

# Kneecapping the Muse

by Bill Yarrow

In 1997, I was exploring a used bookstore in Camden, New Jersey, when I stumbled across a two-volume hardback copy of *The Dictionary of the Khazars* by Milorad Pavić, a book I had been meaning to read since it came out in 1984. At \$10.00 for the set, I couldn't pass up the bargain, so I bought the books and rushed home with them. The volumes were quite handsome, orange dustjackets with bold red lettering, and quite pleasant to hold. I sat down in the wing chair in my bookroom and started to flip through them. Tucked midway in the second volume was one sheet of very thin paper covered, from top to bottom, from edge to edge, on both sides, with tiny, crimped handwriting. My curiosity was aroused. I tried to read what was written on the paper, but the writing was impossibly small. I couldn't decipher it with my naked eye. I got out a magnifying glass I had lying around but that didn't work, so I put the paper back in the volume and gave up.

Years later, I bought a printer that had a magnification function. I remembered the piece of paper in the book and played around with magnifying and printing as much of the paper as I could. After much experimentation and frustration, I was able to generate a fair amount of readable text but only from one side of the paper. The writing on the obverse side had deteriorated and could not be deciphered. I was, however, able to piece together those sections of text that, when magnified, often multiple times, were legible, so a portion of the document became clear. On the paper I discovered a narrative in labeled sections consisting of a "poem" of a mental patient followed by analyses of it by a doctor, a literary critic, and someone who claimed to be the patient's wife. The narrative ended, unfortunately, *in media res*. What follows is my best recreation of the substantial, but incomplete, part I was able, through much tedious effort, to recover.

I.

## Poem of Patient A: "The Glittering"

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*Look, I couldn't help it. I took her. I took her dancing. In Strawberry Mansion. And the night expanded. And she was pressed up tight against me. And the music, though I was allergic, was magnetic. And I could feel her breasts all tense through her dress. But it was not like I was ever going to marry her, carry her across the merry threshold. She was not like the others, those archetypes, those mother types who had smothered me with their tender needs, their needy tenderness. Oh no. Oh no no no. That tactic did not attract me. That resourcefulness did not ensorcell me. They were not even appositely attractive. Just the opposite. I was repelled. Impelled away. I rebelled. What did I wish for when I was twenty two? Not just a woman. A woman I could hold. Who would not hold me back.*

*I can still taste her perfume on my lips.*

II.

The Doctor Will See You Now

An interesting case. Let's analyze the poem he wrote. Seems to me a poem about a man afraid to state the case. He can't admit his desire, the urge to "take" this woman, the free spirit, the anti-mother who doesn't want to get married as all the "others" do. He wants an unconventional girl—he's a rebel! Says "he took her" but only "took her dancing"! Then says the night "expanded." Interesting verb. But it wasn't the night that expanded; it was his pants, his penis, which she felt as "she was pressed up tight [*nota bene*] against" him. He wants to feel her breasts but he can write only that he could "feel" her breasts "all tense" and only "through her dress." Then there is the obsessive, almost pathological, triple wordplay—breasts-tense-dress, dancing-mansion-expan[sion], music-allergic-magnetic, marry-carry-merry, other-mother-smothered, tactic-attract-attractive, repelled-impelled-rebelled. One notices also the double wordplay (was he *incapable* of more triplets?):

archetypes-mother-types, tender needs -needy tenderness, resourcefulness-ensorcell, appositely-opposite. Then unexpected alliteration kicks in in the last line—what-wish-when-was-woman—but one could argue it is echoed (or forecast) in the consonance of "K" sounds in line one. Finally, a concluding pun (holding the final ambiguity): "hold" vs. "not hold me back"—i.e. not return my embrace and not prevent me from fulfilling my desire. But the last line (separated) has none of the verbal yoga, none of the sonic contortions of the rest of the poem. A simple line. Iambic pentameter even. Well, pentameter but perhaps not iambic. The accents fall on "still," first syllable of "perfume," and on "lips." The return of the triple. Here three accents in a pentameter line. Lots of playing with threes and twos in the poem. Also a poem of seventeen lines, a prime number. His experience, he believes, is unique, indivisible. He craves the wildness of three but is reduced to the commonness of two. In the end, ordinary alliteration, dissolving into a paradox—something not to be resolved. Except by memory—something on his lips, but a scent not a kiss. A confusion of the senses. A confusion of intention. The poem of a man who thinks he knows exactly what he wants but who doesn't have a clue.

