

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

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Hussy

She's wearing a too small wedding dress that squeezes her like Aunt Beech when she's drunk and in the mood but ain't no man to touch. ("This pain just way too sweet to waste" is always dropping out Aunt Beech's mouth, like bird shit. And she holds on too tight, for too long.)

From behind, she's a lumpy, lacy thing with shoulders wide as a grave. Her head, though, is small: only ten or twelve plaits fit. Her face is three things: almost-red lipstick, wild lashes, and disobedience. Each set against this wonderfully raped brown (that is, she would be brown alone if not for the insistence of her mother's mother's high yellowness). And she manages, by the skin of her gapped teeth, pretty—her eyes sit way too far apart, but her cheeks? It's as if the bones have been kicked through the skin.

She's fourteen with absolutely nowhere to go, but that's not a wonder. She *is* the daughter of Lawrence and Ellarine Gaither. Lawrence, who believes in raising women clean as a curve, whose hands have touched pots and pans and fruit and toilets and laundry and keys and windows and phones, but not themselves (he's raised six before her—all married, mostly pure), and Ellarine, who is dead as the nails on her raging girl toes. She cannot leave this house except to go inside her own little head. Even and especially on Saturday afternoons, when the other neighborhood children are sitting on their porches being common ("as salt!").

Like any day without school or a trip to the branch library, she's sitting in front of the television—black and white and small enough to be carried at her hip if she gets the feeling and dares defy her father to watch it outside on the concrete steps for the whole wide ghetto to see. Once, he caught her. And did nothing more than lift his pant leg to climb right past her like she was the railing itself. That and whisper, "hussy" with so much grit he must have checked his mouth for stones. He refused her name for a long month after. By the time he called out "Dot" it was the Fourth of July and she wasn't sure if men were real or what.

Today, though, the television's screen is blank and she has nestled her button nose, stuffed to its dull tip with snot, into knotted, praying hands. Over and over again she is chanting the name *Charlie*.

The photograph above the television is almost as tall as the wall it hangs from. *Charlie*. It, like the television, is black and white, but less black and less white, and a full 40 years older. Of her parents standing beside a wedding cake indistinct as the reason they married, it folds in at the corners, despite the frame, as if it to hug (or perhaps to choke) itself. It has hung, unmoved, through a throng of mistresses (bold bitches, slick enough to bring you your cognac in four inch heels and not spill a drip; none of them old enough to remember King's murder), through the suicide encouraged by those mistresses ("You too gotdamn old for this, Ella! Beech hollered, like a crazy thing, at her sister's casket—it was closed because she'd blown her face off), through rape, through the consequent, way too heavy shame, through an illegitimate child neither named nor kept nor spoken of since.

Her father, in a light-colored, well-tailored suit looks satisfied, and her

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mother, behind him, duped. Of this picture, he says, "My! Look at Ella. See that look on her face? If that ain't love I don't know what is." What he ought to say is, "Lord Jesus." *Charlie.*

To the far left of this photograph is a small cut they call the kitchen, but before that is a hallway brief as a blink and beyond it, three bedrooms. In the year of her birth they held nine bodies on any given night. *Charlie.* In the bedroom to the left, the biggest, slept her three oldest sisters—each more ugly than the next. In the one to the far right, the smallest, slept three more. These, on a single queen sized mattress, touching only the ends of each other: green beans in the pod. But this arrangement must have been divine or at least lucky or maybe by the time they were born their parents only fucked and never made love, because not one proved less than gorgeous or unmarried past her seventeenth year. In the center bedroom: Ella and Lawrence, and squished between them—she herself, Dot. Just barely pretty, but pretty still, since the fucking lacked all anger come '78.

