alone, she would pause in her reading, lean back into the couch, her eyes barely closed to picture, not the act itself but the euphoria, something she would never understand. The rush of power latent in two men. Strangers loving the same—the funhouse mirror of their own desire. Intent on tearing each other apart.

But tonight that would not do. She went to the turntable, selected an album. In retrospect, Herb Albert and the Tijuana Brass may not have been the best choice. It didn't so much mask the noise as provide it a slapstick soundtrack. She suppressed a laugh at her mistake. She read Samuel the Snow Queen over the music and the mating.

By the time the first side of the record had finished, the men were quiet. Asleep, she reckoned. But Samuel was not. She read more, three of the seven parts of the story. Little Gerda faced a coming winter, continued on in search of her lost love Kay. But Kay's image of her, of the world itself was forever distorted by a shard of glass in his eye.

Samuel slept.

He was sleeping still when morning came and his father was ready to leave. Flax sullen, stared down into a mug of coffee. Shouldn't Dea wake the boy, so Zed could say his goodbyes? Zed came up behind her husband and bit at his ear. No use in disturbing the kid. He was used to the routine. His old man had run off enough times before.

It disturbed her, but she understood. She guessed he was right in avoiding a fuss, for when the boy woke near 10 and the men were long gone, he didn't ask about his dad. He acted as if Deatrice and he already knew the routine. He was so good at it, in fact, that it

was almost the weekend before she realized the boy might be bored with the cooking and cleaning that filled her days.

He held to her whenever he could. Not under her feet, mind you. But when she paused. Some thought on her mind, he would come to her as if he could take it away. She began to give him exercises. Had him practice long addition. She relearned it herself with him. He liked her nearby. He was still quiet around her. Nights he would fall asleep on her belly as they both read silently. She would jostle him gently. He'd scrape his feet on the floor and head off to bed, but not before he kissed her. It surprised her, this affection, how much she needed it without knowing it. How touch-starved she had been.

As the days passed, he became more a boy. He'd run and roughhouse. He'd talk non-stop and ask her questions about her childhood in Castor, about California and college, about why she came back there to teach. He loved the story of how Deatrice and Flax met. She, a twenty-five year old teacher. Flax, a curious, eighteen year-old senior.

Samuel felt more and more like her friend. But with the change another shift began: he touched her less and less. Their late night ritual shifted too. Gradually he moved away from her on the couch. Before too long, all that was left was the kiss.

It saddened Dea, but she was used to it. She'd seen it happen before. There was something wrong with her that made it so. That made it so hard for her to stay physical. With anyone. No matter how much she wanted it, the deeper she loved the more painful touch became. She blamed her mind.

Christmas was just over a week away and it was decided they should have a tree. Flax and Deatrice hadn't had any reason to have their own for years. She told Samuel the plan and he said no. Mennonites couldn't have them. Then he grinned. So she drove them to the Merc where a few spruce were tied up next to the shopping carts. They started to select one, but Samuel began to sneeze. They swung by the department to tell Deputy Flax that they were headed to town. Wouldn't be back till late.

They selected the best one they could find in Penney's. She let Samuel decide how to decorate it. She suggested toy cars and trains as ornaments, but he wanted bulbs. He chose pearly pink. Must take a little after his dad, she thought to herself. Samuel found the tinsel. The fattest tinsel either of them had ever seen.

They were nearly home when they hit the black ice on the Interstate. It felt like they were a globe set to spinning around and around. The moment was as prolonged as people said. The flash of headlights on guard rails, sagebrush, mile marker, blizzard fence. And

around again. She kept turning into the spin. She didn't know how her mind had been clear enough to remember something that counterintuitive. But it was something about not being alone. It was not her life that mattered.

When they finally came to a stop, somehow they were upright. Somehow they were still on the road. She couldn't believe it. But that was when she remembered. The ice, the spin, the near miss. It had happened before.

Still, as they went to drive again, she was so struck by the miracle that she couldn't talk. Her hands began to shake about the time she saw the rest area just over the last of the tall ridges the natives call the Sisters. She pulled in, surprised to see her husband's pick-up parked outside. She called to him at the door, refusing to let Samuel go inside. She couldn't believe she did it. She had never intruded before and she never would again. Flax came out.

--Happened again, she said.

--What?

--Nearly died. Black ice.

While he looked inside the window at Samuel, Dea rested her head on Flax's shoulder for a moment. Between two knuckles, she held the cuff of his sleeve.

Flax drove them home, came back for the pick-up the next day.

They put up the tree and never mentioned their near accident again.

Samuel loved the tree. In fact it was true the Mennonites hadn't had one. He would stop in his reading and stare at it. Ask Deatrice if they could turn off all the lights and read by candles. She would watch him stare at the lights. She too would stare and scrunch up her eyes, the way she used to when she was a kid. Squinting like that made the lights grow blurry and large like streetlights in a fog.

It had been a couple of weeks since Zed had last called. He'd said he wouldn't be done till after Christmas. Samuel didn't seem to care.

Flax seemed to take to the boy also. And soon he too was much like himself. Deatrice and he would talk the way they had before the boy came. She would read them passages from the Tolstoy, especially any passage about diarrhea or the Count's repeated avowals to never again go carousing with gypsy wenches. Now she understood why it had nearly ruined his marriage when Tolstoy insisted his bride read the journals, on their wedding night at that. She explained it all to Samuel and Flax who seemed amused by what amused her. But she didn't read aloud when she reached a passage from 1899. Late in life, Tolstoy wrote:

“For seventy years I have been lowering and lowering my opinion of women, and still it has to be lowered more and more. The woman question! How can there not be a woman question? Only not in this, how women should begin to direct life, but in this how they could stop ruining it.”

Two days from Christmas Samuel had finished all the Andersen tales. All but one tale strangely missing from the book, that and “the Little Matchgirl.” He’d remembered well how Dea told him not to read it, so he’d waited. Finally he got up the courage to ask. Would she?

She read the story aloud to him on the couch. Their minds envisioning each scene the little girl saw in the light of each flaring match. When the story ended, Samuel reached over to take Dea’s hand. Tears fell on the pages of the book like they had the first time she’d read it decades ago in the late night quiet of her childhood bed.

