

Semele

Howard Firkin

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by
Howard Firkin

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Dedication

A poem needs an inspiration and
new tellings of old tales need more again.
I haven't drawn on life, I've drawn on sand
just as each wave withdraws: a glimpse and then
each glimpse is washed away and leaves us there,
love's witness and love's scribe, that classic pair,
and love: the commonplace, expected, rare.

Semele

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I use the names of lovers some of you
may know already. There's a reason for it.
So get on board; enjoy the ride. I'm sure it's
not past you and Google to review
their story, get the drift. So, on you climb.
You won't miss references if you don't try
the Greek or Latin—nothing is concealed
in this that simple reading won't reveal.
This is a simple story: girl meets guy
and nothing happens... slowly... over time.

*

You need to know her looks to recognise
her should you ever pass her in the street.
She looks like someone you weren't meant to meet;
her looks look inward at you, through your eyes.
You hear her name while staring at her lips,
her tongue, the way it flicks between her top
and bottom teeth. It's Semele. You smile,
because you'll always smile to meet her while
you wonder what to say to make her stop
and talk and shift her weight across her hips.

If you could paint her, which you can't, you'd paint
her curves in single, fluid lines, and cry
into your thinner, thinking hand and eye
co-ordination's just what this job ain't,
caressing her with camel hair and lust.

If she would let you, which she won't, you'd reach
your hand across her cheek and feel her breath
instructing you in ecstasy and death,
the only lesson beauty has to teach,
the only thing you can't learn and you must.

Can't picture her? I recommend you try;
I recommend you see her, watch her stand
before her mirror, glass of wine in hand,
her clothes around her feet... she shuts one eye
and looks, not long, not hard, but carefully.
She runs her left hand slowly down her neck,
explores her nipples, watches, as they peak;
she teases them with drops of wine; they leak
wine for the lover she does not expect
to lick her, kiss her, like what he will see.

She feels her skin, the creamy, soft, the white,
the fluid, moving, warm, receptive skin,
which aches for other skin, which aches within
for love, for touch, for cock, for come tonight,
for come which will not come, which she won't take.
She reaches to the still surprising hair,
she cups her lips into her hand to squeeze,
and feels her warmth, her fingers spread and ease
her lips apart to find the spot, the there,
and work, rub, push, and press to ease the ache

and dream of him. Invisible. The he,
whose fingers should be here, whose ruby cock
should be inside her mouth, whose mouth should lock
her nipples, sucking, kissing, breaking free
to lick her wetter, tease her, taste her, bite,
who should be here to hammer home his cock
to push so deep, to push so hard, to moan
to lose himself in her, to lose his own,
to lose his sperm inside her warm, rich stock.
She comes, and spills her wine, but not him, not tonight.

She tumbles into bed. Her clothes left where
they lie, the carpet stained, her slowing heart beats,
her goosey skin still glowing through the sheets,
her body's warmth dispersing in the air.
She cannot wait for sleep; she seizes it.
He'll come again to her at night in dreams,
a face she knows but doesn't recognise,
a voice that whispers all her best loved lies,
a man who brings her everything he seems,
a man who knows her soul, who pleases it.

*

Of all the thousand ways a woman meets
a man, theirs is a simple one. She drinks
her coffee, reading. He approaches, thinks,
"Of all the tables occupied... " and treats
her to his smile. "I wonder? Do you mind?"
He indicates the vacant chair; she nods,
"Of course!" She clears a space for him. He sits.
And something happens. Unseen. Nothing. Bits
of fate and stellar matter shatter; Gods
applaud their governance of humankind.

She looks at him. His suit is beautiful,
is perfect: line and form and cut insist
it hides a man whom she may not resist,
to whom she owes herself in dutiful
submission. Her response, of course, is fight.
She bows her head, but only to her book.
He glances, stirs his coffee, bides his time:
Mt Semele is not an easy climb,
he knows, instinctively, with just a look,
but what a view from there, and what a sight!

And what a sight she is. Her neck so white
and fragrant; is that coffee or the scent
behind a woman's ear? Her eyes intent
on words... she feels his gaze like fierce sunlight,
and when she glances up, he smiles again
and she is lost and smiles. "Don't let me interrupt...."
"It's not much good." The book is shut and doors
and windows open—in the sunlight pours,
and unknown love, unlooked for, un abrupt,
and not yet certain, but apparent, plain.

