

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

My Wife, in Converse

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My wife and I took a cooking class recently. My wife and I take classes. It is a passion of my wife's, taking classes. My wife is good at most things one could take classes in, which, when you think about it and I've thought about it, means my wife excels in all things. And I believe that is in fact true. I believe my wife excels in all things. I am not blinded by love when I say this we have been together eight years. They say after seven, whatever blindness you had is gone. While my wife was chopping things or perhaps sautéing them, the instructor came over. I stopped what I was doing, which wasn't much. He was a man in his sixties trying hard to look French. He smelled like years of garlic. We looked at each other until some time passed. You might want to take up poetry, he said finally.

2.

The poetry class conflicted with the cooking class the one my wife was excited about, the one from which I was now banned. I make curtains for a living, and most of the work is done from a tiny shop I set up in the back of our house. In other words, my schedule is flexible; this sort of problem never happened before. What do you want to do? I asked my wife. In my chest I was hoping she'd say we'd both quit. I was imagining her saying, Intro to Tarot Card Reading. Or: I heard of a place, just a short drive north, where you can take horseback-riding classes. My wife loves intro classes and loves anything that's a short drive north. But instead she said, We are not one person, you know. My wife had never pointed that out before.

3.

The poetry class was led by a young man with too much gel in his hair. His bio listed literary journals with exotic animals in their names, and words in Latin. I'm a poet before I'm a teacher, he told us the first day, a poet before anything. Everyone nodded.

4.

How was the cooking class? I asked my wife when we both got home. Dominique thinks I should open my own place, my wife said. After three classes? I asked. Eventually, she said, emphasizing each syllable. She looked at me like I had something on my face, but I knew that I didn't.

5.

Later that night, I went to my shop and cleared a small corner of my sewing table. In this corner, I thought, I can be a poet before I'm a curtain maker.

6.

Since then, every night I sit myself down, because that's the first step to anything worthwhile. I bark at myself from a dog place in my brain, a place only I can hear: Write! Then I get up and go to the kitchen to get some olives.

7.

The poem is about my wife, I think. The poem is about Sunday mornings, when the sun is too early. The poem is about being the last human being on earth, but responsible for someone else.

8.

Of course we still have sex, my wife says.

9.

The last time we had sex, it was cold out and they said a storm was coming. My wife was shivering in fear, making a list to steady herself. For a while I was trying to cross things off candles, eight gallons of water, move things away from windows. Check, I would say cheerfully at her, check check check. But the more I crossed off, the longer the list got, and the more anxious my wife seemed. She was sitting on our bed, her upper body low like it was trying to reach her knees. I stood close behind her, put my hands on her shoulders. Honey, I said, and she tilted her head back and looked up to meet my eyes. There was such fear in her face, and I hadn't thought this through; "honey" was all I had. I said "honey" again, to buy a few seconds, and then I just saw it, saw in her eyes the thing she needed to hear, saw it the way you see anything, a car in the driveway, a coat in your closet. I promise you it's going to be okay, I said; can you trust me? She let her head lean further back until it touched my stomach, and I held her like that for a bit, then turned

her around to face me, kissed her eyes. Her body softened, opened. When the winds came later that night, they were far weaker than expected, and we were still inside each other. It had been a while since we made love like that hearing our rhythms without effort, reaching toward each other without haste, again and again. When we woke up the next day, the outside was yellow and brown, a strange mix of relief and disappointment. I tucked a curl behind my wife's ear. We didn't die, I said and smiled. Don't be dramatic, she said and got out of bed. God, I need to brush my teeth, she murmured with her back to me, heading to the bathroom, I woke up with an awful taste in my mouth.

10.

I like saying "my wife" to strangers, seeing their eyebrows twitch. The eyebrows always twitch. The only difference is whether they let them twitch or try to keep them from twitching because they're liberals. When they ask smiling, to show they never twitched at all, why would they? How long have you been married? I say, We were in the first weddings, Massachusetts. I nod a couple times and look away. If I let myself see their eyes, I will see the next question. And I admit: I want to leave them to their twitching.

11.

Someone, perhaps my wife, used the expression "in conversation." The street was being loud right as these words left her lips loud on the end, loud on the 'ation'. "In converse" was what I heard. I can use this for my poem, I thought. That is how I operate these days, like a thief.

12.

Whenever my wife wanted to read the poem, I'd say it's not ready it's not ready. Sometimes she'd say read it anyway, read to me while I cook. Then I'd say I prefer to finish it first, and my wife would make a face. I didn't know why she felt this urgency with the poem. What I did know was: when it's ready, I want her to listen without cooking. I'd say nothing though, because what's the point?

13.

