Repurpose

Jake Wolff

My father used to say that there are two instances in which it’s okay to hit a woman: she brandishes a weapon on you or she brandishes a weapon on herself. He arrived at this last point through experience. Every few months he’d find my mother in the pantry, eyes wild, slicing up her arms and shoulders with his Sabatier boning knife. “Back,” he’d say to me, and I’d retreat to the far wall of the kitchen, where we kept the rest of the cutlery. My father would advance on her, palms out, and she’d point the blade at him and say crazy things, awful things, about her hatred for our family. The knife had been a wedding gift from my grandparents, a family heirloom. My mother held it upturned. Her blood ran over its spine and pooled in the divot of the bolster. My father lunged at her, rattling her body against the cupboards, and gripped her tiny wrists in his large, frontier hands. And when the knife was on the floor and pinned safely under his boot, he slapped her hard across the face with the base of his thumb flush against her cheekbone. She collapsed and sat dazed with her back against the pie safe. My father stood over her, breathing heavy, his broken heart filled with a hatred either rare between lovers or reserved for them.

This was the late 1930s, Houlton, Maine, right on the border of New Brunswick. Do not judge my father any more than your principles require. We knew nothing about the workings of the mind, certainly not bipolar disorder. It would be many years before we even had that term for it. Our French-Canadian doctor called her condition la folie à deux têtes—insanity with two heads.

I was only ten or so, and I’d never known my mother to be any other way. But my poor father had his memories to contend with—a short courtship preserved in passionate, chicken-scratch letters, a honeymoon spent building their home together, a routine and pleasant pregnancy that hinted of nothing so grim as madness.

He must have imagined, standing over her, a different life. Perhaps he imagined leaving her and starting fresh across the border. Canadian women had a fine reputation, if a modest one.

Whatever his fantasies, I’m certain he could never have imagined the real outcomes for both of them. He would never dream that this violent, volatile woman, this twisted specter of the girl he married, would outlive him by four decades. He could never predict that years after his burial at St. Mary’s, my mother would get well, would learn poetry, would have a peaceful marriage with a much older man. These are the kinds of surprises we at least hope to be alive for. Instead, my father died by aneurysm in September of 1940. In 1941, America went to war with the Germans. In 1945, the Germans came to Houlton.

My father died the month before the Air Force completed construction on the Houlton Air Base. Houlton, population 800, may seem an unusual choice for a military installation, but our proximity to Canada provided certain advantages. People forget that the Canadians fought the Nazis, but they did, and before us. The recruitment posters called it Canada’s New Army.

I dropped out of school after my father died to work the fields full-time. The farm itself I could manage well enough on my own, with only a bit of hired help. Potato farming is tiresome work but not complicated. Harder to manage was my mother. I once emerged from the tool shed to find her de-hilling the acre of crop I’d tended the previous week. She sat on her knees in the topsoil, scraping at the hills with her hands. Dirt flew off her fingers and freckled her bonnet and skirts. The delicate stems of the potato plants sat exposed in their trenches. I could picture the spuds greening under the surface, souring like milk.

“Stop!” I cried. I ran to her and pulled her away by the wrists, like my father would.

“They’re suffocating! We have to let them breathe!”

I pushed away from her. “You’re not helping them. You’re killing them. And making them poisonous.”
“That’s only what your Pa told you. We can be honest now, Lee.”

I was only thirteen, and I’d inherited my father’s intolerance. “I don’t think you’d like my honest thoughts.”

“But I would!”

I stared into the sun. “Please go inside, Ma, and let me fix what you’ve broken.”

I picked her up and pointed her toward home. She kept her arms limp but followed my instructions. I could hear her crying as she crossed the fields and her small figure reduced into the distance.

When the darkness came and she bled herself, I’d watch her until Dr. Leclerc arrived from Richmond Corner. Not that he had anything to cure the insanity with two heads. He only cleaned and bandaged her cuts and then prescribed laudanum to keep her sleeping. It was the same regimen he used for wounds sustained from tractor accidents.

We survived this way, my mother and I, until the war began to unwind itself and the Houlton Air Base was transformed into Camp Houlton, a prisoner-of-war facility for captured German soldiers.

