

JENNIFER COOPER-BROWN

So to Speak

a feminist journal of language and art

Summer/Fall 2009

So to Speak

Summer/Fall 2009 (vol. 18, no. 2)

Printed on recycled paper.

Submissions, subscriptions, and all other correspondence may be addressed to: *So to Speak*, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MSN 2C5, Fairfax, VA 22030-4444. <www.gmu.edu/org/sts>

ISBN: 978-0-9801309-7-3

Subscriptions: \$7/sample issue, \$12/one year, \$22/two years

Submissions: All work relating to feminism welcome. No more than five (5) poems at a time; all forms invited. Limit fiction to 5,000 words and essays to 4,000 words. Art should be sent electronically (.tif; .jpg; .pdf) to STS@gmu.edu. We welcome collaborations. Include SASE and cover letter. For more detailed guidelines and for contest information, visit our website at www.gmu.edu/org/sts or send SASE. Our reading period is from September to mid-March.

Cover art: Archan Nair, *THE GOLDEN RATIO*.

The editors would like to thank Jennifer Atkinson, all the authors and artists who submitted to our journal, Michele Braithwaite, the Phoebe staff, William Miller, Valerie Martin, the editorial circle that founded So to Speak (Jamy Bond, Sara Brown, Leslie Bumstead, Jean Donnelly, Colleen Kearney Rich, Isadora Lector, Stephanie Muller, and Rebecca Wee), as well as all past editors of the journal.

So to Speak: a feminist journal of language and art is committed to representing the work of writers and artists from diverse perspectives and experiences and does not discriminate on the basis of race, class, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, culture of origin, disability, political affiliation, marital or parental status, Vietnam-era veteran status, or similar characteristics.

So to Speak is published bi-annually at George Mason University. Opinions expressed by authors and editors do not necessarily reflect the official views of the university.

All rights reserved. No material herein may be reprinted by any means, recorded or quoted, other than for review purposes, without the express permission of the authors or artists, to whom all rights revert after serial publication.

So to Speak

a feminist journal of language and art

EDITOR

Jennifer Goldsmith

MANAGING EDITOR

Rachael Lyon

FICTION EDITORS

Norah Vawter

Kirsten Clodfelter

NONFICTION EDITOR

Jennifer Ann Janisch

POETRY EDITOR

Megan Ronan

READERS

Judith Adkins

Allyson Armistead

Lucy Biederman

Sarah Graham

Valerie Lambros

Jessica McCaughey

Kara Oakleaf

Corey Spaley

Eleanor Tipton

Caroline Zuschek

CONTENTS

2009 FICTION CONTEST

WINNER

Rebecca Adams

Poland, 1952 9

FINALIST

Katherine Ayars

Like the Leg of a Y 30

FINALIST

Tara Laskowski

There's Someone Behind You 56

J. Annie MacLeod

Blink 71

POETRY

Lilah Hegnauer

Rain 16

Rain 17

Anna King

Massacre of Light 18

Tricia Asklar

Wake 19

Margaret Bashaar

Dream Theory 28

Her Prophecies 29

Jane Downs

Descent 37

The Return 37

Sara Nicholson

from HYMNAL LEFT IN THE MOUND 48

Jennifer Jerome

Fire at the time factory 51

Katie Manning

Gospels of the Bleeding Woman 69

The Resurrection of Nura 70

CONTENTS

Michael Hood

Retell 77

When You Fell Away To Find Me, 78

I Found Myself Upping And Found You 79

Grace and Savagery

NONFICTION

Cherri Randall

Jaded Green 20

Julie Marie Wade

Triptych of My Mother, Thwarted Thespian, 45

Auditioning for the Part of Her Life and

Triptych of My Father, George Bailey in Another Life

Marcia Aldrich

Woman, Lying Down 80

VISUAL ART

Archan Nair

THE.GOLDEN.RATIO Cover

Marina Bychkova

Untitled 38

Cinderella 39

The Shape Shifter (*Mammalius Kinesis*) 40

Elena the Beautiful 41

Mari Kasurinen

My Little Batman and Robin 52

My Little Joker 53

My Little Storm Trooper 54

My Little Chewbacca and My Little Han Solo 55

FEATURES & CONTESTS

6

CONTRIBUTORS

84

Blink

VJA, 20 January 1977

With a power that pried her eight-year-old ribs apart, Ginny loved her first camera: a boxy Polaroid. A birthday gift, she spent all of her film taking picture after picture of herself sitting criss-cross applesauce in front of her parents' full-length mirror.

As the square tongues poked out, she held each picture close. Her own, round face rose behind the white-circle flashes. She thought it was a bit like a magician's trick—like doves pulled from the air. Ginny frowned, her mother's frown, dramatic as a villain's V. Trying to photograph the breath between focus and shoot, she saw nothing but a brown-haired girl with a starburst face.

Again and again that silver-coin face, the t-shirt that read "Dreamer" but backwards. Until Ginny gave up, thirty of these.

JMC, 8 January 1864

Forty-eight with six mostly grown children and a carnation-faced husband ever working for this commission or that organization (she did not ask), Julia received—so unexpectedly and with such a stillness upon her own round face that she failed to register her happiness—the surprise Christmas gift of the black box. "It may amuse you, Mother," said her daughter, patting her hand, "to try to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater."

