

John M. Williams

The Year of No Wisteria

I'm thinking, this could go any way at all. But after God knows what kind of a ride through life you'd expect some old memory-haunted, relic-cluttered house at least-not *this*-like finding the key to the universe in a Bill's Dollar Store-but on second thought maybe it fits. The parking lot gives no hint that she might drive-no askew Desotos, no wing and a prayer Packards-but that doesn't say much-of course she wouldn't-and would she be the type to look out windows-no-but know somehow I am here?

Condo-land. Everything new. Busy road-cars swooshing past. A long row of built-overnight townhouses-each in a different style, connected to each other in a long ridiculous row-what is she doing here? Her book has, in some as yet unnamable way, taken up inside me like a stray cat.

The sound I hear during the course of my knock attempts evolves from subliminal disturbance to distant animal cry (I cock my head) to close-range bark. I seem to have been invited in.

Crossing the threshold and meeting an unidentifiable odor, I scope the room-then see her-anchored in a chair angled oddly before sliding glass doors, sharing a view of her kitchenette with the patio, narrow back yard, and a swampy grove of woods left by the contractors. Just around her head from the edge of the patio fans a spiky trellis with crucified vine. I look around-no photographs, nothing that looks valuable or long-owned-like she could pull up and move at any time and leave only the ninety-nine cent view. She is smoking; the table beside her holds an overflowing ashtray, a fleet of plastic cups, and a precarious tower of magazines and books. Can't make out any titles, but I'd know Pall Malls from twenty feet.

sat there gauging me, a character looking capable-what did I expect?-of thwarting anything I might have expected, jowling like some venerable but still venomous frog

She takes a short hard hit on her smoke, squinting. She doesn't exactly blow out the smoke, but lets it bleed around her head. What's that? she asked Tallulah Bankheadly.

Maybe a four for artistic debris, but definitely a ten for frog. She is appraising the bag in my hand.

Mrs. French said you might like . . .

Spit it out, son.

Show don't tell! I unsack the Usher's Green Stripe. She looks at it then cuts her eyes up to me.

Oh, she did?

JOHN M. WILLIAMS

I was only trying . . .

Just set it down. No, right here. I have an occasional sip. Why don't you go in there and find us some glasses?

I do-the cabinet yields two grimy tumblers which-no soap or dish-cloth-I at least begin to rinse out at the sink.

Oh goddamn, son, she croaks from her chair. What are you afraid of this stuff can't kill?

I finish anyway, then return and open the bottle. Crrrk.

The good stuff, she says.

I glance at her. I'm playing with you, son-it's all good stuff.

Alone I go

(His signature haiku if nothing else)

Sniffing the useable

Tank the bag

By the time I get a chair and position it at the right distance she's drained her appetizer and leans forward to pour some more. She lights a cigarette in a seamless quick motion like a snake tongue and looks at me like *well?*

holding audience, this smoke-cured unnecessary queen

I wanted to talk to you about *The Wonder Jar*.

Where'd you find it?

I did a search. Some bookstore in Detroit. She hacks a laugh. But I haven't been able to find any of the others.

The only one worth bothering with is *The Plastered Parlor*.

I jot it down. Her gaze is dead-level. I take a sip of warm Green Stripe. Some of the language, I say-what are those, dream sequences?

No, the dream is the whole thing. She takes a good swallow, holds it, sucks in her cheeks as it slides down the hatch. On the bottle it's already down to the top of the label. I sip.

You smoke?

Cigarettes? No.

What-you're all dopeheads, aren't you?

No, I didn't mean . . .

What'd you say your name was?

Feurel Ivey.

She turns up a lip at it, then holding her drink-she has yet to set it down-turns to gaze outside, her head rotating within the arc of the trellis. Bird feeders. A cheap plastic patio chair and another ashtray, plastic-cup crowded umbrella-crowned table. The little island of woods.

That big oak tree over there, she says, and I lean around to look-looks like it's just an oak tree, now, but it's full of wisteria, even if it is killing it, but everything beautiful's got to suck off something, and this

time of year, a little earlier, it turns purple. Looks like a big purple tree. Or, what?-violet. But not this year.

I look out, then back at her. Why not?

How the hell do I know? Some kind of curse. Blight. Wasn't any this year. Didn't bloom.

