



STORIES and POEMS about WOMEN

by Peter Obourn

Peter Obourn Special Collection

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Contents

Part One:

WOMEN - a dozen poems about women by Peter Obourn
(some published and some unpublished)

Part Two:

Short Fiction - Two Stories

- Women Are Hard to Figure - exclusive reprint of a short story from *Women Are Hard to Figure*, the acclaimed collection of Peter Obourn's short fiction, published 2021 by Ivy Books available wherever books are sold
- An Iowa Story - short story recently published in Green Lantern Literary Journal, published by Truman State University

Part Three:

Essay on writing about Women

Part One

WOMEN

A Dozen Poems About Women

Contents

1. BURNING OLD LADIES
2. MARION MALONEY
3. SONNET FOR LINDA
4. GRAMMA'S HONEYMOON PHOTOGRAPH
5. THE QUEEN AND THE MAID
6. I SAW A WOMAN
7. MY MAIDEN AUNT
8. PANTOUM AUNT MARIAH
9. STARDUST GIRL
10. THE WOMAN AT THE COCKTAIL PARTY
11. WOMAN AT THE JAZZ CLUB
12. WOMEN TRAVELING TOGETHER

BURNING OLD LADIES

you know what mass hysteria is
it's what we all knew yesterday

all of us
believing in
something that isn't

like witches

burning a bunch of nice old
ladies alive
with the pope's blessing

the catch is

you don't know what's
happened until it's already over
because
at the time
what you
burned was
really a witch
it's only later she becomes a nice old lady
after all
even the nice
ladies confessed
 including all
 the salacious details

what I like is
the nonfinality of
it all
 the lack of
closure

as we say at the
office

no matter
how many meetings we have

every day we awake
and see the world with new eyes

*Note: I have found that some people misread this poem. The history
burning “witches” fascinates me. How could so many people, including the
“witch” herself believe it? The more I thought about it, the more examples
in history of the “common knowledge” turning out to be simple stupidity.
And it continues to this day. That’s what this poem is about.
Every day, be prepared to be amazed.*

MARION MALONEY

She reads her Bible every day
Keeps seven kinds of marmalade
Cries at the movies Friday night

She peeks and cheats at solitaire
Kills the ants then sieves the sugar
Slips some brandy in her tea

She confesses Saturdays
Young Farther Cairn with fiery hair
Blesses her and sets her free

She leaves the church with lighter step
Her lust for Father Cairn so deep
The glow of rapture lasts the week

**SONNET
FOR LINDA**

I love the way your lips move as you read
You're full of surprises
the way your finger turns the page
as the need arises

I love the way the clothes you wear
are all made out of cloth
and how you'd hang so upside down
were you a three-toed sloth

I love the way your hair grows out
just a little every day
I love your ankles and your knees
in every conceivable way

I love the evenings when the day is through
You watch an old movie and I watch you.

**GRAMMA'S HONEYMOON
PHOTOGRAPH**

I

I call it
my snapshot of the wind

the surf caressing her ankles
dress pressed against her thighs
that canvas chair swells like a jib
her black hair flows sideways

scraps of paper fly like gulls
above the rattling flags

II

Her hair was thin and gray
when she pressed a sea shell to my ear
or showed me the wind push waves of grass across the prairie
or grasped my hand through a cottonwood snowstorm

III

Her last year
the wind finally got her
hollowed her out
scattering her memories
as when the Sunday News I left on the beach
turned to white and black butterflies
fluttering out of reach.

THE QUEEN AND THE MAID

I

The Queen of Norway dreams a dream
of hillside silver green
the footman steps from carriage gold
and lays beside her
in the heath
his freckled cheeks his lips so red
so close
then he is gone
his kiss stays hidden in her dream
as she awakes
on silken sheets
and eiderdown

II

The Irish maid lies on the hill
she dreams of eiderdown
as she awakes the heather sings
the sun is on the burren
near her grows
the windblown gorse
beside her lies
her Kildare lad

his kiss is sure
he holds her strong
on hillside silver green

for she is born of thrift and dew
where earth is fire
where islands rise
from out the sea
where mist and wind

and bog and fen
live and dance within her soul
on hillside silver green.

NOTE: I wrote this poem on a trip to Ireland. Why the Queen is the Queen of Norway and not Ireland I'm not quite sure, so not only is she not real, she does not even exist in my own mind. She exists only in the dreams of the Irish maid.

