The Deer in the Mirror
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Holladay, Cary.  
The Deer in the Mirror.  
The Ohio State University Press, 2013.  
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The Days of the Peppers

My mother has fallen in love. We talk about it while we feed stray cats in the parking lot of Culpeper General Hospital, where I work in the cardiac ward.

“It’s silly, I know,” she says, “at my age.”

Cats glide out from the shadows. She has trained them to expect her every night. Pouring dry food into pie plates, she calls them by name: “Whirly, Tactic, Sylvie.” Their heads move fast with gobbling motions. The chow smells mealy. “You should go back in, June,” she says, glancing at her watch. “Isn’t your break over?”

“I’ve got a few more minutes.” With an effort, I add, “And it’s not silly, how you feel, but he’s a lot younger and sort of engaged.”

“Don’t I know it.” She bends down and wiggles her fingers at the smallest cat, but it darts away. “Tomorrow I’ll bring barbecued chicken.” That’s their favorite, especially if she microwaves it and gets it over here still warm. Other cats materialize, and she says softly, “Hey, Twinkie. Argyle. Polka Dot.”

The lights in the parking lot make everything look like reflections on a piece of foil. My response to my mother’s crush is total terror. I’m scared she’s losing her mind, although it’s clear she isn’t. Scared these feelings will end in humiliation or some other disaster for her.

The man she loves is a human jukebox. I have to admit he is amazing. Call out the name of any golden oldie, and he’ll sing it. I can see how he has
caught my mother’s imagination, this knobby-headed longhair with his gui-
tar and his zillion different voices—the Beatles, the Four Tops, Don McLean,
Tommy James, Looking Glass, and the Fine Young Cannibals. He sings at Cul-
peper’s only downtown nightclub, downtown consisting of three streets and
the train station.

My mother doesn’t care anything about pop music. What made her fall in
love with the human jukebox, whose name is Shannon Gurley, is the way he
sings “Goodnight, Irene.” He was born to sing that forgotten song about I’ll
see you in my dreams. People ask for it now, people who never heard it before
he sang it, as he does every night, with his whole heart, and suddenly you’re
not in a bar anymore, Goodnight, Irene, goodnight, you’re on a leafy street at
dusk and you’re young and I’ll see you in my dreams. And in my mother’s
dreams, and I know this because she has told me—out here in the parking
lot beside the Dumpster, with only the cats to hear us—in her dreams, it’s oh,
a hundred years ago, and Shannon Gurley is reaching for her on a summer
night back when life was simple.

“He must have had so many women in love with him,” she says. “A good-
looking man like that, he must have groupies.” She pauses. “He’s the most
wonderful person I’ve ever known. I’ve never felt this way about anybody, not
even your father.”

A cat rubs its head against my ankle, but I don’t dare pet it, I’ve been
scratched too many times. “Where do you expect this to go? Do you see any
future in it? Mom, he’s young enough to be your son, and he’s living with his
girlfriend.”

“As a matter of fact, I called him today.” She chuckles. “Woke him up
about three o’clock this afternoon.”

“And?” I’m sweating through my T-shirt, through my scrubs, almost
through my winter coat, a pink coat my mother bought to cheer me up when
my husband and I divorced.

“And, well, we talked,” she says. “I told him how much I like ‘Draggin’ the
Line.’ I can never hear that song enough. Now look, you can’t stay out here all
night. Your patients need you. How are the sundowners?”

She has learned the lingo from me. Nurses know that when night comes,
older patients may get agitated and call out the name of a loved one, usually
a daughter. They’ll call out from their beds, lying there with the lights off and
maybe not even knowing they’re in the hospital, halfway asleep and crying
out a name.

“We’ve got three or four. They’re asking for Darlene and somebody named
Beety.”
“How do you stand it?” A cold breeze fans across the parking lot, and she pulls her jacket tightly around her.

“As long as I don’t really listen, I mean listen and count the number of times they call out, I’m okay.”

My mother reaches out and touches my cheek. “You’re freezing. Promise me you’ll drink some hot chocolate.”

“Maybe I will.” There’s never time to fix cocoa, and anyway, the cardiac ward is always too hot. The only snack I ever want is the orange sherbet we keep for patients, regular and sugar-free.

