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Lockie Hunter

Creative Nonfiction

Lockie Hunter is from a town in Appalachia where oral storytelling is vital to the community. She holds an MFA in fiction from Emerson College in Boston and teaches creative writing at Warren Wilson College where she is the faculty advisor for the Swannanoa Journal weekly public radio program of the Environmental Leadership Center. Her nonfiction can be found in many publications including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Brevity*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Opium*, *The Morning News*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and others. Her poetry and fiction have been anthologized.

The Witness of High Hats

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At 22, I slept with my childhood teddy bear and my musician boyfriend in a 400 square foot studio in the TenderNob district of San Francisco. With one tattoo parlor, two fortunetellers and a sad hotel, the TenderNob is positioned between affluent Nob Hill and the transvestite-hooker district of the Tenderloin. Moving west from Tennessee, I was to be Mary Tyler Moore, hat high in the air, pleats twirling. I did toss the hat once, and a horizontal wind hosting the ever-present fog carried it down Jones Street, and it was run over by a taxi. My boyfriend cautioned against tossing the hat. "You toss it, and it will land in hooker pee or Gray Man will snatch it in the air and claim custody."

Gray Man lives on my stoop. He is not part of my chosen landscape, my attempt at Mary-Tyler-Mooreishness. He is pale with purple veins on his neck, face and arms. He wears a gray coat and has a beard, but perhaps he does not. Now, thirty years later, it is like squinting at too-brightly colored Polaroids, trying to recall the names of those that were once vital.

Gray Man spare-changes me. His upper lip is crusted with something yellow. He smells like the Mission Street garage, like an unclear threat. I give him whatever silver and copper is knocking in my pockets until one night when I dump on the stoop beside him and explain that this is my home. "*My home*," I yell, as if being homeless also makes him hard of hearing. "*I'm making a real home. Fresh flowers, hat rack.*" My vivid dream of home, (cat-books-hats-tea-pjs-plants) is jostled into dusty reality each time Gray Man panhandles, so we work a deal. Paid monthly, Gray Man is to stop spare-changing me. He then takes an ancillary step. Friends are shocked that I have a doorman in *this* neighborhood, on Jones? He winks at me each time he opens the door - and I smile. We have an agreement.

Gray Man peeks inside my shopping bags. I share my apples and grapes. He does not whistle when my skirt is too short, though the boys on the street do. When he sleeps, slumped against the railing, his head swallowed by his coat, he resembles a bundle, a care package left for me at my new home. He safeguards my lies. "I can't go to church. I'm sick," I tell my mother when she arrives at my stoop. Minutes later I emerge, dressed for brunch, and take a cautious step outside. Gray raises his eyebrows then winks. He understands. He opens doors for me.

Gray Man has seen me like few others have: checking on lipstick in the side view mirror of a cab, picking my nose, weepy drunk and fumbling for keys, flirting with my neighbor, struggling with my boyfriend, belligerent to a meter maid, bogarting a joint, lying to my mother about my job, arms loaded with laundry, dressed in church clothes, in vinyl and boots, blue jeans and t-shirt, hat in the air, hat in the gutter.

The day before the explosion, I bought a large T.V. I remember loving the look of it, the sleekness. The modernity of its flat gray face would bring the news, sitcoms, trashy miniseries to my TenderNob home.

June, 1990, and I am scaling salmon. Rice is boiling, the TV blaring, and I've had too much homegrown to be properly wielding a knife. I hear the honk-honk blare of a fire truck on the TV and the urgent sound of a news reporter. I even smell smoke, and I think it is because I am high, a stoned writer creating her own story, packed with sensory details. But now I hear the sirens in stereo, coming from the TV in front of me as well as the door behind me. "An explosion on Jones Street has turned into a blaze," the announcer says as if concerned. "Police believe the explosion was caused by crack cocaine production and is coming through the manhole...residents are advised..."

Who can say why we're drawn to one object or one person? I have a tattoo of a Picasso on my right hip, so in love with the acuity of line that I wanted it to be a part of me, etched into my skin. In memories of my TenderNob apartment I walk past my winking doorman into the lobby, then through the burlwood door, past the steaming clawfoot tub and stroke the poetry books on the shelves. A multi-colored afghan, grandma-knitted, is smoothed on the bed. Small red circles spot the white bedstand, evidence of evenings of wine. A flokati rug with curly white high pile fibers is littered with takeout boxes. A 45 of my boyfriend's new single sits next to the old record player.

As the smell of smoke and sound of sirens surges, every piece of furniture, every book, is prized. I take all my arms can carry: seven books, the stuffed bear, a potted plant, a trophy from softball, the afghan.

Gray Man is waiting on the stoop, eyes wild. "Out!" he says, leading me across the street, away from exploding manholes and shattering glass. Though it is not cold, I offer him my afghan, and he wraps himself in it completely, like a woman in a burka. I am wild. Gray is calm. I am molten. Gray is solid. I coil up from the curb then sit down then rise up again until he makes a disapproving noise. I sit. His profile is dark for a second then glows red then blue then red with the sirens. My flamboyant afghan looks strange on him and I smile to see him so dressed up, so full of color. We wait together for the red trucks.

The next day he is not there. The stoop looks blank, incomplete. "Did the blaze scare old Gray off?" asks my boyfriend. I wait. He doesn't return. I still wait. I want to be ushered inside again; the home that awaits is framed by this ritual. He never returns. I realize I had been pretending that Gray Man fit into my landscape, my home. And, in pretending he was something he was not, we both became more valuable. He became a guard, while I became less guarded.

My vivid dream of home (cat-books-hats-tea-pjs-plants-doorman) is again altered. I enter the building—day after day, tired and energized, formal and funky, clean and stinky, crying and giggling—with no one to observe my arrival, no one to note my departure, and no one to witness my hat... high in the air.

"I've worn glasses all my life. As I age I've become hyperopic. I can now see distance, but I've lost the ability to see things at close range. Distance from a subject allows me to write closely about a subject. When I first moved to San Francisco I could not write about my

new home. The Tennessee hills that I left, however, were brightly lit in my mind. I wrote of my South, my homeland, with great dedication. It was only when I returned home to the Appalachian Mountains and put a space of 3000 miles and 10 years between me and the west coast that I found my San Francisco voice.

Gray Man had been living in these story margins for several years when I began teaching a class on journalism. I encouraged my students to give voice to the voiceless and to seek out those marginalized populations and tell their story. 'This is our duty as writers,' I told my students. Here is Gray's story.

After I completed the story I met a young student living with fear. She was graduating from high school, and her future was uncertain. On graduation day, as her friends tossed their caps in the air, she held on to hers. She clutched the tasseled cap representing security, the comfort of the moment. This story is for her. I hope one day to see her hat high in the air. ”

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