Ludic Writing: Lady of the West

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | July 27, 2019

Ludic Writing is a series of narratives generated through play, exploring the prospect of “Games as Writing Prompt.”

“Lady of the West” is inspired by a play of Tim Fowers’ deckbuilding word game Paperback. Words created during the course of play appear in the story in bold. For this experiment in ludic writing, writing and play unfolded concurrently, with the effect that the unfolding narrative (in rough form) subtly influenced the choice of words played, which influenced the direction of the narrative, which influenced play, which influenced narrative, etcetera. For more details on Paperback, see Session Report: Paperback and Anomia.

Lady of the West
The death of Flatfoot Turner, erstwhile mayor of Narrow Gulch, Wyoming, arrived without warning or reason. A bolt from the blue, as the locals might say—if they were inclined to discuss it, which they weren’t. The town was seven years without a sheriff, enjoying the kind of lawlessness that attracted—and ultimately destroyed—men like Mayor Turner. There would be no investigation into his death, no meting out of justice as it is commonly understood among the more “civilized” folk to the east. In life, Flatfoot Turner had cultivated a habit of arriving late to just about everything, on the basis that it paid to keep ‘em waiting and leave ‘em wanting more. Now, he’d be eternally late. He’d be mortified to discover, were mortification anything other than a redundancy at this juncture, that this permanent tardiness had about as much impact as a fart in a tornado, “Dead mayor’s just as good as a live one” being the general consensus among his former constituency.
Narrow Gulch was a one-horse town, and Talipes, the town’s one horse, was the first to discover the body, laid out as it was near the bales that served as vittles for Talipes and every other hooved creature in the vicinity. Folks tended to avoid Narrow Gulch as a rule, which is how it had earned its nickname among the more well-to-do towns to the east: Last Resort. To an outsider, Narrow Gulch wasn’t much to look at: a few scrubs, some fans of prickly-looking vegetation, one gnarled old tree just outside of town, its twisted, skeletal branches overhanging the old well. Folks with aught left to lose just didn’t tend to venture this far west of Green River, so those who did arrive at Narrow Gulch—and particularly those who chose to put up permanent residence—did so as a last resort. Even the animals avoided the town, for an evil air overhung it, a miasma of lawlessness whose origins ran far deeper than the absence of a sheriff. The only beasts the townspeople saw hide or hair of were those that were mad with thirst or hunger or just plain mad. “You don’t come by here ’less you’s missing something vital,” they’d say.
It was a dusty Tuesday in July, the day after a bullet ripped through Flatfoot Turner’s heart, leaving him to bleed out into the parched soil in the shadow of the old well, that a stranger rode into Narrow Gulch and announced, in a general sense, her inclination to stay awhile. Hattie Almanac—roused by Talipes’ whinnying, for the old horse was an ornery beast with an intense, red-eyed hatred for its own form—was the first to take note of the silhouette on the horizon, hazy against the rising sun. It didn’t take long from there for word to make its way to Patrick “Patches” O’Flannery, who ran Narrow Gulch’s boarding house of sorts, giving him a few minutes to tidy things up. Where rumors went, the stranger would inevitably follow, like a mustang chasing its shadow or a thunderstorm following a still, clear day.
Patches sat alone at a card table at the boarding house’s ground floor, which also served as the town’s saloon. He had a shiny, unbalanced face—the sort of man who nurses a whiskey like it’s his mother’s tit, the sort who never forgets a favor so long as it’s one he’s done for you. Rumors were he’d had even Mayor Turner in his pocket, like a phony ace. Rumors were the mayor’s death hadn’t been all that unexpected to Patches O’Flannery. Rumors were rumors. There were rumors, too, that Doc Briar snuck donkey urine into his curative salines, but that had never been proven—besides which, it had been years since the last donkey had been seen in Narrow Gulch, trampled to lifelessness under Talipes’ crooked hoof.
The stranger found her way to Patches’ place a little past noon. He was amusing himself with a creased and maimed deck of playing cards, with which he’d occasionally squeeze a little extra money or loyalty out of the town’s less perceptive denizens. “Is there anybody in this town can refit a pair of spurs?” she asked, slamming the dust-caked things down on the table in front of him.

*Hell of a way to open a conversation,* Patches thought.

He peered at her more closely, pushing his half-moon spectacles up on his nose. *Why, she’s barely more than a child! What in damnation’s she doing riding by herself?*
At this juncture, Patches took a moment to size the stranger up, as he did with every new face he met. City clothes. Well worn, but expensive-tailored, not homespun. Soft face, too, not at all the kind of weathered old hen you normally saw out here. And she rode. Could be she wrote and read, too. Maybe she danced...

“What’s your name, miss?” he asked, notions of cards and spurs having exited his mind completely—except, in the case of the latter, in a highly specialized, non-equestrian context in which he’d once seen them employed.
She ignored the question. “Horse might have a sore flank. On account of the spurs not fitting right. Anyone in town can maybe heal him up?”

