

Hold On

Ryan Frawley

agony sometimes changes
form
but
it never ceases for
anybody.*

She smiled at me

across the street

as if we already

knew each other

were lovers

had been for some

time.

I smiled too

(though I worried I might be out of practice)

and we grinned like dogs

at each other

across the street

until the lights changed

and we could cross.

We stopped in the middle of the road.

“nice eyes” she said.

Women always like my eyes

(but they are not usually this forward.)

“you wanna grab a coffee?” I asked.

“sure” she smiled.

She smiled a lot.

Then.

Yellow light streaks on the damp pavement. At least the rain has stopped. But it's cold, cold. She wraps her coat around herself tightly, as though it might make a difference. The motel is just across the road. But she stays put, shivering as she stands in the doorway darkness of a dollar store. A train hums at the station behind her. Oily black clouds slide across the sky, and the moon glows, yellow and jaundiced like the buzzing neon all around her. She is far away from home, and the world is big and old and mean. She closes her eyes. And then, she starts swaying. With no one to see and no music, she sings softly, deep in her throat, a song he had played to her, a long time ago. Who was it by? It's hard to be cold and alone and far from home. But she danced to the music of memory as the night swept around her.

She liked:

Vladimir Nabokov, John Steinbeck, Robert De Niro, Douglas Coupland, Radiohead, Jeff Buckley, Anais Nin, Samuel Beckett, Kanye West, Margaret Atwood, Tupac Shakur, Sofia Coppola, David Bowie, Peter Sellers, Yasujiro Ozu, Catherine Breillat, Tom Stoppard, Tori Amos, Albert Camus, William Faulkner, Leonard Cohen.

Lots of those

people

I don't like

but some I do

and it's the small details that matter

in the end.

I introduced her to

some valuable things

like

Tom Waits

Bob Dylan

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Martin Scorsese

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

and

Charles Bukowski

I have always been an evangelist

for the things I love

and lots of people don't like that

but some people

are like her

and they do.

I don't know very much about anything

but I know

what I love

and what I hate.

We talked about different things

what we liked

what we didn't like

and the wounds we had suffered.

There is nothing to be gained from women below twenty

(she was twenty two)

Young women may look good

but they have not suffered

enough

to understand anything.

She understood.

Everything.

He was a mess. All the things that had once appealed to her about him now repelled her. It was always this way. He was hardly the first loser she had fallen for. But he was,

perhaps, the most extreme example. Certainly, she had never felt for anyone what she felt for him. Certainly, she had never tried so hard with anyone as she had with him. But it hadn't worked. Whatever she tried just wasn't enough. Sometimes she just wanted to scream at him, You're not Charles fucking Bukowski! There's only one Bukowski, and he's dead. The world doesn't need another Hank. Stop drinking so much! Stop living in these awful hotels! Stop sabotaging your own life! Following in another's footsteps is no more real, no more artistically valid than becoming an accountant or a bank manager.

But he was in love with self destruction, more so than he was ever in love with her. As the train pulled away from the platform, and her old life dissolved into a series of blurred images half-glimpsed through a scarred window, she fiddled absentmindedly with a crude metal ring on her thumb. She was doing the right thing, leaving all this behind, going on to brighter things. But sometimes, you can't believe in your own victory parade.

Hank was right

Being drunk and writing

Beats being with any woman

No matter who

she is.

I had nothing

To offer

by the standards of those

Who value a man

by the numbers he commands.

But I gave her what I had

Passion

Pain

Reality

or the crumbs of it

that were mine to give

and

for the first time in my life

it seemed I had found someone

for whom this nothing

might be enough.

With her I was a genius

of some rare kind

and I would rather have been

me

with her

than any of the immortal poets.

Fuck other people's ideas

of what is desirable

necessary

worthy, because
they are not me.
Fuck living for stories
Forget about how it looks
from the outside
because I am not outside of this.
Live like you
not some skewed image
of your misunderstood heroes.

The sun shone on the day she left him, pale through sheets of cloud. Tears blurred her vision. She knew it had to be this way. It wasn't as though they argued all the time, or anything like that. It was just that, slowly, they had grown apart. He was too self-absorbed, too self-destructive. He was too wrapped up in his own image of himself to see what she needed. Yes, he was passionate about his art, about the things he liked, and at first she had loved that. But – he was a little *too* passionate. His various obsessions, that had once seemed so real and interesting to her, consumed him until he had no room left in his heart for anything else. Least of all her. And the drinking – why wouldn't he stop drinking? He had been drunk even then, she knew, as she left him. And in a way, that had made it easier. Still, there was a big part of her that hoped he would come out of his room, follow her, talk to her, convince her to stay. But she knew he never would. Because Bukowski wouldn't have.

I lived in a sleazy

hotel

in the worst part

of town

And I felt ashamed to bring her there.

