

WANTON



## CHAMPION OF WANTON ORPHANS

1.

Val called Fern, whispered, *the piano wants tuning.*

There was no way a piano needed tuning every month.

Not even in the cinema, and certainly not at the church,  
where the choir bellowed so loud, Fern grazed the keys,

no one heard anyway. Dr. Sayers paid better than no one—  
no one being the rest of her paying customers.

Tithes in baskets filled Wanton ears with tuned notes,  
orphan labour: uninvited, unpaid.

Fern said, “This is Tabitha, Fern will call back.”

“If you kept the ones in the kitchen so clean as them forks,”  
Mrs. Hill opined, “biggest din in house, you chippin’ away  
the plates so it’s shards we eat from.”

A day of half-thought and a week of half-forgot,

Val called again. “Tell him to get the keys REATTACHED.  
All the starboard keys are useless.”

Next morning Hill’s Hovel was woken up by the blare

of Dr. Sayers’ horn. “The piano’s fixed.”

“Like a donkey it’s fixed,” Fern grumbled.

“Don’t be startin’ the teen angst so early,”

Mrs. Hill said, “my nerves.”

“It’s not my age that accounts for my angst,” she sassed.  
“You knows you’re leavin’ now or you’re gettin’ it,” Tabitha  
breathed.

“I know I’m leavin’ anytime Daddy Sayers drives up the swamp,  
don’t I, what am I stunned?” “Don’t act stunned if you’re not,”

Tabitha wiped spray from her cheek. There’s none on the west coast  
could fix the piano and none from Corner Brook  
would drive in to fix an old upright. “Fern’s busy.”

2.

Old and upright, Sayers dabbed at Tab's logic;  
"She's already dressed," Sayers reasoned.  
Fern slept in her cinema uniform and was, in her way, ready.

Dry saliva held ink outlines of quarter notes on her face.  
She'd like to leave it in the bed,  
let her fingers alone settle up in Sayers' home.

"What, you want webcobs growin' on you?  
Ten bucks come in handy around here; gotta make rent; why  
you think  
he comes end of month; money's gotta change hands,"

Mrs. Hill chimed out from under the red, glistening  
steak porn in the 'Chester's Store flyers  
that shaded her face from the too-early sun.

Fern unsmelled the burnt coconut oil on herself.  
No way to stall for time  
forks in hand, the swamp to scale.

3.

Climb out of the swamp  
wee tramp, three-legged  
bum, get your stump damp,

Tabitha hummed,  
replaced the door in its way,  
the wood weeped

for each exit with more chips.  
Sayers hadn't been close enough  
to the door to see in,

Tab reassured the mess,  
patting the apron that dealt dust  
a noisy pan.

4.

Doc Sayers clanged his mint tea and lime cordial.  
Logos gleamed green, glazed the gaze,  
glittered “go” in the passenger seat.  
Grey tufts exclaimed the first segment of each finger.

New, as if every morning he surgically separated webbing  
to produce ten digits to catch each Wanton birth,  
dispatch the Ferns and Tabs, tablatures and nomenclatures,

under verandas or in good hovels like Hill’s.

For emphasis: thumbs hairless.

“Really hoped you’d like them. Been to Half  
Brook to get the piano

repairman and picked up the ingreed  
gents at the new Dominion store,  
I’d sure be sore to open the bottles alone.”

5.

“Jon D’eners cracks  
open bottles wi’ his teeth,” she crowed,  
the thick air supported her vow of half-silence.

Half a nun that’d make her.  
Artificial heat trumpeted  
from his passenger side vent.

It wasn’t even below ten out. Radiator  
booted excess in. She’d alight  
save her tendency for chill-catching.

Deflected her gaze from reject-making birth defects,  
that kept her working for Sayers and Hill  
or anyone on their way to Sayers and Hill.

Would he mind at all cranking up the heat  
and dallying betwixt the pine trees while  
warm woollies were secured?

6.

Warm woollies pushed it a little.

He himself hurled at passenger door, forcing  
her hand to select a sprain,  
or lose another chip off old D'envers' block,

balance lost, in she was tossed,  
falling in the bucket seat, she  
made a notch on the side of her leg in his favour.

7.

The lock clicked, automatic.  
Control was on his side  
and on the wheel and on the console,  
which he hadn't removed,

highway handjobs a wrist twist and a half  
for the same lousy three bucks, Three-buck-Nancy'd say  
through buck teeth. She'd proven her work for Sayers,  
recalling the exact number of pleats in his khakis,

the theatrical parting of his zipper  
revealing a musty floorboard creak  
the fabric rustle like an audience's hush  
the pillow monologue awaiting the climax's cue.

