

## **Dead bee, stung**

Paul Becker

A dark room: moonlight through a dusty window picks out: a pot bellied stove, a lamp on a table, an old roll-top desk. Many, many books. There is a distant electric hum.

BS, a woman in white stands looking at a painting by the light of the moon.

[from another room: a voice]

‘Now where is that other glass?’

[PO enters with wax fruit: a large man in trousers and vest]

**PO:**

And there was a candle as I came...

[knocks over a plastic tumbler that rattles across the floor]

Ah! The rascal!

[lights the oil lamp, immediately illuminating the room including BS by the painting {which appears to be a mirror} and a lampshade, dust sheeted]

**PO:**

[startled]

Oh! I took you for the lampshade! Gave me the willies!

[exits]

**BS:**

[practices the words]

I, you can't help...

**PO:**

[something inaudible from kitchen]

**BS:**

[louder]

How to describe it: this wicked stink?

**PO:**

[bustles back in]

You already have my dear: wicked. I have a handkerchief, dabbed with essential oil, camphor as it happens.

[he holds it out. she doesn't see. lays it on table. exits]

**BS:**

A window, were it to be held open, a door ajar?

[to self]

Surely, then, the problem solves itself? Air particles collide and surely, then, dissipate...

**PO:**

[from kitchen]

Right with you!

[crockery rattles]

**BS:**

[chin in hand, thinking]

[to self]

To... to... redefine even noisome aromas by changing the words you use to describe:

- a) yes, rotten nappies and
- b) yes, unpinpointable odour of death passed like black ribbon under nose during half-remembered country walk.

Explanations for this:

- i.) Murdered rabbit under hedge. Weasel/Fox probable culprit.
- ii.) Road-kill-tomcat drags himself across warm tarmac; breathes his last into the heather.
- iii.)

[pause]

...no, gone.

Try again. This is a library.

Examples:

‘Death Comes To The Nursery’ (a novella)

‘On Foetid Flesh and Diapers Done’ (the poetaster!)

‘A Dead Child’ (oh...)

**PO:**

[pokes his head past the door]

Gone!

**BS:**

[surprised]

What?

**PO:**

The gas has gone out. Agh! And the stink in here! Our host has left the windows closed...

[he opens a window, wafts it open and closed  
like a fan]

...our host was wrong to...

**BS:**

[to self]

Out loud?

[out loud]

The aroma appears to have fundamentally

[pause]

increased, with your opening...

**PO:**

You are exactly right, of course.

[closes window and leaves the room]  
[BS notices that the mirror she had mistaken  
for a painting, is in fact a painting]

**BS:**

[aloud to self]

Perhaps it was a reflection, a shadow across the varnish...

[it is of an empty table:  
a Morandi without the shaky bottles]  
[silence. a beetle's click]  
[PO re-enters, handkerchief on face]

**PO:**

Oh! Indescribable odour!

[long pause. PO waits]

**BS:**

She, I mean, might not you? Not? Describe it, that is?

[incidentally, BS hasn't moved this whole time]

**PO:**

The moon? It was once thought that lunar emissions caused mental conditions...

**BS:**

[gestures, artificially]

...the stench, I meant!

**PO:**

Ah, I thought you, perhaps you would consent...

**BS:**

(...)

**PO:**

Well, a strange smell it is indeed! And has, you will agree, no business in a library.

**BS:**

(...)

[PO goes out and comes back in with a plate of cut-up oranges. exits]

...emanating from the same book? A black bug crushed among its leaves...

[PO sings from beyond, a kitchen echo]

...the window should remain

[to self]

French?

[aloud]

'enfermée'. Mortar up the doors to guard the castle keep! Cut the drawbridge rope!

**PO:**

[enters]

You called!

**BS:**

Nothing.

[to self]

An old gas oven, towels damp, dug under doors. Can one be the oven as well as just the lung?

[PO produces a notebook from his coat]

**PO:**

Never fear. I am merely a fastidious taker of notes and I have a hunch you are decidedly notable, once the ice is broken, the engine warmed up. Just a minute. Or two. When we part I'll ask for a moniker. Nothing binding, natürlich! I shall put you down as 'artiste'. Sculpture, I was told...

**BS:**

No, nothing so concrete.

**PO:**

I see...

**BS:**

[suddenly smug as PO writes]

A versalitor, a constructrix. Words as objects but mostly the other way. Reviews! 'the utilisation of objects was at best desultory, at worst, nugatory'.

**PO:**

Quite a merry-go-round!

**BS:**

A fair point.

[long silence. PO sits quietly throughout its length; pen poised]

**PO:**

I fancied myself a sculpture... a sculptor once. Never got further than father, his head, in clay. Dead before my time, at least so I was told. Another, a different parent he (or she) hated the head, had no time for it but not gall enough to smash. So buried it in the garden. But now I come to think of it that is a story!

**BS:**

You are a writer, too?

**PO:**

Reader. Hardly even that. I am sure that would be something that to you would come easy.

**BS:**

Hard, to keep all that in one's head! A tightrope artist, weaves the rope as she walks ...

[pause]

The impression given out by the experts is that endings are impossible, and beginnings destroy the will to live.

**PO:**

Meaning that...

**BS:**

(...)

[an effort]

Writers are transfixed by beginnings. Hung out like old coats, pillar of salt-ed! At the exit doors they look back upon imaginary youths! Page one, chapter one...

**PO:**

I must make a note of that. In duplicate!

[exits]

**BS:**

[to self]

Study or library, depository?

[aloud]

Is our host a litterateur?

[to self]

A paper hoarder, rubbing together the pages to strike fire! Self-combusting.

[aloud]

Or is he a mere collector of objects?

**PO:**

[returns]

Ah! It is a he then? As I thought!

**BS:**

[to self]

They meet?

[aloud]

You have, it would seem, met? Actually?

**PO:**

Not at all!

[painful silence]

**PO:**

[bright]

I for one have always found libraries to be wildly erotic places! Possibilities seem to drop from the pages! Everything standing on end.

**BS:**

(...)

**PO:**

And yet, at the same time, they are cold, inert. Cold places, flaccid with knowledge.

**BS:**

(...)

**PO:**

You mentioned a dead child. That is a little macabre. A child though, not a father.

[exits silently]

**BS:**

The dead child? Thoughts of literature, novels - to use precision, to be precise. The dead child, the soul of a novel. Birth and death, entwined. A bee stung by the death in its own tail, do you see?

[turns round to see PO has gone. BS reaches over and turns down the lantern]

END