

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

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Heirloom Song

Alec spread out his Gustav Mahler collection of discs on the kitchen table. He had been at the sawmill all day, but his special fairy came to him and told him to play sick but not catch hell from doing it. So quick-like then he told the foreman he had to go home, stomach troubles. Feather, the fairy, had once many days ago implored him to quit smoking tobacco, and to stop watching girls of the night in dirty film. She'd told him heavily about Mahler's Symphony #5, how Mister Gustav worked on it furiously at the holiday cottage at Maiernigg. It was only a matter of time before Alec began collecting the musical Bohemian's entire catalog, and very proudly so.

Presently Alec watched Feather dance around his kitchen in his home, bending herself lithely, and blowing warm, little kisses. There was not a jejune moment with her, girl of purple hair and pert breasts. Alec, though, had intentions on a human girl, a tomato saleswoman out on the highway. Feather tried to coach him about love's ways. All the different shades of love, from carnal to brotherly and to that of the spirit. She herself had grown nostalgic for a pet ram she used to have, a beast by the name of *Gustav*—just like Mr. Mahler, the mister music genius. One morning Feather had popped up with the dawn and the sound of roosters, but her ram, her own little *Gustav*, was gone. She'd asked her pixie sisters, and she'd asked her mailman. But there was neither hide nor hair.

Alec moved gingerly, made Feather a hot chocolate and one for him to boot at the mahogany sidebar. They talked about the girl from the tomato stand. They did not even have a name for her. Alec knew the saleswoman in a small portion: well, she liked sweetgrass baskets, he at least knew that. She was scared of haints, and hags, and plat-eyes, and as such, covered her tomato stand in a nice robin-egg blue.

Feather sipped her cocoa and traced the wood grain on the table.

"I can never get back to my ram, 'less I teach you along the way to this tomato gal," she said. "You do realize that, don't you Alec?"

"I feel too overweight," he answered. "Too strung out. I don't care about my body—I don't care about anything but you."

Feather got up and went to the stereo. She put on Mahler's Symphony #9, the last beauty that that very man had created. She seized pimento cheese from out of Alec's fridge, grabbed the loaf of store bread on the counter and began making sandwiches.

Smiling, she said: "Why don't we go for a jog today? Down to that park, and around the historical cannons, and where that green heron walks."

"Green herons are so ugly," Alec lashed.

"Nothing is ugly, if you look at it right."

Alec felt warm from the hot chocolate. He felt his blood pumping in a nice sort of a way. Feather knew what was best for him. She had always been there, watching movies with him, chomping on their trays of fatback,

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having great farting contests under the brilliant moonlight. He needed to man up, needed to help get her fairy soul in due course to gain her ram back, her own little Gustav.

"Fine," Alec started. "I will talk to the Tomato Girl. I will find out her name at least."



Stella held onto the newspaper. The weather report was not promising, would there ever be rain, would there ever be justification? She lit a cigarette and prayed the spirits would stop bothering her. She touched as many beefsteak tomatoes as she could, and prayed over them. The haints were after her something fierce.

Most dry-hot nights, Stella thought about suicide. She wished she were a simple flamingo, like the ornaments in her front lawn. No real worries. No arguments with people, no philippic. She wanted children out of life, she wanted the carnal, she wanted more than a produce stand. The stand of hers actually said PRODUCE, but in her own life, she often thought, she was *producing* nothing, nill. She had once loved a Spaniard, Jozabed. Jozabed had promised so many things when he first came to town. He would be mayor, he told the people. He said he had a legal background, could marry people, could preach and save souls, remove their stains.

Stella tossed roma tomatoes in the air and caught them and sighed.



He lit a cigar and talked to the plat-eye. That very spirit could move through the wall of the prison building, shift into a guardsman and let Estefania out. Jozabed missed the girl. The prison men had told him what his love-girl had done, how she had robbed people, how she had menaced with her bow and arrow. He did not fully understand the ways of this land, or the stupid things that were eaten, the inferior things that were drunk—he just simply aimed to get Estefania back into his embrace. She was much better than Stella, Stella with her ridiculous baskets and red tomatoes. But Stella was free and easy whereas Estefania was locked up, not good for anything carnal. The plat-eye had a mind of its own, didn't cotton to things like money or power. Didn't cotton to anything really.