She has to ask at one point, has to say,
"Your suit. It's beautifully cut," and leans
towards him, touches perfect sleeve. He preens,
enjoys her touch and wills her hand to stay
on his for just another moment too long.
He opens up the left side of his jacket,
the heart side, as it happens, shows the label:
"Jupiter's", and leans across the table,
"Imported, made to measure, costs a packet;
you think a little luxury is wrong?"

"Not when you can afford it. Why not dress
to make the most of what you've got?" She waits
to hear him take her bait. He contemplates
her beauty, wonders how best to impress
her—she who's heard a thousand others' lines.
"Yes, some of us need money, some need less..."
His eyes play on her face, her arms, her throat.
She laughs, rewards him with a single note
of happiness and shifts to smooth her dress,
and something moves between them and combines.

He moves to talk of other things: what brings
him to this city on this day, this cafe,
and asks enough of her to hear her say
that she enjoys these playful banterings,
that she does not wish he'd leave her alone.
"I hope you'll let me leave a business card?"
She takes it with a pursed smile, "I can't say
I need a CEO; perhaps one day..."
"Let me call you, then. I won't find it hard
to find excuse to call..." She's in his phone.

Now something strange occurs. A something strange
but strangely not an unexpected thing:
their eyes flash recognition and they sing
their promise: instant and eternal change,
a new beginning and continuing.
The unheard question forming in their minds:
is this my lover? Have I found a one?
A single, a unique, a moon, a sun?
Is this the moment when the present finds
its purpose? You? Is this the thing you bring?

And something answers yes before they've heard
the question properly; and so they skate
around, pretending this is somehow fate,
but something whispers yes, that magic word.
And something now is known between the two,
but only spoken with their eyes; their words
are playful, dancing, feathers in a breeze,
that float and spar and twist and prick and please.
They wheel like kites, like predatory birds,
like lovers, understanding what they do.

Their meeting has to end, but who will leave
when neither wants to interrupt the dance?
The music hasn't stopped, and while the chance
is there to hold their eyes, to make believe,
to reinforce attraction, who should stand?
She teases him with work. "It's getting late.
You can't miss your appointment, am I right?"
He checks his watch. "I'm flying back tonight..."
She shrugs. "I hope we meet again. I'll wait
a bit..." She offers him a smile and hand.

He leaves and waves his phone, "I'll call." She waves
and picks his card up, visibly transfers
his number to her phone; he sees her and infers
the message that she's sending as she saves
the contact, Jupiter. They think in code.
His day, her day has changed, will now proceed
as one that neither party dared predict:
the everyday is singing; something clicked
and everything supplies their every need.
The sun is up; they take the golden road.

*

Now here's a problem mathematics just
can't solve: how long to wait until you call
a woman you've just met? It's tough, but all
the answers happen to be wrong. You must
just call and get it wrong and trust to hope.
He wants to wait and can't; he's always been
controlled, controlling, in command, and cool.
That night he calls himself a bloody fool
and calls—and gets her answering machine
and leaves a garbled message—enough rope

to hang up feeling adolescent, slow,
and clumsy, awkward, what a jerk, she might
have company, not been alone that night,
how could he? It was not for him to know
she'd heard his message while she shaved her legs
and laughed to hear his awkwardness, and smiled
to hear how hard he'd tried to not call yet,
was touched by his uncomfortable regret.
She let him get his breath back, then she dialled—
she didn't want him down too many pegs.

And so began their nightly tele-flirts
their harmless, joyful testing of themselves,
to see whose favourite books were on whose shelves,
who cooked, who cleaned, who ironed his own shirts,
and everything that wasn't good was great.
Within a day or two it turned out he
would have to come back down and stay a night.
Perhaps, if she was free that day they might
have lunch, or dinner? Both, if she was free?
Surprisingly, she was. They made the date.

These two—so cool, so funny on the phone,
so easy. On their date, so nervous, queasy,
and so intent on seeming light and breezy,
but edgy as two dogs each side of one bone.
They're meeting at his hotel's restaurant,
and she has realised the meal is entree;
he's hoping that he's not been too transparent,
that she's been left room to confirm intent
and not feel that he's trying to force his way,
and each hopes to conceal what they most want.

