

# Leslie Bazzett

## Studies in Composition

THE CHAPEL BELLS HAD BEGUN, CALLING THE BOYS TO DINNER. FROM the kitchen veranda Davis watched them shambling through late-summer heat, khaki shorts slung low, loafers mashed at the heels, laughing or occasionally tossing overgrown bangs to the side. In a few minutes the day seemed to have swollen. There was a heavy smell of frying. In the distance the rolling pastures greened and damped, grown dark as moss. The farthest was dotted with horses—the boarding school a working farm also, these hundred years since its founding. Unseen was a river; a dappled wood where on weekends the boys were allowed to hunt, its leafy harbor suggesting other things to Davis. He was an imaginative boy. Handsome and mildly disdainful. When headmaster Givens passed, Davis merely nodded, refraining from the “sir” other boys would have offered.

“Waiter?” commented Beaufort brushing past him, more a statement than a question.

“First time this year.” He had a muted Boston accent that, like his manners, distinguished him from his peers. He had drawn the job from a hat containing the names in his advisory group: Dunning, Fielder, Dex, Becket and Cooper, whom you always thought of in a single breath, and little Sam McCabe.

Davis checked his watch. His gaze swept the Blue Ridge mountains. Then he saw her, shuffling over the loose gravel road that led from her house. There was a ghostly quality to her, swaying at her husband’s side, the low sunlight blurring the outline of her limbs and hair. Lola strolled behind, a slightly taller echo of her mother. Jackson ran ahead, arms circling like windmills, his six-year-old body undimmed by the heat.

Davis stood for a moment, studying the composition they made. It was typical of the way he approached the world—attuned to the interplay of light and shadow, the eloquence of certain images. In his spare time he liked to take photographs.

The first course sat on round metal trays under plastic wrap, the advisers’ names taped on top. Davis took a white coat, fresh from the laundry, and went to stand in the doorway with the others until the headmaster’s greeting and the chaplain’s prayer had finished. Then the wooden stands were carried out, and the trays.

“Aspic, Ma’am?” It was how you addressed the wives at table—the dish part of the anachronism of the place also, its affectation.

“Is that what it is?” Mrs. Hilliard laughed. She had a brazen laugh. Her eyes

were heavily made up, the wrinkles around them deepening now. “My God, who knew?”

“Claudelle.” At the other end of the table Hilliard inclined his head in mild reproach. He was the sort of man you saw running at dawn through the fields. When it was his duty to check on the boys at night, he came with a blue blazer over his pajamas.

“Ted, I’m only saying!” She waved her hand. Reaching forward to take a dish from the metal tray, Davis caught the smell of her perfume and, beneath that, the tart saltiness of her skin. She was only sexy in certain moments, he decided. Like a stone glinting underwater, plain once you’d gotten it home.

“Oh God, Davis.” She caught up the sleeve of his white jacket. Beside her Lola made a disgusted expression, claspng her hand over her mouth.

“Ma’am?”

“It’s obscene; don’t you see what someone’s done?”

An opening had been made down the center of the aspic, as though a finger had been dragged through it. Or else—the idea struck him suddenly—a tongue.

“Seriously, what does this look like to you boys?” She tilted it so they could all see. “*This slit.*”

A cry went up, as from a chorus, heads thrust forward. Jackson was half-leaping from his chair, “Where, what is it, Dad?” Hilliard mumbling as if to no one, “You really should have checked, Davis.” With a jerk Lola pushed back her chair. Her face had gone crimson. The week before they had celebrated her sixteenth birthday with a cake with lemon yellow frosting.

Davis watched her leave. He watched the pale fringe of her hair lift and fall over her narrow shoulder blades, a feeling of hollowness washing through him and away.

*You almost feel sorry for her.*

It was McCabe who had confessed to that. They were having their customary after-dinner smoke on the hill behind the row of cherry trees. Lola wasn’t even Hilliard’s, Dex said, and the boys began to argue about all they’d variously heard. Claudelle was from New York. She was from the West Coast, some foreign country, an orphan, an alcoholic, a former actress. She had been married already three times. Only Davis remained quiet. He wasn’t a smoker. He sat slightly apart, still except for one hand mindlessly ripping blades of grass. A well-known story was being repeated. A summer party she gave where everyone ran drunk and naked to the river. Even old Moubray had done it, *his pecker shrunk to a nub.*

“Like you were there, Fielder.”

