

HUMOR



Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

from *All the Little Live Things* (1967)

Standing in Lucio's courtyard before Fran's ill-omened sculpture.... We were looking her major sculpture right in the eye, or would have been if it had had an eye, and I found myself actively disliking the thing. Troublemaker, pretender, parody of something sad and unattractive--in its maker? In its viewer? Both, probably--it brooded back at us, its exposed torso shiny with welds like scars. Most of Fran's art was either ragged messes of junk (she talked a good deal about learning to think in the medium) or mosaics of old teaspoons, safety pins, coins, and kinks of copper wire embedded in fused glass like the leavings of litterbugs in a Yellowstone hot spring. But this thing was frankly, even darkly, female. Back on the Fourth I had indulged my alcoholic humor at her expense, but now I thought she leered at me with a knowledge that was sinister, sad, and accusing.

A woman, of a sort, nearly life-size. She wore for skirt a cut-off galvanized boiler with rivets running like a row of buttons from belt to hem. Rising out of the rounding top of this skirt like a jutting pelvis was an old shovel whose handle made a spinal column linking pelvis and thorax, as in a wired skeleton. Midway in the spine, moved by some whimsy that I never did understand, but that I would investigate if I were her psychiatrist, Fran had drilled a hole in which she had set a lens from a pair of eyeglasses. For some reason, it was inescapably obscene to look right through that thing's bifocal navel. Filthy X-rays.

Bracketed to the spine in place of a rib case was a portable typewriter rescued from the dump. Its movable parts were fused with rust, its keyboard made a panel of gangrenous guts, its necklace of rusty type hung down between ribbon spools like round rudimentary breasts. To enhance the resemblance, Fran, thinking in anything but the medium, had touched each spool with a bright nipple of solder.

The neck was a hammer handle wrapped with leather like the neck of one of those African women stretched with circle after circle of copper wire. The face was composed only of the hammer's down-hooking claws. Curving up over this tooth-face as halo or sunbonnet was a bamboo lawn rake tilted slightly on the stiffly upright body, so that the faceless teeth under the sunbonnet wore an indescribable look of coquetry. You expected her to sidle up and say in a voice like Mortimer Snerd's, "How'd you like to look through my navel, a-huh, a-huh, a-huh?"

“What in hell do you suppose Fran had in mind?” I said, when we had stood looking for three or four minutes. “She couldn’t have arrived at that thing by accident. And she takes it seriously or I wouldn’t have hurt her feelings so on the Fourth.”

“She’s a pretty vague woman. I imagine it’s just an iron doodle that turned out gruesome.”

“You know what I think? I think it’s a portrait of Julie.” [her daughter]

“Julie, or Fran’s feelings about Julie?”

“Well, isn’t every portrait a self-portrait?”...

[On the Fourth] I saw Bill and Sue Casement, both brown with summer golf, and our resident All-American and his porcelain wife, who were by the bar with our resident dictator, the man in the white coat I had mistaken for a bartender. I should have known better. Lucio’s parties ran on a do-it-yourself basis. Beyond the white coats I noted two incongruous dark ones, the only coats there beside the dictator’s. Strangers, and sticking together like nuns. Also I saw Annie Williamson, our lady vet, hunt-clubber, raiser of beagles and borzois and Tennessee walkers, judges at all the region horse shows and dog shows...a woman with the wrists of a laborer, the shoulders of a bantamweight fighter...and others unknown, a great swarm to the number I should say of three thousand six hundred and thirty-two, not counting the little children, who were all still up at the Casement pool.

Now here came Fran across the blazing patio to greet us....

“Oh, I’m just *sick* about this weather!” she cried. “I wanted to have a really *nice* show, and now nobody can stand out in the sun long enough to look at things.”

I began badly. Turning to the cement mixer, fuming from its maw of ice, I said, “Ah, but this is one I’ve been admiring. No--don’t tell me what it means. Or isn’t it intended to mean anything? Do I have to think in the medium?”

“You come here with me, you scoundrel,” Fran said, and hooked her arm in mine. “There’s one over here I *do* want your opinion of”....

We stopped before the figure in the skirt of tubular iron and I looked her in the teeth. I looked her through the navel. I inspected her rusted viscera. I observed the little flames of the nipples.... With my forked tongue I said, “This is a real departure. This is something *new*.”

“What do you think?” Fran said, her braid in her hand. “Tell me honestly, now.”

“It’s different from anything of yours I’ve seen.”

“Yes, I think I...”

“You didn’t just throw it together, either,” I said. “This was *created*. It will stand a lot of looking.”

“You just look all you want to!”

“It’s ominous, though,” I said. “Is it meant to be a little frightening? Because that’s the way it strikes me.”

“Well, yes, I guess it *is* meant to be a little frightening. It sort of took hold of me as I worked on it”....

“Excuse me, Fran, will you? Marian ought to sit down. I’ll study this some more and talk to you later. You should feel very good about it, I think.”

I escaped, carrying with me her soft, radiant smile and her expression--arch would be the name for it—that said *Don’t you forget, now! We’ve got a date, remember!*...

It was quite a party. In the heat everybody gulped and everybody got quickly tight, and not the least swift of foot among those who ran with the god was [me] Joe Allston, who had started the day crooked and had been itching to set it straight.... I talked with acquaintances, I heard a few stories. Then I discovered that the two dark suits were Russian “students,” men of forty or so, with hard Party faces, whom Fran had met on some committee and captured for the day. She wanted them to see an American neighborhood gathering, and what better time than Independence Day....

