The Prairie Light Review

Volume 13
Number 2 Peak Through The Window

Spring 5-1-1994

The Widow Paris

Margaret Szczekocki
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.cod.edu/plr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol13/iss2/16

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact orenick@cod.edu.
The Widow Paris
Margaret Szczekocki

I woke up depressed this morning. My two week vacation was slipping away like sugar in my hands. A little sweetness may stick to me, but the majority is gone. I always feel like this on my last day in New Orleans. I know that my throat will continue to feel tight for at least a week longer. I know that the faces at O'Hare International Airport will be just as ugly and ignorant as they always are. I know that I belong here and I know that I have to leave.

I took one last walk through the Quarter, imagining once again the people and lives behind the shuttered eyes of their homes. Shutters shut in morning-after shame, not one offered me any secrets. I slowly walked along the uneven gray flagstone sidewalks and listened to the banjo strumming bum. He was missing a string or two along with a few teeth. I smiled back sadly at the happy people that passed by. I passed the huckster calling to me, "Betcha ten bucks Ah kin tell ya where ya gotch yo shoes at ma'am." A laugh caught in my throat as I answered, "On my feet." He smiled and waved his shine rag at me. I touched the lipstick pink, waxy blooms of the bougainvillea twisting out to me through the wrought iron fences. I listened to the argument two old men sitting in Jackson Square were having about beer, the man in the blue seersucker suit was right. Dixie is "gahbage wautah." I ignored the pained voice in my heart. I had to; it was time to go.

At the airport I went through the robotic motions of checking in baggage and finding my seat. We flew, we landed and I was met by the same people I've always met by at O'Hare.

I dread O'Hare, each face uglier and ruder than the last. I swear these people spend their entire lives here just hoping to see me, or rather, hoping that I see them. All the same, homogenized, pasty, bland, unhappy faces. "Welcome to Chicago." I hate these people. Their presence grips me with a fearsome urge to run away, to buy a ticket back home. A ticket back to what? My home is in Chicago; it has always been Chicago. God, I hate Chicago.

I paused to use a pay phone, and made the foolish mistake to smile at the bitch next to me. Maybe it wasn't foolish. At that exact moment, the voice of my boss began bitching about a two week vacation on my answering machine and that woman stared at me as if I were insane or my hair was a coiling nest of vipers. I slammed down the phone, scared the shit out of her and ran to the ticket counter as though possessed. I bought a ticket, rechecked my bags and sank into my assigned seat with a sigh. I happily glanced through the travel brochures and chuckled over the Laveau Voodoo Museum and Store. 'The Widow Paris is waiting for you. Save 10% with this ad.'

I arrived in New Orleans in time to catch the evening parade. Not Mardi Gras, but a ghost parade. I don't find it frightening, especially after Chicago, where the living look dead, seeing the dead in life is natural to me. Every evening at six forty-five, the Inn on Bourbon, is awash in activity, the activity of time long since past. The Inn on Bourbon used to be the opera house. The show begins as the gilded carriages glide silently to the curving curb. I rush to stand next to the door as coachmen jump down from their perches with gold braid trim flashing against their rich red uniforms. Hurriedly a man bends down and unclasps the stairs of the carriage. He steps back and the stairs fall into place ready for the passengers to depart, ladies first, of course. Tall, fussy, satiny curls push out of the dark carriage, in the semi-darkness of the cab you can see bosoms pushed together to majestic heights, cloaked in shimmering gowns of jewel-like colors. White gloves reach out from the folds of the dresses to reach for the coachman's hand as the carriage sways dizzily with her exit. The women remind me of hens leaving the coop, nervous and fluttery. Now the men exit almost regally, although a little awkwardly, like a rooster. From where I stand I
see gray gloves emerge from the darkness to grab the door frames for support. The man then pulls himself out. He wears a black suit and a waistcoat to match the gloves. Too much of a man to lean on the arm of the coachman, he straightens out, sways on the first step and stiffly descends to the curb.

