

Two More for Akutagawa

by strannikov

The True Shape of Flames

Heading for the fields one morning to paint haystacks, Vincent noticed his neighbor's house ablaze. The wind was picking up as the sky lightened, so Vincent crossed the street to be clear of the blaze, eyeing the flames closely over one shoulder. Inside his house he'd left a painting he'd been working on for over a week, Christ visiting the infernal region for the Harrowing of Hell. He'd also left his wife and children inside, who at that hour were not even up and about. He forgot about all of them as he watched the growing conflagration, happy to've stepped outside when he did.

Soon enough, Vincent's own shabby house was aflame and billowing smoke from under the roof, but Vincent kept watching with interest from across the street, setting his things down with the presence of mind to load and light his pipe, never taking his eyes off the fire.

Neighbors rushed up in horror and began sputtering about forming a bucket brigade, but Vincent ignored them. As he watched his house go up in hot flames, he nodded as he puffed on his pipe, the corners of his mouth lifting a little. "How about that!" he finally spoke to himself. "All these years and I never got it right!" Gripping the bowl tight, he traced the air with the pipe stem.

A neighbor frantic with horror stared at him, then shouted out that he was crazy. "Too much absinthe for you!" the neighbor stammered. "Or has the Evil One possessed you himself?"

"The Devil?" Vincent finally answered, as the roof caved in on the crackling flames. "No, no, it's the fire. I've been painting flames all wrong all these years! The youths in the fiery furnace, the Last Judgment, the Harrowing of Hell. No wonder I couldn't sell anything! Now I can see what real flames look like. It's really something! You wouldn't understand, you're not a painter." He

laughed his neighbor to scorn, the neighbor stood transfixed, aghast.

The next "Harrowing of Hell" Vincent painted caught the archbishop's attention and hangs to this day in the city's cathedral.

Casanova's Hungry Barn

Casanova earned his fame as a ladies' man mainly because he made sure to ask about the local beauties, in every town and village he passed through (he never needed to ask in the cities, since in their abundance he could see for himself without asking). No matter her status, noble or peasant, he was sure to find her and ply his charm before moving on.

Sometime after his escape from Venice, going around Bologna on his way to Pisa, he found a girl who enchanted him, even though she was not a perfect beauty. She had, in effect, but one eyebrow, black and bristly, a nose not utterly straight, and a set of teeth that looked as if each one had been borrowed from a different mouth. But the rest of her! Beautiful hands at the ends of long slender arms, two full quivering breasts, a nicely tapered waist, appealing hips and firm buttocks atop solid thighs and well-sculpted legs. True, her feet were a little large, but—he made his decision in less than three moments.

Her father was the village ostler. He kept her close by for odd jobs and to run errands. Casanova parked himself close by, too, and as she passed him on some errand, he caught a fresh whiff of juniper that only widened his eyes with even more desire. As she was returning from her errand, he intercepted her, and so in late afternoon they were on his horse galloping further into the hills.

Casanova had no idea where he was taking her, though. Just before the dark set in, he spied an isolate barn not far off. Upon approach, yes, it looked to be abandoned. The doors had both fallen off and lay splintered in the tall grass. Since the floor inside was plenty dusty, he spread out a blanket so that they could get

comfortable. The pair had just gotten relaxed on the floor of the barn when a sudden storm came up and a tremendous boom of thunder crashed overhead, just as a huge fork of lightning seemed about to crack the sky apart.

Casanova leapt to his feet with the gallantry he was also already known for, drew his sword, and kept the girl behind him while the storm raged. The wind screamed and howled terribly, the horse broke loose and disappeared as sheets of rain lashed wildly, rivulets filled and ran by all around, but Casanova kept watch all during the storm until, just before dawn, it finally passed.

He'd been so impressed with the violence of the storm he'd forgotten all about the girl. When he finally turned around, he leapt backwards in horror: there on the blanket was the girl's head, her hair all askew, her brow furrowed over that single bristly black eyebrow, and on both sides of her head were her feet, still clad in her shoes. All the rest of her was gone, except for the puddles of blood.

Late that day, a frenzied Casanova limped into a village at the bottom of the other side of the hill. He found the lone tavern and asked discreetly about the isolate, abandoned barn he had passed.

"That's 'the Hungry Barn'," the one-eyed publican informed him. "It's been haunted for years. God only knows how many people it's eaten. Nobody from around here goes near it. Good thing for you you didn't stop there!"

Casanova realized instantly that the powerful storm had been no storm at all but the barn's angry ghost or evil demon on the prowl. Later that evening, he won another horse in a game of faro, and the next morning he continued on his way to Pisa.

As the hills receded behind him, he turned once to look up at the hill he'd ascended and descended, vowing that if he lived long enough ever to write his memoirs, he'd be certain never to include this episode.

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