The food is ordinary; talk routine.
He wants to lift the mood, but can't think what
to say, he lifts a napkin, tries to blot
the dull words, pauses, things he doesn't mean.
"It's Semele. It's such a magic name.
I practice saying it to hear the sound:
it smells like honey; does that sound absurd?
I didn't know the power of a word
until I heard your name, until I found
you've mixed my senses till they're all the same."

Love is declared and its intent is bared.
Each word from each to each receives its smile,
each glance to each is their successful trial
of all the all they know that will be shared.
The room is full of sunlight, warmth, and perfume.
When they touch hands, the touch upon their skin
reverberates like song, like flecks of light
on water, each brushed touch, however slight,
imparts its trace, a warmth, a touch within.
They wait to make the way to his room her room.

When lunch is over and the waiter tipped
too generously, it's agreed that coffee's
as easily taken in his room and she's
aware as he's aware a relay's tripped,
a current passes through their eyes to each.
They stand, his hands brush her, their eyes play games;
the circuit closes and electrons mess
and scatter particles of happiness
which light her body cells in tiny flames:
she moves to stay within his easy reach.

They leave together and they walk toward
the lift, his hand now gently on her waist.
She likes its touch, its warmth is like the taste
of skin, of him, the smell of white wine poured
too fast, too fully, in too warm a glass.
They wait together, hoping when the lift
doors open no one else will be inside...
and on one is. They stand first side by side
then turn their faces as their lips catch drift
together. As they kiss, whole storeys pass.

A costly room. A good one. Entering,
she walks toward the window, looking out,
"Nice view ..." He shuts the door and turns about,
"Nice view from here," he smiles at his own bantering.
She starts to draw the curtains, willing this,
eyes staring, seeking him, her gaze implores
him— no more jokes, no words, not now. He walks
into the darkening room and neither talks,
one finger gently on her cheek explores
her face, her skin, her lips. He bends; they kiss.

Their kiss is slow and soft and deepens; they
withdraw a fraction, look into the eyes
exploring them, the willing eyes, disguise
abandoned, longing, mirror eyes that pray
for resolution of their shared resolve.

He holds her face between his hands—so much
is certain now, is known. He draws her to him,
her lips part, ready, waves of heat pulse through him;
their lips are moist with fire, their soft tongues touch,
caress, their hands explore, their selves dissolve.

Just one kiss more. The rest lives underneath,
in other memories, not yours. Her lips
are wet with him, his lips pluck hers, he slips
his tongue beneath her top lip, feels her teeth,
explores her mouth, she feels a finger end
and tongue push in together, feel the warm,
the wet, the yielding mouth, her tongue seeks both,
she sucks him deep into her longing mouth
into the organ lips, tongue, mouth now form
into the warm, wet wealth they long to spend.

*

That night, she is alone again. It seems
the world keeps turning on its same old tilt,
as if their pyramids had not been built,
as if their epoch were like other dreams,
as if their love had changed no more than two.
That night the mirror sees her stand and wonder
how her body wears this same disguise
when underneath, so much has changed, her eyes
don't know how much to trust themselves when under
her skin there lives another her: her new you.

She stands undressed, examining her skin;
she smells her hands to try to catch his scent
and smells herself and him, their perfumes bent
in complex knots of molecules that spin,
igniting flames inside her body core.
She runs her hands across her breasts, along
her side, across her belly, shuts her eyes
and feels him, heavy, full, between her thighs,
again, she feels him, certain, ready, strong;
she touches where he touches her; wants more.

That night, she is alone again. That night
she dreams of him, of feeling breath, of being
held by him, of waking first, of seeing
daylight dimly light a face that might
face hers forever in this moment's pause.
That night, she is alone. She knows alone
again without him, knows the she she is
without him, when she, if she isn't his,
the she she will be if he doesn't phone.
Sleep stutters in on pigeon-winged applause.

Of course he phones. He calls next day. He calls
before she's finished thinking he might not,
before she goes to work, before she's got
her breakfast coffee, while she plans withdrawals
allowing her to save what's left of pride.
They whisper, smile, adore each other's voice,
they prattle, smile, adore in silences,
they laugh at everything the other says,
"Thanks for the call..."; "As if I had a choice..."
They circle love, they hover, dip, and glide.

