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THE TREES ARE AFLAME

from MY COMMIE SWEETHEART: SCENES FROM A QUEER FRIENDSHIP

No one would really be able to describe the life that passes like a stereoscopic whirl of autumn light through a train window in New England.

A therapist once concluded about him that he's been perpetually anxious since the age of eight.

A therapist once asked her: "must you always keep your nose to the grindstone?"

He's a gay white male heavy smoking inspired leftist not necessarily seeking same. Though he sizes people up by sniffing out their politics, he can set sex aside.

She's a white lesbian who enjoys intellectual companionship and gardening. Must be able to dance.

A heron among the rushes was not uncommon but it always took her breath away.

She loves words, the way they skip across surfaces like a shard skimming a lake or how they drop into the known like a stone breaking the same surface, disturbing the sediment, forming a sentiment on the bottom.

The trees are aflame.

Words can change her, she's convinced. In the right hands, the right mouth, words are more sensual than eating, more powerful than touching. He loves languages, the way they enable him to be, and tell stories in an unfamiliar social matrix. He loves humor in a day, at least one good joke, one funny story. He is not unhappy. He is not not happy. He is not happy. He is not always happy. A loneliness can overcome him. She turns away from the cultural imperative, from the category, of happy. She is afraid to say she is happy. She may not wish to be happy.

Could you touch your tongue to a leaf.

"Happiness" is not her aim, though when asked in '78 by the yearbook staff for "goal in life," she wrote, "to be happy."

Could you stand beside a tree and know it.

She was the editor of the yearbook and the valedictorian. He was an altar boy and member of the philosophy club. A fear of loneliness can overcome her. She wanted to be an athlete. To have muscles and exceed limits. He wanted to be a girl. To wear his mother's floral prints, gold shoes, bold hats; to submit to the domination of another. *Could you change.* A therapist once described him as bi-polar. A therapist once described her as obsessive compulsive. *Nothing but a red door.* She's tight. He's loose. Where his motto was to move on, hers was to move through which may be why she often felt as though she were stuck in one place whereas he felt he was running. *As though an abstract artist had access to the industrial complex and painted one door red.* They strongly identify with an Italian ethnic that is one part real and one part fantasy. He was blonde at one time, but since he's gone white, he dyes his hair a choice of colors depending on the season. Curly-haired and bespectacled as an adolescent, she was glad she wasn't also fat. She's been told that her looks fail to change with age, trauma, trial and experience. Like most drinkers, he looks some years older than he is. *The door cannot be opened.* They are the type of people who strike up conversations with strangers and sales clerks. Do people confide in them? They are city people because in the country there aren't enough structures to bang up against, not enough shapes to compare and differentiate one's own body from and so feel present, or so they have convinced themselves.

Orange brown foliage like the gold of old fashioned fillings.

They both had relatives whom they loved and learned from, to whom they were devoted. In Sicily, she had found her third cousin twice removed or was it her fourth uncle once extracted or perhaps her brother from a previous life, a man named Roberto. He looked like her grandfather and they found that their great great grandfathers were *fratelli* on the family tree.

It has no hinges, just the blinding certainty, the sheer facticity of its color.

A tree made of lifelines on a page by a priest.

His closest friend as a child was a second cousin on his mother's step-grandparents' side. Named Patricia. Sissy and brother, pansy and tom. It was love. *Like the lid of a mummies' tomb, immanence of the bright hereafter.*

They could both be cry babies, brats, and bitches. They could both be good girls, innocent tykes, marvelous wonders, cabinets of curiosities. They

were both citizens of these United States of America. *Golden arches stitched boldly on the highway flag.* He was born a citizen of Leominster, Massachusetts. She was born a citizen of Darby, Pennsylvania. *Plastic bags and diapers airborne like kites.* Boston was a nearby city to him as a boy. Philadelphia was "THE city" to her as a girl. *Blank slates of surrender.* If they live now. They are living now. What landscape suits them? What domicile fits them? What is their where, their space? *Caught, unloosed, caught.* There was advice from the old country she didn't understand. Like if you have a trouble in your heart, go to a place that you've never been, and literally toss the trouble into a corner of that strange place.

Certain words cramped their style. Like "addict." Or "woman."

She does not yet understand why she loves to watch him, and, now, tell him. She sees. He sees. They see.

Who wants to read a book by a lesbian poet about a commie fag?

