

Lynda Hull

Link to bio: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lynda-hull>

Shore Leave

She wears the sailor suit—a blouse with anchors, skirt puffed in stiff tiers above her thin knees, those spit-shined party shoes. Behind her a Cadillac's fabulous fins gleam and reflected in the showroom window, her father's a mirage. The camera blocks his face as he frames a short that freezes her serious grin, the splendid awkwardness of almost-adolescence. He's all charm with the car dealer and fast-talks them a test-drive in a convertible like the one on display, a two-tone Coup de Ville. But once around the corner he lowers the top and soon they're fishtailing down dump-truck paths, the Jersey Meadows smoldering with trash fires. He's shouting Maybelline, why can't you be true, and seagulls lift in a tattered curtain across Manhattan's hazy skyline. Dust-yellow clouds behind him, he's handsome as a matinee idol, wavy hair blown straight by sheer velocity. Tall marsh weeds bend, radiant as her heart's relentless tide. They rip past gaping Frigidaires, rusted hulks of cranes abandoned to the weather. Her father teases her she's getting so pretty he'll have to jump ship sometime and take her on a real whirl, maybe paint the whole town red. For her merchant marine conjures names like condiments—Malabar, Marseilles—places where the laws of gravity don't hold. She can't believe her father's breakneck luck will ever run out. He accelerates and spins out as if the next thrill will break through to some more durable joy. So she stands, hands atop the windshield and shouts the chorus with him, and later when they drop the car he takes her to a cocktail bar and plays Chuck Berry on the jukebox. She perches on a barstool and twirls her Shirley Temple's paper umbrella, watches the slick vinyl disks stack up, rhythms collecting, breaking like surf as her father asks the barmaid to dance with him through "Blue Moon," then foamy glass after glass of beer. The barmaid's sinuous in red taffeta, a rhinestone choker around her throat. Her father's forgotten her and dances a slow, slow tango in the empty bar and the dark comes on like the tiny black rose on the barmaid's shoulder rippling under her father's

hand. The girl thinks someday she'll cover her skin with roses, then spins, dizzy on the barstool. She doesn't hear the woman call her foolish mortal father a two-bit trick because she's whirling until the room's a band of light continuous with the light the city's glittering showrooms throw all night long over the sleek, impossible cars.

1933

Whole countries hover, oblivious on the edge of history and in Cleveland the lake already is dying. None of this matters to my mother at seven, awakened from sleep to follow her father through darkened rooms downstairs to the restaurant emptied of customers, chairs stacked and steam glazing the window, through the kitchen bright with pans, ropes of kielbasa, the tubs of creamy lard that resemble, she thinks, ice cream. At the tavern table her father's friends talk rapidly to a man in a long gray coat, in staccato French, Polish, harsh German. Her mother stops her, holds her shoulders, and whispers this is a famous man. Remember his face. Trotsky—a name like one of her mother's fond, strange nouns. He looks like the man who makes her laugh at Saturday matinees, only tired. So tired. Her father pours the man another drink of clear, bootleg gin, then turns smiling to her. She has her own glass. Peppermint schnapps that burns and makes her light, cloudy so grown-ups forget her when she curls on a bench and drifts then wakes and drifts again. At the bar her mother frowns, braids shining round her head bent to the books, the columns of figures in her bold hand and the smoke, voices of men, a wash of syllables she sleeps upon until her father wakes her to the empty room. The men are gone. A draft of chill air lingers in her father's hair, his rough shirt, and together they walk the block to morning Mass. Still dark and stars falter, then wink sharp as shattered mirrors. Foghorns moan and the church is cold. A few women in babushkas kneel in the pews. Still dizzy, she follows the priest's litanies for those who wait within life's pale, for those departed, the shades humming in the air, clustered thick as lake fog in the nave. The priest elevates the wafer, a pale day moon the spirit of God leafs through, then it's a human face—her father's, the tired man's and she is lost and turning through fragrant air. Her fingers entwined make a steeple, but all she sees is falling: the church collapsing in shards, the great bell tolling, tolling. 1933 outside and some unwound mainspring has set the world careening. The Jazz Age ended years ago. Lean olive-skinned men sport carnations and revolvers, and in the

Country of her father, bankers in threadbare morning coats wheel cartloads of currency to the bakeries for a single loaf. The men who wait each night outside the kitchen door have a look she's seen in her father's eyes, although it's two years until he turns his gentle hand against himself. But now he touches her face. Her father stands so straight, as if wearing a uniform he's proud of. She watches him shape the sign of the cross. She crosses forehead, lips, and breast, and believes for a moment, her father could cradle the world in his palm. When they leave the church and its flickering votive candles for market, it is dawn. The milkman's wagon horse waits, patient at the curb, his breath rosettes of steam rising to the sky that spills like a pail of blue milk across morning. She prays that God take care of the man in the gray coat, that her father will live forever.