“He could have been,” Becket retorted. “Think of Stallings.” Stallings was the third-former who had abruptly withdrawn midterm, two years before. No one knew for sure what had transpired, the extent of it. For the remainder of the term Mrs. Hilliard hadn’t eaten in the dining hall—banned by Givens, it was said, because the boy’s parents were threatening legal action.

“But what did she have to do with it?”

“McCabe, you can’t be serious. Why do you think Givens can’t stand her?”

“Because he wants to fuck her like everyone else.” Davis delivered the line as if closing a book they’d all been reading, startling them into silence.

Finally Becket spoke. “Hilliard’s a fool.”

“She’s made a cuckold of him,” McCabe sighed, having heard the phrase in English, and they all erupted into laughter, Dunning for some reason crowing like a rooster. *Probably mistaking cuckold for a bird*, Davis grimly thought.

But it was their lack of inquisitiveness that bothered him the most. None of them had even wondered who tongued the aspic, or why. He thought of telling her this when next they were alone. He thought of her laughing as she had in the dining hall, her wrinkles deepening around her eyes, her face turned sideways into the pillow.

It was then it struck him. The idea of it being a tongue had come from her. As if, in the brief moment when her eyes met his, her empty ring finger drawing back a lock of hair, she had shared that secret with him.

On the heels of one realization came the next. The whole scene was hers. She had tampered with the food herself. *The bitch*.



He had come to her twice, each time a Wednesday. Wednesdays, like Saturdays, were half days of instruction. In the afternoon Ted coached the golf team. Her children were not yet finished with school in town. *Davis, why don't you stop by the house sometime*, she had casually said one lunch. *I could show you that book of photographs?* It had been the topic of conversation, the voyeurism of photojournalism, Davis insisting that truth was what mattered.

The Wednesday after the aspic incident she lingered in bed, half hearing the tinkling of spoons touching bowls and drawers being opened, her husband calling to the children that their ride would soon be here. Later she put music on. She opened a bottle of wine. She watched the dog squat beside the gnarled hickory tree, his lame leg held before him stiff as a crutch. She had found him on the side of the road during the period of her ban from campus. He was ugly but she admired his character, the way he would come thumping onto the bed once Ted had left for class. He had a cat’s disregard. Sometimes he would disappear for days at a time.

“You don’t even know where it’s been,” Ted had protested the night she brought him home. The dog was licking Claudelle’s neck, beside her in their bed. “How could you let that thing kiss you?”

She leveled her gaze at Ted. “Apparently I’ll kiss anything.”

Not that it had always been this way. On the day of their wedding at the Hilliards’ summer house outside Annapolis, she had dazzled in shades of off-white: a beautifully tailored skirt such as Grace Kelly might have worn, a filmy cream-colored blouse through which you could see, like animals taking shape out of clouds, the outline of her breasts. Guests milled over the lawn that rolled gently toward the Chesapeake. All his. She had no one—only Lola, seven then, the flower girl. When the band struck up “Places I Remember,” she began to

dance alone, smiling her private smile at Ted as Lola circled her hem. Near the dock, his hand resting on the wheelchair that held his father, Ted admired her youthful abandon, his daring in having chosen her.

“Look at him,” she kept crying out to no one. “He’s everything I’ve never had!”

He had a self-effacing manner that only later revealed itself to be rigidity. “I’m a simple man,” he used to say. “Just give me my morning run and a decent set of golf clubs.”

They had begun married life in a brownstone near Dupont Circle. *In town*, as the Hilliards called it. Mornings, Ted would see her returning through the front windows carrying bags of pastries and fruit, good cheese. The early sunlight on her cheeks, her tanned shoulders swaying, careless and unhurried. She had begun calling herself Dell. She had had her tattoo removed. At night there were drinks, acts he confessed he’d only ever dreamed of.

“Anything seems possible with you,” he told her. They were lying in bed. This was December, a few years after the wedding, Jackson still a baby. “It’s why I’ve decided. I’m going to change my life. I’m returning to my first love.”

“You what?” She had scarcely been listening. She was staggered. No one had ever left her for someone else. She almost could have laughed.

After several beats, he began to explain. There was an opening at his old boarding school. He had applied on a whim. He was going to teach history. “Books; the classroom, Dell.”

“But you’ve been made partner,” she foolishly said. Already her astonishment was giving way to something more familiar. It was nothing to do with careers; instinctively she knew that. It was not history he loved, but being a boy.

