

Mistress of the Drift [wkng title: *Surprise-homeless*] ~Dixon {cf. notes at bottom}

She doesn’t know where she’s going. She doesn’t know where’s she’s been nor where she is now. She doesn’t really know she doesn’t know. She just drifts. It’s like a boat without a paddle on a lazy river.

Which river, which city? Doesn’t matter, they’re all the same, however many of them there have been. She does know to stay on the move, ahead of the police. *No sleeping and camping in public places*: she can read. She’s had to give up most of her possessions because of it, but she doesn’t miss them. The sedan, the tent . . . some other life, was it ever hers? A slight feeling of misplacing something now and then, like when she first wakes up. And there are some victories, though she doesn’t often know to celebrate them. She has learned to sleep sitting up, for instance. You pick out a clean page or two of a newspaper, find a bench with a good back, cross a leg, set the paper on your lap and let it come.

Sleep is so gentle. Inconspicuous. It connives to not even tip her head over too far. And its blanket of sound, or really a barrier against sound, that high-pitched distant chirr of crickets in her ears, it hums like indifferent consciousness.

She eats well—a little starchy, that much bread, but she makes do—even with the most difficult tasks—like where to go to pee or doo. *It was defecation, I know . . . Seeing me alone in the moonlight above . . .* Mnemonics of sorts offer some hands. *Green is keen, red is dead*. They float in on the shreds as needed, variants and repeats like stanzas. *Red is stop, green is trot. The park in the dark: walk toward the talk*.

She might have been a secretary once, as accustomed to these shreds as she is. A faint pentimento of herself with a serious paper shredder floats to the surface, a shower of twice-shredded word matter gentles down , though today’s confetti is not much help until somehow she has imagined turning the slicer’s strip-cutting to the paper’s width instead of length. Hence, imaginary full phrases twist and twiggle across her day, stringy familiars, often just when she needs one. *The rain in Spain falls mainly on the videogame*—you can stand there at the window all day watching those sneaky sharp-shooters and in-your-face monsters. And inside the store, umbrellas bundled in a tall can just beside the door—like candy canes—when it’s rainy out.

She can be bold because her body knows that confidence trumps violence in a mean street, and she walks like she means it. Proud, Harriet the Secretariate. She usually has insurance, too, when she can find a shopping cart. Or make a show of sorting through a wire litter basket. It works: people actually put money in her hand. ‘Here, darling...’ and ‘Sorry it isn’t more.’ It

doesn't grow on trees, money, but it does seem to fall from them—the garish unbending ones, street lights and traffic signs.

The trouble with money is the choices it brings. Band aids would be better. One man gave her a Swiss Army knife: 'I've been there,' he said and closed her hand around it to make her keep it. It has a toothpick and tweezers, and tools she doesn't even know what for, but it opens cans and bottles like a Swiss trooper. It has someone's initials ...silver letters glued onto it. F S D. She's named it F-S for short.

—FS, you hungry? You still got that fork and spoon in your kit?

She has spared one thumbnail for pulling open its blades—a saw, a corkscrew, one of those screwdrivers that comes to a point. Knife, file, that mean-looking can-opener. Tweezers, pliers, a little magnifying glass. A ruler. They thought of almost everything. If they'd called her [at the office, Hello, Miss Funderburke, would Mr. Kekele be available? Silk stocking, its hiss when she uncrosses her legs as Mr. Kekele glides by shaking his head no at the phone she's holding up . . . if they'd called her...

What was she just now thinking? If they'd called her...

Mr. Kekele, his office had plants she watered. And dusted. The spiky one that always put her in mind of some tropics. A peaceful plant until he'd knocked it over when he pinned her to the floor so fast she thought the building was falling up around her. And when that was over she'd been expected to pick it all up, shop for new pot even. She had, a \$200 one, plus the three packets of salt from the diner up the street. She'd waited a week to resign just in order to make sure—Succulante on that, you prickly prick—and it had come quickly, its sheen turning to brown streaks, the spine curling, the mushy rot at the base—the poor plant was screaming. And the crowning blow: she'd written a note for under the pot, so when the next girl was told to throw it out, she'd meet the truth: *Dear one, Watch out for Mr. Kekele. It's he who poisoned me.*

And that's what she'd tell them if the Swiss Army had called her about a crowning master function for their knife!

What?

Can't remember. It's gone with the all the intentions of those 24 tools. 48? 15? She can't really count them because she loses her way, but she also has a protective sense. Someone—a surprise like opening a blade you'd never seen before—could burst from the periphery and snatch it away from her. So she keeps it on an inside pocket of her pinafore, often with her hand around it. Her right hand because that's where it would belong if she ever really needed it, like the man who gave it to her, *I've been there*, he said. Or was that Mr. Kekele, who was going there helter-skelter whether she liked it or not.

Where is the Swiss Army when you need them.