I SAW A WOMAN

Did you ever see a woman
just saw her
on the street
or in a shop
and couldn't stop looking?

you get closer
to hear her voice
you gaze at her face
looking away
when she glances your way

you pass close enough
to catch the air around her
brush her sleeve

she laughs as you
just as you notice
she is with someone

they walk right past you
she grants you a smile
and is gone
she is no longer in your eyes

that night
and the next day
you realize
she is still in your mind
and will not leave

it happened
many years ago
she is still there
she has never left my mind
she never will.

MY MAIDEN AUNT

My maiden aunt
like the church social
was weather dependent
so she spent
that cloudy day
in the church basement
scooping sherbet
while Billy Bigalow
with that shock of red hair
was at the fairgrounds
behind the bandstand
on the moss
under the oak tree
with Emily Dorset.

A PANTOUM AUNT MARIAH

my Aunt Mariah used to say
beware of a man with a box of candy
he'll feed you chocolate love drops
to drive you crazy with sweet desire

beware of a man with a box of candy
there's one thing on his mind
to drive you crazy with sweet desire
to ravish you in the Strand Hotel

there's one thing on his mind
to take you away for a week and a day
to ravish you in the Strand Hotel
in a room with a mirror and a feather bed

to take you away for week and a day
he'll feed you chocolate love drops
in a room with a mirror and a feather bed
my Aunt Mariah used to say

NOTE: The pantoum is a poem of any length, composed of four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza. The last line of a pantoum is often the same as the first. The pantoum originated in Malaysia in the fifteenth-century as a short folk poem, typically made up of two rhyming couplets that were recited or sung. However, as the pantoum spread, and Western writers altered and adapted the form, the importance of rhyming and brevity diminished.

- poets.org

My pantoum conforms to the strict rules of form, because I find the discipline of form works better for me

STARDUST GIRL

she was a
 mid-american romantic
from that corner of Indiana
 called Hoagy Carmichael
which meant that
 sometimes she
 wondered why
 she dreamed

and
I'm not sure I should
 tell you this

but
she colored her hair
because
she was younger
 than she looked

she did not quilt
she made blueberry pies
 the smells aroused her
she stood at the window
 on lonely nights
she walked by the creek
 with men

when the kisses
 grew old
she hauled horseshit
 in the wheelbarrow

not to clean the barn
but to plant roses.

THE WOMAN AT THE COCKTAIL PARTY

every day comes
with urgency

with need for sugar
in the vinegar

at the end of day
for parties
enticing carnivals
cake
wine
pungent cheese

and love

if only
theses goods
were not
distributed
unfairly

she
always got the cheese
and stood alone

WOMAN AT THE JAZZ CLUB

She lifts her wet glass
leaving a tight
upraised lake
on the mahogany

the smooth music
composes her

part of her
that thinks tomorrow
or yesterday
slithers off the barstool
and leaves the room

through the twisting smoke
she feels his eyes dropping onto her body
it's comfortable
his thoughts don't matter
who wants to be in another head
she doesn't even like to be in her own

she knows nothing

here is
another language
without tense
a language
saying
this is here
this is now

this is why

she comes here

to live in the
astonishing
infinite
present.

WOMEN TRAVELING TOGETHER

Women traveling together
go to
certain places
in New England
which feature
potted plants
and restaurants
little towns
or islands
where men won't go

Women go
to buy clothes and candles
or brass turtles
or anything
men won't buy
to talk about things men don't talk about
or just talk
about anything
because men don't talk.

Men go to Wyoming
alone
hoping they won't meet anybody
but an elk.

Part Two

TWO STORIES

WOMEN ARE HARD TO FIGURE

From my short story collection

Women Are Hard to Figure

It's difficult to say this without sounding like I'm bragging, but as with many great lovers, I started early. My first conquest transpired in the summer of 1954. I was a mere thirteen years old.

One of my fondest memories of those summer days was doing nothing. One such time was a Saturday in June; school was not out for the summer yet, and I was sitting in the park behind the bandstand with Tommy Burns and Tony Angelo. We were just sitting in the grass, doing nothing, with the vigor that thirteen-year-old boys apply to that most pleasurable of activities. The three of us had spent all day together traipsing around the village, talking, wrestling, laughing. We had no money, no plans, no ideas. We had nothing, and we matched that by doing nothing.

