

Glam Affect at the Met

Ankh-Haf and Ipep, Memi and Sabu,
 Pepi the First and a Queen, Pepi Two...
 knickknack dead buried with beer, bread.

Guys stride away from the base, their wives
 posed with palms in prim support, stiff
 as the fifties—hieroglyphs hint at issues.

Stodgy gods: Ra, Hathor the Cow,
 Qetesh, Ptah, names like sneeze or spit,
 Egypt itself like spit in a dry climate.

In one sculpture hunk returns touch,
 hand draped on a breast impossibly pert,
 already old stylish lying about lift.

Na-Wab and Nury—iconoclast kids,
 turned trove themselves, alarmed, guarded
 under glass, rock and the rock-ferried *ka*.

Canopic kingdom sixties, hip commitment,
 bare feet evenly free of the stone.

L'oeuf Forty

This is Nank at The Crutch, every bit as handsome as in youth—I say better looking, the devil: yellow paisley bandana, folded triangular, tied doo-rag style over his healthy head of hair, salmon collared Le Coq Sportif, sleeves tailored extra large for flow and a sharp flag-like snapping after he strokes the ball from the ground, bright white tennis shorts, long enough for a comfortable stretch, slide, or dive, short enough to expose muscular thighs pumping upon any given move, ankle socks white with miniature black rooster insignia, shoes clean, minimal wear, light, reinforced with fluorescent pink durathane by Nike.

This is Nank at The Crutch: man of thirty-five sitting on a bar stool, drinking his third Miller draft, sandwiched between a knobby elbowed factory foreman and two lovely-enough out-of-work factory blondies. Light of day would burn this place blind, don't you know, but the red neon thrown from all corners—across pool tables and jukebox, dartboard and booths, liquor bottles and bar top—makes for sure sweet wallow and first-rate conversation.

This is Nank at The Crutch.

Me, I say.

College by birth, education by habit, tennis instructor by profession, nothing by merit. This is me at The Crutch, Nank, a lover and a baseliner and a humanitarian and, now, a concerned etymologist and conversationalist.

"Is *slough* really a word?" I say, interrupting the two out-of-work factory blondies.

They'd been discussing how to shed the world, how to let its woes run off your feathers like pond water from a mallard's back.

Something about the men in or not in their lives, the crappy work they can and cannot get. "Just slough it off and move on is what I say," the more brunette of the blondies had said before sipping her shot.

"I don't know," she says to me, furrowing her brow, confused. Then suddenly confident, "Sure it's a word. I just used it, and we all understood it."

She's proud of her usage, of her explanation. She has the right to be so. *Slough*. Slough it off like dead skin. Like a snake periodically casting off its old and dry scales for a clean coat around the sound flesh. Like *He managed to slough off his smoking habit*. Like shit from a duck's ass. Slough, baby, the woes of this world and let's drink another round.

"I think it's a great word," I say. "I'm glad you used it here today."

Both blondies, the lesser and the blonder, nod to one another, smitten.

The knobby-elbowed factory foreman had been sucking on his Bud the whole time, working it through a straw with a slurping usually reserved for children and their malts, lurching between his seat and me, talking fast on a cell phone. Something about Brownie's being staked-out, then busted. Something about a gambling ring the owner must have known about, but didn't stop, and so now his wife should meet him here or wait fifteen minutes before heading to the Green Lantern for early happy hour.

"Tell me—I'm Nank," I say, "about Brownie's and the cops and the bust." Tell me, I say, like I'm a regular here and just haven't been in to drink for a few years because of a near fatal accident. Something with water skiing and a shark. Or a motorcycle and a tractor trailer on I-95. Tell me, I say, because I've never been in here before and I'm here now at this moment.

And he does.

He shows me a thin manila card for laying bets, explains the spread, the under/over column, what to circle and why. He whispers to me and the two lovely-enough blondies the name of his bookie, *Shake* (because the upper portion of his pear-shaped body wiggles when he laughs hard or soft), and gives us the skinny on the black box behind the dumpster behind Brownie's where picks are dropped and picked up. He gives us the lowdown on the very tall, mustached man who usually sits right there at the end of the bar, above where they keep the liqueurs, those sticky-sweet syrups for shots and coffee delight.

"He's one of them," he says. "Always sitting there in his navy blue coveralls. Not *Bigley* like the patch says, but a detective undercover in here to gather talk against Brownie, then file a report. You'd have to notice, even from where you're sitting, the man never had a lick of smudge or grease *anywhere*. A mechanic with clean nails ain't no mechanic."

