

A WOMAN WALKS INTO A BAR

What follows is a collection of writings that I found left behind on the bar at the Thirsty Dachshund. The words were scrawled in small block letters in black ballpoint on a stack of cocktail napkins, etched with as much effort, from the look of it, as the initials, slogans, and epithets carved into the wooden bar top itself.

The napkins were neatly arranged in front of the seat customarily occupied by Carla Tharpe, forty-five, with whom I shared more than one drink on more than one evening over more than one bowl of heavily salted yellow popcorn from the machine in the Dachshund's dark front corner. I asked Carla later whether she had written them, but she neither confirmed nor denied it. She shook her head, gave me a long stare, and said, "I really don't remember."

A WOMAN WALKS INTO A BAR,
TRIES TO WALK INTO A BAR
BUT THE DOOR WON'T SWING
OPEN, SHE TUGS BUT IT'S
LOCKED AND SHE SQUINTS AT
HER PHONE, CHECKS THE HOURS,
THEY OPEN AT NOON, SHE
COULD SWEAR IT WAS NOON,
SHE CURSES THE DOOR AND
CURSES THE WORLD AND CURSES
THE DRUMS IN HER HEAD.

A WOMAN WALKS INTO A BAR
AND SITS DOWN. THE STOOL SPINS
HER AROUND SO SHE STOPS
FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE NEAT
ROWS OF BOTTLES, THE WHOLE
HOLY CHORUS OF BROWN-AMBER-
OCHRE-GOLD-YELLOW-CRYSTAL.
ON EACH PAPER COASTER A
GLASS THUNKS AND TINKLES
WITH ICE-ANGEL MUSIC. SHE
SHOUTS "AMEN."

A WOMAN WALKS INTO A
BAR AND THE BAR TOP
SPARKLES WITH PROMISES
UNTOLD. THE WOMAN LOOKS
AROUND AT THE BEAUTIFUL
STRANGERS. THE BARTENDER
NODS, HE'S WRINGING A
TOWEL, SAYS, "WELL, WHATCHA
DRINKIN'?" AND THE WOMAN
GRINS WIDE, AND HER
PEARLY TEETH GLEAM LIKE THE MOON.

REPRINT—EPHEMERA

A man walks into a bar and says—wait, stop. Why a man? Why is it always a man who walks into the bar? You never hear “A woman walks into a bar.” But why not? It’s about time somebody started a story with “A woman walks into a bar,” don’t you think?

A woman walks into a bar with a duck. The bartender nods at the duck, then says to the woman, “Hey sweetheart, what’ll you have?” She bristles at “sweetheart” but orders a beer and the bartender brings her a pint and the check and the duck says, “Enjoy your drink, babe—I’ve got the bill.”

A woman walks into a bar, sees a priest, a rabbi, and a Buddhist monk, and at first she thinks, *Shit, I walked into a church*, then she sees that they’re drinking and sighs with relief and slides onto a stool, gets a bourbon, and listens a bit to their god conversation.

A woman walks into a bar and the bar top sparkles with promises untold. The woman looks around at the beautiful strangers. The bartender nods, he’s wringing a towel, says, “Well, whatcha drinkin’?” And the woman grins wide, and her pearly teeth gleam like the moon.

A woman walks into a bar and birds chirp, flowers bloom, little chipmunks jeté, and the bartender lands from a neat triple lutz, softly plunks down a glass, fills it up, slides it over—the drink pirouettes to slap five to the woman’s raised palm and all’s right with the world.

A woman walks into a bar and sits down. The stool spins her around so she stops face-to-face with the neat rows of bottles, the whole holy chorus of brown-amber-ochre-gold-yellow-crystal. On each paper coaster a glass thunks and tinkles with ice-angel music. She shouts “amen.”

A woman walks into a bar, in her throat the crisp-cold, in her brain tingly-warmth, and she thinks *first-sip-best-sip* but amends and then counters *next-sip-best-sip*, so she orders another ten minutes another ten minutes another and on just like that all night long.

A woman walks into a bar the sensation that builds in the backs of her eyes ocean-swells she thinks *this is the place where I surf* two more drinks she thinks *please god don't let the crest break* two more drinks she thinks *god help me just let me drown*.

A woman walks into a bar stalks into a bar tumbles into a bar fumbles into a bar ambles into a bar gambols into a bar rambles into a bar shambles into a bar putters into a bar stutters into a bar mutters into a bar gutters into a bar huddles into a bar muddles into a bar scuttles into a bar.

A woman walks into a bar and she thinks to herself, *It's not safe, it's not safe, no I know, I will stop, for my health and all else, yes I know, yes I'm lucky, of all that could happen, could've happened already, to put myself into this kind of position, I know I know better, I'll stop it, I will*.

A woman walks into a bar can't remember where was it she came from did she have an appointment or something or somewhere to be was it maybe a job interview can't remember *ah fuckit* she thinks *be here now* and she calls down the bar for another.

A woman walks out of one bar to another but did she remember to close out her tab can't remember and wait did she have one more card and where did that forty bucks go but she thinks *oh forget it it's gone c'est la vie* and she smiles at a neighbor just neighborly-like.

A woman walks into the floor, at least that's how it feels, she remembers her foot reaching down from the rung of the stool and then *smack* she remembers the smash of her nose and her lips on the lacquered wood planks.

A woman walks into a bar keeps her gaze off the mirror she's looking real hard the other way she pretends not to see herself looks at the floor keeps her eyes on her shoes keeps her hands on her purse and her lunch she keeps down but just barely she thinks *goddammit you brain shut up*.

A woman walks into a bar and she's chuckling alone she's the only one laughing at a joke in her head it's so funny she can't help but laugh someone asks "What's so funny?" she just stares ahead, thinks, *Well shit, you don't get it, then I can't explain, it's just life, life's a big fucking hell of a joke ha ha ha*.

A woman walks into a bar, sees the bartender talking, sees everyone talking, but all she can hear is the wind in a tunnel, or sounds bubbling up from a lakebottom dredge, it's all in slow motion with everyone's voice like an off-tune bassoon through her ears cotton-plugged.

A woman walks into a bar, tries to walk into a bar but the door won't swing open, she tugs but it's locked and she squints at her phone, checks the hours, they open at noon, she could swear it was noon, she curses the door and curses the world and curses the drums in her head.

A woman walks out of a bar, stumbles out mumbles out bumbles out humbles out crawls out falls out bawls out stalls out oozes out woozes out snoozes out dribbles out quibbles out snivels out shrivels out pisses out bobbles out hobbles out wobbles out, out into the blinding sun.

VISCERAL

The following is transcribed from a field recording. The speaker is a man I encountered sitting on a wrought iron bench in the town square. He identified himself only as "Phil," and I could not pin down his age with any accuracy. My best guess would be thirty-five, maybe forty. He was rail-thin and had a shock of dark hair that hung down to his eyes. He appeared at first glance to be wearing a grayish-brown felted sweater-vest, but upon further inspection, it turned out that his torso was coated in a thick layer of lint and other light debris. Later, when I asked other residents about Phil, they typically cringed in recognition and said they knew him as "that strange skinless guy." Later still, I learned there was a period when I was widely known as "that blinking, bearded, bespectacled fellow with the notepad and audio recorder who seems to think he's blending in." People call it how they see it, and they never see the whole picture, do they?