Anyway, Tommy and Tony were resting there in the grass, eyeing the clouds as they drifted, excitedly interrupting each other, telling me how the Saturday before they had seen Robert Cosgrove at the movies with Jo Ellen Curtis. Tommy and Tony had been sitting three rows behind them. They agreed that Robert had slipped his arm around her and was kissing her, but there was violent debate as to whether he was "feeling her up." I was just listening. I had not been there. I had no idea what "feeling her up" was, nor was I much enlightened by their discussion that consisted of "He was not," "Was so," "Was not," and so forth. "Feeling up" sounded a little rough, but I knew about kissing and that, by itself, was exciting enough for me.

Robert Cosgrove was a big kid, older, but only by a year. I

surveyed the sky and thought about kissing, and maybe that day, right at that moment, was the first time the idea of kissing a girl appealed to me. In fact, just lying there in the grass and thinking about it made me feel good, different. And then, for some reason, a picture of Irene Russo floated into the air between me and the clouds. Irene.

I didn't hear Tommy and Tony anymore. I was in deep contemplation. How could I kiss a girl? Where? Who? I needed a date. I needed to take a girl to the movies.

I carefully considered all the girls in my class but, of course, I settled on Irene Russo. She had red hair and didn't talk much. She was not one of the really knockout cute girls, but she was pretty. Her smile was slight, her nose turned up a little, and although I had never touched her, she looked soft.

I was smart in math. Once, Irene had come over to the boys' table in the cafeteria and asked me for help with her math homework. I remember she smelled clean, like soap. She was wearing a mint green angora cardigan—always worn backward—which I found particularly enticing. Her father drove a Chrysler with a semiautomatic transmission. It was black and always showroom shiny. For some reason, that was a crucial point in her favor.

But other than that one day in the cafeteria, I had never talked to Irene except to say, "Hi."

For the record, here is a complete transcript of all our previous conversations (except for that one day in the cafeteria):

Irene Russo: "Hi."

Me: "Hi."

Since boys were afraid to talk to girls, and any girl who talked to a boy was in danger of being considered "forward," dating preliminaries had to be carried out by third parties. I decided not to involve Tony or Tommy because they would screw it up. This was a delicate operation. So, after some serious reflection,

I decided the first step was for my best friend Chester to ask his cousin Susie if Irene Russo “liked” me. I need to explain here what “liking” means. “Liking” was a term of art; it meant something specific, something big, something ineffable. If you saw a gaggle of girls talking and one said, “Guess what? Jeannie likes Billie,” there would be pandemonium, screaming, jumping and “Oh, my God!” for several minutes before things calmed down. It was a big thing to “like” someone; it was a major emotional commitment.

“Liking” was not necessarily exclusive. (The term for exclusiveness was “going steady.”) Cute girls had a lot of boys who “liked” them, but many of the girls had none. The same held true for the boys. You had to be careful not to set your sights too high, or you could be crushed. And such a rejection, even through third parties, even though invariably couched in the euphemism, “She thinks you have a nice personality,” was devastating. But with the impossible dream of a kiss in the balance, I was willing to risk it.

The roundabout intelligence gathering required to discover if Irene “liked” me took longer than I had anticipated. After a few days, the strain of the delay began to show. At dinner one evening my mother glanced at me, her eyebrows squished together, and inquired, “Peter, is something wrong at school? Is that Farini boy bothering you again?”

“No, no Mom, it’s fine. I’m fine. Everything is fine. He doesn’t bother me anymore. I took care of that. Everything is fine.” I gave her my best relaxed smile to sell it.

“Yeah, sure, Peter,” said my sister. She tilted her head slightly and grinned at me. Although a year older than I, she may have been aware of the Byzantine intelligence operation Chester and I had unleashed.

My dad looked up from his meat loaf and mashed potatoes, surveying each of us briefly. He was still wearing his white shirt

and tie from the office, the tie slightly loosened, and the top button of his shirt undone. He reached over and ruffled my hair. “Leave him alone, Helen,” he said. “He’s fine—apparently.”

Finally, after almost a week of worry, I was rewarded for my prudent selection.

Irene “liked” me.

It is hard to exaggerate the euphoria, the emotional lift it gave me to learn that Irene Russo had succumbed to my charms. All that remained was for me to swoop in and collect the prize.