Look! He's human! The thumb gives it away every time. Or the suffering. *What once were mills, cloth looming, never enough money earned, clamor. Light? Are now abandoned shells.* He's a Scorpio, born on Halloween. She's a Libra on the cusp of Scorpio told she has only good Scorpion traits. Assertiveness or tactlessness depending on whether the fortune teller is a friend or not. What makes her human are her crooked toes—hammer, bunion, corn. Genetically engineered into the DNA of ancestral laborers from the "old country." Italy. *Alien receptors.* He makes a damn good gnocchi. Ricotta replaces potato as secret ingredient. The thing about gnocchi is you have to eat them the same day you make them. *Preying mantis street lamps.* She makes a damn good eggplant. Trick is an assiduous bleeding process—recall eggplant is of the nightshade family—preceded by sensory worship of eggplant's glistening interior played off its purple skin. He calls associations like this "culinary ethnicity." *Do not adjust your television screen.* What makes them Italian is a politics, or really class is what makes them Italian, not any daily reincarnations at the altar of the discovery of pasta, though it is worth considering how being citizens of the United States makes them critically long for a different identity, how they want to stake claims on Mediterranean sunlight and soil, sensibility and history, language and face. They know who they are! They have habits. *Crosses atop domes.* Nightly tooth grinding. Oil of patchouli. Head scratching. A way of smiling

whereby an eyetooth gets caught on the upper or lower lip is never a good sign, a sign she's not sincere or is harboring a dark thought and her usual routes of deflection are failing. His way of beginning a sentence, "Mmmmm, you know what, why don't we?" . . . is a sign that he will complicate or change plans, usually to avoid a certain kind of work, a certain kind of concentration. *Pried up, open, sidewalks meet like an eave, split in two.* She folds her arms too often in social gatherings and tries to make herself conscious of unfolding them because it's more attractive to appear open. He habitually reads *The Nation*. She has a habit of thinking she has no habits and therefore does not exist. *Grey ducts.* She fails to recognize her habits even though she has a habit of "taking things personally," of feeling guilty for too much pleasure, of hiding one hand in her crotch when she writes, of fearing insanity, of fearing fear, of eating candy at least once a day, of anticipating disaster, of feeling she has never read enough, of speaking in nonsequiturs, of romanticizing and exposing reality's hard edges at the same time, of making everything more work than it has to be, lately of finding her visage in the mirror which seems better than episodes of standing to one uncanny side of the mirror not really able to look at all, avoiding self-recognition altogether. *Graffiti.* He has a habit of not listening to phone messages or only listening to part of them, fidgeting, delighting in the company of real people, storytelling, not really caring about his cat, meticulously arranging his tchotchkes and letting the kitchen garbage fill the room with foul odors simultaneously, denying he is physically ill, ignoring his body's aches, pains and sputum, drinking to excess, thinking he's not been taken seriously, thinking his life is worthless, of fleeing the sight of his own self-making, of spitting at the television set, of thinking he's too fat, of letting things, great and small, roll off of him at the same time that he worries, he worries. *Tractors.* They are exhibitionists. She likes to dress in drag and belt out songs, or in Disco fashion, clear the dance floor. He likes to make his house into a set for myriad desires, textural pleasures, politics on parade. He's not showy, but he'll bend your ear. *Vents.*

Can you tell another person to exist while they are living? Can you tell yourself? She has stood vigil at his deathbed more than once and he has risen from his own ashes. She doesn't want to write his eulogy. *The trees are aflame.* He wants to write a book that dares to depict a homosexual who is also

a revolutionary. She wants to write a book that has a gay man and a lesbian existing with total uncompromised depth and integrity alongside one another, in the same narrative. *Purls of smoke rise from the plant stacks.* He doesn't wish to be a wall of smoke. She doesn't wish to live on the other side of the wall, like a Henry James character, who "turned her face to the wall." When she taught the book she stared into the distance of her classroom, wanting passionately for her students to understand, paean to the brilliance of Henry James for *getting* it, she said it over and again with a kind of jouissance: "she turned her face to the wall."

Billboards flat or three dimensional. The deep lines on his face, grooves in his cheeks and forehead. She wanted to be coaxed to face her desire. Could she dare to face her desire. Her love for him (this delicate man) is concave. He is a delicate man whom she loves. "That's your new word for any food you like," her girlfriend says, "Delicate." *To be rocked and jolted.*

His body is a fist. His body is an open palm. He wears hammer and sickle suspenders and sports a Che Guevara hat.