She had two roommates

(both men. I drank their beer

they didn't say anything

about it.)

We found ways to be together

in her room

in mine

in parks

at her friend's houses

once, in the bathroom

of a restaurant

(she paid.)

I had a beautiful knife at the time

four inches long

wicked lightflashing blade.

She didn't like it

didn't see why I should
have such a thing
want such a thing.
I ground the blade down
until it was smooth
sawed off the handle
hammered the metal into a ring
gave it to her
she wore it on
her thumb.

He was a vicious bastard at times.

He drank all the time, and when he was drunk, the meanness would pour out of him. He'd tear at anyone who tried to reach out to him. And of course, the only one who was there consistently was her. Sometimes, it got too much for her.

"Look at you, standing there" he hissed, the drink slurring his words. "Yeah, I know...I know what you're thinking. You're gonna leave, like they all do. Gonna leave. Go on, then – leave!"

"What are you talking about?" she protested. "When did I say I was going to leave? I put up with your bullshit all the fucking time, and I don't even complain, but there's only so much I can take."

"Oh! Oh! Ho! Threatening me now? You lousy bitch, you think, you think you're so fucking special that I, I, I can't fucking live without you?"

“Jesus, why are you being such a prick tonight?” she asked.

“Who is he? Eh? Who is he?”

“Who is who? What are you talking about?”

“You know...you fucking *know* what I’m talking about. Don’t lie to me!”

“You sound like a madman, you drunken piece of shit!”

“You’ve found someone else. I know...don’t fucking lie to me!”

She left when he threw the bottle at her, and she never should have gone back.

That should have been the last straw. But they had been through so much together. She loved him. It had seemed worth one last shot.

“WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS DRUNK?”

she screamed

“WHY DO YOU HAVE TO DRINK ALL THE TIME?

YOU DON’T *DO* ANYTHING

JUST SIT THERE

DRUNK!”

but it’s not true

sometimes I write poems

like this one

“YOUR POEMS SUCK!”

“Maybe” I said

“but I’m a damn good drunk.”

The guy in the next room hammered
on the paper-thin wall
and shouted.

I threw a beer bottle
it looped in the air
shone like a fish
in the light
and smashed against the wall.

He stopped hammering.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?
YOU CRAZY BASTARD!”

She left.

I opened another beer

Drank

Drank again.

The silence seemed to vibrate in the small room as it filled up the space where a moment before, his words had hung in a rain of silver and gold.

“Wow” she said. “Great poem” she said.

But it wasn't what Bukowski had written that she thought of as she watched streaks of sunlight wash against the walls, slant across his cheek, kindle his three day beard into an inverted halo. It was the fire in his eyes as he spoke, the depth of emotion in

his voice, the power that he found in the words of another. He was swept up by it as he read, elevated far beyond this shabby room in this shabby part of town, lifted into another world. And he had wanted to take her with him. It made her feel privileged. He was unlike anyone she had ever known before.

Hank would have left it at that

He wouldn't have

seen her again

written about her

again

there would be some other

woman

some other drunken night

life would go on

but that's not how it went

with us.

We made it up

"I just want you to *do* something

with your life

I don't want you to waste

what you have"

and I knew she didn't understand

everything I had tried to teach her

like
the future is a myth
life is now
all the great poets wrote best
when they were writing
for their lives
poverty is the price you pay
and hope the gods
accept it
cigarettes taste better
at night.
“Don’t worry
I’ll get published
things will be better.”
But we both stopped
believing

She stopped
hoping.

She looked away, looked back again. He was still smiling at her across the street.
It was definitely her that he was looking at. No doubt about it. His hair was messy, but in

a good way, like he'd just got out of bed. Like they'd just woken up together. Those glasses looked cool. They suited him. Shame about his shoes.

The lights changed. They walked towards each other, ten paces, pistols drawn, to the barricades. He stopped in front of her. Behind his glasses, his eyes seemed to glow, clear and bright, lit from within by pain and joy.

“Hi” he said.

“Hi” she said. “Nice eyes.” And she couldn't believe what she was saying.

“You wanna grab a coffee?” He smiled as though he already knew the answer, and whatever strange impulse she had been following so far pushed her on.

“Sure” she smiled.

There were no more
drunken rows
but one day
she came to me
and she was dressed a certain way
like she was wearing armour
(women have a uniform, I have noticed
they put it on
when they leave.)
“I don't think we can
go on”
she said

“I don’t think I can
deal with this anymore.”

I was drunk.

“Deal with what?”

I asked.

“with you

with your problems

you need to take better care of yourself

maybe then you can think

about someone else.”

the room still smelled

of her

for days after she left.

I gave a month’s notice

and moved out in two weeks.

*taken from *for the concerned* by Charles Bukowski