



## **HE THROUGH HER**

A PORTRAIT OF JOHNNY AT TWENTY

*by Constance McCutcheon*

He was stronger than she, but he was younger. He looked to her for guidance, he complained to her, he said to her: “You know, I think things are going pretty good.” She would nod and shake her foot and look, restless or bored, to the doorway where he stood leaning, a handsome young man with his pants falling below his navel.

She was older and he thought wiser and she said wiser but he said nothing and she didn’t think so because he was stronger. He was all handsome brown, a lean young woodsman one

hundred years ago. Creamy brown eyes, the iris and pupil one soft center. Smooth skin, thin as birch bark, lean as birch bark. Supple and slender as a reed, a bowed back when he swaggered. Pugnacious youth. And he would say to her, “I think I’m pretty good, you know? I think I’m going to make it.” On good days.

On bad days he was ruthless and pathetic. He packed up early, thrust into a gray-lidded dawn by clammy guilt; he had no recourse but to go. Go to where he went, motion divine, beginning with the downward turn of a cracked heel, his destination always redemption, his vehicle a gray metal practice room where he pounded thrummed rolled beat out the quaking of his fear, fingers and feet snapping; legs, thighs, back pumping; wrists and ankles jangling; head and lower lip thrust out keeping critical time; sinew and soul sending heavenward the fear that only she understood. Why the pain? he thrummed. Why am I the only unfinished man? For all day he would practice the tattoo, overcoming no pain, comprehending no why for his being the victim, resolving no paternal hatred, none of the yelling, none of the nervous disease; but he drummed on because he was a drummer. Because he was working to believe himself a drummer.

The janitor would stop by on his way from the cafeteria with cookies wrapped in napkins and lay them silently outside the door; the stage hands would rattle the door coaxing him out for reefer; one girl would pass him a love note, another wanted friendship, and they all loved when he was alive inside the pum! pum! of the dark gray box. Their love was sharp, quickened by the long denial of his pum! pum! resistance, his truculence, because he would not let them see his agony; but they felt that he felt it, because they heard it through the door.

On his worst days, he would come back to the apartment with her and lie on his bed, head wreathed in music by earphones, stretched out in a meadow of strewn clothes he washed weekly in the bathtub. All disorder surrounded him. No furniture but a mattress on the floor and a broken bedside chair were his. On the chair stood a jar of petroleum jelly and brown medicine for his cracked feet. Littering the seat and floor were

the crumpled, brown-stained tissues with which he rubbed them. He had shown her how he could separate the cracks and look down into the deep red.

A paranoia sprang up in him on these worst days. He feared practicing was making his hands, already too short and thick for the task ahead of him, even pudgier, that practicing was only making it all worse. He would show his hands to her and say, “See? I’m not going to make it, I’m not going to make it because my fingers are too pudgy. They’re too pudgy.” And she would look again at the turkey flesh and the old man’s knuckles, turn her head away and laugh because she saw how the world wanted him and because she knew he would go back to his gray box and drum on for his miserable love.

The End