The blondies love his closing saw, the breathless way he told his story to the end. These girls love Nank's strict listening, how I rocked with interest, as if hinged, to and fro. They bob their heads in unison like Pez dispensers with shocking blonde bangs. They smile for real, even though they've heard it all before. The factory foreman is a regular. They are regulars. They all used to work the same shift at the factory. Brownie's has been raided before.

We drink.

We keep drinking until our mugs, tumblers, and cans are empty. Until the blondies split up, cut a quick swath around their stools, and position themselves flank left, flank right, sandwiching the factory foreman and me, Nank. They order a round of Buttery Nipples for all and the bartender, a deft-handed god of quick mixing abilities, complies.

"To Brownie sloughing it off," says the blonder blonde, thrusting her shot glass high.

Arms raised, we drink and laugh and give handsome compliments until the round is done. Then the place quiets again with the electric hum of neon. The factory foreman slips out the double doors, leaving a shrinking slab of sunlight on the bar floor. And the out-of-work factory blondies lean closer to Nank, tongues liquor bloated and licentious, wanting to know why the funny getup and hat. Then, after formal introductions, wanting to know about racquets and strings, about double faults and tiebreak scoring, about Grand Slam tournaments and the let cord rule.

Yes, this is Nank at The Crutch. Me.

But O, Tess! She who's the suffix and prefix of my every thought. Tess, my reckless reckless wife. Never innocent, always proud. Tess, grace of my eye, apple of my tree, à la mode of my heart and pie.

Tess, O Tess! Nurse to be. Who else? Body jutting, lean and long. Your peaks and tips so sudden. Who else could work a twelve-and-a-half-hour day in latex gloves—fingers in asses, lips lightly pressed to the cheeks of the old and sick and vulgar, the wise and dying and dead? Could leave clinicals for the arms of a disposable lover, speed home after to page through *Bon Appetit* and whip up a dish of Phantom Curry Oleo—veal medallions so choice the meat would drop in half at the sight of any dull blade, the jade green poblanos still harboring their white-hot ouch—drink four longnecks, love me like an anaconda in candlelight—every exit and entrance mine in the pitch night—then disappear from our bed before dawn's blue light? Each time with you is a toothpick wedged between my front teeth.

Lovely lovely lovely Tessa, what about poor Nank when you leave? Say, for instance, Nank earlier today? Don't you wonder or care or want to know?

Here: This is Nank in the raw morning, in bed and alone and angry and lonely in his purplish robe. He's counting his short fingers

on each stubby thumb, opening and closing his little kitten paw hands, and thinking of your young boys: their big thumbs; their towering index fingers; what size gloves they must wear; what size racquet grip might fit in their mitt-like fists. Four and a half? Four and five-eighths? Bigger?

Nank sits up, reaches to the bedside for his cigarettes, blue hue from the TV swaddling the room (or was that dawn?), and then he's back on that flight, Delta 2131, a 737 departing West Palm to Charlotte for the Men's Hard Court Nationals, the day of your first leaving, Tess. You abandoned Nank for a young, big-thumbed deejay (with thick, princely digits too, no doubt, to warp, scratch, and mix his vinyl way from rave to rave, house party to house party).

Just when Nank was on a run, up twenty-six ranking points to crack the top hundred after a barrage of five-set victories! Every dump on the circuit with tattered, wanton nets, flawed cement, and the promise of main draw play saw the likes of his sweaty face during those grueling summer months. Opponents and line judges saw Nank's calves in peak shape but you wanted music! Not even music, just gimpy synthesized sounds. Disposable pop and pilfered samples.

There Nank is, taking a long drag off his Camel Light, remembering: how the plane was cleared for takeoff but not flying, how it must have taxied for hours, no coffee or complimentary peanuts for the passengers, how a window seat's nothing when the only thing below is a runway full of lusty young boys tending luggage, how any one of them could have been a deejay, could have been your deejay (it's not a lucrative occupation, it requires a second job), how he could have jumped right down from the wing, could have hijacked a baggage car, stolen down the runway, trailer writhing behind, toward any one of those boys, toward anyone shaved clean to the rubbery face of youth, how he could have battered them good

to the ground, and, once down, could have slaughtered them with disparaging looks that meant other, more distasteful things.

I say that was me in bed in my purplish robe. Nank, man who rises early just to make sale of himself like a used car.

O Tess. What you do to Nank in the morning.

As bad or worse as in the young afternoon.

The temperature rising—humidity too. Nank a sweating mess of tics and jerks while he smoked and squashed the butts in a coffee cup. Yes, this was Nank stalking you, Tess. Cutting the engine and waiting outside your lover's apartment. The man with the green thumb and a deep love for mangroves. An arboriculturalist of golden intention and fine repute. He scours the fringes of highway rest stops for broken limbs and ailing twigs, I've heard, attacks woody neighborhood parks with wide black tape and tremendous gauze.

