

MILE END

By David Kholamian

WHY WE LIKE IT: *You wouldn't think low key and magnificent belong in the same sentence when referring to writing but this low key, magnificently written story will turn that idea on its head. Noir shadings enrich the complex narrative tonalities and the voice exhibits a trust in the language that is more often wished for than experienced. Stylistically, it shares certain idiosyncratic affinities that remind us of Stephen Crane—thinking here, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*. Kholamian mines every rhythmic register, every sonic key in prose so beautiful it makes you want to weep. Excellences accumulate as the story builds and we are, at the end, star struck and slack jawed. This is a textbook example of how to create mood and atmosphere in short fiction—two of the biggest stumbling blocks for the budding writer. 'Mile End' and 'Milo's end'—synergy that burns beneath the surface. The dialogue is alchemical. Quote: Claire instinctively arched her neck some and breathed in with her nostrils with a faint pleasance before taking another sip of the hot tea. Freshened from the shower and with her hair done, life had returned very amiably to Claire, and with the slightest actions she seemed to indulge her senses as if each taste or smell were ambrosial. The small dining section of the hotel lobby was distinct from the dank, musty hallways beyond the stairs, it smelling herbal and of cooking, and now of smoke too.*

“You really hate this place,” she said.

“That’s an observation,” Gerald said. “Maybe it’s a question.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t. I don’t hate it, really.”

Five stars.

Mile End

The dawn had come ugly with yellow vapors rising over the street, feet plodding through puddles among the stones. Haphazard bells rang and men’s voices called out in work tones. Gerald watched from the window with avid and sunken eyes the passing figures on the street, the irises excited in motion from an otherwise still and gaunt face. The room was dark but for the ream of gauzy light through the old window, and in the bed small and wrapped up in contorted piles of

sheets was a head of such long black hair, a small body so deep in the shadows of the room. She was more than still, or silent. Time was not begun with her.

“Claire,” Gerald said, speaking from the window. He spoke her name only once and then waited with a pleasant smile. Facing away from the light of the window, his sunken eyes were not so severe.

The word alone seemed to pull away at the stillness, the silence, the shadow, creating just the air of possible awakening over her, dispelling the static dark of her cocoonal slumber.

“Claire,” he said once more, only just so louder.

The head of black hair shifted just barely, and a whisper parted from the crushed pillow beneath her. She began to rise, and the hairs of her head flowed downward from their matted state as if each one were independent of the other, a torrential motion normally belonged to water and spirits.

The gauntness of Gerald’s face was all but faded by then, and he took into a chair by the desk in the room and began to speak. “We won’t be in Mile End much longer. The case is almost done. See, Milo did some bouncing for that bar, the Clines’ family bar, and that’s where the police thought the action was. But it wasn’t. Truly wasn’t, Claire. See, Milo had a few dirty irons hot in Mile End. I’m going to see a witness today that’ll close it once and for all. His sister was right, see. She knew there was more to it. And when Boss Markham hears, well,” Gerald chuckled. “I’ll only get half the lip for taking a case out here, and the other half he’ll be keeping quiet while he writes the check.”

Claire was up now, solitary in the bed still mostly dark, and her black hair was parted by hand behind the ears. She looked at him and raised a hand as if to pat the empty space next to her, but he was already in reverie, staring again out the window, and from his angle in the chair only seeing the rooftops of other buildings, other windows. She lay her hand down on the vacant pillow nearby, squeezing it tightly, subtly. “Who is the witness?” She asked.

“Name is Tracy.”

“That’s a woman?”

“Seems so.” Gerald pawed for the pack of cigarettes on the desk to find them empty. He frowned into the shadows and, not looking at Claire, spoke to her, “why don’t you get a shower going for yourself.” He turned back and smiled. “A good hot one, the meter’s cheap enough. I’ll make a run down to the store for cigarettes.”

He was nearly out the door when Claire called out, “get a postcard, won’t you? If we’re leaving soon.”

“A Mile End postcard, eh? Sure. Hope you’re sending it to someone that likes wide, open space.”

The damp street was already beginning to heat up under the morning sun. A general store wasn’t far down, only several blocks, where Gerald bought his cigarettes and an extra pack of

matches too, and picked out a postcard of Mile End main street, the emptiness stretching out beyond, on and on, and when he went outside he looked out down the faint hill where the town scattered out to single family lots and ranches, and far away there were mountains but it was far, and the present elevation was none too innervating.

They'd been in Mile End for nine days as of that morning, a nowhere town where the road ran out and where a trainyard was kept. Kansas City was not so far north as the crow flew, but the one road went back east for hours, far into remote Missouri country, before forking anywhere. In those nine days Gerald learned a new road was most of what anyone in the town talked about, a road north to Kansas City that wouldn't leave Mile End abandoned. Something political was hunched over them, though, and building had started and stopped three times. Some folk took the sleepy stasis in stride and went on with their day; Town Hall had people in daily demanding construction begin. And some, like Milo, never would've cared one way or another, for their business was in the dwelling deeply in someplace, in drowning quantities of liquor and stockinged legs.

