

PEP VENTOSA

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

GENANNE WALSH

Your Hysterical Wife

1.

Your hysterical wife is twerking in a nightclub, look at her go. Now she's sitting outside of Safeway with a backpack and a pit bull. In point of fact, your hysterical wife is standing in line for artisanal ice cream; she is planting carrots; she's replacing the register tape and clocking the hours. No, she's kicking drunks out of a dive bar. Your hysterical wife is picking through the recycling bins on Polk Street in the middle of the night. There she is, taking up two seats on the 22 to Life bus. Your hysterical wife was last seen walking toward the Golden Gate Bridge: alert the authorities.

Let's be honest, your hysterical wife is good at making things but not so good at taking care—she has been known, to paraphrase the incoherent pop hit from the sixties, to leave the cake out in the rain. Really, she is just trying to BART home after a shitty day at the office. She is teaching, diagnosing, emailing, snorting, sorting, shooting, defending, organizing, embezzling, talking talking talking. Your hysterical wife wants you to learn everything about her and then fix it. Your hysterical wife wants you to fuck off and leave her alone.

Your hysterical wife is exhausted by her perpetual state of bewilderment. Equally, she is depleted by her endless capacity to bewilder you.

Even your hysterical wife can't weep forever. Her breathing slows and wheels on iron tracks take over, sounding like oblivion. Two more stops and she'll be home. She puffs a cloud of hot breath on the train window. *Be wilder* she writes. Then, with the sleeve of her prim tan coat, she wipes it off.

2.

Your hysterical wife runs into the Pacific and steam rises. She is fevered all the time: hot feet, flushed cheeks. She wears sandals and sleeveless shirts, but that doesn't seem to help. She requires that car rides be conducted with AC blasting and, if it's cold enough, windows rolled down. She leaves fingerprint burn marks on the kitchen countertops and bursts into flame at the slightest provocation. You watch her in the backyard, practicing with a target for greater accuracy in her flame throwing. What is your

hysterical wife's real target, you wonder as you slice carrots for the salad. As soon as she touches the bowl, they'll caramelize.

Your hysterical wife used to be so reasonable. She used to sit on the couch with a little space heater whirring at her feet, the cat and a cozy blanket on her lap. Now she's turned the freezer as cold as it will go and leaves imprints of her limbs in the thick frost inside. You've seen her stepping in and out as if she's visiting a spa. When you ask, "What are you doing?" she won't answer.

You want to ask your hysterical wife, "Are you going to be hysterical forever?" That question would bring disaster. (Do you *want* to bring disaster? Does she?) She sculpts tiny zoo animals out of ice cubes and rests them on her chest and belly in a long line, a chilly Noah's ark melting slowly, dripping down her torso as she lies on the kitchen floor. Are those tears puddling under the unwashed hair of your hysterical wife, or is it a melting elephant family? So far as you know, she sleeps all night there on the linoleum.

In the morning you see brown scorch marks on the white floor, a perverse snow angel in the shape of your hysterical wife. She'll sear through the subflooring eventually. The foundation is at risk. The cat scurries away when she enters a room. In your heart of hearts, you would like to join the cat. What you are trying to evaluate in your still (and always!) rational mind is: Will your hysterical wife cool down? Will she tamp down the coals that burn so hot in her chest? Body like a furnace, brain like a knife, warnings and doom and the target in the backyard now sliced through so expertly, light shines through the center's red disc.

3.

Your hysterical wife has a riotous lower back and has taken to drinking coffee blended with freshly churned butter as she lies with her legs up the wall. She convinced you to move with her and the cat to the hills east of the city, and now your only company as you wash the dishes is a flock of wild turkeys fanning out among the brown slopes past your scraggly yard. Your hysterical wife is perfectly content never to see another human being. She says this often and you believe it to be true, even about you.

It's as if your hysterical wife has forgotten everything she used to love. Now she loves things that are both

common and unsettling, such as ice, loneliness, dried flower arrangements, and fire roads that lead up to indefinite points. The cat has disappeared and you fear coyotes took it, though it occurs to you that he may have just chosen his original feral state, descended the hills, crossed the Bay Bridge, and returned to the wild streets that birthed him.