Fall in Houlton. Brown leaves burning ochre orange—a smoky, cinnamon smell, but cold, too, and wet, so that watching the trees shed their leaves was like watching a fire through a sheet of ice. All of the color but none of the heat. It was my favorite season.

The Germans arrived by train and then rode on the back of a flatbed truck to Camp Houlton. This took them across Main Street and through the center of town. We gathered on the sidewalk to watch them. There were twelve of them, maybe—many more would come later—and they watched us right back. They had big, sun-kissed faces, a little dirty and raw, like children who’ve played too long outside. They wore tan slacks with green military jackets. Some wore hats. They looked just like American boys except for the black POW painted across their pant legs and sleeves. No chains, no handcuffs. They could have jumped right off the flatbed and killed us all in the streets. Somehow this didn’t seem possible. We even waved and smiled at them, and they smiled back. One of them puffed absently on a pipe.

It’s difficult to explain this friendly reaction. I suppose we saved our hatred for the Japanese, who seemed meaner and who were still fighting. The Germans had been all but defeated—we’d won. A wave and a smile were only good sportsmanship. We didn’t know much, then, about their treatment of the Jews. That news would arrive slowly, and we’d be even slower to believe it.

I ran home to tell my mother what I’d seen. I found her in the bedroom, her eyes rose-red from sleeplessness.

“Ma, I saw the Germans!”

She closed her eyes. “Can you bring some water in a bowl? I need to soak my hands.”

“I wasn’t scared of them but some people were. I tried to count how many—”

She waved at me to stop. “I don’t care about this. Of course I don’t.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just excited.”

She remembered herself and reached out for my hand. “Oh, my little Lee-bird,” she said, “if you can get me that water and then please fly away.”

Gerhard Grün entered our lives three weeks later, once the captives had been categorized according to their range of skills and their risk of violence. Gerhard was classified as a highly skilled, low-risk prisoner. This placed him in a select group of POWs whose work detail involved labor on the surrounding farms. My mother and I knew he was coming, but still it was an odd thing to see a German soldier standing there on the porch with an armed guard behind him.

I opened the door and stepped out to greet them. Gerhard bowed his head toward me and then turned his blue eyes on my mother, who watched him from behind the doorway. He was young, no more than 22, and very good looking. He’d tanned more
evenly than the other Germans, and his small nose and highly set
eyes gave him a snobbish appearance, but a smart one.

“Hallo,” said Gerhard. “I’ve come to pick potatoes.”

“You don’t have to talk to him,” said the guard. “He’s come to
pick potatoes.”

“Happy to have you both,” I said. I was fifteen years old.

The guard muscled past Gerhard to shake my hand and tip his
cap to my mother. “I’m Chapman. I’ll be sure he’s no trouble.”

My mother was having one of her good days. She’d left her
head uncovered and gathered her hair into a style I hadn’t seen
before. She still hid in the gray light of the doorway, but this only
gave her a kind of mystery. Both Gerhard and the guard were fixed
on her like hunting dogs. It reminded me of when I was little and
we traveled to Linneus to swim in the lake there. My mother sat
on the bank in her long-sleeved dress, sparkling under the sun.
Country women’s dresses were shapeless back then, baggy like
scarecrow clothes, but it didn’t much matter. Men watched her
from the water. I knew it was hard for my father to see her this
way—back to her old self for even a moment. It focused his hurt
into a small, burning thing, a spider bite.

Now, to my surprise, my mother turned the full force of her
beauty on the guard. “You look old for the job,” she said.

“I am, ma’am, quite. I returned from the front due to color
blindness due to traumatic injury of the head. They were kind
enough to find a place for me up here near my cousins. I was raised
in Oxbow.”

“Never heard of it,” said my mother.

“She has,” I said. “We’ve been there.”

“Why don’t you show Gerhard his work,” she snapped.

So the four of us left the shade of the house and ventured into
the fields. I’d already taken the plow to them, and now the potato
plants sat upturned in their plots, the little round spuds dotting
the ground like turtle eggs. I loved the smell of our farm, the cold
scent of starch and soil—earthy and sweet at the same time, like
dark chocolate.