When he'd returned to the hotel he found Claire already in the lobby, dressed and having tea. He slipped into the seat next to her and started the first cigarette of the pack. When he blew the smoke, overhead and to the left, Claire instinctively arched her neck some and breathed in with her nostrils with a faint pleasance before taking another sip of the hot tea. Freshened from the shower and with her hair done, life had returned very amiably to Claire, and with the slightest actions she seemed to indulge her senses as if each taste or smell were ambrosial. The small dining section of the hotel lobby was distinct from the dank, musty hallways beyond the stairs, it smelling herbal and of cooking, and now of smoke too.

"You really hate this place," she said.

"That's an observation," Gerald said. "Maybe it's a question."

"I don't know."

"Well, I don't. I don't hate it, really."

"Maybe it's just you don't hate being here. Skipping town on Markham, chasing down a frontier case. That's all lovely to you, and for that it's worth being here. But the place itself? Mile End. I can tell, Gerald."

"I won't be checking if any lots in town are for sale, that's for sure," he said. He found himself speaking more quietly than he'd like under the cigarette smoke, and couldn't help gazing to the periphery to see if any standers-by might have heard their conversation. "A town like this," he said, low and near, practically on top of Claire's cup of tea, "it's full of polite people. Polite, frustrated people who live way down on every word, every bit of gossip and rumor. If they don't get their road," he leaned back then, smiling more easily. "It's something strange, nearly a frontier town but built like a block of city alone amidst the emptiness. I have the notion that this middle-west is more a frontier than the real west. What is there beyond our Chicago? Little half-towns like this. In the West there's God and savages, see. But here? Here, you miss the telegraph

and suddenly the world is over. It's the kind of politeness that vanishes in an instant. That's what they have here. ”

“There's civilization in the West too,” said Claire. Instead of expanding on her point, she brought her cup of tea back to her lips and sipped. Placing it down, she looked past her husband to an approaching waiter with a plate of olives and crisps. They sat and ate at the snack quietly through the morning, and Gerald ordered a gin to start the day before closing the bill.

He gave Claire the postcard and she went back to the room to write it and some other letters, and Gerald was out to go see his witness.

He had a little more than two hours before their time to meet, and it was at the other bar in town, the one that wasn't the Clines' bar. When he got there and ordered himself another gin, he was reminded of what a drunk had told him earlier in the week: “A town that's got two bars is nearly a city.”

The illusions of urbanity in Mile End were a sweet solace, despite their flimsiness and suspicion. Gerald was a city boy and grown into a city man in new Chicago, growing up on stories of the fire and a wooden city of filth that men dared to raise above the swamp. Those few times where the wild opened up and he found himself in those dark places of the country he learned he hated the wild, hated the nature of this continent. The ceaselessness of insects and how gloomy men became under wide-brim hats, hiding in shadows and cattle slaughter. In Mile End the stink of cow dung was only a passing scent in the wind, and indoors folk were fond of perfumes and herbal mixtures, got stacks of newspapers from the train, read the latest pennies, wore good clothes if they could afford to. A few mansions where the hills were higher dictated a civic spirit that was here to stay, so they hoped, and the people were well bound with a New England kind of propriety to keep the unsavory frontier folk from making a den of their town. None of that saved Milo, though, and he was muddier than a cowpunk when they found him face down in the alleyway.

He asked the bartender how's business been. The bartender looked at him seriously and said, “it's the selling and pouring of liquor. That's what it is.” Never mind that how and what weren't the same question. Perhaps in Mile End they were. Gerald had a pocket book he pulled out and flipped through, reading old daily entries. Typically he filled it in at the end of the day, and it wasn't yet high noon even. Yet he wrote just that, *not yet high noon. gin is not as cheap as you'd think in Mile End. Case almost closed.*

Gerald gazed at the vacant piano to his right down the bar, past the pomaded bartender, where sunbeams showed off the dust on the black body. He was just starting to imagine a swell tune when the bar door opened, and he hadn't turned when it did, but he did turn when the voice said his name, and he saw Tracy there and immediately he had the sensation of blood.

The pomaded bartender was less than keen of her arrival, and for each patron who looked mawkishly her way, another nearly grimaced and stared down into his drink. She wore a black dress over tan, tattooed skin and had slate black hair. The dress was of a cut not like any Gerald had seen, not in Chicago or anywhere. It was not only lascivious but something else, possessed

of a grandeur that the world had passed by. Gerald offered to buy her a gin, and they both drank without many words and she said they should talk somewhere else.