4.

Your hysterical wife is beyond distraught at the state of the world. She writes countless letters to the editor, to Congress, to the president himself. She is outraged and whipsawed and desperate to take action. She wants ideals divorced from money or power. Your hysterical wife lingers over that word: divorced. When the letters don't work she leads marches and rallies. She tweets constantly and develops a following.

Your hysterical wife begins to speak of other people in the possessive: my followers, my protestors.

In the evening, your wife sits at the kitchen table Skyping with her lieutenants while you sift through the stack of bills on the counter. "We'll create our own Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park," she says, her voice strident. You can't help yourself—you remind her that things didn't work out so well for the people in Tahrir and Zuccotti.

"What concessions, exactly, did they win?" you ask. As you speak, the past-due window envelopes tremble in your hands.

Somebody on her Skype call whispers, *status quo bullshit*. Somebody else: *normalization*. Your hysterical wife says she wants logic and reason to prevail, which strikes you as funny though you manage to keep a straight face. Then she changes her mind and says even logic is a sham, truth twisted by the very people now abusing power, as if we can't see that they, too, are governed by bald fears and desires and emptiness.

Before the conversation can continue you reach out and shut your wife's laptop.

You stare at each other in silence for so long that the tick of the wall clock takes on a quality of substance. Each tick becomes a plank in a house that does not exist beyond this space. A long series of ticks for the foundation and floor, many more for the walls. The earth rotates farther from the sun. A moth beats against the dark window.

Much later you lie together, stiffly, side by side in the dark. "They want us to believe our outrage makes us weak," she hisses across the pillow. You know this is true, that the charge of emotional weakness can be leveled at you and her and all the people in the streets and the parks and the prisons and the halls of power: you are inflamed, unreasoned, riven.

5.

Your hysterical wife has developed plantar fasciitis and a huge crush on Laura Ingalls Wilder. She sleeps with Wilder's illustrated autobiography by her pillow. She opens the oversized book to show you a photo of Wilder as a young woman: stone-faced in a high-necked dark dress, her hair pulled back, curls arranged in a tight row above her forehead.

"Isn't she beautiful?" your hysterical wife asks. You're not sure how to answer. Your ideas about beauty have changed, as have your wife's. The cat is still missing.

When she isn't mooning over Laura Ingalls Wilder, your hysterical wife drones on about Samuel Richardson, explaining how *Pamela* and *Clarissa* shook up the social order of the day by sympathetically depicting women's struggles and virtues. She appreciates these books and recounts their convoluted plots accurately so far as you know, though you've never read them yourself. Still, she thinks Richardson was given more than his due. "He was one of the men credited with inventing the novel even though *The Tale of Genji*, written centuries before by a woman, was actually the first novel. But did I learn about that in school? No!"

You listen but don't have much to add. You suspect that your hysterical wife judges you for never reading novels, especially by female writers. But what can you do? Taste is taste, and you aren't interested in domestic fiction. In truth, life's too short to waste on make-believe. You want opinion pieces with strong ideas and solutions to the world's problems. And though you hate to admit it, you scarcely read anything anymore. You have the sneaking suspicion that your free time is siphoned away while your mind is elsewhere. Concentration is hard, that you know. The world beckons as surely as it repels.

Your wife's Wilder crush is clearly the root of her new-found obsession with old, musty books. She has turned away from organizing for the future and now seeks wisdom from the past, its traumas carefully contained. Your hysterical wife wants to sit in an eighteenth-century pub and watch a servant girl outwit an entrenched class system. She wants to go out to the barn at the edge of a western meadow and press her forehead against a chestnut mare's shivering flank.

"All well and good, but fantasies and hand-wringing won't save us! And you haven't asked, but I want to move back to the city."

Your wife blinks, and you hear yourself. You never yell. Yelling is her domain.