Next came Phase Two, which was to ask for a date. I quickly ruled out asking Irene directly, person-to-person. I simply didn’t have the nerve. The transaction would have to be conducted by phone. Initially, I considered making the call myself, but upon further review I realized I had absolutely no idea how to go about it. I would call her. She would answer the phone—but then what? I had no idea, so I decided to remain in the background a little longer.

My bold plan was to have Chester call Irene and propose a date. We made the call together from my parents’ bedroom where the extension was located, out of earshot of my mother, and worse, my sister. Chester and I seated ourselves on the edge of the double bed and stared at the phone: a black, dial-less, pushbutton-less communication device that rested on the bedside table.

My hands covered my face. My breathing was audible and visible, but Chester seemed relaxed as he lifted the receiver to make the call that could set my first sexual conquest in motion.

Chester calmly told the operator, “Ludlow 6-0478,” as if this was just an ordinary phone call. There was a pause, and then he continued: “Hello, Mrs. Russo. Is Irene there?” Chester put his hand over the mouthpiece of the handset, stuffed it against my mother’s pillow, and whispered excitedly, “She’s there!” Then he cradled the handset against his ear again and waited. Suddenly,

he blurted, “Hey, Irene, would you like to go to the movies with Pete?” He paused. “It’s me, Chester.” He shoved the handset into the pillow again and whispered, “She said okay!” He hung up the phone.

Chester and I beamed at each other in triumph. Then we fell back onto the bed and started pummeling each other before we sprinted down the stairs, through the house, and into the yard where we rolled on the lawn, pummeling each other again.

My first date was set. It was not necessary to establish time or place. There was only one theater, The Rialto, and one Saturday matinee.

“The Date” was big news all over school the next day. I received plenty of congratulations and envious looks for my fast-moving ways with women. I was even told that a couple of other girls “liked” me. My success with Irene had created a bandwagon effect.

I let it be known that I would meet Irene inside the theater. There were many reasons for that strategy. There was the financial aspect, of course, although that was not paramount. Still, I literally had to count my pennies because my allowance was only a dollar a week. The movie cost 16 cents, plus I needed a nickel for a box of DOTS. Then, of course, it was five cents here and five cents there for ice cream cones, Cokes, and other necessities, which mounted up each week and always left me destitute long before the next allowance day.

Secondly, I felt supreme confidence. I knew of three women who “liked” me—a veritable harem. Why shouldn’t I meet Irene inside after she had bought her ticket, thereby saving 16 cents and a possible five cents more if she, for some reason, expected me to buy her candy? Sex was important, but I simply could not justify spending 42 cents—almost half my allowance—on one date.

Finally, I was unsure about what to say to her. What do you

talk about with a girl? By meeting inside the theater, the need for conversation would be minimized.

Anyway, *The Date* was not about conversation. It was about physical attraction. Sex. Sitting in a dark theater with a woman. Letting nature take its course.

I usually attended the Saturday matinee with my sister. I told her I would go with her that week, but I wouldn't sit with her in the theater because I had a date.

"A date?" she said. "You?"

"Yes."

"This I have to see."

I spent the rest of the week selecting my outfit. I remember the shirt. It was two-tone, brown on the bottom and tan on top, with tan cuffs. There was red piping on the cuffs and across the middle of the back and the chest. It was stylish in a western sort of way. And what could be more appropriate for watching two cowboy movies?

My sister and I bought our tickets at the booth outside the front of the theater. "Where's your date?" she asked.

"I'm meeting her inside."

"You've got to be kidding." My sister turned and marched into the theater.

Then, at two p.m. on June 20, 1954, my first date began.

My timing was perfect. I waited outside the theater for a few more minutes, and then I stopped at the candy counter to buy a box of DOTS. Just as the lights were lowered, I found Irene in the darkening theater and sat next to her just as the movie began.

That memorable afternoon we sat together and watched two Roy Rogers movies, a newsreel, a Superman episode, and three cartoons.

I never spoke. Neither did Irene. I turned my head and looked at her a couple times, but our eyes never met. Our elbows did touch on the shared armrest a couple of times. I ate all the

DOTS myself.

At five p.m. we walked together out of the theater and into the bright afternoon sunlight. My sister was waiting. Irene ran over to join Susie and Margie, and the three of them ran off jumping, squealing, and all talking at once.

