

KNOW HER AS, SEBASTIANI

Philip Kobylarz

Finally it rained in California and the promise of seasons made travel obsolete. A winterish fall had come, and that is all anyone had wanted: difference. Enough of the constancy of sun and the wavy hair of palm trees, undulating slow-mo in breezes of salt-watery, sea-smelling, warm and absolutely unreal air. Wind that is like breathing. The peninsular mountains, donning a mantle of resplendent green, decked out in swaths of Monterrey pine, bay trees, chaparral of multitudinous varieties, posed like a hanging garden of Babylon against the white fluff mimicking snow, balancing like batting on a horizon-long ridgeline. Fog suggesting Japan.

In paradise, I had found myself alone. She had left me. Finally. They always do in the end, or middle, or sometimes even the beginning. But I am the abandoned type, if I say so myself. A pariah to the concept of togetherness. Condemned to be alone, as we all, finally, are. It is the cross I daily bear, on

which I nightly nail myself, a Yamaha speaker used as a stepladder to assist my bloody and none-too-easy task. The thoughts that come to me suffice quite well as a crown of thorns.

The house she left me in has been bought. It sits upon a hillside in a cookie-cutter neighborhood by the East Bay of San Francisco. Let's face it—America is a big, all too big, stupid country that, , desperately tries to substitute itself for some version of Europe minus the authenticity, or even a Latin America completely devoid of passion, or an Asia without the values or hardcore ethics that bind people together. It's a place that continually tries to define itself as the memories of the places people have visited.

The house we lived in has cardboard-thin walls and the lowest of the low-quality Home Depot bathroom furnishings, suggesting the finesse of a rest stop. Cheapness pretending to be style. 1970s design, not in a retro flare, but in a stolid, uninspired mandatory-ness that made little sense: wood beamed ceilings painted dark brown, a French door leading into the kitchen, tiled countertops, linoleum, a broken intercom system. A building without a vibe, or the vibe of a shipping container left on a hillside, the contents inside slowly becoming perishable.

Having failed this life—as if life itself could promise anything—her departure came as another small notch in the proverbial lipstick case of how I have personally lost, am lost, am adept at losing, and have, for the brief tenure of my life, never really understood the meaning of being. If there was only one thing I knew, one thing at the core of my being, it was this and only this: she was my everything. A Gala to my illusory Dali-ness, my rock, my center, my beloved, why I was alive, my Wonderwall. Older than me and, yes, age does matter, she in a way, a very real way, taught me exactly how not to be. But I had thought it was the way to be. Years of my life, a life, any life, lived backwards. In error. In her war. Battling daemons I could not see.

They all go in the end and she is gone now and this is why: I loved her too much. Let this be a warning to all the young romantics out there of an x/y derivation. When you love and truly love loving, you will never in one thousand eternities ever be requited in your bliss. In fact, it's a woman's greatest gift. Just ask Dante.

When the eighth level of hell intersects with Shangri-la, what is one to do, the eternal question asks itself. Where and when is it that we turn, not the other cheek, but turn, mocking the dervishes that whirl, and spin, eyes closed, to find, upon opening them, the view to be a silent four-bedroom box placed

on a canyon side, an odd color of blue, in possession of an income as paltry as my lifelong investment in the materiality of existence, and this cardboard cut-out mock-up, background to my crowning moment? A job as an online, *haha*, teacher. The king of nothing presiding over nothing in the realm of nothing surrounded by stunning views of nothing. Life had crystallized into a worst nightmare that had in turn metamorphosed into the greatest of all dreams. Life, you're funny that way.

I would have to find her. All I ever wanted to do was love. All I ever needed was her. She *is* me. I needed a she. She needed a me. We needed a we. This is called belief.

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And in an instant that no one will ever believe, let's call it five days, one hundred and twenty hours, another she appeared. Can new be better? Sitting next to a sculpture of a water-gushing sea urchin, the ultimate symbol of sexual desire, pent up, armored, about to explode, dangerous, flowing. Jack London Square in waterfront Oakland of the bay area. The urchin's needles unapparent but assumed. How I assumed nothing about this blindingly white, so white her skin revealed blood coursing, woman who was empty enough, or silly enough, to carve some time out of her life for a loser lost in life like me.

She was the very picture of whatever the opposite of deception could ever be. It threw me for a loop. No high heels, no attempt at marketed beauty. Just her, there, as herself. On a hot day, dressed in light colors, vanilla, because I could only see her face—I do not really remember what she was wearing. Some type of Euro-esque Birkenstocks and I dared not even to look at her naked feet. If anything, she looked tired. What alone looks like when it goes out. And this is what made her so beautiful. Authenticity. Eros, the trickster.