“Have you worked a farm before?” I asked Gerhard.

He shook his head, but I could see his approval as he took in
the sight of the branching roots, the dark, chunky dirt. “No. Dad
was a schoolteacher.”

“Where are you from?”

“Beautiful village near Baltic Sea, which I will soon return to.”

“We caught him a long way from home,” said Chapman.

Gerhard crouched and tugged one of the potato plants from
the ground. The leaflets were dead now, brittle like dried skin.

“I’ve already risen the field,” I said. “Now we just go through
and pick them. I’ll teach you how to spot a bad one.”

“He’ll know it by the smell,” said my mother to Chapman.

“Keep in mind where he’s been,” Chapman said. “A rotten
potato won’t bother him much.”

I crouched down next to Gerhard. “What did you do in the
war?” I asked.

Gerhard paused and frowned at his boots.

“He doesn’t want to talk about that,” said my mother.

“Not true,” Gerhard said. “Only I can’t find the word.” He
looked to Chapman. “Sanitätär…”

“He’s a combat medic,” Chapman said. “No good with weapons.”

“Sanitätär,” I repeated. “Teach me something else.”

Gerhard thought about it. “Repeat: Ich spreche kein Deutsch.”

“Ich spreche kein Deutsch,” I said, butchering it. “What does it
mean?”

Chapman laughed. “It means, ‘I do not speak German.’”

Late fall is the best time for harvest, just before the winter frost.
We loaded potatoes by the bucket. Gerhard and I worked the rows
side by side while Chapman strolled nearby, sometimes with my
mother. I watched them laugh together at the edge of the forest.
Chapman had a scar that hooked around his eye like a horseshoe.
My mother pointed to it, practically traced it with her finger. I
couldn’t hear what she asked him, but Chapman mimed machine
gun fire in response and then spread his hands apart: boom.

Gerhard saw me staring at them. “I could leave anytime. Just
walk away. What would he notice?”
“Do they treat you okay at the camp?”
“Too cramped, but yes. Most guards are like him.”

Most of Gerhard’s fellow prisoners worked at a lumber yard adjacent to the camp. That was hard, sweaty labor, and Gerhard knew he was lucky to be out in the fields with me, taking it easy, breathing sweet air unburdened by sawdust. I’d spent my early days with him prying for information about the war. He told me about the day he was captured, near St. Mere d’Eglise on the Cotentin Peninsula. The Americans had splintered his unit with artillery fire and then advanced on the farmhouse where Gerhard was hiding. He sprinted out the back and pushed himself into the middle of a pond using a canoe he’d found at the dock. He ducked down into it, hoping the Americans would think the canoe was merely adrift out there, unmanned. But they knew better. They fired into the air and shouted at him from the dock until he poked his head above the rim and paddled back to shore with his hands. Once they had Gerhard in custody, they kicked the canoe back out into the water and riddled it with bullets.

“Then what happened?” I asked.
“Then the boat drowned,” Gerhard said mournfully.

Meanwhile, the German soldiers—as many as 1,200 of them, at their peak—soon outnumbered the rest of us. Some were arrogant and angry, but most were like Gerhard—friendly, smart, eager to please. I looked forward to my time with him, and I did not happily anticipate the day when he would leave.

“What will you do when they send you home?” I asked him once, as the four of us ate a quick lunch of ham sandwiches in the kitchen.

“Return to my family,” he said. “You could not believe my village. All buildings are brick in old-world style. At leisure days we go to the river mouth at the sea and ask every girl for her hand in marriage.”

“Careful, son,” Chapman said. “It only takes one ‘yes.’”

My mother flushed—I noticed—and cleared our plates from the table. It wouldn’t be long until Gerhard returned to camp for the evening. He and Chapman thanked my mother for lunch and made their way back to the fields.

“Nice boys,” my mother said, looking over her shoulder at the door.

One morning, when I’d planned to teach Gerhard the tractor, he arrived to work drunk.

I found Chapman pushing him ruefully along the path. “Brought him in a sorry state, I’m afraid. Thought he might still be all right for picking.”

This idea was nonsense—Gerhard could hardly stand—but I knew the truth of Chapman’s logic. A day spent locked in the drunk tank for Gerhard meant a day without seeing my mother for his guard.

