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Siesta After Finals

He who is disposed to love with sensual love goes to war with himself, for a fool after he has emptied his purse cuts a poor figure! —Marcabru

Be drunken, if you would not be the martyred slaves of Time; be drunken continually! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. —Symon's translation of Baudelaire

The final was easy. One-hundred multiple choice scantron questions and an essay. Piece of cake. Perry spent the last fifteen minutes of the period rubbing the eraser end of his pencil against his polished desk top. Brother Dan paced back and forth across the front of the classroom, hands behind his habit and fingers tugging on the white cord. Perry was thinking of Tamara Ashley Stein. He was thinking of all the fun they would have that afternoon. She wanted to do something. She wanted to do something after school, after finals. And she was keeping it a surprise.

Perry was in his usual green-cushioned booth at the Arabica, knees tucked under his body and pen in hand, when he saw the girl in the brown one-piece dress and combat boots. Like a girl he had put in a poem. He recognized her. She stopped by his table, extended one hand—her fingernails were long and burgundy-colored—and held a cigarette in the other. “I just love your work,” she said taking his writing hand in hers.

His work? What did she mean?

“From ‘Horizon’,” she said quickly, “You’re Perry.”

“Yes.” So she’s read his poetry. He folded over a page in his notebook.

“Your poems are so wonderful. I just wanted to tell you that.”

“Thank you.” He slid his notebook under his arm.

“You look familiar. You were in my algebra class last year.”

“I sat behind you.”

“That’s right. Oh, now I have a face to go with the words! The words! Honestly, Perry, you’re the only one whose work I value in that magazine. Everything else is by some girl whining about lost boyfriends or suicide. I’m just sick of reading that type of work.”

“So am I.” He smiled. She looked different in class. She wore less makeup. More makeup made her face pale and her eyes very dark. She had long lashes and thin black eyebrows.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t recognize you before. It would have been nice to have had someone to talk to in that class. Someone intelligent. It was so boring, and the students were so anal-retentive.”

“You stayed busy.”

“How is that? The class always filled me with ennui.”

“Drawing. You never took notes, did you? You always took out your sketch pad and drew pictures of vampires or something.”

“The class was incredibly dull. Like I care about substituting a for x. Art is more interesting than algebra, dear.”

She took sharp puffs on her cigarette, placed between lips the color of her nails, and brushed long, straight strands of auburn hair away from her face. In class he remembered the hair raised by a network of pins. Now it was down and loose and long. She called him "dear." It just rolled off her tongue. Perfectly natural. He smiled whenever she said it.

She sat down and pulled the ashtray over to her. She propped up her boots against his seat. "I'm Tamara. Tamara Ashley Stein, if you don't know."

"A true honor to meet you." Her eyes were large and green. Cat's eyes. "I hated that class, too," he said believing himself lost in her eyes, "Mrs. Parker's a sexist. Remember when she 'threw out the gauntlet' to the guys in class?"

"Because the girls always tested better than the boys."

"I still got an A."

"Of course." She lit another cigarette. "What are you working on?"

"Nothing." He pressed his elbow against the red cover of his notebook and his forearm into his pen.

"Don't tell me that. I see the notebook under your arm, dear. You come here to write. To create in the coffee-rich, steamy air of the Arabica."

"I wouldn't say it like that."

"But that's what you do. Court your muse over cappuccinos."

"Mocha Lattes. Mostly I just watch the people here."

"Show me what you're writing."

"It's just a rough draft. I haven't finished it."

"Show me, Perry." She tugged the notebook out from under his arm and flipped to an ink-filled page. She mouthed the words as she read to herself, smiled, and waved her cigarette in the air. A waiter in boots identical to hers, olive pants, and a green-striped apron tied around his waist stopped by the table. "Cafe latte," she said softly between two whispered words, never looking away from the page.

"I'd like another mocha latte," Perry said to the waiter, "And a scone."

"Perry." Her eyes widened and smoke curled around them. "This is brilliant. truly brilliant."

"It's only a rough draft. I need to rewrite the last two stanzas."

"You really love women," she said, looking down at the page again.

"What do you mean?"

"I can tell from your work. The poems in 'Horizon' and this one. The words you use. They're so full, full of passion. You really love women."

