

PICASSO'S CLOWN

Bess Landry savored the half-rhymed verses she was cobbling together but worried whether they truly fit. This was her writing style that had served her well in her first and only poetry collection. Bess was happily married to a wonderful man and had a lovely daughter named Cassie, who was even now nearby, seated cross legged on an oval scatter rug reading one of her illustrated children's books. Cassie would take frequent breaks from her picture book to color in the hair and clothes of a prince and princess that appeared in her handy Disney coloring book.

Due to its glass-half-empty tone, some compared Bess's poetry to that of Emily Dickinson. So far she'd written five lines:

*Some spoke fondly of that foolish wretch
who scudded up the doomsday step
sharpened blades showed him the way,
a Guard so kind he let him stoop
to fetch a lucky pence that day.*

Bess favored poems with ironic twists. Her husband Lanni was an associate professor of history, while Bess stayed at home and wrote evocative poetry, occasionally entering poetry slams. She would bring Cassie along who'd sit in the security of her lap, pressed against her chest, quietly marveling at the crowd's respectful silence as animated poets delivered conceits of sensitivity, elegance and fierce irreverence. Poets would clutch then choke the pole mic nearly to death, their emotions not checked at the door. Elongated vowels, limber body language and drama-queen outbursts were frequent, and Bess was confident of Cassie's future climb from a see-Dick-Jane-Sally child's play, to a girl of letters destined for finer arts. Their tethered hearts,

one adult one child, would beat in unison as they watched and listened to the rhymers up on the bleak stage.

Bess had wanted to name their daughter Cassiopeia, after the scheming mythical Greek queen who was banished to a lesser constellation that was in no one's starry gaze. But Lanni had stumbled upon "Cassie," which Bess initially rejected out of hand but later considered "just right," like the ultimate choice of mush by Goldilocks.

Bess's second poem was still in the development stage. It had come to her during a family trip to Yellowstone when they'd watched buffaloes snorting out their own eulogies. She'd named it *Make a Reservation*, and had sobbed immediately after conceiving it—

*They'd played cowboys and Indians till they ran out of arrows
then sat by the ashes of an ancient fire planning their next wargame.
A man red as wood lit a cheroot, then walked to the place
where the village once stood and they'd screeched like owls,
where knives had cut teepees, like scissors cut paper and bullets cut arrows,
where nothing was left but to beg steal or borrow, and live with the sorrow,
that buffalo never were here.*

Cassie began to hum as she read her book, speaking to its characters, ordering them around. Bess continued with her poetry, written by hand, a slow hand in a modern world of computerized refrains, with one eye toward the sky and one ear on the tracks, in case of a train. Cassie suddenly broke her concentration.

"Mommy, do elefins bite?"

Bess looked down at her beloved child whose verbalized thoughts never ceased to amaze her. “I dunno Cassie, do they?” She knew she’d taken the bait, like answering a stupid knock-knock joke.

“Some do some don’t. Do dogs bite?”

“Hopefully not.”

“Some do some don’t. Do lions bite?”

“Well, I think that—”

“Some do some don’t,” answered Cassie with increased confidence as though she were imparting concepts never before imagined. Bess hoped that Cassie would tire before she emptied the entire cargo hold of Noah’s Ark. But Cassie suddenly became silent.

Bess faded back into her own reverie from which she mined her poetry. When she composed, she used index card-size notebooks, each holding 50 sheets of ruled white paper. She wrote with a large Italian fountain pen that had a sharp golden nib—a graduation gift from her papa. The sensation of writing with that pen was not unlike the twang of a tuning fork vibrating against the bones in her forearm.

Writing was itself a seductive shotgun wedding between pen and paper, like a harmonica that hummed a blue discourse of awakening on a frequency heard only by artists who had harnessed the sun for but a nanosecond.

Cassie again broke Bess’s trance when she began singing the first stanza of Hank Williams’ great send-up to a man’s desperate attempts at courtin’ a gal in *Hey Good Lookin’*. Cassie sang the first stanza twice in her child’s soprano, exaggerating the word “whatcha.” She could not possibly know its meaning.

Bess stopped writing because her small innocent daughter, whom she loved more than any being on earth, was herself really cookin'. For an elegant moment, Bess envisioned her Cassie as a sightless cherub with tiny gossamer wings hovering over a lush greengrocer's meadow, grinning as hummingbirds far below coaxed nectar from flowers that blushed under a summer breeze. And in that moment, nothing else mattered.

For 10 minutes Bess's fountain pen scraped modest epiphanies across the alabaster paper. Then Cassie let out a protracted series of chuckles and wriggled her way upright, a dark violet crayon clutched tight in a guiltless hand. She parked herself directly before Bess, smiling uncontrollably.

"What's so funny Punkin?" asked Bess.

"I smell berries on my fingers, mommy." She held out her hands for her mother's examination, letting the purple crayon fall to the floor. Both laughed at their inside joke. Earlier, Bess had made them a bountiful snack of raspberries, blackberries and blueberries topped with a dollop of whipped cream. Cassie had eaten her bowlful mostly with her hand, her excited face smeared purple as though a clown's mask had been painted there by a cataract-driven Picasso. Cassie had run her tongue back and forth across her upper lip like an overweight tabby closing a deal in the presence of nervous mice. Then she'd giggled.