

MEREDITH QUARTERMAIN / The Not Of What She Didn't Know

Hotel Narrative

She said and he thought and he did and she thought and he said and she did and they thought and I went and they said and you heard and we saw and they wanted and she didn't think and you didn't see and I felt and he liked and we said we couldn't tell. Said Mr. Narrator to Mrs. Narrator. Said triologue. And Mrs. Narrator thought Mr. Narrator thought Lady Agonist thought Mr. Narrator. Said Lord Agonist to the trees thought Mr. Narrator. Lacked character said Lady Agonist said Mrs. Narrator thought Lord Agonist. Are you for or against Agonist said Mrs. Narrator to the trees thought Mr. Narrator against Lady Agonist's thigh. Went triologue behind the scenes I wanted Mr. Narrator to think Lady Agonist felt Mrs. Narrator had Mr. Narrator by the. Her Ladyship felt Lord Agonist didn't. Behind the ears then under a nipple inserted in her pocket. Thought Mrs. Narrator. Would your Lordship care for some. Bushes beside a lake, mound beside a mineshaft, peak beside an outing. Bottoms up her Ladyship's butter, we said with breadfruit. Is your Lordship out. They think he's in. Mr. Narrator. Thought I. Said Mrs. Narrator. His Lordship's out of pocket. Her Ladyship's innuendo. He's out to lunch. She's ins and outs. He's *in futuro* incognito. Out of debt. Incomplete. Hoped Mrs. Narrator dreaming her Ladyship's buttons wanted setting forth to switchboard for room service his Lordship. Keeps falling asleep. Said Mr. Narrator. Thought Mrs. Narrator. Don't tell me I'm fresh towel check-out his Lordship. Said her Ladyship's buttony TV. Thought. Mrs. Narrator. You're going to soap the doorman I wanted to this morning. Do you have a reservation we could telephone. Mr. Narrator's bell hop. Not that that would. The black that that she mailed that you said we'd already said. Said Mrs. Narrator thought his Lordship. Not that. The other that that I said Lady Agonist said she'd like to have felt. Not *that*.

A Marijuana Stalk

Unbeknownst to the woodsman, a marijuana stalk has grown 20 feet over the summer. The first snow has wilted its leaves. The woodsman cuts it down and hangs it to dry in his cabin, pocketing his pipe and some hashish. A smoke for later, he thinks, on a path through a meadow, down a road to a frosty dock—floating out to a raft of sail boats in a lake. He walks down the icy planks, then turns to the grey water sliding murkily around clumps of snowy reeds. In a swift, decisive movement, he jumps in, becomes completely submerged, then rises to the surface, pulls himself up on the dock and sits there, drenched clothes streaming around him. Come, get out of the cold, do come inside, the narrator calls to him, the narrator afraid to set foot on the frosty planks of the floating dock. Why, he shouts back. I suppose, the narrator says, You've heard of pneumonia. The woodsman jumps off the dock and dives under the grey brown water toward a steep bank of tangled snowy bushes, leaving the narrator wondering how she will speak to her character. Is a narrator to her woodsman like a king to his army, or a mother to a son. Devil to disciple, or god to bewitched. Like language to word, or planet to plant?

A Disagreement Over Lunch

She passes him more cheese and slices of ham, suggesting that ants are quite amazing architects. He believes, on the contrary, that Architecture has a history. An eggplant or it might be a football enters the dining room and floats blimplike over the lunch table. But surely, she says, ants in their cities practice architecture just as we do. The eggplant puffs itself and hatches some red balloons. No no no, he says, Architecture chooses design, materials, location, Architecture is deliberative. Flags and streamers sprout from the eggplant. It zooms around the diners, grazing their spectacles. But do humans *choose* to build skyscrapers, she wonders, over the crabcakes, or do they *have* to build them, the same way all over the planet. The eggplant hovers over a bowl of peaches, it lets down ladders and rope, disembarking tiny passengers. He pours another glass of wine, allowing that humans looked at from Mars have their uniformities, but looked at from Earth, we see creation, invention, originators. But surely ants have their Palladios and Vitruviuses, she rejoins. The eggplant lifts out of the fruit bowl and floats dejectedly above it. Convoys and caravans of passengers trudge over peachy hills.

If ants do it, then what on earth would *architecture* mean?

There's an eggplant or a football in the fruit bowl.

It looks like a blimp.

It's moving around.

It's hatching eggs.

Wagon trains crawling the peaches.

Ants.

No, they're tiny humans.