"I guess I write about women a lot."

"All the time. What type?"

"Just girls I see here. Girls that look interesting. I don't know any of them."

"Any at high school?"

"No, never," he smiled and then lost himself in her eyes again, "Maybe one or two."

"As long as they're interesting," she said, smiling and blowing smoke straight into the air. The waiter returned with the two steaming lattes and the scone.

"Would you like some?" he asked, pressing a finger against a currant in the scone.

"No thank you."

"So what do you do besides draw?"

"Read. I read most of the time. Or I come here."

"You love books then."

"Adore them!"

"So do I. What do you read?"

"Right now I'm reading Ayn Rand. I just finished *Fountainhead*."

"I have that."

"Have you read it?"

"It's my mom's copy. What's it like?"

She told him, and they talked about books—her favorites by Joyce, Plath, and Woolf and his by Whitman, Melville, and Poe—until the Arabica closed.

The bell rang. Everyone, even the struggling students who watched the clock and sweat-ed, sprang from their seats and tossed scantron sheets on Brother Dan's desk. The class-room cleared in under ten seconds before the friar, fingers tight around the cord, could wish everyone "a safe and spiritual summer."

Shouts of "We're free" filled the halls, but Perry only thought of Tamara Ashley Stein. "Out of the way, fuck-head," cried Jesse, captain of the wrestling team, as he knocked Perry into the wall. He continued to imagine her surprise. Lockers were emptied; vanity mirrors, keychains, and magazine clippings of Morrison, Morrissey, and Madonna were torn down. Notebook paper and potato chip bags and aluminum pop cans buried the beige tiled floor. The hall smelled of b.o., and papers photocopied at the last second in the closet by the principal's office. Shaving cream flew everywhere. Perry pushed his way through the mass of jabbering, sweating peers and grabbed his bag from his locker. He removed his sole decoration—a photocopied picture of Poe from Tamara—and carefully placed it in a folder in his bag.

Two girls stood by Perry's locker their plaid skirts raised to tan thighs, their hair held aloft by cotton and elastic. They smelled of mint and face powder. Their lips diced the thick air as their fingers slowly exchanged a sheet of notebook paper folded into a triangle.

"Did she get it?" asked one.

"Yeah. Nothing great. Just Smirnoff's," said the other.

"Vodka is vodka, right?"

"Right." They laughed.

To Perry, they were like so many of the girls here. The type showcased in year-book prom pictures. The type who never went to a dance with Perry. But he had never asked them. They would spend this afternoon in a house in the suburbs, drinking vodka a big sister purchased and shooting pool in the basement, and this evening on the backseat of their boyfriends' sports cars, or if they were lucky, on the couch in the den. Like so many of the girls here. Perry frowned at them and slammed his locker shut.

Just then an unknown sniper shot him in the groin with a super soaker. It stung for a second. "Fuck," he groaned and drifted into the men's lav, where boys were standing in the doorless stalls and changing into shirts and t-shirts, already sweating from the

heat of the June afternoon. He wiped the small, wet oval on his pants with a brown paper towel. All he needed was for Tamara to see it! Oh, the embarrassment! Oh, the barbarism of this place! "What rogues and peasant slaves are these bastards," he said to himself as he tossed the towel into the trashcan. Perry exited through a side door, having said good bye only to his English teacher, Mrs. Blair. Junior year was dead. He and Tamara had plans.

She had said, "Meet me in the parking lot, dear." He found her black Celebrity in the corner of the lot. Tamara's pale arm—cigarette against the black of the door—was hanging out the window. She smoked on school grounds. He loved that. He quickly seated himself in the car and stuffed his bag under the seat.

"The final was easy," he said, tugging on his tie.

"Good," she smiled and extinguished her cigarette in the black plastic, tumbler-shaped ashtray hanging from the dashboard. "I want to change before we go."

She crawled over the driver's seat, landing on a heap of clothes on the back seat. "Jesus," he said softly, the maroon belt tight around his waist. "I just hate these uniforms," she said, unbuttoning her white blouse and pushing down her plaid skirt, "So confining. So not me."

