

THE ABSENT (*excerpt*)

Rosalind Palermo Stevenson

I had a dream last night of taxidermy. In some strange corner of my mother's house; that is, my mother's and my aunt's house—the two of them absent. But Lucie Beale was with me in the dream. We were on the floor sitting talking like Indians, as though we were children playing, the way as a child I used to play on the floor beneath the dining room table. There was a wolf with us on the floor, or was it a fox, if a fox a large one, although remembering the dream it looked more like a wolf. Sprawled on its side like a dog sleeping, but it was a wolf that had been skinned and stuffed. I began petting it in the dream, though Lucie Beale refused to pet it, and as I was petting it,

it came back to life and leapt up and ran away.

...what silence speaks of...there is that apt gesture of silence, the hand closed in a gentle fist, the index finger raised and placed over the lips. It's silly to stand there, the voice says, when you can lie down and rest. Yes, rest. Enough time has passed—too many days. How many? Do you remember? You look worn. You look tired. It's time. You agree that it's time, don't you? I see the figure of a woman with her belly bulging; she is still a young woman, but emaciated by disease so that her abdomen is distended and her breasts, though small, are sagging. She is not my wife, but she evokes my wife. I've come back to the last time I was in this bed—the last time I was in this bed my wife was with me. Her breasts were small; did I detect a change in them that night? I believe I did, I remember a greater roundness, fullness, something approaching a state of ripeness, the thing that happens to wives, to women...

Reminiscence. A shadow appears in the upper right corner of the photograph—at first taken to be a defect. Upon closer examination it can be seen to be a leaf that belongs to the floral pattern on the fabric of the backdrop—the leaf lifting upward. The figures posed, the necessity of their remaining absolutely still, the figures frozen on the print, for all time a reminiscence, a mother with her child at her side, and in her arms an infant, the infant sleeping, the unadorned gray of the woman's dress with its high-standing collar. The woman stares into the lens of the camera the way she has been instructed; the child clings to her dress; the closed eyes give an odd countenance to the infant.

There, I hear Lucie say, as she hands the finished portrait to the woman—you are fixed, the sun has captured you. It's extraordinary. Don't you think it's extraordinary? Your image has been fixed on this print by the power of light.

As she speaks her eyes are dark like someone brooding, her expression is serious which deepens the look of brooding, dark against the whitish skin, her loose brown hair, a hint of curl, the unspoiled chin.

12 May. We are married almost two weeks. She states her desire to continue to work in the studio with me.

—the adjusting chair with head rest; the adjusting head rest, with the heavy iron foot for full-length portraits.

to make love in the night. the mysterious water. the random words that come at night.

It is a nervous sensitivity. What is the nervous sensitivity? It is not Lucie who suffers from this condition; it is myself. Lucie has a calm disposition, her temperament is even. The nervous sensitivity is my own. Sometimes the inability to breathe, the sensation of my chest constricting, the inability to take sufficient air into my lungs. Or the inability to sleep. I lie in bed with only the pretense of sleeping. As if by imitating sleep I might attain it.

This is what I remember: a twisting in my sleep, that is a twisting of my body, a restlessness that had settled into my limbs, my arms and legs would not stop moving. And in that same way my mind would not settle down with all its wild thoughts and images—phrases spoken in my mind that had no meaning. It went on that way throughout the night—this inability to settle down—my thrashing in the bed woke Lucie, What is wrong, William? she asked—is something wrong? It's nothing, I said, nothing is wrong. She wrapped her arms around me as though to protect me, or to soothe and calm me as though I was a child. Something must have disturbed you, she said. I don't remember, I said. Nothing remains of it. Nothing with a shape to it. Were you thinking of your father? she asked. I answered, I might have been thinking of my father.

...and then the sensation of my wife's body pressing against mine. our rooms are in the rear of the house, on the third floor ell, away from the others.

in the vicinity of

there is something to be said

in the vicinity of the white

there is something to be said for

in the vicinity of

the three in view now standing

in the vicinity of the gas lamps the light is dim, flickering

In the dream I'm split in two, as though being viewed through a camera with a two-section bellows. All else is normal: it's morning; the night has passed; I'm with Lucie; we have come to the table, newly married. The buffet has been set with all the breakfast foods one would expect: boiled eggs, fresh breads, a platter of ham... I don't regard it as odd in the dream that my wife is in her bridal undergarments, her chemise and drawers visibly torn from where I have ripped them. No, it's not odd at all; we are proceeding with our meal in a correct and proper way; the conversation is light; we are discussing the weather. My wife comments on the sunshine, which she describes as "dazzling." It is dazzling, she says. I take two eggs from the bowl and put them on my plate; a slice of ham alongside the eggs. And all the while I do this I see there are two of me, each one faithful to the actions of the other; we are identical selves; each one filling his plate, every movement synchronized: every cut of the knife; every lift of the fork; each of us at breakfast a contented man with his new wife, who is in every way refined, and yet is sitting in her torn bridal undergarments.

