

Excerpt from ESCAPING LEE MILLER

Luck is stepping out on a limb and saving it off behind you.
-Lee Miller

Lee Miller had a thing for bondage
as long as she had a say in it.
It was a game, like a feat of Houdini,
to see what she could escape.
The Surrealists were all for games
to augment reality, or while it away,
or transform it. The element
of transgression, of danger,
acted on them like an aphrodisiac.

Lee Miller was good at getting out
of things she didn't want. As a girl,
she got kicked out of every school
her parents sent her. At seventeen,
she sprung out of Poughkeepsie
and landed in Paris, where she got rid
of her chaperone and lived on her own.

In Poughkeepsie again, she fled to New York.
Then Paris, New York, Paris, New York, Egypt.
No place could hold her, and no one could keep her.
She was charming, and she was infuriating,
because even as she escaped, she stayed attached.

In the twenties, in Paris, when she was nineteen
and beautiful, she sought out Man Ray
as the teacher to enable her transition
from model to photographer.
In return for intimacy, she got
the undivided attention of a master.
Man taught Lee everything he knew,
and she was smart and talented enough
to appreciate his investment and come out ahead.

They liked to walk the streets of Paris
tethered to each other by a golden chain,
he leading and she following,
always with a space between them.
She let people assume he was in charge,
but when he became too possessive, she left him.

Whenever things started to get comfortable,
she'd stir them up. It was a quality

she had in common with Picasso—
both of them egotists and narcissists.
Picasso tried but failed to get the better of her.
Man Ray, Picasso, Max Ernst,
even Roland Penrose, the Quaker pacifist
who would become her second husband
and the father of her only child,
all claimed to love women
yet nurtured desires of mutilating
and destroying them. For proof,
just look at what they did
to the women in their art.

Lee overlooked it. She had to,
if she were to join men as equals
and claim their rights and freedoms.
Drink was no big deal; sex was no big deal.
Some women idolized her; others resented her,
because she acted as if she were exceptional,
and the codes other women abided by
didn't apply to her. She got away with it.
She was careless, entitled, and selfish,
fun-loving, impulsive, and daring.
Her life was an adventure,
and her beauty was her currency,
recognized everywhere.

Alan Steinfeld reviews *Surrealist Muse*, *Escaping Lee Miller*, and *Frida* in *American Book Review*, Vol. 45, no 1, Spring 2024.

https://annwhitehouse.com/pdf/ABRreviewofethelzineSpring2024project_muse_929681.pdf

Laura Salvatore reviews *Surrealist Muse* and *Escaping Lee Miller* in *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, January 2022.

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