

PEN IS ENVY

I've been working at this club for six months now, no less.
The evening shifts, yes. The hours are long and the pay isn't great
But how could I turn down the job, this chance to infiltrate
The inner sanctum of the literary canon, to hob-knob with such
Giants of letters, to serve the world's most cherished men;
Those who have carved their way through history with the pen?
I mean, I'm serving Graham Greene, for heaven's sake,
When he takes sherry once a week with T.S. Eliot.
It's not as if they notice me, (particularly Eliot, sipping
From his glass thin-lipped, and never thinks to tip) but
Just to be around them is an education. The erudition,
The debate, the intellect and wit that flash like polished
Glasses. Some are more like uncles making friendly passes;
Philip Roth will often call me over to enquire what I thought of
His last book (and for a quick look at my legs, bare and smooth
Beneath my dress). Auster's less austere than you'd expect
(And likes a drink, too, unlike Salinger, a stern teetotaler, with
Hawk eyes for the coat-check girl, and her a mere sixteen.)
You just wouldn't believe what I have seen, what I have heard,
Hovering between the tables, cleaning ashtrays, smiling as I work.
Hemingway, you know, will often spend a long time in the Gents
Trying to coax his cock out of his pants after one too many beers
While Norman Mailer watches from the sink, and sneers.
Bukowski, wild old man who stinks of bourbon, drinks it neat,
Will sit down next to anyone who'll listen and recite unpublished
Poems and librettos as I stand there with my tray, patient feet
Crammed into regulation three-inch heel black leatherette stilettos.
Oh, they've all passed through these heavy oak wood doors,
The sacred male canon; playwrights, poets, critics, authors.
I've seen Dickens and Tolstoy playing murderous poker,
Self and Burrows trading substances in the darkest corner
Hesse and Nabokov discussing Eastern European literary borders
Joyce and Dylan Thomas calling for more porter long after
Last orders. Even Raymond Carver; the tallest, quiet, kind,
Has been known to enter the room, circle it once and then
Leave again without speaking to go and meet his wife.
I've heard Amis and McEwan, intently discussing
The problems of middle age with deadly serious faces,
Such as how the libido shrinks as the vocabulary increases.
I would offer them advice, a kind word or two, but etiquette
Prevents me. After all, I'm just the cigarette girl, despite my
BA Hons degree. I got a First, that's right, in English, studied it
At Goldsmiths' College. I could flaunt my knowledge, as I bend
Over the tables to provide a pack of Marlboro or a pinch of snuff,
When the men stop talking for a moment, nudge each other, cough
Or gaze into the deep V of my cleavage, quite forgetting I've a face;
But I know my place. Instead I try to tempt them into buying a cigar.
Hand rolled, they are, in leaves torn out of first editions. I get a nice
Commission if I sell enough. And when the club is shut and the
Evening's work is done, I take my wages, run on home back to my
Room, my desk, the pool of light that warms the typewriter; undress,
And long into the night I tap out words, creating pages of my discontent.
I am not jealous of them, no, for they are men who worked to earn
Their colours. Still my ink is tinged with green. Drunks, lechers,
Impotents; men both proud and flawed. Depending what you carry
In your trousers, the pen is still far deadlier than the sword.