His formaldehyde smell ridiculed her vows of  
half-silence, bristled her wooden calf,  
insensible to the buttery leather  
and the stereo's infidelity.

Rolled eyes and hips,  
she adjusted in the bucket,  
hoped he'd kick it.

8.

Fuss bucket or otherwise she'd gather enough exhaust  
into his lungs to drowse him off.

Accelerator unfloored, boat unmoored.

Winded, Fern culled gumption  
to make like Sayers was mixing mint juleps  
for a slurp of cordial and cast around for another way  
to cover her board and room. Moving out to the 'still,  
Andy and Andre forbid.

Was she really missing the forecast  
of Tab's knee? Knock knock knock  
on knee. Await truth's moment.

The hollow knock Fern popped off her wooden arch  
echoed in the niches where Tab's cartilage stunted  
leaving her runted.

Extra cash for them being hobbled, Hill gobbled,  
see how D'envers got their prosthetics cobbled.  
Tab's rabid wave of the iron in a swoop

made the sun gleam in her hand.  
It's hard to flee the sticks  
when you've one for a leg, it seemed.

Charged for light and power out of their chore takings  
they punched each other's arms in the dark. Toll free,  
uncaught.

9.

Caught thus, Mrs. Hill taught her  
meal tickets to say vahz,  
though they were a nickel a piece  
or salvaged from the trash  
and pebble and feather filled.

She pulled Tab. The tab. The tabby.  
Tabulation. Thunderation. Palpitation. Rehydra...  
and Fern from the gutter without looking for a bill  
neither with a stick a butter to rub together  
and they could do the same for her.

They all liked green sea glass,  
even ogled rock tumblers  
in 'Chester's catalogue.  
The chintz curtains were fluffed and flounced  
open with sateen green eyelashes  
to Dr. Sayers beached on the musky leather vault  
Daddy D'envers tooled for just over a month's wages.  
Fool's camel hide highlighted the pallor of her Puffy  
Granddaddy.  
The naugahyde usually won the best-in-parlour game.

10.

The game D'envers ran on Sayers  
 was tables of imported mahogany,  
 when Fern included them in her day's account  
 Mrs. Hill'd say, "I guess it don't trouble 'im,  
 the cares of this world, he's got the  
 mahogany table to go home to;  
 yer's is the best wooden leg in town, bar none."

Fern collected the blank cheque from the table,  
 wrote herself a tip appropriate  
 to such a large bulgy purple quill.

No amount of zeros would clear her of the rent's blade.  
 How many noses he retipped to afford the false tables  
 Val'd remind her of if the cheque got too fat.

In case one of the cleaning ladies  
 was unседated, she serenaded them.  
 The starboard keys were still tin as his ear.

She gulped lime cordial, considered scurvy.  
 "It's not even eleven, 'f I takes 'is car I can ear up  
 to what Tab's knee's sayin'  
 while it's still b-and-e-like."

11.

Early and bright the bed threw Mary Hill up  
or she threw up the bed.  
Sure the pine tree had been moved  
when she saw Sayers' hearse dipping under it.

Hill lane is completely straight. Even so,  
stories get turned around on the way down.  
Mary prepared explanations for the Doctor's car outside her house.  
Another orphan proffered? None to show for. "Did he drive you  
home?"

Tell me now, Mrs. Fancy Notes, or you'll be living  
under the veranda with the other ferns."  
"No, Mam. Musta been coming back to pay me, Mam.  
I just tuned it and left, just like always, Mam.  
You knows I walked home, you saw me limpin' the last half my-ul."

Fern recounts being led into a dark room with more mannequins  
than light. Puppets in wood with moveable parts.  
Their faces deeply engraved, as with a knife.  
Sayers read her "Hansel and Gretel" and said the moral is  
every time your parents abandon you, your self-rescue improves.

He arranged her adoption. Benched, tuning fork struck.  
No longer a subject.

Mrs. Hill rolls her fists like Tina Turner dancing to "Proud Mary,"  
she knows the tuning fork's sound.

Dr. Sayers described her fishbone braid,  
his own poverty-struck (a fork tap withheld) beginning

in a vague year and country.

She mustered courage to dab the keys.

Some were completely detached. A pink sky—elementary.

“I can’t pick the bones out of half of what she tells  
you always smells of rat, you,” Mam replies.

The way Fern yawns, she could trap flies.

Tab trails Fern’s eyes in the rear-view mirror.

She who outsmarted the Wanton Doc is rewarded with a  
widened berth.