

The Harlow Postcards

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

1

HOLD YOUR MAN

PALM SPRINGS

Harlow & Mitsouko

Harlow died on June 7, 1937, from uremia linked to kidney failure. When her lover, William Powell, visited her in the hospital, she mentioned her blurred vision. “You look fuzzy,” she said. A surprised Powell tried to joke when he lifted his hand and asked Harlow how many fingers she saw. The twenty-six-year-old actress could not see any. During the public viewing at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, her casket was open for only an hour. A white gardenia was placed in her hand along with a note, guessed to be from Powell—“Goodnight, my dearest darling.”

&

Last night I stepped from the sea dressed only in my favorite perfume. *Mitsouko*—a spice rose of animals rutting and wild apple musk. Luckily I couldn’t see when they

shaved my head, uremia blurring my vision, my breath excreting pee. A bombshell dying, and my visitors found the stench unbearable. *Mitsouko*. My perfume's spice rose still exists in this room; open the armoire and gaze into the mirror—there are places in the glass that appear like a field of winter dandelions, their white heads soon to scatter. Look at yourself. Pale, platinum hair that just woke up. The beginning snow is like that, too, each flake winging down, sticking. Early dusk. *Mitsouko*. Wild apple musk waits for the weight of something. I cannot open my mouth to speak since I am the uninvited. In our satin bed the man I love is tonguing another—a gauzy starlet clad (only) in the liquor's fox aroma and *Mitsouko*. A glass lifted. The sip and trickling. Fingers that can sew gashed flesh wandering through the room, touching: the Chinese lantern and brass base, the walls painted green and the woodwork shellacked. The night table holds porcelain teacups with wisps of willow trees. My gift. He smells of inhaled leaves, earthy brown, the reddish bark of the cypress. I still hunger after this older man full of ghosts and lovers. Like the girls in Gold Rush California fed opium until they craved it, I lived in a Hollywood lean-to, giving my body to those who bathed once a summer. *Mitsouko*. I rolled my eyes. I am a street with tree roots that can twist inside you if you walk over me. Long ago, the pampas grass mansions were built on the Avenue with the dirt hidden behind them. Spanish oaks shared space with low-roofed dwellings that music shuddered from, making the Indian paintbrushes quiver. Here in death I wear the dark mink coat.

2

*MICHIGAMME, MICHIGAN**CAMP CHA-TON-KA*

Sent to Camp Cha-ton-ka in Michigamme, Michigan, for the summer, sixteen-year-old Harlow met another sixteen-year-old camper from across the lake called "Thor" by his female admirers. Decades later, David Thornton Arnold spoke of his meeting-in-the-woods tryst with Harlow. "She pulled down her bathing suit and gave me the 'go-ahead.'" They were constantly on the lookout for someone coming. Both were virgins and when Thor saw Harlow's blood on the leaves, he thought he'd harmed her.



I lead him to moss dripping in turquoise over the mushrooms and stumps. Spiders spin meadows of webs, and in pale yellow they weave themselves over the wild rhubarb. The trees part, then crowd together. Thor tells me their names: buckeye, black locust, red oak, sugar maple, bass. He shines, made out of pale light. I am sure no one can see us—not the girls who sleep in the same tent with me, not the camp chaperones. Flies walk on his shoulder; my breath brushes them away. Thor offers me an apple he's filched from the branches. Our teeth shatter the apple's skin; we chomp the mealy white and spit the brown seeds at each other. I press the red of my lips into his. *Harlean! Harlean!* I hear my name called from far away. Like humming. I pull down my bathing suit, and we lie in the sun flickering. He kisses my breasts, moths shivering. Wait, show me what you know. *Harlean! Harlean!* My mother's voice rises in my mind. I've escaped the bedroom she tries to cage me in, where blue robins and maroon doves flit over the wallpaper, carrying golden hair to weave their nests, and where monarch butterflies smile with their eyespots, and pink-eared rabbits row their gondolas. A black-haired, flame-feathered doll waits with the perfume bottles. *Harlean!* He breaks into me and we ride, not knowing where we are going, galloping, telling each other to go faster.

3

IRON MAN*Harlow & The Stepfather*

When high-school-aged Harlow and her attractive mother were dining out, a tall, well-dressed man named Marino Bello asked to join them. He spoke with an Italian accent, carried a walking stick, wore spats, and waxed his facial hair. Considered an opportunist by many, he gallantly wooed Harlow's mother with hand kisses and love whispers. She found him irresistible and they soon married. The couple was said to be money-mad, and Harlow supported their spending for the rest of her life.



I study the couple sitting in front of me. My mother and the tall gigolo talk together, voices flickering like the candlelight. I hear wisps of their underwater whispering—the mussels in clam sauce rancid, not fresh, the linguini soggy. The red snapper drenched in olive oil. Love's not possible on an earth that has no appetite for duels. I turn away after inhaling the musk and lemons of his dark breath. He's a bad boyfriend for her to have—not the Valentino she imagines. He'll rape my salary, film by film. He'll grope my money, dollar by dollar. Already he has copies of our keys. Taken to the concierge moments ago. Soon, he'll jingle a key ring. Slide the diamond I'll buy onto her finger. Now he only orders a pastry and lifts a fork of *crème brûlée* to her lips, a voluptuous baked custard. "Eat, my beautiful Jean." His step light, almost a young girl's gait that doesn't fit with the rest of him. He'll one day assume I can afford to feed and clothe him better. De Pio silk, mid-calf socks, and cashmere jackets. You are the waxed mustache and white spats strolling across the dining room, the sullen man who dusts with his handkerchief the chair before he sits, whose trousers make slippery sounds on the cushion's leather. Like a letter opener slitting the rind of night, your half smile claims her. *She is mine to do with what I wish.* A funeral of lilies has crossed our path, bagpipers marching behind the hearse.

