

After Happily Ever After



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a 2 R i v e r C h a p b o o k b y

Wendy Taylor Carlisle

After Happily Ever After

In memory of Leslie Claire Karnatz Allen.

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Adam

You've heard the story too, I guess, about the serpent and the kiwi—or maybe they told you it was an apple, a Granny Smith, a Red Delicious. Well, no matter, they're wrong. No Python. No Pippin. There was a garden, of sorts, a path through the lush vegetation, the pools and runnels, but none of it had the discipline of a garden. And in case you think I was just sitting there adoring Him, I had my little job to do—to make a name for everything—Maximum Taxonomy, that's what it was. So when I woke after one of my all too infrequent naps, to find one more thing to name, *her* is what I thought. But she was so interested, so hang-on-a-guy's-every-word, I have to admit I found her adorable. Who doesn't love being worshipped?

Then I touched her just to see what she was like—I have to know the feel of skin, the temperature to name them right—and for the heft of her, I took her in my arms. Right there she twisted into snake! I didn't mean for it to end the way it did, but only just to certify her, don't you see, as woman—never as man's woe—only a simple, backboned thing.

And then she said my name.

Eve

From the beginning, I was his extra bone—before the red tent, the named virgin, the whore, and babies brought forth in anguish, before accusation, litigation, I was designed for devotion. After that, all they could say was: *seductress, responsible party, lure and terror*. Those clergy, Paul, Aquinas, none of them realized how ordinary the moment was. No trickery, no double cross, just my palm held out to the prototype farmer, already in a rut, mad for my particular crop. Imagine orchard evenings, breezes, fruit—how they annoyed him, how boredom drove his curiosity, how, not to eat became impossible for him and how soon after that first bite he named his new joy *guilt*.

Dorothy, After

North, South, East, West who could keep them straight? I, for one,
barely remember to pick up the dry cleaning.
Why did I think it would be a good thing to click my heels?

Football and baseball, soccer and swimming—
dates as hard to remember as witches' names. These days,
I'm a whirlpool carpool, strong enough to lift a house, spin it around
with someone in it drinking Margaritas and set it down
in some other county, not a dry county, a county with a nice
yellow brick cocktail lounge and a well-dressed businessman settled

in the corner booth. So what if the bartender is under five feet tall?
So what if the booth is shrouded by red velvet curtains? I
 might go right up
to that man—even up to his room—and never complain
if he talked to me all night in aphorisms, but only whine when
 it was over
and he showed me how to click my heels, told me how to get home.

Rumpelstiltskin

As I see it now, our future was foreclosed as a depression
farm, considering
how his dark eyes woke my appetite, led me

to weave gold into straw, to label that straw, love, while I learned
to praise the stones in some basement room.

I adore you, he declared each time,
then swore he was grinding out a better life for us, but he lied

when he told our story, said I would do anything for him.
Well sure I spun, could you say no? Blue-blooded, he had everything

a girl could want, so—*yes, I would*. And *yes* was what
he whispered when he sat me at the wheel. How wild that

little man turned me when he called me *sweet baby*, while
I sweated all night in the cellar, pretending to give in until

I sent him flying with his own true name. I tell the story
my way now he's gone. But I'm on guard whatever comes along.

Mythmaking

They said she loved her son less
than she hated her consort. When
the boy was born they said it was an Egyptian
she touched, a magus,
peddling seduction and cheap amulets.
Olympia said different.
The God Olympia knew, coiled around her,
brown, sinewy, he entered.
She bore divinity, to spite the palace
scolds and shaped a fiction to name her son
immortal like his father-snake.
Philip didn't care, dallying in the barracks,
currying his horse in the stable, casting knucklebones
in the alley. When he had done with her, he slid away.

Kissing the Frog

At the all night pancake house,
the plastic seats cracked
and the water glasses etched
by thousands of washings, we connect
eagerly, hurried in
from opposite directions,
pale and damp. At home,
we each have someone perfect
we can't trust—
striped shirts, blond wrists.

Hunched over our cups,
we relive mouth-watering days
at the river. Mayflies hovered
on slack eddies, the sun
leached all colors to olive drab.

Should I ask if you still believe
in wet kisses rising to the surface
like catfish?
Should I say I'm the same
hungry princess, prying at the menu
where I wish to find
our story and read it out loud
to discover what
comes after happily ever after?
Is it a picture of me lying
on your chest? Is it a kiss that
can change your face,
or a slithery touch?

Imagine us.
How it would be
to open up our ribs, to gather in
all the small, dark frogs.