I'm wearing a blue nightshirt,

it seems almost indecent, this talk of dreams, nightshirts.

it's the quiet part of the morning, the light still dim, I'm in bed with my wife.

the neighbor's dog is barking. the sound carries into the room. the dog has a shrill bark that pierces at the upper registers.

I consider the role of the husband. the word husband. husband.

when we come downstairs my mother and aunt are already at the table.

I have the sense. The sense of what? Arms and legs. The entirety of the body. Beneath the skin, bone. When cut there is blood.

for blood—that's what the red flag means. the blood of battle. the blood of killing. the blood of the hunt, the wanton killing. the blood of the scalp-knife. the scalp loosed and torn. a trail of red, the trail of blood. the blood loosed by the bullet. the ball loosed by the gun. daily an excess of killing.

the memory of my father and the way he died. it was during the early years when he had moved us down to Arkansas. my father had taken me on a hunting trip along the lower Red River; he was giving me instruction: ...*finish the animal to help it die*. he was a fair-minded hunter, perhaps because he was a judge. he was against the Indian way which was to wait until the animal bled to death. beast at the hands of a man. man at the claws of a beast. beast to beast. man to man. man to beast.

...and then to lie in the earth while the body disappears; first the flesh, eventually the bone; what is left of consciousness wakes to find itself removed, far from everything and everyone it used to know. no one to answer when it calls, only the faint response of the nearby newly dead.

Arrière pensée: a mental reservation; a hidden motive.

The Aru Islands.

The meaningless words that come at night.

To forsake. To renounce. To relinquish. To turn one's back on.

But why these thoughts when I have a wife? The marriage promise: the contentment that's due a man with a wife.

The morning is fair, already hot, tonight the heat will melt us in our rooms. I believe it was her grandmother with her, my mother is saying to my aunt. They are talking about a woman seen yesterday walking out by the tracks—alongside the stretch of trees in the wooded area that runs parallel to the railroad. She walked with her head down, very fast and determinedly... odd she should have been there, my mother says...

Lucie makes the remark that weeks have passed since the wedding and yet it still feels out of the usual to be here at breakfast.

To the women of the household: I'm making a record of things, Ladies. It will be something to survive me. The weather is hot, the air is heavy, it seems that the summers are getting hotter. Something purchased for a song. It's something my aunt is saying at the table. It means purchased for very little. Purchased for a song, or for less than a song. A story printed in *The Dollar*. And then the remark: They have turned quite profitable these stories. There is no attempt on my aunt's part to hide her enthusiasm for the plot. A man with a performing goat. A record of things created. Telling something about what they were. Like a skeleton stretched across the room, or the remaining skin and bone of birds, husks, all stopped in motion, the sun catching them at times, the sun illuminating them at times, carried by the air, or by the water, carried by the river.

In the afternoon we attend the Sunday ballet performance at the Walnut Street Theater. The story of a girl raised by gypsies. The troupe performs in the Russian tradition with Mademoiselle Mathias in the title role. The story from top to bottom convoluted, but unimportant as the story is only an excuse for the dance.

...after the ballet, a stop at Barnum's to have a look for ourselves at The Great Living Black Sea Lion. It's a bull and black as night and thirteen feet in length. It weighs 1200 pounds. The animal eats a hundredweight of fish every twenty-four hours and requires sixteen barrels of sea water every day. The eyes have great expression, Lucie says. It's obedient to its keeper—it strives to please him by moving in and out of the tank of water when he commands. We watch as the zoo keeper gives various commands, which the sea creature

follows. Then we feed the animal with a one-cent stream of fish. The fish sell in one-cent, two-cent, and five-cent streams to feed the sea lion.

...at night a three-quarter moon. There's a name for it: gibbous moon.