“How was the date?” my sister asked.

“Great!”

I considered it a success, although Irene and I never dated again. I guess you could say we broke up. But I will not forget that first date. I can see her profile in the flickering light and feel the touch of her elbow.

It’s hard to explain.

There was a real sexual, sensual thrill just sitting next to her.

That was all.

That was enough.

I don’t know if it was as good for her as it was for me.

Maybe not.

Women are hard to figure.

We read a lot in the news about non-disclosure agreements—those agreements that employees are forced to sign in order to get hired in the first place. For some reason these agreements seem to hold up in court, as if they were freely and willingly entered into. This fascinates me as a lawyer since it seems to me a basic rule of law that something signed under duress should be examined with suspicion. “An Iowa Story” the story is not about non-disclosure agreements of that kind. It is about the unwritten nondisclosure agreement that exists in every family. I guess you could call it the “family secrets agreement”, things that we just don’t talk about. Grandmothers often turn out to be the unfortunate holders and keepers of the family secrets.

AN IOWA STORY

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<https://ghll.truman.edu/32toc/>

I call this an Iowa story because it happened there, and I still consider Iowa the greatest place in the world. My sister Margaret and I lived on a farm, about a mile and a half from Clifton with our grandparents. Clifton is about thirty miles from Cedar City, which calls itself a city but it sure is nothing like New York City.

When I was twelve my grandmother took my sister and me aside and told us we were old enough to understand the family history, and we were also old enough to understand that our family history was nobody else’s business, that secrets are magic glue that holds families together, so I was little afraid the news was not going to be good. That was when I found out that Margaret and I have different fathers. One was an artist. That would be Margaret’s father and the other a philosopher—my

father.

“They are both wonderful people,” Gramma said, “but it just didn’t work out for your mother.”

When we lived in New York, my mother had told us she was raising both of us alone. We were her loves and her treasures, she said, and we would have a wonderful life together, just the three of us. So, I already knew my father was out of the picture. Then, one day, my mother took Margaret and me to Iowa to the farm where she grew up and left us with her parents.

Margaret and I liked Iowa a lot better than New York. We loved living with Gramma and Grandpa. Grandpa taught me things to do around the farm, jobs that I could learn and do but he never insisted. “There’s no rush, lad,” he’d say. “It’ll all get done in good time.” That’s what they call boys in Iowa: lads. Gramma would read to me and was teaching me to play the piano. I had friends at school. Living with our mother in New York had been exciting but a lot of times it seemed like she was someplace else in her head.

One sunny Friday in October, Margaret and I were down by the creek just lying in the sun. It was an unseasonably warm day. We lay on the grass looking up at the clouds which were moving slowly—puffy cumulus clouds, August clouds in October, what Grandpa called Indian Summer. Indian Summer is the time in Iowa when you can lie in the sun on a hot day and not be bothered by mosquitoes. Grandpa likes this time because the harvest is in and he has time to actually sit.

“Last night,” said Margaret, “I met Billy behind the barn. He tried to kiss me. Next time I am going to do it.” I had absolutely no interest in talking about kissing. That’s what Margaret thought about all the time. She had changed a lot since she got to be sixteen. She used to be skinny. Even some of the boys in my class talked about her.

“Do you have any girls you think about, Jimmy?”

“No, what I’ve been wondering about is my father.”

“What about him?”

“Well, all we know is yours is an artist and mine’s a philosopher. Gramma told us that. But what’s his name? Where is he? I’d like to know.”

“Don’t you pay any attention at all?” said Margaret. “They’ve said more than that. My father is French. Now he lives in Paris. Mom promised me when I am 21, we’ll go together and see him.”

“I know all that, dummy. Your father is an artist, who was then in Cedar City, that Gramma hired to paint Mother’s portrait when she was fifteen. But she never said where mine is. What do philosophers do anyway?”

“Most of them teach college, I think. And his name is Spencer. Professor Spencer. That’s what Mother told me. You were born here on the farm when Mother was in college.”

“I was born here?”

“Yes, and then when you were two and I was seven we moved to New York so Mother could transfer to Julliard. We had a nanny.” Of course, I remembered her. Marika. She was from a city called Prague and called my sister Maggie and me James.

“Billy and I are going there Saturday to see the football game at the college.”