They fill their heads with love; they're honey-mad,
suffused with perfume, fuddled, tipsy, young.
He hangs up and calls back at once, bee stung
with love and wanting her; she taunts him, glad
to have a lover who embraces love.
He wants to ask her why he feels like this?
He wants to know how adolescent he
could reassert his raw credulity,
could whisper longing for another kiss?
There's only one cause in these cases: love.

The phone call only ends to promise more:
more phone calls, other contacts, "Tell me I
can call again today?" She doesn't try
to hide her happiness, "You want to? Sure.
I'll try to answer if you feel the need..."
And so it goes. And no one's said the one
thing both now know: that this will flourish, grow,
and if it doesn't blossom, it will show
its head above the soil, will greet the sun,
and promise flowers, nectar, pollen, seed.

That night she is alone and not. She stands
before her mirror, but she sees another
face—an older sister? Or her mother?
Who is it watches her? Those are her hands,
her body, that's her belly, legs, her hair.
So who's the other woman she can see?
Who's looking out through her, through stranger eyes?
An older woman, she, who's seen surprise
and knows it, names it, calls it certainty,
who knows how new love feels, and doesn't care.

The other woman whispers to her, *Sem,*
why was he so insistent that he call?
What is he hiding? Just before you fall
remember men are liars—all of them—
as women are—you know who you can trust:
a dog. Guess what? You don't have one of those,
you've got another man. Don't rush things yet,
you've learnt enough of men and dogs to bet
on nothing. Keep apart; stay on your toes,
protect your heart, prepare to run—you must.

*

They meet again, without the need for lunch—
the same hotel, same looking room. They meet
inside the room. He's there with wine to greet
her, sweep her in and kiss her through a bunch
of tulips, which she'd called a sexy flower
in passing once and he, of course, remembered.
And she is touched and touching, kissing him
her thanks and longing—the coin of missing him
is paid from her full purse, a debt re-tendered,
enjoyed—a fortune in a hotel hour.

A slow and gentle breath and love's complete;
the expiration, breath exhaled like ice
cream melting, dripping down its cone, the nice,
thick lick of sticky fingers, slow and sweet;
they hold each other, eyes are locked on eyes.
They smile, replete, and kiss, a gentle touch
of lips and flick of tongues and settle, soothe,
relax into the softness of their smooth,
warm bed, each other's skin, and feel as much
the other as themselves, one more surprise.

Their breath is shared. They feel the other's breath
upon their cheek and take it in their lungs
and hold it there and kiss and mingle tongues
and scent and skin. Each kiss a tiny death,
a birth and re-birth, wondered and unknown.
She gazes in his eyes. She holds him there.
She feels his body everywhere on her;
she can't remember what her longings were,
she can't remember and she doesn't care,
but in his eyes she seeks them and is shown.

They kiss again, because they can't allow
the time to pass, for time to call an end
to this, to them. They borrow and they spend
and satisfy themselves that this, somehow,
won't end—the magic of love's credit card.
They kiss. Their kisses now are gentle, kind,
and neither thinks, as smiles and kisses blend,
that these are any more than ways to end
their loving, but... kiss follows kiss, and mind
must follow active mind—like soft and hard.

We do not have a word for everything:
the anti-melody of magpie song,
the spray that follows curls of waves along
a beach, the patterns made by falling string,
for moments when intent becomes defined.
These two, they kiss and gaze without regard
for anything beyond the moment's lips,
those eyes, that hair, the hands caressing hips
and buttocks, murmured words like playing cards
are played in suit, in turn, returned in kind.

Their kisses strengthen and their words are fewer;
their kisses deepen, tongues are wordless, quick
and soft. He finds her breasts to kiss and lick;
she holds his head and draws him strongly to her
and feels him growing strong again inside.
He hears her voice unworded with her want
and moves one hand behind her lower spine
and holds her, curls her to a small incline
and pushes slowly, deep into her cunt,
rewarded and rewarded, love is cried.

