

Brenda Riches / THREE PROSE PIECES

CLOTH

I knew his right foot tolerably well, though we were in the dark at the time. It rested on my thigh long enough for me to assess the measure of its tendons and small bones, the tension of its skin, the affinity of its toes. For a while I even got to subdue that springing hair, that rivulet descent from his ankle. But one foot in repose is not a journey, and he was a steady placer of feet, a wilderness walker.

He never wore shoes because he said all ground was holy. Once I understood this it was easy for me to take my shoes off in his presence, and on the rare occasions between his spacious wanderings that I was able to see him, we would sit on dark floors and talk of pendulums and remnants, doors that swung shut, and the balance of dreams. There was a scab just below the ankle bone and I had an elastic impulse to pick at it, but didn't, because I wasn't sure if my fingernails figured in his scheme of living.

Parings, he said aloud one evening. Words are the parings of our dreams. Most people would have them swept into the garbage, but parings can be brought to order, and scum is a substance to be lifted with tenderness.

Habitual walker though he was, much as he loved his roads, he had to step out of that outdoors and take to darkened rooms every now and then, though the most he would concede to furniture was something to raise him a little way from the floor, a thick rug or simple mattress. I was going to say I always knew when he came home, but since his journeying was his home, those interludes we had are better called his disembarkments, his sidesteppings. I always knew, because he'd leave a door open.

I first saw him, thin as a fence post, in daylight. After that time, the day retreated to his personal landscape, a place I could only guess at since he never talked about it. The first and only time I was impertinent enough to question him about the details of his treks, his answer was to pull out a large leather-bound dictionary and read to me from it.

Pendulum: A body suspended so as to be free to swing or oscillate. Usually an instrument consisting of a rod, with a weight at the end, so suspended as to swing to and fro, especially as the essential part of a clock, serving (by the isochronism of its vibrations) to regulate and control the movement of its works.

Don't tamper, was all he added.

I had been so entranced by the rich sound of his voice, I hadn't absorbed the lesson he'd given me, so I lifted the book from his hands and took it to the window. The full moon was angled to light up the page. Pendule, penduline, pendulous, pendulum. I learned that I'd been unseemly in my desire to know of his life. The black leather covers of the dictionary were doors that closed on the definition he had chosen to give of himself. They shone heavily in the moonlight. Beautiful doors, framed by indented lines, a triple frame. Sparse doors whose only vanity was a silken moonlight pebbling.

He must have felt a little sorry for me because at the next returning he brought a willow stick and sat with his knees pulled up and turned outwards, whittling it. The shreds of woodskin tapered and curled, creamy in the dusk of the room. I picked one up and wrapped it round my finger. A second skin, I told him, and he nodded. The stick is ready, he said. It's for you. And gathered up the thin locks of wood and placed them in my hands.

So he left me with a clean stick and the piecemeal covering he had taken from it. And time in my hands to be whittled away.

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Take a cold and vacant paper.

He is asleep. He is lying on his side, facing me, with the sheet pulled tightly to his neck and tucked in around his shoulder. His back is to the window, where the curtains are light with the moon. His shoulder is a rock, his hip is a boulder. Since the light is behind him, the lines of his face are soft, the shadows are the blurring of thick pencil. The hair that grows on his face is grass, bleached of its juices. His eyelids are dark cavities. His face is closed and he's locked away behind it. He wears peace as a mask.

Five minutes ago his tongue lay flaccid in my mouth. His arm was heavy across my ribs. His words that grew with the evening and flowered as a night cactus in the dark, were petalled in my head, white silk over my thoughts. Now he is housed, barred and shuttered against my dark. And my thoughts are uncovered.

I think: What put him in me and left him there to take up so much space, yet all the while he is remote behind his skin, behind his shadowy eyelids? I think: Love is a weight that must be carried, and put down, and carried a little further. A burden to be shifted from one hand to the other. I think: Love makes a stooping of my days, and my nights lie hunched on the wilderness floor.

My thoughts are exposed to cold air.

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In the times between I peeled and polished. I opened the other volume of the dictionary and learned that isochronism was the character or property of being isochronous, or of taking place in equal spaces of time. So I divided the willow shavings into two equal parts and arranged one half in smoke glass, and thrust the other out into the windstorm that lifted the dust and leaves from my yard.

I was about to close the door on their curly flight when I noticed the crab apples swinging loosely under their branches and slipping off, down onto the grass. I picked them up and, leaning against the wind, gathered them into my pockets. In the house I made red jam, skimming the surface foam with care and setting it in precious bowls.

I waited while the jam cooled. I took him a pot of cool jam and a clean spoon.

Soon we came to live in a silence that was walled with tapestry woven with blue and gold and white threads. It was a silence spacious enough to contain both of us, no matter where we were. When he was away, walking his land, the threads stretched to a thin horizon, and though I couldn't see him, if I touched the fabric on the walls I could feel a steady shaking, a soundless rhythm that told me where he was. Then the tapestry would light up for a moment, and details of stubble, clipped and shining, jutting through the glaze of snow and held by a blue sky, would be something to examine and memorise. When that was done, I could roll up the picture and put it away, to bring it out when needed. When the time came for him to return, that slight horizon thickened with nearness, and he came back to the cloth twilight of our room.

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Take a fresh sheet.

Vacuum. By a process of suction dirt is transferred from the rug through a long hose into a disposable brown bag. A yellow filter placed in the centre of the machine prevents clogging. The sun tilts its rods across the room and strikes the quiet tapestry. Dust. I spit on my finger and wipe it over the threads. The fine edges of the weave are clean and fraying.

