

## Et Tu?

*Cambron Henderson*

*“But in hell, old age is not tolerated. It is too real.  
Here we worship Love and Beauty.”*

“Don Juan in Hell,” George Bernard Shaw

She’s late today, nearly thirty minutes. It’s not like her. Gordon Caruthers leans back in his wheelchair and turns his head to gaze out the window at the sky, slate blue, empty of clouds. What does that mean? He is so ignorant now about the vagaries of weather. Does the cloudless sky mean that it is cold? He notes that the grounds need raking again. Saint Dominic’s brochure made so much of their stately oak trees but what a mess they make. He sighs and a small, round cloud appears on the glass. *At least I’m still breathing*, he thinks.

How he misses New York; he misses the comforting closeness of brick, glass, concrete, and steel that used to press in on him, buildings that housed the busy, the hurried, the purposeful. All this open space and sky is disconcerting, like bobbing on the ocean in a tiny boat.

With his one good hand he picks up and readjusts his limp arm so that it lies more naturally across his lap. Yes. There. Now it looks as if it’s resting casually after swirling a glass of claret up against the light, or after brushing his fingers across the top of a soft white hand.

A few feet away his roommate Ray is in bed pretending to read one of those dreadful spy thrillers he gets from the bookmobile on Thursdays. But Caruthers knows that Ray too is waiting, waiting for the sound of Brutus’ claws on the linoleum to announce her arrival.

A rattling in the hall causes both men to look to the open door but it’s only Mrs. Hauser shuffling by yet again in her walker. Dr. Paul recommended that she keep moving so now she shambles

awkwardly up and down the corridor at least four times a day. *Like a drunken rat on an exercise wheel*, thinks Caruthers.

“She’s late,” says Ray, demonstrating his relentless gift for stating the obvious. If Caruthers were still capable of anything approaching normal speech he’d have long since flattened Ray with one of the rapier-like retorts he was once known for. Instead he can only shrug his response, turning away to discourage any further talk. Back when he was still Professor Caruthers, he eviscerated more than one upstart freshman and a few fellow faculty members for statements far more insightful than any of Ray’s.

Down in the passenger-loading zone, Mr. O’Malley’s daughter has settled her father at last in the front seat of her Buick and is struggling to lift his wheelchair into the trunk as the wind grabs at her hair and skirt. Such a plain, graceless girl—horsey they used to call that type. But dutiful, certainly dutiful. She arrives every Sunday without fail to take her father to church and then home for dinner. *It’s the least she can do*, thinks Caruthers, after walling him up here, like Poe’s most unfortunate Fortunato.

Caruthers’ son, Robert, and daughter-in-law, Angela, come only once a month, bringing sugarless toffees. They sneak glances at the clock while blathering on about the house they are forever redecorating. Robert brings a copy of *The New Yorker* every time they come but Caruthers hasn’t been able to communicate to him that one of the many injustices of his stroke is an inability to process written words. Still, Caruthers takes pleasure in looking at the shape of them on the page, like hieroglyphs without a Rosetta Stone—beautiful and incomprehensible.

Each visit, Angela seems to have added yet another piece of jewelry to her already crowded neck, although why she would want to call attention to one of her least attractive features Caruthers cannot guess. True, some of her necklaces—there had to be ten of them—dangle down into the crevice of her quite ample bosom, but he’s never found her type attractive. Too bovine for his tastes.

He thinks wistfully of the lithe, sophisticated young women Robert brought home from college, women Caruthers had been

able to talk to about poetry and wine, women who'd flirted shyly with him, would even have been potential conquests if not for Robert. Or *had* there been some conquests? Caruthers has a vague recollection of furtive grappling in a pantry one Thanksgiving and perhaps a terrible scene afterwards. Yes, yes, that seems right. Robert stopped visiting his father for many years after that. Perhaps Angela's appeal for Robert was that his father found her repellent.

The two of them take Caruthers to their home occasionally—an interminably verdant two-hour drive. God, he hates New Jersey. They only spring him for major holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving. They do it again on the Fourth of July and Labor Day though not on Memorial Day—a distinction that puzzles him. Most awkward of all is Father's Day. All the outings are torturous exercises in forced normalcy, Angela asking repeatedly, a little too brightly, "How's that, *Dad?*" or "You doing okay, *Dad?* Just give a sign if you're not comfortable."

He hates the way she says "Dad," with that unnatural, careful emphasis on the word as if showing off some beefy piece of vocabulary she's only recently acquired and whose meaning she barely grasps. Robert just looks on meekly while she runs the show. When did his son become such a mouse? Vanished are all those misdirected adolescent rages that erupted after his parents' marriage went to hell, all spent now, all spent on his father. Still, any break in the tedium is glorious; the anticipation of their outings always far sweeter than the event but that's how it is with so many things now.

The hands on his watch tick past three o'clock. Where is she? His shoes need a shine, but that can't be helped, and they pinch his swollen feet horribly. Nurse whatever-her-name-is hadn't wanted to help him into them so he'd had to insist quite forcefully, humiliatingly, with grunts and gestures. Slippers with his suit—ridiculous.

