

THE HIGHEST SEAT OF A FERRIS WHEEL

By Vince Barry

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The celebration of language turns this story based on the true account of a brother/sister suicide into a literary event. Through dense, impressionistic prose we are given a poignant glimpse of their heart-breaking last hours. Dialogue is confined to trivial utterances, mostly opaque in meaning, a device that emphasizes their isolation. Barry is a signature stylist. His wildly rich prose gleams with sonic lyricism and Joycean abundances—almost reaching the point of private language. A masterful tale by a superb wordsmith at the top of his form. Quote: 'Toy, at the mechanical chime of the Wi-Fi enabled smart doorbell, "Would you mind, dear One---?" then double quick, before Lucky could say, she aladdinized the lyrical, light voice of Astaire into the spare and serene chords of Satie. Five stars.*

The Highest Seat of a Ferris Wheel

"Usage," Lucky said flatly over "the tick, tick, tock of the stately clock," and from Toy, brushing back a lump of disordered, though picturesque yellow-tinted grey hair, "What about usage, dear One?"

Then directing a troubled glance at the teeming candy and nut serving bowls by House of Hampton she wondered, "Why bother?"

They were having drinks, Lucky and Toy, martinis, elegant and dark for the occasion and shaken in Bond fashion, beside the fireplace of red and orange of their terraced townhouse with tessellated entryway and long kitchen design and legato wall sculptures—mostly Jeré: "Birds in Flight," "Continuity," "Raindrops," such as.

"Well," Lucky went on, "have you noticed—have you?" "Have I?" Toy thought, with a tint of sarcasm, her midnight blue suspiring eyes shooting Lucky a short, ironic look when she answered, "'Noticed'?"—"that people, that-that they say today— have you noticed?" Then, muttering between his teeth, "Today say they—," mouth opening, a slight suffusion spreading over the glaucous pallidity of his long, lined face, "—are you listening?" Lucky continued. "Always, dear One." . . . Then a space filled with:

Night and day you are the one
only you beneath the moon or under the sun.

Toy, at the mechanical chime of the Wi-Fi enabled smart doorbell, stirred, and, viewing no outside activity, said with a tense melancholy, "Would you mind, dear One—?" then double-quick, before Lucky could say, she aladdinized the lyrical, light voice of Astaire into the spare and serene chords of Satie. . . . "Ah," instantly broke from Toy, and a smile played across her well-chiseled face as "Trois Gymnopedies" filled the

room of pleasing sard light falling from silver accent lamps on myriad garniture, mostly floral and hand painted delft, interspersed with the occasional Baccarat crystal piece and several white ceramic lidded vases with lattice design that could be urns. . . .

Of the ever-increasing pauses that punctuated Lucky's speech: "Thoughtful," Toy desperately clung to, even "well-considered." Still, she'd admit, if pressed, they had become—what? "marked" perhaps? . . . And yes, now and then, here and there, every once in a while, "uncomfortable," though certainly not—"embarrassing" . . . yet.

Of her own: They were too fresh to say. . . . Only to muse, abstrusely, of a pause: "What is it, after all? A lull?. . . a stay?. . . a breathing space?". . . But never, "A free and easy silence," though "spare, undifferentiated, inert" had, of late, occurred to her, of Lucky's face. Of her own—"conscious, confidential, with a lurking pathos and hardening lines"—she'd never own, nor that at dawn the trembling of time more and more sent her back to sleep, on the heart side, blank of memory.

It helped, somehow, to sort them out, the pauses. She couldn't say why, any more than of "what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause," that had begun to roll and echo in her head. True, she'd once taught—in the long gone growling past—. Still, why *this* soliloquy? . . . Who-who whoever's reaching it was, she'd come round in lucid moments to likening to her own reach to lay hold, in vain. . . . Lucky's? Well, Lucky's pauses she assayed more akin to "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow." And now this sudden

fixation with Fred. "What next—" she puzzled, feeling slightly muzzy, "infatuation with Ginger and Eleanor, Rita and Cyd?"

At the smart doorbell's second chime, Toy again took the call, though this time in a vertiginous fashion with ebbing expectation. The video feed showed no one at the front door.

"Well," Toy sighed, squirming a bit in her corner of the blue velvet two-person Chesterfield sofa. Then, again, "Well?" this time inquisitively, and from a nonplussed Lucky, "Well what?" "You were saying?" "Saying'? Me? I was saying?" "Asking." "Me? "Asking'?" "A question, about usage?" . . . "Aah! Of course, usage," Lucky said with a hard smack to his high worry-scored forehead. "Please don't do that, dear One," Toy said. "You nearly knocked off—."