Didn't they beat Caesar once—all of Gaul is divided into three parts, except for this little stretch of Avernian hills swarming with Helvetian varmints who are destroying our supply lines.' Ah, Miss Funderburke, you knew your stuff once. Cast your gaze wider:

It's a funky movie theater of long ago, with college roomies who were into film studies and illegal potions, and the hip feature was three movies on one screen at the same time, two of

them in black and white, and whether you'd tucked that doped up postage stamp under your tongue or not, you were soon experiencing time mushy at its base like the spiky spines, memory like a new issue of a Vercingetorix stamp, resembling Pat Boone, singing in falsetto like your grandmother, who made you afraid to fall asleep. The people in the films don't even know what they're doing, and that's what the park looks like today, the dog park, the kiddie grounds, couples strolling, or if not actual couples at least two at time, can they all really know where they're going? A machine, all its parts oblivious to each other but working together. An occasional down-on-his-luck type, she'd like to say hello, but that isn't the right word. She closes her hand around her knife, closes her eyes, casts about for a tune, a ditty . . . *Swing low, sweet Harriet, coming for to carry me roam . . .*

Even as she rose from the bench—she does this abruptly, needs the momentum to get all the way up—even so, she knew about the boy on the bicycle thrusting down the path toward her. In fact, part of her wanted to meet up with him, an impulse possibly left over from the tramp she couldn't find the right word for. But she also knew, as if from a former life, that they could collide. So she is suspended, half way between bench and boy yanking his bike to avoid her.

His handle bars wang into an about face, the bike nearly flips, the boy is air-born and stops only at the next bench, his head plowing up against the concrete foundation of that wood-slatted bench.

Oh, dear. She looks around. Someone to help him. But they are alone. It's curious: they are so alone it's as if they're on a stage with spotlights trying to tell you where to look next. One wheel of his bike is still turning. She scuttles herself over to him. He's moving. He's bleeding behind his ear. He's moaning and bleeding. Quite a lot. She's pulling her pinafore from her neck, muttering there, there, I know, I've been here before. Pressure, you need pressure on the wound. 'You are bleeding profess...profusion— profusely! Bleeding profusely.'

How, with a concrete bump? It should be a scrape, a lump forming. Then she sees the clamp holding the concrete foot in place—which is fake concrete and anchored with a rusty coupler which is bent, in a mean way, meant to do harm. What's wrong with these park personnel. 'You have sliced him,' she says. Her pinafore is heavy, oozing with blood now and you shouldn't even take the time look at it, the slice. Just smother the profusion.

She does look up and down the path, someone will help, is there a doctor in the park? She lingers on her Swiss Army knife, which fell from the inner pocket when she whipped off her pinafore. What they might include would be a Swiss medic. A handsome young man with three or four languages.

And then the next ten minutes, or thirty, or forty-five, of staunching this bleeding, of soothing this frightened boy, roll out. This red carpet, she smiles.

She smiles too at her use of 'ok.' It's not an expression she's used lately. 'You're ok, we're just stopping the bleeding, help is coming, what is your name?'

She doesn't get it, but she says it's a nice name, and how old is he? And then, what in hell, Harriet? Pressure, keep the pressure, put that knife away, someone will think you did it, someone will come and officials will be called and they'll be asking her how, what went down—

look at that bench, would you!—thank you for being a good citizen. This fog lifting, it feels like a new.... **LIFE!** she says. Oh, oh, she says, for the keyhole expands, *fwaap*, she even sees the boy's mother tonight at dinner, ferreting out the story, wondering if she should give him that much freedom, not mentioning it for the time being.

She wishes they would hurry the hell up and get here. She's tempted to peek under her bloody sponge pinafore, but doesn't. Pressure, pressure, until it subsides. Stops. The boy has a lot of blood and he's conscious, one hand around her wrist as if helping her staunch his wound.

She keeps murmuring ok, ok, which originally meant 'all korrect,' an editor's mirth in signing off on one more proofing. The boy whines and she says, no, no, it's ok, going to be all ok, but with each stock comfort she feels herself slip a notch, twist—is it clockwise or counterclockwise—on a rheostat of clarity: **LIFE**. The tremendous world is back, settling around her. She's a nurse, a secretary, a mother, a citizen. She knows what to do here and is doing it and can see ahead and even aways back into the Drift.

She can leave her rhymes behind. She can no longer accept alms from the passers-by. That would be lying. Should she return the knife? Pass it on to someone more in need? Put it on a mantel piece, in some new life, and never tell its story?

—*That's just Harriet's Swiss Army knife. —Don't know. —She won't say.*

God, there was a time when . . . And it bobs off down stream, that misty lazy river.

And now, finally, there are people. Much chatter, questions, advice, pointless sighs. One man is holding his phone to his ear. She peeks. She raises her pinafore enough to see under it—the blood slowly pools but has stopped running. She lifts her soaking pinafore to the side of her face—why not, she is covered in the boy's blood. She holds his hand and presses the bloody glop to her face.