*

If we can use a word like re-unite,
we need another word for re-divide,
for waking up with no one by your side,
when dreams of one have warmed you through the night,
but Semele can find no ready verb.
She wakes, makes ready for the day, she floats
inside her mirror, clouds of morning sun
of swirling golden particles are spun
around her, drapery of light and motes,
an image other eyes cannot disturb.

She sees him see her now and then she sees
the other self see him see her and sees
the look, knows that he cannot ever please
the other; she has made her prophecies
and she believes them. Love is no defence.
The older woman now looks clearly out
at her, clear eyed, determined, wrapped in light,
and speaks, "*The price is age; the gift is sight;
what do you think this love is all about?
There is no love as rare as commonsense.*"

And so begins the mirrored conversations:
one side defends, one side mocks in contempt,
*"What makes this love so great that it's exempt
from all the everyday considerations?
You don't know where he lives. Who else lives there?"*
The question asked, the likely answer guessed
by both, but neither one can give it voice.
"We're adults. Equals. If we make a choice
we live with it." *"And how is choice expressed?
In hotel rooms? By phone?"* "That's our affair."

*"It's your affair? You think so? No one else?
You don't think this might not affect someone
you've never heard of, met? Someone who's done
no harm to you? Excuse me, something smells."
"And I'm supposed to worry, to feel guilt?"
"No, you're supposed to be an adult. You're
supposed to take responsibility,
accept there is no elasticity
in morals, things by which you set some store.
Build castles where it's worth them being built."*

"And what does that mean? All we've done so far is have some fun, and found another life that might be lived. What's wrong with that?" *"His wife. His wife is wrong with that."* "What wife? What are you saying? Do you know he's married? No." *"I know."* "You don't; you can't. We never spoke about our lives apart." *"That's how I know and how you know, as well. You've always known it."* "Cow." *"Names, is it? Slut. Bitch. Whore. You're just a poke, an easy ride, a dalliance, his ho."*

The other, older self is gone and Sem
is left to disregard her words, or try,
but they remain, persistent as a lie,
convincing as the she who uttered them.
If only lovers ever learnt to pause,
but Semele must put this thing to bed.
She has to call him, has to hear his voice,
assure herself she's doing this by choice,
and make the old bitch choke on what she said.
We never learn that circumstance has claws.

She calls him in a meeting; he's abrupt
and business like, explains he's not alone.
She snaps an answer; switches off her phone.
She couldn't plan it better to disrupt
his day. He's absent and can't concentrate.
He rings her through the morning—can't get through;
he hears her voice mail message, cheery, bright,
and loses patience; leaves a message, "Right.
"I don't play games. You e-mail, ring, or do
whatever. Any time. I'm working late,"

resolving not to answer when she rings;
let *her* find words to leave on voice mail — she
can listen to his business voice and be
as awkward as he was. He's strong. But things
conspire as much against the strong as weak:
she rings and he responds, and each one waits
to hear the other's soft apology,
to stop them short, to offer sympathy;
but neither sorries first which aggravates
the kind of person with kind words to speak;

so nothing of the kind can happen now.

"I'm sorry if my ringing you distracts
you from important things." "Can we talk facts?"

"Oh, facts? Not feelings, facts. I thought somehow
we might have moved beyond that. I was wrong."

"Look, I was busy. It's a working day
and I had clients with me; I can't take
a call from anyone ..." A big mistake,
that 'anyone'." "Perhaps you'd like to say
how many anyones you string along?"

"What are you saying? You don't trust me?" "Why should I? What have you told me of your life?"
"As much as you have asked me." "And your wife?"
"What of her?" "What? You're telling me if I don't ask directly, you don't need to tell?
Do you think now, now that I'm asking you, you'd care to tell me if you share a bed with someone else?" "I never said I lived with someone else, although it's true, I have a wife and family, as well."

"You live apart?" "Divorced for quite a spell—
two years? Don't know. She sees another man;
I see the kids on weekends. When I can,
I visit one day in the week as well.
I hadn't told you, but you know I would."
The family is unexpected, but
the news is generally good because
it shows how wrong her older other was;
she smiles, despite the churning in her gut,
"I wish you'd told me earlier. You could."

