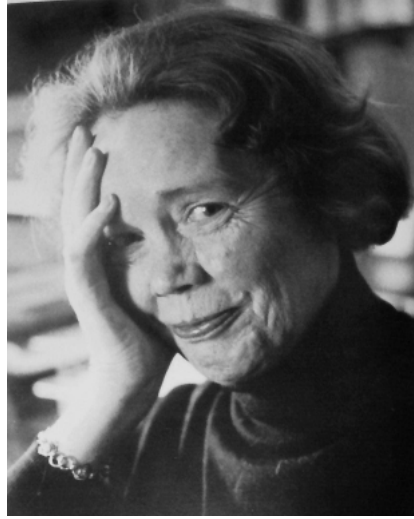


WIT & HUMOR



Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

I am really just a he-waif, what never had no mammy.

Her mother was going to a hospital to buy a baby from the supply kept there in a large ice chest.

Our family was leaving San Diego for that land of adventure, that storied country where life and death hung in the balance, where college professors wore chaps, and where barbers were unnecessary because of the abundance of Indians who scalped you gratis, Colorado.

He had always thought that the song was "O Beautiful for Spacious Guys."

While autobiography is inevitable, we must winnow carefully and add a good portion of lies, the bigger the better.

Not a one of you knows the sensation of having a red Indian arrow whiz by your sunbonnet with wind enough to make the ribbons wave.

There was one place where the mud dried and cracked into wedges like pieces of pie and when Molly was very small, she thought that this was where the sandwiches lived.

When I could not get a human member of my family to listen to me read aloud my plays and ballads and my short, short stories, I read them to our patient dog who loved me.

My father was too cold and awkward to give me affection; my brother soon resented me because I tagged along everywhere; my mother was too busy; my sisters found me too young; is it any wonder that I wanted to marry Laddy? [the Staffords' dog].

They mouthed their sweet cliches like caramels.

The alarm clock ticked smugly.

I, so far from being embourgeoisied, could find pleasure only in the society of the dog.

There was no stratum of society not reeking with the effluvia of fraud and pettifoggery. And the school system was almost the worst of all: if we could not understand fractions, was that not our teacher's fault? And therefore, what right had she to give us F?

Do we really need a poem about a banana that is set in type to form the shape of a banana?

The direct appeal to youth for youth's sake will always be the making of just so many little Hitlers. They love nobody but themselves.

If I'd rooted out all the badness in me, there wouldn't have been anything left of me.

My brain buzzed like a bee.

Even my boredom was curiously exuberant.

Ashamed, disconcerted by the erudition of the college women who had been discussing Hegel's antinomies, the *Faerie Queen*, and *La Grande Jatte*, I went up to my room to drug myself with typewriter practice.

I would dress my daughter in sack cloth and ashes and compel her to read *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Besides the neologisms that are splashed all over the body of the American language like the daubings of a chimpanzee turned loose with finger paints, the poor thing has had its parts of speech broken to smithereens....and upon its stooped and aching back it carries an astounding burden of lumber piled on by the sociologists and the psychologists and the sociopsychologists and the psychosociologists, the Pentagon, the admen... The prognosis for the ailing language is not good. I predict that it will not die in my lifetime, but I fear that it will be assailed by countless cerebral accidents and massive strokes and gross insults to the brain and finally will no longer be able to sit up in bed and take nourishment by mouth.

The only light came from two small, high windows through which I saw a steady parade of legs marching briskly past as if they had been amputated but had retained their power of locomotion.

The skin-deep college education...paled like the tan of a winter holiday.

Her voice fell upon the word "German" in such a way that the emphasis was ambiguous: either a German was infamous beyond pardon or pitiable beyond hope.

She argued hotly, although the German did not oppose her, and sometimes she threatened him with her spoon.

His eyes, pillowed by their pendulous sacs, had ambled sensually over me while his addled brain danced in bewilderment.