It was the last time they would ever touch.

The morning of Christmas Eve, Deatrice slept in late. She’d stayed up all night with a new book after she’d finished wrapping the last of the presents. Late in the morning before she woke, she dreamed she saw a girl standing in the middle of a road. It was late and dark. The headlights of a car illuminated her gaunt frame. She was homely. Like she’d just climbed out of bed, her hair on end. The girl stood stark still on the dividing lines of road.

Startled, Deatrice woke up. She couldn’t shake the vision of the girl she was sure was herself. The house was unusually quiet. Flax had the day off and was sleeping off last night’s bender. It was nearly eleven and strange that Samuel wasn’t up. She went to his room and found him gone.

Upstairs was a note from Zed thanking them. They’d been asleep and he hadn’t wanted to disturb them. They’d understand, he was sure, goodbyes and all. Samuel signed his name next to his father’s. They hadn’t even taken Samuel’s presents. Deatrice called up the Relief Society. Asked if there were any needy families.

It was nearly New Year’s when all the news stations started covering the story. Even Deatrice who avoided news out of principle, couldn’t ignore it. To think she might never have known if it hadn’t have been for media’s sensationalized nickname, all from the color of an unidentified boy’s pajamas. When the realization hit her, within minutes she was on the phone to Flax. He knew people at the Highway Department who understood the

need for discretion. And the authorities were contacted in Nebraska where the boy's body had been found. Frozen in a ditch.

Months later when Flax had spent a Saturday out taking pictures, that they developed the roll of film. Among Flax's photos of the badlands, he found snapshot. Without a word he handed it to Dea.

Zed must have put the camera on timer to take it. Moments before they left. Pictured were Zed and Samuel standing by the Christmas tree on the morning he took him away. A few hours from the end. It comforted Deatrice. She let herself believe that the image of a beautiful tree floated up before Samuel, like it had the Matchgirl, the moment before he breathed his last.

The Gist Of It. *Perhaps misunderstanding the term “Rest Area,” our narrator wastes a much-deserved night off parked outside a roadside toilet. She passes the time wondering what to call a group of magpies. She tries to remember a family pet her family never really had. In short, she tries to avoid all the pertinent questions no doubt plaguing her readers’ minds. How she follows a bird into a restroom. Inside she receives a strange present, takes a nasty spill, changes shoes, discovers her husband with two men. How she runs crying like a baby into the badlands. What horrors she sees there. How she finally meets a certain Constance II.*

Day Seven: Friday, 1 September 1995

i.

Call this black-billed congregation “mischief,”
but that’s too spot on. Call their number “charm,”
just not tonight. This night their magpie mischief
is no “tittering,” it’s a “gulp.” They swarm
a grove of Russian olive trees, leaves pale
as sticks of spearmint gum. A night this warm
they feed like summer’s gone, like all the pale
trees’ fruit might freeze by the time morning breaks
and fall.

A black-tailed cloud, they raise a wail
that sounds like mothers crying. My hand shakes,
and though I stopped here hours ago, my foot
grinds down the pedal to the Bronco’s brakes.
I’ve stopped, but nothing’s stopping. I need food.
One magpie leaves the gulp, lands on my hood.

ii.

The magpie eyeballs me. “Be TRUSS!” she squawks.
Or does she shout herself down in the windshield?
No, she cocks her head back, sighs...she’s mocking
me, I swear. I lean in toward that glass shield
and dare the creature close. I want to peak
behind that sable-feathered mask shielding
what in my condition—hungry, weak—
I’m convinced is a woman’s human face.

A leaf’s stuck in her maw, “Be TRUSS!” she squeaks.
How Poe, I think, but with the trees, this place
is far more like that spot where Dante tells
how suicides are damned: each soul a voice
jailed in a thicket’s leaves—each leaf a cell
on which the Harpies feed.

Which makes this hell.

iii.

No, not hell, Bea. Just a rest area,
 some hole dug in the road where travelers
 relieve themselves, then leave. A rest area,
 so why not make like you're a traveler
 and leave? Your home state ain't the grave. This bird's
 a varmint, not some mythic reveler.
 She pecks the chrome horse on the hood, a bird,
 you see. The only pet you asked your father for.

But Dad said, "Magpies eat spoiled meat & turds.
 They're trouble, Bea, not pets."

"They're omnivores?"

a nine-year old you asked.

"Yep. Steal hatchlings
 from strangers' nests."

That made you want one more:
 white-breasted thief, black head, metal blue wings.
 Bold. Brassy. Brazen. Things you could not be.

iv.

We'd catch you one then. Call it Western Airlines.
 Wouldn't have to stay inside the house,
 we'd keep it caged out back beside the clothesline.
 We'd teach it how a human speaks and counts,
 and feed it dead things found beside the road.
 Through chickenwire the beast would watch our house,
 and once we tamed it, we would let it roam
 to steal bright stuff, to fill its cage with foil
 and jewels. The antelope beside the road
 would have their pelts pecked clean of pests, fleas, soil
 by Western Airlines, who'd miraculously hie
 back home to us. Like souls, their mortal coil
 sloughed off, float back to heaven, our magpie
 would know that home's the only way to fly.

v.

Tried once again to run only to get
 this far from home, Bea? What, your one night off
 you'd rather spend it parked beside a toilet?
 For what? To watch if someone's getting off
 with someone else inside some skunk shit room
 your gender cannot enter? Good Lord, be off.
 What prodding will it take, what sign of doom,
 what rattling of the cage will spread your wings?
 The cage ain't locked and you can fly. What broom
 will drive the pest you are away, what thing?

Keep counting syllables, keep ten count lines,
 back forth between the bars keep shuttling...
 Oops! Go back, Bea, count! That was only nine,
 you disappointing waste of personkind.

vi.

Someone's demanding I recite...But who?
 It's me who scribbles this. Not Dad (long dead).
 And not some child I cared for (frozen through).
 And not this bird (alive and shitting) on my hood—
 this bird who moves close, head cocked questioning.

