

Yalobusha Review

Volume 27

Article 3

Summer 2018

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Recommended Citation

Wohlers, Austyn (2018) "Donna," *Yalobusha Review*: Vol. 27 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol27/iss1/3>

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DONNA

Austyn Wohlers

Standing here you get such a nice view of the future, always cooling, always colder and a little steelier. The future and the bay, tasting like the sea with its gentle green waves, California wildflowers, greenish-blue plexiglass buildings which reflect the gardens and the light. Anna is walking into one. She is not the kind of woman to pause before the door, to close her eyes and think: okay, I'll walk like this, stiff-hipped, really, don't sway your hips, straight up to the fruit and the coffee, where I'll make myself a little plate, walking quickly, then, over to my seat... now she is somebody who people fetch coffee for. She strives for goodness and for excellence, always. She believes in the world and its processes.

Life passes through her like a pleasant shadow. She moves like a cloud of fairy dust, almost immaterially. Vacant and neutral, she enters the boardroom. Strange how men react when you act the mother, the teacher, the nun, receiving them with a nod and a smile, with a blankness almost like a clear white light. Still they think about Anna's soft hair, feathery brown. How it probably smells like hazelnut, vanilla, butterscotch... She smooths her skirt once before sitting down. Walter brings her a cup of hot coffee. She looks at him with the restrained friendliness of an executive, with a warmth that bubbles up softly from beneath a calm and glassy lake.

"Thanks, Walter," she says.

Walter is a little odd but Anna likes him anyway. He is a married man with birdish bones. He takes a seat beside her, smiling, and tells her about how he took his wife, Glenda, out to the crab place Anna had mentioned the other night, and how fantastic it was, and what a nice time they had.

"I'm glad to hear that, Walter," says Anna. "How is she doing?"

"She's alright," says Walter. He is noticing Anna's new brown coat, how she slides her slender fingers into its pockets when she feels uncomfortable. "She's..."

The presenter clears his throat. He is an engineer with curly hair, thick and coppery, with chicken pox scars and dark hawkish eyes which dart around at things. Anna looks over at him, slow and pleasant. He is smiling at her. Behind him two men wheel out some huge and boxlike object hidden beneath blankets, red or pink, coral. The color of salmon, Anna thinks, or of love.

“Hi,” he says. “Hey, everybody, all right.”

He looks pale. His voice quivers. Anna is patient with people like this. She has known solitude but never shyness, and finds it beautiful that people are compelled to do things they find difficult. She tries to look at him with encouragement.

“Some of you may have already heard about our latest project. Well, I mean, product...” He smiles involuntarily. People joke and murmur. “We wanted to show you all a beta version before unveiling her to the rest of the company. Get some feedback, some commentary...”

He fingers the edge of the blanket, just for a moment, twirling it. He yanks it away. Anna sees a silver woman, gleaming and beautiful, the perfect circle of her mouth, and behind her a screen flashing, the engineer laughing and promising everybody that her flesh will eventually be golden-brown, or pale, black, whatever you want, soft silicone flesh grated onto her metal body, but for now Anna can see her wires, red and blue, her veins. The engineer says something about the physical and the emotional, she can't quite hear, something about love on both a physical and an emotional level, and that her hair is shampooable, her long white hair which springs from her silver head, straight and starlit, and how lovely would it be, fellas, to feel that sweet hair on your stomach while she... and you can even cut and style it, yeah, she's completely customizable, down to freckles on her nose, and somebody mentions *Her*, except this time you can finally get her to look like Scarlett Johansson, heh-heh. I'd love to sculpt that metal ass, to make it look more like a peach or like two sparkling cherries. I'd love to pull her panties down over those cold iron legs, to hold her hair in my fist. You can make her look just like your girlfriend (everyone is laughing) or maybe your ex-girlfriend, or even your insufferable mother-in-law, which gets a chuckle out of Walter, the female service droid, the female body, the woman as an amalgamation of sensations, and the engineer, confident now, standing up straight and masculine, he pulls out a little white remote, clicks idly through some actions. Somebody doesn't like the way she blinks, says it's uncanny, but don't worry, the eyes are customizable as well, twin violets like Elizabeth Taylor, and the whole time Anna watching her twitch and spasm over a wooden chair.