The cats are gone. My mother collects the pie pans from the parking lot.

“Party’s over,” she says.

“I didn’t see them leave,” I say. “I never do.”

She stacks the pie pans, balancing them in her hands. She baked pies all the years I was growing up, because my father and I loved them. I know how those pans feel now, sticky from the cats’ busy tongues. She will take the pans home, wash them, and bring them back tomorrow night.

“My kitties,” she says. “In them, I see the hand of God. The very eye of God.”

“I worry about you, Mom, out here in the dark, night after night.”

“You don’t have to spend all your breaks checking on me.”

“You can talk to me. Just know that, Mom. You can tell me things.”

“It’s all right. I’m just like always,” she says.

For a moment, I think she means she is over her infatuation with Shannon Gurley, recovered as if from an operation or an illness that’s serious but short-lived, say an episode of atrial fibrillation, and my knees go weak with relief.

Then she says, “They’ll never get tame. I hoped for so long they would, but now I don’t expect it. The feral ones are wildlife, really.”

She hugs me and then she’s gone, heading toward her car, no doubt on her way to the club. The wide navy-blue sky is edged in freezing silver. Up in the mountains, it’s probably snowing.

I get caught up in the sundowners’ calling. The names are probably daughters who are home exhausted or at work, worried or maybe relieved that their mother or grandfather is being taken care of by other people. I get a picture of the person being called, and sometimes it’s not a person being summoned but a pet, a sweet old mutt who’d lay his head on the pillow, or a cat that would hop up and knead the covers.
There’s no consoling the sundowners. When I was new to nursing, I used to pretend I was the person they were asking for. “Right here,” I would say, but the trance-like calling continued, except for one old man who opened his eyes, frowned, and said, “You’re not Thurla!”

I told Melissa about that. Melissa is a nurse too, working in the cardiac ward along with me. And she is Shannon Gurley’s girlfriend.

And tonight it’s getting to me, the calling: “Beety, Beety, Beety.” I remember some kitchen towels my mother had, plain ones she embroidered with beets and carrots and radishes. My mother was the beautiful daughter of poor parents. Before she was born, her father was a minor celebrity, a pitcher on the baseball team known as the Culpeper Peppers. He played only one blazing season in the nineteen-teens. Bursitis put a stop to his career. The Peppers’ field is where the hospital now stands. The Dumpster where we feed the cats, my mother has said, is where first base was. She has a picture of the team, and judging from the background of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I’d say she’s exactly right. In the picture, my grandfather’s wearing knickers, a jersey, and serious-looking baseball shoes, laughing so hard his eyes are shut. He was twenty-two.

My mother was so pretty that she was chosen to do a wonderful thing. In 1953, Culpeper acquired fluorescent street lights, the first such lights south of the Mason-Dixon line. To celebrate, the city spread out picnic tables all down Main Street, the longest supper table in the world, reads the caption in the framed newspaper clipping that hangs on my mother’s bedroom wall. She got to flick the switch that turned on the lights. The grainy photo shows bountiful tables, hundreds of citizens, and the glow of the lights that to this day grace Main and Davis Streets. My mother isn’t in the picture, but I know how she looked. Her black hair waved back from her heart-shaped white face; her mouth was always startled. “I look like a ghost,” she says of every picture of herself.

As a child, I believed the abundance was her handiwork—the food on the tables, the excited crowd, and the lights themselves.

Her father, the Pepper, lived to see her turn on the streetlights and get married, though he died before I was born. With her looks, she could have married money, but she didn’t. My father managed a dry goods store on Main Street owned by an elderly woman in Warrenton. By the time my father convinced her to call it a department store, people were already shopping at big discounters out on the highway. At last, the woman sold the building to a Chinese couple who opened a restaurant there. She hadn’t offered to sell it to my father, though over the years, he’d “expressed an interest,” as he put it.
He was philosophical about the sale and patronized the Chinese restaurant, which folded.

Over the years, the building has housed a pet shop, a beauty parlor, and a mobile phone store. Now it’s the club where Shannon Gurley sings, the storefront windows running with steam when it gets hot inside and he’s worked up the crowd with hits from the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, and beyond. He sounds just like WKCW, *Ohhhllldees fourteen twenty on your FM dial, all the best of classic pop, rock, and soul.*

How does he remember all those songs? Melissa tells me she wakes up at night hearing *click, click, click.* It’s a special pen he found at the Dollar Store, with a little flashlight inside. He writes down the titles of songs he hasn’t sung in a long time, keeping them fresh in his mind.

