

## Two Poems · *Jared Carter*

### SPIREA

Then she came, the sybil, out through the doors  
of the Bell, the single drinking establishment  
permitted in that narrow little country town—  
she came out neither staggering nor collapsing  
but gliding—not carefully, one step at a time,  
like a tight-rope walker, but recklessly, wantonly,  
as someone oblivious to danger, who knows already  
what lies ahead, and has nothing to fear. Down  
the wooden steps of the board walkway, on down  
into the dust and refuse of the street, the rinds  
and horse-droppings, and they watched her go  
without really noticing—since they saw this  
every evening, now that warm weather had come,  
when she ventured out to wander in the town—  
and the fact that she was barefooted, that  
she wore only a blue shirtwaist, that her hair  
hung the length of her back, and was never combed  
or pinned up, that she seldom stopped talking  
to herself, that all her relatives were dead,  
that she had no place to stay, owned nothing,  
needed nothing, harmed no one—these facts  
were accepted, known throughout the community,  
were discussed by the ladies' aid society,  
by the minister and by the township trustee,  
and yet none of them could contain her—not  
the bartender, who told her when it was time  
to leave, not the old rag buyer, who reined in  
his horse, when he saw her, and called to her,  
asking her to come sit beside him in the wagon,  
and he would take her home—for none of them  
would she turn back, even when they pleaded  
and called out her name. Each time she went forth,

when she walked through the streets, the alleys,  
in the twilight, some of them encountered her—  
the husbands out watering their lawns, the wives  
with their children, the young people pausing,  
at the corner, with their bicycles, watching her,  
seeing her go by. Many avoided her passing;  
many were afraid, unable to return her bright gaze.  
A light shone from her eyes. Something glimmered  
as she walked. There was about her a presence,  
an immanence that announced a way, a direction  
most of them could not imagine, would never know.  
She walked on, heedless, muttering to herself,  
leaving them far behind. In this way she journeyed  
through the summer evenings, and into the night,  
while all around her doors were closing, lamps  
were put out, the world was preparing for sleep.  
Always she moved in a straight line, pausing  
for no obstacle, respecting no property line—  
through backyards, over fences, across gardens,  
managing to steer, nightly, by a different star—  
by Venus smouldering low above the line of trees,  
by Mars or Saturn in stark opposition to the moon—  
by whatever brightness seemed most beckoning,  
however faint or furious its glow. In this way  
she traversed all points of the town, stopping  
sometimes to speak to whomever or whatever  
she encountered—whether house, tree, horse  
or child—but invariably moving on, walking  
on through the streets and into the countryside,  
walking out among the fields, the gravel roads,  
walking until she collapsed against a stone wall,  
under a hedge, or in a barn, with rain falling,  
walking until she lost her way among dark dreams.  
In this manner, on the first evening in May, drawn  
by an unknown star, she left the tavern, and came  
eventually to the edge of town, to the side yard—  
to the croquet court, actually—of a professor

of physics at the college, who nightly set up his reflecting telescope: and who on this evening has trained it on an elusive entity—a galaxy hundreds of light years away, a great star cluster tilted on one side, displaying vast spiral arms— it is this same man, this professor, who notices, behind him, something struggling through the hedge, through the arms of the spirea called “bridal-veil,” through that pale maze of blossoming, that thicket of lush, damp, drooping, spiraling white branches— there in the twilight he clearly hears someone coming toward him, then recognizes this wanderer from the town—watches her shoulder aside the canes, bursting at last onto the level lawn, then stopping, righting herself, reaching to touch and feel the welts along her arms, her shoulders, the thin red cut, on her cheek—observes her peer about, slowly, at the house, the arbor, the herbs in their ladder, her gaze turning at last to the well-dressed man with his celluloid collar, his knotted silk tie, where he stands with one hand on the telescope. Is he young, and handsome, is this semester his first in the town, has he only recently accepted a position at the little college? Does he turn the heads of the young ladies, does he sing bass in the Baptist church choir, is he one of the town’s leading bachelors? Or is he a white-haired gentleman, stooped, round-shouldered, has he been there for years, taught generations of young people, outlived a dutiful wife, sent forth his own children, lived to see grandchildren, does he reside alone at the edge of town, on a wide brick street, in a gas-boom mansion with a massive hedge of spirea enclosing the property on three sides, a front gate of cast iron tipped with arrowheads? Does it matter now whether he is young or old?

Does he himself know about any of these things, on a night like this, at the moment she emerges from the spirea's whiteness, as though swum up through a heavy, pounding surf? Her shirtwaist is torn, she is hardened by incessant walking and wandering, by being out in all weathers, her breasts and her gaunt body neither young nor old have emerged gleaming, she is aglow now, dusted with shattered blossom as though prepared for some elusive ritual, and as she gazes at him she continues to mutter, to murmur—has in fact never ceased to speak, to utter strange syllables. Whether she understands the words he cannot tell; he waits beside the telescope—the gleaming shaft poised on its tripod—which earlier he had pointed up into the wealth of stars—earlier, alone, far from the interference of artificial light, he had come out, he had set up the equipment, he carried chalkboard in hand for calculations—he began to search, to locate, to gaze into the huge glimmering hearth of the night sky—and only moments ago he had found it, had checked his coordinates, had seen distinctly—he had looked up and into, looked out far toward those myriad outflung arms, that turning, that vast, still, immeasurable unfolding—and the visitor, strangely silenced now, begins to come his way, across the fresh-cut grass—she approaches, strides toward him unhesitant and unafraid, reaches to touch the viewing aperture, already in perfect focus, smiles, and leans down—fragments of white blossom, living particles of sundered veil cling to her long hair, drip from her smooth shoulders, her arms—she sees, she looks for a long time. There is no sound except her slight breathing. Finally she begins, she raises her head, the light is in her eyes,

the shining, and she speaks what comes. He bows  
as though in prayer, knowing there is no difference—  
it is the far galaxy, great orb and afterimage  
in his brain, it is the milk-white hedge cresting  
all around them, it is the unsummoned presence  
come at last, and always, up through the waves,  
it is the voice speaking through all, to all,  
here, now, in the darkness, in the starlight.