

# After Paradise

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*“For a man and a woman. For one plant divided  
Into masculine and feminine which longed for each other.”*

—Czeslaw Milosz: “After Paradise”

Tr. Robert Hass

# 1.

Thursday. Early September. On a field in Maine, the outskirts of a small town called Scoggin, here are three men. One of them holds a flashlight; the other two are toting armloads of wooden stakes and short, heavy hammers. The man with the torch is wearing a light jacket, khaki pants, and a grease-stained fedora; he is smoking an unfiltered cigarette. The others wear overalls and denim shirts. All three wear army boots.

The man with the flashlight, who is the layout man in charge of this activity, indicates a spot on the ground, and one of his crew promptly sets a stake and hammers it into the earth. The layout man takes a number of paces away from that stake and signals a new location with his light. A new stake is set, and the process continues.

The field—the locals call it “The Meadows”—covers a fair-sized area, perhaps thirty acres or more, and its grasses in this late summertime, ordinarily knee-high, barely reach the men’s ankles. The men are here before dawn, and though at this early hour the grasses are damp with dew, the morning sun will burn the dampness away and the dry and yellowed grasses will be brittle underfoot. No rain has fallen here—at least none of any consequence—since June, and when the leader has finished with his smoke he won’t simply toss it

away. First he will kneel to stub the burning tip into the dirt; then, when he is sure the cigarette is dead, he will field-strip it, splitting the paper by running his thumbnail the length of the butt and scattering the loose tobacco to whatever winds there are.

The three men make their way roughly around the perimeter of The Meadows, moving counter-clockwise. Sites are chosen, stakes are set, the noise of the pounding rings against the hush of the morning—wood-notes, hammer-songs. The trio continue the circle until they are nearly to the place where they began.

Now the movement is in the interior of the field, where yet more stakes are hammered into the ground. By the time the work is finished, an edge of orange light has appeared on the eastern rim of the world, and the sky has begun to lighten upward. It is 4:30. The men have established the layout for a traveling carnival whose vanguard—the trucks and trailers loaded with tents and platforms and rides and the gaudy signage of the trade—is already laboring up the long hill past Goodwin Memorial Hospital.

What the three men have made—and it is what they make in every town where the show pitches its tents and its concessions—is a real-size map of the carnival, whose three dimensions will be erected by the crews to follow. From the main entrance, which is at the front of the carnival, the tents and concessions as one travels counter-clockwise are first those designed to appeal to families and to children, then those for older patrons, *et cetera*, so that shows at the back of the carnival and down the left perimeter are increasingly “adult.” The concessions: popcorn, cotton candy, and drinks—but no beer, because the county doesn’t permit selling alcohol by the drink—are interspersed.

Their work done for the morning, the men leave the field, climb into the dusty Ford station wagon parked at the side of the highway,

and drive into town for coffee and safer cigarettes—and perhaps enough conversation to establish for them Scoggin’s samenesses to, and differences from, the dozen other northeastern towns they have platted this arid second summer after the war.

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The first of the carnival vehicles is already at the crest of the hill, already turning in to The Meadows, finding by rote its place on the map of the empty field—each new truck arriving at its pre-plotted place, and each one disgorging one or two or three men or women who set themselves to the business of unloading their trucks, setting their platforms and stages, putting up their tents like nomads arriving—how apt this is—at a temporary oasis in the desert.

From the foot to the top of Hospital Hill, the train of vehicles comes on. Vans, ten-wheelers, pickups dragging closed trailers—here is a mile or more of equipment, displays, performers.

Far back from the earliest arrivals, a green Chevy pickup truck towing a silver Airstream trailer is moving along a deserted street—River Street, so called because it parallels the Scoggin River—following a ten-wheeler with the words *World of Pleasures* elaborately inscribed across its rear doors. The script is overburdened with serifs and curlicues, and its colors, even in the weak morning light, are vividly red and yellow. *World of Pleasures* is what this carnival is pleased to call itself.

In the cab of the pickup: Frank Coggio, driving; the passenger beside him: Sherrie Adams, an exotic dancer known professionally as *Sharita*.