* * *

Strawberries. She smells like strawberries. The world is a dark orb glowing pink, the sun now setting, the fog of dusk descending and eating the light which shimmers against the valley towers, the fractals. Anna enters once again, luminous. Walter is waiting for her in the lobby. They act out a little fiction for security, not that they need to, a little *thanks for meeting me here this late*, a fiction and a hug, in which Walter, embracing her, inhales, deeply, he takes a deep breath of Anna's soft brown hair, which decisively (he can tell everybody) smells like strawberries. Mousy little Anna who smells like fruit and sugar, as sweet as she is. He was thinking it would be good to do something nice for her today, after the horror of today.

"I just want to see it again," whispers Anna.

She feels as though she has cracked the world like an egg, this secret. So this was it. But didn't she already know?! Her hug with Walter is cold and mistrustful. All of them, even him. She feels as though she's been suddenly awakened, angrier, awakened from some pleasant and disturbing dream. So this was it, always.

The laboratory is at the end of the hallway, a little blue room of light and darkness. Long bands of fluorescent light darken by contrast the corners of the room, plunging into shadow the objects against its walls. But there, in the center, all alone and totally radiant, capturing the light on her skin, lies *her*... the air is calm, there is almost no sound. Anna approaches, feeling her own rage, its dimensions and its properties. She feels its presence throughout her entire body. She can feel the chilliness of the room now, the sensation of her feet against the floor, the eyes of Walter behind her, looking at her, sizing her up. She feels as if she is approaching something purely evil.

Walter studies the robot from the doorway, feeling uneasy.

"It really is kind of excessive, isn't it?"

"..."

"I think there are talks of a male prototype," he says. "Just to let you know."

Anna does not answer. She hovers her hand over the cool metal. Inside she feels

her vacancies expanding, filling up with emotion and lucidity. She touches *her*. She lays her hand softly on *her* shoulder. My God, thinks Anna, from her purse producing a small sledgehammer, as dull as the woman is glistening. I am really about to do this, me. Meanwhile something is emerging from very deep inside of her, something small and glowing and full of color.

“Anna,” says Walter, meaning to stop her. And then quickly he averts his eyes. He is realizing something, slowly. He feels exposed, humiliated.

My God, thinks Anna. She is touching the robot’s skin. Softly she tucks its hair behind its ears, *her* hair which is as white as snow. She runs her finger across the engraving on the back of her neck, which reads *Donna Haraway: Davidson Mechanics Service Robot, Model 1.0*. She can hear the engineer laughing. She is touching the robot which looked cold but is actually warm. She pets the robot’s hair. Suddenly she leans in and smells shampoo... strawberry, strawberry and coconut, Herbal Essences, so familiar. She leans in closer. Hey, thinks Anna, I know. What a miserable world, but I’m taking you out of it. You should thank me.

She looks at the robot’s body, crumpled up and submissive, and then down at her own. The female body, the same female body. As if she’s been exported... Her eyes begin to widen. I want to paint bright pink lipstick over stainless steel, thinks Anna, the beauty of rose on sterling. I want to take her home. I want to dress her up in something nice, something pretty and modest. I’ve never had a friend. I’ll tuck her into red velvet sheets and we’ll sleep side by side, safe and warm, and we’ll chat until the morning, like schoolgirls. She invades my heart, my sensibilities. I feel bright and weightless all over again. The two of us as light and as heavenly as freed birds, flying away from here, somewhere distant, just the two of us, straight into the paradise of my dreams.

AUSTYN WOHLERS is a student of Comparative Literature and Creative Writing at Emory University. Her work has previously been published in *Shooter Literary Magazine* and in *Alyss*.