It's a type of vine?

She stares at me. Wisteria.

What was the point of the midget in *The Wonder Jar*?

I needed a midget so I used him.

I mean . . .

I don't know, son. Everything that had anything to do with me in that book was over the minute they got their hands on it. I don't know-I don't remember. It was what? . . .

Tip of my tongue. Thirty-four years ago, I say.

Sometimes you just need a goddamn midget.

I laugh-she doesn't: then forges ahead from sloppy seconds and the bottle is starting to look half-fullish. Occasional sip, no shit. It goes glug glug glug coming out. She leans back and takes a deep drag on a Pall Mall.

another of Ivey's patented raids of literary liposuction, this time the sublimely obscure Babs Kath, author of five novels, if remembered at all remembered for The Wonder Jar (1955) and, possibly, the 1962 collection of poems Lonesome Web; wife of Gordon Kath, magnetic center of the Forgotten School, remembered for his "zebra" poems I Shall Smell You All: Remembering the Forgotten School.

When did you meet your husband?

When I was nineteen.

And you got married . . .

The next year.

And this was . . .

Thirty-nine. My daughter will be fifty in July if that tells you anything.

Where is she?

She's been living in France for twenty-something years.

Does she like it there?

She must.

Do you ever see her?

I close my eyes, I see her all the time.

And your husband-would you say he was a strong influence on you?

Jesus, son. You're nineteen with three notebooks full of poems and you meet a twenty-five year old best looking man you've ever seen in your life and a genius-what do you think?

I mean your work.

JOHN M. WILLIAMS

That's what I'm saying. My work. It's all my work.
The only one of his books I could find was *Adventures of a Bad Rug*.
Even though *Already Dead* is the best.

What was it like with two writers in the house?

There weren't two writers in the house-there were about twenty.

Real writers, some of them.

Some aren't?

Of course not.

What is a real writer?

Somebody who takes the time to do what anybody could do if they could only do it.

I laugh. I remember reading somebody's definition of a poet: one who renders in the sun what is lived in the moon.

Sounds like they rendered that in the moon. Poetry's just how you overcome the fact that there's no single word for a porch with a mop hanging from it in the late afternoon sun that reminds you of your mother.

You were in San Francisco?

She slowly nods.

When?

Her features make a shrug. Early fifties.

Is that when you started writing?

No, that's when somebody started reading it.

Did you like San Francisco?

Yep.

Why did you leave?

It was time to go.

This was before Miami.

Oh, yeah.

What about your husband during this time?

What about him?

Was he writing?

He was a writer, what do you think he was doing?-except for his spare time which he was better at than me too, but I tried.

Do you still write?

Not with my hands-they hurt too much.

Pickled Pearl: Re-Wondering The Wonder Jar

What do you read today?

Same thing I read yesterday and the day before that.

Which is . . .

Things I like to.

Contemporary fiction?

Good God, no.

Why not?
It's not any good.
Maybe you should write a novel yourself.
About what?
About this. Now. Your world.
My *world*? A broom closet in the backside of nowhere? Do I look like a goddamn English teacher to you? Why would I write a book about nothing?
I don't know. And no.
No what?
You don't look like an English teacher. *Rabbit*.
Boredom begat art, she says-and now art's returning the favor. But it's not like they have a choice-and I'll tell you something-it's like pouring dirt into water-once they take over-
English teachers?
English teachers couldn't take over my butt. Do the math-you won't even know this place. It'll look like Bumfuck, Egypt. They'll have football and baseball and all that but the boundaries won't really count every time. And the art-good God.
What?
What do you think? About 1930-that was the end of European art. About a century ahead of Europeans.
Do you ever read criticism?
Not since I realized it was really about them. Glug glug glug. Drink up, son. I take a sip. How old are you? she asks.
Thirty.
Good God. What's your-what do they call it-your rank?
Assistant Professor?
I'm asking you, son.
Okay. Yes.
Do you write?
I write. Yes.
I mean anything any good.
I've been working on a novel.
Are you crazy?
To be working on a novel?
No-mad.
Angry?
Either one.
I have my psychotic episodes.
Oh, phttpt. She takes a drink and a drag on her cigarette-turns her frowning features once more to the back yard. Then she says, it's amazing how every time I'd think this is it and start trying to figure out

JOHN M. WILLIAMS

what the hell I was going to do-after one of those times I'd come after him with a knife or something-and for that tenth of a second really want to kill him-not that he ever really wanted to kill me, he never loved me that much-then the next day it'd just be gone, and we'd settle back to our separate ends of the house, typewriters whacking away-spider web blooming on the TV screen with the cracked bottle of gin still smelling on the floor below it-then out of the blue one day he just decided to die.

