

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

Kurt Shinian

Stella Liebeck V. McDonald's Restaurants

Liebeck v. McDonald's Restaurants is a 1994 product liability lawsuit that became a flashpoint in the debate in the U.S. over tort reform after a jury awarded \$2.86 million to a woman who burned herself with hot coffee she purchased from McDonald's. Liebeck's attorneys argued that McDonald's coffee was "defective," claiming it was too hot and more likely to cause serious injury than coffee served at any other establishment.

I apologize in advance for calling you
So early in the morning.
Your bedroom must be curtained, I imagine,
Dark during the course of a day,
Drawn upon itself
Like a snake in its pit,
All encircled and
Pushed into the lightless corner.

I know it's not a flattering image,
But I can't help but see the
Whites of your gaping mouth,
That serpentine opaqueness
And the dull slithering tongue
Like a rock-bottomed parched creek,
Sunburned and weathered.
It must really hurt.
You probably can't even
Roll that tongue
Around the cave
Of your mouth,
That unextinguishable garden,
Wasted and barren in all that
Scorched dirt and ash.

From what I understand,
And I might be wrong,

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The car in front of you came to a
Sudden stop -
And bam -
Just like that,
It happened.
And in that first unrecognizable moment,
The milk and sugared
Sirens came suddenly from somewhere,
Slow and steady through
A fog strewn morning.

Just beyond the drive-thru window,
Your skirt
Hung like a drenched cover
Over the corpse of your crotch -
Your shedding skin adhered to
The thighs of your seat cover,
Totally burnt.

It sounds cold when I say it like that,
But my tongue is flame rusted when
It comes time to name calamity.
And I'm just going to say it, Stella -
And besides,
I've said too much already -
When I think about it
All I can see is
Thick pieces of skin
Removing themselves from just beyond
The lip of your panties -
It's like ants marching off with a
French fry from a picnic.
But what do I know,
I'm not even sure if you
Burned your lap.

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I guess that
This is a bizarre way to talk
About singed skin,
But seeing sickening
Scenes with such a
Supercilious eye
Lends me a certain
Degree of serenity.

I'm so sorry Stella,
Sorry for everything you have
Had to go through,
But it seems that no matter
What I say,
The bandages of my tongue
Uncoil themselves
And utter something
Completely diluted
And tepid.