"That Boy Blue story's fake..." But once that's said
 it's me who's fake. I start backpedaling:
 "I mean I didn't write that tale," I say
 to some fool bird I think can question me.
 "I didn't write it—couldn't have," I say
 to some devoid of feeling bird whose back's
 towards me—not listening (it's gone, in fact).

ix.

Not merely pushing “MEN,” I’m entering.
 The door’s halfway ajar. Rubber doorstep
 stutters across a floor that’s glistening.
 It’s still wet from a Pinesol-scented mop.
 I follow bird tracks over drying tile.

Been years since I have been inside a reststop
 I’ll have you know, Chaste Reader Keeping File:
 in all my years of voyeurism, I
 have not done boysrooms. Not my style,
 just too much risk. That bird’s the reason why
 I’m here. Its tracks grow faint. They seem to go
 into the far stall where—there’s no magpie.
 Instead I find, sitting beside the bowl,
 a picnic basket draped in calico.

x.

A basket so cliché, its calico
 is Judy Garland checkered blue and white.
 I half expect to find a toy Toto...
 But from a bow of ribbon on the side
 there hangs a note written by my Admirer...
 by now I know well how this Person writes.
 It reads:

*“To Miss B. Haven in Her Mire:
 Accept these tokens of my deep regard.
 One trusts You’ll use the one that most inspires.
 From One on Whom your eye shall bend soon,*

C.”

I pull the cheap print fabric back and here’s
 a toilet brush. I pull that out and see
 beneath some wadded tissues what appears
 to be—and is—a pair of pruning shears.

xi.

Yes, pruning shears. A rusted pair at that.
 The heft of them is pleasing in my hand.
 I try to squeeze the cold, red handles shut.
 The rusted blades in my arthritic hands
 resist at first then warm with each new scrape.
 The sound: like metal grinding stone to sand.

I switch them for the toilet brush. Its shape,
 its lightness bothers me now. I look around:
 all stainless steel. No need to scrub and scrape
 a burnished permanence. Just flush things down
 and presto! Clean. So, where's the fun in that?
 "I choose the shears," I say. How dumb that sounds:
 I choose the shears and not the brush. "For what,"
 I ask, then turn...

a door's pulled quickly shut.

xii.

And just as quickly, I slam shut the stall.
 My Admirer is here, hidden inside
 the service closet opposite my stall.
 That eye that watched me from the other side
 in Bruised's room watches me again and knows.
 I lean my head against the door and sigh
 or, rather, moan. Another moan echoes
 across the room. It's wrong. It tries again.
 The echo practices, gets better, knows
 what I know—more—what I do not.

Breathe in
 breathe out, hold back the wish to sigh or moan.
 I feel the steel partition cool against
 my head, a groan escapes, I hear a groan
 perfectly timed and pitched to match my own.

xiii.

Not only perfect-pitched and timed but close.
Not 'cross the room, but here. My breathing quickens.

As a lover in bed—trying to close
whatever distance separates his sticking
body from the Beloved's—learns to catch
and steal that Other's breath—even so each quickened
inhale/exhale that I take is matched
by someone standing now an inch away.

The metal door between us both is latched.
It's stainless steel as well and yet it's stained
by some man's seed shot 'cross its mirror-like
expanse. I see this and devise a way
to find out what my adversary's like.
Like that "seed" did, I start a downward hike.

xiv.

(A viscous liquid does not hike, it slides
especially down. I wrote that just to rhyme.)

Without moving my feet I try to glide
down low enough to see just who I am
up against. All restrooms have that gap...
as if a full-length wall would be a crime...
I bank on it. It seems I bank on gaps
a lot—at least the one in Room 13,
but that one's vertical. To my mishap,
this horizontal one's too low. I'd lean
upon my hand to get down lower, but
that would be seen and I will not be seen.
And so I try to balance, squat and jut
my back back, but instead, fall on my butt.

xv.

As I fall back, my head hits the commode.

I will not have the reader think I'm prone
to fits of pique or fainting episodes,
but I might have blacked out.

I wake. Alone.

The person cast in the Tormentor's role
has gone. I'm on the floor, would be supine
if it was not for one steel toilet bowl
on which I rest the base of my sore head.

Such is the gift of toilet bowls: that cold,
bless'd comfort to the sick and vomited.

I am alone (or think I am). I treat
myself: I lie there sprawled out like the dead.
Stretched out beyond the stall my legs and feet
That's when I hear *them* talk about my feet...

xvi.

Imagine: two men traveling. They speak
in shouts. Their need to stop's almost as dire
as their need to go—it's not a leak;
the truck's gaskets are tight; no need to wire
or talk to anyone about a horse;
the racing kind or other; all their tires
are gauged; their tank's near full. They shout. They're hoarse
from singing to their cassette tapes in gorge-
ous voices. Started out excited. It grew worse.
A scheduled pitstop feels much like an urge.
Grown men still prone to youth's hysterias
and stunts, they're on their way to Flaming Gorge—
not the one sinners need be wary of,
but Flaming Gorge Nat'l Rec. Area.

xvii.

They smell already like the place they're headed,
 like Flaming Gorge—its sunburn, pinyon pine
 sweat, cocoa butter, juniper, its leaded
 gasoline. Their Dodge Ram '89
 is winged: two blond-haired forearms flap and glide
 out two side windows. Both arms beat in time
 to match the wind with some drumbeat inside.
 Both point the exit out they need to take.

Before the fun to come, some on the side,
 a scheduled pitstop they can't wait to make.
 The summer's 'bout to pass and these fit lads
 must take what sun-sweet fun there's left to take—
 one fling before the final fling is had—
 must meet a trick found through a personal ad.

xviii.

We'll not attempt to recreate that ad.
 Let: "Wrangler butts just drive me nuts" suffice,
 along with this last turn of phrase: "Right glad
 to host buds passing thru WYO real nice."
 So let's imagine that this ad (found in
 an independent weekly's classifieds)
 inspired a certain party to phone in
 toll-free a message which got a response,
 and that response responded to honed in
 upon a date/time/place. No frilly ponce
 called them. Each "hey dudes," "howdy men" and "whoa!"
 maintained a proper manly nonchalance.
 At least his voice filled up their jeans, and so
 they sallied forth to meet him on the road.

xix.

