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Bow and String

Michael Koenig

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Koenig: Bow and String

BOW AND STRING

Michael Koenig

All throughout the last month of my sabbatical, you were telling me you wanted us to stay on, even though you knew that it was simply not possible.

I thought you hated living here. You hated the rain. All along, I assured you that everything would be fine and went on with my work. I told you to go make friends.

It was Anna who suspected first. She ran into you at the market and you spontaneously began telling her how happy you were with me. You went on in this vein for several minutes. She immediately suspected foul play; she knew you never liked to share.

Of course I suspected you; every night you were absent I slept on top of the bedcovers with one ear to the door. In the morning you'd be there to wake me from my stillborn sleep, bringing deli coffee and a prosaic excuse, a newspaper, a compliment and a kiss. (Even though you'd never offered excuses for being late before.)

Car trouble was endemic that year, and you were always tired, but never needed any sleep.

I thought of confronting you, but a dying marriage is like a bad job. You wait until you get fired. You make them fire you.

I began to enjoy arguing; it was the only thing in my life that resembled progress.

After a few more months it was settled: we went home together. All three of us.

We are bow and string, horsehair and catgut. You are an irritant, rubbing on my skin.

This is what I've been doing while you've been away: I've been holding my suitors at bay. I've been chopping up the house for firewood; I've been making a spectacle of myself.

I left you a note on a parking ticket appended to your windshield. Why waste my time being subtle? That never worked with you.

Oh go on grow up, and I say, no, you grow up.

Consume me, I said. Let it be you and not the fire.

Let's close the book on this tawdry little episode, you said.

And I said: This is a public place. You can't have me thrown out of here.

Tell me how it all began: with a drink? With dinner? Did you feel awful about it the first time?

Were you able to convince her that it was all her idea?

A long time ago, one of your students became distracted in her work, prone to extravagant metaphors about the color of your eyes and the beauty of your smile.

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MICHAEL KOENIG

You tended to belittle such metaphors, but you found her persistent flattery pleasant. She continued her studies with another teacher, but after that she found that she was no longer especially gifted.

As years passed, she tended to your reputation on her knees, with cotton swabs and alcohol, occasionally adding a few paintstrokes in the style of the original. She loved her work, as she had once loved you.

And though she never completely abandoned her admiration, she eventually became your equal.

I met her at one of the parties, your lover. I shook her hand and shared a few ideas with her, then made excuses when she ran out of things to say. I thought her work derivative. I thought her unworthy of you. I spent the whole evening dumbfounded at the thought of her wearing sandals to one of these affairs.

You didn't notice. You were talking with someone else.

She put her finger in her glass and licked the wine from her finger. You came over and kissed her hand.

I let my wine glass fall on the floor, but you didn't come to see if I'd been hurt.

(You can't blame me for trying to press my advantages.)

I knew all along you would choose her.

I have gone back to the places you went with her. I have been sitting at a table in the corner, plotting the trajectory of your fall. And after

the last customer has left for the evening, I will stay to sweep out the floor.

I see her through a window, shabby with longing. Sitting there with her textbook and her notebook, shuffling her props on the small round table with uneven legs.

She's wearing a pretty black dress. Imitation velvet. I don't think I could pull it off, but you certainly will.

(I should tell her to make you wait. You're always so much nicer before dinner.)

She's early. You're late. She wonders whether you're coming at all.

You're so late she has to touch up her lipstick, or maybe that just what she always does when you come. She leaves the imprint of a kiss on the coffee mug.

I overhear you talking to her. She laughs at something you said.

You ask her to tell you a little about herself.

You pass compliments back and forth like a flu; you love her hair, she loves your tie; you love her legs, she loves your shoes.

She's eager for you. She'll probably invite you over to her apartment.

She'll sit outside in the car with you, jiggling the door latch; maybe she'll kiss you on the lips, maybe she'll blow you off with a handshake.

Maybe she'll invite you in. She's already tidied up. You'll never catch her unaware, not even in her sleep.

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Make your pitch. Baby, it's cold outside. Don't just sit there saying nothing, but don't be too bold. Even if it's a sure thing, she's going to make you do your entire presentation.

She's left the porchlight on. She says her roommate is out of town. She invites you to come in for a drink. You know what that means. I know you do.

She stretches out her arms like a scarecrow. Take off those warm clothes. Put down those heavy things.

She opens the bottle of wine you brought and pours it in a coffee mug. She keeps the cracked one for herself. You sit with her on a well-worn couch. She's saying something but you can't hear; you're looking for an opening, a chance to propose a toast.

You're so charming and by now she's drunk.

Touch her nipple. Go for it.

Now go be charming in your moment of triumph.

She's done for.

Is sex like music or is music like sex? Duet for tuba and violin.

Still life of prey artfully arranged. Dot and dash. Moss over stone. Tonight you'll make one shadow.

Every sunrise from now on, you'll be there to describe it to her. How will you ever find the words, without duplicating yourself?

She'll wake up with you on her breath. And the more she tries not to think of you, the sadder she gets.

She'll think that all the sarcastic things you say are funny because you never say them about her. She'll think that your roses were grown in her tribute.

She'll begin to believe your flattery, even if it doesn't convince her that it's true.

She'll exaggerate every kindness and disregard every slight. She'll have to think back hard to remember when she's ever been angry.

She will never fail to hold your interest. She will be endlessly accommodating to your funny little moods, amuse but not upstage you, brighten every room, make good of every disaster, speak intelligently in support of your arguments, until she can't stand it anymore.

I know that by the time you stop seeing her, that necklace will be in pieces on the floor, replaced with a far more delicate thing.

You'll keep everything you own, but she'll sell the jewelry.

Her love for you is drawn with crayon, vivid, but not indelible.

She doesn't know your barbarity yet.

You told her about me. You described me sympathetically, like someone with a lingering illness. These days I'm a catch in your throat.

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You say it's a matter of the heart. That's the phrase you use for every bit of behavior that you can't explain.

You've sent everyone an apology. I used to write those letters for you.

You have the nerve to bring your new fiancée to dinner: mounted and now stuffed.

I come to dinner and leave early, apologizing profusely to the hostess, who barely takes note of my absence.

One more place set at the table. A few chairs shuffled around.

I think it's awful how quickly everything returned to normal. Even for me.

It seems now as if I have hated you for as long as I loved you. It seems now as if I live merely to do you harm.

I am a firing squad, turned upon itself.

I've given up lipreading and gone back to my studies.

I have stopped trimming the roses. She has a garden of her own.