

## Two Poems from *Masquerade* Carolyn Wright

*from Stress / Disorder*

### I. 1040

I bring you a jelly glass of white wine  
as you lean into the desk lamp's  
saffron pool of light, reworking the last stanza

about an ambush near Phu Bai.

Mid-April and your W-2 forms  
sit untouched on the kitchen sideboard

next to the cassette deck playing

Miles's *Black and Blue*.

You're paying memory's dues. Debits,

credits. Your silence an undeclared war

full of buried weapons, the gunshot

wound you never name, my fear

and fascination. No one is exempt.

I've double-checked my own columns of figures,

schedules I've finally earned enough

to admit to. I've signed and dated  
my return, licked the bulky envelope,  
paid my damages to Uncle Sam.

Would you walk me through these trigger-  
happy streets to the Bywater Station  
to make the midnight deadline?

The back of your raised hand  
tells me *Yes, honey, just let me*  
*get these lines.* I sip my wine,

watch your dark head  
bent in that arc of concentration  
I love: humming slightly, scattling

the new phrases as they come. Pen  
stop-starting in sweet brainfired  
syncopation on the page.

"What about your return," I ask  
for the third time. You half-turn,  
glare at me, the lamp's molten light

doing a slow glide across  
your forehead: *Don't need no IRS*  
*to know my whereabouts!*

Your voice Deep South under duress,  
stress-dialect. "They already do,"  
I say. "Name, address, taxpayer ID #.

Right here on these labels." But you're back  
inside a bamboo blind, trail of smoke  
between paddy fields. Memories

we've told each other that itemize  
our fears: delayed reactions'  
anodyne that almost could have healed us.

Your third-degree dreams gagged  
and bound to a broken stool,  
the interrogator's pistol pressed against

your temple, her voice in your ear

a bullet slipping in its chamber.

You stand with the others against

barbed wire, between curfew sirens

and blood money whispering

*Shoot to Kill.* You go on wrestling

your shadows. What might change

the bottom line between lovers? Who else

would finish your taxes for you?

## What If?

The two white cops hadn't erupted into  
our front room, empty of everything  
but stepladder, carpenter's level, and the echo  
of a blow? If they hadn't vice-  
gripped you by your lapidary  
arms, your face gray as slate  
and drained of everything but itself?

What if paint scrapers and sander parts  
hadn't bulged from pockets of your coveralls,  
wood shavings hadn't curled like blond  
indictments in your uncombed hair,  
the fruit of sweat and troubled  
equity, love's undocumented loans?

If I hadn't stood there, hackles  
high in shocked homage to the Beast  
Within, and when the cops barked  
*Whadda we do with him*  
*lady?*, what if my anger didn't break  
the trance, and I hadn't stumbled  
upon my own slow diastolic

measure, a single melodic line  
searching itself out in darkness  
the way lovers once echo-located each  
other? If I hadn't startled  
myself back into the room?  
If I'd answered, *Take*  
*him away.*

What if they'd read you  
your Miranda rights, then shackled  
ankles and wrists shrunken in denim  
cuffs, and hauled you in  
like a flounder at the telltale end  
of its camouflage? Run brain scans  
in the squad car, and fingered  
your wallet flat for jailbait  
while I signed their bad actors'  
prompt book with your real name?

What if the metal detectors  
had flashed red as they hustled  
you past lockdown, and Storyville  
had morphed to Angola's anteroom  
while I sweet-talked the mortgage lender  
into buying back the house? Little  
me: born out of reach of the 'Nam  
and its National Draft, my brothers

burning their high-stakes numbers.  
Little me—those shotgun rooms  
in the Crescent City's mephitic spring  
my only Combat Zone  
and Finisterre. Little me,  
mistress of no debility  
but my own. *You're on your own,*  
*kid,* said the paternal echoes in my head  
when I stepped across the color line.

Could I have taken matters into  
someone else's hands? Crawled back  
from the slammer where  
I'd absented you, to pick up  
my glasses slapped across the floor

or *cry me a river* in full view

of the guard towers?

What if I'd settled

your affairs, sealed my own fate

with hell's power of attorney? If

I'd finally sprung you

and we'd faced each other

across the bedroom's bruise-blue

swelter, if I'd held out my hands

with their broken nails, my lucky numbers

extinguished in your eyes?



Then what of your scot-  
free metamorphoses, bright  
moments in the third-degree  
klieg lights? Thanks to me  
your rap sheet in the sweet thereafter  
shorter than a bebop *koan*,  
all charges against you  
zeroed out.

*What if?* That prestidigitator's  
second grasp, the year 2000's non-compliant  
heart running its computer simulations.  
Where we would be now. Futility's  
pushups, absences we talk to  
in the mirrors? Or adversaries  
in each other's arms, both of us  
collecting life sentences like paychecks  
on the run?

**Carolyne Wright's** latest books are *Masquerade: a Memoir in Poetry* (Lost Horse Press, 2021) and *This Dream the World: New & Selected Poems* (Lost Horse, 2017), whose title poem received a Pushcart Prize and appeared in *The Best American Poetry*. A Contributing Editor for the Pushcart Prizes, Carolyne has published 16 earlier books and anthologies of poetry, essays, and translation. She lived in Chile and traveled in Brazil on a Fulbright Grant; and returned to Brazil in 2018 on an Instituto Sacatar artists residency in Bahia. A Seattle native who has lived and taught at colleges and universities all over the country, and on fellowships in India and Bangladesh, she now teaches for Richard Hugo House. She has received grants from the NEA, 4Culture, and Seattle's Office of Arts & Culture, among others; and a 2022-2024 Fulbright U.S. Scholar Award to Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

© Carolyne Wright poems appearing in this WLA 2023 issue were first published by Lost Horse Press in *Masquerade: a Memoir in Poetry*, 2021. Reprinted with permission from Lost Horse Press and Carolyne Wright.