Hands behind my head, elbows spread wide, I sprawled out beneath the orange tree in his front yard, waited for him to come out. I waited to see his arms around you like brown on his precious bark and soothed myself with one of his fallen oranges. Peeling and eating, I tossed the rind this way and that, reveling in my well-baked plan: When *aren't* chainsaws on sale? Those heavy-duty powerhouses *not* twenty to thirty percent off at Home Depot?

I got up, opened the car trunk. With both hands I swung it to the curb, pulled at the cord and braced for the kickback. "Behold," I readied to say, "cuckolded Nank in his tennis attire! Here to fell for love!"

Ha! No tree could stand in my way. I could hack the world to trunks for you, Tess, leave the stumps and their respective forests burning in my wake. That is if I could've gotten the thing started, had remembered to buy gas. Instead, Nank tugged and tugged at the cord until the young afternoon was fading, and he happened to

see neighbors on the phone inside their houses, probably calling the police. At which time he decided it might be wise to get far away from that tree and apartment, far off to a bar, or to the club, and fast.

And with a farewell to all (and a sunglasses check) I am off for the club. Out the double doors and into the blinding sunlight and onto the highway, leaving the lovely-enough blondies and fleet-handed bartender until next time.

Tipsy Nank speeding and switching lanes to make back some time and change.

Tipsy Nank trying to make it to the prim ladies by two o'clock.

Tipsy Nank, Head Pro in smart shorts. Mr Nank now in charge. Nank the hagiographer. Nank on the clay courts of Del-Air Country Club, Delray Beach, Florida, home of the once-funked, now defunct Lawrence A. Sagel: man not of instruction but knowledge, man of strategy, man of economic stroke production and the pocket elbow tuck for ripping net play, strength conditioner, builder of teen confidence and the potential of Nank's all-court, all surface game. My Teacher.

My lovely Tess, soothing nurse to be, help me to be half the living body Saint Sagel's spirit left behind. O true Tessa, drafter of care plans, taker of temperature head to toe, tune up the sour orchestra plucking in my head, steady my racquet and guide my hand while I feed the rich and tanned bright yellow balls. Gather my bandy legs when I take Court One with a shopping cart full of such ammunition, adjust my bandana, check the sun, knock a little dust from my soles, and rally the troops round for drills.

"What will it be today?" I say. "Fence to baseline and back, fence to service line and back, fence to net and back?" In response to which there are groans and bahoos and wet tonguey sounds. For the growing older, each new day ensures not just aging and potential discounts, but newfound reservoirs of venom.

"Get off it, Nank. Let's just pair up and play doubles," says Margaret, maid of sixty-two, wife of three, mother of multiple lawyers, owner of the finest overhead smash and top spot on the women's fifty and up ladder.

"But ladies..."

"Oh, go drink a Coke in the pro shop, Nank," says the lowest seed, Peggy, doctor's wife, oldest daughter of a Pennsylvania steel tycoon, designer of contemporary weddings for South Florida debutantes and trendy holiday trinkets: gold leaf chocolate menorahs and such.

Then they're a whirling gaggle of pleated tennis skirts and dark veiny legs. Rowdy and vocal in their sagging bloomers, with their Wilson Sledge Hammer racquets and face-lifts and frosty dye jobs and blue rinse, they make for the water cooler under the courtside cabana.

Nank could be discouraged here. Nank could be broken in his loose shorts. Nank could be any smug cat who suddenly, shamefully sees for the first time that he's been wearing the same outfit for years. But I see how the ladies drink up quick. How fiercely they swallow, crush their paper cups, take the court hydrated and, under Margaret's command, face off, popping balls chest high across the net with good intention, slight angle, much sweet spot, and some accuracy. Margaret and Peggy, Thelma and Sabina, Irene and Ruth, Bonny and Virginia, Jane and Vilma, Ethel and Josie, Susan and Marka, Leslie and Adrienne, all punching ferocious volleys with sharp backspin, their elbows tucked, their bodies compact and square to the net.

They are stolid backboards. They are steady old beach palms that bend and bend storm after storm.

They make my heart swell then shrink, then swell and shrink, like a close love-forty call caught on replay, shown over and over

again. The yellow fuzzy thing round, then flattening, then oblong as an egg. Then back to a full ball.

Then over again.

Yes, I say, as handsome as in youth—better, you know, Nank, Nank, Nank could be on the verge here. The verge of something he's not going to take anymore—and then will take that much more of. Nank is on both sides of a cliff, not just hanging from the edge. He's the sturdy tree on the ledge and the roots that squeeze through the rocks and soil above the water so far below.

This is Nank. Me, I say.