

J. D. McCLATCHY

Sorrow in 1944

1

The name in the register was *Pinkerton, Frank*,
The plate on his Ford parked next to Cabin Eight
The dented oil-and-orange of the Golden State.
The Pinewoods Motor Court, on the riverbank
A mile south of the Heart Mountain camp,
Seemed cozier with each visit—not a home
But a familiar port of call where, cold and alone,
He can walk the wards of desire with a signal lamp.

His father's Navy ties had kept him free—
No bedding, kettle and hot plate on E-Day.
Milton Eisenhower's signature
Was clearance enough, but only for him, not her.
The years in Wyoming, she said, have been "okay."
He stared at her mittens, love's own internee.

2

They'd met at a blood drive, winter of '42,
Her father a clerk, her mother a picture bride.
Pearl Harbor meant they were on the same side.
His father was dead, his mother said she knew
"About the things my husband had done abroad,
About the suicide . . . mistakes of the past . . .
A love that made no sense and could not last.
Under his uniform, what man isn't flawed?"

He filled out a form. She glanced at it and then
Looked up. She saw a future, he the face
Among the fallen blossoms. They agreed to meet.
It was already hard to cross a street
Without an angry stare, or find a place
To share a pot of tea, again and again.

3

Her name is Tanabata, after the queen
Who wove the Milky Way's gauzy grisaille,
Her loom but three weak stars in the eastern sky.
Her herdsman-lover can cross the Celestial Stream
On the seventh day of the seventh month, a span
Of birds his passageway, and, as he nears,
The sallow river-mist begins to clear,
The floodtide loses ground where once it ran.

She has waited there for him on the other shore,
A year at a time. She has waited through her tears,
Through all the promises made and broken before.
But there he is! The familiar shape appears.

At the water's edge,
Her robe of rushes and cranes
Slowly getting wet,

She can hardly remember
In which lifetime they had met.

4

The weeks in the assembly center's horse stalls—
The stench, the straw, the lack of privacy—
Had made the boxcar and the barracks seem
A privilege. Actual beds and tarpaper walls,
Canned Vienna sausage and apricots,
The Rockies beyond a barbed wire fence.
The guards were tight-lipped and indifferent,
Like their old neighbors, who waved and forgot.

The world beyond the camp was a weekly newsreel.
She pretended not to mind the soot and the noise,
Or notice the boys who sat near her at meals—
Those swoony, moon-bit pepper-shaker boys.
She sewed, and gave a day at the clothing bank,
Chewed her pencil, and sometimes wrote to Frank.

5

Only once had he ever heard her name.
 Sitting in the chair of his hospital room
 Towards the end, his father suddenly assumed
 He knew the story but never whom to blame.
 “So long ago. . . . What was I thinking of?
 They said she called you Sorrow. I don’t know why.
 We give the silliest names to the things we love.
 I killed her, I guess. I called her Butterfly.”

After the funeral, his mother told him more.
 She hated what she couldn’t understand.
 He watched her twist her handkerchief and cry.
 She told him of the blindfold, the knife on the floor . . .
 Already items in memory’s contraband.
 The sun sank quickly. *He called her Butterfly.*

6

He has driven twice a month, for two years now,
 Through endless miles of broccoli and sugar beets,
 Then east across the mountains to a road that meets
 Another, despite the map, and leads somehow
 To the Pinewoods’ nondescript, unfastened door.
 Only the slant-eyes down the way have a past.
 A “salesman” is what he’s called himself if asked,
 But no one seems to care much anymore.

Each night at nine he’s at the prison gate.
 A pack of Chesterfields, and a familiar face
 Is furtively waved in. He’s allowed an hour.
 He and Tanny sit and complicate
 Their lives, while rival gangs of schoolboys chase
 A barking mongrel towards the security tower.

7

Just sitting there, at the table for BLOOD TYPE B,
She seemed to Frank at first too young, all wrong,
The sweater and saddle shoes, the hair too long.
But the longer he spoke to her, the more he could see
That time and chance had converged on this one girl.
His duty now was clear. What might it mean—
All the years between them merely a screen
He could slide to reveal the cherry trees aswirl—

To love her who long ago had this same face?
He waited until he was sure she'd seen through
His social calls more than she'd admit.
He hesitated, then in an awkward embrace
Vowed to be constant and compassionate.
(Oh, how not tell the truth and still be true?)

8

She and her parents sent away for good . . .
The world at war . . . the papers filled with hate . . .
She was twenty, he was forty-eight . . .
Everything conspired as it could
To keep them apart. Even the words they spoke
Fell short of what they felt. Sometimes silence
Seemed more to them than merely convenience.
Tanny would fidget or hum. Frank would smoke.

Her father asked him to smuggle letters or take
A message to the general, but he refused,
Not from fear but apathy, or heartbreak.
He wanted only what she might suddenly choose,
Though for herself she asked nothing, like love
Or like stars, those wounds in the tender flesh above.

9

Each night—on those nights he visited the camp—
 He'd turn the corner by Block Thirteen and stop,
 Expecting to find a badly painted backdrop,
 A pale body on a bloodsoaked, floodlit ramp,
 And the tearful applause that echoed in his dreams.
 Instead, she was sitting there on the mess hall steps
 And shyly smiled. Again, his promise was kept.
 Again, she helped him past the years between.

She let him hold her hand while she described
 A basketball game. He looked down at the ground
 And smiled to hear just how the girls would shriek,
 How they ran across the muddy court and found
 An opening in the air. She'd nearly died!
 By then he wasn't listening, but he let her speak.

10

When all the wells in the holy city had failed
 And only Matsumura's, as if fed by a spring,
 Remained, he allowed the afflicted people to bring
 Their buckets, until one day—or so the tale
 Unfolds—a servant drowned and the old priest
 Went to the well where he saw in the water there
 The image of a woman combing her hair,
 A ghost from his past or a spirit unreleased.

A week later, during a violent storm,
 The woman visited his room and revealed
 She was a dragon's mirror in a woman's form.
 No harm would come so long as he kept her concealed.

The well, drained and raked,
 Yielded a blazoned hairpin
 And a mirror rim.

When he searched its emptiness
 He saw what had haunted him.