

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Laurette Folk  
**Carpe Diem**

Jacinto and I have oscillated toward and away from each other for three months now, unable to give each other up. My latest stunt is to ignore him completely, to not look at him, to not speak to him, to live my own life. The expression on his face says this, "Fine if this is what you want, then, fine." It's been a week and there have been no coffee breaks together, no lunches out by the pond. But I know we are at the breaking point.

He gives in first. I am working at my desk and the smell of his cologne permeates my cube. I think of vintage wine and shaving cream. I do not turn around. "Have lunch with me today," he says.

"I can't. I'm going out for lunch."

"With who?"

"With some people."

"You're avoiding me," he says, attempting to shrink me with his stare.

"I am not."

"You keep trying. But remember this, you need me and I need you. Be prepared, I will be persistent."

I watch him walk away, shoulders square, confident. Meanwhile I try to make more friends in the office, but everyone else bores me to death. Even Inessa, the Russian drafter who has entertained me with the progress of her garden, is becoming predictable. I want to tell Jacinto, or Jazz as he calls himself I picked up a new book, *Tropic of Capricorn* by Henry Miller because I fall under that sign. I want to tell him how liberated I felt when I read it because it was not at all proper, because it was profligacy at best, that I fall under that sign too. Thinking about how happy he was to read Kurt Vonnegut, the last American writer I introduced him to, made me think I was doing him a disservice by not broadening his mind. I march right into his office before I can convince myself otherwise. "Hi," I say, smiling like an idiot. He is shocked, overjoyed. He has won; I can see it all over his face.

"Please sit down," he says.

A saxophone plays from his radio. I sit, but I get up again, fidgety. I want to move. I go to look out his window to the world below. "I have something for you to read," I say.

He ignores me. "You like me again, don't you. I can see it in your eyes."

I want to laugh at his frankness, at his ability to reject our hiatus on a whim. I glance down to the Charles River, the white specks, a population of geese by the boathouse, the tiny people in the park. Here in the office, the child his wife is carrying doesn't seem relevant; it is just a spec, like one of those geese. This is our world, his and mine.

"I love it when you like me," he says.

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"This book, *Tropic of Capricorn*, you have to read it. I just wanted to tell you."

"Really," he says with a smirk. "Who wrote it?"

"Miller. Henry Miller."

He writes down the name and then looks up at me. I turn away, shut the door behind me.

My car is in the shop down the street, so he drives me home. I invite him for dinner as a way of saying thanks. This is how it begins, something we call "carpe diem."

He switches to the left lane, driving wild, passing all the joggers and cyclists on Memorial drive. He could run them over for all I care. The wind tears up the car and blows the Globe apart, papers everywhere all over the seat. I take off my shoes and let my toes touch his windshield. Human prints on glass. At a light, he rubs his hands up and down my calves.

"Hmm, pretty nice. Do you work out?"

The car next to us is playing loud Flamenco music. The sun splits itself across the glass. It is summer again. I laugh and he accelerates up into the coaster of the turns, the wind spilling into my mouth. "You can take Mt. Auburn Street," I say. I look at my face in the side view mirror, I could pretend I didn't exist. This is what I tell myself; then I could get away with it. So I go on that, laugh, swallow more wind and let my feet feel the heat of the dash. He pulls a right into a liquor store parking lot and in one motion gets out of the car. Then he peeks back in.

"Any preferences?" he asks.

"Red. To make sangria."

He shows an army of white teeth and is gone.

I pull open my purse and shuffle for a lipstick. I peer in the mirror again and decorate my face with color, with black liner for the eyes, Jezebel. He is back, pulling at the gear shift and the music is on, bouncing in his old speakers, making the air vibrate. He tears down the street, but he doesn't get far; another light, more people with open cars, dark stares, dark eyes, old eyes, sinful eyes, forgiving eyes. Sinful eyes. We pass them all. I show him where I live and we get out, go to my place around the back. Bubbies, my ninety pound black labrador retriever sees us through the living room window and starts to bark hysterically. "We have to play with him," I say, "or he'll torture us."

"Is he going to bite me?" Jacinto asks.

"Don't be afraid," I say. He will bite you if you are afraid."

Bubbies comes busting out the door once I get it open, jumping all over us, tail smacking itself against the house, paws groping and flying, stepping on toes.

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"Jeez Chrise," (this is how Jazz takes the Lord's name in vain). "He's a bull!"

"He's my baby boy," I say.

Bubbies focuses on Jazz and jumps on him. "No, down, Bubby! Down!" he says.

