



William Taylor Jr.

## Two Prose Pieces

### Portrait of an Afternoon

The sun and the billboards and the people with their important faces and places to go are indifferent to our grace. The day lies before us, empty and endless and a most perfect shade of gray. It's North Beach and we drink gin on the patio at the Savoy Tivoli. It's Paris and 1932 and I am Hemingway and you are Kiki De Montparnasse. I am Man Ray and you are Lee Miller and we sit in these ornate metal chairs just like they did a hundred years ago. We watch the people drift up and down the sidewalks, the people are pretty and angry and lonely and sad, just like they've always been through the centuries, only now they dress poorly and have terrible haircuts. You hold your cigarette with fingers torn from a portrait by some old master, gazing at your drink with black velvet eyes, eyes that have led a thousand men happily to their dooms, and when you turn them on me the timeless sorrow of it tastes like a desperate kiss. We are lost in the city and its ocean fog, lost in the rain, lost in a song in someone else's dream, praying they will not find us. We walk by Café Trieste and the old poets sit outside waiting to die as they always have. An old man smokes in Saroyan Alley waiting for the bar to open; he leans against the brick and inhales and exhales, and I can hear old Bill's voice, these days all but forgotten, saying there is no death and can never be. We know the name of every ghost we pass. We're in your sad old room with bottles of cheap wine and you sit Indian style on the floor, peeling paint from the walls in strips, revealing stains and colors of those who came before. We're drunk in Tenderloin alleys, propped against pissed stained walls plastered with posters and handbills of all descriptions, and you peel those too, like paint, layer after layer: advertisements for dance clubs and record albums, perfume and alcohol, lost dogs and lost people, failed politicians—a tragic circus, an obscure history of lost things. But nothing is ever lost, and the woman standing on the corner of California and Hyde, wrapped in blue

and gray scarves, she's always been there, staring down the ages, and this dark little bar is the perfect place to hide from the day and whatever else might be trying to find us. It's anytime and anywhere and we are anyone with any story we choose. The past and the future hold no power here, just this burning moment. Lily lights another cigarette and gives us dollars for the juke. It's after midnight on the lost highway and Patsy and Hank cry their deathless tears through the darkness like love.

## The Saddest Hotel in the World

It's on the edge of the Tenderloin, a narrow building wedged in between the transgender bar and the pot dispensary on Geary Street. It's a perfect place to go if you want to hide, or fuck, shoot up, or just die quietly without bothering anybody too much about it. There's a bell to the right of the door and if you press it long enough eventually the lock releases with a click and you can push the door open and go inside. Beyond the door is a tiny foyer, barren save for an old Korean woman behind a dirty little window. You give the woman twenty dollars and if she's fairly certain you're not a cop, she'll let you have a room for an hour or two, or until whenever it is she feels like kicking you out. She gives you a room number and a key. She presses a button and an iron gate buzzes and unlocks just long enough for you to get beyond it before it closes heavily behind you with a sound like a prison. The hallways are long and narrow and the walls and floors are bare and stained. Inside the halls are more metal gates and the feeling of it is akin to a condemned hospital in a post-apocalyptic dream. It feels like a place you will never be allowed to leave.

Angelina has a room on the third floor, dingy and boxlike. There's a hard little bed, the sheets and pillows stained with grime and blood. There's no toilet, but a half roll of paper sits on a little table, along with a plastic ashtray and a clock radio, but the radio is broken and the time is wrong. There's a small tv on a crooked dresser and a window that looks out into a stinking alley full of waste and broken things. It's a Wednesday afternoon and the man she's brought up with her has just discovered she isn't exactly what he had imagined her to be. Her hands had betrayed her; her traitorous hands, large and thick and manly. After a barrage of threats and insults, he spits upon her pleading, prostrated form. He beats and kicks her as he would his wife or his dog. He takes back the money he had given her, along with most of the other contents of her purse, knocking the little television to the floor as he stumbles drunk and cursing into the hall. The room is full of his scent, his stale whiskey and stinking body, and she just lies there sobbing on the crusty bed, the old Korean woman pounding the door, telling her she has to go.

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*William Taylor Jr. lives and writes in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. He is the author of numerous books of poetry, and a volume of fiction. His work has been published widely in journals across the globe, including Rattle, The New York Quarterly, and The American Journal of Poetry. He is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee and was a recipient of the 2013 Kathy Acker Award. [Pretty Words to Say](#) is his latest collection of poetry from Six Ft. Swells Press.*