Outside the day was bright and Tracy looked anomalous in the sunshine, and when they'd come to her abode and gone inside it was so dim and the air so heavy with scents it seemed they had immediately walked into the deep of night. She sat herself on a burnished chair that seemed positioned as a throne to the rest of the room, two perpendicular couches flanking it. Incense smoked from a table, and a cat crept in the corner of the room.

"Milo's end in Mile End," she mused.

"He's got a sister out east," Gerald said. "She's the one who contacted our agency. Why I'm here. She wants closure."

"Dead is as closed as it gets, and he sure is dead," she said.

"No detectives in town. She knew, and I'm starting to think she was right, that it wasn't just a bad luck alleyway beat-up. So you tell me you know something too. I'd like to know."

"Milo was only bouncing for the Clines for half a year. That was his clean-up act, you see."

"No kidding," Gerald said.

She leaned back in the burnished chair, raising a leg, placing a bare foot on the coffee table, revealing a thigh marked with a green avian spirit wreathed in black flames. "We're not so near the rest of the world out here, detective. Not so near civilization, and there are men who come out of the dark emptiness with needs, desires. Milo used to work for me."

"And what is it you do, ma'am?"

"Nothing where people say ma'am," Tracy said. "Do you know what I hear about the boom towns out on the railways, way out in the western nothing? I'll tell you. It's not the men who brought civilization. They would have been happy enough living in tents shooting arrows with Indians, beating stakes into the ground. And come long enough, the government of the United States would have looked out and said, 'we didn't create any civilization out there, but we did send them a bunch more Indians.' No, it wasn't men who civilized the West. It was whores."

"You seem to appreciate the indelicates of life," Gerald said.

"But don't you understand, there was nothing so delicate as a frontier whore. They made men remember what warmth and decency was, that there was a reason to get in the tub and scrub once in a while, to live with pride and not like giggling animals." Tracy pulled her leg from the coffee table and sat forward. "Can I tell you, there's nowhere on this earth for me really, nowhere but a place like this, Mile End with nothing but emptiness beyond. Where are you from?"

"Chicago."

“Chicago,” she smiled. “That’s good. On the west side of the Lake Michigan it’s not so bad for Halfbreeds, but there’s never been a Halfbreed so half-bred as me.”

“You’re an interesting woman, Tracy. But my main preoccupation is the gig, see. It’s Milo, and something I can tell his sister, and a piece of evidence to tell it right, so she can say the right prayers and sleep soundly.”

“Milo was a charmer,” she said. “That’s what he did for me – charm the right girls and lead them to the right places. Well, he was good at it. I won’t say he never charmed me.”

“He gave you girls to prostitute.”

“It’s all clear when you use big words. But what’s a whore anyways...” Her confident tone slipped then, and instead she stared distantly in genuine reverie.

“You’re used to an open way of speaking,” Gerald said, and he was flusher at the neck and cheeks, and he felt the incense was within him, bringing the gin to life, and his pupils dilated as he concentrated.

“One day he charmed the wrong woman. Well, he didn’t think she was wrong. She was so right, in many ways. A broken off piece of innocence, just like Milo. Just like me. That’s what it was, you see. She opened the gateway to something he didn’t understand. Not love, but different from lust. It was almost like religion, what the three of us had...”

“The three of you?” The story was growing stranger yet, and suddenly Gerald felt as decent as a New Englander.

“It was the purest thing, but an illusion in the end. A broken off piece of innocence, I said, right? Most people are like that, but they just have a missing half. Some of us are a little more broken and it takes more to put it all together. With no one chasing us, not bill collectors, sheriffs, pastors, or Pinkertons,” she smiled at the dick before her. “We were free, and each of us suddenly had brought back to life that bit of childhood we each had before it’d been smothered and tarnished by this world. We were not yet beyond the shore where it is only a savaged, drowned existence; we were in the perfect place. We were at Mile End, realer than Indians, realer than colonists. I recall a pastor coming to my mother’s home when I was a girl, to our squalid little hut on the outskirts of town, and he’d read from the Bible for us and I recalled my Indian mother down on her knees in ecstasy for his teachings, and I in the corner with a nose full of sin. God lived forever in the flames for me, in the fireplace I could stare at while my mother moaned over the baptist’s sermons. Milo and Daisy stoked that fire again. I love God now, do you understand? Even though Milo is dead.”

Gerald had started a cigarette, and felt his insides clutching onto the gin in his gut for dear life. There was an out-of-sorts sensation rushing over him, a seduction that skipped his loins and nestled deep in his torso, between that gut of his and his heart, it was almost like love but filthy and a different kind of dangerous. “Daisy,” he said. “Did she kill him?”

