No Place Like Bed

The novel's heroine is chronically tired and her favorite attitude is horizontal

Anna Shapiro

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THE FATIGUE ARTIST

By Lynne Sharon Schwartz.
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Scribner. $23.

LAURA, the solipsistic narrator of Lynne Sharon Schwartz's fifth novel, "The Fatigue Artist," is herself a successful enough novelist to live comfortably on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, overlooking Riverside Park. She doesn't seem to be worried about her solipsism, however, or aware of it. She is guiltless about the affair she maintained throughout her 11-year marriage, though her husband died, and violently at that — he was a reporter covering a drug deal in the Bronx. It has been two years since his murder, but she sometimes wakes up feeling his absence, even if she didn't love him a great deal. She does not much like her current kindly, useful lover either; when he tells her he loves her, she thinks: "That was quite nice. It always adds something to hear it." But she doesn't believe him.

Her enthusiasms are reserved for her tai chi exercise class, which takes place in the park, and for her bed: "I almost hear the bed whispering to me to come, the way you might feel a lover longing for you." Though carrying on with her usual routines, Laura is suffering from an illness that appears to be some version of chronic fatigue syndrome.

The action of the story follows the illness — its diagnosis, treatment, gradual alleviation and others' reactions to it — and is punctuated with black-and-white photographs and a Chinese medical chart. Oddly, the reader gets very little sense of what the disease feels like, unless the main symptom is to brood upon who occupied your bed before you fell in love with it. For Laura, the significant one is "Q." He is an actor known to his friends as Quinn. (After telling us this, Laura goes right on referring to him as Q.) He was already married when they met, he was her first big (and maybe only) love, he set her on her writing career, and he always found some excuse not to make his life with her. For a month after Laura was widowed, he lived with her. Then he was off again to other loves, and sometimes back to Laura.

About all this, Laura is cynical and knowing, as if knowingness and understanding were the same thing and could ward off pain. Perhaps this lack of understanding is what makes her vulnerable to the utterances of the Chinese tai chi master, or the herbalist he refers her to, or the performance artist in the class whose work is to make metaphors. Laura is so under the sway of such metaphorical mysticism that she configures her malady as a trope for her love life: sometimes she thinks her illness is Q.; sometimes she sees him as the cure.

Maybe performance art, tai chi and fatigue just aren't rich enough metaphors to carry a novel in the way that classical music and pre-Socratic philosophy lifted Ms. Schwartz's "Disturbances in the Field," with which this novel shares certain features: violent death, a persistent tie with a premarital narcissistic lover, prominent female friendships and, of course, the setting. The earlier book was also packed with what is

missing here: warmth and wisdom. In Laura one recognizes much that is accurate about the (often pretty bereft) way novelists live. But she has a degree of detachment, whether caused by her physical illness or a different kind of sickness, that is low on humor and doesn't even have objectivity going for it. Resentful and blinkered by introspection, Laura is enough to give novelists a bad name: if we can't be enlightening or moral, we're at least supposed to be entertaining.

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