"Get your ball," I tell Bubbies. He runs back into the house and comes out with a tennis ball, crunches it a few times and then spits it out at Jacinto's feet.

"How's your arm? You throw while I make the sangria."

"Must we entertain him?"

"You have to entertain your children, don't you?"

Jazz glares at me.

"Give Bubbies, give," I say.

Bubbies picks up the ball crunches it a couple of times more and drops it again at Jacinto's feet. Then he picks it up, crunches it again, and spits it out at my feet, staring at it. I pick it up and throw it. Bubbies runs down the steps and crosses the yard like a bullet. "See, this is the little game we play. I throw it, he goes and gets it and brings it back. Now you try." Bubbies rushes at him with anxiety, spits out the ball, and then jumps back, doing an anxious dance on his toes. Jazz tosses it into the yard, a lob, his arm isn't American baseball trained, but the black bullet doesn't care. He digs up grass to get to the ball.

"It's amazing what keeps some creatures happy," he says. "What will we make for dinner? We should have talked about that before I got the wine, I suppose."

"I'm going to make shrimp scampi. I just bought the shrimp yesterday."

"Oh shit! Here he comes again. What happens if I ignore him?"

Bubbies spits the ball out and stares at it. Jacinto makes a move to kiss me and Bubbies takes his paw and gives Jacinto a wallop right where it counts. "Watch it!" he says to Bubbies, crouching and backing away. Jazz puts one hand to protect himself and bends to lob the ball. It doesn't go far, a few feet, and I know Bubbies is disappointed in me for bringing home a loser when it comes to throwing, but he'll take what he can get, hoping that this stranger will develop an arm with practice. He rounds the corner, up the steps, spits the ball at Jazz. "He doesn't give up, does he?"

"He doesn't."

A shrilling bark and Jazz jumps back. "All right!" He picks up and throws the ball, side arm. It goes farther this time. Jacinto rubs his shoulder with the hand he had over his privates.

"He's going to kill me," he says. "This is why you brought me here, huh? To be killed."

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"He won't kill you. Maybe just work you over a bit."

"Get me a glass of wine, will you? I need to get drunk to be abused."

I have mangoes, peaches, cantaloupe. On the counter, they roll every which way. I reach in the drawer, fetch a steel blade and lop the cantaloupe in half. Then I pull out the nestling seeds and drop them in the trash. Jazz peeks his head from behind the door. "I figured out how to trick him. It pays to have a working frontal lobe."

"He's playing with you. You'll see. Your trick won't last for long."

"This is a test, isn't it. I bet you do this with all your boyfriends."

I laugh, peeling back the tough skin of the cantaloupe, finding that division between green and orange. The mango, a softer fruit, cuts easily; there is no jagged motion as there had been in the cantaloupe, the mango gives in to the knife. I wonder if Costa Rica, Jacinto's homeland, harvests mangoes. Something about the fruit, like a Gauguin painting, a foreign tongue, a native language strikes me as sensual. It is one of the many somethings missing from Cambridge. An exotic species. In the sangria, it is perfect.

Jazz comes in looking for a towel. His hands are covered in slime and dirt. "I lost the ball permanently. I guess you could say I won."

I tear off a paper towel, wet it, and hand it to him. The black bullet darts zigzagged out there, nose in the grass, tail flopping from side to side like a circus whip, legs in a gallop trying to catch the scent of the ball.

"You think you're so smart," I say. "Have you any idea how many balls are out there? It's only a matter of time before he finds another one and comes looking for you."

"I'll lock the door."

I pour the sangria into the glasses. We toast. "Carpe diem," he says, "isn't what this is all about today?"

"Carpe diem," I say.

Jazz puts the glass down and rolls up his sleeves. "It's mighty warm in here. Do you have air conditioning?"

"Usually there is a nice breeze in the evening. Just wait."

He goes to the kitchen table and sits down. "So you are making the scampi?"

"Yes."

"Do you have white wine for cooking? Do you have shallots? You have to make scampi with shallots."

"I was going to use onions and I have no white wine."

"Oh no, darling, we're having shrimp. We must have a nice white wine. You should have told me when we were at the liquor store," he says reaching into his pockets for his keys. Bubbies takes a swipe at the door. "I will extricate myself just in time. Is there a front door?"

"That is the front door."

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I let Bubbies in and he runs to Jazz and drops a black tennis ball filled with decaying leaves on his shiny shoes. "Bubbies!" I say. Jazz slips by him, hands in the air, to the door and is out, without a word from Bubbies, who runs to the living room window to watch him go.