When did he die?

So long ago it's like he was in *The Iliad*.

Do you read his books?

Hell, I typed every one of them-I don't have to.

Did he read yours?

Of course.

Did he like them?

Everything but the parts about him.

How much was that?

Most of it. But I learned to disguise him by describing him exactly the way he was.

He's Rayfield in *The Wonder Jar*?

She half laughs, half coughs. Oh, Jesus, son. Hell no.

Then who?

He's the house, and Julius, and the boy on the bicycle, whatever his name was.

Buchanan.

Yes, he's all of those. Rayfield-that's different.

Did you have affairs like Lucinda?

I told you when I could-but Kendrick stood out.

Who?

Rayfield.

You said Kendrick.

It was.

Can I ask what you believe?

Sure, go ahead.

What do you believe?

Nothing till somebody asks.

Okay, I'm asking.

Hell, that's why I made up all those people-to do the believing so I wouldn't have to.

You can't be more specific?

She reflects. I practice being dead by looking at pictures I'm not in.

No Goddamn English Teacher Daddy-O: Babs Kath and the Practice of Death

All this shit, she asks-is it that we make whatever means anything in our heads, there is no objective anything and everything comes from that and it's all just words or whatever the soup is that words come from, but they're really nothing but panes of glass we put up along the way and believe that since there's a word there must be a thing-but there really isn't such a thing as a forest or a book or a you or a me?

Something like that.

Then what?

Then what? I don't know. Nothing, I guess. That's the point.

She hacks a bronchial laugh. So that's it, she says-three thousand years and it ends up with a little group of people in berets saying it's nothing.

Well-yeah-

Hell, they've got to make a living too. Ask me something else.

Well-tell me about the Miami years.

Careful-you're asking the only one left alive.

I'll take my chances. Did you know Delmore Plover?

Know him? I couldn't get away from him. I even sucked the little son of a bitch off.

What was he like?

You sucked one, you sucked them all.

No, I mean . . .

He was smart-everybody was smart-about three-fourths full of shit-but like every poet made his living off it.

I hear objections.

Everybody objects when you tell the truth about them. But who cares? Can you knock the expression off somebody's face with words-that's what counts and it's all that counts. And make them laugh. I mean really laugh.

With words.

You-the person.

Why?

So they'll know you're there. Or slap the shit out of them. Either way. She takes a drink, looks outside. You ever done anything?

Done anything? Yeah, I've done things.

Like what?

Well, twelve years of school I still wonder how I survived.

No, I mean done anything-not proved you're trainable.

Yes, I've done things.

I can't see any of them. You're not drinking.

Yes I am.

Well, you'd better hurry. Glug glug glug.

How long were you in Miami?

JOHN M. WILLIAMS

Oh, she thinks-seven years. Eight. All that missile stuff scared us away. But we'd started dying off anyway.

Who were we?

Well, most were just sawdust people-but some, if you took a swing at them with a machete, you hit metal.

Who do you know like that today?

There's nobody to know anymore, son.

How'd they die?

Mediocrity, most of them.

I never thought of it as being lethal.

Well, it can be.

Like boredom?

No, boredom's different. It can bloom.

And the others?

What does it matter? They died.

Do you miss them?

She shrugged. The only difference is I don't have to personally deal with them. The part of life where you're doing the breathing is the smallest part.

I wanted to talk some more about your book.

Go ahead.

I mean ask about it.

There's nothing to say. My head split open and that's what came out. I can't say it was worth it-but it's the only way to get anything any good. A-what'd you call it?-psychotic episode.

Babs Kath's Prose Piñata: Cracking The Wonder Jar

Anyway, I'd need about three days to sit here to think all that shit up again-and I'm not going to do it. Why are you squirming? Do you need to go pee-pee?