Outside the windows of these bedrooms, then and now, pure white wilderness and all the rest of Buffalo sit. Not one girl, ugly or not, has left this house tongue kissed (not even the raped one), let alone a whore. *Sweet Charlie.*

Once, when Dot was eight and the house in chaos, her Aunt Beech pulled her into the beautiful girls' room for a one-sided talk. Lawrence was using his body to clean the living room floor and Ella was crying enough to drown. They'd just found that Pearl, the third youngest, had been took. You should have seen Lawrence. He was a thrashing black fool mop, there on all fours, begging God to take it back. He kept asking, "What good is she?" And Ella kept not answering. If not for the Smith boy who cared far less about a spoiled wife (the rape brought the unnamed son) than the way she said his name (like it was a risk), Lawrence might've died of grief thirty years too soon. That spectacle, plus Aunt Beech's lecture (it was all, "See how precious pussy is?" and "You ever seen a grown man cry like that before?") made Dot know. She's suffocating in this wedding dress to lose her virginity, then. Since it should be spectacular. *Charlie.*

She's the only one to have been plump in it or not standing before the noose (marriage), but it's what she has. Never mind that the skirt is big as all outdoors, all the ruffles that'll tickle him, and nothing's funny—she knows enough to give the day some weight. If it were her choice, she'd wear a miniskirt, just long enough to cup her behind, and kitten heels. Her lipstick'd be brighter, righter, thicker, more serious (like blood), not the weak red (it might as well be pink) she has on now. But her father is careful about his money, counts it wearing dish gloves, sleeps with it shoved to the very center of his raggedy box spring, and only ever buys things he can afford flat out. He would never—not for her prom to come, or her mother's funeral passed—consider something new when something old exists. Anyway, what would she ask him? "Can I get me a new skirt, Daddy? One that don't cover nothing and hug me too good in the middle? I need to go on and make love with your fine friend, Mr. Charles." *Charlie.*

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They have done everything short of making love, but the restraint belongs to the man. He said “fuck no” to thirteen. Thirteen was unripe, an insult. “What kind of man fuck thirteen year old girls?” He was always asking. So, he only tasted her there, six months in a row and as recent as last week, with his fifty-year-old mouth, because that can be forgiven. And she knows, because he’s told her, that it tastes like pickles or tomatoes, depending on the season. And he loves either. Naturally, she’s tasted him back, because that’s not sex at all, but when asked, “What’s it like?” she’s always lost for words and says, “Skin” or if she’s swallowed, “Silk.” *Dear Charlie.*

According to Melody and Harmony, fraternal twins who live two blocks over—too big about the hips (they’re barely thirteen themselves) and so poor they swap shirts and shoes and bras and gum...they can’t even afford their own ideas and swap those too—when it comes down to it, Charlie won’t want to be bothered with pants. They’ll inconvenience him. He’ll prefer a skirt. He may walk away if she wears jeans and then where would she be? Exactly where she started. New. He’ll want her like a bowl he can dump himself into. And anyway, does she want her virginity tossed away like theirs? On no particular night in no particular way or with a holey, baggy, dingy, doo doo green T-shirt worn?

“What about Ella’s wedding dress?” Dot asked the twins three days back when the snow was young.

And Melody said, “How come you call her Ella and not Momma?”

“Because that’s her name.” Dot looked at her hard, no blinking, but the twin couldn’t handle that.

The idea of a wedding dress pushed convenience out of their heads. They forgot it’d knock things over; it’d be heavy; it’d make all that noise. So what. It was perfect. Still, they warned her about underneath.

“Wear panties if you want,” Melody said.

“See what you gon get,” said Harmony.

And though she is sure Charlie will wait, long as she needs, for her to peel off a pair of pants or panties or her own raped brown skin (he is patient as a rock), she believes the twins. They were right about kissing—how it’s nasty and heaven all at once; and they were right about his age not making a difference where true love lives. And especially...especially about her body craving his like he was stark white sugar. *Charlie.*

He had better hurry. *Charlie, please. Please, Charlie.* Her father will be home in exactly one hour and thirty-three minutes, and won’t stop short of gutting him (a cat fish) if he’s found between her where only superhero underclothes or sheets or her own hands with toilet paper go. Charlie knows that. He saw, like she and all the rest of Leroy Street, her father drag Bridget’s crush out the house by his ankles. And his head hit each step with six thuds that changed things forever. Charlie knows the boy’s eye wandered here and there but never where he told it after that. He knows everybody hated and loved the Gaither girls from then on. To not only have a daddy, but to have a stir crazy one that cracked little boy skulls while he hollered your name? They were a sweet and terrible myth. *Come on here, Charlie. You promised.*

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Seven hundred seventy-six *Charlies* and the man arrives. He looks like he has no future. He looks like he needs everybody's prayers. He looks like a blessing taken back. He doesn't even have a coat on.