Carpe diem is more complicated and involved than one would think.

I open the book and read anywhere because this is that type of book; I read to dissuade my mind from its logic and impending regret. I read past Germaine and her prized treasure as Bubbies gobbles down his food. I read this:

*My eye, but I've been all over that ground, years and years ago. I've lived out my melancholy youth. I don't give a fuck any more what's behind me or what's ahead of me. I'm healthy. Incurably healthy. No sorrows. No regrets. No past, no future. The present is enough for me. Day by day. Today! Le bel aujourd'hui.*

Bubbies finishes his meal, his doggy pellets spat out around his bowl with threads of drool. He drinks, slopping up the water into his mouth like a great bear. Then he comes to me, as he does every night and thanks me for his food by drooling the excess water all over my knees and nudging my hand. And I always kiss him tenderly between the eyes for his being a big grateful brute. I think to myself how wonderful it is to be simple, how Bubbies is the luckiest of the three of us. Jazz returns with a bagged bottle, red tea roses peeking out of a shopping bag. "Now we will do this correctly. Here is fresh parsley, lemons, shallots, a lovely bottle of Chardonnay and these are for you."

"How sweet."

I put the roses in water. Jazz sits down in front of the plate of fruit and cheese and took a slice of cheese. "What kind is this?"

"Monterrey Jack."

"Oh."

"Is that unsatisfactory as well?"

"Oh no no. But you should have told me, I would have bought some Brie."

"Well if you weren't so damn impulsive about shallots, I would have made you a shopping list."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted everything to be perfect. I want this night to be perfect."

"But it can't. Given the circumstances."

Jazz slumps in his chair. "You don't like me again."

"You're high maintenance. I don't know how your wife puts up with you."

"Well it is more practical at home, with the kids. She feeds them and I get the left overs." He looks in his wine glass. "Hmm. I think it has gathered dust."

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"At my house, it was different," I say, "My mother made every meal with my father in mind. There were two dishes all the time, for meats, vegetables, pasta; "with" and "without.""

"With and without what?"

"Spices, anything that added the pizzazz. My father wanted everything bland. He believed spicy food was to blame for any of the discomfort he had in life."

"Your poor father. But at least he had a woman who cooked what he liked."

"But it frustrated her. She liked to cook, like to experiment. She liked pizzazz. He wouldn't have it."

I look down at the fruit in the wine, swirl it about with my fingers, watching it get drunk, stained in red. Bubbies comes in and slumps by the door, panting, his tongue bouncing up and down, a puddle of drool collecting underneath.

Jazz looks at Bubbies. "Beauty and the Beast," he says, sipping his wine. "So are you like your mother?"

"I am divided up evenly. Half him, half her."

He leans closer touches my wrist with his forefinger, looks at me over the rims of his glasses and raises my wrist up to his nose to sniff for perfume.

"Ah yes," he says, "pizzaz. Tonight you are like your mother."

"If you embrace me in front of him, he will get angry," I say, putting a hand on Jacinto's chest when he comes for me after we start to clear the table.

"Then let's go to the bed. Come on," he says, looking around for it.

"It is upstairs. We should clean the table..."

"Fuck the table." He sticks out his hand. "Come on."

We climb the stairs to my room. Bubbies follows and I shut the door on him. Jazz sits on my bed, looking at the slanted ceiling.

"This is a kid's room."

I sit down next to him.

"Why do you say that?"

"The kids always get the dormers. The master bedroom must be on the other side of the house where your landlord lives."

Bubbies moans on the other side of the door. He clicks the doorknob with his nose.

"He knows the doorknob is how you open the door, but he can't work it," I say, changing the subject.

"Let's forget about him."

We sink into the bed, kiss.



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"Take off my shirt," he says. "Unbutton it slowly."

