The Black Rose

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The Black Rose
Grand Rapids, MI

The beasts were chained together
grey leather legs and sides
cracked with weight and time

a memorial march, a mourning march
—slow moving, a silent train

walking back-to-trunk
tails in mouths
on a barren Sunday street.

In our low tent
in the middle of the woods
I lay on you
and thought of another

I couldn’t breathe—
was collapsing in that nowhere.

Through dark windows of the pub
we saw Barnum & Bailey, tent down, stakes up
lead the saddest most beautiful parade
and it almost brought me back.

But I go crazy in the fall—
snapping branches
kicking-up leaves.

It was a good day to give you away—
the day we watched the elephants
we sat on the same side of the table
took food from the same plate.

What You & I Failed Through

Walk in front of a firing squad, set yourself on fire with matches from Bill Knapp’s
and gasoline, rewire all the electricity in the house down to one socket; stick
your finger in it. Howard listed ways to commit suicide in his head (as he always
did when he felt a panic attack approaching) while hanging upside down by
his seatbelt in his sixth deceased wife Estie’s 1988 Lincoln Town Car, on the
way to her funeral. He always failed at remembering the Dorothy Parker poem
that made the listing process considerably easier to handle, just like he failed
everything, except being intoxicatingly, devastatingly handsome. This was
key: when he was younger, he was a brawn 6’1” with wide muscular collar and
shoulders, exceptionally-flat waistline; tan, rosy skin; brilliantly white teeth,
dimples to make the legs quiver; a head full of perfect brown waviness—just
enough to give it body, volume, oomph. He was a charmer, a smooth & sweet
talker and as he aged, he did so gracefully, with a class that reminded people
of Sinatra, Brando, Robert Redford. Even so, he was a complete failure, since
looks only get you so far. He failed in school (slight undiagnosed dyslexia),
failed as an army recruit (beautifully shaped but poorly-made knees), failed as
a shoe salesman (not gentle enough), a cab driver (too many speeding tickets),
a short-order cook (very unsanitary), a post office carrier (too slow) and hun-
dreds of other jobs. Eventually, in his late forties, he filed for disability under
the pretense of fibromyalgia. He also failed at keeping wives alive; for years he
wasn’t sure why he kept trying. He wasn’t a needy man, that is to say, he made
his own coffee & retrieved his own newspaper in the mornings, starched his
own shirts & bleached his own underwear, knew how to vacuum, bake cook-
ies, scrub his own john. Things, according to his friends, that should’ve been
executed by a woman, things expected to be executed by a woman. He stopped
expecting anything by wife two when he failed to produce children with her.
(He, actually, failed at producing children, which he wanted very badly, with
any wife due to the fact that no wife lasted longer than one year and that he

1 Estie choked on a BBQ spare rib while out to dinner at China China Garden, her favorite restaurant, with
her thirty-seven-year-old niece, Tanya, and Tanya’s life partner, Teena.