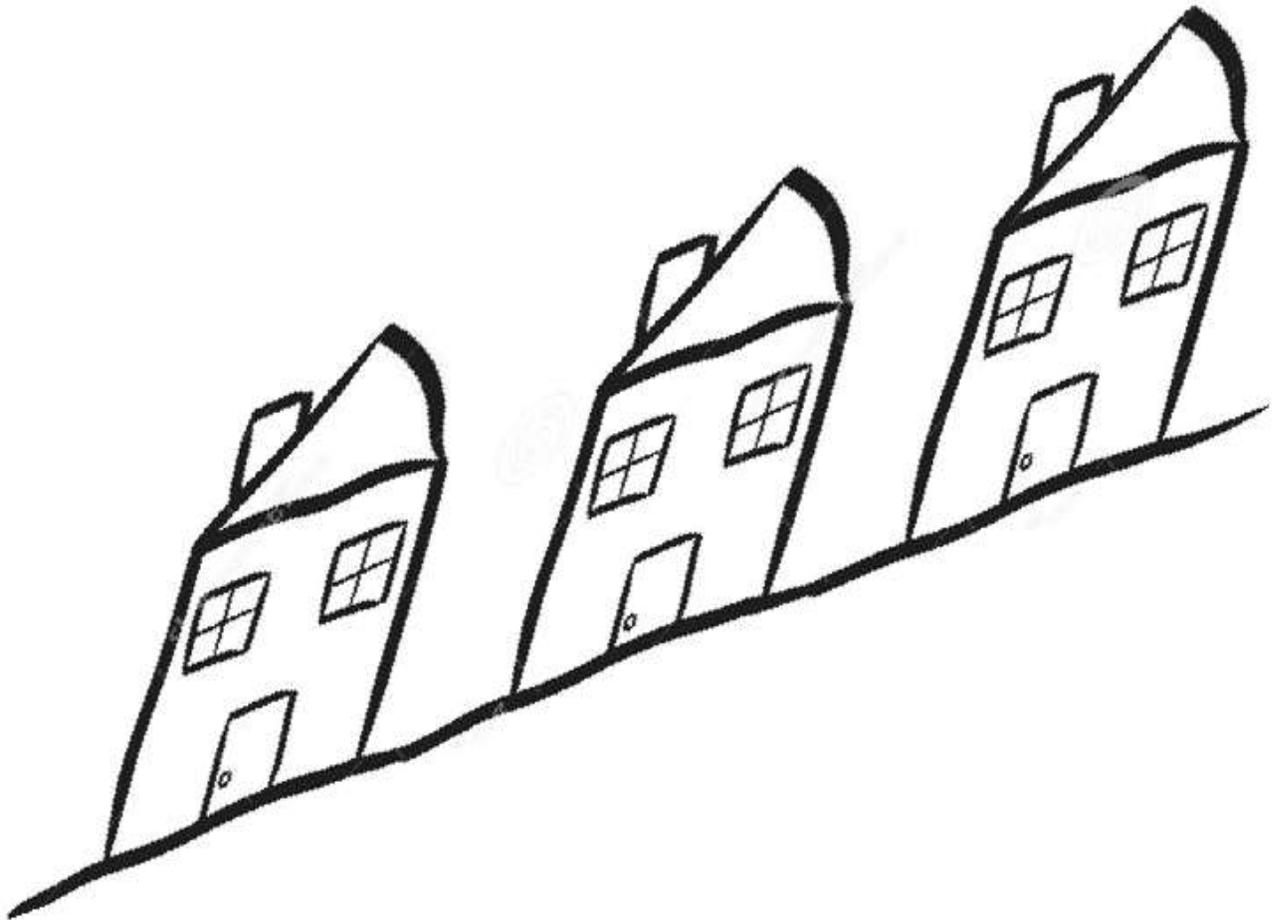


A Row of Houses

off the bypass



a novel (excerpt) by tracey sterns

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

I'm here to tell you why, "A Row of Houses – Chap. 1," by Tracey Stearns, is worth continuing the novel.

Tom Arrow and Esther Day are a mediocreatly married couple. He's an accountant, she's a psychologist; he loves to be with his wife, she wants to be with him; Tom loves to be told what to do by Esther, she loves to tell him what to do. These two are a couple in love.

Then, one morning, Esther falls over dead. No suspicious activity, no supernatural want from Tom and materialized deadness, there's not even any warning for Tom to get out his last, "I love you." She's in the middle of telling him that there is work to be done around the house and keels the hell over.

What ensues is a clever, playful set up for the rest of Stearns novel.