I do as he says. His skin is smooth, white. Caucasian. He has only a few hairs on his chest. "I didn't think I would end up here tonight. I didn't think it was possible," he says. The first thing he removes is his glasses. I try to find his eyes, away from the glass now, but the lids are closed. Aphrodite's underwater, but breathing; her bubbles are finding my head, tiny air pockets rising to the ceiling of my consciousness. It could be the wine. But there is also a sinking to a heated point and I balance there. He touches me. The aura of could be, surrounds us. We start to believe we can isolate ourselves enough, find a place. Forget. Carpe diem. As I float with the bubbles, I release my mistakes. He starts to kiss the bare me, the feminine flesh, the salts in my skin dissolve between his lips. The world darkens outside, is darker inside. He removes my shirt, tugs at the skirt to take it down past the hips. A sort of melding happens as we sink deeper into the bed. Jazz removes his pants. I don't look, don't touch. Only touch the safe parts, the arms, the face, the chest. The train chases on, his breath, his momentum keeping him oblivious to my hesitations. He grabs my bra strap with his teeth and pushes it aside. I stare at the slope of the ceiling, the shadows in the corners, the light scraps beneath the door. Where do I choose to suspend myself now is all I can think of. But why think? There shouldn't be thinking. Make a decision, mind says to heart. Either the dark corner or the light beneath the door. Either my father or my mother. Heart freezes, kisses back, but still does not touch *everything*. There is a sound from outside, from the next yard, a cry. I freeze. He stops, opens his eyes. Bubbies barks, growls beyond the door. Another cry. An infant, outside under a tree, in the dark, under the haze and the stars.

"It's almost real," I say.

"Shh."

"But it sounds..."

He tries to brush it aside, the milk, the breast, the swollen womb. He is only interested in the vacancy, the place to put himself. I get up, go to the window, look for it out there in the shrubbery, behind the Rose of Sharon, but there is nothing.

"It's a cat," he says.

We look at each other and wait. I check the yard again, but nothing.

"Come back to bed," he says and extends his arm. I turn to look at the door, as if I expect it to open and the creature crawl in, but it's job is done. I stand naked in the middle of the room, a silhouette on the wall, caused there by the neighbor's lights across the lawn.

"What are you looking at?"

He sighs in frustration. I raise my hands, spread the fingers wide, make a fist. He sits up, watching me.

"Look there, at the hands, the edges of the shadow are definite. There's beauty in a precise shadow, isn't there? Usually you see the shape blurred, amorphous. Definite shadows are rare."

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He is not amused. I slide to the wall, touch it and then sink down, naked and in the dark. I feel him watching me, waiting to see what I will do next. When he is tired of waiting, he gets up, takes my hands and I stand again, clothed only in the light that creates the shadows. He pulls at me and I plant my feet, put my hand on his chest, this time with a force.

"Everyone always kisses the wrong person goodnight," I say.

"What?"

"Millions of people all over the world are kissing the wrong person goodnight."

"Who says?"

"I read it somewhere. I am beginning to believe it is true. I don't want to contribute to this madness."

"Do you love me?" he asks.

I could answer, the message is on my tongue, how I loved no one, not him, not those before him, but he interrupts, "I am going to divorce her. As soon as I make enough money to support her and the kids, this baby... myself. I don't need much. Just a small apartment. I will like being alone. You see after kissing the wrong person goodnight for twelve years, it's something to look forward to."

We try to find each other's faces in the darkness. There are only the silhouettes, nameless, we could be anyone.

"We tried to trap it," he says. "And it turned into something else."

His eyes again, one eye illuminated, smaller now, I can't remember if it is brown or blue. I want to tell him that the thing it turned into was compassion. That perhaps it was never anything different from this. But I can't explain, I am still struggling with his disappointment. Then he bends and picks up his pants, his shirt from the floor, sits on the bed. He looks at a spot on the rug for a moment that may or may not be there. It's as if we've been married twenty years, the passion, an ember.

"Love," he says. "She shows up again with another face, but her tricks are all the same."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "No, don't say that. That's obvious, useless. I have to get home. I always have to get home."

He dresses and I stand watching. The wrinkled sheets make interesting forms I could catch with charcoal, this is what I think while he bends and picks up his things. It would not be a portrait of sex, but of absence, relinquishment. I pick up my panties, put them on, my bra, starting to cover myself. He notices this and the momentum of separation resumes. He stays for awhile, paces around the room, picking up objects, looking at them, putting them down, stalling, giving it another chance, but neither of us move toward the other. When he's sure it's gone and I am fully dressed, he turns toward the door and leaves.



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LAURETTE FOLK completed her MFA in Writing at Vermont College in 2003 and has been the recipient of several artist grants and scholarship opportunities. In 2006, she received a semifinalist nomination and “Noted Writer” award from the Boston Fiction Festival. Ms. Folk has been published in the literary magazines Upstreet, City Lines and most recently The Copperfield Review 2009 fall issue (now online, <http://www.copperfieldreview.com/fiction/Wild%20Cat.htm> ). She is also the creator and co-host of the The Thursday Theatre of Words and Music, a popular writer's forum where emerging writers share their work with the public on a monthly basis at Cornerstone Books in Salem, MA.