

Before the society, the good-bow-your-heads-type-women, the parlor women & piano playing out onto the alley. Before a red-corrugated iron fence held them in. After the burro express, before & damn it, the Volstead, this war & that, the girls coming every other stage then train, Ana Charleau & Eva Blanchard née-Wiley. Around the early boom of the new century, before sainted city folks, before statehood, knife fights out the street, dirt through the alley, ours, a sheer perfume to it.

Go by the way of
the river, girl, days
no tender sex dare say mother
fucker, she bells her petticoat
dropped to the floor, mister, boots
by the doorframe, lain fastened
in this barrio all prairie gone & breath beyond
her work dress, naked her hands
on the brass rail, he enters.

Creosote brought by the rain, I wake blessings
mama, the morning light I hang my stockings on the line,
1909 a cold November but this morning, the way
light bends past the mesquite through the dirt it seems
you'd swear God lived here too, this place called God-forsaken
you don't know this damp smell of the plant growing somewhere
mid-desert, reaches high through the mud walls. These hands mind
the chickens, their eggs, same as home, one long prairie you
& father I could not stay for reasons you'll not understand
I cannot explain every time he leaves it's buckshot
all my pieces, how I must comfort myself in the arms
of all this dust & even more, it is mine now, Hannah's, go well.

It was he who visited my sleep again
every foothold cross the kitchen important
what take the soul strap my ass to Reno
five dollars one push, he vitiates,
he, two hands on my hips, rough
faceline below water I swear what wouldn't
shadows do on a dirt street, possess, this
life is mine now, every cent back to Reno,
get your hold, Abigail, Abigail, money
by the door, the desert right out
he unfolds into all that dirt past
the Santa Cruz, past the stage I took here
accomplished in his very swagger, very cumber
of my brace one girdle on down, one cat rubbing my leg
get out you beat the door
the neighbor girl fresh in from Phoenix, you okay, Tough Luck,
it was just a dream, the daybreak time to work a call
get yourself an absolute straight line, one rail down
his absolute pocket money withheld a wife, lifework as priest
or merchant, the cat in my lap, let's have a little brew, Mary,
the dawn's still a tease upon the hill over yonder, that cold moon,
my girl, this stray I feed my baby, one of them.

Camacho, one pistol down the bar top knows us.

You pay your dues, girl. You work tonight. You want whiskey
the moon.

The sky held it all up & in, tune on the player piano so fast
you want kick your shoes off, rouged up cheeks like holiday
every day. Shoulders fast to music, just shoulders, eyes closed.

You do want that January moon
pressed sheets & a see-through scarf cross the one window
see that moon through.

She said stop & time did a falling goat
one down your last departure, his continual come
back when I find my two hands on the wall
a rose trellis up-up-up the roof in a grand city
I never could stand for. He is there back & forth
whether he knows his name or not. I cannot
one foothold his city bottles pours & so does
this wild west, hung petticoats, ironwood
a line whipping your last creosote I fathomed
amor ten times behind a brick wall, held my back up
against it, tomcat at heel, those always do father such dawn
my ass'd never see not drunk. There's a wedding going on
hurry up he changes his mind.

Every girl, Annie, Mollie, ramshackle the verb says noon a white phantasm passing, strung lights, every hers barrio, even when she's cold the desert burnishes fingers alabaster wrought the ditchline. From any farm to your own crib, it's sir, eyes, sir, averted—here is your side of the street, here's mine. Oranges from Sonora, gilt under the shade tree we photograph well, pay our monthly dues. This singing all over town is a sandstorm, its thieves, the very bread of bad language how I make my money, athirst now, dirt barrio, end-of-winter intent on warpath, horsemen, whatever o'clock he enters I'm dressed then I'm not.

Sun, bread, up again the backyard choosing dress
the day that hanging the line, cat at my heel.
They know something we don't know, you see,
crook & eve of prairie home or Frenchie's faraway,
roundabout the window frame le chat, babyyyy,
Frenchie says, mine. My younger days in New York
we had horses in Brooklyn, bicycles,
bicycle the Bridge when I needed it for someone
freer than I, married to such holds you housebound
never could give birth. I do believe I can never
go back. I am corner crib 12, Ana, my babies,
so many girls. These our public selves, cover legs downtown
but bare feet on the Alley, the littlest chase
butterflies, everything down in their bellies, mothers'
said get on now, how they lay & up & ball,
shed again baby girls for butterflies here
after winter, up from Mexico, for us:
stay many, many moons Jolie screams, fifteen.

There's a wedding going on hurry up
he changes his mind.

Open palms a hawk the world I hope he's happy.

I've decided not to stay. Strong molding holds body weight, her
soprano outcry spread over the yard, your insides aches because of
it

they soared, every last man'd take
the hole weeks at a time for the sound of

they can't touch amped up on forever hold your.

There's a hundred different ways to skin a top off a man
underwing, found the brazen he never had forgot about it.

That humor held I found there's always a river.

Dirty river apparition I figured the way with hinges, not unlike those
Texas girls,
burn the very structure, cotton relentless, a man's back won't stop it
grow.

Are you here to stay or are you going.
Or are you gone.