What does Tom do with Esther's body? Who does one call to deal with that sort of absurdity? What past events about Tom and Ester will be revealed? Is any part of the story going to go the way that you may think it will?

I won't reveal much, but I can already tell you no. No, the story does not go the way in which you would imagine it going.

I think what Stearns has done with their first chapter is to craft the beginning of an intriguing work. The writing is stylistic and witty, "He would combat the tyranny with whatever resources at his disposal: Jokes, japes, jibes, jests—genial, jocular generalities;" and the language used is layered and enjoyably smarmy, "If we cantaloupe, honeydew say you'll marry me, gushed Walter Melon."

Stearns, "Row of Houses – Chap. 1" is worth the read, it will make you smile, it will make you appreciate the craft, it will make you want to read more.

Enjoy.

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*There's more than a pinch of Pynchon in this droll, teetering mallow-drama and narrator Tom would not be out of place at Meatball Mulligan's lease-breaking party (Entropy from Slow Leather, 1984) with his linguistic formalisms, retro-style syntax and mordant humour. That said, it's as much about language as action, and for me, Sterns subtleties are the emblematics of a richly furrowed literary imagination.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language)...

"No one shops for food, they just get it. Get it?" He changed direction, altered his expression and looked wistful, composing as he rose. "I only really care for the sweet, fragrant scents of the produce section. I can't bear the arid dry goods, rows of cans, or slaughtered fare for that matter. It's the lush, fleshy fruits, fresh leaf, stem and root vegetables for me." Tom stood up and began pacing, lightly prancing, genuinely posturing now. Doing whatever he could to delay the day. "If we cantaloupe, honeydew say you'll marry me, gushed Walter Melon.'

....a not-a-poet's prologue

A ROW OF HOUSES

A row of houses, windowed eyes,
From floor to ceiling truth and lies.
In bowels of basements souls disguised.
Through gentle cracks a soft wind sighs.

The roof sheds off the rain in tears,
Collects in gutters, wells in fears.
Measured rooms and walls with ears,
But who can count the missing years.

The echoes in the attic know,
There will be storms the wind may blow.
But as the families come and go,
They each shall cast a same shadow.

If only they had not been born,
Had undrawn curtains not been torn,
The stairs would not have seemed so worn,
With dreams forsaken, hearts forlorn.

Or maybe they might someday learn,
The ripest apple draws the worm.
Addressed 'To Whom It May Concern,'
A name not called was next in turn.

And if they rose and rang the bell,
Staved the hunger, broke the spell,
How-do-you-do and fare-thee-well,
What toll is taken, time will tell.

Tom Arrow and Esther Day fell desperately in love. Each enjoyed every moment they were together as a gift untold and otherworldly divine. Tom was an accountant who loved spending time, and Ester was a psychologist who loved to share it. They were professionals, childless and lived life to its fullest, relished one another's company, embracing their routine. It was Saturday morning and Ester spoke with an imitated frankness:

“*Hot dog, you musta 'rd, it's time to ketch-up with ought-to-do's.*” Her way, each and every weekend, of saying there is work to be done—things to put in order—and never tired of the condiment metaphors. Tom had grown mildly repulsed and slightly embarrassed for her. Curiously, even in the absence of any other outside observer. There was a shame in mutual solitude, however devoted. Still, combating such foolery was, for him, mere child's-play.

“—with a whistle and a giggle like a corny *dawg* sizzles.” He accompanied the nonsense lyric strumming the air in mock rock star mimicry. His stub-pencil a pick as he recomposed and poised himself to get busy making lists, aping enthusiasm and brushing imaginary flecks from the table as Ester spoke dictation outlining appointed duties. Tom was in his mid-thirties, his wife somewhere younger, but his age did not interfere with adolescent outbursts when he thought Ester was being too autocratic. It was the only defence he had so far devised in disrupting and undermining the *Jester's* dramatic, didactic, 'to-do' dynamic. Yes, he called her Ester the Jester or just *the Jester*. Ester perceived it nicely complimented her sublime wit and general sense of fun. In sharp contrast to her prepossessing, no-nonsense, take-charge persona—but it was intended to be derisive and, delightfully, even sinister.

“There is food shopping,” Ester said, and Tom winced and drummed his lap attempting to distract her.

“No one *shops* for food, they just get it. *Get it?*” He changed direction, altered his expression and looked wistful, composing as he rose. “I only really care for the sweet, fragrant scents of the produce section. I can’t bear the arid dry goods, rows of cans, or slaughtered fare for that matter. It’s the lush, fleshy fruits, fresh leaf, stem and root vegetables for me.” Tom stood up and began pacing, lightly prancing, genuinely posturing now. Doing whatever he could to delay the day. “*If we cantaloupe, honeydew say you’ll marry me, gushed Walter Melon.*”

Ester tittered, chortled. Tom wiped some spittle from her mouth and stuffed the tissue up his sleeve. She snorted, choked and grew paler, gripped the table hands clamped, knuckles blanched, stiffened, swooned and capsized, falling over—stone dead.