The developer, who for quite a while had been feeling no pain, had been feeling other things, including several bottoms. The city manager and I, squatting to examine Fran’s old relic of a blowtorch, observed his wandering hand. The manager looked at me and pulled his deadpan joker’s face down. I was equal to the occasion. Showing him how the torch worked, I dropped some carbide into the tank and added the ice cubes from my glass. When I closed the tank and opened the valve and struck a match, I just happened to be holding the thing close to the developer’s rear end, and the pop of blue flame from the nozzle set his shirttails afire. His friend the manager put him out with a flat-handed slap that moved him six feet.

Later, Lucio and I made an acetylene cannot out of a length of soil pipe, and shortly Lucio, the city manager, the Nobel Prize winner, the All-American, Bill Casement, and a half dozen more of us were happily blowing cans and plugs of wood fifty feet down into the gully. I heard Fran explaining to the two

Russians that fireworks were traditional on Independence Day, though for safety reasons--and Americans were *much* more careful in that way than world opinion credited them with being, look at the comparative statistics on traffic accidents in Europe and America--they could be fired off only under permit. The city manager's presence made us sort of legal, though he wasn't *our* manager.

I didn't hear the Russians' reply, but I thought I could paraphrase their response: *Warlike, barbarous, technically advanced, the Americans demonstrate even in their toys and playthings a martial and destructive spirit, though their improvised ordnance seems definitely inferior to the Russian....*

Coming up past them after we had exhausted Fran's supply of carbide, I gave them a cheery greeting in Italian, but they only stared....

The first thing I saw was Annie Williamson burrowing into the cement mixer, evidently in search of a beer. Even on tiptoe, with her arm in to the shoulder, she could not reach the bottom, and in exasperation she hopped up and put her head and shoulders inside. Right then, behind her, I became aware of the city manager with the mixer's power cord in his hand. Following his wildly pointing finger, I saw an outlet in the wall. He flung me the cord across twenty feet of patio and I plugged it promptly in.

The mixer grated and started to turn, Annie's tiptoeing feet left the ground, her rump reared up. There were muffled sounds of bears attacking bulls and dinosaurs being gelded, and then Annie's feet found pavement and her head popped out, red, wet, and roaring.

The city manager liked the deadpan pose, but he was definitely breaking up.

"Laugh!" Annie roared at him. "Honest to John!"

I handed Annie my handkerchief, saying, "That was a kid trick if I ever saw one. It's a pity people drink when they don't know how to hold it. Public officials at that. What will our Russian friends think?"

They were standing together with their impassive lumpy faces and their stony Party eyes, and I read their minds. *Among the overprivileged Americans drunkenness may be called the standard. Weak as their liquor is, they do not carry it well. Far from creating the happiness that they say they are in pursuit of, their capitalist system encourages self-indulgence and alcoholic deviation....*

The police car squawked... The manager slid inside and slammed the door. The motor caught, the turret light began to revolve.... Shoulder to shoulder the Russians watched. *Pravda reports law in America enforced by alcoholics.*

Several times during that sweaty afternoon I had caught Fran's eyes on me, or caught her working in my direction.... I kept clots of people between us, I failed to catch glances, I made strategic retreats to the toilet. When I finally did find myself confronting the statue, I could feel the alcohol in my balance and my tongue, and I was again in the company of Annie Williamson.... My ear was tuned to Annie's confidential whisper, which would have rustled palm fronds at forty rods.

"Now you tell me," she said. "You *tell* me. What is it?"

"Annie, you've been a judge in too many dog shows to be baffled by art. Look her over. Check out her points"....

She examined its rear end for a good while, hands behind her, head sunk, lower lip jutting.... She bent, and her bifocally magnified eye glared at me through the navel. She straightened, shaking her head.

"It beats me. It's got points, like you say. It's got class. It could be Best of Show. But what the hell's the *breed*?"...

Circling, she peered up under the hammer claws. "Good bite," she said, and then, excitedly, "Say, the roof of her mouth is purple. That means chow blood."

"But if she's chow shouldn't she have red hair?" I said. "You notice she hasn't got *any* hair. And look at that brisket. Could she be a Mexican Topless?"

"Haw!" Annie said--one blat from an old rubber-bulb Model-T horn. She touched the carriage bar, which dangled like a withered right arm from the typewriter's shoulder. "A pointer?" She leaned forward, trying to read the label on the rusted machine, and shook her head again. "Who ever heard of a Royal pointer?"

With her knuckles she knocked once, experimentally, on the galvanized skirt, which hummed out a resonant A. Joe Allston, that bald-headed cutup, threw a finger in the air, slopping his drink. "Annie, that did it! We've got it!"

She waited, glowering.

"My dear Watson," I said, "it's an Ashcan Hound"....

Annie came down in laughter like somebody falling through a skylight. She fell upon me and embraced me, roaring. And as she did so the camera changed its angle and looked with Joe Allston over the damp gray head, straight into the face of Fran LoPresti, a dozen feet away. For the instant of contact her eyes

flared as hot as the spit of her torch. The soft face wore every expression I never expected to see there--disappointment, rage, a distended ugly vanity, and hatred, hatred. Then the hostess look melted over her mouth and eyes, her face moistened and softened into the rubbery indulgent smile. Of course. Only Joe making one of his jokes....

Carrying my empty glass, or somebody's empty glass, I made my way back to my women, to whom I had paid no attention for an hour. But someone had kept their glasses full, or else they had nursed their first ones, and their circle was still deep in the sort of talk that women get into--about clothes, children, P.T.A., local politics, conservation, world affairs, art, music, books, that sort of thing--and they looked at me with some amusement and waved me away.

Wallace Stegner
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