

Four: Of Moths, Poets, and Streambanks

by W.F. Lantry

“Oh, James, you read too much!” she said, surveying row after row of books. Her light fingers brushed along the spines of a shelf, raising a small cloud of dust and moths, and leaving a double track any eye could follow.

“I only read on cloudy days. Or when the wind overcomes me. Or when it's too hot to be out in the garden. Or when it snows. Or at night, when small beasts skitter about among the herbs. Am I supposed to set out floodlights? It would confuse the poinsettias. They might start blooming in May!”

“What's wrong with that?” she said. “A sudden rush of color out of season never hurt anyone. Most people wouldn't even know. They just want to look out on the garden and see something vibrant. Something that would look good woven into a woman's hair. Or maybe a quick bite to eat. A nice red sensuous tomato. I could bite into it, and get juice all over my dress! What do you read, anyway?”

“Garden books. Histories. Mystically luminescent texts. Volumes of poetry.”

“Poetry? What a waste. Every poet thinks he's the best who ever picked up a pen! I've seen men in bars, weighed down by gold chains and chest hair, who had less self love than poets!”

“Is there no virtue, then, in vanity? That beautiful blond hair of yours- have you never squeezed lemon juice into it, and stood in the sun?”

“Yes, I have. And men crave the result, even if it's artificial. I've also bought a brand new pair of jeans, drawn a wickedly hot bath, put on the jeans, immersed myself in the feverish water, and then walked around until the jeans dried, just so they'd cling to every curve of my form. Look at me! I am my own work of art! Am I not the beauty every poet desires?”

“Alas, there is no dispute. One may as well deny Aphrodite her doves.”

“And what kind of man would prefer all these dusty old books to my physical form? Who would memorize archaic incantations, when he could be whispering in my ear? Why search for the ancient splendors of metaphor, when one could be searching for the splendors barely hidden beneath this dress! Why, I once knew a man from Taconic, who told me a story about this very thing!”

“And now you're going to tell it to me, in this dusty library, while only giving me hints about your dress?”

“Yes,” she said, brushing away a pair of moths hovering about her. “And it seems he heard the story from someone else, so I have no idea whether or not it's true. Anyway, there was a pretty young woman, who lived alone in a cottage, placed serenely in a forest clearing. There was no-one else for miles around. And all day, she did nothing but grow her herbs, and prepare them for sale in the market once every two weeks. Most of the people who lived around there thought she was some kind of witch, but she kept to herself, and never hurt anyone, so they pretty much left her alone.

“When she was done with her herb work for the day, she'd take a basket and go down to the stream. There was a nice grassy bank to sit down on, and she'd spread out her bread and cheese and maybe a little wine, depending on how she felt. On this particular day, she'd had a glass or two, and she fell asleep in the sun.

“After a little while, she woke up, still a little drowsy, and she had the distinct sense someone was watching her. She looked around at the trees along the forest's edge, but she didn't see anything. She told herself she must still be dreaming, but when she put her head back down, she couldn't fall to sleep again.

“So she just lay there a little while, with her eyes open. That's when she saw some hesitant movement along the treeline. She wasn't afraid, more curious really. So she just lay still, waiting to see what would happen.

“After a while, there was more movement. Then she saw his form. He was a big man, more than a bit scruffy, like a traveler who'd been

wandering around in the forest for a while. She thought it odd that he moved so lightly among the tree trunks, flitting back and forth from one to the other, more like a bird than a man. As if he wanted to come over to her, but didn't want to frighten her. She finally sat up, and waved to him.

"He had to cross the stream to get to where she was, and he walked slowly through the thigh deep water, being careful of his footing. He looked like someone who'd fallen into more than one stream. And sure enough, two thirds of the way across, his foot slipped on a wet rock, and down he went, waving and blubbing. He had trouble getting up. She had to splash into the stream to help him out.

"She got him up to the bank, and offered him some wine. He seemed flustered, and a little tongue-tied. You know how men get! So she started asking him questions, just to keep the conversation going. Easy ones, like 'where do you come from,' and 'why are you wandering around in the forest,' and 'do you fall into every stream?'

"He said he'd been wandering around, looking for answers. 'And you thought you'd find them in the forest?' she asked. 'Well, I wasn't finding them in town.' 'OK,' she said, 'What's the question?' 'What is love, and how do I find it?'

"Men are always like that. You'd think they'd figure things out. 'There's an energy,' she said, 'all around you. Some places more than others. That's why I built this cottage here. You can feel it, if you just open yourself. Let me be your channel, and I'll let you feel what I feel.'"

"And did he?" I said.

"I have no idea. I wasn't there. And the guy who told me the story didn't know either. Maybe he was just trying to intrigue me. I've never been to Taconic."

"So was there a point to all this?" I said.

"No." she said. "But it's better than these dusty old books." She clapped her hands together, and there was one less moth flying around her head.

