

Fiction

Short story Three Poets in Key West, Florida

By *William Boyd*. Inspired by the painting *Lapeyrouse Wall* (2004) by Peter Doig



She had heard the news in the post office. Two women were talking and she picked up one of them saying something like, ‘— Yes, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, right here, can you believe it?’ She listened some more but they started gossiping about church matters so she had to interrupt.

Excuse me. Did I hear you say? Yes, they told her, both these great poets – by uncanny coincidence – were staying at the Casa Marina Resort Hotel on Reynolds Street.

She walked out of the post office in something of a breathless stir – excited, almost as if she were a little girl. Frost and Stevens – here. She liked Frost but she revered Stevens. She cycled slowly along Flagler Avenue until she could see the red roofs of the hotel rising above the palm trees.

She parked her bicycle and walked around the hotel gardens, gathering up her courage, before following a small group of tourists into the lobby. It was cool in the lobby and nobody seemed to pay her any attention. She picked up a brochure and pretended to look at it, glancing up from time to time at the hotel guests sauntering through on their way to the beach beyond. She knew what Robert Frost looked like but her sense of Wallace Stevens was hazy. She remembered that Miss Moore, who had met him, had said he was a ‘large distinguished-looking man’. That wasn’t much help... Quite a few large distinguished-looking men had wandered through the lobby while she’d been there.

She replaced her brochure and crossed the marble floor to the long reception desk. The desk clerk smiled at her.

‘Checking in?’

‘No. I’m looking for Mr Wallace Stevens.’

‘May I know your name?’

‘Miss Bishop.’

The clerk made a quick telephone call.

‘I believe he’s in the Patio Garden restaurant.’

The clerk pointed down a wide corridor.

There was a maître d’ in a white jacket standing by a lectern outside the door to the Patio Garden restaurant. She could tell at once from his small, pursed mouth that he was not a pleasant person. From inside the restaurant she could hear the hum of conversation and the staccato percussion of silverware on china plates.

‘May I help you, Miss?’ he asked as

she approached.

‘I’m looking for Mr Wallace Stevens.’

‘Mr Stevens is lunching with us but...’

‘But what?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t let you in.’ He pointed at a small gold-lettered sign by the glass door to the restaurant. ‘PROPER ATTIRE REQUESTED’.

He smiled sadly, but she knew he was secretly pleased.

‘Ladies are not admitted in slacks.’

She looked down at her white shirt, her beige chinos and her espadrilles.

‘I don’t wear dresses or skirts,’ she said.

‘I don’t own a dress or a skirt.’

‘It’s hotel policy,’ he said.

‘It’s 1940, for god’s sake,’ she said. ‘Not 1840.’

He shrugged. ‘Rules are rules.’

‘Do you admit negroes in the Patio Garden Restaurant?’

‘I’m afraid we do not.’

She cycled slowly down to the harbour in a dizzying mood of rage and frustration. She had been so close. Just yards away. But that prig wouldn’t even let her take a look inside. She parked her bike by the wall and told herself to calm down. She took deep breaths, her eyes closed.

‘Hey, Miss Elizabeth, you OK?’

She opened her eyes. It was old Joe Callaghan standing there, under his pink umbrella, looking concerned.

‘I’m fine, Joe, thank you. I just had an irritating encounter with a petty-minded man.’

‘Oh, those petty-minds is everywhere, Miss Elizabeth. You don’t pay them no heed. They gonna get what they deserve. All in good time.’ He pointed up at the sky. ‘He gonna take care of all them petty-minds.’ He smiled. ‘They bringing in the catch at Cayo Hueso.’

‘Thanks, Joe.’ She watched him wander off down the sidewalk by the mottled and weathered sea wall, oddly reassured by the old man’s words, his pink umbrella offset by the washed-out blue of the sky. He turned and gave her a wave. She felt calm again, thanks to Joe’s intervention – almost serene.

Down by the bight she soaked up the early afternoon sun, enjoying the heat on her face, her eyes dazzled by the mineral flash off the choppy water. Perhaps it was better not to meet your heroes or heroines, she thought. Better to live with the sense of them in your head than encounter them in the flesh...

A muffled chugging sound came across the water from the dock as a little dredger started up and she watched the shabby little sponge boats manoeuvre into the quayside, effortlessly, like sliding into bed. A big pelican crashed into the water making the man-o’-war birds soar higher, their tails like black scissors. No, more like wishbones... She knew what was coming – a poem was happening: a poem was being born. It might take a long time before it grew up, she knew – she worked very slowly – but it was stirring, gravid. Better to write a new poem than meet two old poets, she thought.*
William Boyd’s latest book is the collection of short stories The Dreams of Bethany Mellmoth