

MARCEL MALONE

LEW WATTS

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Some of the author's poems in this book have been previously published.

Haiku, in order of appearance: *Tiny Words*, 2014, September 22, "summer solstice;" *Modern Haiku*, 2012, vol. 43.1, "5 star hotel;" *Modern Haiku*, 2013, vol. 44.1, "pawnshop;" *Frogpond*, 2013, vol. 36.3, "child lock;" *Frogpond*, 2015, vol. 38.1, "old Beatles tapes;" *Heron's Nest*, 2014, November, "evening calm;" *bottle rockets*, 2012, issue 26, "trying to recall;" *Modern Haiku*, 2013, vol. 44.2, "Thesaurus search;" *Modern Haiku*, 2010, vol. 41.2, "two dealers;" *Modern Haiku*, 2012, vol. 43.1, "first day;" *Modern Haiku*, 2015, vol. 46.1, "open casket;" *Modern Haiku*, 2014, vol. 45.3, "a patch of glass;" *Frogpond*, 2014, vol. 37.2, "sunlight through aspens;" *bottle rockets*, 2014, issue 31, "freezing lake;" *Modern Haiku*, 2011, vol.42.3, "birdsong dies;" *A Hundred Gourds*, 2015, vol. 4.2, "Yellowstone;" *A Hundred Gourds*, 2015, vol. 4.4, "after the flood." Haibun: *A Hundred Gourds*, 2015, vol.4.1, "This moment." Sonnet: *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, February 5th, 2015, "Mask."

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“Tell me what you’re thinking...what’s going through your mind, Marcel?”

He is curled up on the sole rug in the room, knees tucked into his chest, and arms wrapped around his head. We are ten minutes into our session, and he has lain like this for most of the time, ever since he tried to tell me about his latest disaster. Of course, I could just wait him out, wait for him to unwrap and turn to me with another inane example of the way he’s treated, how it’s not his fault, how he tries but that, time and again, the rebuffs come pounding in. And it’s not as though I’m unable to empathize with this side of him. I do care in a professional way, which is why I am trying to be professional, with soft and soothing tones of inquiry—tell me in your own words, Marcel, take your time, we have forty minutes left.

From my notes, I know this is our ninth session. We have made little progress, although he now talks much less about his one-time girlfriend and how it felt the night she told him it was the end, how he has left the plates where they were the moment she fled. Their relationship had lasted longer than seemed possible. “She cycled in and out for several years,” he once said.

What is Marcel like? Well, he’s an underfed son of a steelworker, although he told me his mother was Italian and played the piano—but I get ahead of myself. He is ordinary, small and slight, and his skin is so pale that the veins on his forehead seem iridescent, like earthworms after rain. I would best describe him as unkempt. His most redeeming features are a head of dark curls, and a face that seems to be constantly asking itself questions.

“Do you want to talk more about this, Marcel?”

At times like this I make my mind as blank as I can, even though there are so many things to do this afternoon—patients, notes, a manicure, and then the rush to join Raymond for dinner. My office is intentionally warm, but not so warm that it would be a womb—more like a place of welcome, with two easy chairs set well away from my desk, a rug, and a single painting of sky. I am imagining it now and can feel myself...

"I do not want to talk about it any more than I have said, if that's all right with you. I know you want me to, but no."

That's a long sentence, Marcel. They are usually shorter, in that staccato way you speak to me.

How many therapists have waited for an adult fetus to wipe tears from its eyes before it sits up and blinks? This is what he does, eventually, and, as he leans back on his skinny arms, I can't help thinking how lucky he was to have met his girlfriend when he did. He once showed me her photograph, a two-inch square he keeps in his wallet—her hair was almost as long as my own, lighter in color, and her face was the shape of a tulip, with cheeks poised to smile. She must have looked especially beautiful as the evening wind caught her skirts the night she left.

"I'm sorry that the session was a waste. I couldn't stop myself from falling down."

And he picks up his folder—always the folder, pen clipped into the closed plastic envelope, as opaque its owner.

"You don't need to apologize, Marcel," I say in my sympathetic voice. "We're here to try to surface the way you feel and what's behind some of the patterns unfolding in your life. You clearly have strong feelings around rejection, and your recent experiences with dating are just one part of this. We need to better understand what's causing your reactions, but also the effect you have on others."

"I just feel that I'm wasting all your time," he whispers, moving towards the door.



Here are the notes I wrote as little as a few months ago—an age it seems, but this is how I saw him then, how he wanted to be seen, whether he knew it or not.