*

If lovers ever learnt, they'd recognise
the danger of expressing love with more
than touch—the touch of lip to lip is sure—
but love is treacherous to vocalise;
our words are prone to random shifts of sense,
and Sem, apparently in full command
of armies, swarms of words, will find again
that once let loose, words find their targets when
they hit, and not all hits are hits we planned,
but that's a sentence for the future tense.

She smiles and says, to let him hear her smile,
"But really, I suppose, the thing I need
from you is information. You'd concede,
I think, it's odd to know so little while
we're lovers. Please. Let's talk; it isn't hard."
"Okay. You start. You know about my wife,
but what have you revealed to me? I know
approximately nothing of you; so
why not begin with something of your life?"
His cool tone throws her, puts her on her guard.

"Well, what's to tell? You know a little bit about me—more, perhaps, than you pretend. You know about my work, that I intend to buy a house next year unless I quit and travel; and you know the sort of men I like. You know I don't prevaricate. You know that Mister Right will have to tell me straight that I am right for him as well. You also know that I'm prepared to wait. You know I rarely make mistakes again."

"What do you want to know? You want to hear
about my father? Do you worry I'm
a daddy's girl who's likes men past their prime?
I like you, okay? Nothing there to fear;
So isn't that enough?" It's far too much.
He hadn't thought before about his age,
and now her reassurance makes him think
her message uses lemon juice for ink;
the moment's heat reveals an acid page:
the years of difference. He's out of touch.

To everything there is a seasoning
and lover's always end up choosing salt.
Misunderstandings may be no one's fault;
it may be just our powers of reasoning
aren't quite up to the tasks we set for them.
"I hadn't realised," he starts to say,
"that age was such a big deal for you. I'm..."
"What? Mentioning your age is now a crime?
All right, you're older than me. That's okay."
"Okay. I'm glad it's 'okay' for you, Sem."

"Perhaps I haven't understood," he starts to say, "perhaps I'm rushing things for you, expecting too much from you..." "What you do, or don't do, what you 'understand', the parts of sentences you never finish, they mean nothing to me! Got it? Nothing! Zip. There's nothing that we need to 'understand'— we kiss; we fuck, we take the other's hand, we walk together brushing thigh to hip— or else we don't. There's nothing more to say."

She says, expecting he will say his say
in turn. He doesn't. If there's nothing more,
he does what should have been done long before:
he hangs up. And he breathes. He is away.
He knows it suddenly: he is alone.
And she? Does furious convey enough?
It sounds too calculated, logical.
She's cyclone wild. She's meteorological.
If he thinks this is how to play it tough,
he's going to learn—at least, he will be shown.

*

Misunderstanding is a science none
need study—long ago and far away
we captured it within our DNA;
so now its bitter fruits sour everyone.
He may not hear her, but he'll read her thoughts.
She e-mails him, or rather thrashes words
out of her keyboard, words, which bite and sting
which howl her rage, which slander everything
he means to her, retelling what occurred
as if their lives had made the family courts.

But, strange to tell, her final, icy phrase
invites him to respond,—perhaps you'd guessed—
pain, pus, and anger have to be expressed
but she'd left little of his name to raze;
so what she thought he'd write, God only knows.
He did reply, as cool as she was hot.
Her rage was voluble, so his was terse:
a cool haiku to her impassioned verse.
He thanked her, grateful for the time he got,
and hoped she liked the destiny she chose.

With this, this meagre-hearted scrap of text
he stood revealed before her: something small,
a god of pots and pans, a god of all
the little things. It made an unexpected next:
she felt a stillness, felt that something died.
She saw her other self, reflected in
the screen; she saw her mouth his words and smirk,
"I may have mentioned this would never work."
No words could counter her elated twin;
the younger woman read her loss and cried.

A day or two can pass and what seemed sure
can seem a little doubtful, edges blurred.
Discord remembered can sometimes be heard
as chords, a minor key, or something more;
so Semele is not upset when she
receives a message with the Subject line:
"You may not want to read this, but here goes..."
and reads contrition in the measured prose,
acceptance that his punishment's condign,
and something gentle, that she loves to see:

he asks her to consider, can she say
she felt no electricity, no charge,
no energy to share, explore, enlarge?
Because he did. He felt it straight away.
He wants to give their love another chance.
She knows she will. Within her body core
a warmth, a blossoming of body heat.
Love's fission makes its fusion more complete.
She taps Reply, high heels on hardwood floor,
and lets herself be waltzed off to the dance.

