

The Muse

By Heather Whited

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A pervading sense of the mysterious and the nocturnal inundates this psychosensual somewhat gothic-toned Symbolist story of a sibylline young woman—like an ancient succubus-- who is a transient siren call to wordsmiths who feed her Delphic muse. In particular, the action dwells on Caleb, a young writer, who bonds with Opal, in a relationship that is less symbiotic than needfully sycophantic. Opal is the perfect name, as she ‘shimmers’ and ‘opalesces’, like a radiant spectrum of colour (Cdn. sp.), with her shifting moods and cryptic dialogue. The faceted prose is both ravishing and dreamlike.*

Quote: Everyone he encountered seemed too large, too large by far. They lacked all grace and they lumbered. He thought their faces looked like unrisen dough. Every laugh and cough made him flinch. Other people spoke too loudly and were almost, to a person, ugly to him. He put bread into his basket, and vegetables, and a cheerfully pink bottle of wine. The whole time he tried to avoid looking at other people, but the strain of being around them made his hairline sweat and his chest tight with anxiety.

He rode the elevator up to her apartment, stepped into the dim and musty windowless hallway.

The heavy gate clanged shut behind him and began to rumble away to its next stop. Caleb checked his watch. A minute to spare. He knew he could not be early. It was almost like she did not exist until the time of the meeting arrived. A held breath exhaled as the minute hand crept forward. Her building was old and especially on damp days like this became a musty.

Condensation had blossomed on the lone window at the end of the hallway.

Right at 5:00, he knocked on the door. Opal didn't answer immediately and his heart began to beat faster. She's fine, he told himself. Don't worry so much. A few more seconds passed. Caleb knocked again, more frantically now. Finally, he heard the lock slide from its place. His whole body sparked into life knowing she was close. The door opened. Opal looked up at him.

"Sorry," she said, after a long pause where a sliver of recognition appeared to break through her exhaustion. She pulled her robe tighter around her thin frame, blinking away confusion. She studied the wall behind Caleb, the door frame, and then his face, and with a yawn she accepted them all. "I was sleeping."

Caleb only smiled.

"No problem, really. Are you okay? I texted earlier and..."

Caleb stepped into the apartment and switched the lights on, making Opal flinch, her blinks the stunned and uncomfortable motions of a nocturnal animal suddenly exposed to light. She spent a moment peering around as if in inspection for something she recognized. She pulled back her long hair as she walked to the kitchen. He followed her with his eyes, rapt. In the kitchen, she reached for the cabinet where the mugs were kept, but became distracted staring out the window at the rain. Her arm drooped down before she picked one out.

"I'm just fine," she said, seemingly having just remembered what Caleb had said at the door several moments ago. "Just fine."

Caleb set down the library books he had picked up before arriving and rushed to the kitchen to make her tea before she could do it herself.

"Please," he said. "Let me."

She smiled at him and sat down at the table. Opal sank into the chair like waking and walking the length of her apartment had been exhausting. Caleb switched on the electric kettle.

“I hope to get a whole chapter done tonight,” said Opal.

“Great!”

“Are you up for it?”

“Whatever you need. I’m- I’m very clean. The connection should be easy.”

“You’re a lovely boy, Caleb.”

Caleb brought two mugs of hot tea to the table and left one to sit in front of an empty chair for himself. While Opal started on her drink, he began to rummage through the cabinets and refrigerator. He found a piece of fruit that looked still edible on the counter and brought it to the table.

“I know you haven’t eaten,” he said, finally taking the first sip of his tea, but she scrunched up her nose and looked away. She shrugged guiltily, a coy and untrue gesture, to confess and placed a small, cold hand on his. He almost felt their connection latch into place on him and his mouth dropped open in unexpected pleasure. She removed her hand with a demure, chiding wave and her eyes cast down.

“Not yet,” she said.

He drew his mouth shut and gave a mute nod. She began to eat large and ravenous bites of her food.

