

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Susan Tepper
Face It

When they march us back to the cells at the end of our work day, at a particular bend in the passage, where the stones protrude and narrow the space to single-file, forcing us to merge— that moment can result in any number of distresses— such as stepping on a foot or elbowing someone, however unintentionally. It's at that point great drama often breaks out. People will be subdued in various ways. It is something to be avoided. Then nearing the single, high barred window, free of glass, not even a few hanging shards as though it had been punched out, I always hear chanting. Primitive. Perhaps from bygone days. But not of these days. We are submissives; the tap of collective feet on uneven cobbles. Up, down, eat, work, shit, sleep, wash from the few cracked basins. In my distilled musings, I have come to believe there was never glass covering that window; where each day I shorten my step ever so slightly. Not so much the guards will notice. Only that I might once again, however briefly, feel the sun's heat, or the wind, snow, a droplet of rain against my face. Whatever nature intends. As for the chanting, it may be simple child play in an incomprehensible language. If it is language; as we humans have evolved to comprehend the spoken word. When matters of humanity begin to churn my mind, I sink to a level so unfathomably deep, I'm certain if I somehow get free of this place, I will never again feel optimistic.



As I make my way slowly through torrential rains, the car wipers barely keeping the windscreen clear, by pure accident I come upon a hotel, or some type of lodging. A grand place, too, on this lonely off-road, at the base of a hill in dense woodland. Large, it's built in the style of a manor house, with cross beams, sloping roofs and turrets. Still some distance from Avignon, my destination. I calculate several more hours of miserable driving. Then, as if shoved, I swing the car turning into the wide car park fronting the place. Without this sudden bit of luck I would have lumbered on; possibly skidding and colliding with a tree.

It's with a great sense of relief that I turn off the motor, sighing, shutting my eyes and resting my head back. A knock on the window startles me. A uniformed doorman is holding up a huge umbrella. I crack the window a notch. Madame, he's saying. Inquiring about luggage. When I shrug saying there is none, my stop is impromptu, weather-driven, he smiles and replies that all my needs will be met. Getting out of the car, feeling suddenly light in mood and step, I allow him to guide me under the umbrella toward a pair of tall entry doors.

The sprawling foyer is a surprise. A bit haphazard. Rather than the usual country furniture of the region, an eclectic mix of dainty silk Fauteuils with sturdier Bergeres, tufted leather Chesterfield sofas, lamps and tables looking Egyptian in origin, have been set onto threadbare Oriental carpets. As if things had been moved in quickly to fill the area, from a non-specific source. Never to be quite properly matched. Enormous Chinese floor vases, stuffed with white lilies, line the dark panelled walls. Their scent catches in my throat and I choke a little. I'm also feeling light-headed, as though my knees might buckle.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Another man in livery is slipping my coat off my shoulders. "Madame, you will naturally be dining with us, as well, tonight?"

Presented as a question, it nevertheless sounds like a done deal. "I am quite hungry now that you mention it."



The ample dining room bustles. Waiters rush about hauling silver trays heaped with foods. The room being near to full. I'm seated at a round table for two. Presented with a tasselled menu. Fingering the silky, sky-blue tassels, while thunder rocks the night, I'm glad to be settled here.

Three bottles of wine have been arranged on the center of the table. Everything clean and organized. Looking around, I notice an absence of pictures or any artwork. Instead, the velvety cream-colored walls are hung with a variety of mirrors. Each of a different design and origin, similar to the choices made of the furnishings in the foyer. Directly opposite from where I'm seated, a thick, crudely carved wood framed mirror, painted garishly, could have come from a temple in Thailand. My face, reflected back, appears startled; lopsided; my lips pale and drooping as if from a palsy. I can feel heat moving into my neck and shoulders. When I turn to stare into an adjacent mirror, my face appears normal again. Somewhat disconcerted, I focus my attention on the table wines reading the different labels.

Sudden wild applause, and a somersaulting monkey springs across the room in a short red coat with brass buttons and red pillbox hat. Backward and forward springs the monkey several times. As it takes its bows, the patrons scream out for more. Coins get tossed. I notice some waiters are snarling. One tries kicking the monkey. But the small creature is adroit and manages to avoid the shoe, colliding into the legs of another waiter. A tray he's holding clatters to the floor. The waiter raising a fist while the monkey wastes no time pouncing on the food. Now it's kicked squarely, screeching as though dying. Everything brought to a sudden halt by a piercing whistle.

"Adamo!" A woman dining alone calls out. Bright yellow boa encircles her neck, the feathers rise and fall in sequence with her shouts. "Adamo! Adamo!" She blows the sharp whistle again, the monkey running to her and scurrying under the tablecloth.

I'm dumbstruck, sitting perfectly still. As I continue to observe, the woman lets out a long gasp, her black bulbous eyes rolling back in her head, heave of her ample breasts, huge gold hoop earrings swinging, the boa fluttering like yellow birds.

A waiter sets a glass down in front of me breaking the spell.

Absinthe. I know immediately. About to tell him Please take this away, when he jerks his thumb toward a man seated at a table perhaps ten feet from mine. Of course, also alone. Why else send over a drink?

The man is watching me, waiting. Though seated, his strong, heavily built frame is apparent. Thick black hair widow-peaks onto a broad forehead. His dark flat eyes continue to stare as he fingers a short black beard.

Finally, to put an end to it, I nod slightly. Satisfied, the waiter moves

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

along. I owe the man nothing more and have no intention of taking a single sip. It can sit full in the glass 'til the end of eternity.

