

First Woman



A 2 R I V E R C H A P B O O K B Y

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First **W**oman

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First Woman

Ø. Introduction: When I Realized

When I realized I could no longer find the words I needed, I was flying out of myself with the regularity of breathing. There was music on the stereo and I rose thinking I might dance, and it was ink on tracing paper, it was hypertext clicked and swallowed, it was the chill and moving letters of the signs in Times Square on a tiny screen. My ideas fled and separated, groups of bright sophisticated girls smoking and half-smiling in the after midnight streets of the college town where I lived, who suddenly were half my age, wearing absurd costumes and then spookily wearing just exactly what I wore when I was 14, 15, 16.

Poetry flying out of my head like the rhythm of water in the shower, the calm desert sun of California and the uncanny farcical figure of St. Francis rendered at the Serra retreat out of something halfway between plaster and Holiday Inn plastic. When I was a kid the mall in Kokomo, Indiana, had "the largest cow in the world," made of a similar substance, ironically exactly the opposite of what was happening to me as I became less and less solid, thoughts blending dissolving as if stunned by hot dry air.

The chemicals of my mind my body the dynamic pattern itself surely evanescent, clear like liqueur, like the Chambord in a twisted James Bond glass, drunk at one of those bars that is like someone's cool basement party, and can you believe I thought I was pregnant? It is too small and pitiful, the shape of my personal and sentimental tragedy, the way the hurts and losses are buried inside like the treasures we had in metal boxes when we were six! Imagine looking in one of those now! Dirty toy figures smelling of saliva.

Cling to them, there's nothing to do but cling, under knotted sentences, cellophane, unsatisfying, let what I mean to say come right to you, I think that all this grasping after material things is just fear of change and what is honesty except for the biggest change of all? After all like Plato said our carpets hallways hairbrushes signs and trunk lights that flicker as the headlights go on, you have to slam it to make sure it will stay closed, bring me the cigarettes before you get back in, illicit borrowed keys, booty of my youth, all this is elusive, shadow, reality standing behind it like the parent or therapist who we always, but always damn it, find out is right after all. I am afraid of this change, this process toward honesty, I want to hold onto the poems I wrote when I thought about intrigue, flirtation, danger, thought it was the center of me, when I still thought I was hard sufficient and capable, capable of anything.

Thin like tracing paper, words that turn and dissolve, animation that can't be kept in the face of the advancing years, that fades till they are indistinguishable from the light that faded them, that comes from within, light we can't escape, light that comes from everywhere.

the trial

When she comes to stand
in front of all of you her name
means nothing. Which one she was
is never quite clear. It's the face
you remember, like the woman you saw
in a movie all about fire, how her eyes
slide like a marble. Though you can't
navigate the details, she persists
similar in your vision, trees and ministers
never fell as straight, never ate
less, the food refusing
her mouth, perhaps, cold

as the witless dinner on your plate
you feel her gaze over you, at the oddest times....

when you are driving, or when
your chest is briefly naked as you change
after work, into the person you were before.
Brazen, the simple
trips our bodies take.

Intensive Care

physician of record

Look to your work when I come to you,
vivid as if with fever, holding out
one dangerous hand.
Stronger men than you have felt it,
that is, the confusion,
and strong as any passion the impulse
to just say, "Yes." Trust me too:
I see you smile when I
enter, my body
in check, saying something simple:
but what you hear is something yet again.

counseling the family, cont'd

Why not by th' hand, sir?
How have I offended?
You lie, you disarming
woman, you turn, glancing
behind you, looking for a picture, a framed
set of rules, an open door . . .
ordinary, like the measure of desire.
All so ordinary. You are undone
by the simple trick of a made
mistake, gravity and sadness
seem to be the law. You break
easily, have to negotiate the pieces
again and again in darkness, and again
smoke in the air is the only mark
you make.
*You have obedience scanted,
and well deserve the want that you have wanted.*

the patient was unconscious

Trust me too—I'll betray
you only in the way your body may,
silent, explained by metaphor, unkind
unless reviewed from comfortable,
objective distance—nothing
is unobtainable, no pain
remarkable—trust me,
and with my cool hands, cold
heart, I will prepare a place
that like your body, holds your spirit
safe for your return. It is a journey
hard to remember—did I tell you,
it is easy to bargain with the devil.
Offer a soul
that doesn't belong to you.

and expired at 4:10 am

*If fortune brags of two
she loved and hated,
one of them we behold.* I loved you, too,
whatever good it did me. Will you kill
the physician and hand down the fee
for the disease to spend—I think, for you,
nothing is holy, nothing is too much.
What should I wish for? That our pain go on
and on beyond us, pacing like a runner
that never tires? As something else is ending
when I am standing silent at the bedside
distance and stillness
we are still forgetting.