The baby had begun to fuss, asleep in his car seat in the living room. Outside the snow was pouring down, the city mute. For some inexplicable reason, she was thinking of Lola’s father. He was going to make films. He spoke of this the night they met, and all the places they would go. Brussels and Amsterdam; Munich, where Fassbinder had died—surely she’d heard of him? *Yes*, she unthinkingly answered, bending to take another line of cocaine. She was nineteen; he was twenty-six—the youngest man she’d ever been with. So what if it never came to anything? She understood him. He was beautiful, as lithe as a dancer.

Ted had stood to get the baby. In the doorway he paused, waiting for her to say something. She stared at the broad back covered in hair already turning silver. He had once seemed to her so elegant, in his solidity and wealth.

It was nearly three o’clock when she surfaced from these recollections. She was a little drunk. Davis would not be coming. Her children would be home soon.

In the kitchen she found a fresh pack of cigarettes. Perhaps she wouldn’t quit after all, she told the dog. He followed her in his halting way onto the patio, cocking his head when she tapped the pack against the table as if to decipher meaning from the incidental rhythm.

“Fuck it,” she decided, the words issuing in a wash of thick gray smoke.

But she felt herself falling, lonely as a stone.

For two weeks Davis did not appear. Perhaps he wouldn't again, she couldn't guess. She had stopped going every day to the dining hall. Nights arrived more swiftly now. A different smell in the air, loamy and undone. She slept poorly, waking day after day to a house whose inhabitants had already dispersed. The thin silence gave her the sense of rooms that have been abandoned. On Saturday not even the dog was beside her. Dishes sat still as statues. A bird fluttered against the kitchen window, affronted by its reflection.

She carried a glass of wine into Jackson's room, cheered by the sight of his little clothes strewn about. His shoes and miniature skateboards, his figurines. On a wooden crate near the window sat a small record player and a single record. They were the only artifacts from her childhood. Her father had given them to her. He had placed them inside a cardboard house he made, in the middle of an empty living room she imagined overgrown with pine trees. Four or five she must have been. It was not long after that that her mother had left, the marriage over.

Absently she had begun to arrange Jackson's toy figurines on his bedside table, battling around his fish tank, one dangling precariously from its edge, gun in hand. Others she hid within the folds of his covers forging an ambush. A caped figure hung suspended from the chain of his ceiling fan. She imagined his delight in discovering them over time, only gradually comprehending the scene's scope. She could see the pleasure come into his face, and she thought then that she could still be something different with him. Worthy. She was scanning the floor for props. His window was open onto the garden, letting in a smell of fern leaves and earth. Smiling, glancing to the trees beyond, she saw him. Davis, half running on the lawn toward her. He carried something over his shoulder. She couldn't make it out. A present, she fleetingly thought.

He had finished her glass of wine, without a word pushed her roughly against the wall. *Not here*, she told him, laughing and sliding away down the hall. It was a camera he had been carrying. She could hear him shooting as she walked away, like the sharp cluck of gossip at her back. "Stay hungry," she teased over her shoulder. When he didn't answer, "I'm only getting dressed."

In the bedroom she spoke quickly, strangely nervous. They would go into the woods, find a quiet spot. She would do whatever he wanted. She herself wanted only to return to Jackson's room, to the figurines—but of course she held this back.

"Ready for your shot?" she laughed, pulling off the shirt she had slept in.

In the dull afternoon light her breasts seemed insignificant, smaller than he remembered, almost withered. She had become thinner these last two weeks. Somehow it angered him. He lowered his camera. For a moment their eyes met. He had a murderous look, she thought. *All right, go ahead then*, she silently told him. *Let's see what you can do.*

The day was warm and without wind. The grass made a crunching sound beneath their feet. They had walked across the upper field and were nearly across the lower, where two horses had been let out to graze. Davis felt a peculiar tension in him. His heart was beating uncomfortably. As they approached the woods he anticipated the shade, like the moment before a glass of cool water touches your lips. She was swaying her hips self-consciously and something—the sense of excitement or fear or revulsion—made him turn. With a start he saw they were not alone. Lola was running toward them, her hair blown back, her face opened with eagerness.

“I saw you from the house,” she breathlessly explained—the “you” somehow singular, meant for Davis. She had been going to read outside, in the shade of the tree. The image struck Davis and Claudelle both in the same way, imparted an almost impossible innocence. *A book under a tree*. It was as though they had crossed into a different land. Lola had bent over, holding the hem of her shorts in two fists. For moments they all listened to the sharp intakes of breath.

