

Big Horn PASS Δ VER

Instead of lamb I eat angus steer medium rare drenched in Heinz 57,
play pool with the only other customer while the juke box
blasts a song about blue, and that's when he comes in
holding the local paper out in front of him like it was a matzo.

By Donna Kaz

Mud spattered on his black hat, cattle dung caked on the heels of his boots,
gold buckle guarding the flat of his stomach, and except for the circle cut
made by the tin of Skoal in his right front pocket, his Wrangler rodeo jeans fit smooth
like they were poured from a mold of his waist on down.

He curves against the bar and leans left chewing on his paschal side of beef,
I know this night will be different from all other nights
as he eats without a sound, not even a faint scrape of the fork against the plate,
leaving nothing, his appetite huge and endless.

Suddenly he saunters (yes, I now know that I have never seen anyone saunter before)
and with outstretched arm his mighty hand tucks two quarters under
the lip of felt on the table. On all other nights I drink eight dollar glasses
of cheap red wine passing for Merlot in pretentious Soho bars

but on this night I drink Red Dog beer from the bottle in the oldest bar in Wyoming.
The game slows as winning is overshadowed by the tingling thrill of the chance
to play the cowboy. Counting the five solids I've left stranded I'm thinking my luck is cursed
when my partner calls the corner pocket and scratches out.

Without a blink the cowboy is racking up
saying "I'd like to play partners. You and me
'gainst the bartender and the loser." He sidles towards me
(never saw anyone sidle either) sticks his hand out.

I grab what feels like grade 10 sandpaper,
his grip a sawdust massage, scream my name in his ear over the music,
pick up my stick, swallow hard, taste the bitter marinade
the steak has left on my tongue and bank a clean shot.

The angel of death hovers overhead and then passes.
A pack of cattle moves down the street outside,
the cowboy smiles and the distance between my house and his
falls together like the Red Sea.