By using “sally” do not get me wrong.
 To sally forth takes “balls” especially when
 it’s forth to meet some stranger in a john,
 and these Wheeler boys are ballsy men.
 We’ll call them Wheeler, Daise and Cheyne, assume
 because of their resemblance that they’re kin.

A four-eyed Someone exits the restroom.
 Daise and Cheyne Wheeler passing nod and grunt.
 Was that their guy? They turn, check and presume
 it’s not...unless they are some joke’s cruel blunt:
 would Wranglerbutt come dressed in Levi jeans?
 They step inside. It couldn’t be that runt.
 They go to use the urinal, it seems,
 while actually their eyes survey the scene.

xx.

And what exactly do their eyes survey?
 A pretty fancy men’s room, nothing more.
 The trough and sinks are chrome...It’s then that they
 see something weird under the far stall’s door.
 There’s something poking out. They step back, zip
 and see: a body sprawled out on the floor.
 An impulse to turn tail and run takes grip,
 but Daise and Cheyne stand firm as iron rod.
 Like two defensive linemen duck and zip,
 they shuffle forward to inspect the bod.
 But it is to the feet their eyes get glued.
 It’s not the feet themselves, but how they’re shod.
 Not in your standard brown, black, white or blue:
 They’ve got on ruby-sequined tennis shoes.

xxi.

Bright red. The Wheelers' ruby-sequined shock's nothing to what goes through the wearer's head at seeing them herself.

I hadn't walked here in them, wouldn't think of wearing red much less a sequined sneaker. Then I hear a Wheeler sing. "Ding dong, the witch is dead."

"Shut up, she might be."

"Let's get out of here."

"You think that runt we just saw offed this chick?" one asks and leaves.

The other shuffles near and kicks my foot. I let it flop. "That's sick," he says deciding that I'm not alive. He runs outside. "We gotta leave, bro, quick." At which I hear, I know 'cause I'm his wife, the Sheriff, Platte, the Story of My Life.

xxii.

Imagine next an episode we'll call "How the Wheeler Boys Met Junior Platte."

Daise means to run, but sees a man. He's tall. Cheyne runs out shouting, but a cowboy hat distracts him. "Body," he says.

"I know, damn,"

says Daise, not sure which : this man's or that one by the can. Their impulse was to scam, but now they want to stay, especially when they hear his voice. Its swing-low, thank-you-ma'am-like tone says, "Howdy, what's the problem, gents?" A rush of explanations then ensues.

The long, tall stranger listens, then walks in and grants the Wheelers the back pocket view, that brown stitched brand, that Wrangler "W."

xxiii.

He tells the boys stay put and put they stay.
They gaze a moment at the place he went,
then at each other, not daring to say
what they both think. They don't seem innocent
Daise spits. Cheyne cleans an ear. Looks like they're caught.
They like their trouble, but this time they went
and got themselves real screwed: this guy's a cop.
The way that he went in that door—they've seen
on real-life films and TV and whatnot.
They didn't see a gun, but what's that mean?
They ponder this a minute, seems a year,
then through the opened door a pistol gleams.
They're asked, "What really brings you boys out here?"
The gun waves them inside. "Step to the rear."

xxiv.

They stand shoulder to shoulder, wrist to wrist,
like prisoners already cuffed and chained.
They look aghast for neither would have guessed
what they see now, not the grisly remains
of some foul homicide lays in that stall,
its door now open. "What the hell," says Cheyne.
The armed man says, "Now don't play dumb, y'all."
"Go pick it up," he says and nudges Daise.
Daise does as he is told. "Don't this beat all.
I don't know what it is, I swear," he says,
but it's a basket, the kind grandmas love.
Cheyne pulls an object out, shows it to Daise:
a pale pink toilet brush. There's more. He shoves
his hand back in and finds...a latex glove.

xxv.

A Playtex Living Glove, to be exact.
 “Well, dudes, that sure’s some picnic lunch you found,”
 the armed man says, then laughs his laugh that cracks.
 They’re silent. He tells them to turn around.
 “Is this the stiff you’re looking for?” he asks.
 They don’t reply. They hardly make a sound.
 Just breath, just working mouths, a muffled gasp...
 I don’t need to imagine what these comrades
 do. I’ve seen the scene. It doesn’t last.

The one called Platte knows just the place these nomads
 can get off. They go. None of the men
 mentions the body, but as our Dear Comrade
 Stalin said, “No person—no problem.”
 They didn’t look for me. Who can blame them?

xxvi.

Yet there I am in the most obvious place,
 hiding now in the closet ‘midst the mops,
 a bucketful of tears run down my face.
 It’s not about my husband, not those fops.
 I will not have you think I give a shit—
 about those men, at least. I cannot stop.
 I leave the closet, drop the shears and split.
 Outside it’s almost dark. The sky’s a blur
 of lavender. I walk. I almost slip
 on something. Look, it’s one of those black birds
 run over on the road, its breast, that band
 of white’s a red mess now. The flock of birds
 flies north then east.. I look up, clench my hands
 and follow them, out into the badlands.

xxvii.

The badlands stretch two hundred miles east.
 On brightest summer days they're colorless,
 not brown, not gray—a bland, grand feast
 of devastation. They look like the mess
 a bunch of toddler gods would make in mud
 before they learn to carve. They're contourless
 these towers and hills, these crumbling piles of crud.

You got the picture: not called "bad" for naught.

Except—at certain sunsets when the flood
 of ebbing light gives out its last long shot
 at grace, then these sad gulleys mirror sky.
 And into such a view I go, my God,
 I pause a moment, dry my eyes and sigh,
 then head into the badlands, out to die.

xxviii.

The mudstone shale gives way beneath my feet,
 but I keep moving on. (It's those damn shoes.)
 "People will look. They'll see me," I repeat.
 As if I can outrun the very shoes
 I'm running on, in vain I try to scramble
 up a ridge. I fall. I cannot choose
 to stop and so I crawl. The badlands crumble
 in my hands as I claw my way up.
 I'm nearly at the crest, but then I stumble,
 fall down, climb back up. I reach the top.