Lost Fugue for Chet

Chet Baker, Amsterdam, 1988 A single spot slides the trumpet's flare then stops at that face, the extraordinary ruins thumb-marked with the hollows of heroin, the rest chiaroscuroed. Amsterdam, the final gig, canals & countless stone bridges arc, glimmered in lamps. Later this week his Badlands face, handsome in a print from thirty years ago, will follow me from the obituary page insistent as windblown papers by the black cathedral of St. Nicholas standing closed today: pigeon shit & feathers, posters swathing tarnished doors, a litter of syringes. Junkies cloud the gutted railway station blocks & dealers from doorways call coca, heroina, some throaty foaming harmony. A measured inhalation, again the sweet embouchure, metallic, wet stern. Ghostly, the horn's improvisations purl & murmur the narrow strasses of Rosse Buurt, the district rife with purse-snatchers, women alluring, desolate, poised in blue windows, Michaelangelo boys, hair spilling fluent running chords, mares' tails in the sky green & violet. So easy to get lost, these cavernous brown cafés. Amsterdam, & its spectral fogs, its bars & softly shifting tugboats. He builds once more the dense harmonic structure, the gabled houses. Let's get lost. Why court the brink & then step back? After surviving, what arrives? So what's the point when there are so many women, creamy callas with single furled petals turning in & in upon themselves like variations, nights when the horn's coming genius riffs, metal & spit, that rich consuming rush of good dope, a brief languor burnishing the groin, better than any sex. Fuck Death. In the audience, there's always this gaunt man, cigarette in hand, black Maserati at the curb, waiting, the fast ride through mountain passes, descending with no rails between asphalt & precipice. Inside, magnetic whispering take me there, take me. April, the lindens & horse chestnuts flowering, cold white blossoms on the canal. He's lost as he hears those inner voicings, a slurred veneer of chords, molten, fingering articulate. His glance below Dutch headlines, the fall "accidental" from a hotel sill. Too loaded. What do you do at the brink? Stepping back in time, I can only imagine the last hit, lilies insinuating themselves up your arms,

leaves around your face, one hand vanishing sabled to shadow. The newsprint photo & I'm trying to recall names, songs, the sinuous figures, but facts don't matter, what counts is out of pained dissonance, the sick vivid green of backstage bathrooms, out of broken rhythms—and I've never forgotten, never—this is the tied-off vein, this is 3 a.m. terror thrumming, this is the carnation of blood clouding the syringe, you shaped summer rains across the quays of Paris, flame suffusing jade against a girl's dark ear. From the trumpet, pawned, redeemed, pawned again you formed one wrenching blue arrangement, a phrase endlessly complicated as that twilit drive through smoke, applause, the pale haunted rooms. Cold chestnuts flowering April & you're falling from heaven in a shower of eighth notes to the cobbled street below & foaming dappled horses plunge beneath the still green waters of the Grand Canal.

Night Waitress

- *Lynda Hull, 1954*

Reflected in the plate glass, the pies look like clouds drifting off my shoulder. I'm telling myself my face has character, not beauty. It's my mother's Slavic face. She washed the floor on hands and knees below the Black Madonna, praying to her god of sorrows and visions who's not here tonight when I lay out the plates, small planets, the cups and moons of saucers. At this hour the men all look as if they'd never had mothers. They do not see me. I bring the cups. I bring the silver. There's the man who leans over the jukebox nightly pressing the combinations of numbers. I would not stop him if he touched me, but it's only songs of risky love he leans into. The cook sings with the jukebox, a moan and sizzle into the grill. On his forehead a tattooed cross furrows, diminished when he frowns. He sings words dragged up from the bottom of his lungs. I want a song that rolls through the night like a big Cadillac past factories to the refineries squatting on the bay, round and shiny as the coffee urn warming my palm. Sometimes when coffee cruises my mind visiting the most remote way stations, I think of my room as a calm arrival each book and lamp in its place. The calendar on my wall predicts no disaster only another white square waiting to be filled like the desire that fills jail cells, the cold arrest that makes me stare out the window or want to try every bar down the street. When I walk out of here in the morning my mouth is bitter with sleeplessness. Men surge to the factories and I'm too tired to look. Fingers grip lunch box handles, belt buckles gleam, wind ruffles my uniform and it's not romantic when the sun unlinks the end of the avenue. I'm fading in the morning's insinuations collecting in the crevices of the building, in wrinkles, in every fault of this frail machinery.

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