

# The Drinker's Apophenia

by  
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1846

We're in Garrard County, Kentucky. Carrie Amelia Nation (née Nelson) is born to the wife of a farmer and stock trader.

1974

We're at an undisclosed bar in Los Gatos, California.

Friend 1: "—So, as I was sayin' before you so *rudely* interrupted me, I'm backin' the car into the carport. The girls run out and scramble into the house after June. And I'm just, whatever, y'know, fishin' the change out of my pocket to dump it in the cup holder and I hear this godforsaken scream, this true shriek of death, this high pitch sound about breakin' every tiny bone in all three of my ear drums, if you know what I mean."

[Friend 1 takes a gulp of cold lager and gazes out the dusty front window.]

Friend 2: "Well, what the hell happened?"

Friend 1: "Y'know those hamster wheels? Not a wheel, I mean, it's some kinda ball where you turn some piece, tuck the little devil inside, put the piece back on and let it run around."

Gary: "Sure."

Friend 1: "It's supposed to be fun for the thing."

Gary: "Right."

Friend 1: "Well... someone forgot to take little Malty outta that ball and off the back deck before we left for swimmin' at the quarry."

Friend 2: "You don't mean—"

Friend 1: "—I do mean."

Gary: "Hooo-eeee!"

[Gary smacks the bar top.

Friend 1 shakes his head deep and slow, smiling slightly.]

Friend 1: "I mean I think June's alright with it. She was the one cleanin' the damn cage every week."

Friend 2: "We've about had it with this new kitten of ours, too. Three months in and the thing still doesn't know where to take a leak. I mean... you can clean a bed sheet but what're you gonna say about the inside of a mattress?"

Friend 1: "Thing about a pet is that it never grows out of the diaper-changin' phase. I don't know why, as a people, we're so bent on keepin' that up as a hobby."

19 BCE

The poet Horace writes *Ars Poetica* (The Art of Poetry), in which he warns against *purpureus pannus*, or "flashy purple patches," referring to the swatch-sized statements of wealth that Romans were known to sew on their clothes for no other reason than to mark disposable income. No colour could make a fabric more expensive than the colour purple; and so, "purple prose" came to stand for buttery rich tracts of language, passages of excess.

1899

We're in Medicine Lodge, Kansas. Carrie and a group of Women's Christian Temperance Union members—from the branch she'd founded—waltz into a tavern to close their eyes, pray and sing hymns. Sometimes, someone brings a hand organ for accompaniment. A common greeting for the bartender: "Good morning, destroyer of men's souls."

1975

We're at a building supply warehouse in Rosarito, Mexico on a balmy, 22-degree morning, not far from the water. Gary is running one wily hand over a flat of smooth, egg-like stones. They're

cool to the touch. Rhinestone Cowboy swells on a tinny radio. The attentive manager, with his hands neatly clasped, realizes his brow is furrowed and unfurrows it.

Gary: "Penny-a-piece?"

Supply Manager: "Si, señor."

[Gary picks one up, examines it closely and unceremoniously tosses it back on the pile.]

Gary: "Deal."

1900

After begging God for some cranked up new direction in her activism, Carrie gets the impression that she has received an answer to her prayers. In obedience of this divine communication, she gathers rocks—which she calls "smashers"—and, after absolutely nailing a 4-part harmony of "After Death the Judgment" in some establishment, begins to hurl the contents of her pockets at bottles of red rum, dry gin, 80-proof moonshine. A maraschino cherry bounces off her size twelve boot.

1985

The New York Times publishes Paul West's "In Defense of Purple Prose," wherein he describes the literary tendency as "the world written up, intensified and made pleurably palpable, not only to suggest the impetuous abundance of Creation, but also to add to it by showing—showing off—the expansive power of the mind itself, its unique knack for making itself at home among trees, dawns, viruses, and then turning them into something else: a word, a daub, a sonata."

1975, again

It's Christmas morning in God Knows Where, America. A child ambles out of bed and into the living room which smells like French toast and wet carpets. Having been told the parcel was fragile, the child removes, one at a time, each piece of tape adhering paper to gift. There are air holes in the box.

1900, again

When Carrie gets home that night, she rouses her husband to regale him with the damage. With The Sandman in his eyes, he jokes that for maximum results, she might consider using a hatchet. By the light of the kerosene, she looks at him resolutely and says: "That is the most sensible thing you have said since I married you."

1985, again

West continues: "The gist of it all is that a mind fully deployed, and here 'mind' includes imagination, will find the merest thing an inexhaustible object of wonderment... Purple is an homage to nature and to what human ingenuity can do with nature's givens."

1975, again

Together with the father, the child reads the 32-page owner's manual. "Your new rock is a very sensitive pet and may be slightly traumatized from all the handling and shipping required in bringing the two of you together. While you may look in on your new pet from time to time, it is essential that you leave your rock in its box for a few days. It is advised that you set the box in an area of your home that is to become your PET ROCK's 'special place.'"

1901

We're in Topeka, Kansas. Carrie is speaking in a public square, to more pigeons than people. A man from a pharmacy walks briskly toward her and unfurls his fist to reveal a handful of inexplicably tiny hatchets. She'd secure a supply and sell them until she died, the profits addressing her fines and bail bonds.

2000

Gary beats out 4,000 competitors in the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction contest, which awards authors for "purple prose." His submission: "The heather-encrusted Headlands, veiled in fog as thick as smoke in a crowded pub, hunched precariously over the moors, their rocky elbows slipping off land's end, their bulbous, craggy noses thrust into the thick foam of the North Sea like bearded old men falling asleep in their pints."

1911

Carrie, who once described herself as "a bulldog running along at the feet of Jesus, barking at what He doesn't like," dies in Belton, Missouri and is laid to rest in an unmarked grave.

1920

The Prohibition Era begins.

1889

We're in the hotel that Carrie runs in Richmond, Texas, just down the road from her husband's saddle shop. The maid is sick today, so it's Carrie's business to turn the rooms over. There are clam shells, delicate ropes of dried milfoil, small crab bodies and a few stones placed in museological fashion around the bathroom sink. While sweeping everything into the trash, she notices a stone with a face that seems familiar. She holds it up next to her head, looking in the mirror from her face, to the stone, to her face and so forth.

1976

With his flash-in-a-pan PET ROCK fortune, Gary opens a bar called Carrie Nation's. It's open tonight until 2am.

This text is based on real events.