The climb has done me good; my eyes are drier.
 All better. Should go back, but I can't stop.
 (Those shoes.) Another ridge, one even higher.
 I stand atop its height and see the fire.

xxix.

An infant fire, soon to be a blaze,
 its light becoming bright enough to see
 the fire-making women, eyes agaze
 at some fantastic figure through a screen—
 the sparks and burning sheets of paper floating
 like petals off a rose caught in a breeze.
 This cinder eddy whirls about the gloating
 faces: women—plain, drawn, homely—none
 distinct except the one on whom they're doting.
 She is, in form, a marvel carved like stone.
 They stare at her, light blinding, blackening shade.
 She does not care, this dread, fantastic one.
 She gazes down at her reflection made
 upon the flat face of an axe's blade.

xxx.

Description of the figure, foot to head:

Bronze rubber sole; steel toe; a combat boot
 laced to the calf—clay brown, a thoroughbred's;
 the golden knee, bone, sinew, firm as root;
 and then the ruffle comes in scalloped white;
 and then the prairie skirt begins, each foot
 of fabric is a mile of countryside,
 a flyover of Iowa; the waist—
 the fabric ends, it's broad, a country wide;
 her navel fertile; and the skin, the taste
 of copper; ribs and valley; there they are—
 the breasts, bare to the sky and full; her face;
 the knots of woolen hair blown high and far...

And what did I leave out? Oh, yes, the scar...

xxxi.

Or rather plural—scars—for they are legion.
 From head to hip they run in routes north/south.
 One alone slants: stretching from the region
 of her right brow and cutting 'cross her mouth
 through both her lips; it skips from chin to collar,
 bone to breast it plummets left.

One doubts
 that the attack was meant to kill. Just maul her.
 I say attack for they seem random but
 these scars are tended to, as if they all were
 marks she wants to keep, like garden ruts
 she furrows with great care. If truth be told,
 she wants them seen, and thus her strange get-up:
 her low part—chaste, her upper—bought and sold,
 half Ingalls Wilder, one half centerfold.

xxxii.

I look at her nine seconds, maybe less,
 and yet, you see, the sight is somewhat branded
 in my mind. That axe blade as her glass,
 which she begins to swing. From where I stand
 it seems that she is hacking at the flames
 those women made and all their faces, bland
 and sterile, are the subjects of the frame—
 the blade reflects their camp, the bus, their tents.
 A strange sight anywhere which the badland
 turns stranger. When I hear the breath she vents
 I feel how close I've come. The group of hags
 breathes unison, then stops when she stops, when
 she bends, and wipes the axe on some long rag,
 which then turns out to be

Wyoming's flag.

xxxiii.

Emblazoned on a deep blue azure field—
 rectangular in shape, much like the state—
 Wyoming's seal: two columns and a shield,
 three figures—miner, rancher, suffragette.
 This seal is planted deep inside the belly
 of a bison caged inside the state
 its four walls white then red. He fills this cell. He
 hunches in submission to the flag
 and to the fearsome woman as she sullies
 his white hide. She pulls his great neck back
 and cuts across it with her soot-stained blade.

She then looks up (and so do all her hags).
 They look toward me where I think the shade
 protects me...I'm wrong. I should not have stayed.

xxxiv.

For then the woman beckons me to come.
 I almost do. (Those shoes.) Then the hags see,
 and then they beckon too, and then I run
 (which these shoes do quite well). They're following,
 I think. The sequins blink. They're on my trail,
 I'm sure. The idea drives me on. They see,
 see how I'm crumbling through the badland shale.
 Across the backs of turtles fossilized,
 through alkali, I run while sirens wail...
 and not the women kind...cops, flashing lights.
 They're after me, I think. What have I done?
 Thus crazily I run and fantasize
 until the rest stop—lights ahead like home.
 I'm back inside the Bronco, all alone.

xxxv.

Alone, I think, but as you gather, I am not.
 Surprisingly it takes me quite a while
 to realize that Person's there, and that I'm *not*
 surprised to find she's been there all the while
 I sat and caught my breath eyes on the wheel.
 This fact might be hard to believe, but I'll
 swear I didn't jump. I held the wheel
 as she put her hand beside mine.

I turn

to look at her in profile. Reader, feel
 assured: I knew her long before she turns
 to look at me. I see a face that I've
 seen several times before. I know. I learn.

"You've seen them?"

"Yes."

"The scarred one? She's alive?"

I nod. She points the shears at me, says, "Drive."

xxxvi.

The halogen lit entrance ramp presents
 a choice: we take the left. The orange beams
 fade in the rearview. Highway. I can sense
 her to my side, her thick-lensed glassed gleam,
 her skin's a sickly silver, bark on birch.

"Who is the scarred one?"

Narcissism(?)—she seems

to answer.

"Oh. The others?"

"Them? They search

for me." Fay ones or fans, I think she says. "They came!"

She is that woman in the scarf at Church,
 Busch Beer cap guy at John's—one and the same.
 She makes a more convincing man than I,
 I must admit. I ask, "What is your name?"

"Goddess! Of course, you know it, dearie! Why
 I'm Mrs. Rasmussen, Bruised's second wife!"

The Gist Of It. *Beatrice wakes in unfamiliar circumstances; she think she sees Bruised's adopted father. She is sung to sleep. She wakes again with a stranger in the bed. She is more confused than before; a possible state of arousal. How she discovers what motel she is in; the poor state of housekeeping in that motel room; amid the disarray she discovers verses that appear to have been written by herself; she does not remember writing these verses; she reads them. The verses include a disturbing vision she may or may not have had. She finds a flashback possibly written in her hand; she begins to read it. The flashback is interrupted: her strange bedmate is awake; the bedmate shows her something and makes a request. The flashback is included nonetheless..*

Day Eight: Saturday, 2 September 1995

i.