Last week in class we workshopped a poem written by an older woman with thick, black hair. The teacher talked about mastering the quiet, which has something to do with space breaks. This woman is very good at space breaks, if I understand it correctly, and is quite close to mastering the quiet altogether. After class I collected my things slowly, waited for people to leave. The teacher was texting or perhaps checking his e-mail. I waited for him to make eye contact and when he did, I asked how do I know when a poem is ready. The teacher sighed. A poem is ready when the poet stops writing it, he said. So I should just stop writing it? I asked, confused. The teacher put the phone in his back pocket.

I said the poet, he said. He looked at me for a few seconds, then started moving toward the door. With his back half to me he said, Look, it's not personal, I just

don't like it when students get ahead of themselves. Whatever poem you're talking about—let's workshop it first and take it from there. I stood in the empty classroom for a long moment after he was gone.

14.

When I got home that night, I could hear laughter. I stood outside our door and listened. Why would Dominique be in our living room? But I was wrong the laughter was coming from the kitchen. They were giggling at the salmon. My better half is home, my wife said when I opened the door, glancing in my direction. How am I better, I wanted to ask, in what way? I have an order to finish, I said and walked toward my shop. I'm sorry about the smell, my wife called after me, let me know if you need your pills. I'm allergic to fish, and sometimes the smell alone burns my lungs. It's a big order, I shouted back, I just have to finish it. I sat myself down and tried to find the quiet in my poem, but everything was loud. I tried to find the quiet in my poem until through the loudness I heard Dominique leave. In bed, my wife mentioned a cooking seminar in the South of France. I can learn so much over there that I can't learn here, she said. I nodded in the dark. But there's more to learn here, too, though, I said. There was nothing before my wife said, Sure. When I heard my wife sleeping I said, I'm quitting the poetry class. That's too bad, my wife said, already in a dream. It'll get too soggy if you soak it overnight.

15.

I didn't know the seminar was only a few days away, didn't know my wife and I agreed she should go. I only understood the next day, when she brought the big suitcase up from the basement. She looked at my face and said, You didn't think I would take the small one, did you? It's a long time! I said No, of course, of course. I wanted to ask how long exactly, but got the feeling I was supposed to know. I didn't want to say anything that would make her think once again I wasn't listening. It was true I was lately finding it hard to listen. My wife cooked for me that night. Do you like it, she kept asking, even though I said a few times that I did. She was saying things about the texture of the food and I nodded. I wanted to ask if she would still have vacation days when she returned. I'd been wanting us to go somewhere, but she could never take time off. Now, from what I understood, she was using those accumulated days for the seminar. But perhaps not all of them, I thought. Perhaps she would still have a few left? If she'd resist, I would say something like, If you can take time off for cooking, why not take time off for us? I was thinking it through while chewing. I had good ideas, but the words stayed in my mouth. Before my wife married me, she was married to a man. He liked his shirts ironed and his blankets tucked, which were two of the things they didn't see eye to eye on. On our first date, I took my wife on a boat one of the ones that go around the city making everything look pretty. Even though she was still married, I already knew she would one day be my wife, so I planned well. They say the past is the best predictor of the future, and what I say back is that it's actually the other

way around: the future, if you work hard enough at it, slowly changes your past. But there are times, and that night on the boat was the first, when I look at my wife and for a fast moment see that she belongs to no one, not even herself. She is always leaving someone.

16.

I'm sorry this is happening so fast, my wife said. She was all packed, and Dominique was picking her up in an hour. I wasn't sure what she meant; it didn't seem she was talking about the seminar. Well, you don't control the schedule, I said and tried to smile, and her chest dropped. I took a deep breath. Is he picking everyone up, I asked. No, my wife said. She was looking straight at me; that's the question she wanted. Are you meeting the others at the airport, I asked. No, my wife said. Everything was quiet then, very quiet and still, and it seemed the world would be that way for a while. We're hooking up with them at the resort, my wife said finally. Even Dominique's car horn was quiet, a small bee in the distance. I do love you, my wife said, with one hand on her suitcase. She kept her lips on my cheek for a bit.

17.

After my wife left, I slept for two days. My dreams were mostly about money I was making a lot of it now. The curtain business took off, or I joined a start-up at just the right moment and made CEO, or in one dream I became a successful lawyer. And in all the dreams I was either showing off my new money to my wife, who was no longer my wife, or trying to win her back with it. In some dreams we were still together, and I was buying her diamonds and making her quit her job. I would wake up between dreams, sweaty and puzzled. My wife never complained about the curtain business not making enough. My wife loved her job. My wife hated diamonds.

18.

When I got out of bed, I walked straight to my shop without brushing my teeth. I erased my poem, except the line I stole: "my wife, in converse." Then I took the pile of papers and marched over to the dining area by our kitchen. I stood there for a moment holding my papers and looked at the large mahogany table no one would be dining on for some time. The shop is for curtains, I thought, not for poems.