No one knew in this country where, how, or by whom their clothes were manufactured. Where, how, or by whom the food they ate was cultivated and gathered. Where, how, or by whom laws were passed and enforced. Where, how, or by whom images appeared on their TV screens. This must be what was meant by "the mystery of the unknown." *Swingline Staplers.*

She sometimes felt caught behind a self-protective fence of her own making. What was she afraid would happen? What consequences did she think she wished to avert? *If you open your eyes wider, does your body open also.* Hepatitis. Pseudo-zanthoma-elasticum. Eczema. Liver Disease. Adult onset tonsillitis. Retinal degeneration. Adult onset acne. Hemorrhoids. Endometriosis. HIV. His and Hers. *It's not often that you are able simply to gaze through the window, thinking.*

She used to believe that if she got lost, no one would try to find her. Thus she tried to practice losing herself in some creative activity as a rehearsal for the real thing. He believed that if the dinner he prepared did not succeed, he would suffer the utmost abandonment. No love. She believed that if she experienced—to say nothing of expressed—her anger, someone would die. Possibly herself, but more likely a parent and therefore herself as well. He

believed that if he failed to make people laugh, they might glimpse who he really was, they wouldn't like that at all. It was none too pretty. No love. She believed that stepping in dog shit, being pooped on by a bird, having a bat fly into the house, the bestowal of a gift to or from a stranger on a public conveyance brought good luck.

If she lifts her nose from the grindstone, she might have to look through the window. The trees are aflame.

He believed that ammonia sprinkled on his trash bags kept the rats away.

He believed he was a feminist.

He believed in making more food than anyone could possibly eat at a dinner party.

She believed in the importance of soul food even though she drank a variety of herbal teas. She hated their flavorlessness but believed that they were good for her.

She believed that an unutterable, unbearable shame was in store for her ever after which life would never be the same, if it even resumed, and from which she would never recover.

He believed that he was fundamentally unworthy even though he didn't know exactly what made him so.

They believed that the assertion of their desire, their "happiness," would incite a catastrophe. Narcissism, someone's, was at the root of this belief.

For the longest time, she did not believe in mixing medication, say, Tylenol and penicillin. It would overload or otherwise confuse the system. For the longest time, she didn't drink water out of the bathroom sink. From time to time, especially if she is alone in the house, she believes that ghosts exist, especially on the stairways, and that they have decided to like her, but if they wanted to toy with her, they could push her backwards down the stairs.

At a certain overpass, all of the birds from everywhere gather on the same wire.

No one knew his own motives or intentions. No one knew what the words she used really meant or why she chose just those just now. No one knew the difference between waking and sleeping life but only that they seemed to be different. No one knew where language came from and how it was different from images. No one knew how or if he chose to be here now.

No one knew the desire behind the desire behind the desire but only that some desires were sacred and others profane, some acceptable and others unacceptable, some daily and immediate and others forever banished from consciousness, never had because never heard.

This must be what was meant by the "mystery of the unknown."

The doctor has called him to the office, which is the reason for this trip and his gaze through the window.

What she loves about writing is how she cannot know what will emerge if she lets language lead, but no sooner does she believe this than she remembers convention's dictating predictable role. The contradiction tears at her and tempts her to write more. What he loves about arranging his house is the transforming possibilities of a fringe, the old world infusion of lace, the eros of tassels, the willingness of dark colors, the wonder of two-way tape, and all of it indicative of a world he can reside in at the same time that he remakes it every day.

From time to time, he said he heard her voice "travel across his brain."

When words fail her, she turns to images. She has been known to crawl under the covers with a good book of pictures. He turns to television, but the television is so hard to get to because it mustn't ever be in view—so unaesthetic—that he has to lie on his stomach on his bed and crane his neck to watch it.

The train doesn't know an end, but only a direction.

Her prose sounded like Paganini even though she wanted it to sound like Bach.

He was the only person she knew who could dress his windows with rugs. Some of his windows drew dappled light through lace, but none were translucent. When she visited him, she and the cat enjoyed the company of shade or light, and she marveled at the courage of interior décor.

She dreamt she had thyme in the garden to prepare the chicken and woke to realize the thyme was time and the chicken was herself.

He dreamt he was addressing a mass of people in a smoke-filled room lit communist red. In Italy. Roma. He is standing on a table addressing the assemblage on freedom while introducing his comrades in the struggle for liberation, his two illustrious lesbian friends, Jean and Mary. He calls this a Prozac dream

because of its positive fire ambiance.

She dreamt that she owned a used bookstore where she also sold a carefully chosen handful of antiques. The bookstore had an elaborate sound system for filling the store with beautiful music. She considered that she could run this bookstore—she needed to—and still keep her day job teaching people to read because she could sit behind the counter and read one book after the other from a perfectly still angle and an intimately comfortable distance.

He dreamt he could fall asleep.

It was so much easier for her to remember her dreams than it was for her to remember his. And anyway he always called psychology underworked sociology.

Once she was all set to look through the window when they announced, before boarding, that the train was full.

A feeling flounders like a fish out of water. Somewhere, somehow it didn't always flounder, but whatever its original element was is not of this world and so it flounders unless she can give it a medium. But she isn't God. She can't draw water from a stone.

