

DOOR OF CONFOUNDING

Lou Robinson

She wanted to be a horse handler. All her life she gathered testimonials. She listed all tentative information. She tried to imagine--causing a pain behind one eye--buying a trailer to take the horse back, now, today, to what? The word intriguing is such a case. Once understood to mean deceitful, coming through the French from entangle with the intention of issuing a warning. A boy grows up to be a man.

The horse shared the barn with her father's motorcycles. A Harley. An older Harley. An older Indian in baskets. Bridles hung from the handlebars and 'a dusty red Sioux Indian saddle rode the old Harley, the one that was retired. This Harley had been ridden during the war, through Indianapolis in the rain, spilling him three times, a wounded, delirious, AWOL Eddy, riding home to see her mother, Mona, before they were married. There was an ache in the presence of these machines, in the very premise of a thing that can't stand on its own, that is too heavy for a girl to lift, but whose weight can crush you. She would have had to leave him lying

on the road in the rain. The mare was half-Saddlebred, half-Arab, a field accident. She lifted her feet high, that was the saddlebred. She had fears, expensive needs, a weight of affection, a wayward soul. The motorcycles are still there. What could a girl hold on to, for a future?

They have stopped for coffee on the way to Maine for Linnie's wedding. Before he retired, he had conducted an informal survey, her father is saying, of how men and women release the coffee into their cups from the coffee urn in the faculty lounge. Men push down, he says, and women lift up. To a man. Her mother had become intrigued, surveyed the bridge club and their husbands, and had to agree. Later, the three of them watch each guest approach the urn across the dance floor under the strobed light in the pine barn called 'club' at Linnie's wedding reception, and he is right. There are no exceptions.

Suddenly he worries that no one will make a toast to the bride and groom, and begins to write on a napkin. She and her mother cringe,

grin ruefully at each other as he rises. On the napkin he has written: 1945 Harley, Linnie in saddlebag.

Later Cat asks friends. One remembers that he used to push down on the little lever, but always worried that the urn would tilt and crash, so he switched to lifting. "But even you were dumb enough to push down first," she says. She feels cheated. All along she thought the things were meant to be lifted; people who pushed were going to break it off. Why hadn't someone told her they were made to move both ways? Why had she never taken one apart? Was it a man who first took it apart or put it together and knew it could be pushed? Why hadn't she watched how He did it? She had been tricked into another feeble, feminine gesture.

Riding behind him when she was five, she pretends to be French. His shoulders block the sun. Her mother teaches French. It is a special female domain, intuitively decipherable, like a language of known affections. She spares herself the meanings to keep the mystery, the purr, and to have words of her own that her father can't explain. And there is more, French is sex. A sly connection to the motorcycle magazines she discovered in the rack at the candy store. Finding the one where they put their hands down the women's blouses. They handcuff a woman to a motorcycle and drag her. Her father's wide black leather saddlebags say Eddy in rhinestones. Intense rise and guilt, reading these

things. Riding behind him all the way to Indiana, bugs smash on her teeth, she says le, ta.

Was vanilla female, was chocolate male? Was a chair a woman? A kind of sex dyslexia set in. She still says wedding when she means funeral, and vice versa.

Riding behind them in the back seat of the van, through the snow to Maine, she composes his obituary; it will be stern but forgiving, glossing over the obvious wounds. At Linnie's funeral that afternoon she hears him telling her aunt that he has noticed a new trend in obituaries: they refer to the deceased 'companion' or 'survived by her friend anti partner' . . . Father and daughter, writing each other's obituaries, anxious to find a form that will be acceptable to the dead, slumbering at last in forgiveness and vindication.

Every noon in the second grade she went to other people's houses for strange sweet green beans so that the parents could concentrate; Eddy to write his thesis, Mona to type it. A speech teacher, right? Enough to strike you dumb. In the evenings a series of children with speaking problems were led up the long stairs to the gable room with his grey leather chair and the window made of small panes of glass where they put the Halloween turnip.

Murmurs of encouragement from behind the door, which he explained must be closed so the child won't be embarrassed. Speech

Therapy. Which witch. All the w's in her first grade books underlined. A letter for the occult sounds owls make. The creature she and her mother saw in the window, his mouth making a silent sound. "He" because it spoke, even though they couldn't hear it. The mythic significance of the double-u which she could pronounce perfectly and the boy could not. Would he grow up to be a man or something else? Yearning passing to a rootless, groundless resolve resides in this sound, for the root does not bass, and the yearning reveals no root. She never sees the child Eddy tutors. She imagines it is because the wound of her perfect W would break his heart. The boy who is also other, behind the door of confounding. This is the first hint of her kind of power in the world and what a burden. She cuts some holes out of her skirts.

Eddy takes her with him to home debate tournaments, where she gets to flip the time cards, watching the second hand on his watch. In the car on the way home they argue. "How can you say one thing that you know is right, then switch and take the other side? I can't do that. I wouldn't do that. I would just quit."

"You confuse yourself - with words," her father says, secure in his birthright, shaken by all that escapes speech. Twenty years later he says this again. He means she is moved to action by rhetoric. "At least I never had a guru, Eddy." "No, you were a guru unto yourself," he says solemnly.

She sees sentences in her sleep: Things can form but not attach. Hooks can be removed and reexamined. She breathes in all her murderous possibilities. She dreams that she murdered her wife. Her wife had disturbed her sentences. Without thinking, she reached over and squeezed her neck, and it popped. Ever since, years, she had been living underground waiting for the knock on the door, the badge, the arrest, the trial. A horrible moral structure presses against her tongue. Backed by relentless dogma, it holds in breath. She throws up a little king.

Home from kindergarten, she and her best friend used to play Killing the King up in the attic. They bound an invisible king to a chair and whipped him. Sometimes they whipped themselves.

In the stomach the king has been left to establish himself as a given. So there is a limit on the range of possibilities . . . This boundary squeezes sense out of words, words out of sync. She gathers testimonials to revolt:

One from the newspaper--

"State police are conducting a door to door search in Horseheads for the prime suspect in a stabbing death, who sent a 68-page letter to the police signed 'Jezreel.' In this letter Jezreel says, 'I can't wait to render him back to where he came from and can just picture the look on the little runt's face. well I finally killed his physical body. yes I know you untrue souls think I'm

insane...•

From a hitch-hiker--"I was wondering if anyone would pick me up or if someone would pick me up and kill me, but I think my vibes are too good for that since I stopped being depressed. I was really depressed last week, I used to think about killing myself e' bt, like from a doorknob or something, but all the ways you can kill yourself are too painful, know what I mean, I guess if you're too depressed to do anything, killing yourself is too much work. Anyway I decided to stop being depressed because it was so boring talking about myself all the time. I mean when I was depressed I would have gotten into this car and started telling you all about how I lost \$500 my rent and I don't have a place to live and everything. I was hoping to get in the car and hear a lot of interesting things from you that I could think about for a change. When I was depressed I used to look terrible but since I stopped I've been dressing up. I've been looking good for about two weeks now. I don't know if I can keep it up. I'm in college. My own college, I call it the College of Trial. I study whatever I want, but at the same time every day. Like if I'm going to do reading, I do it at the same time each day. I'm adding an anti-sexist class that will go on all day long. This way I can study anywhere, in Ireland, when I go to find Stiff Little Fingers. Did you ever feel like death is just 20 feet behind you? I'm just ahead of mine, that's why I'm going to Ireland. Look at my tongue. I painted it green.

In Ireland they paint their tongues green so their words have the power to make things real.

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