Really this is about—isn't it always?—your hysterical wife. Where will she turn her attention next, looking to make and break and mend again? She takes a sip of tea and sets the cup down gently. Her feet rest in a tub of cold water and in front of her on the table the book is open to another photo of Laura Ingalls Wilder: older here, standing in front of a plain stone house with a grizzled dog at her side. Somewhere nearby a finch sings, a wolf waits in the tall grass.

6.

You and your hysterical wife reconnect over a scorching hatred of the president and Roman Polanski's *Bitter Moon*. Together, you drink too many gin rickeys at the Philosopher's Club and stumble out of the bar and onto the train tracks. You stretch out your arms in a Jesus pose, prepared to die for your sins. The L-train driver dings his bell pleasantly, not even pretending that lives are on the line, and calls for us to step aside before inching the train into the West Portal tunnel. "That driver is almost as big an asshole as the president," you say—or maybe I said it. We briefly considered walking on the tracks through the tunnel but we were not prepared to be arrested, having forgotten everything we once knew about nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. We thought there was a good chance that we might become violent—violence sounded very good to us. Also, we had to pee.

So we boarded the train and rode inbound to Church Street. "We can pee at my friend Kevin's," you said, or

maybe I said. It could be possible for two Kevins to be known to two individuals and for those two Kevins to live in close proximity on Church Street. It is a common, uninspiring name after all. It could also be possible that we knew the same Kevin, or that, less possible but more interesting, we were in fact the same person, talking to ourselves about peeing at Kevin's and what a douchebag the president is. Nobody sat next to us on the train and we were glad about that.

Kevin wasn't home.

"What do we do now?" we asked, confounded. Find a café and sober up like reasonable people, or try another bar. A discerning reader will correctly predict what we chose. (Hello, discerning reader.) When we'd peed like racehorses in the dingy john at the Pilsner Pub and ordered another drink, we cut to the chase. We have dreams about death constantly, we confessed. We don't know what to make of them. Last night a man was painting his body with some substance that turned him into a corpse or made him appear as a corpse—running a large paintbrush along his limbs like a housepainter, but his body was the house. It was not a particularly upsetting or frightening dream, in that way that morbidity can be utterly pedestrian and humdrum. Being afraid of our dreams might be a good sign but we weren't afraid. We wanted more. We always want more.

"The problem is," you said, or I said, "things are so tremendously catastrophic at the moment." And then I said, or you said, "Don't deny your own fragility, but don't assume this is where the story ends." We slurred our words, drooping over the table. We understood in a new way the term *shit-faced* and laughed sloppily about it until we cried, rivers of tears that we couldn't stop to save our lives. We were spinning out, monstrous, and through sobs admitted that we were quietly hysterical 80 percent of the time and noisily hysterical 10 percent. In the nonhysterical remaining 10 percent we got a lot of shit done. Just a couple of hysterical women—less than women: wives. We are hysterical wives, how has this happened? We aren't even believers in the patriarchal construct of matrimony. We staggered to the bar to get napkins to mop up our snot and the bartender pointed to a sign that read "We reserve the right to refuse service to hysterical wives" and cut us off and kicked us out.

So we stumbled and cried along Market Street, looking for a shred of reassurance and familiarity, eventually

forgetting where we lived, forgetting our selves, our wet faces and wringing hands, forgetting even whom we hated and why we hated them. We walked until we fell, exhausted, and then we got up and walked more, until we forgot about love, too. Wind and fog powered over the hills and we shivered, clean and bright. We stood behind the clock tower at the Ferry Building looking out over the water, the Bay Bridge sparkling to the right, Golden Gate looming silent on the left, and the sloping curve of the headlands dark on dark across the bay. We breathed it in: cold and dear and full of mystery.

Genanne Walsh is the author of *Twister*, which was awarded the Big Moose Prize from Black Lawrence Press. *Twister* was also short-listed for the Housatonic Book Award in Fiction and the Sarton Women's Book Award. She lives in San Francisco, California, with her wife and dogs. www.genannewalsh.com

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