"Maybe she's not coming today," says Ray, giving up all pretense of reading. Caruthers narrows his eyes at his roommate but says nothing. If Ray thinks he will give up and ring to be wheeled to the rec room or the dining room, he's a fool.

A fierce rivalry between the men emerged the day of that first visit several weeks ago. Angela had signed Caruthers up for the Thera-Pet program without consulting or informing him. He was seated in his wheelchair next to the window, his bed too much like a coffin to be any comfort. Sunken down into one of those stuporous naps, induced by the fistful of pills he was sure would eventually choke him, he awoke with a start to the dog's hot breath tickling the hairs on his arm. Ray was grinning at him like a penny circus clown. The room would not stop spinning, and for a terrible instant Caruthers thought his own mind might finally have crumbled.

But then she spoke, and broke the spell.

"Mr. Caruthers? Would you like to meet Brutus?" Her voice was gentle.

He blinked up at her, his eyes focusing slowly. She stood framed by the window, the afternoon sun creating a halo around her. "Angel," he murmured, though it only came out as one of the grotesque, strangled noises he emits in place of speech ever since his stroke. When well rested, and with enormous force of will, he can form a handful of coherent words but the outcome of his efforts is at best unpredictable. At that moment however what emerged from his mouth was nothing like speech.

But she smiled at him as if she understood. "Sit, Brutus," she said, and the dog obeyed instantly, glancing back at her.

Caruthers had never really liked dogs or the chaos and filth even the cleanest and most well behaved seemed to carry with them. Because it belonged to her though, this beast, an unrecognizable mélange of breeds, tall and lean with eerie white-blue eyes, was not nearly so repellent. He tried to bring his hand up to pat its head but had forgotten that he did not have the strength to lift it more than a few inches. Suddenly she was kneeling next to him, placing her smooth hand over his useless one, picking it up and brushing it over the thick grey fur at the dog's ruff. The sweet smell of her and the sensation of her fingers cradling his wrist intoxicated him. He concentrated very hard on a single word, as his speech therapist had encouraged him to do, and managed to whisper, "soft."

Then she laughed a husky, honeyed laugh. Their eyes met and he recognized in her at once a fellow sensualist. “Yes, he is soft,” she said. How gratifying to finally have someone not speak to him as if he were a slow, obstinate child, or worse, to shout at him as if he were deaf. She spoke in low, private tones, the kind adults who understand one another used, and he soaked up her voice and the nearness of her like Tantalus at last touching his lips to cool water.

“Your daughter thought you might like some animal companionship from time to time,” she said.

Caruthers didn’t want to waste his energies trying to make her understand that Angela was only his daughter-in-law, the disappointing, mediocre choice his son had made after the boy’s mother died. Still, he hated for her to think of crass, bossy Angela, who insisted on calling his son ‘Bobby,’ as a blood relative.

“Brutus and I come once a week,” she was saying but Caruthers was having difficulty concentrating, distracted by the ripeness of her lower lip, her eyes (were they brown or was there a burst of green at their center?) and the arch of her brow that rose and fell as she talked.

He tried to hold onto her words. Had she told him her name? If so, it had escaped him. “I used to visit my grandmother, who loved dogs, and got permission to bring Brutus,” and here she rubbed the mongrel’s jowl, causing it to stare up at her in naked adoration. “After she died, they asked me if we wanted to participate in the Thera-Pet program and we’ve been coming ever since. Almost a year now.”

A year. How could she stand it? Didn’t her nostrils clench shut at the stench of urine and decay? Didn’t the slobbering souls who had once been human and now wandered the halls like wraiths make her skin shudder? Didn’t the dearth of anything resembling intelligent conversation make her want to run screaming from the rooms?

And then, as if on cue, Ray spoke up, Ray who had not uttered a single syllable of import in the nine months Caruthers had spent shackled to him. “I like dogs too. Here boy,” he called out, leaning over and patting the side of his bed.

She and Brutus moved to Ray's bedside and Brutus wagged his tail as Ray rubbed at him roughly. "Yes, you're a good boy, aren't you?" Then the beast licked Ray's face. Revolting, but Ray only said, "At my age, I guess that's all the smooching I'm going to get."

And she laughed again, long and sweet, kind really, thought Caruthers, but he suddenly found it hard to breathe. Ray grinned at him over the dog's head, clearly gloating. And thus their rivalry was born.

Every visit the men competed to be the first to make her toss her head back and laugh. She laughed easily. Last week Ray had resorted to a ridiculous, tired joke he'd picked up from an orderly and embellished shamelessly, something about an old monk weeping when he realized the proper biblical translation was actually 'celebrate' not 'celibate.' "That's a good one," she'd said after her initial laughter trickled off. Ray had worn an insufferably exultant smile the rest of the day. Cheater. Well, if that was how he wanted to play, Caruthers was an opponent to be reckoned with. He was ready for Ray this week.

Caruthers tries to ease the ache of waiting by conjuring her up in his mind, a now almost commonplace habit these last few weeks. He rests his cheek on the cool window, shuts his eyes and imagines not her smooth brown hair, nor the curve of her hip, nor even her lovely laugh. Instead he remembers her smell, the smell that every time she visits so enchants him and lingers in the air after she's gone, too precious, too subtle to be obliterated by the animal musk Brutus leaves in his wake.

