

Letter to the Man from Ely Who I Met in Tonopah

by Michelle Aucoin Wait

In the time we spent at the park's shared picnic table
talking into the wee hours of night, you taught me
how to say Ely with the same grace and gentle smile
friends used to instruct me on the pronunciation
of Nevada as they helped me unpack boxes bursting
with memories that weathered decades of dampening
and longing for a place where I felt I belonged, you traded
in your whiskey for a taste of New Orleans I had stashed away
from my travels to the places I used to call home, you shared
memories of faithful shepherd dogs who followed you from a boyhood
tending sheep on Basque ranches in the high-desert grazing lands
'til your children were grown and had babies themselves, you told me
how losing those good boys turned you into a cat man, your deepest regret
(*but we aren't here to talk politics*),
many jokes, one you excused *in the presence of a lady*
(my how we laughed at that one),
how you believed Covid had fractured us all, how you had faith
those bones would mend, how you got to see John Prine
right before he died, how he was your favorite storyteller,
you even sang me a few lines under the moonless sky ripped with stars.

I told you I had visited Tonopah a few times before—how on my way back
from Vegas with Bryant & Andy after seeing Joshua Trees,
their spiky limbs raised in praise of elevation, we parked
in the gravel lot adjacent to the Clown Motel so many have haunted,
how we snapped pictures, but ever afraid, I made some excuse
about wanting to get home before dark because I dared not enter,
how on the way to explore the International Car Forest of the Last Church,
I finally worked up the nerve to see the menagerie of clowns up close
and even tread lightly through the graveyard next door, how I wanted
to use the epitaph *life became a burden* in a poem, but I didn't know
if that was desecration or not, how after seeing the painted cars jutting
out the cracked dirt like colossal psychedelic wildflowers, I stumbled
into a rockhound's treasure trove where she revealed infinite possibilities,
how this time we were just stopping through, old friends seeking respite
on the front porch of lazy sunsets that stretch and burn violets and oranges
until extinguishing into charcoal ranges etched into the horizon, how I had written
an elegy of sorts after Prine's ashes were spread in Kentucky's Green River.
Thank you for asking me to read, for making me more a poet
in that moment than I've ever been before, for welcoming me home, for being
a cold drink of water in the parched wind, a shot of whiskey too.
With Much Love,
The "Lady" from Reno



Photo by: Michelle Aucoin Wait