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The House Wren

by Terri Brown-Davidson

I remember when Lulu Mae was born. There was nothing to her, Momma said. A little scrap of a girl with a face like a wrinkled sausage-case and a clean bald sweep of a head oversized, painfully swollen, as if the brain were struggling to escape from her skull. Which turned out to be true, didn’t it?

This story begins in winter, when the snow around Yaddo melts into the slushy awful yellow dogs leave sometimes in urinating trails. This story begins in winter, when the brilliant bursts of crimson roses shut their mouths, bow their heads, wither and go black and die. This story begins in winter, when the river freezes over and Carson huddles on the bank in her baggiest pair of jeans and a faded, ivory, fisherman’s sweater, her pasty face bumpy from cold, the thermos of hour-old sherry trembling in her strong, veiny hands.

This story begins in winter because in winter I was born.

I don’t know what made me hate her. I do know that I loved her, too. Though Linda doesn’t believe that. Though Carson hadn’t spoken to me years before she died, not since she sent me that postcard from New York with a greenshadowed Statue of Liberty, perfectly eyeless, gazing off into some netherworld of space. She’d had another stroke and I saw once the photo with her hunched over like a sparrow fluttering into spasms, her gigantic head shaking, her eyes hooded, luminously dark with a suffering I’ll never be able to imagine. I heard the photographer had to prop her up, again, again, again, for that shot, because her crippled body kept slipping down. But she didn’t look propped. Still, that’s ice water under the bridge, isn’t it? Since she’s dead and Linda has to feed me hot spoonfuls of bourbon every night and still I can’t forget.

This story begins in winter.
This story ends in winter.
Or will end when I’m dead.

But there are unfathomable mysteries attached to the human heart. That’s what Linda says and Linda should know because she’s a licensed therapist, an M.A. in sociology and psychology too, with a burgeoning family practice. And she possesses exactly the perky attitude that makes patients love her. I watched her work, once, behind a one-way mirror, when I was still strong enough to climb out of bed without help. Linda was counseling a family where the youngest girl, a fifteen year old, claimed she was addicted to sex. Linda seated the family in a circle of folding chairs and made them confess their deepest, most impenetrable secrets connected to envying their daughter, who, at fifteen, was a precociously beautiful girl, and within the hour Linda had the entire family sobbing out their mutual forgiveness, mutual dependence, the mother and father clutching hands, uttering mea culpa’s, the beautiful, tear-wrecked daughter vowing she’d renounce men and sex forever to regain the love of her family.

That’s what Linda does. Some call it a living. But I know it’s not reality.

Reality is this king-sized bed which Linda bought for us when we were young and passionate and I’d wake to her mouth pressed tightly over mine, like a cat’s sucking lifebreath from an infant. Now, when Linda accidentally touches my arm, I freeze like Nanook of the North and burn like a dozen devils at that brush of skin against skin, which the doctors claim is a strange symptom for my disease, though, in my mind, the larger disease is life. Reality is lying in this bed day after day, hour after hour, until the sky goes dead, leaden, and shineless as warped tin, the mustiness of my body rising to layer my face, and then Linda arrives home at five, cooks us a copper potful of bean-with-ham soup, and, with a single, powerful grunt, lifts my bird-weight body in her arms, carries me out to the living room couch, watches TV with me.
quietly, respectfully, though, to me, it’s a little like enjoying the company of a corpse for the little I have to say and Linda would be better off with someone younger, stronger, heathier, purer, yet Linda mutters only “hush” when I say such things, tells me she loves me, tells me I’m uttering nonsense, and we sit that way for three hours or more until Linda, still silent, wipes my mouth, brushes my teeth, sits me on the toilet, carries me back to bed.

And oh God I wish it hadn’t happened and oh God I wish she’d forgiven me when she was alive but it doesn’t really matter now because Carson’s been dead for years and still I can’t forget, still I can’t forgive myself, and, though I know Carson herself never felt this way, sometimes I pray I’d never been born.

And sometimes I tell Linda it’s the rosebushes that led me astray and sometimes I tell her it was Truman or those long walks Carson loved to take through the woods or my momma’s favoring Lulu Mae but when I say such things, when I become particularly excited and repeat “I wish I were dead,” Linda gets depressed and is likely to bear me back to our room, tuck me into bed, slam or close softly the door.

So I’ve learned to shut up about that part of my life.

But I’ll never forget, not even when I’m dust.