We heard a whistle. Margaret jumped up and ran in her bare feet through the grass to the barn. It was Billy’s whistle and I knew Margaret would be kissed behind the barn.

I stayed lying in the grass watching the clouds. Margaret was sixteen. When Margaret was born, Mother was also sixteen, in high school, only four years older than me. If I was born here on the farm and my father was a philosophy professor, what did that mean? What was philosophy? Where was this college Mother went to? Is that where this football game was going to be?

I found Grandpa standing by the fence, leaning on it looking

at the cornfield. All the corn had been picked. The stalks which a month before had been green and soft were now brown and crinkly. I leaned on the fence next to him. He was chewing a blade of sweetgrass. I picked one from next to the fence post where the uncut grass is over a foot tall so I could chew with him. I came up to his shoulder and I could just barely reach to put my foot on the bottom rail like he did. "Grandpa," I said, "Is it true I was born here on the farm?"

"Yup."

"What's my father's name. The philosopher. What's his first name?"

Grandpa looked up in the sky for the answer and then stroked his chin and said, "Don't rightly know, lad. Let's say we go see how Gramma's doing with dinner. Where's your sister?"

I looked in the sky for the answer and said, "Don't rightly know, Grandpa."

He put his arm around my shoulder and we walked back to the farm house for five o'clock dinner.

* * *

That night, after Gramma and Grandpa were in bed, I sneaked into Margaret's bedroom. "You have to take me to that football game tomorrow," I said.

"No way," she said.

"I'll tell Gramma I saw you kissing Billy."

"You did not see anything."

"You and Billy can go hide somewhere. I'll watch the game and know what happens. I need to try to find my father."

"You're crazy."

* * *

“Margaret, I don’t think taking Jimmy sounds like a good idea to me,” said Gramma at breakfast.

“Please Gramma,” said Margaret. “He just wants to see the game. You never let us do anything. You won’t let me see Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show tomorrow night, like every other girl in America will be doing. Please, please, please. I promise I’ll watch him every minute.”

Grandpa reached out and messed up my hair, “I think it’s a grand idea,” he said, and that settled it.

The bus was once a day, except Sunday, from the Clifton General Store to Cedar City. It cost three dollars and took a couple hours because it had to stop at Big Forks and Indian Mound, and anywhere in between if somebody came out to the highway and waved it down, or if anybody pulled the cord the bus would let them off anywhere also.

Billy and Margaret chipped in to buy my ticket. When we got to Crampton College and found the football field, the game had already started. Margaret said to me, “Now, get lost and meet us right here right after the game.”

I figured my father would be on the Crampton side of the field. There were a lot of people there, more people than lived in Clifton, Big Forks and Indian Mound put together. Anyway, I asked some college kid with a Crampton sweatshirt on if he knew Professor Spencer and the kid said ask that woman over there so I did.

She looked around the crowd and then said, “See up there,” and she pointed up into the stands. “See that guy with the umbrella.” There, in the top row, was the only person I saw that day with a tie on. He also had an umbrella which is a funny thing to carry on a sunny day. I went up and sat next to him. There were people around him but no one was sitting close to him.

I just sat there. We watched a band march up and down the field. Then the second half of the game started. We watched a

few plays and saw Crampton score a touchdown. Everyone in the crowd jumped up and cheered except Professor Spencer and me. After it calmed down, he turned to me and smiled.

“Hi,” I said. “Are you Professor Spencer?”

“Yes, sir.” he said.

“I’m Jimmy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jimmy.” He shook my hand.

Then in the fourth quarter, after there had been a couple more touchdowns and a fumble, he said, “You don’t seem like much of a fan Jimmy. You’re pretty quiet.”

“So are you,” I said.

“Are you here alone, Jimmy?”

“Sort of.”

“Where are your parents?”

Mother was touring Europe with the Des Moines Symphony Orchestra. She sent us a postcard once in a while. “Well, my mother is somewhere, I think. Maybe somewhere in Italy. I’m not sure.”

“And your father, is he here at the game?”

“I think so.”

“What do you mean, you think so? What’s your last name, Jimmy?”

“Monday,” I said. “James Monday is my name.” He looked at me funny-like, tilting his head and squinting his eyes. “My mother’s name is Gloria Monday.”

Then he looked at me very carefully, like looking at me was going to help him make a decision “Where do you live, Jimmy?”