If I block the door the ghosts simply pass through me with a delicious shiver. I don't think they see me, but I have noticed a tall black woman watching me. She seems to stand outside of the activity. I saw her on my first visit here and each one thereafter. She isn't as static and organized like the others. I've seen her all over the city wearing an indigo bandana wrapped tight about her hair, a long rust colored dress, and circles of gold throwing fire from her fingers and ears. She isn't as dusty or watery looking as the others. She is more real, but not living. Ah, New Orleans.

My face hurt this morning when I woke up. I think I slept with a shit-eating grin all night. I wandered around the quarter and put a big deposit on a cheap rental at 1020 St. Ann Street. It's a tiny Creole cottage with a courtyard bigger than the house, filled with banana trees and wisteria. The garden smells moistly-sweet. The surrounding wall is nearly completely covered with laurel. An enormous myrtle grows along the left wall. The laurel wall is buckling from the forceful growth of the roots. Someone carved a poem deep into its twisted trunk:

"Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

I'm going to hang a swing from this tree. I intend to play in and under this tree.

A single ride in a mule-drawn carriage brought my few belongings and I moved in. Inside the home, the landlady had left furnishings. In the front room was an old oriental rug nailed down to the scarred, wide plank floor. A water stained, ivory silk chaise lounge was positioned to bask in a slice of the afternoon sun. A bookshelf of cherry was waiting to be filled, and a small steamer trunk served as a coffee table. In the kitchen I found a pot, a pan, white towels and an iron table and two wicker chairs. In the bedroom a four poster bed, so large only a three foot clearance circled the room, held court with fresh sheets and bedding. The finials touched the wood plank ceiling and I could see faint gouges from past attempts to move the massive structure.

Happily moved in, I went off in search of a telephone. My employer hates me. Mr. Brenner told me not to expect a single decent word to pass his lips about me. I told him it would be terrible if he started being decent this late in his business life. I hung up gleefully and danced across the cobblestone street to the bar waiting patiently for me to enter.

I was greeted by the smell of lemon oil, jambalaya and a head nod, half-smile from the bartender. This bar was once the premiere gentlemen's club, before the red-light district broughthooking to the masses, not just the privileged. Now a secretive gem of a lounge nestled in Pirate Alley named, Noire. Dark, polished wooden panels stretch from wall to wall. Glowing, green glass light fixtures on brass chains hang from a pressed tin ceiling. The tall ornate bar glows with a lustrous satin finish achievable only through decades upon decades of hard drinking and lemon oil.

I nestled myself in a black leather winged-back armchair with a brown leather topped table before me. Basking in this masculine den I casually studied my view. The tall trio of French doors was partially obscured by a potted palm, but I could still see blissful couples stumbling on the brick walk as if drunk. Just as I was about to pick up the wine list a waiter appeared at my right arm. He held a tray with an aged, dusty, cut glass decanter and a crystal Baccarat goblet. "Tafia, from Marie, the woman in brown." He smiled and efficiently unloaded the spirits. I looked around and saw no other person, let alone a woman in the bar. Shrugging, I poured a
glass of the thick, pale gold tafia and watched the rainbows dance in the crystal like diamonds. Raising the glass to my lips I caught the scent of spicy, rum-like liquor. A sip sent a sizzle down my throat, leaving a burning outline, letting me know exactly where my esophagus lay. After a few sips I no longer knew or cared the shape and size of my organs. My stomach was a warm throb inside of me and I liked it. I again searched for a woman in brown and was disappointed to see that I was still the only person sitting down. I finished my glass, capped the bottle with the ground glass stopper and waved to the waiter. He waved back with a smile. "No charge", he called to me and I was struck by the resonance of his voice bouncing against the wood surfaces. "Take the bottle, it's yours." I attempted a smile, which felt rubbbery and foolish. As I stood, the room towered around me pleasantly and felt myself walking out the bar swaying ever so slightly.