*Marcel Malone:*

Thirty years old, accountant, prone to strong periods of melancholy. Mother died when he was fifteen (cervical cancer), first generation Italian who met her husband-to-be in high school in Pittsburgh, the family hometown—passionate, pianist, occasional music teacher. Father (Irish stock) remarried shortly after to a

woman Marcel believes was a longtime lover—she may have sharpened the tension between father and son, but this had simmered for some time. The father longed for an athletic son, with hands that, “could wrap right round a can of East End beer” (his quote). Instead, Marcel played with books, wasted a college degree by shunning engineering, and sunk into depression as he got older. No siblings.

Met his only girlfriend, Susan, while studying economics at George Washington University—she was diagnosed bipolar, and was in her depressive stage. She said she found his voice soothing, especially when he recited the sonnets he wrote for her. But when she was in her manic phase their relationship strained, and she would often distance herself for weeks or even months before returning. The night she finally left they had again failed to make love.

He rents an apartment in Adams Morgan on a rolling three-month renewal. Apart from a bed, a hard-backed chair, and a kitchen table that also serves as a desk, he tells me there is no furniture or clutter in the apartment. He keeps his clothes in two suitcases, and his only luxury is his precious hi-fi system—from one of the photographs he took for me, the speakers seem to be placed on stacks of books.

His passions appear to be Susan [oh dear], fly-fishing [he stopped just after his mother died], music, and writing poetry—he has been unsuccessful so far in getting any poems published. He also loves movies and one in particular: *A River Runs Through It*.

The nature of his anxiety: multiple, repeated rejections at all levels—father, ex-girlfriend, colleagues, occasional dates, poetry. Cannot tolerate being alone. Spends his evenings after work at the DC public library on G Street, hangs around the office coffee machine, and often lingers at the end of our sessions. Is unable to take ownership of problems—they’re always the fault of others. No drugs, moderate alcohol consumption, has taken antidepressants but says they affect his work,

washes hair daily, nails desperately need attention,  
pays on time.

That's all I knew of him really. Perhaps that's all there was, or all he wanted me to know. And what was the cause of his latest descent into the birth position? The night before he had arrived early for the weekly open-mic at *Busboys & Poets* on 14th and had seated himself at a vacant table for two. As the room filled, a young African American girl took the remaining seat and, seeing him writing, asked if he was going to read. He couldn't remember his reply, but she closed her book and left the room, supposedly to make a call, and never returned. It was a rejection—clearly—and the latest in a growing trend. I confess I hid a smile, unlike the smile I gave him when he told me of a lunch date with a colleague's sister. Halfway through the salad course her eyes had closed and she was lightly snoring.

But I am paid to listen with open eyes, bound by every word, captivated by the true self that emerges for me alone, for the shared secrets.

Secrets...he said he never took the lead, that Susan had always been the adventurous one. When she would return from her wanderings she was always willing to try some new form of foreplay. "I read it in a book," she'd say, but had she, had she? As with all my other patients, it was all I could do to just sit and listen.

*She had not read it in a book, Marcel.*

March 29

The afternoon had been the usual rush—all flush and flurry in that hurried swoon of tasks my days had become.

As Marcel left, Julie entered, in a smock that hid the weight, already whining in her rising west coast moan. We talked about her need for dependency, and I remember thinking that her voice was like the young interns from the Hill, the way they ended each sentence on a note of question. As she left, she asked me to help her manage her finances and open a bank account.

And then there was Julian—Jewish Julian with his secret closets—and small and painted Margaret who hated herself for hating herself. By the time I entered the small spa on 18th Street, I wanted it to be about me, but Vietnamese manicurists are incapable of listening. Once again, I had to endure Veronica's account of the latest scandal, and of the list of ingredients in the finger bath where my cuticles would soak until the skin turned white.



It is Thursday. I am at the entrance to a drinks reception at *The Willard* hotel, savoring minutes of quiet independence before I become an appendage. I have replaced my ankle boots and long green skirt with black pantaloons and matching one-inch-heels; these still match my white silk blouse that is overlain by one of red chiffon. Soon, my husband will escort me to a client's spouse before he discards me—so elegantly, my love—and moves to the next suspecting prey. I will take morsels from the passing plates, waiting for the question, "Are you Raymond's wife? How wonderful."

The room is filled with dark suits. The few female executives, also suited, wear Hermès scarves and there is not a neck to be seen. These denizens of K Street weave and mingle with targets that would much prefer to talk to each other, who dread that they will be caught, *in camera*, in conversation with a lobbyist.

There is the occasional beauty in a dress—always smiling, always discrete—with adoring eyes half-trained on a husband

doing business. Here, for example, is Amanda Brock, wife of Cyril Brock. Cyril is founder and CEO of Brock & Associates, and past Assistant Secretary to the Secretary of Energy in the Reagan administration, a man who, ever since, has leveraged this to dizzying heights of influence and commissions earned through advising Commissions.