“Out near Clifton.”

“On the Monday farm?”

I nodded.

After the game we walked together, stepping down through the stands, and then he stopped and stared. He was looking at Margaret. “That’s my sister,” I said, “and her boyfriend.”

“Oh,” he said, and put his hand on his chest and kept staring. “I should have known.”

The professor walked with us to the bus station. He even waited for the bus with us. He waved to me as the bus drove away.

* * *

When Margaret and I got home Gramma and Grandpa didn't say much of anything. We had to eat real late. At the dinner table it was pretty quiet, which was unusual. Usually, Margaret and I told Gramma and Grandpa everything we had thought and done during the day. Finally, Gramma served us each a slice of fresh apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on it, which, in Iowa, is as fancy as it gets. She served mine last and it was the biggest. Then she sat back at her place at the head of the table and said, “Your father called to tell me that he had met you. You know Jimmy, I have been hoping this would happen someday, but your mother made us promise we wouldn't tell you where he was. I didn't think it would happen this soon, but you figured it out for yourself. I don't care to know how.” That was all she said to me. Then she turned to Margaret, and said, “So, Margaret, where in hades were you when all this was happening at the football game ? ” and Margaret got all flustered and funny.

Then Grandpa said, “All I got to say is that your Gramma told Jimmy's father he is welcome here anytime and Jimmy can go to Cedar City to see his father whenever he wants, but he's got to call him before he goes. And, also startin' right now, I'll be keepin' an eye on you too, young lady. Yessiree.” Margaret and I looked at each other.

* * *

That night, as soon as my grandparent's door was closed and their lights out, Margaret came into my room, sat on the edge of my bed, and whispered, "Aren't you gonna ask me if I did it?"

"Did what?" I said, half asleep.

"Kissed him."

"Well, did you?"

"Yes."

"I knew that. I didn't have to ask," I said. "I saw your silly face when Granma asked where you had been during the game."

"Okay. Well, aren't you gonna ask me how it was?"

"How was it?"

"It was pretty good. We're gonna try again tomorrow."

She went back to her bedroom. Something had changed in Margaret. She had grown more. She was now a lot older than me, doing things I didn't know anything about and feeling things I didn't understand.

The next week, when I went back to school, I realized that I had changed too. I could feel it when I talked to my friends and in class listening to the teachers. I could feel it not just in my mind but in my body or somewhere in myself. The world had changed. Something was over and something was starting. Now Margaret had a life of her own, separate from Gramma and Grandpa and even from me. And I had a life of my own too. I walked down the halls of the school thinking I would kiss a girl someday, probably one of the skinny girls I already knew, when I figured out how to go about it and why. There was no rush. All in good time.

Part Three

ESSAY

Writing About Women

WRITING ABOUT WOMEN

I'm a fiction writer who recently published a collection of seventeen short stories. The book is titled *Women Are Hard to Figure*.

You may remember, in the movie "As Good As It Gets", Jack Nicholson, who plays a writer, is just leaving the publisher. The young female receptionist asks Nicholson a question.

Receptionist: "How do you write women so well?"

Nicholson: "I think of a man and I take away reason and accountability."

You might also remember that he proves himself about as wrong as a man can be, thanks to a waitress played by Helen Hunt. It's a great movie and Helen Hunt plays a woman that I wish I had created. In fact, maybe now and then I steal a few of her character traits.

Writer Yiyun Li in a recent interview in Michigan Quarterly says:

"I wish people would ask me about the importance of the imagination. I really believe that one should be able to imagine being somebody else. This is important for writers, but it's also important for readers, and for all human beings to be able to imagine being somebody else. . . I always love to talk about William Trevor. He's my biggest influence because he imagines the world; he has a very compassionate imagination, which is very rare. I remember in an interview, and when I met him, he said he likes to write about women because he doesn't know what it is like to be a woman. How beautiful that is because that's a real understanding of human nature—to be able to imagine what it's like to be a seventeen-year-old maid in a big mansion."

I wish I had said that.

For me, women *are* hard to figure. If you are not a woman, how do you imagine one?

To me, as a man, women also mysterious, enchanting, attractive, mesmerizing, emotional and endlessly fascinating. Men are none of these things. I feel comfortable, confident and sure of myself around men and nervous, unsure, weak, stupid, insecure and speechless around women. However, I prefer to be around women. Women are amazing.