Lucky removed his black topper with blood red band, and he dabbed sweat beads from his clouded brow with a white cocktail napkin of linen-texture finish with embossed in purple the monogram "L." Toy, for her part, fumbled for Brite Eyes II—her normally water-clear grey eyes, of a sudden, sounding, not feeling, *sounding* like despairingly flapping wipers across a dry windshield. (She hadn't yet discovered Brite Eyes III.) Then from Lucky a loose laugh following an impulsive, "'Heaven I'm in heaven,'" sung over Satie's oscillating chords and quarter notes.

Toy sat still in the soft light under shut lids and mulled, "How long will scorn be enough?" To surmount she meant their fate. And again, of scorn and fate, "How long?" she mused on.

Of "dear One."

Precisely when they'd come to call each other "dear One" Toy couldn't say. But if pressed, possibly, she might venture or invent, "One night it was," embellishing with, "somewhere on 52nd Street— perhaps at the Three Deuces? the Onyx Club?" As for Lucky, well, it could have been when Toy was filling the candy dishes an hour or so ago.

About their hypocoristics, however, Toy might, perhaps, tell you, "Lucky so-named me because he once said I made him speak and come to life, as in *Pinocchio*. Imagine." And further boast, or not, that she in kind, years later, on a whim named him "Lucky" because his given name was Westley, the charmed farm boy become gallant hero of—well, Goldman's *The Princess Bride* she'd not likely recall, notwithstanding a strict regimen of ginseng and Gingko, not to say acetyl-L Cartinine, and, of course, the anti-stress mineral magnesium— the blood-brain barrier busting magtein, actually. Lucky? Well, Toy had long since— suffice to say "a while" it was since Toy had shared any nostrum with dear One. Not, mind you, that Toy didn't care. She just didn't see any point any longer. "It's too late now," she self-confessed, like the observation of a mute, always with wet worried lips soundlessly parted, as Lucky's pauses

turned to lengthening shadows cast by the certainty of a crushing fate—
“and forever will be.”

Toy sipped her drink, thoughtfully, meditatively, before adjudging emphatically, “This is not Bloom London.” “Tanqueray,” Lucky owned meekly.

A grateful and forgiving pause followed before, from Toy, a cheek kiss, which Lucky received in a subdued happy lassitude with, “Yes, yes, as if out together dancing cheek to cheek.” Toy answered with the ghost of a smile, slow and smug, at both her percipient taste and peck, and said, “What about it, dear One?” She meant “usage,” and to bar any misconstrual, added, “Language usage?”

“Oh, well, it’s just that—” “Yes?” “—nowadays—” “Yes? What about language usage nowadays?” Then another of those—well, call this one—what? “pregnant”? Yes, yes, “pregnant” will do nicely, before Lucky delivered, as it were, “—people today don’t say, have you noticed?—” before again breaking off, abstractedly,—though “hotly,” “sullenly,” “crossly” crossed Toy’s mind as she held her breath and nervously fidgeted before Lucky rescued her with, “—to one another—,” and Toy, on an exhale, “Nowadays?” “Yes, yes,” from Lucky, on the rush of a deep breath, “nowadays.” “And why—?” “Oh,” lightly from Lucky, “no reason.” “Hmm,” from Toy with another easing sip, “reason enough then, dear One,” and again shifted, Toy did, on the damson settee, so that her legs were sealed and bent slightly to the right, feet crossed at exposed

ankles reaching out from a zombie corpse dress, that perfectly complimented Lucky's high hat, red tie, and tattered tails.

A long space, a sepulchral quiet really, as though respecting, as the poet might say, "the descent of their last end," Lucky and Toy, pale and fragile as porcelain, indulged, before Lucky's voice cleaved the silence.

"Have you noticed, dear One, that in the past—" "'The past'?" "Yes, the past." Then, sufficiently mulled, from Toy, "As in 'days of old'?" "Oh, no, no, no," Lucky abrupted. "Not back—" "That far?" "Though," Lucky allowed, bridging his fat-fingered hands, "of course, yes, yes, of course, back in the day, so to say, but I mean closer to—" "'Hitherto'?" Toy broke in helpfully, this time smartly ignoring the chime of the eldritch smart bell. "Hmm," Lucky weighed, then, with a nod, "'hitherto,' yes, yes, I suppose 'hitherto' will do. Thank you, dear One." "Good." Reassured, Toy sighed and said, "Then that's settled," before a wide pause before a suddenly fidgety Lucky said with pique, "'Settled'? You say 'settled'? What is settled?" and added, "This itches," of his dark jester fancy dress costume, and fussed further, like a man whose flesh was in revolt.