Caruthers fondly remembers the women in his life not by their names but by the perfumes he chose for them: *L'Air du Temps*, *White Shoulders*, *Joy*, *Chanel* (Numbers 5 and 19), *Cinnabar* and *Charlie*—young, neurotic, ultimately self-destructive *Charlie*. That last had been a mistake, had in fact quite painfully brought his marriage to an end.

He would never have dreamed though of suggesting that she wear anything that would mask her own unique and deeply nuanced scent. She smelled of summer, of just ripened peaches, he

was certain it was peaches, promising juice that would drip down his chin and linger on his lips, sweet and sticky. He has almost imagined that peach taste onto his tongue when the clatter of Brutus' claws across linoleum stirs him from his reverie.

Both men sit up straighter. Ray puts his book on the bedside table and smooths the hideous orange afghan his daughter in Texas crocheted for him over his lap. Caruthers readjusts his lifeless arm and tries to arrange his face into a smile, hoping it's not the lopsided grimace he usually sees in his reflection. He pats his pocket to make sure the bit of roast beef he squirreled away from dinner the night before is still there. It's an important component of his plan that Brutus come to him first.

He concentrates on the words he will speak when Brutus has gulped down the last of the roast beef and responds to Ray's predictable, "Here boy." All morning Caruthers practiced quietly, under his breath. How had he not thought of it before? "Et tu," was all he thought he'd need to get out. Though, if necessary, he was prepared to add, "Brutè." She'd understand then and she'd laugh, perhaps touching Caruthers' hand. They'd laugh together and Ray would want to know why but, even if they explained it to him, the reference would be beyond his crude grasp and not worth trying to explain.

Brutus rounds the corner, his tags jingling happily and then, at last, she is there, in their room, not imagination or dream but flesh. "Hello, boys."

Caruthers loves that she calls them that; it sounds so flirty and young. Brutus wavers between the two men before ignoring Ray's frenetic gesturing and choosing Caruthers instead. Ray feigns indifference and Caruthers shoots him a brief look of triumph before slipping the hidden morsel to Brutus.

She stands in front of him. God, she is lovely. He thinks, not for the first time, of Byron. Caruthers had loved reading poetry out loud to his classes, helping his students to hear the music buried in the words. If he still had command of language, he would ask her casually if she'd ever read "She Walks in Beauty

Like the Night” and she might be surprised, might not have read it. “No,” she’d say, “I don’t think I know that one.” And he would recite to her and make her feel what he felt. And he would touch her with the words, Byron’s words, so that she would see beyond the husk of a man he’d become. Instead, he must settle for cheap parlor tricks to lure her dog to his side. What a spiteful twist of fate that Caruthers should discover such an exquisite creature when he is immured in this tomb of a body and can only speak in absurd, nearly unintelligible code.

Brutus has finished the roast beef and is snuffing at Caruthers’ pocket, then pushing a cold, wet nose into his hand, searching for more. Caruthers is about to stop his attentions to the dog so that Ray can play his part and call it to him, but just then she bends over to scratch Brutus’ head and Caruthers spies the ring.

He’s certain it was not there before; his practiced eye would never have missed a detail like that. It is a small, single diamond in a solitaire setting, encircling the fourth finger on her left hand. This is no heirloom from her grandmother.

She is speaking but he can’t think because of the ring with its cruel sparkle that means some young man, some mindless cretin, who has no idea of her value, is free to touch her, to slide his hand up her thigh under a table, to brush his lips across the nape of her neck where her smell is most concentrated, or nearly most concentrated, and yes, those places too, to suffuse her face with that animal pleasure Caruthers knows she’s capable of.

It is unbearable.

There is so much he wants to say to her, but cannot. He, for whom words were a way of life which he loved more than any woman; he who lectured so eloquently to hundreds, no thousands, over the years is now left without even the ability to tell a nurse when he needs to have a bowel movement.

There is so much he wants to say.

He wants to tell her that he regrets not having been a better father; that he’s sorry he seduced, then callously tossed aside all those beautiful, intelligent women whose names he can’t even

remember; how in the dark, at night, a loneliness comes over him like a sickness; how he is afraid to die but cannot bear to live another day; how he squandered everything.

He wants to tell her about Byron, how Byron loved dogs too. She'd like that. How he wrote a beautiful epitaph for his Newfoundland whose gravestone is bigger than his own. He wants to tell her that she too walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies. He longs to feel a flood of words crowd together in his mouth, to hear his voice say all these things.

Without effort or thought, a single, lonely word slips out: "Beauty," he says. His voice is cracked and hollow and unimaginably old.

She stops petting the dog, looks up at him in surprise and then laughs. It really is a beautiful laugh. "Aren't you the smooth operator, Mr. Caruthers," she says and then winks indulgently.

And something—some fleeting, unnamed something—moves just out of reach.

"Here boy," calls Ray. "Here boy. Come see me." And Beauty and Brutus move to Ray's bed. On to their next patient.

*Et tu*, thinks Caruthers, as he watches her. *Et tu.* ∞