Emily Listens to Johanna, the Spinster

Stephanie Dickinson

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr

Recommended Citation
Dickinson, Stephanie (2021) "Emily Listens to Johanna, the Spinster," Yalobusha Review: Vol. 21 , Article 5. Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol21/iss1/5

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
1917. Trees hot and heavy, the thrust of leaves around the porch, the wild vegetable sex of summer clinging to the rain gutters. Fecundity in the insect kingdom. I try to coax broth through Johanna’s lips as she tosses on her bed, her skin the flushed pink of a woman in deep fever. She rambles. Bemoaning her breasts that a baby never suckled, her flat stomach having never been a womb. My cold hand against her forehead, my fingers chase the geranium sweat from her temples. Since our beloved pastor, died at age 99, she has no one. What greater love can a daughter have than to never marry and care for her father?

“If you’ve not left your father’s home or ever gone barefoot outside the walls of the manse,” she says, “you begrudge him every mouthful, his quivering, his sucking coffee like a nursing infant. Your suitors never good enough yet you’re obliged to kiss his pipe-stained, yellow-bearded face. He dies suddenly and you wake standing in the creek with your skirts rolled to your knees. You lie down in the water. There, fish make bubble nests. One whispers, telling you to hold a saliva bubble in your mouth, release it against a water lily’s underside, and your wishes will come to life. I let the bubble go and spy a man with his shirt off standing against a tree. The heat of fever sticks to him too like slobber from a cow. The man stops in the middle of the stream, not looking to the left or right, or even straight ahead, but down past his rolled pant-legs into the green water. A bandana flashes in his hand. He wets and wrings it over his head. He is washing himself. Now his hand goes to the waist of his rolled up jeans. Your eyes follow the bandana moving over muscle. The man’s beauty must draw all things female/male–ewes, sows, cows, and bitch dog, female snakes, birds. All the wanting, all the dead afternoons with staring eyes and mouth agape, all the sermons that sought to preach endlessly into your head vanish. Gone like the odor of smoldering peonies when the sun’s directly overhead or the gruel of a mourning dove’s tune. The ghost of your girlhood beauty—strawberry-blond hair streaming—gets up from your father’s leather armchair and wades toward the washing man. Amen.”
Once again, Johanna tries to strip off her clothes and I tire of struggling with her. I let her lie naked afloat in her mind creek. I do not judge. There are some women and men who will eat mosquito larvae, all things green and starve out the other fish. She has so little time to feed.

2/

1917. Inside the manse there is a held breath, a quiet that waits to be broken by his shuffling step, the walls and floor and curtains remember his cherry pipe tobacco. Johanna pours a glass of lemonade but instead of drinking spits into the sink. For the pleasure of it. Her feet carry her into the study. She wrote his obituary, a draft of it lies on the desk where she put down the pen. FRANCIS PORKORNY, age 99, died Friday. Johanna, the Gentle, Johanna, the Left Behind, Johanna, the Good Daughter is no more. Now she writes: “He gutted me, refused me my season, the wound his knife made from collarbone to tailbone, a butcher’s incision, the taking of my life, skewering it. My intestines kept slipping from the incision like wet flower stems. Last look at my father he wore his coffin suit and liniments—a black frock with velvet panel—and atop his nose the mortician had set his steel-rimmed spectacles. What was there for him to see? A man fed and bathed and put to bed by me, the only man my hands had ever traveled over. I’d bathe him in the kitchen, pull the shades, sponge water and shake talc—flecks of red plum, over his twig nest and shriveled chicken neck. Now my father’s safely tucked away in heaven. I throw the windows open, shrug off my long skirt and apron, I wrap my nakedness in curtain lace. Girlish feet still, pink and fresh, unused, feet that hadn’t traveled far carry me to the creek behind the manse. Letting the current feed on me, I laugh. Kneeling, I sense the depths where water eddies over the drowned branches. The two suitors my father turned away will hear of his death forty years too late. My twenties and thirties, the hardest. Birthdays, I cursed. Never would my eggs turn wet, never would I fill with milk. On my forehead, the word Heresiarcha was carved. The green flow washes between my unfucked thighs. Once, I entered a meat locker—that frozen world of sawdust and ice, kinged by the headless tallow cows. Suspended from hooks and upside down, I wanted to giggle for I saw myself hanging from the hook of my quiet bedroom. Beheaded, my girl-self’s mane of cornsilk hair and stew of blue eyes sat there in my horsehair chair. I wade into the deepest middle of the stream. Sheep graze its banks. They mock me, life unlived, my sixty-nine years rotting. I eat their golden turds, their straggling fleece that catches on the bark.