II. Euphoric Recall

From [bried]

how well her wishes went . . .

The first power, night
the second, how those two lived
in a courtyard, brick-paved, like elves,
the third, her voice uneven,
laughing, wanting me.
Cool as my star-
crossed legs, we moved as one
person, he the 4th and I
like foxes, chasing them across
the roof, across
their sofa, then
turned out at last. No luck! She'd think
of me for days, telling her body,
her husband said, the precise sound
of my shallot heels,
of my thighs over them.

the marquis / the mark is

Trust in this place lasts
minutes, an aisle of light
flicked out, the center
of my wrists, let your hands
tamper with me, I'm not easily
broken, and when you bind
me, where do I go? Not over the mirror
you've made me say all the words
you want me to like prayers. Not where you entered
me, burning, as within I laughed,
flying out of my body. I return
fully never to you. Trust in the truth I carry—
what you give freely
bluer eyes refuse.

fisher

Slipped from his arms like a net
in cold water. Don't grab
after me, dearest—he did
what I said. Again and again
he loved me. And empty
as the long beaches where he loved
to open up my clothes, in time
I knew flight
was not something
that I had to do.

Black print

I don't want your wrist, that wears
the bite for hours afterwards,
rope marks. I don't want
you to wear that blouse, ugly once it is torn.
What do I want? Your courage, the sting
of your tears, that parting
like the lips of a wound, says,
Violated. But what I want is cheap
and paper obvious.
Our force must smear
double-carboned, like your makeup, in the darkness
just as our plans, smoldering and old-fashioned,

are already illegible. You'll look back in danger
angry at what I failed to give you later.

Troubled

by your beauty which travels separate, visits me
always at the wrong time, I think of your luck—
your looks are part of you, but
not enough. *Just your hair*
just your lips / enough
to crush you,
enough to open
my mouth and take you in it.
All of you, can't you see, everything
why not? Between beheld and real.
How can I trust
what is not there to feel. Not an ounce of regret
in your smile that turns me
back, always back, almost over
to your side, didn't your maker
dare smile too? If you protest
I'll force you, before the mirror
how could you still refuse. I am so tired
of ordinary things, and you're anything
but ordinary, bright and uncertain
as wildlife, needing to be named.
Call yourself different
every time. The same

maker you wait for is,
I'm afraid, the one who knows you well,
calls you to colors as a desert
lizard can be called to change, who made
people who are not beautiful
happier than you. Not property,
only art
is more judged, and you your own worst judge,
must always live inside it, seed to grass,
grass to hay, spinning

like an idea. And like the idea
of glamour, rising, ever
hot and indistinct, away from us.

Contract

What was a voice, a hiss
—the lines are indistinct—
what took my arm, said *Miss*.
Hard as the words I blinked
and agreed, you know the way
anything but alone—
anything I can say—
hard as the words were stone.

I never had any choice besides, because
the choice was the devil in the lines (or in the darkness).

Runaway train

still

Still I remember how I took to the life,
still unapproachable. How I came close, for time
after time. Had luck. And then gave up. The dry
smile on my lips. Was stuck.

Surgeons, that sign
a procedure report like a check, had shown me then
how to walk out of a proverbial room,
crowded with people . . . those who wished me still
something. The past. What I deserved. The circle
wide as a boxer's arm.

Who wished me ill
words or harsh looks I did not want to know.
You were as quiet as I could expect,
watching me go as if from a distance still.

silence

one woman against the past—
believe me, I'm powerless. Did you think
I'd lie? I can tell you, now
that no one will hear me, hell, I've not
always been decent. The things I've done!
First, there was doing them, then there was
supposedly being ashamed, but really
proud, that I could keep those secrets like
a kid whose footprints lead
backwards, to the parental bedroom. Then
well, there was really
being ashamed, and then
silence. Just that. To stop
the train on the tracks with a finger
on my lips
to hold the line
softly as a lover's hips.

anonymity

names of the victims held until families can be notified
I was trying to affirm
my unique identity
by using one of the common
denominators of man.
Before stage I obviously stage 0
that which we all find ourselves in, the cancer
almost a relief, from nothing-
ness to oneness.