It was winter and the rosebushes which, in spring, had bloomed in riots of yellow or pink or scarlet, their fat mouths popped open in Bacchanal shouts, were bagged silent, tied with cords. Carson was there, though it was unusual for her to travel in winter because, while she loved and exclaimed over snow, she reacted toward subzero temperatures more finickily than a cat. Carson was at Yaddo, sans Reeves, to finish The Member of the Wedding and all of us, including Truman and Katherine Anne, were convinced it would be her masterpiece, despite its abbreviated length: I’d read portions of it in manuscript, and, like most of Carson’s work, it struck me as splendidly lyrical, perfectly odd, joyous and chantlike and true. But Carson was feeling poorly that spring, her tissuepaper chest wracked with a cold seguing into pneumonia, communal breakfasts and seven-course dinners alike punctuated with the rasp of her cough.

And me. What was I doing there? At Yaddo, for God’s sake?

Now, with the goosedown comforter heaped over me because, though it’s seventy-five in this house, Linda’s convinced I’ll die of the cold, with my feet in their booties pressed down beneath the three sheets, one blanket, and comforter, toes purple at their tips from lack of circulation, isn’t it difficult to remember? Because I’m not a writer and never aspired to be and yet there I was, sharing eggs over easy and oilblack coffee with Truman.
Capote, who kept tugging, with elegant fingers, his duckfluffed head of hair; with several dark-eyed poets, perverse in their silences, I couldn’t identify then, can’t recall now; with Katherine Anne Porter, who dressed regally as the queen of Egypt, that blonde, patrician head set off on a white-column neck and oh the flowing jewel-toned dresses and oh the silk scarves she flung around her throat to make a “fashion statement,” though I couldn’t translate for anyone to save my life what that statement might’ve been, except “Ouch: my scarf’s too tight”.

No, I wasn’t a writer, yet I’d wrapped up a little handwritten manuscript of poems, mostly doggerel, verses with titles like “Autumn Dusk” and “Morning-Glory Rapture,” scrawled my name on a cover sheet, then, beneath it, wrote in clearer, larger letters, “the sister of Carson McCullers,” and sent that manuscript in to the Yaddo residency-fellowship committee, begging abjectly for admission.

At least they had the decency to let a month pass before they telegraphed their congratulations.

Now, for some people the idea of Yaddo is akin to Heaven in that near-silent, white-uniformed people prepare fabulous, exotic meals at any writer-in-residence’s request, and the Mansion akin to Heaven because, in its austerity, squareness, brown-bricked grandeur, it’s truly a visionary sight, a magnificent edifice towering up, though it’s not exactly a Frank Lloyd Wright chef-d’oeuvre, though there is something musty about the whole affair; and there’s something wonderful, true, about gazing across that vista of fabulous, winter-browned lawn toward the Mansion or sitting on the squat brick wall surrounding the Mansion to think and think and think. But there are drawbacks, too: in winter the Mansion is closed, and people are herded into smaller rooms and studios such as those in West House, studios so cramped I nearly went insane day after day, pretending to be a writer but actually lying for hours on that dumpy yellow recliner which only stared up at a low-sloping ceiling or sitting in a battered easychair by the window, watching snow waft in bursts of dazzling white while I drank black bitter coffee from a red thermos top.

So the worst part was that I didn’t know why I was there. I had an inkling, though. And Carson did too. That winter she sat slumped in her dinner chair, muttering about the “we of me” in a sing-song voice while all of us, including Katherine Anne, who clearly thought Carson was too peculiar to be admitted into that august and stalwart roster of Yaddo writers, pointedly ignored her or listened, respectfully, to the bone-dry, deepening coughs which, in no time, had turned her into a baritone. But Carson ignored me, even when I sat next to her, and though I understood that she had perfect contempt for my work— I wasn’t a writer, after all—really all I wanted was a little of the attention she’d received her whole life; a little taste of her fame; a little perfunctory respect or, sadly, that’s what I believed I wanted then, though it wasn’t true—not one impulse connected to my journeying there had been true.