“Go on, then,” I said to Chapman.

Chapman went to the house while I dragged Gerhard away from it. He stumbled over the hard, knotted path. A thick root came up from the ground like a tripwire and caught him at the toe of his boot.

“Oopsie,” he said. He picked himself up and did a blind-man’s jog to the trenches.

“Gerhard, just sit!” I called.

“No!” he shouted back at me. “I’ve come to pick potatoes!”

Once he reached the edge of the field, he pulled his gloves tight against his fingers and bent over at the waist, swatting at the ground. We’d covered this patch long ago. In a month or so I’d cultivate the soil, revive it, prepare it for planting.

Gerhard went down again, face first into the dirt. He glowered at the rotten potato resting in front of his nose. “Hallo, Kartoffel,” he said to it.

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“Stay down,” I said. “You’ve been beat.”

“Not yet.” He rolled onto his back and reached inside his jacket. There, he had a speckled glass bottle of moonshine tucked into a nest of tissue paper. He held the bottle out to me, and I took it and sat down next to him on the ground.
“Careful,” he said. “This sneaks on you. When you are sitting, everything feels normal, but when you are standing, everything feels…abnormal.”

“Good thing I’m with das Sanitäter?”

Gerhard grunted.

“What?”

Gerhard capped the bottle and pointed it at me like the barrel of a gun. “You’re at war,” he said, “and a man shoots at you. How do you respond?”

I disarmed him of his weapon and drank. “I don’t know. I hope I’d shoot back, but maybe I’d just run.”

“Both sensible choices.” Gerhard nodded. “But the medic can do neither.”

Laughter echoed in the distance—my mother’s laughter, reporting from the house. Now it was my turn to grunt and feel sorry for myself.

Gerhard nudged me. “Be thankful,” he said. “I miss my family. In my village we have very dark sea, and then in sunset it becomes like jewelry.”

“They’ll send you back soon.”

He shook his head. “I meant what I said before.”

“When?”

“When I said I could leave and no one could catch me.”

“I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“I say soon I will make my escape.”

It’s admirable, looking back, how long my mother maintained the illusion with Chapman. For weeks he thought she was like any other woman—a bit drastic, perhaps, in her temperament, but also warm and whip smart, with plenty of her looks still to lose. But when the illusion broke, it shattered.

I saw her screaming at him near the tool shed. She thrust her head under his chin and poked him again and again in the chest. Chapman rocked back on his heels, bewildered. Gerhard straightened from his work to watch them with me. My mother’s voice ricocheted off the trees. Chapman held out his hands to calm her, but she swatted them away. It doesn’t matter what he first said to ignite her. It could have been anything.

My mother turned her back to Chapman and left him reeling. She hurried to the side door of the house and directly into the kitchen.

“Oh no,” I said.

I took off after her, Gerhard trailing baffled behind me. By the time we reached the tool shed Chapman had recovered enough to use his legs, and we ran shoulder-to-shoulder to the open door. In the kitchen, I held out my arm to slow them and then gestured toward the pantry. My mother had backed all the way into the corner. She held the boning knife upturned. She breathed through her nose. She drew a little red smile into the knob of her elbow.

“What is this?” Gerhard asked.

Chapman couldn’t speak.

“My real mother,” I answered.

She eyed the knife in her hand and blinked tears out of her eyelashes. That was all Chapman needed—for men with true, loving natures, a woman in tears has activist power. He summoned himself and advanced on her, palms out. She watched him like a snake.

Chapman sprang into action, grasping at my mother’s wrists, losing them, finding them. They wrestled in breathy silence. The knife struck the wall and carved a scar into the molding. Chapman seemed at first to have the upper hand, but soon it was clear they’d reached an impasse. Any further and he’d have to be rough with her. The good man, bless him, lacked my father’s angry reserves.

My mother seized on this weakness and drove her shoulder into his kidney.

“Agh, woman!” he shouted as he careened off the cupboards. She still had the boning knife, and now she threw herself behind it. There was a warm, fleshy sound as the thin blade sunk into the meat of Chapman’s thigh. She released the handle and let it stay there, protruding. Blood burst from the wound in an alarming, fountain-like stream. My mother fled from the pantry and locked herself in the bedroom.