IMAGINING SISTERS AND MOTHERS

In a story called “Family” in my collection of short stories, *Women Are Hard to Figure*, a woman’s younger sister is dying. The dying sister’s daughter is expecting a child. The dying sister and her daughter ask the older sister not to be just an aunt but a grandmother to the child. This will mean, basically, lying to the child and pretending to be her grandmother. That’s how the story ends. When my son read it, it bothered him because he would think that the mother and daughter would want the child to have a memory of her true grandmother. So, his question is, how could I imagine that a grandmother, knowing she is dying, ask her sister to pretend to be a grandmother to her own granddaughter, in effect erasing herself. And why would a daughter consent to such a plan, to ask her aunt to replace her own mother, to pretend to be the grandmother to her child?

I cannot imagine the story working if it were men—imagined grandfathers. But my imagination tells me that the motherly instinct is at work here and that the motherly instinct strives to protect and comfort the child in its vulnerable years in any way possible. I recognize that it is asking a lot of a woman to make such a sacrifice. But I think a lot of women would do it.

I think it's a good reading of the story to realize what a sacrifice this is. But I hope the reader can make the leap to realize that women have the power and instinct to put the child above themselves.

WIDOWS

In another story from *Women Are Hard to Figure*, titled "The birds of Bristol Court", I deal with drama among widows and widowers. This is a world that I see around me, although fortunately I hope I am a long way from being a widower or my wife a widow.

The women I imagine in this story are devious, competitive and sometimes downright mean. They come out on top in the battle of the sexes. There's no question which sex is stronger. The drama here is in the competition among the women. The men are somewhat helpless and hopeless bystanders. The women lead them around with little difficulty. Perhaps guile is a kind word for some of the widows' behavior.

IMAGINING GIRLS

Some of my stories deal with adolescents and teenagers and the world of coming-of-age, particularly in matters of dating and the early attempts at establishing relationships with the opposite sex. Once again, the women I imagine are very much in charge. They know how to play the game. They make the rules and the decisions. It's not to say that girls or young women are not naïve, but they are fast learners. Their powers of observation are incredible. Their basic instincts far superior. They use their minds more than their emotions. Not to say their emotions are not involved, but women are more apt to know and understand their own emotions than boys or men.

CRIMINALS

Some of the women I imagine are capable of crime, very capable, just as sneaky and dishonest as any male criminal. What differentiates men and women in the area of crime is that in many cases crimes of women are almost excusable, almost explainable, almost with good reason. These are the women I imagine—smart, crafty criminals

CAN'T HELP LOVIN' THAT MAN OF MINE

The women I imagine and some of the girls can often see the good in a bad man. Sometimes they can bring it out. Women can be not only introspective, but in many cases they can see inside of a man things he can't see himself. I have to imagine this. Otherwise, how do you explain what my wife sees in me?

WOMEN IN THE MOMENT

My method or technique in writing fiction is what the writing teachers describe as scene based and character based. In other words, in a story, one scene follows another, or to put it better, one scene leads to another and the stories are about the people who are the characters. My characters are ordinary people in somewhat ordinary situations. Scenes from ordinary life.

In a scene the reader must be there with the characters. I must show the reader, and the reader must see, the room and the people in it, the divan, the ashtray, or the backyard patio with the dappled flagstone or the office with the watercooler that leaks a little. Often, I give the reader access to the thoughts of one or two of the characters, or even her desires and fears. I want the reader to be there, alive, in that moment, and maybe know a little more than the other characters. Every scene has drama and

meaning.

Keep in mind that every day all of us remember certain moments when something happened, something real, something dramatic something beautiful something frightening. Those are the moments that are the scenes. Like a painting, every scene captures a moment in time. In a painting every brushstroke counts. In fiction, every word counts. A story is like real life, except you leave out the times when nothing much happens. (which is most of the time)

I write moments of discovery. I imagine a woman in the moment when she is told her sister is dying, or when it is revealed to a daughter that her suburban mother used to be in the circus, or the moment a woman runs into her ex-husband in a furniture store and watch her react. What does she think? What is the interior dialogue with herself go? The dialogue between her emotion and reason? What does she say to others? Never what she thinks. What makes her cry? What makes her angry? What does she want?

Who knows?

Women are hard to figure.

Peter Obourn
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