"What happened? We said two-thirty." Dot says.

She's turned gray from waiting. There are only forty-nine minutes left, and she doesn't match as beautifully with her unfunny dress anymore. Not like when she was still burnt butter-colored and horny.

But he doesn't answer. Not with words. Instead he runs up on her, like for violence. He tries putting his hands cold hands all over her, but he can't. The dress is there, saying no and she just almost cries she hates it so much. Rather than keep tearing at it, he grabs her face and kisses her, pushes down her throat his tongue and desperation and a bunch of old man pain she tastes and misnames love.

Then he cuts all that out. He pulls his hands off of her like she's fire. Looks at his fingers to confirm the burn. The end of the touching/tearing/old man kisses is as violent as the beginning, and the silly studying of his fingers pricks Dot's wonder. Nothing about this feels honest. His face is empty courage, one. It must have poured out his ears when he tipped his head reading each hand. Two, Dot's thighs are weeping despite it feeling like Charlie's declared war. She feels the absence of his touch far better than the touch itself. And ain't that war? A crushed throat, but no foot for proof? Rage, no teeth?

"I'm hungry," he tells her. "And thirsty too. I need somewhere comfortable to sit." He looks around, like for something to cling to and she wants to do something awful—scoop out his eyes with her pinky finger and a spoon. But she pours him homemade juice and chases it with rum, like her daddy does. And where there was weeping between her legs, there's now fur. Where there were nearly fifty minutes there aren't thirty-five. Where before he'd use concrete hands to unlatch her bra he combs his chest with shivering wooden ones, nervous.

"I ain't cooking shit, Charlie." She says and hands him his drink. She sits right close (he can't get the glass to his mouth without bumping her titty with his elbow), and puts all her thousand eyes on him. There are the two too-far apart ones in her head, but nine hundred ninety-eight more litter her chin, cheeks, neck, shoulders, arms, torso, the length of her. All of her sees all of him and all one thousand eyes are held open while he sips his drink like a lady. He sips his drink like a lady and she thinks, *Do you slip out of love that easy—is it like mud?* Because she feels it going. She's going to ask the twins. Do you? Slip out easy as you slip in? It's a taste in her mouth, but she can't find the meat that left it. She's climbing her mouth, its roof, its secret parts, with her tongue, looking for a sliver of pork. But nothing. Anyway, the twins won't know. They won't know about falling out of love with an old man or one fact about love at all. Only Aunt Beech will know. And her answer will be, "So you fucking?"

When there are only nineteen minutes left and he still has yet to finish the goddamn rum or stick a finger between her were-weeping thighs, he says, "I can't do this thing, Dot. Can't do it." And spits out her life.

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They're quiet so long Dot starts to dream. They're quiet so long it's a wonder Lawrence doesn't walk through the door and murder them. When she finally speaks the words have four feet, headed four different places.

"You talking like you ain't had a year to get ready, Charlie. You said 'fourteen'. 'Fourteen, Dot. Wait 'til you fourteen. I'll fuck you then.' And now you talking like my daddy won't be here in a minute. He gon kill you, Charlie. While you acting like a stranger. How you gon marry me and you can't fuck me first?"

"Can't do it. Don't care what you say." He tells her.

"And what I'm supposed to do? When I want you like this?" It's not true, but she paints her voice red so it sounds it. She can't even find the bite of pork that proves she loved him; she doesn't even want him in particular, but it's time. "Don't you remember what we said last night, Charlie? On the telephone?" They kept saying "tomorrow at two-thirty" and "won't tomorrow hurry up and come?" Intolerance is in and under and between her words when she says, "Quit playing with me, hear?"

Had she been paying any attention, had all thousand eyes not been hawking his throat wanting it cut, she'd have seen the lumps. It's like he's collecting quarters there. It's like all twelve months—January, February, March...on through to December...it's like all twelve months she waited for this day are piled on top of each other collected there. What's there, between his legs, is different from what's forced out his mouth. His words are a mere drip. His body a storm.

"Don't you remember, Charlie? Don't you know I love you more than myself?" She smiles.

"I remember," he says.

"Don't you want me, Charlie? Don't you want to be the first one I know?"

"I do." He tells her. "Hard for me to say that, but I do."

"What's hard about it? I love you. You love me. You told me that."