He didn’t know how she made it through the rest of the week without him. She seemed to hover over the earth without really being a part of it or touching it at all. He knew that there had been others before him, other young men and women who had come here over the years to be her muse. She did not speak of them, though once they had been the ones to nurture her and had been happy here like he was. She ate gratefully when he was around and was always there on

Fridays and that was all that really mattered right now. While Opal finished her food, Caleb inspected the bare kitchen shelves.

“I’m going to go to the store. No protests. I’ll be right back.”

Caleb ran back out into the rain and into the large supermarket across the street. The bright lights were offensive after the gentle dimness of Opal’s home. Everyone he encountered seemed too large, too large by far. They lacked all grace and they lumbered. He thought their faces looked like unrisen dough. Every laugh and cough made him flinch. Other people spoke too loudly and were almost, to a person, ugly to him. He put bread into his basket, and vegetables, and a cheerfully pink bottle of wine. The whole time he tried to avoid looking at other people, but the strain of being around them made his hairline sweat and his chest tight with anxiety.

The cashier was the only solace; solidly built, a pleasant, handsome face, the man, was not especially young but for that was distinguished. Tall and bearded, with wide shoulders, his strength seemed unquestionable. He exuded grace to Caleb, who calmed in his presence. Caleb wondered if Opal, who loved beautiful things, would like to hear about the man and was sorry, as he stumbled out into the clammy evening, that he had not looked to see if he was wearing a name tag.

Opal was asleep on the couch when he opened the door. Here, things were fine, the only place they were. Only a few lamps gave light. The only sounds were secondary, from other places in the building; footsteps from the floor above. He decided not to wake her and went to the kitchen, where he began to make a proper meal. He started a can of soup simmering and then cleaned.

There were things to throw out, things that had rotted or gone bad during the week. A brown banana that fell apart as he put it in the plastic trash bag. The fuzzy end of a loaf of bread. Tiny flies, darting specks in the air, hovered over the spoiled food. Small deaths collected around Opal

during the week. He sprayed surfaces and wiped them until they gleamed. Once that was done, he made a sandwich to complete the meal.

The smell of cooking woke Opal and she soon wandered back to the kitchen. There was a hint of the movements of a feral animal in the way she sniffed the air and peered around Caleb at the food with her long hair in front of her face, but she remained elegant even in her wildness. He set the table and she sat down in front of the food.

“After this, we get started,” Opal said as she picked up the large sandwich, glistening with bacon grease, that he had made her.

Caleb agreed. She didn't ask if he was ready because now, after a year, she knew he was. As soon as the meal was over, it would be time.

He told her about his roommates while she ate with a powerful appetite. They were noisy, he said. They were stupid, he said. One of them had scared him by dropping a coffee cup in the other room and the fright had made him jump and stumble and cut his foot on the wooden frame of his bed. Opal listened and responded with calm. That she wasn't annoyed by the roommates made them seem not as bad as they had earlier in the day and he was embarrassed that he had made such a fuss. Quickly, Caleb decided to switch topics.

“There was a man at the store,” he announced with as much false confidence as he could muster that she might be interested in this, wiping his damp palms on his trousers. Looking up, he saw that she was licking grease from her fingers, absorbed in that task.

“Hmmm?” Opal lifted her eyes toward him and Caleb felt himself blushing.

“There was something...he was like an oasis. You should have seen his hands.”

Opal stood, smiling serenely at him as she did, and patted his head before walking from the room.

He washed dishes while she changed from her sleeping clothes. When Opal came back out, she was in a skirt and sweater and it was time to work.

He got out the pad of paper from the drawer in the desk in the living room. She sat on the couch and he sat with her.

Caleb flipped open to where they had left off last week. Opal transcended the earth during these times and needed not only his energy, but for him to write what she dictated. He took off his shirt to expose his clean skin. He was cold, but that would not last long.