"Hello, Vera. Amazing how Cyril manages to get politicians to drop their work and join us, don't you think? And how are you doing, how is Raymond?"

Amanda has no interest in how *I* am doing, and she no doubt knows that Raymond has worked the last five weekends, including our twelfth anniversary. She knows this because she used to be Cyril's Executive Assistant, so many years ago that most people have forgotten the days his ex-wife appeared foaming and groaning at their offices. This was before Amanda's diamond clasps, and the Louis Vuitton purse in which she keeps a file on all that is seen and unseen, even the unseemly.

"I'm fine, Amanda, thank you—just arrived. What a lovely turnout indeed. You must be very pleased."

I have to admit I love watching the way a seasoned operator moves and stalks, and she is one.

"And Raymond, how *is* Raymond? Cyril tells me he's been working nonstop for such a long time. How *is* he?"

Meaning of course, how are *we*, how are we keeping our lives together? Her eyes seem intent on telling me that Raymond has needs, and I am the one to service those needs, that my purpose is keeping him succored, fit, and well. And what if I don't? Well, look at what happened to Cyril's ex-wife. As always, I decide to stroke rather than scratch.

"I'm so glad you asked. It's a comfort to know how much you and Cyril care—not just about Raymond, but everyone in the firm. He's fine and loving the project, just loving it."

"And the two of you?"

"Couldn't be happier. Makes the times we're together so...precious."

Just a word, two syllables—"Lovely"—and she is off, leaving me alone for seconds that are indeed precious. Lovely.

A drink tray approaches, and I wait until the largest white wine is facing me. The river-sounds of chatter rise and fall, and I wonder what secrets lie beneath the surface of these shallow



conversations. How many here have torrid lives and seek their solace in private acts, or live with a veneer of contentment, burying pasts and feelings? Do the prim act out their whims in wayward ways? Do the brash bullies later cower beneath batons of self-doubt?

There is Christopher Evans, taller than his suit, forever bending forward giving the impression that he listens and cares, which he doesn't. Darren Carter has a different problem—he simply cannot find a place for his spare hand and cups his glass in both as though holding a chalice for a priest. How many priests have held you, dear Darren? Georgina Tuft is one who just stays put, rooted to her island in the river, sexless and staid tonight as always, except when she has captured some sweaty worker in her apartment. And then the diminutive Mrs. Iris Parker, picking at her nails in the shade of her husband, she who hosts perfect dinner parties in her perfect house, and who dreads the hours afterwards—all those trinkets, coasters, and candles slightly out of place. She and Raymond have a lot in common.

In this room there must be torrents of guilt and sorrow from hidden lives and buried pasts. There must be those who want to curl away alone, or slide into corners to watch and wait. You would not know it to observe them, but they know it, they all know. Eddies draw their doubts down deep, while ripples of laughter dance in the shallows and, now and then, cascade over waterfalls of anxious mirth.

"Ah, there you are! Lots of people!" This is my husband—Raymond, with his uniform of dark suit, pale blue shirt with a white collar, and broad-striped tie. "Let's go, there's someone I want you to meet," and, leading me by the elbow, he places and introduces me within a circle, then abandons me.

"So you're Raymond's wife," someone says, looking past my shoulder. And it is reassuring that the script is being followed.

"Who *was* that man, the one who took you aside as we were about to leave?"

We are home, drinking large nightcaps while making preparations before our literary half-hour in bed. I have an ankle seductively perched on the other knee while sliding off a shoe, and Raymond is carefully placing his cufflinks in their box, the

clasps turned back at precisely ninety degrees to the squares of lapis.

"The best thing that happened tonight," he says. "That was Rob Williams of the EPA telling me they got the message. He's very influential, a key player in the emissions debate."

Raymond is a lobbyist. Raymond wasn't going to be a lobbyist, at least not when we met. In the early years of our marriage he still retained some semblance of a higher purpose, and I held on to that for several years, even when he withdrew his name from a secondment to Bosnia. I did protest. "We've *talked* about it," I remember saying. "I could apply for a local license to practice. It would be a fantastic experience"—a chance to escape, I could have added.

It was, of course, to no avail—his mind was made up; or rather, his mother's mind was made up. But it was several months later in a musty room filled with antiques that I felt the lid close, when I first heard the name of Brock & Associates and the pale endorsement in his father's words—"At least it's better than pushing rocks uphill in some failed state." Raymond had never discussed it with me.

That was when I knew I was an afterthought. It hurt—naturally—but who was I to think that I deserved more? There were even times when I considered I might have been wrong, that his chosen new career could reach the giddy heights of altruism. I know I was proud of some of his early projects—promoting a trade agreement, the advancement of worker standards in Asia—but there was always a lingering resentment, of what could have been. Perhaps this is why his secrecy is now almost welcome.