How to describe Coggio? He is small, dark, a man whose appearance and demeanor are entirely out of key with the pleasures of this or any other world. He wears a narrow snap-brimmed hat encircled

by a stained grosgrain band. He is smoking; one might infer from the pale-olive cast of his skin that he chain-smokes, that his fingers—also yellowed—are rarely if ever empty of a Lucky Strike tapped from the pack in his shirt pocket.

The name, Coggio, is what? Italian? Then one might imagine he came from South Boston, a nineteen-forties Italian ghetto of a thousand men as small, as dark, as fond of nicotine. Imagine, too, that he plays checkers—a hustler adept at contriving *twofers* and *threefers* as he collects his winnings from any poor mark who challenges his board-game skills; that he plays the ponies—Rockingham, Narragansett when he is in this neck of the woods—that certainly his hands are dirty from handling the kind of paper money spent on the World of Pleasures grounds.

But Coggio is not himself a carnival gambler. He stammers, forcing out his hard consonants only over two or three attempts, and the stammer seems intrinsic to his entire body: he has no aptitude for the shell game, or three-card monte, or any other con whose success depends on the dexterity of the concessionaire's fingers. Coggio's fingers are clumsy; like his speech, they stumble over small objects.

Coggio is a sideshow talker.

Which seems paradoxical. A talker draws the crowds, sells and takes the tickets, makes his success or failure by the effectiveness of his spiel. A man who stammers, who finds himself blocked on the wrong side of letters like *p* and *b*, and *m* and *n* (to name the worst of them), whose attempts to express himself are painful and patience-testing to normal hearers—how can he summon the eloquence to gather an audience?

But Coggio can, and does. It is a trick of some queer biological circumstance that when he is doing his job on a carnival stage, his

stammer disappears. Standing in front of the gaudy banner that proclaims Sharita's name to the world, Frank Coggio is as eloquent as a Bryan, a Roosevelt, or—to reach back to his distant Mediterranean ancestry—Cicero himself berating Cataline.

That eloquence may only be a quirk of Nature, though it might also have to do with Coggio's passenger. It might be that Sherrie—Sharita—is the inspiration that lifts him out of his flawed self, remakes him, gives him the smooth tongue that helps make a living for both of them. Frank and Sherrie are not married—they are rarely lovers—but they are a couple, dependent on each other, protective of each other, inseparable for more years than they might care to remember. And they are fond, one of the other, a fondness not always fathomable to the strangers among whom they move.

Not that Sharita is past her prime. She claims to be in her late thirties; one could reasonably add five years and not be far wrong. But she is still attractive, in the hard way of women who have never lived comfortably, never known a settled domestic situation, never confronted the world without the embellishment of stage cosmetics to convey expression to the farthest row of the house. And she is—ask Frank—“a good person”, who suffers and forgives the day-to-day humiliations of the responses to her dancing: the innuendos and catcalls, the indecent proposals, the sweaty hands that reach across the line that is supposed to divide performer from audience.

Perhaps she forgives them because she deliberately courts such negative—say “lascivious”—attentions. As the years have made their marks on Sharita, and as she is more and more distant from the days when she was part of the Jazz Age marathon-dance madness, Coggio has watched her raise the temperature of her performances: fewer clothes, more suggestive movements, an obscene act or two to swell the

crowds of men who supply the wolf whistles, the rhythmic clapping, the atmosphere that eggs the dancer on to show more, do more, allow more. Now the icebox in the trailer behind them holds a newly added part of the act: a three-foot rat snake, coiled inside the ice compartment.

Why a snake? Only a month earlier, in a small town in western Massachusetts, the local police closed Sharita down for “obscene and vulgar acts” involving a novel way of holding a lighted cigarette in not her proper lips. Next day, Coggio bought the snake at a pet shop in Worcester as an alternative and an embellishment to the cigarette routine. Sherrie rehearses with the snake—a safe and not impressively long creature—but she has danced with it in public only once, a week ago in Bangor. “I can’t do this,” she told Coggio afterward. “It scares the shit out of me; what if it really gets inside me?” “We’ll t-talk about it,” Coggio had said. “N-not every copper’s so t-touchy.” Now they’re back to the original act, where she feels comfortable. They only use the snake out front, to draw the crowds.