He nodded to show her he was ready and the familiar humming filled his chest as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. He felt the invisible fibers reach out to him, sink in, and begin their churning. Opal sighed in bliss as the connection was established and his energy flowed into her.

Briefly, he let his eyes close and the world there was golden. But it was time to work and he opened his eyes to Opal smiling at him.

“Take a moment,” she said.

Caleb felt a joyful surge and sank back for a moment. He heard Opal breathing deeply in contentment. Finally, she spoke again.

“It’s time.”

He sat up and reached for his pen and pad of paper.

She began narrating the novel again without pause and Caleb wrote. Between them, heat flowed, heat that Opal turned into words and gave back to him to write. Heat turned into words that he filtered and put on the page. They were extensions of each other. Caleb was never sure if she spoke when she gave him her story or if she cycled the words back to him through their connection.

During these times, he felt everything fiercely. Each small movement against the couch, each of Opal's words was like a burning stroke on his skin. The connection between them sometimes twitched, filling him with a tingling. She transmitted until after midnight, when the channel of energy became thin and whiny and Opal started to shiver.

"You're tired," said Caleb. He heard the words, he thought, but even now couldn't remember if he'd really used his voice or if they were something he had thought and she had felt. "We should stop. It was eighteen pages tonight."

Opal sighed. She let the connection drop fully and Caleb lurched where he sat as he was released. Instantly, he was freezing and he grabbed his shirt. He shivered so hard that his teeth knocked and he buttoned his buttons, the ones he could manage, crookedly. There were dark circles under Opal's eyes and she slouched, hardly able to sit up.

"A whole chapter. Just like I had hoped." She pulled herself up a little on the couch. "I was waiting for days for you to come so I could tell you all about it, so we could work. Thank you. I'm going to go lie down while you get things ready."

Caleb staggered to his feet and helped Opal stand. Leaning against him, he walked her to the bedroom and she lowered herself to the bed.

In the bathroom, he filled up the tub with hot water and her favorite bath salts. He went to her room where she lay on her bed, eyes closed and her slender arm draped over them.

"It's ready, Opal."

He helped her stand again, let her again lean on him as she stumbled to the bathroom, and she went in, closing the door behind her. He waited until she called for him and then went to fill her request, which was a hot cup of tea. Within minutes, he had brought it to her, making his way through a heavy cloud of steam to leave it on the edge of the bathtub. He picked up the clothes

off of the floor and when he left the bathroom, he folded them and went into her room and set them on her bed.

He felt their presence here in the bedroom, the others who had come before him and done this thing for her. He felt them in this room, felt them move his hands to fold the clothes, felt their breath on his neck. They were his icy shadow and they thought his thoughts. He thought theirs in return. But he wasn't scared. Love for Opal coursed through their presence. The other muses were very old, some of them with musty, decaying voices, much older than he liked to acknowledge. There seemed to be layers of them, reaching back years, stacked on top of each other.

He sat for a while next to the clothes he had put on her bed. He caught his breath and listened to the noise of the ghosts of the other muses and let them come to him. Opal's room was bare and clean. She had few clothes, all of them similar and colorless, hanging in a neat row in her closet. A few books on her shelf. A small, porcelain lion sat on a table by her bed. Caleb wondered if he would haunt this place later, when Opal was done with him. He tried to imagine the person who would come after him, but he couldn't. It seemed impossible that this would not last forever. He left her room.

For a moment, he watched steam leak from under the bathroom door and then he went and laid down on the couch.

She refilled the bathwater twice and Caleb watched television in the living room, drinking from a large bottle of wine and occasionally getting up to bring her more tea until she was done. He was woozy from giving so much of himself to her, woozy from the wine. Exhausted/[Exhaustion](#) threatened to overcome him, and pain too, like his skin, every inch, was bruised, but it was a pleasant feeling, one that left Caleb disconnected from the world. He wondered sometimes, in

the dreamlike moments listening to the splash of bathwater, if he imagined these evenings here. He looked down at his foot and saw that it was scratched from earlier in the day when he had hit it against his bed after his roommate accidentally scared him. He supposed he was real and here, after all.

