

Peter Mladinic

Dear Caryl, Dear Chessman

Kathy Hamilton, I live in Hawthorne,  
New Jersey, in a split level with parents,  
one older brother and one younger.  
Do they have split levels in California?  
All I see are bungalows like we have down  
the shore. Hawthorne has lots of trees,  
it's not named after the author  
of *The Scarlet A* I'm reading, maybe you  
are too, with time to read at San Quentin,  
your mingling with others restricted,  
I mean you yourself an author, infamous,  
must have alone time, even in the library  
pouring through pages to find loopholes.  
I read *The Scarlet A* for school.  
A high school freshman, I don't read much.  
My passion is watching television. *Car 54*,  
*Where Are You?* makes me laugh.  
Also I ice skate on a pond in woods  
close to home, unafraid some big burly man  
like you will come along and grab me.  
Though I mostly skate alone.  
Other than that, and TV I've no interests,  
not even a pet, but I read about you  
in the papers, you're there practically every  
day, and today, March 5th, 1958,  
I see you're fighting just to keep breathing.  
Their sending you to the gas chamber  
when you didn't kill a person seems unjust.

You raped Mary Meza, three years older than I, and women, but consider murderers avoided the gas chamber. Justice like love is imperfect. Maybe you'll be paroled.

Eternity's Not What It's  
Cracked Up to Be

The weather, no floods no climate change,  
is March dew on buds, a tree lit with crystals  
never blooms outside my window, forever  
in my Father's house. Roads are paths,  
rivers one river, no super highways, no tolls  
no Super Bowl, no social security, only  
a table, a chair, no Hopper or Mondrian  
prints on walls, just that tree of eternal life

out my window. Everlasting rings true.  
No Sting or Sinatra sings through a radio,  
no Donna Summer disco, no Dorsey swing.  
Hymns to the Father watered to elevator  
Muzak, half the time I don't know it's on.  
Gospel's "When We All See Jesus" said  
the other side's milk and honey, no achy  
joints, no house payments, only this house

oddly like Philip Larkin's Mr Bleany's room.  
Better than nothing. I'll take it, I said.  
No choice here, whether one prefers sauce  
to gravy. We take what we get, what He  
gives, the thrower of dice, God, Yahweh.  
Jack Benny's here, the Kennedys, MLK.  
Though I don't hear from them. Occasionally  
a rumble of thunder, always the Muzak.

What to do for fun? No fun, no type A  
decisive organized or type B indecisive  
disorganized types here. No miniature golf  
nor shops with mannequins in the latest  
to peak one's desires. Desires, I remember  
lifting a lid from a paper cup. Steam rose.  
A coating made inside of the cup shine.  
No cups like that here. Styrofoam, a thing

of the past, as antiquated as fire escapes,  
and cures for cancer. No cancer, stoke  
or heart disease. Still, not all they promised.  
I sit on a bench. At the altar He lifts a cup,  
drinks blood of the lamb. As exiting as  
Parcheesi with my grandmother on New  
Year's Eve. No Eve, no Adam, no fall, no nail  
fungus. Only His Muzak and eternal love.

Files of Information on  
People Who Don't Exist

Art Vaught is my name.  
My ex-lover Melissa Necessary and I worked  
the jubilee counter at Myer's Department  
Store. Everyone could use some help.  
No help in her dark time—  
I'd like to but I can't—  
I made up this present, a night  
in August, 1969, Youngstown, Ohio.

Watching Melissa on stage,  
Tom Book, a Seabee  
from Vietnam, who lives in New Castle,  
and I, yeoman third class  
stationed on an LPH, the USS Boxer,  
that takes marines on maneuvers  
in the Caribbean. She's docked in Norfolk.  
I'm on shore leave. Tom drills wells.

From a sound system jazz plays softly.  
Melissa takes off her blue top and bottom,  
stands naked. Hourglass shape,  
fair skin, shoulder-length hair. Some things  
cry out to be touched, some people,  
but this is hands off night, Melissa on stage,  
her music the soft, brisk "Love Someone"  
followed by a bouncy "Night Train."

The past is Camp Carter, by the China Sea.  
Tom and I snuck out to houses of  
prostitution in Danang and used girls.  
He wore a red mustache, false teeth.  
In high school his front teeth knocked out by  
a hockey puck. Our blue helmets, with white  
letters Security Police, we left in the  
barracks when we snuck out to the houses.

The future: the Challenger explodes in space, 1986.. Melissa's twin, Priscilla dies on a kitchen floor in West Monroe, Louisiana in 1990.

Tom drove us here, the Starlight. Shortly after he got out of the navy, honorably discharged, he shaved off the mustache. A wide smile, he gawks at Melissa.

In another life, 'Nam coming down the pike, a night out in Monroe, the Pour House, "Tom, this is Prissy." Long red hair a shade lighter than his pompadour. They cosy at the bar with shots of Jack.

Fast forward to blue sky, Wednesday morning: Melissa lays flowers at her twin's headstone.