So now I can say I’ve had a stroke. And that
makes me like Carson. And now I can say I lie in a
king-sized bed, staring up at ceiling stains because
I'm too weak to move my arms, legs, head. And
that makes me like Carson. And now I can say I lie
here and dream up all kinds of complicated narra-
tives in my mind when really, despite Linda's most
beautiful efforts (and they have been beautiful over
the years—they have), I'm lonely, sick, tired, and
I'd rather be dead. And that makes me like Carson.
But the strangest aspect about my situation is that
I wanted so fervently to be like Lulu Mae and here
I look like her, with my hunched and battered body,
horsy face, blunt-cut, old woman's bangs, but never
was I anything like her, really, never a Doppel-
ganger or a psychological twin but more like these
house wrens I see building nests of straw and string
up under the eaves as I lie flat on my back in bed,
and they're so busy I imagine their little hearts close
to bursting from all their frantic, home-building
exertions but they're tiny, actually, crushable as
thin bones, and they're weightless, creating no
physical impact upon the Earth, and they're pur-
poseless in the sense in which I like to think of
that word, building and building without having
the slightest idea why.

But there's one story I remember which almost
explains it. What happened next, and all the years
that followed. One story I remember that Carson
might be proud of. Carson was five. I was ten.
Momma was taking us to the carnival. Carnivals
were different in those days, but maybe not so dif-
ferent as we'd like to believe: between the World's
Largest Steer and the Sword-Swallowing Freak and
Gigo, the Hermaphrodite Boy, they were—are—
damned disturbing places. But every year, Lulu
Mae clamored to go. And, since Lulu Mae was
Momma's pet, every year we went, though that year
I was feeling too mature to do more than glance at
the pop-a-balloon booths, cotton-candy machines
that spun wild blue fluff, the mountaneous Fat Lady
Lulu Mae gaped at as we passed.

There was one smaller tent at the end. One tent
smaller, darker, than the others. "In you go, girls,"
Momma whispered, as if she sensed the sanctity
of the place. She lifted the tent flap with two trem-
bling fingers; her auburn hair shone, set so neatly,
beautifully, in its permanent wave; her crimson-
bow lips were like a slash of startled across her
acne'd, pale face—poor Momma, dead for so
many years now, though maybe, in some respects,
the dead never do leave. "In you go, girls," Momma
muttered, and Carson and I went. Lulu Mae, then,
was a spindly girl, all elbows and knees, with big
dark eyes that swallowed a person whole in a
glance. She preceded me into that red-brown gloom
and the whole place, bedded down with straw, lu-
minescent with canning jars arranged row upon
row on low-lying tables, glowed with the phos-
phorescent eeriness of a fish tank.

And Lulu Mae stepped ahead of me then,
strolled with as much dignity as her tiny self could
muster toward a row of those aquarium-bright jars.
And I noticed the way the light-brown hair lay in
shining disarray along the back of her slender neck,
the way her too skinny waist hitched up on the left
as she moved, the way her slightly bowed legs
buckled when she reached the first row of jars. And
that noticing was the beginning of my love for Lulu
Mae, which was the beginning of my love for
women, though I didn't know then because I didn't
let myself know because I wanted to be either ex-
actly like everyone else—a "normal" in the small-
town U.S.A. sense of that word—or exactly like
Lulu Mae, and for me there was no in-between
state, no comfortable method for admitting that
tenderness which pressed against my insides harder
and harder as I grew, pressing first, with Carson,
like the gentlest of palms but later, when I was a
teenager, later, when I felt I had to go to Yaddo,
prove I was as much a freak as Carson McCullers,
smacked like a fist so angrily, insistently, against
my gut that it punched a hole, finally, in my spleen,
stomach, intestines, a wound from which no one
could recover.

And Carson stood, admiring those jars. Lulu
Mae stood, admiring those jars, her thumb creep-
ing toward her bunched-up mouth, her thumb sliding smoothly into her bunched-up mouth before she thought better of it, yanked it out. And as she stood, gazing at the fetus floating big-headed and bobbing in its wash of fake amniotic fluid, everything passed over her face and I saw it and Momma saw it, too, but she didn’t understand it the way I did, I’m sure of that now, didn’t glimpse the rage and terror melding abruptly into a mirror-smooth blankness as Lulu Mae straightened her features, tucked down her dowdy dress at the hem, started her strange, clipped-tone litany.

“Momma, why did it die?”
“Baby, it was never born.”
“But it looks so ugly. And dead.”
“Everyone looks ugly when they’re not alive.”
“Will I look that way, too?”
“Everyone does. Everyone.”
“Then I never want to die,” Lulu Mae announced, turning her back with all the solemnity her five-year-old self could summon on those hideous jars.

Momma, half-secretly, smiled. “Baby, maybe you never will.”

For me—for the world—Lulu Mae never has.

But in all the space and motion of time itself, that afternoon will never be erased. That afternoon at Yaddo when I crouched outside Carson’s studio and listened to her movements within, waiting for her walk, dreaming of an act so huge, significant, I believed the entire world would feel its repercussions.