Lonesome Web or Black Hole?: Stop it Babs, You're Killing Me

Then go, I said. Sitting here having a drink of boy. Remembering.

Nothing left but those Friday afternoons-all that should be left-our natural ritual in that hallucinated place-never knew who would come by-martinis beginning at three, or two-or who knew who began what when?-didn't matter, people everywhere-God, the people-those days you never dreamed they'd run out-in every room, on the porch, outside, in the hall, in the bathroom, sitting around the kitchen, and you could see out the window through the oleanders people coming up the drive, usually wondering who they were-that house full of books and art and music and the people that made it-Chad Grantham making his little balance creations on the kitchen table-salt shaker, lemon, coffee cup, knife across it with a grape on each end-remember the first time I saw Kendrick-one of those things where you didn't see him come he was

just there and even when you saw him it was only like something finally coming into focus that was already there-never knew who brought him, if anybody-I'd forget for a while, then see him again-finally caught his eye-then I went over-standing there with a glass of wine talking to Helen Bain-she said writing is an exhausted art, and he said he doubted it was the writing-and I laughed-and she asked him what he thought about so and so and he said his mastery of the already-perfected shines in every line-and I laughed again-that got rid of her-goddamn good-looking boy he was-I call him a boy-he still had some boy-something lingering about him-made it through his whole life mainly on that-so I'd come and go, always drift back to him-and Gordon: I'm telling you, he was just one inch away from coming up to women and hunching on their leg-he was the *horniest* man-he was after this long-legged black-haired claimed she was a painter-hell, I didn't care-then I was back to my boy and somebody was talking about God, and he said, look Him right in the eye and still not know who is whose character-

Who?

God.

No-who said?

Rayfield.

I thought you said Kendrick.

I did. But if we're getting rid of religion, he said-let's get rid of it-don't dump it on art-art has better things to do. And I started asking around and finally somebody showed me something he'd written-a review-

in the craft of wordplay he has, like millions, some facility; of the art of writing he is perfectly innocent

And it was that, but more wanting to run my hands up those long smooth arms-he was smooth, not hairy-and that whatever he had that was just about to laugh-how many women have killed themselves trying to have just that?-and by the time it started getting late I'd gotten past the arms and just wanted his clothes off and his body all around me.

He still didn't know I was married to Gordon-and God knows I wasn't about to tell him-and then for a while I thought he had left and I remember how goddam mad I was-and then the painter or whatever she was slinked out-and Gordon got good ol' David to go through their routine-I don't know why he bothered-going over to David's house for a nightcap, probably be too drunk to come home, just spend the night there-and I was about to pick up something and start swinging-until I saw him: lurking in the shadows down at the end of the hall where it turned into the bathroom-all Gwendolyn's paintings hanging there and stacked against the wall-looking-and then I thought, watch Gordon not

JOHN M. WILLIAMS

leave now-but he did-so the painter got the drunk half of him-well, more like three-fourths-still some people talking about Existence in the front room but they were on their own and I caught his eye. Him standing there at the end of the hall looking at me: that's what I remember. More than the year-off and on-and you saw he couldn't help but work his way through the women, one by one.

In the book you were on a boat, says the boy.

I look over at him surprised because I had forgotten he was there. He re-forms in his chair in the shadows.

Yes, it was on a boat, I say.

That sounds like at your house.

It was. Drink up, son.

I think I've had enough.

Oh come on-get to the bottom of it.

Dusk falling outside-frogs commence in the accidental marsh-and suddenly a brand-new deep-throated thing throbs in like the year hitting adolescence. The first whippoorwill, a train somewhere.

Which one was real? he asks.

Hell, son, I don't know. What difference does it make? Something was real somewhere, I know that. And there aren't many things I'd live my life over to have again, but him closing that door would be one.

He's dead, isn't he?

Yes.

What did he die of?

Same thing we all die of: disappointment. It's not thinking something up-the trick is believing it.

Baptists do that.

No, they don't think anything up.

Well, snake handlers.

Okay, they're geniuses. But you can't have both.

Both what?

Both of whatever it is.

This beyond life-but it was all beyond life-I look at him again: Buster Brown pinned against the wall. Time to let him go.

Outside, the scented night-jasmine, clover, no wisteria-waits.

I can't drink like I used to.

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