Patches tipped his chair back until it rested against the bar-top, stretched his arm back, and pulled a bottle of whiskey down from the shelf. A finger or two of grainy brown liquid sloshed around the bottom. “You put me in mind of a pretty young whore I—”
The butt of her riding crop came faster than a rattlesnake’s bite, and with considerably less forewarning. One second, Patches was pouring himself a dribble of whiskey, and the next, he was sprawled out on the floor with a busted lip. “I’m not here to inspire memories of lost loves,” the stranger said. She spat, the ball of saliva landing near her boot.

“Why are you here, then?” Patches coughed, although he already knew—knew who the stranger was and what was coming to him, what she brought, just as he had known since the moment the bullet tore through Flatfoot Turner’s heart.

“You have an animal doctor in this town?” the stranger asked, inspecting the silt—more sand than liquid, really—at the bottom of the whiskey bottle.
“Go back to whatever Hell you came fro—” Patches replied, the final word truncated by another swing of the riding crop, whatever else he had to say rendered unintelligible by the mess of blood and teeth that his mouth had become. Another impact, and a silence descended on the place, broken only by the stranger’s whistle—a strange, somber tune, like the wind through a ravine.

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Doc Briar’s practice was a swirl of hazes, each one tinted and scented to match its provenance—mostly variations of desert scrub, distinguishable only in the eyes of a connoisseur, though certain of the pastilles were of considerably more exotic extraction. He held, in his right hand, a blown-glass bottle in which a rattlesnake fang hung suspended in a half-inch of milky liquid, while his left hand pinned a mewing kitten to the operating table, meaty fingers locked around its delicate neck. A dozen more of the bony animals peeped and mewed from a stack of cages in the corner.
“Quiet, you little starvers,” the shiny-pated doctor growled. “You’ll get your turn.” Then, he tipped the vial, gently, so that a thin stream of the milky potion dribbled into the kitten’s mouth. At the first touch of the liquid, the animal began to thrash wildly, and an errant paw caught the bottle, splashing the rest of its contents over the front of Doc Briar’s apron. “Perdition!” the doctor shouted, struggling free of the smoking leather apron. Thus disencumbered, the kitten twisted to its feet and leapt from the operating table, scrabbling to its freedom through a gap in the door where the warped wood had given way to rot.

“Months of distillation, wasted!” Doc Briar shouted, banging a hairy fist on the table. It was at about that time he noticed the stranger.
“Well, hitch my wagon to the Devil’s train,” he said, extending a paw in her direction. “A new face in town. Must be my birthday.”

“I’m told you’re the man to see about an ailing horse,” the stranger said. She did not take the hand, and Doc Briar let it fall to his side, looking neither sheepish nor affronted.

“Might be I am,” the doctor replied. His words were cagey, but his demeanor was cordial. “Depending on what ails it.”
“Could be it got rode too hard.”

“Is that so?” the doctor asked, looking inquisitively at the stranger’s face. He found he couldn’t meet her eyes, obscured as they were by the brim of her riding hat.

The stranger shrugged. “You’d have to ask the horse.”

Doc Briar laughed, a hearty, dusty laugh that was prone to zig and zag. “Suppose I did that,” he said, wiping his eyes. “What might it tell me? Only a few things inspire a body to ride a horse so hard it requires the services of a physician.”

“And yet,” replied the stranger, “it ain’t exactly a rare thing invites strange men to ask after a lady’s business.” She leaned forward, pressed a soft finger to the doctor’s chapped lips.
A storm came over the man’s craggy face, and he batted the finger away. “So. You’re a lady, are you?”

“Sure I am,” said the stranger, resting an elbow on the operating table, watching him shift hues from cured leather to eggplant to spoiled milk.

“Don’t suppose that’s mud on your boots,” the doctor observed.

“I don’t suppose it is.”
The doctor slumped forward. “You know,” he said feebly, “I made a vow once. To do no harm.”

“How’s that been working out for you?” asked the stranger.

“Much better without the help of mysterious wayfarers who don’t even do me the dignity of a proper introduction,” he wheezed.
“On the contrary,” the stranger replied, leaning over the doctor as he struggled to draw in breath. “A wayfarer is one who travels by foot, like Johnny Appleseed. I believe you’ll find”—she spat into his eye—“that I arrived on horseback.”

“I wonder… what are the odds… that you would find us out here…” His voice was barely audible now, hardly more than a breeze. The kittens began to yowl.

“Somewhere along the trail between zero and zilch.”

The kittens piped harmony to the stranger’s somber tune.
It was mid-July in Narrow Gulch, Wyoming. The town was seven years without a sheriff, yet justice had a way of getting itself doled out anyway. Beneath its hard, spiky exterior, the town—like its inhabitants—had revealed itself to be pink, soft, and moist, like the shell of a conch. The death of Flatfoot Turner, so sudden and so arbitrary, had been a sort of catalyst to drag out the secrets from the stowage of their hearts. It hadn’t been pretty, while it had all been coming to light, but now that it was over, there was a certain organic beauty to it.
She’d left their bodies for the sun, the dust, and whatever else happened to wander through. Perhaps nature would return to Last Resort at last, now that there were no devils left to chase it away. It wasn’t likely, though. This place would always be a last resort. A refuge for the long-toothed and the black-livered. A crocodile tear on the face of the West, shed with neither grief nor jollity.