How we find people these days in our Era of Desperation. Need I name the forums of sadness and longing? I answered her inquiry because it said something memorable, I do not now remember, something we all want, some pinprick of desire. Something about Europa. The link to history, the conflicts, the terrors, the suffering, the great eroticism that we call art, that place we love to love but have had to escape from to stay alive. That whiteness that really doesn't exist, that is hinted at, the reflectivity of flesh, the feeling of being king of a kingdom, being the queen of something unconquerable, vast lands, of legacies and bloodlines, the strangeness of a peninsula of a thousand cultures, hardly known but having some version of salted fish. Oh, her she-ness. Her being something I could never be. A form of purity? A rite. A passage.

The love of no one's life? How could it be? Who would ever deign meet me, like this, just like this: _____?

She did not speak; her accent spoke instead. From the fallow fields of a land in between Germany, the Republic of the Czechs, the south of Polandia, a place layered in Bohemian confusion, she had come. Russian-esque with flecks of Austrian, unafraid of the guttural, a voice so different, the polar opposite of diminutive, flat, American. The voice of a power subdued.

Our speaking, an exchange of currencies; her pale skin suggesting Ireland, the colors of rust and maple leaves, a hair a darkness of red tinged in auburn, a darkness radiating light. Perfect teeth that had never known the conspiracy of braces.

No makeup. She appeared proletariat. World weary. Too trusting. Alone. And that was her aura: a deep and heavy solitude. Her lips were uncharacteristically plump.

"Tell me more," she said. I must have been different than the string of men she had "interviewed," her word for it, on many not-so-clandestine rendezvous just like this one. How many times she could have been murdered, she did not even know. Nor care. I could only wonder which number I was. Eleven or one

hundred and fifteen. There was no way of telling. She wasn't the type to kiss and tell. She followed in the footprints of unnamed saints.

After I confessed my mediocre tale of having loved another for twenty-three years and her leaving me as soon as she attained what in life she really wanted, a specter called status, using me until the moment I was no longer needed, *this is America where nothing is ever certain and all centers on the self, the self, the self* . . . there wasn't even a flinch. My horror story was to her an *intrigument* as she said, an illustration of how people lack souls, and not even a mild peculiarity. She had known worse. She had seen things.

Here are the stats. She was born in a village. She earned no money. She is a nurse. She flew to Haiti to help one day. She came here for the dream. She was lost. She thought she was unloved. She didn't understand. She looked at me. And now she is something no one has ever wanted to be.

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Mine.

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We drank too much. We had Indian food named after one of my favorite forms of poetry, . . . Ghazal. Inside an old filling station-turned-coffee house,

now defunct, once filled with grimy uber-cool hipsters, I seduced her with chocolate cake. She licked the frosting from the fork without hesitation.

She came and she went. She came and she went. She couldn't commit to anyone as she had never committed to anything that ever lasted the long, dull, traffic jam that is time. She was an everything and a nothing all at the same time. She had no idea who she was or who she wanted to be. She just was. And therein the mystery lies.

She was better than any invention I could have created out of thin air. Don't get confused with the Twilight Zone episode, even though it's foggy, in a black-and-white way. There's a writer, is he in a robe, and he dictates into a recorder, people, and they come alive. Everyone he knew, his wife, his family, he realizes have been creations, until of course, it is revealed that he, himself, is not real. But I am real. These things happened to me. And she is real too.

Things have happened to her. Living on an island. A small airplane flight with a goat in the back seat. Years in thousand-year-old buildings watching how the sun moves throughout the day. Farms, and the hard life they breed. Cats who eat human food only. None of this is fake. Except the part where we are together. Because when we are together, we are just sharing deeply our solitude.

Remember the ember. It's what I say to her because, more than anything in this life, she likes to make fires. This is what we do any time we can now. After her week of nursing is done, after my week of teaching is done, we get into the car and head for nature just outside the city. The trunk is filled with the reams of our pasts: old clothes, photographs, trinkets collected, love letters, everything we used to be. We find a clearing in the woods and build a bonfire. We have the best wine that we can afford and one of those fashionable picnic backpacks, the kind that has, even, a cheeseboard. We get tipsy and burn everything that we once were, everything we used to be. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand why we bring blankets. There is no better thing in this life than being free, together and naked under the sun and the moon and the stars. Being free from whom we used to be. Being free in each other's arms. There is nothing more passionate than a fire and smell of your past in flames. There is nothing more erotic than the light of flames on the skin. She is everything I have ever desired to be.

Starlight, fire, her hair, she makes me think of one and only one thing.

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Red. Not as a color.

As a feeling.

Philip Kobylarz is a teacher and writer of fiction, poetry, book reviews, and essays. He has worked as a journalist and film critic for newspapers in Memphis, TN. His work appears in such publications as *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Best American Poetry* series. He is the author of a book of poems concerning life in the south of France and a short story collection titled *Now Leaving Nowheresville*. His creative non-fiction collection *All Roads Lead from Massilia* is forthcoming from *Everytime Press* of Adelaide, Australia and he has a book now available from Brooklyn's *Lit Riot Press* titled *A Miscellany of Diverse Things*.