III. The Building

The Building

The light in the highest window
like a picture in pieces
we can constitute without
meaning though it is
unnatural, architecture and light
falls through the spaces
as through an elevator shaft, used
up before the bottom, as though
it were the beams of an empty ski-
cathedral. We can find
what we want to see in the details,
a wooden button. Hangs
like a round familiar goal, her fingers,
her hair, I don't even have
to tell you. She was wearing

gold, that was the first time
her teeth flashed for a second, slick
as an animal under the water, momentary
face of her emotion, as quickly re-immersed.

What is a time step? How much can it hold?
In my imagination it's easy. The wood
creaks under my weight, I squint
in the warm sunlight, turn, seemingly everywhere
looking for her though
she can't be here. Smell
of my clothing, formal in the hard
light, the sound
of my heel as it falls on simulated stone.
Wholeness and pieces. Not pure. You can ask
me but now I've begun to say
just about all of it, so bright
and forward, construction
music, and in tone.

Subject

Despite what I said, she walked in
the foundation site as I visited
the shop of the glassblower. "Tell me
we are just alike," I said to him in a low
voice, indicating her with my chin as she
picked her way among the concrete pilings,
raised one arm to balance on a slab of wood.
He chuckled and gestured that I should take the tube
dipped in hot glass, and despite temptation, not inhale.
Under his watchful eye I breathed
blue-black, a perfect sphere.
*You can still go back, he said, but you can
be like other people. Which will it be?*

His laughter was sharp, painful as the mirrors
all around his shop I used to avoid,
that now showed me: a respectable woman dressed in black.
Her eyes doubtful, lips poised.
The window,

I said, looking already at her at a distance,
desperate to remember. *Once I did
tricks with contraceptives, wore
a tattoo of illicit substance, my bones
glowed in the early morning hours,
I am sure I said I had nothing to lose.*

*Weren't you wrong then, as you long
to be wrong now, he shrugged,
not everyone works in these media.*
Sometimes you can't know if it's you
or the glass that's broken, that separates
along a clean, planned line,
that's free, smooth and dangerous in its fine edge.
But cracked and faceted still
are not the same.

*Forgive her, he said, his gaze following mine,
as she grew smaller and smaller, trash blowing around her,
receding like a boat sailing
away, or perhaps an illusion—my eyes
were full of tears. And as time
drained from the unlit shop in the sudden twilight
the silence between us slowly turned,
a child's blue pendant on a shining thread.*

Stroke rehabilitation

Show me, I say, my hand
making, somehow, the small performance
of a quick, freehand outline of the United States,
where is Florida. Make an X.
On the slightly enlarged hanging
leg I drew for him, my patient
indicates correctly. Good.

Show me Maine. Texas. California
and Oregon, startlingly, sit among
their fellows in this man's version,
like party guests who bunch around the buffet,
like a New York joke, everything East Coast.

This cognitive exam's more familiar than my hand
that in harsh morning light suddenly shows age, more familiar
than the memory of how so many late nights I longed
to escape rooms exactly like this one,
staring at the hospital doors, so angry
that they opened again and again, but not for me.
Now so willingly why do I return
sketching my bold lines? *Can you mark
the middle?* I expect
that what we neglect
we must come back to learn.

Poem

I dreamed of making a painting like a lake
flecked with real leaves, unreal blue,
blue like a card of a children's book but
it's ridiculous, I can't paint
at all, the surface of the painting traced
silver and gold lines with metallic ink.
An easel a room with sun, rounded
smooth canvas like pressboard. I'm dreaming
perhaps about my pregnancy, the baby straining
at the surface like the smooth round mouth of a fish.
Floating in decorated solid blue. So soon
imprinted in my mind, heavy and abstract,
coins stuck to its surface, seamless, without
a brush mark to flip its tail and dive again.

(kiss)

Midsentence slid to a stop
like the surf at your lips,
sweet the late sound of words
you've said before,
why should I care if the light drained, night fell, if
hard as the words stopped short:
your face, that door?

End Matter

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About the Artist

Margot McGowan grew up on the South Coast of Massachusetts with her father, mother, and older sister. She creates art in many different media and is a student at Holderness School in New Hampshire.

Richard Long, Editor

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