

The Woman

I Love



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by Mike Finley

For RACHEL

on the event of our 30th Anniversary

July 25, 2011

The woman I love is much smarter than me. Therefore my life with her is one long lookout. Where will she turn up? I never know.

You sometimes see me peering deep into my binoculars, scanning the horizon. Then she is there, tapping my shoulder from behind.

You would think I would learn, but I don't. Idiotically, I still walk down the street whistling a tune or kicking a can. Imagining every eye behind every drape were not hers.

Sometimes I congratulate myself, saying I did it, I made good my escape. And run to a place that she will never in a hundred years find.

But when I get there the bedsheets twisted, the dried drop of wine on the floorboard all tell me she is keeping pace.

One time in the Delta she was a street musician, and I held back. I figured, she's blind, she's got a monkey to feed. And with that accordion playing she could not be grossing much. I put two bits in her cup and slipped away.

In my dreams she whips off her black glasses and I tumble down her eyes, waving my arms, falling like a bucket down a well.

She bites me on the wrist and takes off after me, chasing me through the French Quarter. At the last moment I disguise myself as a bishop in an innocent game of chess.

Though she is clever, I am no slouch. As a boy she was my teacher and I fooled her routinely. The other nine-year-olds hated me – the mustache, I think – and because of the special favors she bestowed.

One day she demanded I stay after and wash her blackboard. I soaked and I rubbed, I smeared and I stroked. She said don't stop but I stopped.

When I told her I had to "go," I tore the corridor pass from her fingers. I gave her the slip and fled through the groaning swingsets.

I hid in the grass for forever, and when the moment was right melted into the crowd.

This is not an allegory. It's the truth. She changes. In 1936 in Berlin I was Jesse Owen and she was Frau Cosima, an ideological gleam in her eye. She reached for my baton but I broke for the finish.

All this time I am madly in love. This is a woman who knows about a man. The things he needs, the things he needs to need. How we are pale flowers struggling in a soft breeze. How when we say no we mean yes.

You appreciate that when you are up the Amazon without a paddle. She was gentle. I was in a tree, with a sloth and a parrot.

I was yellow with sharp teeth and black spots. She had a Mauser rifle and two trained crocodiles.

How my jeweled eyes lit up the night. And my pounding heart found its place in her cross-hairs.

She knew I was not ready and let me off easy. The bullet only grazed me. I was up all night, yowling and licking the wound.

I am at a party high over the city. Someone says something, four score of eyebrows arch.

Across a battery of stemware I spot her and look for an exit. But the Empire State Building is like the moon – its dark side has never been seen. I look out the window – one hundred and two floors of fire escape.

Luck is with me – I beat the elevator down.

She chases me across the Yukon carrying a sling of baby sons in one hand, a foreclosed mortgage in the other.

Over my shoulder she has become a ravening wolf, bounding after me, snapping at my heels.

I hop across Alaska and dive into the Bering Sea. She is equally vivid as a killer whale. Crawling onto dry land I take cover as she strafes me as a fighter plane from unbelievably low altitudes.

I make my way panting across the Sahara. A dozen dunes away I hear the drone of the jeep of the woman I love. Except she isn't a jeep. She's a mosquito the size of a jeep.

I morph into a billiard ball and burrow into the sand. Foiled, she buzzes off.

Forty days I spend in the desert, religious as cactus. Then I hear it – a thousand

saxophones bopping martially under the noonday sun.

I look down as legion upon legion pass below me blowing hot jazz. And at their head is Octavian and she means business.

Fortunately my disciples prepared for such an eventuality. I climb through a trap door in the desert and emerge at the corner of Fifth and Wabasha in downtown St. Paul.

It is never far from St. Paul to the desert.

I brush the sand from my jeans and board the 21A. The driver's eyes meet mine in the mirror, but I am exhausted, I collapse in the seat. Those eyes, where have I seen those eyes before, like happy dragons, ready to dine, and me a porkchop pooling in its fat.

I know how it happens. She will strip me bare, lay me open. I will be the meat

braised by her fire, flayed and fulfilled, seared through to the marrow.

Because my flesh is for her use, forever.

July, 1981