She pulled a one-piece dress over her head and down to her hips. The dress had daisies silk-screened onto it. She replaced her penny loafers with black combat boots and put the yin-yang medallion which was tied to the rear-view mirror around her neck. Finally, she removed some pins from her auburn hair and allowed it to fall to the base of her back. "You can look now."

As an act of courtesy, Perry had placed his tie over his eyes. But not before catching a glimpse of pale, rounded breasts. Not before seeing her toss off her white blouse, unhook her white bra in one swift motion—it had to be white, he thought, because of the blouse—and pull one strap and then the other off her shoulders, pushing down the bra, revealing nipples the size of silver dollars, almost as pale as the breasts. Nipples he'd seen pressing through her one-piece dresses. He tried not to look. Breasts he'd seen pressed together when she bent over to light a cigarette, in their booth at the Arabica. He really tried not to look. He really tried to look at his notebook, the green cushion, the steaming mocha latte. Now he saw the whole of her breasts. Saw them with the afternoon sun pouring through the back window, making visible soft, white hairs on pale flesh. Botticelli breasts. Venus de Milo breasts. Pendulous he had called them in a poem hidden in his algebra notebook. Pendulous he had called them without seeing them fully. But he had been right in his description. And so he pressed his tie firmly against his eyes. She was *Ars Poetica*. Physical poetry was what he meant. More interesting than anything he could create with words. She must stay that way. But she stripped in the school parking lot. She stripped in front of him. He loved that. But he still pulled the tie tighter. He had to. She was like no girl he knew, no other one at the high school for sure, and they were going to do something that afternoon.

They stopped for a red light across from the bus stop where students stood or sat on the wooden seat of the shelter smoking. Bookbags were under the seat or piled on the grass. Everyone at the shelter smoked. Smoked in clusters. Smoked in lines. Because of the day, some took time between puffs to spray shaving cream on a telephone pole or

on each other. The guys stood with ties off, belts unbuckled, and shirt tails hanging out of their pants. The girls stood with raised skirts and untucked blouses. Perry looked at them through the rolled-up passenger side window.

"Look's like there was a breakout at the monkey house."

Tamara looked at the shelter and took a drag on her cigarette. "Don't you wait for the bus there?"

"Any other day I would be standing on that curb." He pointed a finger against the glass. "By the telephone pole, looking up State Road for the bus. And the bus, when it finally got here, would stop five feet away from where I was standing. I'd sit in the back. By myself, listening to the guys up front talk about who they were going to fuck that evening."

"Charming. You don't like the bus."

"I usually get my calculus homework done."

She took another drag. "When will this light change?"

"I don't like the people on the bus."

"Neither do I, dear."

"Look at them. Just look at them, Tamara. Wasting stupid, little..."

"So what have you been writing?"

"Why can't they just treat people with respect?"

"Anything new?"

"Maybe. Are we going to the Arabica?"

"No. We're going someplace else. Doing something different, remember? I think you'll like it." She swore softly at the red light.

"I'm sure I will. You're not going to give me any hints?"

"Let's just say it will make you re-sculpt any pedestal you've put me on."

"Sounds fun." He watched the bus slow to a stop beside the curb, and the students waving dollar bills and yellow tickets push their way in. "My mom's pissed about this. She thinks we're going to the Arabica. She's still pissed about last Saturday."

"I got you home by four."

"My curfew's midnight."

"You've barely lived at midnight."

"Don't your parents care when you come home?"

"Like they care about anything, dear. When is this light going to change?" She drilled her cigarette into the plastic ashtray.

"I know what you mean about parents. Like mine care about anything." He had asked his mother for permission over dinner, when his father was present. His mother didn't like Tamara; she said she was using Perry. She told him to wait, to wait for her to hurt him just like any other girl. She seemed to base her belief on Tamara's habit of calling Perry after midnight. Perry's father had nothing to say about Tamara. He just frowned when Perry said they could not go to Comic Town on Friday. "But the new Flash is out," his father said; Perry, his father, and his grandfather had all read comic books for as long as they could remember. Now Perry only read poetry, and he spent more time spinning the spaghetti on his plate around his fork and thinking of Tamara Ashley Stein than he did listening to his mother's warnings and his father's weak words of cartoon adventures lost.