Tonight, at the mention of "emissions," I recall a rare conversation several months ago, with the sprinkling of words like "strategic plants" and, most oddly, "grandfathering." But I am too tired to ask further, and the bedside book is beckoning. Clothes folded away into a linen basket or, in my case, thrown to the corners of the closet, we nestle silently into our bed. Raymond's side is closest to the door, a mere eight steps to his bathroom. A bottle of hand sanitizer is always next to his bed, usually on top of a book he intends to read. My bedside table is stacked with novels, a foot manicure set, and a box of tissues rarely used for anything other than cleaning reading glasses.

As the clock moves to 10:30 pm, I receive a dry peck before he turns over to sleep.

I am unable to sleep. Waves of betrayal to Raymond have washed over me for most of the night. What I shared earlier, of my disappointment in him and my sense of hurt, should have never been allowed to surface. Here is what I should have said:

Raymond always looks after me and always has. He is usually forthcoming, and is a source of sanity and stability on days when I am caught up in the bizarreness of my work. There is rarely a thing out of place with Raymond. He is dependable and predictable, and he manages his days like ticked-off checklists. And when he feels passionate he is bold, and he never, ever falls asleep immediately afterwards.

He is tall with legs that reach above my waist, and he has a bald spot that he will not stop scratching. He showers and shaves daily, lies in when he can on weekends, plays golf (badly, despite the childhood coaching of his father), and doesn't force me to go to church with his parents when we visit them in Boston.

He has always been a good man at home. He loves cities and what he calls "the buzz of life," though he is never the one buzzing. He drinks single malt scotch to my Martinis—Highland Park or Springbank, on the edge of being peaty, just like his father.

We met almost sixteen years ago at an event organized for new students at Georgetown University. I had just escaped New Mexico, and I remember being bewildered by the wonder of Washington, DC. Raymond was halfway through a Masters in Public Policy and, compared to my fellow psychology students, was far more interesting in a worldly sort of way. He brought a sense of knowingness and never commented on the fact that I didn't drink. I used to love how he could drape his arm across my shoulder and down my side when we walked. I think that was what drew me to him, that with him I was safe.

I was originally convinced his name was Paul, even repeating the name after we were first introduced. But it was his nickname, "Pole." Some of his frat friends still call him this, but never at work. We started dating within a month of meeting. I used to joke with him that he only asked me out to impress his friends—I stopped when he stopped laughing. I had already turned down approaches from two of his classmates and was thought to be—to use his phrase—"a challenge," although, in truth, it was just my reaction to their come-ons. When one of his buddies, Simon, said Raymond "didn't have a hope in hell," I think that was enough for him. Raymond was polite, waited for the third date to kiss me, and we have lived together ever since he received his first small salary as a research assistant at Brookings.

He is a person of ambiguities, as though he were two people at the same time. At work he is refined, somewhat aloof, and always deferential to clients and to Cyril Brock, to whom he exudes loyalty. Outside of work, and particularly with his friends, he sometimes assumes a Boston accent and, over the years, has developed a liking for button-downs, chinos, and shoes with tassels. Unlike my Volkswagon Golf, his BMW is spotless inside and out—no stickers, nor even an indication of model type. The only objects visible are CDs—classical, of course, in case he should be forced to give a ride to a client. At home, when I am unable to stop him, he listens to vintage country-western music, the kind of songs where you know the tune and words ahead of time.

We have never really argued or, at least, never had—this is largely my doing, for Raymond is certainly not conflict averse. In the rare times I've allowed myself to study him professionally, I have seen through his macho persona to a child seeking the approval of a father incapable of giving love. I have marveled over his false confidence, at his constant need to put order into his life and into mine.

Overall, and this will never change, he is a mama's boy, as cosseted and smothered as any single child of

Protestant parents can be. But by a strange quirk it was something his mother said that gave Raymond the confidence, and permission, to propose to me, even though he knew his father disapproved. I had just started my doctoral program and we were once again visiting her in Boston when she said aloud, "How lovely, a doctor in the house!" I often wonder how many times her husband has reminded her of that small suggestion of approval.

Despite all this, we are as well matched as opposites can be. He loves to be touched, and I love touching him. Whenever we get away, whether to New York (in which he thrives) or to the Shenandoah Valley (which I adore), he is quickly able to relax and I can be in love with him again, just like the first time. He reads political history, while I devour mystery novels—we sometimes meet in the middle, at the opera. But I have to say that he is a book I would like to read faster. I would like to turn the page and find something that takes my breath away, that has a surprising turn and makes me ask questions of myself and of the world around me.

Yes, this is what I should have said.