I huddled outside her door. Let my hot moist mouth breathe circular patterns into the battered wood. Inside, I could hear her pace: her wont when she was submerged in an intensely creative moment “Fragile Francine,” she laughed, “you are the we of me,” then, “Oh Katherine Anne, Katherine Anne, I do admire you so,” a revelation completely unsurprising to me and to all of Carson’s other cohorts at Yaddo, who knew Carson was infatuated with Katherine Anne, who’d heard the sad twisted tale from The Lady herself of how Carson curled into a fetal position outside her door wailing for admittance until Yaddo security dragged her away. Katherine Anne thought Carson was a lesbian but maybe I was the lesbian and—how paradoxical—no one wanted to see it. For, though Carson and I bore a strong resemblance to each other, both possessing the same boxy face, jutting jaw, sad opossum eyes, militaristic bob, no one thought of me as “different,” “strange,” simply because I wasn’t an artist.

But I wanted to be. I wanted someone to notice that I was unique. I wanted the world to stop dropping bouquets of yellow roses at Lulu Mae’s feet. I wanted a woman with strong shoulders and skin like cream skimmed off the bottle to hold me and kiss me so passionately I forgot all my envy, forgot how I hated my baby sister, who’d committed no sin in the world except being more talented than me.

Leaning my shoulder against the door, gently I pushed it ajar. The wood swung open on its dangling hinge into a rush of must: the mossy odor of boots uncleared after a tramp through misty woods; of cigarettes lit frantically, one off the other, and then buried in the ash pile in a tray; of a body too long unwashed; and, layering the rest, the sweet, smoky smell of fear. Carson was pacing. Carson didn’t notice me. She was wearing only her white-cotton bra, with the half-deflated baby cups, and a pair of moth-eaten brown trousers, men’s trousers, with a belt. She was speaking so quickly to herself I couldn’t follow the rush of ideas or wild exhalations of breath, but her eyes shone black-gleaming as midnight oil and I could tell she was excited, furiously excited, by something that had occurred in her story. “Justin Henry,” Carson murmured, standing still suddenly in the center of the studio. “Justin Henry and the ferris wheel. Carson, you’re a genius.” As she paused, the wooden-wall studio awash in dusky shadows that made everything shine rustic, warm, as if the room were swimming in luscious chocolate tones, I admired the set of her head, her oddly manlike chutzpah, and I
thought, for a second, I should leave now—find a woman—go away and marry her, but of course this wasn’t the 1990’s and there were penalties attached to such absurd actions, though if I were an artist, like Carson, more of my oddities undoubtedly would be forgiven, and seeing her stand white-faced and stalwart and lock-bodied there, like her own little temple of doom, I loved and hated her so intensely I knew I had to move forward or die.

But now Carson dashed forward. Yanked a faded fisherman’s sweater off the windowsill glinting pale beneath mounded-up snow steaming against the glass. We were in the middle of a three-day thaw, and only in isolated pockets—piled against windowpanes—did the snow still shine crystalline and blinding and beautiful. Everywhere else—by the East House, Pine Garde, the woods, the Mansion, the lake—it had assumed the black-streaked yellowish ugliness of oatmeal. Carson tugged the fisherman’s sweater over her head, snatched a yellow rainhat off the coatrack in the corner. I knew where she was going. To the lake, frozen though it was, the bank a mass of hardening and melting ice and mud, to sit on a rock, hugging her knees, gaze across a sunsplit vista of cracking ice, sit and sit and dream and dream, working out the details of the story in her mind until, when she arrived back home in her studio, the words, dynamics, characters, plot, would catapult her to the end.

I crept behind the door. And now Carson darted outside. On her face glimmered the translucent loveliness that is the result of pure joy, exaltation, such as only young children experience, when sunlight wafting across an African violet’s dusky purple petals, or a prism irradiating a dusty corner with a red-tinged streak of sudden rainbow, is enough to transport them out of themselves in an intense spiritual flood of self-awareness, self-abandonment, that withers in adults or is revived through the near-sexual pleasures of art. I followed Carson at a distance of three or more yards as she stumbled downstairs through the West House, all those antique busts, scowls of white marble, and sumptuous emerald tapestries gazing on in a kind of mock classical horror at her precipitousness. And, as I tracked her, I was angry, yes, that I’d never experienced what she’d experienced. That I’d never dreamed of the opportunity. For, where Lulu Mae could peer into a canning jar at a preserved but indisputably dead fetus and glimpse, amazingly, manifold possibilities of life; where her imagination opened and opened and opened until, avaricious as a Great White Shark, it threatened to swallow the world as we’ve discovered it whole, I looked into that glass jar and saw a dead, ugly, repulsive fetus bobbing and stewing in its juices: I saw the world shut down, the world shut against me, and never in my life would it be any different.