III.

#### The Literary Critic

I find the doctor's analysis interesting but wrong. His reading does not take into account the poem's title. Why is it called "The Glittering"? Doesn't the doctor find the title odd? There is, after all, no literal glittering in the poem itself. The title, clearly, is an allusion. We find the word in the following works:

1. Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part One:  
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
2. Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes":

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see  
That brave vibration each way free,  
O how that glittering taketh me!

3. Boswell's Life of Johnson:

He observed, that the established clergy in general did not preach plain enough; and that polished periods and glittering sentences flew over the heads of the common people, without any impression upon their hearts.

4. Dickinson 479:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades—  
How glittering they shone—  
And every One unbared a Nerve  
Or wantoned with a Bone—

5. Whitman's "City of Ships"

CITY of ships!  
(O the black ships! O the fierce ships!  
O the beautiful, sharp bow'd steam-ships and sail-ships!)  
City of the world! (for all races are here;  
All the lands of the earth make contributions here;)  
City of the sea! city of hurried and glittering tides!

6. Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli":

Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

7. Auden's "Deftly, Admiral, Cast Your Fly":

Salt are the deeps that cover  
The glittering fleets you led

Taken all together, the use of the word "glittering" suggests personal failure, sexual arousal, elaborate oratory, treacherous diction, animate Nature, wisdom, and warfare—all of which I find in the patient's poem. The author's personal failure is his sexual arousal (he "couldn't help it") expressed in euphuistic (i.e. over-elaborate or I might even say "treacherous") diction in which Woman's animate (smothering) nature mingles wily warfare ("tactic") and sweet wisdom ("perfume"). But what of "*Strawberry*

Mansion"? "Dancing" and "mansion" are half rhymes but why "strawberry"? What does a strawberry have to do with a mansion? Why is that particular fruit mentioned in the poem? Well, strawberry is, the doctor will surely attest to this, sexual slang and artists' icon for a woman's genitals. "Mansion" likewise, as in Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop": "But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement." *Quod est demonstratum*.

IV.

#### The Wife Has Her Say

Strawberry Mansion. That's what intrigued me too. I wondered why it was capitalized so I looked it up on Google. It's a section of Philadelphia where my husband's father was born. This leads me to wonder whether this poem is even about my husband. You both assume it is, but could it not also be about my father-in-law? None (or nearly none) of my husband's poems are about himself, even when he uses the "I." They are all persona (that's the right term, right?) poems, they all intuit (that's the verb my husband uses) a speaker, a speaker of some kind. I don't recognize my husband in the speaker in this poem. My husband is faithful. He's loving, he's kind. I married a veritable saint.

V.

#### The Doctor Has a Question

Why do you keep saying "my husband, my husband"? Why don't you refer to your husband by his name?

VI.

#### The Literary Critic Thinks He Knows

Why doesn't she call him by his name? Don't you see? She thinks her husband "saintly, faithful, loving, kind." There's no such husband! Never been such a husband! Who thinks like that? No one. A fictional character! I suspect this wife is pretend, a hired actress perhaps. I'm not even sure the patient is married. This may be just an act. I think he wrote those lines for her say.

There's a long respected tradition in literature for that kind of thing.

VII.

The Doctor Turns Suspicious

So you don't think a husband can be saintly, eh? That's interesting. What makes you say that? Why do you see that as an impossibility? What makes you so certain? Tell me about your own father. What was he like? How did he behave toward your mother? Was she

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Here the manuscript breaks off.