I wake. It was a dream. This room's my room.
This bed's my bed. That smoke's a cigarette,
the Sheriff's smoke. It's dark so I assume
that it's still night outside and so I let
myself believe it's Friday still. That chain
of images—the danger, the upset—
were all a dream. I hear a sound like rain.
An air conditioner turns on. It creaks,
then drones,

which means:

not home;

that's not the rain,

it is a faucet. Voices—one that squeaks,
one low—both intensely whispering.

“Just take the car and go,” the low voice speaks.

Then a door opens. Light falls shattering
the dark and sets two shoes a-glimmering.

ii.

I slept in them. Those shoes. Seeing them shine
brings back a flood of recollected shame,
ancient of time but clearer in my mind
than day-old news. The facts of how I came
to be here in this bed are far more muddled
than why those sparkling shoes cause me such pain.
The details of that past, both bold and subtle,
just yesterday were long forgotten lore,
but now it's yesterday that's all befuddled,
lost...

The light goes out but not before
I see Butch Rasmussen? but who can tell.
He looks back at me, then he shuts the door.
The dark's full of sensation, sound and smell,
foam blanket, muslin sheets, a cheap motel.

iii.

A darkened motel room defies all sense
of place and where you are becomes uncertain.
Behind an almost universal scent
it hides particulars. Its vinyl curtain
shuts out time. It tucks bedsheets so tight
that even restless feet must rest, the burden
homelessness laid down. Yet every night
must end, synthetic fabrics can't stop that,
and when the motel lights flip on, the fright
of place comes back, the ugly spot you're at.
In pastel mauves and blues it says: Move on.
This No Place room's no place to hang your hat.
Get up. It's No One's bed this bed you're on.
There're other vacant rooms ahead. Be gone.

iv.

Beside, beside my head a nightstand stands.
I cannot see it, but I know this table:
beside each motel bed across the land
there's one just like it. There's a lamp—not able
to see it either, but it's there atop
that nightstand. Fixed and bolted down and labeled
"Property of _____." Constant amidst the nonstop
flow of passing lives, each separate, unlinked,
a stable fixture in each drama, just a prop,
that lamp has lit the spot and, on cue, blinked.

Eyes open in a room, oil dark as crude,
I lay there frozen on the bed and think
about that bolted lamp and I conclude:
I'm just as stuck and I'm not screwed and glued.

v.

I do not hear the bathroom door, instead
 I feel the air shift, turn warm, shift again:
 the Other Person here's a body on the bed.
 The mattress does not shift. Just out and in—
 a breath in time with mine—her outtake cooling
 "O" exhaled against my neck. A twinge
 of feeling, sharp first, then a dull and pooling
 sense of loss seeps out from someplace deep.
 while in my ear I hear her gentle cooing:
 "Atta girl, Beasy, bye-bye, looli leap."
 Her voice is high at first and then the drop:
 my father's timbre, lulling me to sleep.
 My wrist begins to pulse and ache; the throb
 of longing bursts. She holds me while I sob.

Lullaby.

*Bye you, willows weep, weep
 'Long the river deep, deep.
 By the by we'll make our bed
 of this singing in our head.*

*Elephant all bare there
 Had a bad nightmare, mare
 How a mousy got him drunk,
 Then cut off his lousy trunk.*

*Bye you, girlies, ding dong,
 Fall off by this sing song.
 Ladybugs like God's Own Blood
 Sprout like flowers in the mud.*

*Bye you, willows, weep, weep.
 Cry yourselves to sleep, sleep.
 Dream of children all forlorn—
 Soon the morn.*

vi.

Another kind of throbbing wakes me up.
 Days might have passed—I feel like I've been drugged.
 Through fabric something's pressing me; it rubs
 against my spine. I sit up, feel the rug
 beneath my feet, (no shoes). Afraid to rouse
 my bunkmate. Strange sense in me, try to shrug
 it off. Back wet from sweat: the sheets are doused.
 My bunkmate gives off heat like someone sick,
 while I—how shall I say it—feel aroused.
 I guess that's what it is: a lunatic
 fluttering in my gut, a dizzied drumming
 in my ears, the darkness is so thick
 it moves before my eyes like insects swarming
 to a beat; air tense, sensate and warming...

vii.

...the warming warning me to stand or lay
 back, have who-knows-what done.

I choose to stand.

The swarming darkness tilts, it turns both ways.
 I reach for something steady: my palm lands
 upon the nightstand where an object—metal
 cold and sharp—lies. I jerk back my hand
 now covered in some liquid. As unsettled
 as I am, I reach back down once more
 then draw my fingers to my lips. A metal
 scent of blood's what I expect, but gore
 is not what lies there pooled about those shears
 with drops, I'd bet, upon the carpet floor.
 The liquid feels and smells and, no doubt, is
 what adolescent boys would label "jizz."

viii.

And now I really want to turn the lights on,
 but can't—I fear whoever's sleeping there.
 I think if I had something I could write on,
 write with, I could figure out just where
 I am and how I got here—the mundane
 yesterday facts of which I'm unaware.

I reach inside the nightstand, which should contain
 some Book from Gideon and stationery,
 but feel an empty bottle of champagne.
 Someone's been having fun, prob'ly not me—
 though even that's something I do not know.
 I do find pen and paper I can't see.

Across the room the AC starts to blow—
 where AC is there must be a window.

ix.

I reach the heavy-curtained windowpane.
 I part the curtain on the outer edge.
 This crack tells: 1.) It's day; 2.) I'm in pain.
 The slice of light feels like an iron wedge
 hammered through my skull. This lo-behold's
 a whirling universe of mites I dredge
 up strength to look at, order and control.

I raise the paper to the light and see
 "Little America" embossed in gold.

Of course that's where I am, that's where I'd be.
 I'll write that story now, I think, but find
 the stationery's written on in 14
 penciled lines, 10 syllables per line,
 in penmanship that's much—no, just like mine.

x.