L'amante anglaise

She flirted with her. She put her tongue to her liquorice. She tasted a négligé, a chemise, some culottes, a pelisse. Plunged into ravines, scaled buttes, traversed escarpments and plateaus. Of la belle française.

Les complications arose. La française ne l'a pas aimé! Votre prononciation est terrible! Take your tongue from my words. My mots in your closette minuscule put back. And don't forget: give back my camisole and peignoir.

Oh, how would she escape her armoire anglaise into the outness of la française?! Furieuse, elle a crié, They're not yours; they're mine. You can't have them.

Imbécile! Don't you know French when elle vous donne un coup sur la tête? Besides you look stupide in that lace. Comme une mêlée chartreuse. A fricassée de polkadots. Then give me back le weekend and le hotdog. Le film, le punk and le squat.

Mais la belle française ensconced herself in une silk sulk.

Pourquoi won't you couchez avec moi, you know perfectly well our great great grandmother gave me that chemise in 1066. Pourquoi must you be une puriste? Couchez avec moi dans le downtown. Couchez avec moi dans le camping. Couchez avec moi on my couch.

My Agency

In my production studio, I throw back my shutters, meet my creative director. Copy writers swarm over us. I send them for new blood. My art department erects flyers for the latest campaign. Get image targets. Get juice and punch. Strategy. Tactics. My wanteds will be posters; my spots will be billboards. Let me poke digits into clients of myself.

Friction, force-fields, magnetism—I research. Dig up enzymes and yeasts. Get multiplication. Get logos. Map competitor apartments. Means. No. Trump. Yes. Authority. No. Coup d'état. Yes. Importance. No. Signify. Yes. Exert. No. Muscle. Yes. Rule. No. Sublimity. Yes. Clout. No. Conductive. Yes. Pressure. No. Dispatch. Yes. Use. No. Capacity. Yes. Force. No. Morph. Yes. Convert. No. Midwife. Yes.

I ring the phone of myself. Cut these false job-starts, my traffic boss chides. Make weathercocks of myself. International Standard Self Numbers. Epaulettes and bugle calls of myself. Ripen them, says my she. Brew them in my market niches, my slots and buttonholes. Your my is not my my, I say to my she. Your my is not her my just as my she is not her me, and my her my is not your my she. All the better to eat you with, my little she me, my sweet her your me in my wheel teeth.

Oh come to me my rifts and ha has, my honeycombs of surge and dint, for it is very dark in this stomach.

The Lawn Dress

scrubbed her words dirtily. She hung white li(v)es. White wall(et)s. White st(o)reets. White (grr)rooms. On the line. It's a good day for washingles, said a horse-dog over the fence. Yes a very fine d(el)ay. The Lawn Dress went on hang(ke)ring shee(p)ts and tow(e)els. Will you come with me to the car-navel, said the horse-dog. Nay, said she, I must soap my wor(l)ds before the man-iple comes home. Look at my pile of wor(l)ds; high as the heav(y)ens. I will hel(lu)p you—the horse-dog leapt over the f(eel)ence. No thank you—the Lawn Dress threw some p(r)ants and shir(le)ts into the sud(den)s. The horse-dog gallooped up the pile of wor(l)ds—she chewed them up, they were (trom)bones. My words are ruin(g)ed, go away god-dogged-horse, go away from my line(al)ins and cot-ton(e)s. Come to the craneval, said the horse-dog, I will glue your wor(l)ds. I will carol you on my back. I will take you on my marry-go-round. Just then the manner-man came in. These clothes, why are they torn up, he demanded. Why are they marked with letters? The Lawn Dress stood by her wash tub. Oh Manner Man, said she, behold my galleon. I am her pirate captain gathering golden-eyes and sil(ly)ver. We have come to Utopia for buried treasure, in a dark woo(le)d, 27 p(l)aces south and 36 p(al)aces east of the manner house in the c(r)ave of a drago(o)n. Stand back from my (s)words.

The Sonic Boom Catcher

I've always wanted to cross the sound barrier, Kaspar explained to her friend Sigismund. It's greener on the other side. It's friendlier. Not that it's not friendly here with you, it is, but I'm certain it's more furthering on the other side of the barrier, more tending and availing to inventors and ingeniouses such as we. No, not a word (she held up her hand), you're going to say I can't possibly know since I've never been there. You're going to tell me stories of Icarus. But remember, Daedelus also flew, away from his island jail, and landed safely in Sicily. I've delved into this, I've looked at it and fathomed. If I catch a sonic boom, I'll cross the barrier. I know where one hangs out. I found its boom carpets in the field where we tested our dreameanors. I tracked its spoor of scorched ideoglyphs. Its signal stench.