An aging, florid German whose face was as scarred as the moon, and who wore his monocle like a reprimand.

as spiritless as city lights

He paused once to point his spoon at Mme. Floquet as if he were going to shoot her.

They often killed each other because they had nothing else to do.

A pretty pickle of fish.

They were the tallest men I had ever seen and, though they must have been no less than twenty-five years old, were still unused to their height, as if they had shot up overnight and had not learned how to steer themselves.

The doctor wiped his shining lips with a purple handkerchief...as if he had been eating the face before him and its flavor had been so delicious that in his gorging he had been too enthusiastic to mind his lips.

All five toes [were] the same length, flexing and straightening as though a jungle vine to swing on were just outside their reach.

My heart pranced in surprise.

My heart was plucked quickly like a taut gut.

Ascent is so easy when we are lifted up by the wings of our dreams.

To her own heart, which was shaped exactly like a valentine, there came a winglike palpitation, a delicate exigency, and all the fragrance of all the flowery springtime love affairs that ever were seemed waiting for them in the whisky bottle.

There was a sweet flamboyance to the music; it was like a plump and tender hug into which I burrowed luxuriously.

The dew in her eyes as a bride gave way nearly at once to a glaze when she was a wife.

Far from conquering all, love lazily sidestepped practical problems.

Love is a child at language, speaks nonsense, asks stupid questions, makes insipid replies.

The warm tears well up as freely as water from a drinking fountain.

He was at times as frantic as his cousin's cat who, believing herself to be two cats, boxed her reflection in a mirror and hunted for herself behind it.

[He] never left his wife but studied her as the rapt jeweler studies a rare stone through the little magnifying glass enfolded in his eye.

My heart had been skinned by his silence.

I was a burst balloon.

He's got a sand dune for a soul.

Oliver [second husband] was worshipful and I was scornful.... Now at the moment of release for which I longed, I see the loss of what I needed.

My face drooped with stupidity.

I know that my friends have persuaded themselves that I once had a love affair that turned out badly--upon this universal hypothesis rests perhaps as much as half the appeal of unmarried women who show no signs of discontent, and there is no fact more beautifying than that which protects a grief that is never discussed.

I had been tricked into my pomposity by the corpulent silver inkwell as though its original owner had left his nineteenth-century cliches behind to mingle with the ink.

Raoul St. Denis came, bringing his house-guest, a brash seventeen-year-old dandy from Mobile named James Partridge, who had a mandolin and, inhaling, smoked Lucky Strikes, and who so swept Honor and Harriet off their feet that for days afterward they mooned and could not eat and when they were not writing in their diaries, stood looking at themselves in mirrors, stunned with foolishness. They wanted to fly a Confederate flag from the barn.

Uncle Claude laughed so that his belt buckle hopped up and down on his stomach like a jumping bean.

If she ever got fat, she thought, or ever said anything fat, she would lock herself in a bathroom and stay there until she died. Often she thought how comfortably you could live in a bathroom. You could put a piece of beaver board on top of the tub and use it as a bed. In the daytime you could have a cretonne spread on it so that it would look like a divan. You could use the you-know-what as a chair and the lavatory as a table. You wouldn't have to have anything else but some canned corn and marshmallows, and if you got tired of those, you could let a basket out of the window with a slip of paper saying, "Send up some hot tamales" or some hard-boiled eggs or whatever you particularly wanted at the time."

"Floorwalker! Mr. Bellamy! I've caught a thief!" Momentarily there was a violent hush--then such a clamor as you have never heard. Bells rang, babies howled, crockery crashed to the floor as people stumbled in their rush to the arena. Mr. Bellamy, nineteen years old but broad of shoulder and jaw, was instantly standing beside Lottie, holding her arm with one hand while with the other he removed her hat to reveal to the overjoyed audience that incredible array of merchandise. Her hair was wild, her face a mask of innocent bewilderment, Lottie Jump, the scurvy thing, pretended to be deaf and dumb... I tried to defend myself, but it was useless. The manager, Mr. Bellamy, the clerk, and my father patted Lottie on the shoulder, and the clerk said, "Poor, afflicted child." For being a poor afflicted child, they gave her a bag of hard candy, and she gave them the most fraudulent smile of gratitude, and slobbered a little, and shuffled out, holding her empty hat in front of her like a beggar-man. I hate Lottie Jump to this day, but I have to hand it to her--she was a genius.