The snake sleeps in the icebox, where the cold keeps it sluggish and tractable. It gives Sherrie a start whenever she opens the icebox door: that creature half coiled around the diminishing block of ice that keeps cold the milk and tonic, the vegetables and wax-wrapped slices of meat on the shelves. When Coggio lugs in a new chunk of ice, a 25-cent block every other day, Sherrie holds the snake, then resettles it around the new ice. Before the next show, she has to brush the damp sawdust off the snake’s skin.

None of this—the obscene performances, the erotic costumes, the suggestive and vulgar content of her dancing—is to suggest that Sharita is an evil person. Sharita is still Sherrie Adams, a persona not only “good”, but God-fearing as well. Sherrie attends church, when she can and where there is Christian Science, and she wears

an anklet bearing the inscription *Love*. The word is probably wasted on Sharita's audiences, but as a reminder to Sherrie, no doubt it reassures her—and never mind the audience.

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Sherrie has slept off and on for most of the trip—the night drive down from Waterville to Scoggin, Coggio slouched over the wheel, his eyes fixed on the shoulder of the two-lane blacktop roads—and now, the truck and trailer halfway through the town, she wakes up and looks out the window.

“Is this it?” she says. What she sees through sleepy eyes are drab tenements, a storefront or two, a filling station featuring Cities Service products.

“B-b-big city of Scoggin, Maine,” Coggio tells her. “The n-next three days of your l-l-life.”

Sherrie sighs and stretches. “You get any sleep at all?”

“S-stopped outside P-p-portland. Caught forty winks in the p-parking lot of the train s-station.”

“Good for you.” She rests her head against the window, watching the town slide past. “Looks like nowhere,” she says.

Coggio smiles, showing yellow teeth. “Your h-hometown.”

“Funny,” Sherrie says. “Just watch out for that kid on the bicycle.”

“P-paper boy.”

“I don't see any papers.”

“He's f-finished for the d-day.”

Sherrie sits straighter, fiddles with the truck radio until she finds music. What she finds is a rendition of Duke Ellington's “Caravan.” She snaps it off angrily.

“Christ, I hate that music.” She says it with startling vehemence.

## 2.

Across the highway from The Meadows, a teenaged boy sits on a blue bicycle and watches the carnival being assembled. The sun is barely above the horizon; ranks of thin clouds have taken on colors that range from orange, at the land's edge, to a shade of yellow, half-way up the eastern sky, that might be called peach. The morning is cool, but that swath of orange suggests the day will turn hot, yet another in the hundred-odd parade of days without rain, and the sooner the shows and concessions are in place, the better for the men doing the work.

The blue bike is trimmed in off-white: painstaking triangles at the front tips of the fenders, a less careful striping along the frame; a bullet-shaped chrome headlight is mounted at the front, a nipples red reflector at the back. The boy—his name is David Willard—painted the bicycle himself, the body color *Royal Blue*, the trim *Eggshell*. He has been up since four o'clock, and though he did not arrive at the carnival site until after the three men had positioned their stakes and gone off to find coffee, he was in time to watch the first trucks unload and the first tent rise over the first stage.

A lot of work remains to be done—the cook tent with its stoves and tables and benches isn't settled yet, the merry-go-round and its

ponies aren't put together, and half the attractions are still mere stakes scattered across the beaten-down grasses of the field—but David consults his wristwatch and pushes off in the direction of town, pedaling hard until he is at the crest of the hill, then coasting down it, almost the whole distance into Scoggin.

His destination is Kate Meredith's house.