Tracy frowned for a moment, then looked away, again brought to a more solemn reverie. Something was opening up within her, and it almost seemed as if she were becoming teary. “You’re skipping ahead in the story,” she said. “You don’t even know who Daisy is.”

“Since you’ve mentioned Him, I may as well say that I leave the truth to God. What I’m looking for is enough. Enough for the sister, enough for my agency, enough to leave this nowhere town. Did Daisy kill him? A jaded ex-lover of hers?”

“No you were right,” she spat out. “She killed him!” Anger was flushing her cheeks now, and she got up from her burnished chair and in a movement both lethargic and immediate brought herself to the couch where Gerald was seated and put herself next to him, her tattooed flesh pressed against his own, and her dark eyes burning against his, them cool and fading.

He grabbed her by the chin with both hands, his left snapping to her shoulder as she rustled intensely, and back to her chin, and he said low, “you’re up to your tongue in problems, Tracy, and that’s not *my* problem. And what you think you have, what makes you so valuable, it’s just a cheap show to a guy like me. So don’t go talking about God in your torn funeral clothes, putting your thighs against me. There. Bring that beating heart down back inside you, and tell me. Tell it to me straight, alright? Tell me what happened to Milo.”

Tracy had pushed herself a hands-width apart from Gerald, then, and looked back at him like a spiritual being. “Our childhood dream,” she said, with an immediate and revelatory desperation, “it was Daisy who broke it. When you go spinning around and around, someone falls off. Daisy did, and Milo right on top of her. They left *me* alone, killing each other like that! They wanted to really be in love! They didn’t want what *we* had!” She was weeping openly then.

“So what, Tracy? Daisy stabbed him? And where is she?”

“She did she stabbed him with an Indian’s knife, with *my* knife!” She pointed like a child reporting to her schoolmistress to a dresser in the far corner of the room. Gerald went up to look at it, breathing a sigh of relief to be off of the couch and away from the bodily intensity. There it was: a bone-handled knife, the blade clearly made from industrial steel.

“And Daisy?” He asked, turning from the dresser.

“Wandered into the wilderness. Just walked off into the dark.”

“How do you know?”

“She stabbed him and left town, and no trains were coming or going for the next two days.”

“You don’t think she hid out somewhere?”

“There wasn’t nowhere for her to hide out,” Tracy said. “We were her safe place, don’t you see?”

Gerald stopped short of pinching himself to stop the questioning. He had the murder weapon and a story the sister could put to bed. This was a closed case. More than that, he feared

from loin to heart how many ways things could go wrong if he stayed in that room, and so he took the knife and didn't say anything else but left, and Tracy only sat there on the couch, resuming a fitful sobbing as he left, as if finally she'd been given permission to weep.

Out back in the sunlight he had an unnatural sensation, and the best he could do was consider the thought that it may be better to not start drinking so early in the future. A European habit could quickly become filthy out in this middle-west beyond Chicago.

Claire was in the hotel lobby when he returned, finished with her letters. She looked up serenely at Gerald's return and did not quibble over his vexatious state.

"We're leaving on that train tomorrow," he said, and angling his body to cover his hands showed her the bone-handle knife. "The case is closed."

"It really is?" She asked. "Come then, you must tell me of it."

They returned to the room and he recapitulated the story.

"You don't think," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed with Gerald in the desk chair pulled near, "that there is no Daisy at all? That this Tracy woman is a wild-minded vagrant who did the deed? It's her knife, Gerald. Isn't it all too convenient?"

"The details are too ugly either way," he said. "Markham will hear, the sister will get it simple. A jaded lover slew Milo. It's a little bit pretty that way, I figure. There's those who want to find rat in every sausage, but they're the ones that'll bring this whole country down on top of itself. A detective doesn't just find the truth, he finds the *right* truth. The just truth."

They had dinner in the hotel as well, and did not step foot outside its premises until the next day when their train was due. Suitcases in hand, the clerk paid, Gerald noticed a smell of incense in the lobby, and he only stepped faster to the door, and in his haste to the train Claire was three steps behind him all the way until they were seated in the train car, the engine beginning to heat under the Kansas sun.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story is part of a cycle I've been creating on and off for the last several years, this one inspired offhandedly by the sleeve matter of God Speed You! Black Emperor's album F#A# in which they describe their recording process at a studio called Mile End. I wanted to explore the American interior's nowhere-ness, where every town can feel like a dead end or a lost cause, some kind of fluke. The casual, somewhat unreal nature of the detective is learned from Kobo Abe's The Ruined Map.*

BIO: *'David Kholamian is a writer and poet living outside of Chicago, IL. He has had poetry published in Milk Journal and DePaul's Crook & Folly as well as creative nonfiction in Chicago's MAKE Lit journal. He currently has a finished manuscript lying around somewhere, waiting to creep its way into the hands of some unsuspecting and prominent literary agent.'*