He and Opal simultaneously bowed their heads in silent prayer. Both of them thoughtfully chewed gum... Evangelist Gerlash, having cranked the car, making a noise like a collision, climbed into the driver's seat, and grinned at the sight of the dollar... The car shook as if it were shaking itself to death... "It isn't every girl of ten years of age who brushes up against some moonshiners with a record as long as your arm in the very same day that a couple of hillbilly fakers try to take her for a ride."

I had to give up the library altogether after one unlucky occasion when Reddie stood on his hind legs and put his paws on top of her high desk. She had had her back to him, and, thinking she heard a customer, she turned, saying in her library whisper, "Good afternoon, and what may I do for you this afternoon?" and faced the grinning countenance of my dog. That time, in her wrath and dismay, she clutched her head in her hands and dislodged her hat and then her wig, so that a wide expanse of baldness showed, and everyone in the children's section dived into the stacks and went all to pieces.

The dog was tangibly in the room with us, shedding his hair, scratching his fleas, shaking rain off himself to splatter the walls, dragging some dreadful carcass across the floor, chewing up slippers, knocking over chairs with his tail, gobbling the chops from the platter, barking, biting, fathering, fighting, smelling to high heaven of carrion, staining the rug with his muddy feet, scratching the floor with his claws. He developed rabies; he bit a child, two children! Three! Everyone in town! And Gran and her poor darlings went to jail for harboring this murderous, odiferous, drunk, Roman Catholic dog.

The black bear on the polar bear's left...is a rough-and-tumble, brawling blowhard, thundering continually as he paces back and forth, or pauses to face his audience of children and mothers and release from his great, gray-tongued mouth a perfectly Vesuvian roar. If he were to be reincarnated in human form, he would be a man of action, possibly a football coach, probably a politician. One expects to see his black hat hanging from a branch of one of his trees; at any moment he will light a cigar.

The French Canadian game warden of great age and rumored lunacy (he sometimes thought he was General Pershing and tried to drill the trustees when they were working on the highway)...

She had come drifting like a hobo up from New York and finally had settled here, an eyesore when she was abroad, a burden to the taxpayers when she stayed put.

She wanted them to go together to some hopelessly disreputable bar and to console one another in the most maudlin fashion over a lengthy succession of powerful drinks of whisky, to compare their illnesses, to

marry their invalid souls for these few hours of painful communion, and to babble with rapture that they were at last, for a little while, no longer alone. Only thus, as sick people, could they marry...for rubes and intellectuals must stick to their own class. If only it could take place--this honeymoon of the cripples, this nuptial consummation of the abandoned--while drinking the delicious amber whisky in a joint with a jukebox, a stout barkeep, and a handful of tottering derelicts.

He would declare that she was not a harlot because she had been in love with each of her bedfellows.

He was asleep among his chins.

Boston was something in the days when hell was immediate, altruism was ruthless, and justice was Mosaic. Now, cured of its chills and fevers, its blood watered down, it was no longer exciting. Still puritanical, it tried to imitate Sodom and Gomorrahs in their decenter fashions, but the result was only dowdiness.

Conversation moved on stilts.

The yellow sofa was so placed that from it one could look nowhere but at the portrait of the Countess... pompous with the self-importance of the ruling class...a unique specimen, for she was not only aristocratic, but she was beautiful and talented as well, and, implied the station of the picture, according to standards that were not local, the *most* beautiful and *most* talented woman in Boston.... The Countess...drew my arm through hers... "Tell me, how did you like that little likeness of me in the hall? Did you notice it?"