Perry watched Tamara closely. She bit her lower lip, and her boot hovered over

the accelerator. "About what we're doing," he began, and the light flashed green. Just then a kid from the shelter ran out to the car and pressed a picture of a nude woman in argyle socks against the glass of the driver's door.

"Isn't that lovely," said Tamara, lifting her foot off the accelerator, smiling at the kid, "She has such form. Look, Perry."

"I don't want to." He looked out his window.

"Oh, Perry," she said, "He's just showing us a picture. It's just a picture, dear. Look, her socks are like yours."

"I don't want to."

"Where's the libertine in you, Perry? Byron would look."

"I'm not Byron. The light's green. We should go."

She thumped her boot against the accelerator. "I don't understand, Perry. It was just a picture. You've probably written worse."

"Thank you so very much," Tamara said and smiled at the round, middle-aged woman cradling a brown paper bag. "You know how it is. In a hurry to have a little fun, you forget a thing or two. We're going to have a picnic, and you can't have a picnic without..." They had exited the Dairy Deli and were approaching the parked Celebrity. "I can't say how grateful I am. I'm just sorry that I..."

"Nothing to worry about. I know what it's like," said the woman as she set the bag on the hood, "Now I'm not really supposed to be doing this, but what the hell, you kids have fun."

Tamara handed the woman the ten dollar bill rolled like a rug and squeezed into her hand. The woman folded the bill and placed it into her shirt pocket, "Now don't you kids drink and drive." Tamara smiled. The woman looked into the car and winked at Perry. "Sure there's nothing else I can get you?"

Tamara smiled, smiled politely. "No, we're fine. Thank you again. Bye." The woman waved at the Celebrity as she returned to the Deli. Tamara grabbed the bag with one hand but Perry pushed open the door for her. She sunk into the seat.

"Thank god that's over," she said removing a cigarette from her black box-shaped purse, "That woman was too nice."

"How'd you do it?"

"I just told her that we were college students headed to the beach for an afternoon of sun and fun. I forgot my id."

"Id?"

"ID, dear. It was all so spontaneous."

"And she bought it."

"With smiles and gratitude. It all works that way." She took several quick puffs and drilled her cigarette into the ashtray. "Turn on the radio please."

"So what did you buy?"

Tamara started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. She tugged

on the sun visor, swore, and began rifling through her purse with one hand while steering with the other. "Vodka," she answered while pulling from her purse assorted lighters, lipsticks, class notes, and breath mints.

"Vodka at the beach. Why?" He frowned.

"We're not going to the beach, dear."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." She smiled at him and pushed the purse away from her. A pair of sunglasses with purple lenses were now in her hand. She used her teeth to pull back the wire arms and slipped the glasses over her eyes. "Don't you like vodka?"

"Not really. I don't like drinking really."

"Hah! And you call yourself a writer. All the best drank. Dylan Thomas—plastered always. Hemingway with vodka over his Wheaties. Faulkner, dear. Joyce, I think. Was Joyce a drunk? Did he burn a hole in his gut? 'Ah, triesta, triesta, in triesta I lost my liver.' I know London was. And Fitzgerald. Your pal Poe. Truman Capote liked pink pepper vodka. Writers and alcohol are inseparable. An occupational hazard. It channels their creativity. You have to drink a little to be a writer, Perry."

"A poet," he said weakly.

"What's the matter, dear?"

Tamara smiled at Perry. He was looking at the brown paper bag. This was something unexpected. Not something he had imagined as part of her surprise. Sure she smoked like a fiend. That's fine. But she wasn't a drunk. She was *Ars Poetica*. Perry thought of pale breasts, of the back seat of the Celebrity, and of the surprise awaiting him. "Nothing. Just thinking about your surprise."

"That's good. You'll never guess." She smiled at him. "Perry, dear, can you get an L&M out of my purse?"

Perry placed the cigarette between her lips. She wore little make-up today. Her skin was dry, and, despite the purple shades, gray shadows were visible under her eyes. But she smelled like Tamara—a blend of vanilla and tobacco. Perry inhaled the scent as he lit the cigarette.

