The Wavering Red Light

Gretta’s breasts and belly are blue in the light of the computer screen. The end of her cigarette, by contrast, lights up red. So very, very red.

TheLover.doc

It is 1996. It could be anytime in fall. I know this because I’m sneezing. Lance’s pores are open. His eyelashes are long, his eyebrows wide and scattered. His forehead shines.

When he’s being looked at, he can’t look. To look is to feel curious, to be interested, to lower himself.

Eight bodies lie in the grass outside the lodge. The steam rising from their bodies can be seen through the inconstant light of the fire in the ash-and-coal-filled fire pit.

A man holds a running hose over his head and wipes his face. It is Lance, suddenly and inexplicably repositioned from our grassy bed. A red dot which is the burning end of a cigarette can be seen wavering. It is his mother’s.

Soon I will be cold. I get up, wrap a sweaty towel around my shoulders, step into my sandals. I walk around to the driveway, to the front of the old house—the big house that eclipses the trailer house, the past that eclipses the present, the extreme poverty that eclipses relative poverty. The old Victorian bears traces of magnificence: twelve-foot-high ceilings, intricate crown molding, the masonry and woodwork of
men. Now abandoned. Left for something smaller. An appreciating asset left for a depreciating one, something smaller. I appreciate to nothingness, step by step. As if the worn wooden stairs of the porch were always such—sweet nothingness, containing nothing, nothing coming, nothing going, a thought, a precedent. No one stops me. I am followed by dogs.

The porch steps are rounded with wear, both from my husband’s family and the family of the farmer who lived in it before them. Who, after running the house ragged, rented it to a family of Native Americans in exchange for long hours, subminimum wages, and an absence of insurance in an environment of broken backs, missing fingers, sleepless harvests.

The door is not locked. The lights do not work; there are no bulbs, there is no service, not anymore. I am in the kitchen. I have seen it in the light. To my left are white cupboards. The walls are bright aqua blue, or orange, or both. I can’t remember which. Inside these walls, Lance’s parents threw raucous all-Indian parties: broken windows, broken limbs, broken vows. Inside these walls, they found the drum, brought to them by a friend, and soon after chose the drum over the bottle. They sobered up, for good. The vows, unspoken, sealed shut again and they took a good look at the children.

Six footsteps across raised, torn linoleum, I bump into nothing. I reach out—the wall is cold and almost soft. I feel around for the doorway, my hand gets caught on a nail. I suck on it, drawing blood. The wallpaper peels.

Have the stairs always groaned so loudly? When Lance and his sister jumped from the middle of the stairs to a stack of pillows at the bottom, did they bump their heads on the threshold like other kids might? Did they laugh despite? The rail up the stairs stops halfway up.

There are sixteen stairs. At the top stair, Lance once held a shotgun inside his mouth. "Just like you the first time," he explained. "Except mine was loaded." It is this top stair, or the door looming above it,
that awaits me. It is as if it always has, if only to send me running back outside. I am an intruder, after all. I can’t seem to help but intrude.

I am reminded of something Lance had said, that I belonged nowhere, that I wasn’t responsible for my displacement. No more, he said, than he was. An off-reservation, intertribal Indian, fallen in love with a white girl.

I feel the walls, the floors, I have seen them in the light. Dead flies and dirt crunch under my sandals. Chunks of wall are missing. I follow the wall-ness up, up toward the door. It terrifies me. There is a knob. It is cold and smooth in my hand.

“You know, the author of that book was a Communist,” Lance told Gretta when she first began reading *The Lover* some years back. “That’s what I heard.”

“You know what I herd?” Gretta said, co-opting Lance’s favorite joke.

“Sheep,” he answered, always the good sport.

“She *was* a Communist. She left the party. And so what if she was?”

He shrugged. “She was a Nazi sympathizer too.”

“She *slept* with a Nazi sympathizer. Or so it is rumored.”

“So maybe she was a racist too.”

“You sleep with me—does that make you white?” That’s what she said, but in truth some of the condescension with which “the little white girl” in *The Lover* described her Chinese john and the Vietnamese in general made the book difficult to read, much less digest. Sometimes it seemed that the very structure of the narrative cast a furtive glance toward Vietnam. But that didn’t mean she was inclined to back down. “Have you ever even read the book?” she could have asked, a wild card, but she thought of something better. She grinned unbearably because she knew she had him in a corner: “Better yet, *I* sleep with you. Does that make me Indian?”