



passager

Winter 2022

ERMINE

The weasels have slept – slept! –
in the woodshed, neck to nose
with the owls and the chickens,
and somehow no one was hurt
when we opened the doors
this morning, masked up
and ready for another day
at the tool and die shop.
The chickens demanded
more coffee than usual
but otherwise didn't seem
out of sorts. The owls
just piled in the back,
sat with their usual glowers,
got ready to bully everyone
else into productivity
and strike off one more day
till they get their pensions.

Robert Beveridge

SEVENTEEN QUESTIONS FROM THE SILVERWARE DRAWER

Why fleet and pride and labor?
Why words to describe the rare gatherings of mud
hens and lions and moles – and nothing
to capture the commonplace mayhem
of this menagerie? Why the violent affirmation of a murder
of crows, and not, say, a murder of the two dozen bamboo
skewers left over from last summer's picnic?
Why the civic formality of a colony of ants,
and not a colony of the numerous small towns – tea, table,
soup, slotted, wooden, measuring – that comprise
this nation of spoons? Why a kindle of kittens,
and not a kindle of the mismatched spatulas that clutter
the confines of this space? Why no litter of ladles?
Why no covey of corks? Why a pod, a pack,
a paddling of dolphins, dogs, ducks – and nothing
for these skimmers and strainers and drainers and scoops?
Why no clowder of cookie cutters?
Why no watch of whips or whisks?
Why do coyotes, chicks, and sheep merit bands,
broods, and flocks – yet no word exists to contain
this sharp-edged zoo of scissors and slicers and shredders
and sifters and graters and ricers and dicers and forks?
Why no brace of beaters? Why no muster of mashers?
Why a quiver of cobras but not of corkscrews;

a flight of butterflies but not of butter knives;
a prickle of porcupines but not of potato peelers?
Why no wake of tongs or rake of prongs? Why an army
of frogs and a skulk of foxes, a charm of goldfinches
and a leash of greyhounds, a herd of harts and a down of hares –
but no collective term to contain the splendid squalor
of these cake breakers, egg beaters, meat mallets,
melon ballers, garlic presses, bottle openers,
and fondue forks? Why is so much reserved
for birds and beasts we will never see, and so little
for the gnashing metal creatures that churn
and slice and beat their way across the bowls
and plates of our everyday lives?

Elizabeth Klise

MANAYUNK ALLEYS

Those ash-tiled, single-file hallways
Connect, lead to, wrap around
Structures more important –
Like commas laboring through the words of *War and Peace* –
Our childhood thoroughfares.

We claimed them, called them by name:
Old Lady Lewis, Beer Bottle, Misty Twisty Way.
We played Truth and Dare in them,
Whispered dirty jokes,
Sang Beatles' songs, kissed and smoked.

Lost in their sunlit confines,
We discovered secrets in their shadows:
Cool slate dreamed by sun-broiled streets,
The short cut to Iggy's Woods, the long way home.
Upside-down gardens of icicles,
Milkweed's sting on bare ankles,
Purple stars with white eyes making sky of patched stone.

We stuffed heart-pounding darkness
Deep into our pockets
With the musty smell of mill-town mist,
And heard the three-legged dog's bark
Race across the echoes of elsewhere-bound trains.

HER LEFT EYEBROW

Jayne Brown

It raises, it cocks. It praises, or mocks. I learned early to watch that eyebrow, the way I learned to read the weather of a room. It might signal encouragement, or warn me to back off. It told me whether she wanted Irish Spaghetti or Spanish Rice Quickie for supper, whether she thought my new poem was nice, whether to dress my little brother in blue onesies or the yellow giraffe pajamas.

The eyebrow was the last of her to go. Eyes closed, mouth slack, she moved between labored breathing and finally drifting mostly on a morphine float. But when my sister asked, “Are you hearing all the nice things we’re saying about you?” up went the eyebrow, pleased. When one of the men she fondly called The Gay Dads visited from church, she managed smiles we hadn’t roused for days. “What are *we*,” my brother asked. “Chopped liver?” Up it cocked, a well-timed laugh.

It was how she answered “yes” to sips of apple juice, a sponge of water on her lips. When I tried to feed rice pudding from a spoon and said, “My kids have told me I’m terrible at this,” the eyebrow rose in arch agreement. Her eyes popped open for a moment once, and the eyebrow frowned and furrowed to find she wasn’t done. “I have to get this over with to make the movie stop,” she said. When the eyebrow finally was still, it told me she was gone.

RIVALS FOR MY AFFECTIONS

Craig Hukill & Freddie Lee Wilson

The Germans may have surrendered in May of 1945, but hundreds of English women kept right on fighting – fighting for their Black G.I. boyfriends. That summer, an American commander in Bristol refused to let his Black soldiers say goodbye to their British girlfriends before shipping home. The Brits were peeved. Marching arm-in-arm on the military barracks, they broke down barriers while singing “Don’t Fence Me In,” a popular Cole Porter tune. The Army ignored their pleas, and when the lonely soldiers were later herded onto trains bound for port, the women stormed the railroad’s gates. “To hell with the U.S. Army color bars,” they shouted. “We want our sweethearts.”

By the time I got to England six years later in 1951, not much had changed. The American high command still hadn’t figured out a way to keep White British women and Black American soldiers apart. At least that’s the report I got from my friend Eddie.

“You won’t believe it,” he said, returning from a weekend in London. “They love us!”

“Who loves us, Eddie?” I asked.

“The ladies love us – the White ladies – that’s who.”

I laughed. “You mean you love *them*.”

“No, I’m serious. They’re looking for fun – and they know when they see my uniform that’s what they’re going to get. At least that’s what they got this weekend.”

I knew more about England than I’d known about Japan, my first

overseas stop, but White women wanting to have fun with Black men? That was something I hadn't heard before. The more I considered Eddie's words, though, the more I was intrigued. The only problem was that I'd lost all my money playing cards and shooting dice on the ship. I'd have to wait for payday.

When the big day finally came and my wallet was full, Eddie and I caught a bus and a train to Paddington Station. The trip into London was almost more than I could take in. The train was clean – “tidy” as the English say – and we could sit wherever we wanted. The conductor who sold tickets, the porter who helped with luggage, the guard who made sure everything onboard was just right, and the stewards who served meals in the dining car, were all White. Not a Black face in the bunch. And they were courteous – every single one of them. “Mornin’, guv,” one said to me as I climbed aboard.

Out the windows, green fields and bushes sprouted everywhere, with grass so abundant that people used it for their roofs. Just as strange were the cars with steering wheels on the passenger side stopped in the left lanes at train crossings. As I gawked, Eddie filled me in on how things worked.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, talking about the girls we hoped to meet. “They aren’t streetwalkers, they’re working class girls. They’re sweet. They don’t have much money, but they work hard all week and want something to look forward to on the weekend. Yes, sir, they love us to death.”

“But why us?” I asked.

“Why not us? When they see Freddie Wilson walk through the door, that’s what they’ll see – not *Black* Freddie Wilson. It’s class, not color.”

I was suspicious. “How do you know all this?” . . .

AGING LOVE-CHILD LOOKS AHEAD

In the fullness of time,
which is to say
in the fullness of space,
this body bequeathed me
by strangers in a back seat
by the tracks
or a rented bed
by a vacancy sign
will let go its
lifeline of days
and simply float
in placid dissolution,
and what was
fullness of pen and muscle
in the pulsing docket
of clockworks and suns
will be new emptiness

waiting to be filled.

Tracy K. Lewis

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