“Boys, I’m stabbed!” Chapman cried. He sank to the floor.
I could hardly breathe, but apparently the sight of a knife wound did for Gerhard what my mother's crying did for Chapman. He grabbed my mother's dishcloths from the table and a spool of baler twine from beneath the kitchen sink. I'd never seen him move this way—determined, in charge.

He huddled over Chapman's leg and prepared an elaborate bouquet of cordage and cloth. The bandage enveloped the wound and halted the projectile bleeding.

“This will do for now.” He looked back at me. “Let’s see to your mother.”


Gerhard rose and pulled me by the arm to the door of my mother’s bedroom. We could hear her sobbing from inside.

“One, two, three!” he yelled, and we heaved ourselves through the door, cracking it right off the hinges and laying it like a ramp up the bed. We converged on my mother from left and right and tackled her to the mattress. She thrashed until she no longer had the breath for it.

Gerhard succumbed to a coughing fit, and I waited for him to work through it. “Chapman?” I said then.

He waved a dismissive hand. “I stitch him in a minute. I knew your mother is sick, but not so much as this.”

“The doctor says she has the insanity with two heads.”

Gerhard looked at me as though I’d told him my mother was possessed by the devil. “No, no, no. What insanity? She has the manic depression psychosis.”

I blinked at him. He patted me on the shoulder.

“No worry. There is medicine.”

Dr. Leclerc called on us the following day. He brought with him his bag of bandages and laudanum.

“My mother’s wounds have already been cared for,” I said.

Leclerc nodded patiently. “Yes. By the Nazi.”

We had gathered in the living room—Leclerc, Gerhard, Gerhard’s new guard, and myself. My mother still rested in the bedroom. Chapman had been admitted to the military hospital.

Gerhard smirked. “You give laudanum to manic depressive. Is like treating man on fire with damp cloth.”

Leclerc refused to address him and continued to speak only to me. “Ignore his experiments.”

“Experiments!” Gerhard clapped his hands together in mock amusement. “This diagnosis is made in my country for decades! There is research as far as Australia.”

They both began to rise at each other, but I interrupted. “My father would have tried anything to fix her.”

Leclerc shrugged and gathered his things. “I will check with my brothers in New York. But I fear you think me incompetent.”

Gerhard scoffed. “I don’t know ‘incompetent.’ I believe you are stupid.”

Five days later, Leclerc returned and my mother received her first dose of lithium. The following night, Gerhard escaped from Camp Houlton.

His plan was perhaps needlessly elaborate. First, he’d studied the patterns of the foot patrol who walked the grounds at night. The chart he’d made looked something like the diagram for a waltz. Next, he built a sling shot out of wood from the farm and medical tubing confiscated from the camp’s supply closet. This he used to fire acorns at the guards in the watchtower as a way to determine their alertness, which he deemed to be very low indeed. Finally, and over many long weeks, he tunneled like a rabbit under the barbed-wire fence, with a row of outdoor showers used to conceal his subterranean progress.

Once free, he changed into an outfit composed primarily of my dead father’s clothes and then marched south along the border toward Amity. As he walked, he would have heard the screams of the fisher cats, which climb high into the trees and wail like a child dying.
Also at this stage, Gerhard’s entire plan ceased to function and the reason for the guards’ laxity became clear. Gerhard had nowhere to go. To the north and east, Canada was no friendlier to the Germans; to the south and west lay hundreds of miles of cold Maine wilderness. The guards could sleep through their shifts, could ignore the rattle of acorns fired at long-range, because Camp Houlton wasn’t the prison—the whole continent was.

I went to see him after his capture and return to Camp Houlton. He wouldn’t be allowed on the farm any longer—he was a lumber man, now. I had to talk to him through the fence.

“Hallo!” he called as I approached. He still had the scruff of his day in the wild. It made him look younger, really, like a rebellious teen. The other prisoners milled about the yard smoking cigarettes. They had started an intramural soccer team and were kicking the tar out of the locals, who couldn’t quite fathom a sport without hands.