"So, when are we to meet again?" she waits for his response. "As soon as I can get there. Unless..." he pauses, "I could pay your fare and you come here." She smiles and hesitates, a counted beat, "I'd like to come. A lot." So one week later, flying business class, she comes to him, to where he chose to book a hotel suite. She comes to reassess, to look him over, test him, and he's keen to pass. He knows this is the only chance he's got.

He knows she's not impressed with money spent
for spending's sake, but knows she's coming to
inspect the bower and expecting blue;
so, cool display of power 's his intent,
and he'll deliver. That, he'll guarantee.
He books a hotel suite that overlooks
the harbour, overlooking nothing, this
is special as a secret lover's kiss,
a gift: not jewellery, but books:
two books she wanted — shows he listened, see?

He waits. She should arrive—his watch shows nine—
at any moment, gods of traffic willing.
Time has a way of taking time in killing.
He smiles to find he's practicing his lines.
He looks into the mirror, checks his smile.
Perhaps downstairs would be a better place
to meet? He stands and moves towards the door
as she approaches down the corridor
and so without a knock they're face to face:
the happy shock of love, the death of guile.

She enters and she's strangely shy. And he,
the smooth, the well-prepared, the smart, the quick,
the one who knows the answers, easy, slick,
he moves like something on a stick, absurdly.
He plants a misplaced kiss; his mobile rings.
She turns to let him answer, drops her bag,
and sits down on the bed, admires the view,
until she hears the call brings something new,
brings something wrong. Her body is a rag,
a scrap, a dirty thing that someone wrings.

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She's in the room, a distant vocal hum,
in phrases, words, that Semele can't hear:
the older woman's voice in her man's ear
is telling him, is urging him to come.
The words: a light bulb hits a concrete floor.
He gets up, grabs his coat, "I'm sorry, Sem.
One of the kids, my girl, has had a fall
at school, they've taken her to hospital.
I've got to go." "Of course." Of course, the them,
the others call and he is out the door.

She's left with nothing but the clumsy hit
of his goodbye-I'll-call-you kiss. The room,
the bland hotel room, empty as a loom,
no bodies weave here now, no fingers knit,
no warp, no weft, no work, no shuttling cock.
She looks around, what now? I'm on my own.
I may as well go shopping. Should I wait?
No, fuck him, he can call me. I'll be late.
Her anger just confirms that she's alone.
It frightens her that this should be a shock.

It hurts her, she remembers he's a dad.
His girl is hurt. Of course, he has to go.
There are some truths it doesn't help to know.
It doesn't help the feeling she's been had.
He has a shared past, shared, and not with her.
The day outside is bright, but on this bed,
a darkness, heavy blankets on her chest;
she shuts her eyes and waits. It isn't rest.
It's waiting. Dead weight. Dad weight. Waiting. Dead.
She waits for the expected to occur.

Insight like an incision showed her life
as clearly separate from his; she saw
whatever he could offer, she'd want more.
Her understanding was a long, slow knife,
which parted flesh to show the wound within.
There was no blood. She saw and she was dry.
Her tongue played round her mouth and found no word,
no sound, no syllable she hadn't heard,
no x, no y; there were no tears to cry,
there was the end. The end had to begin.

The end began with what she couldn't share:
a moment in his living past, the past
that shapes the now. The extras in his cast
were cast as stars. Her own name wasn't there.
She looked. She looked again. It wasn't there.
Her breath fled from her lungs like water down
a drain. She felt the spasm of its twist
like someone wrenching at her wrist
to drag her off her feet, to throw her down
and batter her. She left her body there...

He steps into a darkened room, sees how
she lies, alone and desolate. He sits beside
her, takes her hand and says, "You know I tried
to call. You didn't answer." Doesn't now.
"I'm sorry, Sem." "I know. How is your girl?"
"They think she's fine. Her leg is in a cast.
But she'll stay in; she's under observation
until the risks of further complication,
of any secondary trauma's past."
He lies beside her in a gentle curl.