It reads:

*"I'm told to call her Constance, that's not right
 she knows, I must have questions which she'll answer
 all in time, first business: I must write
 one of my lovely flashbacks, like a dancer
 when I compose such grace, we're sisters, dear,
 just look the chin! "like someone lanced her,"
 just like her Bruisey's, means we're sisters near
 as any two were ever, that poor boy,
 the things she's put him through, oh dear!
 and now me too, so trusting, things that boy
 believes, first: babies, then: the cancer, oh!
 but what is that to what Bea's done, oh boy,
 but that's the flashback, not supposed to know.
 She'll shut up now and let me tell it.*

Go."

xi.

I put the paper down and use the light
 to see across the room. The fog that's slurring
 up my mind fills the space, too. Can't quite
 make out her sleeping form, like it's a blur
 and not a body in that queen-sized bed.
 I'd make more light but for the spur
 and pounding ache resounding in my head.
 I'd make more light but for the goshdarn awe—
 I feel for whatever blurs up that bed.

I'm leaning on the AC's edge. It claws
 my arm, distracts me from my head. I wonder:
 how I could write something I never saw;
 what are these feelings; what's this spell I'm under.
 What mishap brought me here? What chance? What blunder?

xii.

The table near me's cluttered up with junk:
 an ashtray heaped with lipsticked butts, a bourbon
 bottle—make that two—both of them drunk,
 the bones of dinner, cups, an overburdened
 trashcan, pencil shavings, crumbs...and paper—
 pages ringed with amber stains of bourbon,
 scribbled on, stacked, scattered, hung like drapery—
 all written on in what looks like my hand.

The smoke that fills the room is more a vapor,
 a stage effect. It makes the scene seem planned,
 a tableau, "Debauched Poet's Garret, Morning."
 What painted mischief's this? What slight of hand?
 I ask myself, gut-level instinct forming—
 do not believe a scrap of this. Take warning.

xiii.

There's order here: three stacks of sheets, one labeled
 "Friday," one "Face," one "Ramble." I sit down,
 careful to note where things are on the table.
 Atop the stack marked "Friday" this is found:
 "xiv: A viscous liquid does not hike..."

Disgusting. I read on until I'm done.
 It's what happened last night, I guess. Looks like
 one of my entries, too. Its style and phrasing
 are hardly something anyone could like...
 but that is not the point. What is amazing
 is not what's written there, but that I wrote
 at all.

Amnesia, Bea? What housewife gazing
 at the tube would buy this daytime soap?
 Who do they take me for, some kind of dope?

xiv.

(The Stack Marked "Face"
Comprising Sonnets xiv-xxvii)

She made me finish Friday's entry first
that I thought that she could turn into a bird
amuses Constance. Eyes filled up with thirst,
she watches me consider every word,
while she considers, too, her own reflection
above mine. Letters upside down and backwards
form lines and climb the mirror. The affection
girls pay mothers making up their face
she pays to me a while, 'til her attention
fades. She disappears, comes back her face
more painted up, unscarved. Her wig's so bad
it must be real. It's female pattern baldness,
she says, sisters for generations had
it. Family Curse. Poor girls got it from Dad."

xv.

*I should not be alarmed. I will not choke,
I'm told. She's sure I must be wondering why
our queen-sized motel room is filled with smoke.
She's right; it is. The thought that I might die,
however, has not crossed my mind. Incense
for ambiance, she explains, (which I don't buy).
Unscented, she says, (which does not make sense).
It swirls like stage fog all around my feet.
"Where are those shoes?" I ask, but she plays dense.
"What shoes?" asks she, something between her teeth.
Why haven't I mentioned the flowers?*

"What flowers?"

*ask I, then see the dozens, one she eats,
then lights a cigarette. I smoke. The hours
disappear and with them all the flowers.*

xvi.

She talks a lot. Do I know in Italian stanza means 'a room,' from stopping place in Vulgar Latin? Straight from some stallion's mouth she learned La Lingua. No disgrace in studying things in school, but she's a girl who does her learning firsthand, face-to-face.

'You don't believe a word I say, but girl sometimes the strangest people make one feel the most at ease and, Beatrice, you're that pearl of greatest price. Most folks think you're a real odd duck, you know, that boy, that Samuel, dead—Dad too—because of you... Let's make a deal, whenever quoting direct what I've said please note it. Does that pencil mark in red?'

xvii.

She wants her discourse written "indirect, like sunlight." She says she has a "following." The way an aging starlet might reflect back on pawing fans this "following" is talked about, how they might misconstrue her words, poor swine, might wallow in some quote, 'til someone ends up hurt and rues the day that she was born. She calls me Beasy. Do I mind? Do I know what we'll do? We'll draw her face. This one. We'll draw her "measly Constance face" the way "we" did that skank-- that scarred Narsister.

As if my words come easy, she says, "use words." No affect. Must be frank. So I say, "One can't draw a thing that's blank."

xviii.

*A blank? All the better to write upon,"
she says, goes in the bath, comes back naked,
wrapped in a sheet. I keep my eyes fixed on
her feet like someone facing something sacred.*

*No need to be embarrassed. We're both gals
and she's a doctor. She's known tons of naked,
all brands of nudity. She knew this gal
a few years back when she had a career
in adult entertainment—yes—this gal,
she had her "Area"—opposite her rear,
you know, the one between her hips— tattooed.
"Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here,"
it read in cursive letters, curliqued!*

She says, then drops the sheet and stands there nude.

xix.

*I keep my focus on her feet, as if
by staring down I'll will her face away.
That doesn't work. She shuffles over, stiff-
legged 'til my shoulder's at her crotch. She sways.
Something brushes my ear; I turn and find
her "area" covered by some strange toupee
tied to her body by a fishing line.
Transparent, thin, it cuts into her skin
above her narrow hips. The curls—entwined
and shiny, doll's hair black against her skin;
paunch belly—breathing; gaunt rib bones encaged*

*"Describe me, Be-uh-truss," she says and when
I won't, she grabs my hand. I disengage.
She has my pencil, writes across the page:*

xx.

Dr. Constance Stoika's not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance Stoika is not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance Stoika's not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance Stoika is not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance Stoika's not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance Stoika's not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance Stoika's not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance is not a pretty girl. Is not a pretty girl. Is not a pretty girl. Dr. Constance is not a Stoika, not a Dr., not a Constance, not a pretty Con Con Constance is pretty not not pretty not a Dr. Pretty Girl. Pretty not a Constance pretty not a girl.

xxi.