Straightening, “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“Your mom was just showing me the horses.”

“What for?”

“She knows a lot about them.”

“Mom?” She laughed, twisting her ponytail around her finger. “Seriously, what are you doing?”

Davis smiled, reaching slightly forward as if to take Lola’s hand but not taking it. “Do you really care?”

She blushed and looked at the ground. Even before now he had perceived her feelings. They had been there when she left the dining hall, and when she looked at him—only for a second—before blowing out the candles on her cake.

Claudelle could not speak. In her daughter’s face were traces of the baby she had once held at her breast. Her cheeks, her pursed lips and staring eyes. The sight seemed to take everything from her at once. Quietly she said, “I know about horses.” She read disbelief in Lola’s eyes, something of her own ridiculousness. A middle-aged woman; nobody. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” she insisted.

“Like your secret past as a cowgirl?”

“I can ride a fucking horse, okay?”

They drew quiet then, embarrassed for her she supposed. Turning her back, Claudelle began to walk toward the horse. She had an intuition that Davis and Lola were touching—perhaps it was only the sides of their hands. The hopefulness of the imagined gesture filled her with sorrow. Not her exclusion from it. The knowledge that there was no great fulfillment to come. She wanted to warn her daughter, to scream. Instead she kept her eyes on the horse.

She had ridden only once, in Mexico. She must have been fourteen, she guessed, for she was living with her uncle then. *Gentle horse*, the man had reassured her. *Lenta, lenta, lenta*. But when they reached a span of empty beach the horse took off at a gallop, the wind rushing her, filling her lungs in terror before her body felt what it needed to do.

“Easy, boy,” she said now, half-stepping closer. “Easy.” The horse waited, still. The dainty quiver of his lips; her face, held in the glassy blackness of his eye. *I’m going to ride you*, she told him without speaking. He flung his tail and stamped. Two flies lifted. A sinew of muscle shivered the length of his shank. *I’ve squandered everything*.

She had begun to imagine a different life. Rides through misty dawns. Apples stuffed deep in coat pockets. Something inviolate and belonging only to her. When she reached toward him he nodded, his great head bobbing in solid motion, lifting and dropping on its hinge. His nose trembled into her palm. Her thoughts pooled there also, mingling with his damp breath; dispersed into cool vacancy. *Now*, she thought. In a daze she had grasped his mane and was struggling to pull herself aloft.

“Oh my God.” Lola’s voice was shrill, even scornful. “Ma, what are you doing?”

At the sound of her voice, Claudelle’s heel digging into his back, the horse startled. She felt the change, as though a cord were tightening along the length of his back. She had managed to swing half her body over him. She heard the pound of his hooves, three, four times. It was as though he had shot ahead of her. She felt herself momentarily suspended, like a cartoon of someone who has run out of ground. But then he stopped short and she sailed over his head, into the hot nothingness. She must have been somersaulting in air. Her bearings were gone. The day had turned strange. *A storm is coming*, she calmly thought.



At first she hadn’t felt much. Davis and Lola had run up and she told them to get the minivan; the keys were in her beige purse on the counter. If not for their expressions, the way they held their heads tilted back as if forced to smell something gone bad, she would not have been alarmed. The pain did not fully arrive until they lifted her into the car, managing the task slowly, her bones loose in her, peculiar.

“Drive slowly,” she called again, her voice nearly unrecognizable. “*Christ!*” She was laid out in the back seat, Lola in the front beside Davis. Out the window hung a quilt of thick green leaves, the southern overabundance she had never gotten used to. Was that the rumbling of thunder? “How close are we?” she demanded. It seemed a monumental effort to speak; she wondered if she had even managed to. Her mind worked frantically above the pain, crafting her story, as she always had done. It was like trying to fashion truth from a hallucination. *Lower me into the garden*, she finally told them.

Lola immediately protested: They should take her to a hospital; later they could pretend that they had found her that way, fallen into the garden. Claudelle shook her head. It was too difficult to explain, all the lies, things said and done. She had drunk several glasses of wine. That would be found out too.

Lola and Davis were whispering conspiratorially. *Hospital*, she heard, then

Davis, slightly louder, saying, “We’d have to pass the gate keeper.”

“For Christ’s sake, Lola, please, fuck, just do what I tell you!”

Opening her eyes, she saw the hickory tree and thought of Jackson climbing it, his limbs parting around a low branch.