Kate is not quite his girlfriend. They don't go steady, they don't wear each other's jewelry, they aren't even in the same class at the local high school. David is a senior; Kate is a sophomore. They pass each other in the school corridors sometimes, exchange an occasional glance in the cafeteria. What they share—what brings them together—is the neighborhood, their white-collar fathers in this blue-collar town, and their membership in the Scoggin High School drama club, *Thespis*. At *Thespis* meetings, the two of them read together, play with or against each other in—so far—three school productions; David is a whiz at memorizing. The two of them often sit by themselves in far corners of the gym, heads almost touching, talking and laughing like a pair of happy conspirators. Someday their respective yearbooks will likely call them “most popular” and—quite possibly—“class clown”.

Today, Kate has agreed to go with David to watch the carnival set up. She didn't ask her mother if it was all right, this early morning adventure, because she was afraid Mother would say no. She would have asked her father—the parent far more likely to say yes—but he has been away on business for nearly two weeks. She thinks it likely that at five a.m., the time David has appointed, her mother will be sound asleep, a book or a magazine butterflyed open across her stomach.

The clock on the stand beside her bed already reads 5:15. She's running late, but then, so is David. In the dimness from a hall night-

light, she moves about, dressing, being careful—never mind trusting the depth of her mother’s sleep—not to make any unnecessary noise. Kate is fifteen, a naturally pretty girl with solemn brown eyes and a full lower lip; she can skip such refinements as makeup, and she is in the final stages of getting ready to tiptoe out when there is a noise at the window, a sharp clatter like small hail.

Going to the window, Kate sees David looking up at her from the gravel driveway, grinning and waving like a ninny. Annoyed, she goes to the window, slides it half open and kneels to speak to him in a voice the play books call *sotto voce*.

“What do you think you’re doing? You want the whole world to wake up?” She frowns at him over the windowsill. “My gosh,” she says. Boys have no sense of decorum; she thinks she has known this all her life.

David doesn’t bother to talk softly. He is breathless from pedaling hard across town, excited by seeing Kate, in a hurry to lead her to the World of Pleasures.

“I’ve already been over at The Meadows,” he tells her. “Hurry up, will you?”

“Would you *please*? My mother’s asleep.” This in a hoarse whisper.

“They’re already unloading. They’re putting up the sideshow tents.”

“I’m hurrying. I’ll meet you out front.”

“If I get a ladder, you can climb out the window.”

“We don’t have a ladder, and I’m not climbing out any window anyway. What is the matter with you?”

“We could pretend we’re eloping.”

If this isn’t the silliest thing Kate has ever heard, it comes pretty darned close. “David—” she begins, and then realizes she is speechless.

But David is not, and he plays it out. “Honeybun?” he says, “did you pack a suitcase? I’ll hold the ladder for you.”

“—will you please GO!” Not a whisper. She closes the window, almost too hard, and turns away.

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David shrugs, but he is sure Kate isn’t truly angry at what he said. He knows she makes allowances for his awkward affection.

He takes up the bike and wheels it around to the front porch of the Meredith house. Once there, he lays the bike on its side and sits on the next-to-the-bottom step. Kate’s bike is nearby, chained to the railing.

David thinks his worst fault, or one of his worst faults anyway, is pushing his jokes one step too far. His father, the minister of the Congregational Church, is forever chiding him. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you?” his father says—daily, it seems. “You always have to take it one step further, and cross over the line of common sense and decency.” His mother puts it differently. “David, why must you always have to have the last word?”

But he likes to think that the “last word” in this present instance, the scenario in which he elopes with Kate Meredith, isn’t really a crossing of the line. Elopement isn’t going to happen in the next four or five years—or maybe further off than that—but it’s a thing he wants to see happen. He so much wants it that he has just now amazed himself by joking about it with the object of his desire. Not that Kate *knows* she is such an object. In Mr. Clifford’s English class last year, there was a line of poetry David knew he would never forget. It went, “Never seek to tell thy love, love that never told can be.” It fits his case exactly, which is why Kate thinks he is trying to be funny, and that’s all. If she knew the painful truth. . . .

While he waits, he considers his near future. The plan to watch the carnival build itself has long been arranged—since mid-summer, in fact, a scorcher of an afternoon in August, when Kate came home from the YWCA camp in Winthrop and he bumped into her at a Twilight League baseball game, Genest Concrete against Allied Shoe. He was by himself, on a bench behind the home dugout; Kate was with her father, sitting in the first-base bleachers. David was watching her—it was between innings—when she looked in his direction and waved. After the next inning, he climbed up to talk with her.