"So tell me about what you're working on," she said.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? What about the one piece for 'Horizon?'"

"I gave up on it. I couldn't find the voice."

"You'll find it. You always do."

"Yeah."

Perry looked at the bag again. The black bottle top peeked over the fringed edge of the bag. Vodka. Cheap diluted vodka. He sank into his seat and wondered where the car would stop next.

Tamara parked by the curb. Perry, to his dismay, recognized the place—a park where she had once stopped and smoked after an evening at the Arabica. Tamara had made a little fire by the swings, and they had discussed the works of Joyce by the light of it.

"What are we doing here?"

"You'll see."

She took the bag in one hand and her purse in the other and used her combat boots to kick open the door. Perry followed her to the merry-go-round and sat himself on

an elephant with a coiled spring for feet. "So you're going to get plastered in the playground."

She laughed and motioned for him to join her. She sat in the lotus position with the bag to one side and her purse before her. An L&M between her lips. Perry gave the round a spin, slid under a red metal support, and sat himself on his knees.

"Isn't this lovely, Perry? Just around and around we go."

"I remember falling under one of these things once. The kids on it just kept going round and round. My grandpa saved me. I was all cut-up."

"I'm so sorry," she said softly.

But what he didn't tell her was that the boy—the boy with the blonde hair and striped velour shirt—pushed him off the round. He pushed Perry off, and Perry rolled under it. And all the kids laughed. They laughed as the round spun, and Perry covered his face with his hands and screamed for his grandfather. He never went back to the park. He hated parks. Instead his grandfather took him to the library where they read *Ivanhoe*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *The Gold Bug*—all the Classics Illustrated. And the occasional *Superman*.

Tamara took the cigarette firmly between two fingers and threw open her arms. "We're free, Perry! Free from it all! Free for the summer!"

"I have to work tomorrow."

"But it's still summer, Perry. That's what's important. You'll have plenty of time to write now, and we can go to the Arabica, and I can..."

"Maybe. Maybe I'll write some more poetry."

"Perry, what's the matter, dear?"

"I just don't want to talk about writing now."

"But you're so good."

"I just want to talk about something else."

"Like..."

"You look tired."

"Really. I suppose so. I don't sleep much these days. Too much to do! To see! To live!"

"How were your finals?"

"They were." She smiled and took a puff on her cigarette. The round was slowing, and she was looking off to the side.

"You're really intelligent. I just wish you'd..."

"Oh, look," she held a green maple leaf in her hand, "How delicate. Every vein is visible." She held it by the stem and blew air across it. The leaf flapped forward, curved like a sail. She laughed and held her lighter against the leaf which caught fire. "So pretty."

"Why are you doing that?"

"It's dead, Perry. A beautiful corpse. It's just going to decay, dear. Why not let the beauty touch the sky as smoke and flame?"

"You've been reading too much Shelley."

She smiled.

Perry glanced over his shoulder at the other people in the park—an old lady and two children. He hated children. Pushing other kids under merry-go-rounds. Squirting

with a silver eagle and "Burton" printed in silver upon it.

"So what are we going to do now?" asked Perry.

"Talk." She held the bottle by the hand grip and unscrewed the top.

Perry looked at the tent. Uncle Jessie winked at him.

"And drink." She lifted the bottle to her lips and tilted her head back. Clear streams of vodka ran down the sides of her mouth, watering the daisies on her chest.

"Talk and drink," he sighed.

"Are you sure you don't want some?"

"I told you I don't drink." He wanted to crush the bottle, squash it with a rock by the fire ring.

Tamara weaved in and out of the circle of lawn ornaments, taking sip after sip. Raining vodka down on a mushroom umbrella-carrying elf. She ran into the woods and reappeared again, smiling at Perry each time. She hid behind a gnome. Put the bottle against its plastic lips. She smiled at him. She ran into the woods. She came up behind him. He could smell the vodka on her breath. "'Be always drunken,'" she cried, "'Nothing else matters: that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to earth, be drunken continually!'" He could feel her body moving against his. Into his. Her chest pressed against his back. "Drink," she whispered holding the bottle to the side of his head. "Drink," she whispered waving the bottle before his eyes. He could smell the vodka on her breath. He could feel her breath in his ear. Warm and wet. "'Drunken with what,'" she pulled the bottle back, "'With wine, with poetry. 'Yes, Perry, poetry. 'Or with virtue as you will. But be drunken!'"