4

SATURDAY NIGHT KID***Extra Girl Harlow Gets Her First Close-Up***

Harlow began her acting career on a dare and as an "extra girl." Selected for a close-up in a Laurel and Hardy film, she discovered, to her amusement, the shot would not be of her face but her legs. Her favorite photographer later commented that the camera was in love with Harlow, and their relationship reduced him to the role of a voyeur.



The intoxicated rain and heat became bearable only from a barstool where portraits of stars wandered. I filmed all of them. As soon as they opened their mouths, their divinity withered. Harlow was different—intelligent, sensitive. Her eyes would go soft as a crawfish, and the lens squeezed her juices into its mouth. When we played chess between takes, her head whirled as if some pond scum had been stirred. I centered her face for the close-up. A pre-Raphaelite goddess. Dante Rossetti married his Muse—an artist's model who once lay in the water while she was painted dead. Ophelia floating among the weeds. "I'm good," Harlow said, after hours in makeup and wardrobe. Her mother was a blue fish. Such fish are vicious and eat everything in their path. Her mother drove her to drink.



At home she boozed by the aquarium and watched glittering things. It was so much nicer lying in long strands of daydreams, mouth open, chin raised. A marbled veil-tail actress drifted. Then ghost angels, silent film stars with long fins, glided past. The oxygen must have been dying in the water. More extras floated on their sides. Black-and-white checkerboards. A few glassfish still swam and had to keep swimming. The fish-girls were sad, sluggish bits of light. Harlow slept belly first on the polar bear rug, the carnivore's paw in her cheek. Huge mango hummingbirds with red torsos fitted on her shoulder. Tiny hummingbirds like bees beat their wings hard. The camera's eye was her lover, and it ravished her.

5

HELL'S ANGEL***Harlow on Promotion Tour***

Howard Hughes's 1930s movie Hell's Angels was Harlow's first major film and included a ballroom scene shot in color. Although color photography was in its infancy, and actors often proceeded at their own risk, Hughes wanted Harlow's assets highlighted—her

skin, her platinum hair, and her blue eyes. Each shoot could last up to sixteen hours under klieg lights, and close-ups were hazardous. After the film's release, Harlow embarked on a Hell's Angels promotional tour. Her eyes had been irreparably injured, and bright sunlight caused the actress intense pain.



It's white outside the train—white fields, white grass, and more white falling from the sky. I strain to see through ice that creeps along the window and snuggle deeper into my furs. Snow makes the trees grow antlers like white deer are hiding in them. Rabbits, too, the thin brown ones now fat and white. From city to city, I'm a Hell's Angel, who walks on stage in negligees, the halls warmed only by one-liners and the ticket holders' blurred faces. I am seventeen and ice my nipples before bending over to show my cleavage. Afterward, my gang heads to the speakeasy's cushioned red booths moored by tiers of liquor bottles. Around town are farms, brittle-looking as if the wind could gnaw them apart. Windows broken out, shadows crossing the gray shingled roofs without hair, and eyes having no shape. I glance at myself in the yellowed, wavy mirrors. My lips look scratched, and the spaces I've come through spook my face. The klieg lights have scorched my corneas as if whoever clocked me had done it once, then again and again. I'm gassed on gin. There are white deer running in my head that's as silly as the pink fizz floating its maraschino cherry. Drink up. I can't see. I am Jean Harlow, a half-blind paradise.

6

SARATOGA

Harlow & The River

Soon after being admitted to Good Samaritan Hospital with nephritic poisoning, Harlow, her face already twice its size, was placed in an oxygen tent. Her mother and her maid, Blanche Williams, stayed with her throughout the agonizing night. Her head

had been shaved, and by dawn, when her skull began to swell, her aunt went in and clutched Harlow's hand. "She said, 'I love you,' and in all that horrible suffering winked at me." A few hours later, she lost consciousness and died at 11:38 a.m.



Dust chokes red roads and I rise and fall with its breathing. Far away, someone says my brain is swelling. They'll drill holes in my head for the gray matter to escape. *Fight, Baby, fight. Your mother loves you; your mother needs you.* My father, whom I've hardly seen since I was a little girl, is here, isn't he? Daddy? I smell the river's sweet saliva. The glowing water tries to reach me. *Harlean*, he says. *I'm here.* Water cool and pale as cucumbers, water flowing over the algae-caked rock that tries to take away the pain. We're going fishing, father and daughter. I won't let Mother send him away. How handsome he is—his eyes, his close-cropped black curls. Minnows swim in our bucket, pink, aqua, white. Who keeps yammering? *Baby, you're not fighting. You have to fight. Your mother is right here. Can you see me, Baby? You can't leave me.* The river flows in an emerald current between white tablet rocks. Waterfalls feed secluded pools. Daddy, I'm big now. My head's a fat porcelain doll, bald except for a few strawberry curls. Maybe this baby isn't normal. Daddy, here I am. The water's swift-moving but not deep. There are footsteps in the green slime. *Where are you going, Baby? You can't leave your mother.* Holding hands, we wade into the water that feels as green as it looks. Fish shiver past, bits of living light. Shooting stars. I know where we are, Daddy.

Bibliography

Bret, David. *Jean Harlow: Tarnished Angel* (2009)

Marx, Samuel and Joyce Vanderveen. *Deadly Illusions: Jean Harlow and the Murder of Paul Bern* (1990)

Shulman, Irving. *Harlow: An Intimate Biography* (1992)

Stenn, David. *Bombshell: The Life and Death of Jean Harlow* (2000)