Toy said, "What of it?" and Lucky said, "Itching?" "No, dear One, you were saying—" "I was?" "—that hitherto—" "'Hitherto'? Me?" then petulantly, scrunching up his face, "I'd never use—never ever have I—'hitherto'!" "But we agreed." "'Agreed'?" "Agreed about what?" "That 'hitherto' people—had I noticed?" "Noticed what?" "That's just it, dear One, you were asking—" "Yes?" "—whether I had noticed that people

hitherto—?" "Aah! Yes, yes, of course, hith-hith—what?" "Hitherto." "Yes, yes, of course, of course, my mind's a sieve—'hith-hitherto' I was saying—" "Yes?" "—that people hith-hitherto used to 'contact' one another?" "Hitherto?" "Yes, exactly, hith-hitherto." "And now?"

Toy sipped and, staring blankly at the puddle of light that the gold glaze table lamp cast over her bare bony ankles, she brooded over why they had agreed to grow old in front of one another. Then on a whim she disabled the internal door chime and said, "They don't keep up, you mean—keep in touch, that it?" "No-no-no," frantically from Lucky, "quite-quite-quite the—" "Opposite?" went Toy. "When they do, as you say,—what was it?" "Keep in touch?" "Yes!" "What about it?" "About what?" "Keeping in touch." "Aah! Of course. . . .Well, they-they instead—" Lucky ceased brokenly and threw his head and shoulders backward as if taking a blow and moaned, "What's wrong with me?" Then his stiff torso leaned forward and, arms hanging, he stared at the green as oysters Oushak carpet with star-shaped medallions, as if into an irremediable void.

With unruffled aspect Toy brushed off Lucky's frustration with the play of a feeble, deprecating hand that coaxed her spouse upright again. Then, dropping her voice to a murmur, she said, "Of keeping in touch, dear One?" "Reach out," Lucky said in a sad, hollow tone. "Reach out?" Toy echoed. Then Lucky went, "Haven't you noticed?" adding, almost pleading, "Surely, you must have—" That's when Toy reached out with an inchoate, nervous longing in her slender fingers for

the tall Waterford pitcher resting on their "sanctuary end table" by Hooker, and drained it into her extra large lead crystal martini glass bearing the monogram "TOY."

There they then settled, Lucky and Toy, for a while, a long while, before a recomposed Lucky mused, "A lovely word picture." "'Reach out?'" Toy said dreamily. "Yes, yes, like-like—?" And Toy, gazing at Lucky with nostalgia's wan mien, "Two hands to show support or love or help?" "That or . . ." "To ask or beg or implore for the aforesaid?" "Yes, that all." . . . "And," then from Toy in a foggy voice, "why all this, dear One?"

"Well," from Lucky with a soupy sigh, "because Scott—" "'Scott?'" "He writes—" "'Scott?'" "Yes, he writes—" "With two t's or one?" a fuddled Toy broke in, and before Lucky could say, "Two—why?" Toy went on, "You mean—whoever— texts?" Lucky wagged his head, and again to Toy's "E-mails?" "But, dear One," Toy fretted, "I thought we'd agreed—" Toy meant they'd agreed, she and Lucky had, at someone or other's urging, that they would—well, "keep up," and they had, in a fashion, kept up, with emailing and texting and that nuisance-ringing door bell, and now this—this intrusion, this encroachment, this-this meddlesome double-t'd Scott!

"He, not me," Lucky said sharply. "Of course, of course," from Toy apologetically, "it is he—this-this twin t'd individual, like-like—" and she reached in her rusted spring of memory for the two t'd literary figure

she once was so fond of, but regretfully settled for,—“not you, who writes—this-this, what’s his name?” “Scott,” Lucky said, and presto, he produced a letter like a playing card up the sleeve.

On inspection Toy appraised the missive handwritten with a fountain pen, not just any—but a, to her best guess, a Waterman. “Possibly, a Sheaffer or Parker,” Toy sniffed. But had she, y’know, to bet her life, she’d aver a Waterman 52 or 452 with silver overlay. Still, she granted, “Possibly a Parker 21—with, of course, the octanium nib,” before opining further, of the stationery, “Positively Alden Grace.” Lucky offered no opinion, as he took the letter and began reading:

“Dear Wes—,” “Wes’?” Toy remarked, “A charming elision, ‘Wes,’ albeit a tad vulgar, wouldn’t you say, dear One?”

“It has been—” Lucky went on, “Yes?” from Toy, “— a long time since I wrote to you, my childhood friend, though I have had you on my “to do” list to get a letter off— Unfortunately,—”

“To do list” Toy thought, “how quaint,” and said as much. “Did this- this,” she stuttered, and went on with, “this Scott individual actually say ‘to do list’, dear One?”

