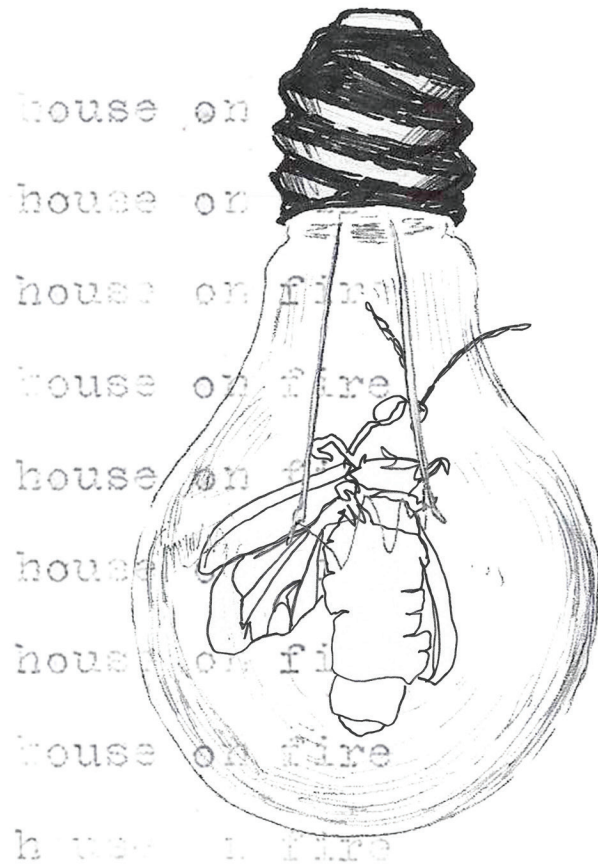


From Fierce Wounded Things:

# WISH YOU WERE HERE

By Eric Bennett





**LEO LIVES ALONE, ONE PEA IN A POD, NOT TWO.**

Her breath is sweet, her waist thin, and her tiny hands fit neatly into her little lap. Her eyes are apples and her heart a ripe melon, ready to be plucked from branching ribs.

After college, Cleo sold her car and moved to Manhattan. She hopes to find one man among the millions to love her, but that's not what she tells her left-behind friends. While speaking of the city's neon energy and her job as a writer for a greeting card company, Cleo secrets a desire to feel the baritone of a man on her milk soft neck.

Cleo's apartment is in Alphabet City, named for avenues A, B, C, and D, the only streets in Manhattan to have single-letter names. She has what's considered a good view. Out from the twenty-third story window her eyes look up and down the street like a searchlight. And as every evening for the past three years, Cleo sits on her sill watching people spider through the streets below until the bone colored moon rises. Cleo understands that while she watches everyone from on high, no one is watching her. So she turns down the comforter and turns down the sheets and goes to bed considering that she's been turned down as well. The bed feels like snow, even on summer nights. Knees chin-tucked, her loneliness is a frost and her whole self shivers on the vast tundra of immaculate white sheets. Her tears dry glistening on the folded face of her pillow and, eventually, she sleeps.

It's early the next morning and Cleo readies herself for work. The radio is on and an announcer is reporting an unusually large number of firefly sightings yesterday evening in the city. He's telling Cleo that it was

ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit with ninety percent humidity, although it didn't rain. Now he's interviewing an older gentleman who sounds like someone whose aftershave would smell good. Cleo thinks how nice it would be to lean on an older gentleman who smells like Old Spice. The older gentleman is saying "there were at least thirty fireflies around my balcony, especially by my potted herb garden. They seem to prefer some cover." "Don't we all" Cleo thinks locking the apartment door behind her as she leaves for work.

The subway entrance gulps her down and spits her out on the platform. Cleo surreptitiously scans each male commuter asking herself, "Would you do him? Would you do him? Would you do him?" She answers, "Yes, yes, and yes." Another little game she plays: chose six men from the passersby to marry before getting to the corner of 23rd Street and 5th Avenue. She insists on choosing exactly six men no matter how sparse or plenty the pickings. Cleo is a huntress, stalking someone to love her. And just below her cream-colored camisole, a raging heart beats as with the fiercest of animals.

Scrupulously fitted into a beige cubicle, Cleo writes romantic greeting cards: husband to wife, boyfriend to girlfriend, married man to mistress. She writes the words she longs for someone to say of her, a kind of backward hope.

There.

Nestled in a cocoon of sheets

is my beloved.

She glows.

Unknowingly, she radiates.

I gather her warmth

and drink it in.

She nourishes my eyes

and feeds my want.

I am washed in her beauty

and lost.

Fifteen poems later, Cleo is tired somewhere deep in her body. She sighs, adjusts her lazy lipstick, and then hauls herself home counting the city's recently ubiquitous fireflies rather than picking random men to marry.

First thing through the door, she waters the plants on the kitchen windowsill. She's growing herbs to learn how to nurture a living thing. She remembers reading somewhere that music helps plants to thrive, so she sings to the rosemary, basil, and sage. Cleo's convinced her crooning helps the plants to thrive because something in her lifts too. "What's good for the basil is good for me," she says aloud. And that's when she notices the fireflies crawling between the parsley stems. "Aaah," she says letting down her piled high hair, "'Some cover' for my new friends."

At this moment a bell sounds in Cleo's head – an idea. She scrounges through desk drawers for a pencil and then writes on the pallid pulp of a page, "I am lonely without you." She then perches on the windowsill

leaning out over the ledge, her body a ribbon waving in the breeze. Pinched between thumb and forefinger, Cleo holds the creased note above the streets of Alphabet City. The wind moves in every direction and suddenly her letter, as with sparrows, takes wing from its perch.

That night, Cleo falls asleep on top of the covers. Someone is laughing in the street far below her window – it floats up the gleaming glass walls of the skyscraper, through the window, and quietly warms the room. Her bed thaws and, for once, Cleo sleeps, the corners of her eyes smiling.

Launching love letters from the windowsill sets Cleo free, which is why she makes a habit of placing her words on windy shelves each evening. Monday she writes, “I’m calling on your fingers.” Tuesday: “Find me.” Wednesday: “You are a waiting wish in my heart.” Thursday: “Keep me like a secret.” Friday: “Wish you were here.” Cleo’s faith in the wind is complete – she hands her printed hunger to the zephyrs, a child entrusting treasures to a mother’s apron pockets.

It’s Saturday morning and Cleo shuffles around the apartment straightening rugs and pleated pillows when she sees it – the very note she released to the wind the previous evening is situated a few inches from the front door on the entrance hall floor. She supposes someone slipped it through the crack under the door. Reddened, she picks it up and reluctantly unfolds the paper. Just below her original message is a response written in hard-pressed script: “Give your arms to my waist. Give your touch to my skin. Hang your heart in this rib cage.” Glee swells until it is everywhere in Cleo’s heart, bouncing and bright, and there to stay.