Hopestill Mather...paused at the door like an actress overdoing her entrance in the fear that the audience would not applaud.

She wore everything to match exactly, including her stockings and gloves, even if she had to dye them, with the result that she resembled a caterpillar whose cocoon matches the leaf on which it is spun.

She held up her manners like the emblem of a secret cult.

No one had ever liked her, for she was a fool and had not worn stockings to her wedding.

Women, on first confronting Angelica Early, took a backward step in alarm and instinctively diverted the attention of their husbands or lovers to something at the opposite end of the room.

manacled envy

Neither of the men could have sensed the source of his charm since it required the intuitive simplicity with which a woman perceives in a man the very embodiment of temptation. This is one of the mysteries of their sex by which men are infuriated for, being unable to solve it, they believe it to be a hoax.

The curse of being female...is that we must pretend to be quite incapable of grasping the self-evident.

The whole of Miss Duff's mind was seldom in attendance when there was a gathering of more than three.

The Amazons went out to war for principles and rights while the men stayed indoors in their ivory tower.

Mr. Barker who knew a smattering of law said, parenthetically, that in ancient Greece, rocks that had fallen on people's heads and killed them had been tried and sentenced and executed although he was not just sure how.

Miss Pride...glared straight through his head as if the gimlets of her eyes could puncture the optic nerve.

Mrs. Fowler hated men so passionately that no one could dream why she married so many of them.

Tippy's word of honor proved to be no longer than a nonsense syllable.

As independent as a hog on ice.

Mr. Morgan's rejected paw faltered uncertainly to his side.

His smile went off like a street light.

Something inside him twitched like a cat's tail.

It's not right for a girl to be alone in the mountains with a lion loose.

"My friends and I have managed my life with the best of taste and all that is lacking at this banquet where the appointments are so elegant is something to eat."

To be loved is to be beautiful, but to be beautiful is not necessarily to be loved. Go and find a lover and obfuscate his senses.

Miss Pride thought of God as a big man who had, in misty times, drawn up the Ten Commandments, and about Whom it was in bad taste as well as half sacrilegious to talk.

Although it was fitting for one to have an acquaintance with God and with Milton, it was not proper to display more than the merest courtesy towards them.

Just as one believed in God and invoked Him but trafficked only with the minister, so one believed in Shakespeare but depended on *The Atlantic Monthly*.

A parrot in a cage...regarded her with wicked eyes like a patient maniac.

"I really enjoy church, you know. But Sunday is such a lovely time to exercise my dog."

The parrot, eyeing Rose in the twilight of the hall, gave forth a glottal giggle full of wisdom.

"I never read *The Atlantic*. I just skim it the way I do the Bible."

Her pudgy fingers were always quarreling in a box of chocolate creams, trying to find one "fit to eat."

As soft and fat as the gelded white Persian cat who dozed at her side, his scornful head erect, as if he were arrested not so much by sleep as by a coma of boredom and disgust.

There was something she had meant to remember or to think about that was troubling her aged mind like a rat in a wall.

She shrieked again, quivering pitiably like a baffled mole dislodged from his safe tunnel.

[My new psychiatrist] is so much more articulate than any of the others I've ever seen, and it's a new and extremely good and astringent experience for me to be with a man.... I think I am in love with him.... I don't know his status, whether single or married, but I want him to adopt me.... On the whole, I'm more for adoption than marriage.... I think he thinks I'm losing my mind and I'm with him there.

The dipsomaniac wrests himself from the fear of his desire by changing the name of it to "need," thus to tolerate his destruction as if it were no fault of his own.

cataleptic tranquility

If she stays away from John Barleycorn, she is, in our opinion, an OK kid.... We wouldn't mind...if she and Barleycorn stole a few kisses from time to time. It's this going all the way that causes so much trouble.

Molly thought of herself as a long wooden box with a mind inside.

The unmolested oyster creates no pearl.

Michael Hollister (2021)