My mother has confided that, hearing the Bee Gees while grocery shopping, she has stopped in her tracks, “overcome with love for him.” I picture her pausing by boxes of pizza in the frozen food aisle, enraptured by the Bee Gees’ rapid, reedy melody, which evokes for her the voice of Shannon Gurley, and I wonder if I will ever feel that way.

So I’m hearing “Beety, Beety, Beety,” and I’m thinking about the dry goods store, how my father would get everything shipshape and shining every single day and greet his customers with old-fashioned courtesy. I’m back in time, remembering how my mother and I stayed up late during my high school years, eating “poor man’s shrimp cocktail,” as she called it, her special mixture of ketchup, horseradish, and lemon juice, with Saltines for dipping.

I’ve been a nurse long enough that I can think hard, can remember deeply, if I stay very quiet while working with patients’ IVs and medication. When I was growing up, my mother loved to hear about my classmates’ activities. She relished the story of how a football coach saved a boy’s life with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. “The breath of life,” she’d say. That made me decide to be a nurse: I was at that game, on a cold November night when I was sixteen, and I saw the boy start breathing again.

Melissa comes out of a patient’s room, thumps me on the arm, and says, “Well, you’re not Thurla!” and we laugh. She gets me every time. “Here.” She hands me a patient’s chart. “Did your mom go to the club again?”

“She might have,” I say, trying to be nonchalant. How much does Melissa know? Everything, though I haven’t said a word. Melissa has seen my mother at the club lots of times. Sometimes I go too, although these days I don’t know whether I should sit with Melissa or my mother, if by sitting with either one, I’m taking sides in a war for the heart of Shannon Gurley.

“Shannon’s not there. He stayed home sick,” Melissa says.
Even now, my mother must be making her way through the dim room, the air sour with last night’s smoke, finding a tiny table with a candle on it, and slipping off her jacket, the lug soles of her oxfords holding a nugget of cat chow. She’ll look toward the square of linoleum where Shannon perches on a metal stool to sing and play guitar, and she’ll see it’s empty. His backup singers, shadowy sidekicks, won’t be there either. They won’t play without him.

She’ll be crushed.

The chart slips out of my hands.

Melissa picks it up and gives it back to me. “I’ve always thought your mother is an extraordinary person,” she says. “Does she love music all that much? The kind of stuff he sings?”

“It’s a new interest,” I say. “She knows who Van Morrison is, and Tony, oh what was his name? ‘Knock Three Times.’”

“Drop a quarter in Shannon’s mouth and he turns into Neil Diamond. It’s nuts, when you think about it. He made a record once, did you know that?”

“No,” I say, imagining my mother scanning the club in hopes he’ll stroll in, hoping he’s just a little late. Does she think about my father when she is there, remembering all those years when he ran the store in that building? It smelled of floor wax and of the cloth he unfurled from enormous bolts, back in the days when women sewed.

When did I become so conscious of time, measuring my fifty years against past lives? It has to do with my mother, the way her life dazzles me, all the way from the first fluorescent streetlights in Dixie, 1953, to her passion for the human jukebox who sings in the building where her husband sold dishes and shoes.

“It wasn’t a very good record,” Melissa says. “People told Shannon they couldn’t tell the difference between him and the real singers, but I could. He’s talented, sure, but he’s also kind of afflicted.” There’s something other than affection in her voice, measured and objective.

“But ‘Goodnight, Irene,’” I say. “My mother really likes that one.”

“That’s different,” Melissa says. “That song, and him. Well. Have some sherbet.” She’s eating some. She herself resembles sherbet, her skin and hair and pastel scrubs all the soft flavors of lemon, raspberry, and rainbow.

Like my grandfather, her great-grandfather was a Pepper. We’ve talked about that.

“Shortstop, right?” I ask as she licks her spoon. “Your great-granddad?”