Lucky showed her the letter. Toy scanned it. “Hmm,” she said, swept into her own thoughts, “of course, of course, what else of a Waterman?” Then she said, “Did you know, dear One, that a solid gold Waterman

signed the Treaty of Versailles?" Lucky met her question with an immense, glassy stare, and Toy thought, "the pale stare of Hecuba," and said, "Go on." "Where?" Lucky asked. And Toy read aloud with a broken voice and tearing Brite eyes:

"... Unfortunately, I now have a more urgent reason to reach out, and that is to notify you that Blake passed away on Labor Day. I received the news from Cherill DeCherill notifying me of Blake's passing and also of the passing of Belinda Sahwin on Independence Day." Of this drollery of departures Toy did not inquire, but steadfastly continued reading: "Lou notified Cherill as soon as he heard the news from Phyllis. Brad tells me that Phyllis has planned a memorial service in Fairmount on September 30th. . . . (I know, James Dean. Amazing, I know!). . . Anyway, Lou is going, and I plan to make arrangements to travel to the service. Attached is the obituary. Don't know who composed it. Cherill, probably.

"Should you care to reach out, Cherill can be reached at—"

Toy's voice trailed off with, "I hope this note finds you in good health and spirits. At a convenient time for you, I could travel to — coffee or breakfast with you would be enjoyable for me. It has been a while."

Then, with, "With kind regards," Toy stopped reading, and handed Lucky an obituary, then a picture, with the extended afterthought, "A—" "photo," she never said.

For a long while Lucky stared at both with eyes unzipped before finally letting them drop onto the bold octagonal centerpiece inlaid with grey agate tiles. Then he said, making a moue, "Have you noticed—?" . . .

A long silence followed, not free, not easy.

Then, nerves in a clamor, Toy said, "What say some-some more Fred Astaire and-and, say," — she stuttered, swallowing a lump of panic, "Rita Hayworth?"

"'I'm Old Fashioned'!" burst from Lucky with the wild leap of a child's excited heart or a zealot's rapping out an oath, before his lips tightened on a grin.

"Why not?" from Toy, as she swore she could hear still another smart bell's tone, over a smash-up. "With, say," she added loudly enough to drown out both the tinnitus and the head on meeting of a Porsche Spyder and a Ford Tudor, "another Poison Blackberry? . . . It is after all—" "All Hallows' Eve!" burst from Lucky to complete the track of her thought.

With wavering steps and breast aflutter Toy retreated to the delightful conversation area that flanked a craftily concealed bar in the center alcove.

There, busy with crushed ice and scruples, Toy weighed, as if on the highest seat of a ferris wheel, with cold horror and a fearful sinking, and, against her ribs, a thumping time-enevenomed heart, not to say a soul unsure it could any longer brave itself to endure, twenty-five milliliters of ninety-five per cent pure Chinese sodium Nembutal, with just a dash of Dilantin, against, so weighed, "Is it still long enough?" Of scorn, of course, she meant.

end

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *It was a raw, rainy morning, more years ago than I care to remember. I was, at the time, idling over the Sunday papers when a backpage filler caught my eye. A double suicide in Philadelphia, brother and sister. Later that day—I don't know why—I wrote a one-act play titled Broken Yokes. Happily, the venerable Wynn Handman at The American Place Theatre thought enough of twenty-something's Toy and Lucky, the play's sole characters, to showcase the work at The American Place Theatre. Fast-forward to 2016. Lucky and Toy turn up in "Internal Damage," a story published by The Saint Ann's Review. . . . Now, after all these years, burdened with the indifference of the soul on the evening of the Great Pumpkin, they're back. . . . If it's true that "all stories, if continued far enough, end in death," something tells me that their story, Lucky and Toy's, has continued far enough.*

You might rightly suspect from this backstory that my earliest literary influences were notable playwrights of the day: O'Neill, Williams, Wilder, Miller. But, here's the thing: It was their stage directions that fascinated me—the detailed and lyrical descriptions of characters found, for example, throughout O'Neill or in, say, Saroyan's The Time of Your Life. I didn't know it then but I was really reading, loosely speaking, a novel within a play, presented in an intoxicating mix of poetry and prose whose dramatic effect revealed the "inner person." Ever since, I suppose my taste in literature has listed toward the psychological/philosophical. Thus, James,

Wharton, Woolf, Eliot (e.g., The Waste Land), and certainly the great literary metaphysician Lawrence Durrell. Speaking of metaphysics, readers familiar with existentialist thought will recognize that at the end of "Ferris Wheel" Toy puts to the test Camus's (and hers) exalted stoic apothegm (from The Myth of Sisyphus): "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."

BIO: *After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad, including: The Saint Ann's Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, The Broken City, Abstract: Contemporary Expressions, Kairos, Caveat Lector, Terror House, The Fem, BlogNostics, The Writing Disorder, whimperbang, and The Disappointed Housewife. Barry lives with his wife and daughter in Santa Barbara, California.*