Opal emerged from the bathroom swallowed by her robe. Fragrant steam billowed into the living room behind her.

“Goodnight, Caleb,” she said. She absently touched the wet ends of her hair. “I’ll see you next week.”

He knew where the blankets and pillows were and he got them for himself when he heard the door close. From the couch, he watched until her lights went out. It was almost morning.

Fridays were his favorite day.

He woke only a few hours later, as he always did after a night of work.

For a moment, he had the impression of a lanky young man standing at the foot of the couch. He was transposed over the morning like a thin film. In that second, the room was icy and different. The curtains were a heavy, velvety material. There was a record player in the corner. Not a record player. A gramophone, a great, hulking thing that was not out of place here. The young man didn’t see him, but called Opal’s name. Only, it wasn’t Opal that he said, but another name for who she had been then. Caleb realized the vision and tried to catch the name and bring it back with him, but he wasn’t able.

The scene dissolved instantly as he woke. This had happened a few times before but he was never as aware of the feeling as he was now. He gasped as a blink showed him one last time what had been. He let his head sink to his knees and breathed deeply.

The ritual was for him to let himself out when he was ready. Caleb knew he would not see her this morning. He showered and put his clothes back on and had coffee while reading over the chapter from the night before. Seeing the words again made the ghost of his connection with Opal ache. It would be another week before he was back and squirmed thinking of how long it would be until he could again slip into oneness with her and quell the itchy craving gnawing at him.

He washed his cup and went out briefly onto the fire escape next to her kitchen window and into the misty morning. When that was done, he made a call to see that more groceries were delivered for her later in the week. He stood at her bedroom door for a moment, listening for any noises inside. There was never anything and it made him want to cry and beg for a little more time, but he knew that would be undignified, and so he didn't.

Caleb gathered his things and left.

He hated this, the long stretch until next week. Saturday mornings hurt. At the bus stop, he crossed his arms and watched the neighborhood slowing coming to life, despondency turning into surliness. There was none of the magic of Opal anywhere here. Caleb rode the bus home glaring at the view out the window.

At home, his roommates were still asleep. Caleb went back to bed, where he stared at the ceiling thinking of the night before until he too was able to rest.

***AUTHOR'S NOTE:** can honestly say I'm a bit surprised that this weird little story found a home, and on its first time out too! I've fiddled with this piece a few times*

since writing the first draft a few years ago, but recent time off has given me a chance to pick it back up. My first, very basic, idea for this was to invert the idea of a young, pretty woman being the muse of an artistic man, so I started with that general framework, making the (seemingly) young, pretty female protagonist the creator or artist (I wasn't exactly sure where the story was going), and giving her a male muse completely in her thrall. It eventually started to transform into something a bit more supernatural, with Opal being an ancient, otherworldly creature of some sort who instead of being merely inspired by her muse, literally uses Caleb's energy to create her work. I wanted to add in some ghosts too, so I just went ahead and did that. I love strange stories, and especially ones with strange women characters. Shirley Jackson is one of my favorite writers, and I am inspired her ability to send a shiver down a reader's spine, shock them, or leave them vaguely disturbed, all while creating unforgettable characters.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Heather Whited is originally from just outside Nashville, Tennessee, and after many changes of her major, somehow graduated from Western Kentucky University on time in 2006 with a degree in creative writing and theater. After a few years working and traveling that saw her hanging out on no fewer than three continents and gave her the chance to try vegetarian haggis, Heather returned to Nashville to obtain a Master's degree in education. She now lives in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches in the public schools and at Portland State University. When not writing, she plays on a killer Harry Potter trivia team and a general knowledge one too, spends time with her dog, does not go camping, ever, and tries not to think too much about the vegetarian haggis.*