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Barbara Henning

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Bill Kushner's *Walking After Midnight*. (Spuyten Duyvil 2011)

I have a stack of books to read by my bedside and a journal. When I finally crawl into bed, usually just after midnight, I pick up the journal and I write one page. Then I start reading the book on the top. Last week I read from Bill Kushner's new book *Walking After Midnight*. I loved reading these story poems. Some of them are childhood memories, others veer off into an imaginary life, sometimes like a fairy tale. I found myself more than once lying in bed laughing. I'm putting three that I really liked here.

HUMMER

"I'll tell you nothing," he said, as we drove along. I could almost count the poles as we sped along. And my father hummed. He was a hummer. I looked up and saw the clouds holding up the sky. "You're not gonna see me," my father said, "once we get there." And then he sort of chuckled, a funny sound. "I mean," he went on, "that I am just gonna disappear." Ahead, I saw a kid on the side of the highway, holding out his thumb. The kid looked hot. The sun was out and it was hot. I could see he was almost soaking wet in sweat. My father just drove by. "You could've stopped for him, Dad," I said. "It would've been like a nice thing to do." Immediately, my Dad stopped the car, and we both lurched forward, then back. "You wanna get out and walk it? he queried. I thought about it and swallowed. "No, sir, I don't" "Don't what?" "Don't wanna walk it, sir." He stared hard at me for one long minute. I could see the cactus, sky and the mountains in the far far distance, as he kept on staring. i could see the kid sort of running in a funny hop towards us, my father's car. "So do we understand each other from now on?" my father asked me. "Do we understand each other at last?" Thick silence, and I had to answer. "Yes, sir, Dad." "Yes, sir, what, boy? I said yes, sir, what?" "Sir, we understand each other at last." My father's arms shot up as if in a weird kind of victory. "At last!" he said, almost breathless. "At last!" By now the kid had almost reached the car, and he had one arm out as if to quick grab at the handle of it, my

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father's sky blue car. And I could see the kid's eyes
kind of crazy scared eyes. "Good," my father said,
as he gunned the motor, and away we drove real fast.

THE LITTLE DEER

The witch said, "The deer! The little deer! Run
after the deer and capture him, my little darling,
and you shall be king! So I did what the witch
told me. I ran and I ran, but that little deer was a
fast one, and always leaped ahead, just out of reach.
Suddenly, there I was, in the heart of the forbidden
forest, and I was alone, for the little deer was gone.
"Who is that under me?" asked the talking tree.
"It's me," I answered, "your little king." "You're not
my little king!" replied the tree. "you're just a lost
and frightened little boy, aren't you? Afraid that
someone will eat you? Afraid you'll never find your
way back home?" "Yes, tree," I said, for it was true.
"Climb a bit up me, little boy, and I'll try to protect
you. I'll try to find someone to guide you out of this
forest you are lost within." Just then, a riderless
white horse came along. "Oh dear me, oh dear me,"
said the sad horse. "For the Prince of this strange
kingdom and I went out riding, but the Prince he
strangely fell off me, he fell to the ground where he
is now unconscious, and I can't wake him for the
life of me, oh dear!" "Then let this little boy ride on
you, and take him where the strange Prince lies. I do
believe the boy has the magic to wake the Prince up!"
So there I was, riding on the white horse. "Hold me
tight, boy!" the horse commanded, and soon there we
were before the sleeping Prince. "Do your magic,
boy!" the horse whispered. So I bent over the Prince
who was so handsome why I kissed him on his lips, and
that kiss seemed to do it. The Prince awoke and lifted
his head toward me. "Is it you, boy?" he asked. "Yes,"
I said, "oh yes!" "You've saved me, boy! Why I was
lost in a dream of wolves and dragons!" "It was my duty
and my honor, sir!" "Then come and we shall ride back
to my kingdom, boy, and you shall stay at my side forever,
for who knows when I shall need that magic kiss again!"
And so it came true, for I find there is no denying the
command of a handsome Prince. Could I? Could you?

CHIWAHAS

Did you know chiwawas are descended
from wolves? Do not get a chiwawa mad at
you or he'll bite your head off and eat it for
lunch. I saw a chiwawa eat a sheep once,

and then knit himself a sweater with the
leftover wool. He says you got a secret.
A chiwawa can tell if you got a secret. A
chiwawa can smell your secret in you, and
spell it out. "I'm gonna tell on you, sucka,"
my chiwawa whispers when we go for a walk.
Sometimes I just wanna kill my naughty chiwawa,
but I love my little Chi Chi too much. At night, as
we sleep together, and he howls at the moon in
my ear, I just wanna kiss him all over, my sweet
little sweetheart Chi Chi, my very darling dear.

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