There are two ways I can dust the top of the cabinet. I can lift one object at a time (the photograph, the green bowl, the candles, the brown stone jug filled with pampas grass) putting one down before I lift the next. If I do it this way I knock the tallest candle from its holder. I never fail. Or I can take everything off and put it on the table and clear the dust with one sweep of my arm.

The tapestry is still. I shall take a walk.

The snow squeaks under my feet like a finger that rubs on clean glass. I must be alone with my walking so I can avoid the twiggy prints of birds. We don't tread the same lines. They have pencilled their footfalls with thin strokes that go beyond the places I can see. The snow is falling; thin flakes are ashes blown from burning paper. Grey against a paler grey sky. White, only if I look down at the hallowed winter floor.

PERSIMMON

Why couldn't Ambrose learn from the persimmon? If he left her alone till the frost got her, she would be soft for him. What was his hurry? Didn't he know he would live forever?

Virginia was sorting socks. Seven orange and thirteen brown. The brown were perfect, but three of the orange had holes in them. She slid her hand into one, stretched her fingers to web it, and held it to the light. Ambrose, she said aloud. As matters stand at the moment, I don't give a Chinese fig for you. She opened her sewing box and broke off a length of orange wool. Threaded a wide-eyed needle. Knotted an end and began the weave. First the tight warp through which the weft would dart and pull. She liked sewing. One. Two. Oh shit, she had to go.

Which meant she had to lodge the needle in the sock, draw out her hand, lay the work down, and hobble to the bathroom.

Ambrose, your propositions, past and present, are a load of bullshit. Fie on you, Ambrose. (Flushing with vigour.) If it wasn't for this damn toe, I'd boot you from your studio couch to the topmost branches of the elm, where you would bunch like a rook's nest.

She was back, her hand in the sock, her needle a bright splinter in the summer light.

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I love you, Virginia. I want to make you in colour. I can see you now, centre page, full spread. Your breasts are marshmallows, your nipples are cherries. Come with me, my sweet, my dainty, let me fill my mouth with your delights. But you are wrapped in cellophane and lie on the wrong side of the window. Pity your Ambrose with his nose pressed to the glass.

Oh Christ, Virginia, take your clothes off.

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Did you really think DID YOU REALLY THINK, Ambrose, that I would jump at the chance of seeing a front-cover portrait of myself leapfrogging naked over a fire hydrant? I am not a **THING** to be processed and glossed for the public. It's **NOT** art, Ambrose.

The glaring eye of June bored through the window. Four months to frost. *Come with me, my little tangerine, and see what develops.* No kidding. His opening words to her as she stood in her embroidered cheesecloth and waited for the bus. Corn, pure and golden.

There. That one was mended.

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Darn it all, Virginia, I'm a goodlooking guy and I take good pictures. Click. You're shuttered in my Pentax. I take you home, lay you in gloomy chemicals, swoosh you around, and there's your cold face, drowning into life. Oh Virginia, when can I click your naked body? I'm good. I do it better than most. Better than anyone. Classy.

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She threaded a new strand and took up a second sock. They used to call these holes 'potatoes' when she was a child. Potatoes, too, shouldn't be dug up too early. And celery should wait for frost, so her grandmother had told her.

It was Ambrose and his swollen idea that had crippled her. *Put on a robe if you must, my cantaloupe, and rest this pumpkin on your shoulders.* Lady Atlas. Him and his plaster gourd, his futile equipment, his flashes that didn't flash, his loose cables, WHOOPS! and the pumpkin dropped, SLAM, on her big toe. You and your lofty ideas, Ambrose.

She stabbed with her needle, deft in her patching.

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It can't go on like this. I haven't taken a good picture in weeks. I'm vegetating, Virginia. I'm rotting away.

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When she was well into the second sock she encountered a snag. She had miscalculated the length of wool. She would have to use another piece to finish it. How irksome. One loose end too many. Well, she wasn't going to unpick all her careful weaving, so the flaw would just have to stay.

Of all his warped notions, that BIRD'S EYE BIRTH OF VENUS was the most twisted. *No-one'll see your body, Virginia. Just the top of your head.* And how was he going to get that one? Dangling from the top of a pine tree. Fiddlesticks. You can't pull the wool over *my* eyes, Ambrose. Try again.

Yegods! It was hot by the window. She took off her sweater.

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I'll send her a letter. A cryptic billet. "Meet me at the junction of F 11 and 120th, my negative love." My wit will draw her to me like the image into the lens. I shall loosen the drawstrings of her chemise so wide she'll be over-exposed. Oh Virginia, how can you resist my professional touch?

Jesus, Virginia, I can't wait much longer.

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One more to go and she would be done. The sun was high now and would soon be on its way to the back of the house. She might get out and do a bit of weeding if she could find a boot to fit her. Should she call him first? On second thoughts, no.

It might soil her image, calling a man she barely knew.



THE TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

(oil on canvas)

Augustus Leopold Egg 1816-1863

She who sleeps has flesh fingers, has a torn basket of orange in paper
(wicker plaited) set aside on velvet (grey).

She who reads has blue clad fingers to leaf her book (her eyes are
dropped but not shut) has a posy, pink flowers settled at the side of her
skirt.

Silk girls both. Billowing grey. Shot with light. Hair caught in nets.
Necks collared in starch. Black hats, scarlet feather tongued.

They travel.

They lower and shut eyelids in face to face. They are fabric to fabric.
They are parentheses to window.

Window. Unfolded: sea (blue) sky (blue) trees (green) beach
(yellow) houses (white) hills (layered).

They travel.

Still.