

Still Life with New York

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Black hoods, black earth, two cloaks concealing three. Gray-bearded peasants whisper in the fields. *The Padre? It can't be.* No matter, they know nothing of sin.

The sweep of a scandal: now fall the clothes of a man, now falls a man of the cloth.

The Padre has a friend among the Sephardim, an old man, moneyed, landed, peahenned, who'd bought baptisms by the bucket. Padre and wife can hide as brother and niece. No one will know but the graybeards.

And the girl? They can bury her in the library, feed her on pure spirit. Maybe it will take; maybe she'll evaporate.

A company of peahens sweeps the courtyard each morning and each night. They huddle in the heat beneath a date palm. Here is the gamecock, naked from the neck up. He eyes his brood, a Spanish sugardaddy.

The girl's bones are soft as saplings. Peasant boys speak of rolling her up

and rolling her down a hill. *Just one thing to do*, the Doctor says. *Gird her up like Liberty herself: steel pins, thumb-screws, scaffolding in chrome. Put her soul on the rack till it screams.* The prescription is unyielding: eighteen years of steel, no less, lest she become rebent.

The girl grows into a skyscraper of steel and glass. They teach her, of all things, a language. Up, down, left, right, spirit, flesh, time. The teacher of all things is language.

The bishop comes calling. A moraine of dread precedes him. The Sephardim practice their prayers. The prostitutes polish their pleasures. The Padre feeds the peahens. All goes according to plan. The spirit-girl watches from a windowpane.

Water, sun, sand, sky: so many ways to mark the time. Graybeards? You can and cannot step into the same peasantry twice.

The Padre turns, his wife is gone. She has left for New York. The girl knows New York. She has seen Abbot's

sunprints, she has read Baldwin's broadsides. She is not yet prepared to undertake the Atlantic and fears she never will. Still, she stockpiles dates.

The old Sephardi has a boy. The boy is salt. Of the earth. His problem is simple: his father cannot bear to watch him dissolve. The old man implores the Padre to finish his son, to give him a language, to give him a life.

Father to father, conspiracy à deux. The Padre will give the boy language and life, the boy will take the girl for his wife. The boy's problem is solved. The girl's problem has not yet been formulated.

The boy sees her only in shadows, hears her mechanism clatter along. *Maybe she's a ghost.* The ghost in the machine. He wonders if she sees him, wonders if she gets wet. *I've never done a ghost.*

Lessons commence. Aristotle, Balzac, Chaucer, Dante, Emerson, Fichte, Goethe, Homer, Ibn Khaldun, Jefferson, Kierkegaard, Lucretius, More, Nietzsche, Origen, Pound, Quintilian, Rumi, Shakespeare, Tauler, Undset, Valéry, Wittgenstein, Xenophon, and Yeats.

The boy reads by the date palm while the pimp-cock pecks his brain. In, out, ideas find the holes and flow. A world springs up aside his own. He steps out from the arcades one day and sees New York, its spires all asplendor. Aware of nothing, he resolves to meet the girl.

She is waiting, not for him but for New York. When he appears she sighs and shuts her eyes. Her thumbscrews gleam. She is quiet, preemptive. *Luisa. No. Yes. Fourteen. No. No. No, you sick disgusting cad.* He has not said a word, no longer needs to.

When he leaves, she misses him. This is how she knows she's flesh.

Under the date palm, he misses New York. He dreams of prostitutes there, and philosophy. He dreams himself into her machine and watches her strip palm leaves from her chest. She attaches each to her Argus-eyed broom. Finally, exhausted, he clatters to collapse.

Now love leaks in. At dawn each day he leaves a date outside her door. At dusk she lets a single line of verse, etched in chrome, fall clanging to the yard. The peahens titter like the peasantry. The gamecock calls New York. The Sephardim prepare a wedding.

Her padre, her beloved. She knows his hand. She has found her problem. She begs him to allow it: *One night only, no trap, no cross, no chromium chains. Let me wed. My love, she says, my love is a load-bearing member. I must test this flesh, see if I get wet. One night. If I go lunatic, horned as a horseshoe, you'll never hear from me again. I'll be silent as the moon.*

Painted lights, a burning night, New York just offshore. The boy waits by the chuppah. She appears, a tempest of sashes and bows. Clever, he thinks, all that steel wrapped in silk. Tonight he will peel her like a date. All await the coming clatter.

Will you will it? I swear I won't complain. Let me have my life. I absolve you of my blame.

Down the aisle she strides ungirt. The padre smiles in pain.

A phone booth in New York. A prostitute stoops to paint herself in the reflection of the phone's chrome. She has no children and knows Spain only for its rain. But she, she would understand.