

BUTTONHOOK PRESS 2022 PAMPHLET SERIES

Americana

MURDER IN THE HOUSE:
THE “NUTSHELLS” OF FRANCES GLESSNER LEE



JESSICA PURDY

AN O:J&L WRITER'S PORTFOLIO EDITION

MURDER IN THE HOUSE:
The “Nutshells” of Frances Glessner Lee



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Buttonhook Press

An imprint of OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters (O:JA&L)

Brought to you by OJAL Arts Incorporated

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization

Buttonhook Press
Great Falls, Montana

Set in Garamond and PERPETUA TITLING
and made available online and/or printed in USA.

Cover Image: *Barn* [cropped] Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death, Barn diorama by Frances Glessner Lee. Photograph courtesy of Jessica Purdy.

JESSICA PURDY

INTRODUCTION

These poems are excerpted from Jessica Purdy's work-in-progress entitled *The Adorable Knife: Poems on Frances Glessner Lee's The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*. The *Nutshells* were exhibited at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC, from October 2017 through the end of January 2018.

Frances Glessner Lee is known as the "mother of forensic science" and became the first female police captain in America. Each of her *Nutshells* is a meticulously crafted crime scene diorama meant to help police officers hone their skills of observation.

Each poem in Purdy's series is an ekphrastic poem based on a specific *Nutshell*. In some of the poems, the speaker is the victim, and in some, the perpetrator. In still others, it is the poet's voice that is heard.

Other poems in Purdy's manuscript have been published or are forthcoming in many distinguished journals and anthologies, including *Poemeleon's Plague Papers Anthology*, *Museum of Americana*, *Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art*, *Harpy Hybrid*, *The Curator*, and *Ethel zine*.

SESTINA IN THE VOICE OF
FRANCES GLESSNER LEE

When I was a child and heard the word *murder*
It hit me in my center and entered my sleep.
What was this fear I'd never felt? This worry.
In my imagination, my body was carved with an adorable knife.
Each entry meant another miniature. Crime scenes in a nutshell.
Imitations of little deaths in my head.

My dollhouses made them real. To study the bludgeoned head,
the intention. My marriage had been murder
motherhood stifling, in a nutshell.
My husband could only sleep
around. When I was young and in love I said I loved knives.
Guns and their chambers made me worry.

I wasn't prepared for worry,
but I could make a doll's head,
a cloth curtain, miniature furniture, a protruding knife.
Was it suicide or murder?
Did it happen while the family was asleep?
Each room seen from above like the walnut shells

my mother would crack, create baby bassinets out of half a shell
with glue and old sheets torn by worried
fingers, feet. Ripped and tucked over a toy mouse asleep.
So now I make dioramas, dolls with bashed-in heads,
cigarettes that glow red, bullets lodged in ceilings. Murder
into art. Maybe the police will think of me like a knife:

cunning and sharp. I've always loved knives,
shield myself from those that don't take my Nutshells
seriously. These detectives need to learn observation, and murders
need to be solved by looking. Don't worry,
make time for the details in your pretty little head.
Did this one die in his sleep

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or did his wife poison his wine and *make* him sleep?
Did the perpetrator knife
the girl in the chest and then head
home? Crack nuts and leave their shells
like trails of bread crumbs? Did her mother worry
she'd never grow older than sixteen, the victim of murder?

I've started sleeping with a knife
under the head of my bed. My obsession became the Nutshells.
Still, my ultimate worry: the precision of murder.

LOG CABIN

—Deceased: Arthur Roberts, insurance salesman.
Questioned: Marian Chase, his mistress. Reported:
Thursday, October 22, 1942

In this Nutshell I created a miniature log cabin. I fell in love with the name “Hy-Da-Way” when I saw it on the side of a barn on Route 3, so I spelled it out with thin birch branches. I based it on the girl-sized one made for me when I was a child. The one I made is hewn from real birch and cobbled together with pin-sized nails. During the war it was difficult to find hardware so I had to make my own.

In this Nutshell there is a miniature dead man face down in the kitchen. The cause of death appears to be a gunshot wound to the chest. Marian Chase said she had been having an affair with the dead man and that they met at the log cabin. Arthur told her he was leaving her. His marriage was intact.

In this Nutshell, I want to speak through this scene. How would I feel in this situation? My marriage had dissolved before I made this one. My husband had not supported my creative energies. Even though she was married, still his property, Marian said she didn’t live with her husband. She was probably thinking Arthur would leave his wife and marry her.

I remember making jams in the kitchen of my playhouse. Everything was built in working order and to scale with my 10 year old body. My small hands. My feet could have been bare. My only mistake in marriage was that I told too much truth.

Marian tells too much truth in her witness

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statement. She admits he was leaving her, but that his gun went off after he turned towards the door and was trying to pick up his dropped cigarette. Good motive, I'd say.