"What's wrong with you?" He asks with his mouth, of course, but it's the eyes that give the question doubt.

"I love you," she says.

"This ain't right," he tells her.

"Sure it is."

She reaches behind herself and starts unhooking the ladder of buttons connecting her wide as a grave shoulders. Soon she pulls the dress down over her breasts, pretty as a pair of unblinking eyes. She takes one old man hand, now warm, and places it on one raped brown breast, puts the trembling pointer of the other in her mouth. She sucks it long and hard in a one-two rhythm, as if it is peppermint, won't dissolve.

"How is it...how is it that you know to do things like that?"

He's pretending, but his hand is tug, tug, tugging at the pretty eye and this ain't the time to tell him, "You."

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With the passing of her tongue between the pointer and middle finger, right before she begins to lick down his palm, headed for his wrist, he says, "Well come on, then." And tears his hand from her, again like she's fire, again checking for the burn. "We need to get this thing started if we gonna be done in time to miss Lawrence, right? He'll be through this door any minute wanting his rum and paper, won't he?"

She stands and lifts her dress so that it is gathered at her hips in a bunch of pasty, unfunny ruffles. She poses there with her fat legs exposed all the way to where they meet in a glorious V. No panties. She's posing with her fat legs exposed to their glory, where she's only had hair a season. It's not tame and Aunt Beech's told her, "Leave it like that, 'til it's enough to braid. When it's enough to braid we'll talk." But she's tried her hand at shaving it already—it grows back like it's pissed. She's round and soft and new standing there. She's round and soft and new and any boy her age would be displeased with the folds; a young boy wouldn't rest his hands between them and tell her how much she feels like home, but Charlie's twenty years past young with eyes that see things in a beige light. So they head toward the beautiful girls' room together. Along the way, he says, "I got no business here", in a whisper, and the redundant "this ain't right", but by the time he is sitting on the lucky queen-sized mattress: "I know plenty of men slept with girls exactly your age. Some two, three years younger" in a normal, steady voice, and then, "It's way worse things going on in this world right now. Things way worse than a man making love with a girl that really want it in the first place" loud and clear.

"Uh hunh," says Dot.

They bear the inconvenience of her getting out the dress quietly. There is only the chorus of the unfunny ruffles passing each other on their way to the floor. Dot thinks, *I'm not listening to one thing, not one more thing them twins say*, and mounts him.

It's difficult making room inside her. First, she's sealed and second he's outsized. Third, he's nervous and therefore unfeeling. He doesn't notice her face clenched tight as a nut and never thinks to kiss even one wrinkle away. Then there's time to think about.

In nine minutes, Lawrence will shuffle through the door, high off of Georgia, the new, peach-smelling woman at the plant. He'll put his hat on the hook beside the door. Pour himself six shots. Drink them before he tastes them. Run his bare feet across every plank of the wood floor, not even knowing his daughter's there, getting grown. If the liquor hits him hard, he just might be fooled, for he'll stand beneath the shade of the photo of him and his dead wife and see it for what it is. She will look, in his drunken state, as she looks to everyone else: suicidal. He'll get angry with her and call her "stupid", decide, with both hands curled to fists that Ellarine Gaither is weak, simply. Eventually he'll holler, "What I still got you on my wall for anyway?"

While Lawrence is asking his dead wife questions, Charlie can put himself back together, and Dot can clean everything away. She won't have to worry about the bedspread so much as she will returning the wedding dress to its plastic shield in her father's bedroom—Lawrence will not go into the beautiful girls' room drunk (all over there are mirrors and he is a

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short, dull man, shorter and duller when drunk). While he is pretending to search for a hammer to remove the frame, Charlie can slip right past. He might as well be Lawrence's shadow if the liquor hits quick enough.

Except that Charlie starts up with his crying and slows everything down. He's done this before. Separated into pieces—the strong, willful parts tucked and sewn, beyond his own reach and certainly Dot's, the weedy parts hanging and ripe and plentiful, too easy to touch. The tears open wide all over Dot's pretty breasts and there's not even the hint of pork in her mouth. She begins slamming her fists against his back, drops them, square as rage, into his old man back thirty, forty, maybe fifty times.

"Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up, Charlie!"