“Hi, Katie.”

“Hi, Dave. You know my dad.” She turned to her father and touched David on the shoulder. “Daddy? You remember David? His father runs the Congo church.”

“He’s the minister,” David had said. “Nobody *runs* a church.” Not that he’d meant to belittle his father’s importance, but the touch of Kate’s hand through his shirtsleeve had thrown him somewhat off stride.

“Good to see you again, David,” her father said. “How are you enjoying the game?”

“It’s a good one, sir. I like it when they’re close.”

“So do I—though I thought Grimes should have held on to that line drive in the third. That would have changed the whole complexion of the game.”

“Yes, sir. It certainly would have.”

It had been awkward, making conversation with Mr. Meredith, feeling the sweat trickle down his side, when he’d rather have been talking with Kate. Even looking at his own feet—because he wasn’t sure how directly he should look at her father—what he saw was Kate, her white ankle socks, her penny loafers with actual pennies

tucked into both of them. The embarrassment was really getting to him, but then Mr. Meredith rescued him.

“I feel like a hot dog,” he’d announced to no one in particular. He stood on the bench and sidled around Kate on his way to the end of the row. “Either of you two want anything?”

“I’d like a tonic,” Katie said. “Anything but Moxie.”

“Nothing for me,” David said. “Thank you for asking.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir. I had a big lunch.”

What a jerk he’d been, to say a dumb thing like that. What difference did lunch make at four in the afternoon? Katie’s father must have had him sized up as some kind of nitwit. “What do you see in that Willard boy?” he’d probably said to Katie when they got home. “He sure as hell didn’t inherit his father’s gift of gab.” But would Mr. Meredith have said “hell”? Yes, probably. He’d been in the war, in the Air Corps; he hardly ever went to church. He’d have called David a moron in no uncertain terms.

But the afternoon ended well. He was able to talk with Kate—her father was at the concession stand *forever*—and agree with her how lousy it was that summer was going by so fast, school already on the horizon, but Thespis would start up and they’d be in plays together, and hey, there was a carnival coming, Labor Day weekend. No, Kate wasn’t sure she could go, but she’d try to get up early the first day, to watch the shows set up. That had been David’s idea, his fall-back in case she turned him down for an after-dark date. “It won’t be as big as the circus,” David said, “but it’ll still be like going behind the scenes—if we get there early enough.”

So here he was, plenty early enough, but stuck waiting for Katie to finish whatever she was doing. His father must be right. Once,

when he'd been waiting to take the family to the movies, he'd said to David, "If God had intended women to be on time, he wouldn't have invented mirrors." Mother had overheard him, and she made them wait even longer.

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Upstairs in her room, Kate takes a thin blue jacket from the closet and shrugs into it. From the top shelf of the closet she brings down the pink cap she wore for softball at the YW camp and carries it with her across the dark hallway to the bathroom. She closes the bathroom door and turns on the light. Brushing her hair—it is chestnut colored and falls to the middle of her back—she ponders it, wonders if it needs washing.

She is of two minds about her hair. She knows boys like girls with long hair, that it is the first thing they notice about a girl and, usually, the first thing they praise. She knows Daddy likes it, because whenever she raises the possibility of getting it cut, he is eloquent in protest. "It's your crowning glory," he says. "It's the artistic frame for your pretty face." Trained as an engineer, he isn't usually so flowery, but something about her long hair inspires him.

Mother sees the matter differently. She seems to be neither for nor against Kate's long, straight hair. Her own hair, after all, is as long as Kate's, though she wears it up most of the time—sometimes in a bun, sometimes in one or two braids bobby-pinned upward, once in a while in something called a French twist. Her attitude toward her daughter's hair is often wary. She agrees that men like long hair, "but that's the problem," she tells Kate. What is she worried about? "Men like to touch a woman's hair," she says. "The silkiness, the softness, it pleases them. But some of them like the pleasure too much; they get carried away."