Carson hurried across the lawn, the grass dried, brown, wreathed with melting snow. Hurried toward the woods, gleaming violet now with the first uncertain shades of a dusk that would spread, soon, into the black certainty of night She looked absurd in her oversized sweater, the glossy yellow hat tugged over her ears: but I knew she wasn’t feeling her ludicrousness, grotesqueness, sorrow; she was lost in the personable, pleasurable throes of her art and couldn’t see, then, though I saw with a clarity that seared into suffering so many years later, so many years after she was dead, that she was grotesque, yes, but she was enlightened, she was beautiful, as Bienchen was beautiful, Mick, Mr. Singer, Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Frankie; Frankie, with whom I identified Carson most closely that day, for Carson was the “we of us,” the tangible spiritual being beating inside us.
all whom I had to smother, to crack apart in my hands, for a dream is more dangerous than any reality, a dream furnishes, sometimes for long seconds in this awful existence of ours, remnants of hope.

And Carson wended through the woods where the brown and white deer loved to graze, their sleek hides spotted with moon. And Carson tramped in her thick-soled winter boots along the trail she’d refashioned after it’d grown over, a raggedy path toward the lake that never abandoned completely its wildness, so both of us snapped twigs and branches and crushed brambles as we hastened along. But, for some reason, she never heard me. Or—more likely—never let me know she did. And a pale, pock-faced moon glinted through the overhang of branches as we neared the lake, and Carson located her favorite flat-topped rock and settled there, tipping her body back, her face a mirror for happiness and clouds disappearing from the tempestuous, black-dappled sky and white shining moon that wrapped her whole body eventually, layered her with patches of light, so she rocked there all aglow.

And if I can’t remember exactly what happened after that, perhaps it’s the kindness of my own mind protecting me, the benediction of merciful memory shutting down. But when I grasped her by the shoulders, wrenched her around to look, she scarcely seemed surprised. Her great, luminous eyes were calm, and I thought suddenly, of Judas, of Pontius Pilate, though I wasn’t killing life but art, though I wasn’t killing life but a festering hope I needed to be gone that winter I was born, that later winter at Yaddo, and her huge, dark eyes shone as I pushed her forward over the rock, as she sank with a bleeding face and garishly scratched forehead into the dark water that lapped and lifted and buoyed her up, and though I wanted to believe she was dead, though she floated, unconscious, with the limp-limbed acceptance I’d always prayed for, imagined, in the end, I was the one who dragged her limp body onto the bank, I was the one who swiped her mouth clean of debris, I was the one who resuscitated her then fled through the woods knowing the other Yaddo guests would find her in hours, in days, slack-bodied but alive, alive, alive, though sicker than ever before, her pneumonia so acute she spent weeks in the hospital before she could walk again, before she could limp into a room and not feel suspicious toward every stranger sitting there, for, if her own sister could betray her, how could she consider the rest of the world a friend?

So, in the end, I didn’t destroy her but stripped her innocence. Or thought I had, though, truly, the joke was on me, for it was I who suffered the greatest loss, it was I who felt the final, beautiful, indefinable something inside me shut down and die.

And Carson?

Carson recovered, as all great innocents and visionaries will. Went on to write many more splendid books, for, though she was sick her entire life, though her sister nearly killed her, there is a quality about that kind of woman that will not admit defeat. Finally, paralyzed with strokes, hunched over so horribly the photographer almost despaired of acquiring a usable shot, I can imagine her laughing. At me, and at a world that finds it so impossible to embrace life wholly, to love. And when that terrifying, final brain hemorrhage stained her world red, when she went out from this life in a floodlight of color, I like to believe that she was happy. That she forgave me. That I can forgive myself, finally, or that I’ve offered penance through the three or four or fifty strokes I’ve suffered. For, in the end, nothing else matters, does it? This world. This beauty. This love, which I feel again as I lie in my bed, staring up at the ceiling lavendering with evening shadows, and, outside my window, house wrens settle in for the night, stir and coo and get sleepy in a warm, dusty rustle of feathers, and Linda comes in with another bowl of soup and, propping my body until it remains stationary against the pillows, feeds me, kisses me.

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