Kaspar raised her nets of muzzlements and dumbitures. They covered the whole sky and sure enough when the sonic boom came the nets caught it. A thousand hurricanes thrashed inside the snare. Tsunamis boiled the ether, filling the world with a terrible silence. A tonguelessness. Lightning without thunder. Earthquake without rumble. Not a bray. Not a twitter. Not a hiss. Not a nicker. Only a tomb of violent quietude. She must open the nets, she must let go the sonic boom, but the nets were so glutinous, so barbed, so leechy, so lovably kickbacked. She must wait more patiently, she thought, she must not really want that notness that she was not forbidding, the not of what she unwanted that she was uncarelessly not insouciant to, the not of what she didn't know but which she was compelled to unseekingly diswoo.

Parts Department

I park the car and follow footprints underground. To a cave where lights flicker on blotches of grease. Mechanics in blue overalls. Air hammers, nut pullers, brake lathes and torque wrenches. A pry bar clangs the concrete. A man under a hoist under a car splays out his foot as he heaves his shoulder into car belly, grabbing pliers and clamps from his surgical tool cart.

I line up with a golfer, a lifeguard and a postal worker. Front-deskmens peer furiously into their screens at plate numbers. Print out work-orders in triplicate. Lube job. Brake shoes. Clutch overhaul. Timing. Super-easy slice cure, says the golfer's magazine. Sand game. Ball position. Control your trajectory. *If you see a line of flotsam moving seaward*, the lifeguard muses, *that's a sign of a rip current. They form around structures*. Should I sort shibboleths with passwords or with stamps, wonders the postal worker, Badges or tickets, blue ribbons or bunting? *Look for a break in the wave pattern or a channel of churning water*.

Among the blue bins and cardboard boxes of gaskets, pistons, and spark plugs in the canyons of the Parts Department, two grey-beards—no longer sleek for sales or heave-ho under the hoist—trade hugs, one cheek, then the other.

Your number is up, says a deskman, you'll have to stay here with us. *When you're caught in a rip*, warns the lifeguard, *swim parallel to shore, then angle in to the beach*.

Singing Lessons

You must go on the road and find singing lessons, my teacher advised. She was the chorus-master of a large opera, shaping and sculpting the elkish basses, the beaverish baritones, the tenor lynxes, the porpoiseful altos, the soprano loons. You have too many feet in your songs, she said, melt some on the road. Hike, amble, stride or stagger, anyway sing as you go. I went on the road. I took directions. Were they mine or the road's. We did not dispute the ownership. My puppet walked inside me, clacking mandibles, bonking knees and elbows. Go straight on, she said, veer off a little, make a sharp left and when you get to the castle look for the oldest woman. Hear the note in your head before you sing. Repeating a song caresses your brain. I met a rat practicing arpeggios, and humming, Music is the Food of Livers, Sing onion songs and bacon. Monday songs and Tuesday. A song in time makes nine, crooned a cow, Sing needles and thread, sing meadows and hey to the moon in a dish with a spool. Night fell. Walls fell and eggs fell. I met three bats flying over the road. We are eighth note, quarter note and half note. Each of us is half or two times one or the other, and together we are whole. Melody's on the road—where does it begin or end? To put echoes together again—all the song's horses and all the song's pens.

My Characters

My sidekick muscles my henchman, whose hunter suspects my penitent who rescues my liar and his nephew, the prime minister, yet woos my cousin's worshipper and betrays his road buddy, her ex-dentist and the worshipper's daughter who cheated their boss in the hockey pool. Then the sequel: my stand-in star, piloting my princess's aunt to victory over his professor and their doctor who plan to jail my queen sorcerer with her slaves' bogus master conspirator whose sister abandoned my twin sons' karate teacher in my torturer's dumpster. *I don't find it the least bit crowded in here.* My karate teacher snaps a roundhouse, making her narrator duck under her mother's suitor and prudent villain who polluted our fake sage and his narrator's playmate with a billionaire. Your character pinched my dog, barked his narrator. To his majesty's apologist. In the pigpen. *Your* narrator ditched my Olympic diver for the roulette spinner. Oh my narrator, my narrator, I've lost her, breathed my acrobat. Where's my co-pilot in the legislature, my ex-neo-stunt-woman voice-over? *I don't find it the least bit crowded in here.* My karate teacher whips a side heel-kick my post-ersatz quack narrator fails to duck.