Mass

The Mass of an object does not change when an object's location changes. Its weight, on the other hand, does. *The MathMol Hypermedia Textbook*

A woman finds all ordinary vows
insubstantial and volatile as the breeze
that pours galvanic electricity
over her skin. In this paradigm, I do's
have a common density
with fog no matter where she stands.
In some other landscape,
the aggregate force of an old litany
is caught in fingerprints, love-names. The almost-
forgotten caress is heavier in that location,
where once she lay down as part
of a couple, inside her a man's weight
measuring matter, the body of his concentration,
the pull of that gravity on her heart.

How Could Norma Jean

be any other high school angel, unnoticed
in the back row, not enrolled

in pliant blond, not translated from angular childhood
once she found the appetite

in new-milk skin and that proficiency in the thrown-back head,
in arms akimbo? She had to

amplify on schoolgirl, ingénue. And wouldn't you agree
to alter and become that Playmate,

skirt blown north? Fidelity never flashed so white a smile.
Praise that absolute waist, those thighs

that ripened and tired in Technicolor. But how could she stay
at the party later,

sleepily crooning *Happy Birthday*, sewn into that impossible gown?
Out on the rim of self-invention,

a stranger teases us one screen farther, Norma dissolved to
an eloquent flicker, *The End* indistinct in black and white.

Her Husband:

After Botero's *Leda*

When whatever happened to her had happened,
from looking at her thawed face,
softened, a touch self-satisfied, he couldn't
exactly call it rape, had to make
himself remember, whatever got written
later, he was the first—she loved him
with all his pomp and posture, all his *fol de rol*
and loved him best. He had to say, instead
of *flog her*, a prayerful sentence on the will
of Gods. But when the towers flamed inside
his daughter's eyes and when they dragged the corpse
around the city wall, and on the day of the last horse,
he'd say aloud and then repeat in court again,
she was his wife, the kids he couldn't claim.

I Swan

Everyone makes much of it, but truth to tell
The honor could have had more physical appeal.
Trumpeters have limited romantic skills
and lack imagination, not to mention lips.
During the act, I must admit,
I entertained some questions of a theologic
nature. The poets say he overwhelmed me
on that bank—the sudden blow, the storm of wings.

Why do they reckon I gave in? Inquisitive? You bet.
And let me say that even mediocre sex
can't take the edge off having done it with a God.
As for the kids, around the neighborhood
my alibi is this: they came from eggs.
Don't blame me if they didn't turn out good.

The Fairest

Below skin-deep in the steadiness of organs,
in the upright bones, where all the solid, perfect cells tick on,

the widow's heart, that little zip lock of gore, fills and empties,
regular as a metronome, only a wisp of memory stirs.

Nothing moves her but her chestnut hair, her own pale cheeks.
She hums; she ignores the darkness somewhere east

of the lace that disappears between her thighs, attends only
to the mirror
and it's flattery, staying alert for signs of that other,

too-fragile face. Her husband sometimes complained
of loneliness and fear, as if she could cure him. For him, she
puts on

ugly clothes that suggest loss. For her reflection, she wears
satin. She hardly thinks of the stepdaughter growing up next door.

At the wake, she claims to be stricken. But she can't transform
the fairy tale—evil step-ways, an autumn forest, first the
woodsman,

then the disguise are caught in that same glass where she displays
an apple cheek, the satin skin, a flat black empty eye.

At This age

The sun rose and we were
polished as apples—
me on the back of Frank's motorcycle—
we were sixteen
when he ran it into the Ford
pickup and died.
The Junior class had no words
for grief, wept,
but were appalled
by his mother's face,
red and swollen.
We were tuned then
only to WKOL
and to our own heartbeats
which we knew
would go on forever,
death being as far from us
as some dim galaxy.
But this week,
when my friend called
to tell me her sister was dying,
that sorrow was visible
without a telescope.

Film: A Short Love Story

A couple embrace in the corner until one of them peels off like a price sticker and is out the door and all that's left for me to look at are the good women around this table, talking, drinking Anchor Steam. I'm only half-in the conversation when someone from the other end of the table drops your name, casual, all about something else, as if she didn't know the story, and suddenly I want to touch your mouth. Outside this barroom, the whine and struggle of passing traffic, rain, wet crows in the pear tree, a long lawn dotted with Adirondack chairs.

What memories do any couple owe to outsiders? The history of how they met, pitched back against the wall, chewed on words, drove Short Pierre Street then Old Military Road, heading to Wisdom. How it came about on one of that year's three perfect days—fall in the edge of their eyes, its capped toe pushing into the porch floorboard—that they began with road sex, two near strangers, three-quarters through the century? Or only how we ended: fixed in the glossy eight-by-tens of our lives?