This also presented a problem for Tom, and not just because it wasn’t on the list yet. He had never seen anyone fall over dead. At first he thought she was just expressing a pedantic insistence that he be more serious. But she’d never mimed her instructions before. Tom caught himself blinking and sinking into one of his un-realities, and when he came around he found himself wondering whose turn it was to speak. No turns were taken.

“Mel Blanc was the voice of many characters,” he said.

He set his chair down off its hind legs as if he had been told to do so; searched for and selected the pause button in his brain and stared vacantly at the lifeless lump on the floor. Half sprawled, half slumped who he had affectionately called *Pant-Load*. Partly because Ester had become concerned about gaining a little weight, partly because Tom thought that psychology was mostly *bullshit*. But presently, because Ester was staining herself and emitting a foul, sewer-

gas odour she would never have otherwise tolerated in her home—and of all places, her kitchen, specifically, the sunroom-cum-breakfast nook.

In point of fact, Tom had never even seen Ester in a skirt. She refused to wear them. He had learned this the hard way their first Christmas together when he bought her a beautiful A-line, plaid pleated skirt, just past the knee with a subtle slit at the side. On the advice it was the latest fashion—one size too small as it turned out. And Ester said, ‘but I don’t wear skirts or dresses. When have you ever seen me in a skirt or a dress?’ Tom allowed that he hadn’t as his addled mind racked and rattled over his remiss in observing what seemed both obvious and obscure.

‘*Nooo,*’ he said, pensive and timid. ‘It’s not something I would wear either.’ He rested his chin on the palm of his hand and pressed the tips of his three fore-fingers into his lower lip—just as he was doing now. ‘But it will make for splendid curtains on the little window in the breakfast nook. The colours are just right. Come, I’ll show you.’ And they made love there that very first Christmas, in their new house, back when that was then.

Tom had saved the day that time, and the skirt served a more than perfect purpose as a window treatment and always something to laugh about. ‘There’s nothing like a little skirt that lets in a little light,’ Tom would say, as he parted the modest drape on the mornings they had time for coffee together. Ester would smile in supple compliance as her lips moistened the rim of her mug. But not this time, Ester lay dead on the floor. There was no doubt about it. That was for certain. *Death* was like a work of art, rendered by a great master, even if you didn’t have a cultivated taste for it, you knew it when you saw it.

Tom found himself wondering what Ester would do at a time like this. She didn’t *really* wear the pants in the family. Not in the strict figurative sense. However much she may have

thought she did. Tom preferred to think that he delegated the minutia of their common existence—their shared life—to her. Like a power hungry clerk aspiring to middle management, she had always been very direct, precise-minded and plainspoken. This tended to create an illusion of being in charge. Because she could be so curt, so coarse, so unreserved and outspoken, one mistakenly presumed she knew what she was talking about—a sub-intentional device to be sure. He did often wonder, however, how someone so utterly bereft of feeling could have become a psychologist. Not that Tom ever minded following, but he was quietly annoyed to think that Ester thought she was leading. He would combat the tyranny with whatever resources at his disposal: Jokes, japes, jibes, jests—genial, jocular generalities. But when at wit's end, he was easily made battle-worn and no match for the sophisticated firepower she held in reserve, deep within her arsenal, for her most difficult patients. Then, he would resort to sulky, sullen sarcasm, sometimes even bitter derisive irony; employing wistful, withering euphemisms when he grew weary and downright absurdities when he was outraged and outright ignoring her all together. Of course, none of it worked. The fortress in which she guarded her ego remained intact and indestructible, bolstered by her lofty, elevated sense of self-assurance and fortified by an altitude at which she maintained her esteem. Celestial coordinates he calculated to be in deficit for her to be, at times, so harsh, so cruel and on other occasions despicably and utterly mean.

Still, she was his little bird with the devotion to regurgitate her bounty and the malevolence to peck a rival's eyes out. There she lay. Feet caught in the rungs of her overturned chair. Clinging to the underside of her perch, eyes like great beads. Her sharpened delicate beak cleaved and lifeless, silent tongued, to cheep no more: 'Who will take care of me?' Tom will take care of it. "Rest sweetly my little popinjay. We have one final flight before you soar."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *i think i like to think about this novel as a Speculative Modern Romance*

AUTHOR BIO: i actually did live along a row of houses in which i rarely gained admittance.