“Lola, are Jackson or Daddy Ted home?”

“How should I know?”

“Drive around to the front,” she croaked. “If you see them—”

No one was there. Few words were spoken now. Everything had been explained. She would say she had stumbled on the front step and fallen into the garden, about a three-foot drop. An awkward fall. Ted would find her there when he came back from golf.

In the moment before they lifted her she was thinking, *yes, it will work*. And the ferns would be soft, the ground carpeted in myrtle. On top of everything she was simply unbelievably tired. She was thirty-seven years old. She might have been a hundred. She had already filled a lifetime. *On three*, Davis was saying in an undertone, as if hefting a bag of cement, the desire to be done with her written plainly on his face. When they lifted her, a blast of pain like nothing she had ever felt shot through her. *Motherfucker*, she called out.

Davis’s hands flinched as though he would drop her. “There’s no need to talk like that,” he muttered.

She looked at him, summoning the effort to focus her eyes, and saw disdain in his.

“It’s a filthy word,” he said.



Perhaps forty minutes had passed. The last words had been Lola’s. *You’re sure, Ma?* Her voice had broken on the phrase, as if she would begin to cry at last—perhaps it was only shame, Claudelle told herself. *Yes, go, leave me; you don’t know anything about this, either of you.* She had marked the sound of their footsteps on the gravel. Calm at first, and then sharp as they began to run. Were they holding hands? She saw them this way, heard them turn into the field of tall grass. Then a great span of silence. *It won’t be long*, she told herself. Gripped by pain, she watched the storm gather and then undo. Incrementally the sky burnt clean. Birds called and were answered. At one point she began to cry, stupidly, furious with herself.

It must have been near four o’clock when she heard Jackson skipping on the gravel road. He was talking urgently to himself, composing lines for his figurines, an intermingled monologue of superheroes and villains. His consonants sparked out in fitful breaths. She was staring immobile at the sky, the fringe of treetops. She imagined his happy gallop. His arm making a circular motion at his side, as though it were a hoop or some other toy out of another time.

He was on the top step before he saw the tangle of hair. Fear froze him in that gesture of reaching for the door, first because he didn’t recognize it; after,



because he did. Her body was different. He stood examining her strangeness, wrong in some broader way he could not place.

“Son?”

“Mom, is that you?”

“Jackson?”

“What are you doing?” Stepping closer, bending. Seeing his face she felt the sharp press of tears.

“Did you get hurt?”

“No,” she lied. She didn’t know why, it was beyond a desire to protect him. Out of habit, she supposed. She could see immediately it was a mistake. In an instant his face seemed to harden against her.

“You’re drunk,” he said.

No, she wanted to protest.

He was scolding her, Daddy would be angry; she was stupid; she was ruining everything.

Never in his life had he spoken to her in this way. She could see only his forehead and the tips of his backlit hair, the residue of a boy, his ghost. *Speak*, she commanded herself. Her lips parted dryly. She managed only to jerk her arm. It rose clumsily, like a fish breaking the water, before settling back into its sea of ferns.

“Get up!” He was shouting at her. She heard the fear beneath his anger. Then, nothing.

A moment later she heard the screen door slam. She heard the insects’ sounds, and the wind bending the tall grass. She blinked her eyes against the gaping indifference of the sky above her. Years, whole lifetimes were falling away. The Chapel bells were tolling the half-hour. Her body was trembling, she realized. It was shaking violently. Inside the house that would never be hers her son was discovering the scene she had made. In stabbing gestures he was sweeping it away. She saw the heave of his shoulders as he cried; the few figures still undiscovered, the caped hero twisting at the end of his chain.

Pain racked her, down through her legs. Her toes were numb. She could not stop herself from shivering. Suddenly she was afraid of the insects teeming beneath her. The dark harbor of the earth, all the things that can’t be known. Her fingers clutched themselves. She could not will them apart. *How much longer?* She begged for the sun to set, for nighttime, for anything.

She heard the scratching of the needle first.

Almost as quietly the violins began. Then, like water spilling into water, the viola and cello. For a time there was only this. A small tributary of sound that she ran beside, not trusting her own memory, until at last she heard it again. The clarinet. It was the clarinet she had always longed for. Its mellow tone beckoned, in and out of shadow, farther and farther. Her body parted the leaves. She had begun to cry. She no longer minded. *The clarinet is the loveliest part, Jackson. Song of deep woods; ode to being lost.*

But soon, she knew, she would be found.