She's bent down over me while she's writing the way a teacher checks a child's work. She finishes and turns her uninviting face around, inches from mine. She smirks triumphantly, the way a half-wit does. She motions for me to admire her work. But I will not oblige her—just because. She might want praise, or just to get my goat. I won't react, no matter what she does—at least, at least, I tell myself I won't. But that's when she takes my face between her hands and asks did I see how she wrote.

"You learned to write like me," I say.

"How keen you are. Now, notice me, my face—what's seen?"

xxii.

"What's seen?" I ask, "You mean what do I see?"

She smiles. "No, seen. Almost forgot you teach the language arts, must watch my q's and p's."

"Not teach. I taught."

"Par-doan! You gave up teaching for what? To fluff my dirty pillows, right?"

"Exactly," I say, emphasizing each syllable, face in her hands, the spite inside me almost blotting out the other thing I feel.

"This new career excites you with its opportunity to observe others, Am I correct? Then, observe me! What's seen?"

"Not pretty."

"Thank you, Bea! But I would rather know what's playing there, know what I mean? My face—how shall I put it? It's a screen."

xxiii

Her face! What wonders are exhibited upon its surface! Such advantage have I in my vantage point! How limited is she, who may only reflect—her calf eye self—the same old show, a crystal ball looking into a crystal ball and have I ever seen a hall of mirrored hall?

"Your face is blank, I told you that already."

"You did, yes. Nothingness—now tell it all."

I'm tired. I let my gaze slip from the steady anchor of her jaundiced eye. It drips down to her cheek, a paint-pocked land. Unready I blink, my eyes reopen, lose their grip and fall upon the mole beside her lip.

xxiv.

*“A beauty mark,” I mutter as she presses
a tablet to my lips—a horse-sized pill.
A glass is at my mouth, a drink caresses
my teeth and gums and tongue. The ice-cold swill
burns as I swallow down. Her beauty mark’s
no longer there: fell off or grew or spilled
into a greasepaint smudge. Her mouth’s—a bark,
a teeth-clenched snarl. Her smile—two points of gauze
stretched out, nailed to two walls. The beauty mark,
that mole’s no longer there. Her mouth’s all gauzed,
a lampshade skin. Her eyes—a concave lid.
Her face—a nyloned thief, a scarecrow’s jaws,
a burlapped screen, an empty, flesh-toned grid.*

I say, “I see a girl, a homely kid...”

xxv.

*I say, “She’s homely. She is nine or ten.
Her image stutters, like projector’s light
through celluloid. Pink fleece. Pajamas. Satin
lamb frolics upon her chest. Stretched tight—
her chest is flat, her pj’s small. The lamb’s
a patch, an iron-on, embroidered white.
An iron scorched it to her chest. The lamb—
it’s dost-thou-know-who-made-thee innocence—
is like hers, but her face is not a lamb’s.
She doesn’t know her homely difference.
She doesn’t see what the lamb, two stitches
for eyes can: Homely. She wears innocence
the way she wears the fleece. Her image twitches,
loses focus, closes in, then switches...”*

xxvi.

*I'm telling Constance this, making it up,
just to appease her. I don't see a thing
in that crass mug of hers, making it up,
being so careful it feels like the things
I'm saying are things that I've seen, the words
come awkwardly like truth. One cannot fling
what's real about like lies. The truth occurs
uneasily; it shoots and misses more
than hits. The truth can't aim for shit. True words
come stumblingly the way this wretched girl
crawls out my mouth. I care for her. I feel
responsible, as if she were more girl
than fabrication.*

*Constance says, "She is real.
She's a vision, Bea. You're with her still."*

xxvii.

I am.

*Midway on a path, a dotted line
between our legs. The highway we're on's black.
The sky is asphalt too. The dotted line
is lit by something hurtling through the black
toward the girl, eyes lit with expectation.
I watch her. With her. Stuck in her tracks,
disaster hurtling on, her realization
of the danger she is in far off.
I'm moved. Her stupid look of expectation,
her dumb-with-waiting mouth, its edges soft,
strike me as perfect. What tragedy she'll meet,
a head-on blow, will always be far off;
her ugliness unknown. Timeless, complete.
Homely pajama'ed girl. With red-shoed feet.*

xxviii.

I put the stack marked "Face" down, curious
 what else I might have written unawares.
 I pick the other stack of spurious
 material up. Of course, I should be scared:
 I have been kidnapped, drugged and forced to write,
 but somehow I just want to read. Who cares
 that Someone who has been stalking me these nights
 who knows somehow the intimate details
 of my unspoken griefs is lying right
 before me fast asleep? I should turn tail—
 this is my chance, perhaps, my only one,
 to flee, get help...Alas, my good sense fails,
 fails me again as it has always done,
 and I stay put. I'd rather read than run.

xxix.

The final stack of papers is marked: *"Nightstaff,
 Or the Flashback of the Red Shoes, with Which
 All Flashbacks End, Attempting to Engraft
 into the Tale Answers to Questions Which
 the Reader Might Have Left about the Past
 Misdeeds of Bea/Beatrice/Beatrix,
 (born Kulpa) Platte, Also to be Known As
 the Prophetess's Mouthpiece as Told to
 Ms. Féa Villaine, Also Known As
 Constance nee Felix Espiritu.*

*DISCLAIMER: Stories do not heal, compelling
 though they be, however pained or true.
 This story's Bea was broken, sad, repelling
 before and will remain so after its telling.*

xxx.

I start to read, and quickly I'm engrossed,
so much I'm years away again and more.
I do not notice that Person approach,
naked again, as was described before,
but minus that strange wig tied about the crotch...

"Not story hour yet—there's one thing more
to do," the Person indicates the crotch.
The wig had hid what now points right at me.
"You see—things grew back under your watch.
I blame you," Constance says and then I see
the pruning shears "she" carries and a book:
A Modern Guide: Animal Husbandry.

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