He felt incredibly stuck with life.



Feather combed Alec's hair, pushing back each brown strand. She drank merlot and coughed the tiniest of coughs.

"I mean what do even I say to her?" Alec intoned.

"Say what you feel. Tell her about Gustav Mahler, how his song gets up in you."

"It does get up in me, makes me feel like a man, makes me feel alive with life and strong as the lion, cat-like reflexes, as people say."

"She will love you, and then I can get my ram back. My Gustav."

"Maybe I should write Tomato Girl a poem, a villanelle even."

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"Just be yourself."

Alec arose from the stool he had been using. He wanted a cigarette, but Feather had made him quit. It was a disadvantage to life, smoking.

When they got outdoors, they held hands, the pixie and the man. They looked at the aubergine sky.



Stella had stained her purple shirt. She did not understand how the mark had gotten there. She had a hoodie in her truck, but it was too warm for a hoodie. She needed a high-sale today. Stella figured she could sell off the sweetgrass baskets given from the Gullah women if she needed to.

The Gullah had warned her about the plat-eye, and to their own personal Geechee noggins they thought Mr. Jozabed a worthless man, a direct scallywag.

Presently Stella felt stir crazy. She decided to climb in her 4x4 and head off, to the gas station, to anywhere but the view of her tomatoes. Stupid cherry tomatoes, stupid Camparis too.

She drove and sang hymns she had once learned in church. Jesus and her personal fairy were all she had. In the mirror above the dashboard, she caught a look of herself. Her eyebrows needed work, her hair looked like a nest up in the pines. But she was doing all right.



Jozabed had—in life itself—traded in his personal pixie for a plat-eye. Presently he had coffee in him, and he had malice. He listened to flute music, some orchestra he had on disc, listened as he drove his flawless black convertible. He craved a Cherokee Purple tomato, and he craved Stella, the very seller of them. Yes, if he could never again quite capture Estefania, he would have his Stella back, and he would carry her away with great force if it came to that. He was not afeared.

In the trunk, he had an ax, and he had a quilt. He drove on, humming to the soft sounds of flute on the car stereo. He cranked it up and smiled greatly.



When Feather and Alec arrived at the PRODUCE STAND, all was quiet and still, all was dead with the world. Feather suggested they sit in the car and listen to Mahler's 3rd Symphony, it's slow, peaceful start, which gives a person over to dreams.

As for Alec, he was worried about where the Tomato Girl might be. Why would she desert her station, her livelihood, her forever place?

Feather yawned, "I can't wait to get my ram back, just to hold him close in the sunshine."

Alec countered, "But I am afeared something will go wrong here now. I don't have a long history, like some fellars do, of talking to girls."

"Do you think I am pretty, Alec?"

"The prettiest of pixies. And I have seen many—I have heard of many."

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"Just talk to her, talk to her like you would talk to me. Tell her about Mahler, about the pain and joy of his sounds."

"That is a fine enough idea, I suppose," Alec said. "I am sure she has the soul for music after all."

And there he was, a man with an ax and a snarl, tapping, tapping, on the window.

"What burdens you, stranger?" Feather asked of him.

"I aim to kill you, me and my plat-eye both," the leathery face seemed to sing out.

He escalated it, he pursued it, as he began to choke Feather through the open window. How the man hated fairies.

Alec sat stymied. How could he proceed; his mind matched the new, galloping pace of Mahler, Symphony #3 in his dashboard, brain thought of his own after brain thought of his own, all the days with Feather came racing in, pomp and circumstance, the music roared; he wished he had an ax too, or a 10-gauge, even a crowbar or a switchblade.

Feather spat and shook in the passenger seat.

Jozabed gripped down ever harder.

Alec undid his seatbelt, gingerly he walked.

And there she was, it was Tomato Girl, panting, running, crashing on in. She laid claws on the brown neck of the man, and Alec kicked him in one knee, and then the other knees, spat in his eye, and the man fell to the clay like a sack of trash.

Stella drew closer to Feather.

Alec drew closer to Stella.

Sounds of Mahler, and sounds of whippoorwills far off. Stella and Alec and Feather. Tomatoes and sweetgrass baskets and behind them great fences, covered in kudzu and yellow jasmine, as the gloam of the wonderful day settled in like some passionate sheep come down to woo them.