She pictures herself running through snow and the imprint left in the place where her knee crests the otherwise packed flakes before being swept away by wind or filled again by more snow being evidence that there's a body here.

He pictures himself sitting on a balcony anywhere in the world but it must be a balcony.

A therapist once told him he was cured but really it was that his health insurance was running out.

Certain words ran away with themselves. Deviant. Defiant. Deft. Delight. Doo-little. Say more. Respite.

Supernovas. The matter of more than one universe. The matter of matter. Birth and especially death. Birth and if so death. The ring around Saturn but not around Mars. The sun, the earth, the moon—their tripartite relation. The tide, the fish, the cell, the scale, the nucleus, the eye. The origins of queer. This must be what was meant by the mystery of the unknown.

She is on her way back from having given a reading in New York, which was in every way satisfying and also anti-climactic, and besides now she is going back, which is

the reason for her gaze through the window.

There was always existing alongside each other multiple consciousnesses and the others or several weren't always simply "un."

There was no organizing of her thoughts, so why pretend?

She has survived the holidays and thus her exhausted gaze through the window.

Certain words got carried away. You damnable disease carrier, you. You molester of children, and yet so many of you artists, you. You pervert painter, don't think you can brush me away. You turn! You euphemism. "Yous" instead of "you." The yew plant has medicinal properties.

Holding her lover in the morning, especially her arm flung around her lower belly, holding her this way, she thinks she can see her breathing it is so real.

At wedding ceremonies, as a child and then an adolescent, he wanted to catch the bouquet, not the garter.

A feeling needs to be swum through to get to its other side or you will be forever landlocked. The need for a punching bag or at least a pillow to sob into.

Because those were not anemones through the window, they were clouds.

What he has put behind him persists in her.

She saw something in him.

He and she prefer shopping in the vegetable market, and fish market, and cheese market over and against the chain supermarket. Tasting is encouraged from store to store, or a bundle of parsley bunched like a bouquet, the muscled fist of a tomato, its bright skin against snow, or the way a wedge of sky punctuates their stroll. They stop so she can tell him about what persists from the night, the day, weeks, decades, a lifetime before. If it were good, it wouldn't need to be felt again, it wouldn't need to be talked about. They linger over shapes of pasta, grades of olive oil, and cost: "How much do the bandits want for this?" they ask, mimicking his mother. They stop so he can tell her where he's going next, or how he plans to gather these ingredients—lentils, string beans, chicken breasts, parmigiano—into a huge net then batten down the hatches, seal the windows, sit by the soup, the warming, bubbling soup for the rest of the afternoon and until night falls. She places three small lemons in a brown paper bag. They find and celebrate fresh sage. He seeks imported bouillon for

a special uncle. STAR. "Oooh," they keep saying, "Oooh." Between stores, he hooks his arm in hers, like a grandmother in the old country. Between stores, she hooks her arm in his, like a campagno holding fast a campagno. At times, he moves in one direction while she ponders another. Their company is robust. Their company is laughter. At times, she's drawn to one counter, along a bed of flounder, down a row of rice, while he lurks at the dry goods stall counting out five lace handkerchiefs, one dozen eggs, six boxes of Jell-O. "So what was Pasolini's relationship to neorealism?" And, "how could I enjoy Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* so much in spite of the misogyny I woke up smiling"—their time together not filmy, flimsy, fleeting. It sometimes feels like all she might ever ask for. But of course it is not.

Certain words ran rampant and out of control. Vampire Nation. Villette vilifiers. Wedekind and his kind. Violins. Vintage clothes and furniture. Vichyssoise. And unreadability. Before her mother knew she was a lesbian, she said that lesbians were incomplete.

He is fleeing because there is no clear place to be, no place free from the anxiety of living. He is gazing through the window trying not to think about where he is going or why. He is on his way to see a friend in New Jersey, to attend a political rally in New York, to settle accounts at his mother's former home in Massachusetts, to see a friend in New Hampshire, to attend a Radical Teacher meeting in Boston, to catch the bus from Boston to Montreal to Cuba where his newfound lover lives, because of whom he cannot believe his life.

A propos of impropriety she tinkered with inappropriateness.

To think of oneself as sharing in the common lot could be awfully consoling.

The beauty of the magic marker being just one saturated color and the question of whether any consciousness could withstand that.

Certain words heralded the monotony of a refrain.

"His passion for the refrain is like an echo from a hollow. It is his own voice returning—"

Once the train stopped for a very long time until the difficulty announced was that a boy had thrown himself in front of the train and they were clearing the tracks.

She could see but barely through the window that the trees were aflame.