Home Fires

At the gates, Thetis' boy, the one with the bad heel,
waits for his war. The Gods know his mother

tried to save him, to make her mixed marriage last.
Six children sacrificed, the ardent goddess

blazed to purge her seventh of mortality
but where she held him, he scalded.

Out of childhood's shadow, he doesn't feel
his own weak foot; he can't recall

the water or the stranger's bone. Eager
for vengeance, not enticed to live forever,

he hefts the great round shield, his principal defense
a mother's love. Underneath his breastplate

what is mortal and almost mortal thrums.
He doesn't notice how the touched place burns.

In His Lecture on Resonance, the Poet Instructs Us

The poet tells me I will be redeemed, if I embrace
dying. Mortality, fondled like a lover's balls
will give my words the dirt blessing,
fill my mouth with salt and sweet as if my tongue
licked up a man's thigh to the dark earth scent
alive at the edge of language. Knowing
I'm on my way out, he says,
should be the fruit of every day.
But such short days—and what if they include
the drop and rise of my slick belly, breasts
against a lover's skin? He never says,
stroked clean and rolled again in sweat,
how I could crave another kind of death?

History

I hate that return path through the lot next door,
the Johnson grass, the broken toys—
an impossible jack-in-the-box, the spring inside
his flimsy body-cloth that I can never stuff back
so Pop Goes The Weasel pops him
every time, or even working my way up the quarter-mile drive—
1320 feet of phylox—weeding. This is the story of
yesterday, which is the day that inevitably
receded into my idea of that day, which preceded or followed
that other, more perfect day, when
the path was cleared, the trash recycled, Jimson trimmed,
the weeding done. Or even a bygone day
only months ago when you were still here,
on your knees by the fresh beds, digging, glittering with sweat,
your chest hair, eyelashes, all the fur
of a lifetime spent avoiding that long talk we meant to have, wet
myself, I kneel beside you and begin the job. We work
down the drive, each of us in a hurry to find out
what happened, each working hard on our own version of history.

She Half-Remembers

the dim mouth of the theater where they found her,
the lobby's pungent breath, concessionary hum,
the angle her body made to catch the impossible
words—skid, guardrail, subdural—
before they plunged over the edge
of the afternoon. She can still almost
see the exposed brick outside, its blush
and blur. Minutes before, she was
blind as a cave fish, thinking of nothing,
of the hulls of popcorn trapped between
her teeth. All at once the afternoon, with all its
breeze and heat, was a low-budget film:
ersatz buildings, artificial blood, a long tracking
shot and never later could she see more than that.

After Anesthesia

So much energy went into healing that July,
the soaked afternoons that ripened one into another
when, sick with love, lush with papayas, guavas, I lay
under the laboring GE fan, my thin white shirt stuck
to my skin, my mind on fall, the cool air
slumping down the weather map one picometer at a time,
bringing relief from Canada for the betraying heat. And so
my tomatoes never got properly ripe while the neighbors'
Big Toms swelled ruby on their metal cages, dripped
when bitten, tasted of the mountains I thought of as home,
of him, his breath on my shoulder when I was tight
and hot as a milk cow's udder, waiting for the rain to stop.
Today, I wait for the back steps to dry, the yeast to rise.
I'm too tired to cook, details confuse me: jalapeño, cumin,
cucumber, basil, the froth of Arkansas Travelers in the chopper
as each dinner slips away like a slick seed off the edge
of the cutting board. Salsa, gazpacho, slices of warm red
from the special knives, slices of a life I wanted
to ripen, the metallic taste, the slow coming awake.

Adamant

We ask what feeds the ravenous dead—
their clicking bones follow us,
three paces back. We gather up their gloves,
press forgotten doeskin against our brittle ribs.
They smell of their fingers drives us wild.
Their nails grow long in the grave.
They need a shave. Above
them, we ripen then wizen, like Lot's wife,
we look back. A nation of hunger artists
we always ask, *Is it possible to be less empty?*
The dead tell us. Flat as opera mittens, they fill us
with invisible loss.
Hardening in the earth like coal, they are
our carbon octahedrons, our own diamondiferous core.

Taking Down the House

We bring our pickaxes; we dig
beneath the translucent skin

for a blue electric vein
as plaster flies. We follow the stains

from ceiling to baseboard,
cheek to chin.

If the children cry, we tell ourselves
they won't remember.

Place no blame
for what shattered the walls. They'll take up

their own hammering and, grown
impervious,

they'll shoulder rucksacks and axes
into the basement,

burrowing for the good line,
the one we once found

for them,
before the walls came down.

End Matter

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