She pushes him off her like he's fire, but doesn't check for burns. There are three minutes left and she doesn't know if she's a virgin or not. She can't tell if the pile of skin between his legs where January, February firmness was means anything. And for the first time in a year of stark white sugar love she feels like a girl with him.

"Get the fuck out!"

Squatting on the floor in the beautiful married girls' room, Dot licks her knee. Buck naked, her thighs weeping, but not their own goodness, she considers Ella. She's not nearly as messy as her mother was, measuring blood with an open mouth (her eyes had been spit into two opposing corners—an amazing feat, since the gun was antique). Where Ella's mess was not almost red, but all the way, and velvet, pulpy, generous (bits of it reached even the windows, Lawrence's suit jackets hanged in the closet), Dot's is thin and no color, no texture worth the memory. She's not nearly that messy, but she's the same. And the child just almost cries for the mother. Just almost. The tears well up so high it's a wonder they balance. So high if she breathes big the levees will collapse. But she pulls it together and the water gets swallowed backward to live insider her. She takes her tongue back and forth across the other knee. The first has been stripped of its salt.

When Aunt Beech knocks, arrives even before Lawrence (he is a full sixty minutes late, and Dot is sure this means Georgia has been fooled onto her back) she is dressed and fed, if no longer new. The house's windows are raised to their height. All sixteen of them. The scent of her rape, not the one suffered her skin, the one suffered her spirit, draped on other houses, cars, the snow.

"Where your daddy?" Beech says and pushes past her, same as she would yesterday.

"Don't know."

"Hmmm! You ate? What in the world you got all these windows open for?"

On a single Saturday must everyone be thrown from his throne? Dot thinks, *How Aunt Beech don't know? How tell-me-my-own-life Aunt Beech can't see? Sixteen windows enough to stop her? Some winter air and she blind?* She looks down at her hands: trembling, yes; some of their color missing, too. *And Aunt Beech at the stove whipping eggs!*

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To greet Lawrence she pulls her plaits back into a bouquet of limp sticks. She cannot wear lipstick 'round him, so she must rely on the lashes and disobedience. To greet him she invites over the twins. She stands on the porch, legs wide as when they welcomed Charlie, her hands thrust to the beginnings of her pockets (to contain the tremble). To greet her daddy she's posted on the top stair and Melody and Harmony skip every other one below her. Where they are underdressed because they are poor, Dot is missing hat, gloves and coat because there's a hill a fur between her legs. She's warm.

He tries walking past in a way that says, "You're common," but the girls are staggered and he can't give the stairs a straight go. He tries stomping around them but the steps haven't been cleared and his anger is lost on the snow. It must make things worse that Dot's eyes aren't low, evaluating her feet. He can't want to hear her voice.

But she says, "I smell you," anyway.

And he gives her nothing back. He hurries inside to fill himself to the collar with Puerto Rican rum, to eat his sister-in-law's cornbread, to prepare himself to not ever, ever, never, ever say that shaming hussy's name.

"You crazy?" The twins say, over and over on top of each other when he's gone.

But Dot is cool. Dot is the daughter of a woman sad enough to shoot her face off and a man weak enough to make her do it. She was half-raised by an aunt named Beech who calls pussy diamonds and sneak kisses her daddy when no one's looking. "That's a sea you got down there, you know? Either drown them in it or wind up drowned yourself," is a thought she's memorized, backward, forward, and out of order. Her sisters have never touched a man that didn't touch them first and she has no idea of a brother's love. Dot calls her momma by her first name—Ella, or Ellarine when she's lonely—and wore the woman's wedding dress to get fucked her first time. She hates her daddy, hopes he dies as often as she hopes for rain, and rain is her favorite thing in the high, wide world, next to sugar. She drinks his rum with a loose jaw, this girl. Like its sweet tea. She sleeps in the pitch dark because *she's* the witch. And her first love, Charlie Matt, Charlie Matt of 7274 Leroy Street, bottom level, turned fifty just this August, the 4th, raped her so good she thinks he's the one got took without asking.

"What that meant? When you said you smelt him?" Melody says.

"Yea," says Harmony. "What that meant?"

"It meant I got a whiff of him and knew just where he'd been. I knew where he was at because he smelled like me."

She frees a plait from its place. Whips it 'round and 'round her young finger without an ounce, not a gram of tenderness.