She doesn’t bat an eye. You can switch topics with her, just like that. “Till 1912.” She tosses the cup and spoon into a trash can. “Then, third base. Right out there, that’s hallowed ground.” She waves toward the glass walls that face
the parking lot, the mountains, and the highway. The glass is tinted light brown. At night, reflections make a tawny shimmer. This floor is so high that the Dumpster is just a little cube. If my mother was still out there, I would see her feeding the cats, as I have seen her so many times.

Now Melissa’s talking with other nurses, explaining QT intervals. She’s a great teacher. She teaches her patients too, those still awake late at night. Another sundowner tunes up, calling for “Deb,” making two syllables out of it: Dayab, Dayab, Dayab.

I think of all the threads of conversation my mother and I have picked up and dropped over the years. I try to focus on the chart Melissa gave me.

Something explodes against the wall of windows, and we whirl toward it—Melissa and the other nurses and me. A bird has hit the glass.

Whenever that happens, it blasts the heart out of me.

“A dove,” says a sharp-eyed girl named Kendra.

Sometimes the birds drop straight down, dead, into the parking lot. This one catches itself, breaking its fall with flapping wings, and disappears into the night. We’ve all been holding our breath, and we let it out with a sigh.

“Look,” Melissa says, pointing to the glass.

The bird left its outline traced in dust. The black sky allows us to see the shape of its wings, with individual feathers brushed onto the glass as if with sand. There is the empty space where the eye would be, and the angle of the beak. No image of the feet, which were a split-second too far back on the body to register on the glass.

“A dove,” says Kendra softly. “As long as it doesn’t rain, it’ll stay there."

Jack, my ex-husband, loved trains, the sounds of the whistles and the wheels. At night in bed, he’d say, Listen. Pretend it’s wartime and all those trains are headed to the front. Before we got married, he made it clear he hoped for a family. I didn’t want children, but I thought being married would change me; surely, after a year or so, I would crave a baby.

But I didn’t. Years went by. Strangers, meeting us, felt free to demand why we didn’t have kids. Jack didn’t pressure me, but he got more and more involved in Civil War battle re-enactments. I used to go along to take pictures, using black and white film so the scenes looked real. Jack loved a photo of himself astride a horse on a hilltop. The shadows were just right. Man and beast appeared strong but frayed at the edges, as if they’d fought all day. “Man, that could be Jubal Early himself,” said Jack. He was spending a lot on his uniforms and equipment, more than we could afford.
When we separated, he said, “I always hoped when I was old, I’d have the
same wife I started out with.”

“That sounds impersonal,” I said. “You’re not really wishing for me.”
I knew he was thinking of his own parents, of his stylish mother energetic
in expensive woolen clothes, a good sport, doing all of the driving.

Soon after we divorced, his mother died and then his father. He inherited
their house and enough money so he could devote all of his time to re-enact-
ments. Now when people ask about children, I say, “It wasn’t in the cards.”
Their expressions turn sympathetic. They think I wanted them. My stomach
flutters at the almost-lie.

I never see Jack. I heard he moved out to the country. The trains roll
through Culpeper, lonely and determined and forgotten, each hoot the final
cry of a gone world, and I picture Jack cocking his head until all that’s left
is the velvet hum of the vanishing wheels. Maybe he’s married again. He
wouldn’t stay with a woman who didn’t fall silent at the sound of a train.
Whoeversheis,sheshaslearnedthatmuch.

So now the days are growing short. Irish coffee’s half-price at the club. Silver
Christmas stars are up on the light posts along Main and Davis Streets, cour-
tesy of the fire department, and Shannon Gurley’s including carols in his rep-
ertoire, leaning back his knobby head and closing his eyes as he sings about
ayn-julls.

I went to the club last week on my night off, and there was my mother,
spellbound, unaware of anybody except Shannon, who slumped on his stool
crooning the Chipmunks Christmas song, hula hoop. The crowd was drinking
beer and singing along. My mother had a cup of tea, and when I touched her
arm, she looked up with sparkling eyes. Shannon Gurley finished the song and
slid off his stool to take a break. My mother turned the red glass candle-holder
between her fingers and said, “Why do they call this place a club? I always
thought a club was something you had to join. This is just a bar, isn’t it?”

Shannon loped by our table, tugging his guitar strap over his head. “Hey,
Dorothy,” he said to my mother. “Hi, June.”

