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Mystery in Spiderville

John Hartley Williams

About the Author

John Hartley Williams is the author of seven collections of poetry, most recently *Spending Time with Walter* (2001). He teaches English at the Free University of Berlin, where he has been since 1976.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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MYSTERY IN SPIDERVILLE

A Romance

John Hartley Williams


V I N T A G E

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He's a monster born in the brothel, who stands eternally on a pedestal. Although he's alive, he's nevertheless part of the museum. He's not ugly. His face is even attractive, very dark, oriental in complexion. There's a good deal of pink and green in him. He squats, but in a bizarre, twisted pose. Wound several times around him, like a big snake, is something of a blackish hue. I ask him what it is. He tells me it's a huge appendix that comes out of his head, rubbery and elastic and so long, so very long, that if he coiled it on top of his head like a pigtail it would be much too heavy and absolutely impossible to carry - so he has to wind it round his limbs, which actually gives a better effect. I converse for quite a while with this monster. He shares his anxieties and sorrows with me. For several years now, he's been obliged to present himself in this room, on this pedestal, to the public's curious gaze. But his main problem is at dinner time. As a living creature, he's obliged to eat with the whores of the place, tottering along with his rubber appendage to the dining-room, where he has to keep it round him, or place it like a spool of rope on a chair, taking care not to let it drag on the ground in case it pulls him over backwards. In addition to this he's short and squat, yet he has to eat beside a tall, well-built tart. He tells me the whole story, what's more, without bitterness. I don't dare to touch him, but I find him interesting.

Charles Baudelaire
Lettre à Charles Asselineau
[Paris] Jeudi 13 mars 1856
Tr. JHW

What a man has to do, he has to
meet his mother in hell

Charles Olson, 'O'Ryan 6'

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THE BED

You make it, you lie on it. I do, anyway. I'm in the seventh-floor dwelling of a run-down apartment building. There are pigeons on the flaking sill outside. The bedroom has four walls, four papery sourcloth, cheesepink walls. Stars everywhere, to remind me of why I'm here. Also a used condom under the bed. Above me, the ceiling spreads its carpet of dull gold. There's also, naturally, a door.

I lie on the bed. I'm waiting for what I do not want to happen to happen. For the door to open. Through a thin wall, I can hear voices, brilliant with communication, with laughter and murder. I'm certain it's Spider, exchanging his essence with whoever might be foolish enough to believe him.

Truth is a holy flame.

I'm aware of it burning next door. I've no intention of getting too close.

Spider is enjoying himself. He's exploring the nature of those around him, slipping the hooks and eyes of people's minds, curious to see what might fall out. The solution to the puzzle of my existence, he thinks, is to be found in an object discarded by someone who has undressed much too hurriedly, an earring, a clip or a brooch.

Can you imagine him bending down to examine a minute yet precisely coiled artefact observed upon the carpet?

I am a hairpin.

Naked as I am, I'm certainly no sight for the men in hats and the women in raincoats who stumble in from the street, down the corridor outside, to recapitulate finally what love has done to them under the silent and white umbrella of darkness.

I try to imagine her as she was, touching my eyes with her tongue. Her hair was slightly foetid, like leaves. She pinned

it back, casually, at the brow. No, I am not now, nor at any other time, being caressed. Nor do I hope for or have any presentiment that would lead to small touches of her mouth to mine. My emptiness is full as the room.

Spider! Spider! Hold on to the truth!

ROOM SERVICE

The pain of this location (Alarum Heights) jabs my shoulder like a nerve.

Is it something to be breathed over by cigarette-stained men in the quiet puzzled investigation room of judgement day?

I try to pull the bedclothes over me. I was always trying to do that, but they merely slide away from me, as if the most important thing in the world were the acute recovery of my nakedness.

Spider, I know, is not sleeping.

He has that old jacket for comfort, that impregnated jacket, made of the thread of old woman's hair, of the cloth from a soldier's combat clothes, of a thick weave, its collar patchworked with fur, a jacket steeped in tiredness - the tiredness that comes from years, yes, years of the old task: self-preservation.

Spider's fists are entombed in its pockets.

I should wear to bed what I wear in the world, but I don't. As the light fades, I disguise myself. I change my teeth, my skin, my dreams, my soul, anything. My pyjamas pulse with chameleon colours. I change myself over and over in bright complicity with the darkness until the darkness wins and I sink into the nothingness of sleep.

Spider never sleeps, yet when he considers the contents of his wardrobe he does so with heavy eyes. His wardrobe is a museum of sleep, and Spider is its curator. He reaches in and selects one dreamless garment after another. He wears only what's old, what gets older as he wears it, never throwing things away, the older the user, the user the better, with a slight smile on his face.

He's wider awake than time itself.

Meanwhile, the throbbing structure of this building remains unaltered, in cold altercation with the sky, my unmoving position, here, on this bed . . .