I stumbled out into the dying light of day and a breath of lemon oil wafted by me. I blinked and saw the tall black woman with the indigo bandana and the rust hued dress walking past me with a cut glass bottle like mine tied to her hip. I stumbled in my hurry and I called after her. "Marie!" I ran clumsily after her. She didn't seem to notice me next to her, but a small smile played upon her full fleshy lips. I looked up at her and was struck by the large, deep blackness of her eyes. Her nose was slender and straight, she held a certain regality in her posture. She walked with long strides and I heard her skirt whispering to me. We walked for what felt to be hours, as the heat and humidity made me feel even more drunk than before. "One five two St. Ann." I jumped at her voice. Quickly I tried to remember the grid of addresses in the quarter. "There is no such number on St. Ann." I said.

"Child, I have lived there two centuries, and you now tell me that I have not?" she asked without looking at me. "The last square of St. Ann's along Rampart."

"I live there," I weakly offered, as I wrestled with the bottle stopper and again felt the burning wash down my body. "I've seen you everywhere else," I gasped. "but not there." We were quickly approaching the thousand block of St. Ann Street, we continued our pace until we reached 1020 St. Ann. "This is my house." I murmured. "It has a wonderful courtyard and an enormous myrtle tree with a lovely poem."

She smiled as she answered, "I planted that tree, I carved that poem, I have lived and do live there." With those last words she pulled the creaking wrought gates open and we entered our moonlight bathed court. She suddenly and soundlessly doubled over and just as I was about to panic she stood upright with the back of her full skirt in her hands. She twisted the fabric and tucked the coil into her waistband. Pleased with her makeshift trousers, she began untying the sash holding the bottle to her waistband. She handed the bottle to me as I stood with a bottle in each hand. As she slipped off her shirt, I was amazed to see her full, dark breasts standing before me. She took a bottle from me and she began to drink in long, smooth swallows. I watched her serpentine neck move as she emptied the bottle. I brought my bottle to my lips and began to drink past the burning. Immediately the warm throb began and the yard seemed to expand as the neighboring homes beyond the four walls disappeared. I closed my eyes and felt a swoon wash over me. I heard my blood drumming in my ears.

When I looked up we no longer were in the courtyard. We were in a bayou clearing. Eyes glowed in the dark growth beyond the glow of a large bonfire. Moss hung from the twisted cypress branches above. Birds twittered in the blackness and the full moon was bigger than anything I'd ever seen before. It was glowing and growing closer, as if to warm itself by our fire.

The drumming in my ears grew louder and I realized people were emerging from the tangled growth of swamp. Shirtless men with drums pounded out a hypnotic pulse. Half naked women began to writhe and dance around the fire to the fierce throbbing tattoo. A group of men busied themselves below a tree. I saw that it was the poem bearing myrtle. The men were refilling bottles from a barrel of tafia and when refueled, they promptly joined the women in dance. Naked bodies twitched and pulsed in
time to the drums. The drumbeats grew faster and fiercer. I watched the couples shedding their inhibitions just as easily as their clothes. The throng spun around the fire dizzily and I had to shut me eyes for a moment in order to remain standing. Across the fire I could see Marie coming towards me. She draped her arm around my waist as we watched the dancers. Marie began to sing and the others followed. We refilled our bottles and slowly wandered away from the revelers. We sat down in a small clearing and watched the moonset. I fell asleep against Marie well before the sunrise. As I nodded off, I thought I heard Marie howling. I woke up in my courtyard, under the myrtle, facedown, mud-streaked, and very hungover. I stood up shakily and winced at the drumbeat in my head as I walked into my house. On the steamer trunk I saw a cut glass bottle with a tag. I leaned over and ignored the pain which had a pulse of its own. I picked up the bottle and read the note.

"I believe that sweet are the uses of adversity. The hair of the dog that bit you. I'll see you tonight. The widow Paris."

The widow Paris, I thought. A dog howled and I suddenly realized that Marie in the brown dress was Marie Laveau, the queen of old New Orleans.

Sugar Island
Rebecca Lambrecht

Your beautiful body encompassed by miles of sugar expanding outward layered beneath the colors swimming inside:
magenta vibrance fuchsia life, canary thoughts, and orange clowns.

You are the color's world, their mother, gently caressing and feeding even strange feet passing by cooled by your dance.