She feels his breath upon her neck, and knows
the tiredness his tired body weeps
and she absorbs it, feels it as it seeps
inside her, feels it fire her. Something grows
within her, something warms her, something stirs.
She turns to face him. Wordlessly they kiss:
a gentle kiss, the kiss of equals as
they know they have to part, when each one has
the knowledge that their future's only this.
His weariness her strength, his strength is hers.

They start to peel away their clothes. Her eyes
are watching his watch her, reveal, consume,
the only lighted object in the room,
her body has the power to mesmerize
and he is spellbound dragging off her clothes.
Desire swells like surf, like waves of sound,
a thousand decibels of swollen cock
is thunder in his ears, is surf on rock,
and she is harbour, she is harbour found.
She watches him. She watches and she knows.

Between her legs she aches for his relief.
She takes him in her mouth, saliva, warm
as cunt around his cock, her tongue takes form
and strokes it, licks it, lets him feel her teeth.
He lifts her chin and kisses her, hands placed
to push her back, to ease her thighs apart.
His fingers find her open, wet-lipped cunt
and push inside and lift and stroke the front,
he bends to kiss her clitoris and starts
to lick her: fingers, tongue, and taste.

She drags his face toward her, bites his lips
and tastes herself. He licks her nipples peaks
and works his cock between her legs and speaks
a single word as cock finds cunt and slips
so slowly in, she gasps. It pushes on.
She claws his buttocks, thrusts him harder in
as cock withdraws and pounds out its attack,
her nails, like jealous eyes, knife in his back,
her pelvis pushes up to suck him in,
her legs, push, wrap, and urge him on.

The screaming end, the choking smoke of breath,
the agony of burning flesh, the flail
of limbs on flaming skin, the pain, the pale
wounds blackening and crackling to their death.
The wrenching cry that signals nothing more.
The long, soft hiss of burning green wood steam,
the sudden jerk as knitted limbs collapse
and shed a final jet of sparks, perhaps
the spasm that initiates the dream,
perhaps the moment that the boat leaves shore.

Exhausted, battered by their love, they lie,
and cling and hold each other, breathe and merge
the self created by their single urge,
their breath its double heartbeat and its cry,
its new skin slippery, and filmed, and warm.
The moments have no moment. This is still.
They have no sight or feeling. They are free
of all expressions of the verb to be.
They lie there, fraction parts of single will,
divine expression of a perfect form.

The old philosopher was wrong. We seek
our matching halves until we find them, then
we run. No one can live in love. Not men,
not women, not these two. Love lasts a week
or fifty two, whatever, but love dies
or lovers do. Mortality will take
its fee: you pay in love or pay in life:
one husband's lover is another's wife;
so either love or life (or both?) is fake.
That's just the way it is, so dry your eyes.

But what if love is truly open-eyed?
Perhaps all lovers know what's on the cards
but choose the sunlight of a hundred yards
before the mile long dark of life untried.
These two have died; these two will live again.
Within the broken souls, within each bruise
that colours them, that maps were each has bled
from words they shouted, thought, or left unsaid,
the love that they were brave enough to choose
is pulsing still and warms their lives with pain.

Each breath that shreds them, tears their lungs apart
is their genetic memory: the pain
of being beached before their time, the strain
of gills to suck dry air, the dying heart,
the clouding eyes, the skin, like sand, that dried.
But something comes of this: something evolves,
and deep within them, molecules reknit
and reassemble, realign: the fit
survive, and somehow, still, the world revolves
and love, the never possible, is tried.

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You may be wondering, 'What happens next?'.
There is no next for mortals. There's an end.
The simple truth that sends us round the bend
with new interpretations of a text
that's no more complex than a lover's 'Yes'.
And who am I? I'm no one you recall.
We haven't met. Our paths have never crossed,
or if they have, the memory is lost.
I'm just the mug who chanced to see it all
and wrote it down, the whole, untidy mess.

So there it is, or was. A common tale,
a fairy tale, a myth, a commonplace:
a couple doing what the human race
calls getting raced off, running off the rails,
or, in their quiet moments, finding love.
You may know someone like them, or may not.
You might perhaps feel envy, pity, lust?
But lovers find their love because they must;
they got as far as anyone has got...
now, don't mind me, go home, and don't mind love.

Semele

Howard Firkin