It was as if the whole world extended right out of that corner say right about sundown. I slept the whole day at the Red Front. Me & Annie, Mollie, sissy, baby Jolie, & Big Flo, cussing all the way to sleep, the man at the front swatting his hand at her in disgust, her in men britches, her having drank too much, all of us weary in the morning light. The whole world in a stocking leg drops the ground, asleep, our heads hit the pillow & rush to eat, back at that corner crib line up, painted & waiting, every coquette for herself, the end.

Right down the line, they all went there, those Christian society women thinking their man's out playing cards, hrmph. This Mason Society, hush, hush, I've seen them all at Madam Eva Blanchard's dressed well, that kind of respect for a woman, not perverse like you might think. Even on the street in the light they dipped their hats to us. We, always on trend, hair rolled, rouge, & lipstick, the society women looked to us for chic, wouldn't you know. When it's over, they will be sent to their homes, no matter where they be. This much was understood.

Eva Blanchard had none of Ana's hard wrought pioneer ways. That say one word & you'll be decorating a tree kind of sass. She was brought up in New York, daughter of a rich immigrant, a Mr. Wiley, high up at the bank, married a rich trader with rough hands couldn't give her children, found that fancy feeling so hard to articulate in a street boy barely a man; she slipped out one night & went West so easy with this boy-man, his boy-man body, full lips, soldier courage. The trip used all that girlhood wildness, freedom, love making every train leg the road, up. In San Francisco she was left alone, he, so be it, a gambler, everything transitive in a Wild West town, down in the parlors picking women; those laughing girls with well-kept hair, red mouths. Eva thought poor, poor me for a minute at best. See this was America & she did think from watching her daddy she didn't have to lie in wait like her mama & all those women waiting after their men, she was her father's daughter & she had learnt things. Them walking Manhattan streets, he saying now tell me what you think of this, what about that? And at night he reading to her, & every time her eyes widened, he stopping to ask her every thoughts. Going West gave her eyes. And she'd never be the kind of girl room bound waiting. She took the street herself, woke soon after in a border town on the line, a pueblo town just becoming a state, learning womanly ways from one hard-assed Anna Charleau.

Anna Charleau: born, California, to parents come West in the decades after the Rush. Raised in the woods, knows her way around gun, bear, drunk men getting frisky, drunk men wanting one thing. There never was any gold, or, droves before had exhausted the earth its very treasure, wrung the world that is California & got used to living like gypsies cause they never knew how to live in a city anyway. Life had to have purpose, pan in the hands by day, limbs used to the river, your daddy's perpetual logged hands, bottles by night; a woman knew how to get by out there. When papa Charleau died it took nothing for Anna's mama to find a way to get by & Anna was then thirteen; her neither.

Toughluck from Phoenix: I knew as far as this thing sat upon my chest & wouldn't get out what my day-to-day had become. Was it father gone, not bullet gone, but south runaway this desert, where the earth falls off, bodies decorated trees in a light wind; me too, scarcely a wobbling pivot; gone when the burro express kept this town wet all through the Volstead years later, even longer; up & disappeared, that's the line a man walks so easily I tell Mollie in the back with her laundry. Yes, it all seems so easy. He too about town my three year visitor, so his they called me Johnny's girl, my life set nightly, those happiest times, why you wanna know all this? Summer torrent or pale moon cold, a dueling paradox I felt my chest blown through, that turn & pull kind of lights out, mornings Eva pulled my feet to the ground, it's time now, Bess. I gave all dreams a prayer & walked Meyer in the morning light still myself, my belly aching for food, for a man long gone I knew his shadow. It was Mister three years my nightly life got snagged by that society lady built the Temple, kept the church full, all that we were kept out of by unspoken ordinance—we nymphs du pave, needers of husband; all I know is he quit coming; he married. Eva pulled my feet to the ground, the Sunset Route its daily grind through Tucson, I grieved & worked, dressed nightly in lace, painted lips, washed body, gripped the brass railing to quell the pain, I bent farther the floor their grunting, collected my money each time they came, those days Eva kept me upright & corseted in because what else would I be. If we passed on the street I was eyes on the sidewalk, their babies already skipping keeping time. Gone, whether south the border, plentiful fruit, the war, always necessary work, or right in the big house on the corner, leaving their hooks.

Big Flo: blast of the worst words ever heard in your life balled up with hooves furious down the mud-packed barrio streets: best get off the road. Eva said from the Number 12 door line: to watch her work a horse was to know they are different breeds of women, one for every man. Whose hers was was never a secret to us but the rest of the town, for he had married young & had babies to care for. Big Flo in her men trousers & wild hair, never wore lipstick, lace, men choose things for reasons we can have no idea what went on behind Number 16, a strength contest or every brace that held the bed snapping. Eva called her Peach to Flo's blushing, somewhere inside the little girl had not been laid to rest. Flo was carrots in her pockets out the backdoor for Bebe, his horse; he was hand in the middle of her broad back Camacho. That sonofabitch she said, full of shame she needed anyone; that son-of-a-bitch. His towering frame making her a tiny thing as they walked their horses down the back alley away from everybody's eyes.

Ladies & Camacho: two pistols on the bar top on Sunday. Church people, their picnics, Elysian Grove, church society ladies, their parlors, we lounged at Eva's, up & down Meyer trading clothing, Toula's latest styles, liquor, always a bottle for our men. Camacho'd just sit there. No one dared bothering him for wrath. He was thinking about something. Everyone let him think.