Gerhard wrapped his fingers around the chain-link. “I didn’t think to see you so fast. I thought I’d get farther.”

“They’ll send you home soon. Why escape now?” Gerhard’s entire face changed, darkened and grew haunted. He looked at me with something like anger. “Are you so dull?” he said. “My home is gone.”

I was so dull. He had to explain it to me. The war destroyed Gerhard’s home in more ways than one. The Russians had leveled it first, rolled their tanks right through it and left it on fire. Gerhard’s father he knew to be dead. His mother and sisters, if they lived, could be anywhere. The home he’d described to me was nothing but a lie he told himself.

“My village is no longer even part of Germany. They gave it to the Poles in the Agreement.” At this, he spit on the dirt. “They’ve driven out the Germans.”

“Everything will be okay,” I said, my optimism ringing laughably false.

Gerhard looked away from me. “I forget you are child,” he said, “like I was.”

“I didn’t know what to say.
“‘You heard the stupid doctor. I am Nazi, always. I change myself to that. So.’
“Maybe you can stay here with us,” I said. I really would have let him.

He waved his hand to dismiss me, as he had Leclerc and Chapman and everyone who bothered him. “You should go home to your potatoes. Pick them, plant them, pick them. You know exactly what’s to come.” It was the last thing he ever said to me. Gerhard had sentenced me to a grim future. A whole life of finding my mother in the pantry, of disarming her and then hitting her, like my father did. A whole life of staring at my hands, afterward, until I could make them stop shaking.

When I returned home, I found my mother on the porch, crying into the sleeves of her dress. I climbed the steps and stood alongside her.

“Don’t worry, Ma. He’s fine. Chapman, too.” She wiped her eyes. “I’m not crying from that.”

“Oh,” I said. It was just her usual depression. I had a new name for it, that’s all.

She read my disappointment. “You don’t understand. I’m not crying from sadness.”

“What then?” She looked up at me. Her wet eyes sparkled. “Lee, the medicine is working.” I smiled down at her, but it was the same smile I’d give to a passerby on the road. It was the smile I’d give to a stranger.

I don’t know what became of Gerhard. I know he was shipped to France before his release into Germany. After that, nothing. Many German soldiers started over, recovered their families, found a way to rejoin the world. Others did not.
My mother married Chapman and continued her treatment, but it was too late for the two of us as mother and son. She was no longer the mother I grew up with. My mother getting well made me an orphan. It didn’t seem fair. After all, I’d done everything right. I’d done exactly as my father told me. It’s a very difficult thing to change a person’s nature, to repurpose. I couldn’t be a part of her happiness. I knew too much of its cost.

Still, her marriage did open doors for my future. Freed from my obligation to the farm, I re-enrolled in secondary school and then left home for college. My mother and I remained in touch via post, but my leaving was for good. I never returned to Houlton.

I later attended medical school. After graduating, I published a paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* arguing for a new treatment regimen for bipolar disorder involving anti-depressants and anti-convulsants. At the very same time, a former rival of mine published a similar paper with a slightly different combination of drugs. We argued heatedly in writing over whose research came first and whose treatments were more effective.

We finally squared off against each other at a medical conference in Albany, New York in the late 1960s. We locked eyes from across the stage and engaged in the first and last staring contest I’ve endured as an adult. We breathed through our noses. We shuffled our note cards loudly and communicatively against our podiums. The lights dimmed, the crowd took their seats, and then we went to war.

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**Poems for Freud**

*Sharon Venezio*

1. **Poem of Denial**

I am not my young mother in her apron, blazed with anticipation. I am not half shadow not waiting, unanchored in the shifting.

I am not bird song, not feeder, not seed, not sun rising on unripe blueberries. I am not a deer head mounted on the hunter’s wall, not the tiny body lifted onto her uncle’s shoulders to caress the carcass, finger the wildly dead black eyes.

2. **Poem of Ego**

*after Evie Shockley*

Self-portrait with cat, with books organized by genre and size, with Rothko, with earth tones, with coffee and no cigarettes.

Self-portrait with light and shadow, with paroxetine, with butternut squash and Napa red, with half-read, with hipster friends too young to know.