“Shannon, can you come here?” my mother said, her voice full of feeling.
He turned around. “Ma’am?”

“I want to tell you something,” she said.

He ambled back to us.

“Lean down.” My mother reached up, grasped his shoulder, and murmured
in his ear. I smelled his scent of old denim.
“Oh, wow, Dorothy,” Shannon said. “Gosh.”

Then he was gone, and my mother said, “Tell me I didn’t make a fool of myself.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Nothing really,” but she was glowing.

A little later, Melissa stopped by our table. She has known my mother for years, ever since my father went into the hospital with his own heart trouble. Back then, my mother was so grateful for her kindness.

My mother barked, “Are you and Shannon getting married?”

“Mom,” I said, alarmed by the bluntness, so unlike her.

Melissa swallowed, her throat moving above the V-neck of her angora sweater. “There’s foot-dragging going on, by both of us,” she said. “To tell you the truth, Dorothy, I don’t know if we’ll ever get married.”

“I just wondered,” my mother said.

Melissa said, “When he’s not singing, Shannon’s a man of few words. I kind of wish he’d talk more.”

“He does just great,” my mother said. She lifted her cup of tea to her lips. It must have been cold.

I ought to insist she close up her house and move in to my apartment or to the assisted living facility where so many of her friends have gone, gracefully or in fury or resignation. Yet doesn’t she have hundreds, thousands, of days left, of nights to feed stray cats in the parking lot that used to be the Peppers’ field?

Melissa read my mind. She pulled another chair to the tiny table and sat down, touching my mother’s hand. “Let’s talk about the Peppers,” she said.

I’ll never forget the expression on my mother’s face, how important Melissa’s words were to her. She said, “Okay,” and her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them back.

So Melissa talked about the Peppers, and my mother chimed in with stories of her own. I thought about pictures—the Peppers team photo, the pictures of Jack at his reenactments, my high school yearbooks with Jack’s smiling face and mine, the slick pages smelling like memory itself, the edges sharp enough to slice my fingers.

I went to the bar, ordered three Irish coffees, and took them back to the table. Melissa was still talking about the Peppers, and my mother nodded the way she did when my father was sick and Melissa was gently explaining what was wrong with his heart.

We sipped the Irish coffee until Shannon came back from his break and sang again.
So what did my mother say to Shannon Gurley on the phone today, waking him up on a winter afternoon when he was sick? Did she ask him, the man of a thousand songs and few words, to meet her somewhere? To sleep with her, run away with her? I picture him sneezing and saying, “Okay, Dorothy. Wow, Dorothy. Gosh.”

Melissa’s at the nurses’ station, yawning at a computer. The sundowners have gone quiet.

“Hey,” I tell her. “You’re supposed to be a night owl.”

She flops her head on her arms, letting out a loud pretend snore.

“Melissa?” I say, and she looks up, reading the fear in my eyes.

“Oh, June.” She rises from her chair and steps out from behind the desk. “Shannon would never hurt your mom’s feelings, or take advantage. She’ll be all right.”

“But she’s getting old,” I say. One day she’ll be gone, and then the sky will make me think of her forever, a wide sky on fire with sunset or blue with afternoon or pale green before a storm. She has a way of entering a room that catches at my heart. It’s her uncertainty, as if she doesn’t think anybody will be glad to see her.

An old man wanders into the hallway, squinting, his gown too big for him. “I can’t sleep,” he announces. “Don’t you girls tell me to watch TV. I hate TV.”

“That’s okay,” Melissa says, her voice so warm and cheerful that he moves closer to her. She calls him by name. She’s better at that than I am, learning their names. “Come here,” she says, taking his arm and leading him toward the wall of windows. “Look.” She points to the outline of the dove, all dust and impact on the pane. “See that? Where that bird hit?”

“I don’t see anything,” the man says. “It’s nighttime, is all.”

“You have to kind of look past the glass, at the sky. Look beyond the window, and you’ll see what’s on it,” says Melissa.

We wait while the old man stares.

“It’s like a painting,” he says at last. “That’s fine, real fine.”

“It’ll happen again,” I hear myself say. “Another bird’ll hit the exact same spot. Bam.”

Melissa says, “You’re right, June,” but it’s like she’s talking about something else, not the bird. “All you have to do is wait.”