This jilted woman I created would never have let a man inhale one drag of a cigarette without killing him first. The first person to pick up the gun was me. I made the gun, after all. She was a tiny doll who held it in her own hand. A hand cuffed by marriage.

She claims she only picked it up after she heard the shot, but wouldn't he have fallen on it if he had shot himself? They found it next to his body on the floor. Her purse was still on the bed. The bullet went clear through his chest. It took police three days to find it lodged in the attic. His body lies face down and away from the door.

STRIPED BEDROOM

—Deceased: Richard Harvey, foreman in an ice cream
factory. Questioned: Mrs. Mary Harvey, mother.
Reported Monday, April 29, 1940

To solve this death of a man
they would note the objects
of a room decorated for a woman.
What would a man want
with striped wallpaper? Flower chains
and stripes like the bars of a jail cell.
What did the women want
with him? Did they strangle him?
Cloaking him with their scents.
Their overwhelming pillows.
His pocket watch rests
on the green dresser. Cigarettes
offer themselves to the taker.
His striped tie wraps around the mirror's
spindle frame like a noose, like a man.
No flowers on that fabric
he entrusts with his throat.
What man would want
to smell like gardenias
except after having been kissed
by perfumed lips. His place
in the bed meant for safety and sex.
Even his mother had left him that day.
Came back to find him unexpectedly
dead. Notions of romance
in the wedding photo. The fabric
of upholstered gardens. Ruffled
curtains framed the outside world.
He meant to drink all the alcohol
kept chilled by the bed. It was hardly
finished. Somewhere a wife wept.
Loosed herself. Suspicion aroused
by a victim's gendered leavings.

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In this, a bible, booze, and the clothes
that kept him a man. Inside his body
the blooming organs held in harmony,
nestled slick as slugs on a peony,
will help determine what causes
a man to die among women's things.

BARN

—Deceased: Eben Wallace, farmer. Wife, questioned:
Mrs. Eben Wallace. Reported Saturday, July 15, 1939

In this Eden hangs Eben
who noosed his own neck
so many times previous
Peter-who-called-wolf would rival.

One day his wife was too late
to talk him out of it.
The cows had come home.
The slats on the crate cracked
under his weight
in a final act of failure.

Or maybe she was late
on purpose. Having had
enough of his theatrics
she thought *let him bluff*
I'll call him on it. The
shattered crate beneath
his exhausted feet
didn't even kick as the rope
jerked and his neck broke.

Or maybe she thought
why not use his own idea
against him. When he threatened
to do it, she could have
jumped on the chance to tie
the end of the rope to the tractor
and drive off into the sunset.

Didn't the Missus watch
Double Indemnity?
There are lessons to be learned
from the study of art.

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SALOON AND JAIL

—Deceased: Frank Harris, dock laborer. Questioned:
Dennis Mulcahey, city patrolman. Reported: Sunday,
November 12, 1944

A found poem with lines based on vintage whiskey advertisements

It's a man's drink. The ice clinks in the glass. The anger
amber tries to drown in 1,2,3,4,5. No more! It's a man's
drink. It's happy hour. Everyone wants to.
Smoother because it's power to please.
please stop when will you stop you're getting
that look on your face you're trending
towards blackout pace. It's a man's drink.

For the Man in your life! Because it's every
ounce a Man's whiskey. Even a lady
could learn to like Soft Whiskey. It's not hard.
Isn't black Velvet smooth? Share America's whiskey!

Taste is the name of the game *and your woman*
shunned by sport is alone. Turned away from.
Attention grabbed by this man's drink.
Anyway, you didn't burn the Schlitz!

Give him the gift that will make him say
"just what I'd pick for myself!" It's richer—
the difference in taste is terrific.
Every man should have an Imp
he can call his own. *You're drowning.*
Happy to be aboard.

A mark of good taste. *Your tongue reeks.*
It's a man's drink. Will the whiskey
you buy today be the whiskey you buy
tomorrow? If in doubt try
the responsibility of being the best.
Men who plan beyond tomorrow

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like the lightness of passing out.

When will you pass out so you can stop

hearing ice clinking against this glass

It's a man's drink. He's young. He's confident

He's looking good. Drinking good.

It's a man's drink you're drowning in.

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ABOUT THE WRITER:

Jessica Purdy is the author of *STARLAND* and *Sleep in a Strange House*, both released by Nixes Mate in 2017 and 2018. *Sleep in a Strange House* was a finalist for the NH Literary Award for poetry. She is the author of the chapbook *Learning the Names* (Finishing Line Press 2015). She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in many journals including *Menacing Hedge*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Radar*, *SoFloPoJo*, *Harpy Hybrid*, *Lily Poetry Review*, *One Art*, *Poemeleon*, and *Museum of Americana*. She is poetry editor for the anthology *Ten Piscataqua Writers*.

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