

Word Made Flesh

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LONDON TO EDINBURGH

I am not long in this country ... I loop the phrase around in my mind again and again, stretching it like a rubber band between two fingers ... it's his opening line ... mine, too, but I wouldn't say it that way. The echo of it makes me smile, and he is encouraged ... I can see by the way he shifts in his seat so he can lean ever so slightly toward me, his left shoulder and arm screening out the passenger sitting beside him. Yes, I've noticed the wide shoulders and full biceps under the casual shirt ... actually, I noticed the shirt first, because it is lightweight cotton, and I have on a new British Woollen Mill sweater, and the other travellers wear typical tweed jackets over jumpers ... it is summer, after all, but outside the train the sky is a fat grey rat devouring the land like grain in its path. There are more grey rats than pipers in this place. I reply, *They say it snows in parts of Scotland this time of year ...* wondering if it will prompt him to roll down the sleeves of his shirt and button the cuffs against a hint of weather ... he has small wrists for the size of his forearms ... do his cuffs gape ... is that why the sleeves are pushed up to expose dark hair? I'm being generous, perhaps ... he looks Latino. But he only widens his eyes in disbelief ... so I say, *Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. ... Do you know that line?* ... he is still smiling, but the corners of his mouth are paralysed ... he searches ... not for the answer to my question but for the answer to me. I tell him, *It's the opening line of One Hundred Years of Solitude ... Garcia Marquez ... Colombia ... snow in summer ...* He says, *I like Shakespeare ...* my eyes widen in disbelief ... he continues, *you know, the comedies with the dirty jokes*

... that Mr. Shakespeare, he's a funny man, maybe as funny as Jorge Amado ... Brazil ... no snow in summer ... heat and crying frogs.



We both lean back in our seats ... the train is pulling into a village station ... we do not look out, our eyes still on each other catching the drift of each other across damp woollen air, a momentary rift of pipe tobacco, orange peels and trapped sweat ... the train pulling out jerks us forward and the curtain of his shoulder divided space again into place ... I notice the muscles run like new roots dug up brown, hard and curving from his skull down the side of his neck. I speak first, *Tell me a joke.* ... His smile registers my familiarity, my expectation of a gift ... his eyes register the challenge of my tone. He asks, *Are you Catholic?* I am cautious, *Why? Is being Catholic a joke?* His hair is long and he pulls at it where it is twisted and held with red string at his nape, *To some, of course. But, no ... Catholics care for sacrilegious jokes. Others ... the English ... make fun of the body. Which are you?* I register the challenge to reveal myself, *Both,* I say. Bemused, he asks, *English Catholic?* My turn for the superior, detached look, *No, physically sacrilegious.* He nods his head, *Ah, yes, I see.* ... His words mark time ... then he asks, *Why does the Pope shower with his shorts on?* I smile and shake my head. ... *He doesn't want to look down on the unemployed.* I nod knowingly and laugh soft, wanting to slap him on the knee the way I do to signal my brother well-done ... but it is my turn ... I don't ... I say, *That didn't come from old Willy or your man, what's his name, Amado. ... how long have you been in this country ... long enough to have some fun?* His face changes to show where he's been ... he says, *Yes, yes, in London I go to the clubs where the comedians play. I like it when they get up on the stage and start talking to us like we're friends in the street ... stories about the people they know. ... or this fellow who called out to us for a word ... any word and made a whole story out of it.* He is animated, leaning farther forward as if I am the stage ... what can I say to him, *So you dream of being a standup comedian?* ... *Dream,* he says, *is a mysterious word.* He strikes me as strange and I look to the corded muscle in his neck ... it feels familiar. I say, *Do you want a word to build a story on ... and then there was the word ... and the word was made flesh ... reinterpretation.* ... I see the flesh below the single gold earring rise and fall with his heart's

blood ... he clears his throat to speak, *No, no word for me, thank you.* What else can I say that will alter the configuration of muscle slipping away into his shirt collar, *No, I'm disappointed, you seem capable of rising to the occasion ... you're not a performer, then?* He turns his face from the window to me, *It depends upon the stage, he says.* I'm prepared to watch his eyes for now, *Oh, I see, you're not flexible?* He watches, *No, I stretch.* Dark brown almost black, eye of the storm. ... I say, *In that case, what about the word there on your sports bag ... AMATEUR ... can you make that word do tricks?* Smiling, *A tricky word,* he says. Stalling, he gazes at the ceiling, *Let me see ... amateur from amatoreum, amare, love, one who does something for love.* ... An educated guess or a lie, I'd say ... he's quick but can he deliver. He continues, *A very common story.* I scoff, *Common as dirt.* He asks, *How is it that dirt is common?* He's shifting the story to me, *You explain. You're the storyteller.* He nods, *I think that dirt is our uncommon beginning.* Does he expect this to throw me, *Oh, you have no new dirt for me. Adam and Eve, old news.* ... He laughs, *Adam and Eve ... a story without genius, a sorry little tale.* ... I laugh, *From a dirty mind.* He looks away, *Perhaps.* I do the same, *So?*



The eye of the storm touches my face. He says, *She lies naked in the creek.* My mouth opens, *yes,* it seems enough, but he goes on. *The water running the length of her body and spreading her long hair like an alluvial fan into the ocean.* There are minutes between us, *Alluvial?* With two fingers he brushes the dark hair on his left arm into an upswept wave, he says, *Yes ... geography ... sand deposits ... University of Mexico ... Summer of '85.* The pattern on his arm ... alluvial? I look to his face, *Is this a folktale?* He escapes me through his fingertips, *What do you mean?* What does he feel like to himself, *You know, a legend, an old story that belongs to your folks, your people.* He stops rubbing his arm to look at me, *Who are my people?* His exposed arms make me remember Chinese wrist burns, fingers squeezing and twisting the flesh red, *Now you're playing games. You do have relatives don't you, kin? A large family somewhere?* I've twisted his mouth, got the neck muscle to harden with my stereotype. He says, *Yes, the largest. Estimated at eight billion and growing every minute.* This was meant to put me in my place, but it's not that easy, *What?* The

tilt of his head is condescending. *My folk ... you know ... the world is one big stage and we are all players.* Does he know about Chinese wrist burns or paper and rock, *Willy, again,* I say. The reflection of windows reeling off the train passing on the track beside us, fast-frame his face. He says, *Not the only one who says so.* This could be a slow-mo film, I answer *No.* It's like he's doing lip-sync, *No ... Carl Jung ... racial memory ... University of Toronto ... Fall '86.* He is rock. I am paper. I should stick two fingers in my mouth, suck them wet, take them out shining and slap his wrist. I say, *Hold everything.* Everyone is silenced by the conductor announcing Waverly Station Edinburgh ten minutes.



He says, *No time to build a story.* Even though paper covers rock, I say, *How lucky for you. But then ... what could you know about a woman lying naked in a creek?* He runs a fingernail down the underbelly of his left arm, the blood rises to form a welt out of the scratch on his smooth skin. He shows me his arm and says, *If I did that to you, the result would be the same.* His arm is hard and hardly marred by the act. I ask, *Is there a full moon when she lies in the creek?* He examines the pure colour of blood under skin, *If you like.* He is generous in his preoccupation. I say, *She lies naked in the creek, the water running the length of her body and spreading the blood from between her legs like an alluvial fan into the ocean.* His dark eyes draw a line up my arm, over the rise of my shoulder to the slope of my neck up past my jaw and cheek, the line of sight stopping short of my eye. He says, *I am the thirsty rocks on the shore.* The train shudders and we are thrown together. I smell the seaweed in his hair.