The dining room, at first perfectly comfortable, now feels much too warm. Stifling. The monkey has come out from under the table and rests on the floor close to the gypsy. I've made that assumption. Gypsy. No one else is dressed so flamboyantly, sporting whistles and peculiar mannerisms. Not to mention a monkey. Two tables over, an elderly woman with a poodle in an adjoining chair. Normal for France.

The waiter returns and I order a light meal. It annoys him that I don't request a starter. He tries pushing the escargot, extolling its freshness from the sea that very day, making a gesture as if the sea were within walking distance. I can't imagine any body of water in this dense wooded area. When I shake my head no, he grabs the menu and struts off.

I glance covertly at the man with the widow peak— feeling almost pulled toward him. Telling myself this is only because there is nothing else to look at. Unless I want to keep looking in the mirrors. It's a quandary. I'm feeling less relaxed at my table in my comfy chair. I pick up the Absinthe, taking a small sip, not looking his direction. Instead, a quick glance into a mirror – seeing myself twenty times twenty in descending order. Possibly more – my image a hundred times a hundred? Each growing smaller? I'm feeling almost giddy giggling under my breath. From just one sip of Absinthe? Where is the waiter? I'm starving. I would like my dinner.

Why all the mirrors? I decide it's an annoying cliché. Feeling the urge to block my eyes with my hand. Many are very old; the glass smudged sooty, irregular. Others with patterns etched along the edges: rosettes and exotic florals, and other markings I can't identify. Who came up with this idea? It's starting to feel crazily repetitive, like being in the funhouse where you see yourself reflected indefinitely.

The monkey, curled up next to its Mistress, hasn't changed position.

Other diners have apparently forgotten the monkey, eating and drinking, laughing, picking up where they left off. Even the man with the black widow peak is focused on his meal. The noise level in the room reaching a pitch. I feel a heightened confusion. Dimly lit chandeliers blur the rain splashed windows. Then the gypsy clanks a heavy ring, repeatedly against her plate, to catch a waiter's attention. Crossing and re-crossing my legs under the table I consider tipping over the Absinthe; watching with a greedy lust as the pale liquid streams down the white cloth.



Chairs scrape wood as people get up, tables are re-set, new people sit down. Swiftly; anonymously. A steady influx. Why to this remote place?

Rather than a smell of savory food, a greasy train odor is always present. Where is my dinner?

"Savory," I say to the waiter who stops to refill my water glass.

"Madame?"

"Where are the luscious food smells?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

He shrugs. I look in a mirror. Again, a different version of my face. Does this happen to everyone in the room? To the man who sent over the Absinthe? I twist the backs of my pearl earrings 'til I feel the pull of flesh then a wetness on my fingers. Have I made myself bleed intentionally? "Damn those mirrors!"

The man looks up from his meal. Taking hold of the crystal glass I raise it. He smiles widely, pushing back his chair. Standing. In a moment towering over me. Enormous. Everything – his fingers. A huge block of flesh and bone. "How long do you imagine this rain will last?" His accent, not pure French, could be Algerian.

I'm not prepared. He's waiting. "This chair is quite comfortable," I finally say.

Why the chair? Why not the food, which hasn't arrived, or some other polite comment about the drink he sent over? Even the goddamn mirrors. When he doesn't respond I continue in this same vein. "You see, I've always been fond of velvet chairs which my aunt had in her apartment in Paris, though thick with hairs from the cat." I take a breath. That one sentence has taxed me.

"That can be difficult. Vexing," he says.

Difficult? In what way? Is he referring to the cat hair or cats in general? Is he the type to run down a cat with his automobile? Does he own a car? We still haven't exchanged names. I begin to wonder if that will ever take place. This is not the usual scenario but skewed like the mirrors. Besides his strange physique, the man has an off-putting quality. Meat, I think again. Hacked; then left to trail blood in sawdust.

My lashes flicker.

He misses nothing. "I have a car outside," he says.

"I have a car outside."

"Well. It appears we both have cars outside."

"Apparently. Cars but no dinner. At least for me."

He seems unconcerned. I run my tongue over my teeth. Tasting the remains of a good meal. Garlic and other spices. My stomach feeling quite satisfied. Yet the silver service plate still remains on the table, the bread plate is free of crumbs, cutlery arranged exactly as when I first sat down.

Could I have eaten and forgotten? Was the table cleared and re-set while I was self-absorbed in a mirror? Shaking this off I'm thinking absurd.

There is an air about the man. He assumes things. His mind open for the taking.

He assumes I will leave my chair and accompany him out of this dining room. I look into one of the mirrors. Vines along its serpentine top, it sends back the face of a woman with garland twisting through long, sea-swept hair.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

"Sorry for what?"

"I'll be unable to travel with you."

"Oh, that."

He places his fingers, interwoven, against his ribcage. Rocking on his heels. An all-consuming confidence. Then the suggestion he should join me for dinner. "After all, you have two chairs," he says.

What? I'd watched him eat his meal. Everything was going backward.

A glance into another mirror sends back a face splotched with fear. What is to fear from this man? He has no hold over me. I look again. Rage is flung at me. Male rage. Imbedded within my own image. I stare down at my hands resting in my lap. The pale, square cut of aquamarine has darkened. "This ring," I say raising my hand to the table, "has brought me no true pleasure."

"Indeed." He takes the chair opposite me and settles in. "The ring, though exquisite, is entirely wrong for you. You're of the earth and the ring is all water."

A sudden absence of rain pounding the roof becomes apparent; the quiet is almost an explosion.

"I can't be responsible for anything further," I tell him. "It's become a matter of life and death."

"Face it," he says, slipping the ring from my finger.