She ran back into the woods. Her laughter came from all sides. High and wild. The old lady can hear us, he thought. She appeared again by a plaster raccoon, "This is Rick. He's from Parma. His ear is chipped. Say 'hi' to Rick. Oh, come on, Perry. Say 'hello' to the raccoon." She grabbed a gnome around its pointed hat, "This is Barry. Barry likes gin and tonics. But don't tell his wife that. Who's his wife? Why this lovely dwarf. But Barry likes the goose from Brooklyn, Betsy. Betsy was dressed in a yellow rain coat and hat when we took her. Then we stole all these other outfits from other geese in the neighborhood. Do you like what she has on?"

"What about the tent? Where is that from?"

She smiled. "Don't you like them? Don't you like my gallery? I brought you here because I thought you could appreciate it. You of all people appreciate artistry. Look at this one, a kissing Dutch couple. So in love. He'll be plugging the dyke soon. Hah! I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so ribald. I know how you hate ribaldry."

She approached him. "Isn't that right, Perry? You hate ribaldry. You're better than that. It was only a picture, Perry. Only a picture."

She leaned into him. Her dress was wet. The vodka soaked into his white dress shirt. He grabbed her shoulders.

"What? I don't need you to hold me. I'm not drunk." She pulled herself away and then leaned in again, "I wish you'd have some of this. I went through a lot to get it for us. Just for us, dear. To celebrate the death of Junior year. The birth of summer. I wish you'd take some. 'It is the hour to be drunken! Be drunken, if you would not be martyred slaves of Time; be drunken continually! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you

will.”

She held it to her chest. “Take some. Please drink some.”

“I don’t want any vodka.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I...” The tent. The pillow. The sleeping bag. *Ars Poetica!*

“What do you want?”

“I want...” A wet dress. Pale breasts. Long auburn hair. Burgundy-colored nails. Vanilla and tobacco. *Ars Poetica!*

“Tell me,” she strained each letter, fell into him squeezing the bottle between his chest and hers.

“I want you...” They were all watching. The gnomes. The loafer. The raccoon. The goose. The Magi. The polar bear. The kissing Dutch couple. The Virgin Mary with one hand. Watching. Circling. Watching. Circling. He grabbed the top of the bottle with one hand and raised his other. He looked into her eyes. Green eyes. Cat’s eyes. *Ars Poetica’s* eyes. Her pupils were enormous. And there was nothing behind them.

“I’ll tell you what I want, dear. I want to sit down.” She fell to the ground, the bottle landing between her legs. She crawled to the edge of the fire ring, taking chug after chug. “Perry, dear, I wish you’d tell me what’s the matter.”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, stop with the ‘nothing’ words. Everyone says, ‘nothing.’ I want you to really tell me what’s troubling you.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because it’s killing our conversation. Because you’ve been like this all day. Because it’s a glorious afternoon. I want to have glorious fun and glorious conversation. But you won’t drink, and you won’t talk. You’re behaving...”

“Anal-retentively.”

“No, no, just...not like the Perry whose words I savor.”

“Stop with that. Stop with the poetry. I’m just a Little Chandler.”

“No, no you’re not. You’re brilliant. I read a lot, but I could never write like you. You’re wonderful. Your poem about the gazebo—so lush, so beautiful. You’re worthy of...”

“All we do is talk.”

“I love talking to you.”

“I know. But I want...”

“Fine.” She stood up and smoothed out her dress, holding the bottle against her hip. “There’s a lot of Mr. Burton remaining. I’m going to the tent to play Liz. You can join me if you want to talk. Or continue with this Hamlet-esque brooding. Your pleasure. Whatever.” She drifted off to the tent.

Perry crouched by the fire ring. He took two sticks in his hands and began to drum a crushed can of Rolling Rock. So this is what they were going to do. What they would always do. All that waiting and talking and coffee drinking for more waiting and talking and vodka drinking. She was like all the others. He beat the can and wondered when she would take him home.

—Paul Durica '00