First Julia planned—careful plans, step-by-step. She asked Oscar to take her through the entire procedure, garnered his assistance to procure the whistle-clear framing glass, which she cleaned first with wax and then two separate baths in boiled water. Finally it was owl hours for her first attempt, and as the sun turned pink, then pale, Julia kept her eye to the horizon, needing all to be ready before the sky was too far in blue. Eluding her servants to set up the camera, her "caped accordion" as she thought of it (with the air of a villain out of a melodrama), Julia poured gun-cotton and ether onto the glass, just as Oscar had shown her, more wrist than hand, silver nitrate on top of that, light-sensitive—ready to create the whole world over. Carrying it all to her accordion, she had but three minutes to arrest the beauty that came before her. The image snatched from under the cloth, she repeated all that pouring, this time in grain alcohol and ferrous sulfate,

with the smell of a Calcutta fish market, finally fixing the photograph with hypo—discovered a mere two decades earlier by none other than her dear friend Hershel.

Her first subject: the winter wildflower patch behind Freshwater. She had hoped to capture something very beautiful, as sunny and sweet as a child, to find a truth in her camera's voice. Yet Julia herself inadvertently silenced the negative, rubbing her hand over the glass. The flowers and sky and horizon darkened, hardening into a jagged line like a piece of fabric torn in two. That day, Julia did not attempt again.

VJA, 23 April 1979

With her new-used Kodak, Ginny took pictures of her parents' odd things: a salad bowl in the shape of a head of lettuce, an old Miss Piggy alarm clock, an oil painting after some famous photo of Tennyson, thick and orange. She was interested in the shapes, mostly circles, and the colors. The candy-red rims of her mother's mixing bowls as surprising as blood on a towel.

When her prints came back from the Photo Hut, one picture had a bug crushed up against the lens, a small silhouette in the corner of a photograph of her father's coffee mug. Ginny wondered how it got there. Did the bug die at the shutter's release? Was that smudged leg a bit of buggy soul?

Without telling her parents, Ginny smashed bugs on purpose, wetting their guts against the glass. Eighteen rolls of twenty-four exposures, but she never again got that phosphorescent stain—her camera as common and dirty as a late-summer windshield.

JMC, 1 May 1865

The most beautiful old man on earth, yes, but with a sunken loveliness like a dropped plum, as elusive as the seat of the soul. Julia believed in omens, had structured much of her life around her idiosyncratic interpretations of them—she and Charles discovering in their first, strained conversation that they'd both finished the very same novel the previous week (Austen's *Persuasion*), had both been born in Calcutta to fathers who'd failed in the East India Company, and had a mutual antipathy to Bombay sherry (a sure indication, she felt, that they could wear their bodies well together over many years)—and thus it must be a solemn coincidence that Freddy should see her portraits at the controversial Photographic Society Exhibition

and then unwittingly attend a dinner party with her the very same evening at which he had hoped to, as he confided to her, "Go free as a poet," but rather went "Double!" But then their neighboring island properties at Freshwater and their eventual friendship and of course all of his portraits, the repeated heaviness of beard and brow. In life, Freddy's beauty vibrated a room, and yet when she tried one of his thick-ribbed books as a prop or Charles' velvet tam or even, this time, the rough drapery meant to look like a dirty monk, she was left with no more than a glass negative that, despite its weight, made her feel poor—poor and dull against Freddy's rich soul, gorgeous as a pomegranate. Julia so wished to do her duty toward the great man, to record his inner as well as his outer beauty.

An aggregate of sixty-seven portraits, perhaps three passing. None, she felt, good.

VJA, 14 October 1983

Fourteen and almost a sophomore, Ginny was now Virginia Jane, saying it as a single word. Beyond the textbooks, in her backpack she carried three things: a spine-split copy of Judy Bloom's *Forever*, a condom she'd stolen from the box in her father's medicine cabinet, and the Pentax her uncle had given her because he "never used the thing."

Virginia Jane had never been to second base, never even been kissed except by a fish-mouthed boy at a spin-the-bottle game, but she knew how boys talked to pretty girls. She'd heard Dave's "Hey, weren't you at the soccer barbecue?" and Nick's "Hey—how'd you do on that trig test?" Always questions, usually with a "Hey," their voices a little higher than usual and the inflection all wrong, up in the beginning and down at the end.

In the library, in class, in the lunchroom, on the bus, Virginia Jane studied their sideways eyes, their drumming fingers and bouncing knees. She wanted them to want her with pain, as if they'd swallowed bits of glass.

Behind a double-locked bedroom door, Virginia Jane held the Pentax above her own face. Her left hand thumbbed the lens and released the shutter. Her right slipped between her legs. She knew the French called it *la petite mort*, but the pictures she developed in the school's darkroom didn't look like death. Her face was pale, her eyes hooded, plum-dark, but she could have been sleepy or drugged-up on cold medicine. Day after day she died, freeing the shutter at her own small sigh.

One afternoon she cracked the glass on the school's enlarger, put

her finger in her mouth. A small piece of glass scratched the back of her throat. She swallowed, and she felt it catch along her heart.

Virginia Jane burned all of the negatives and contact sheets in her parents' back-porch grill, told her mom it was an experiment for her chemistry class.

JMC, 10 November 1867

"Try to remain fairly still," she said. "Too much motion will spoil it." Julia walked over and loosened Mary's hair, spreading it around the girl's shoulders, dropping the pins in a pocket.

"Pardon me, mum, but no one's seen my hair down since I was a girl." Mary Pinnock came from the North Sea islands, a place Julia had seen but once: wind-whittled in winter, sun-spun in summer with lochs as blue as a mussel shell. Her father was a hired hand at Freshwater, and Mary helped with odd jobs about the glazed fowl-hut that Julia now called her glass house.

Mary's hair was russet, the color of crofter's peat. Yet even in the coffee-colored wash of an albumen print, Julia was sure the hair would hold the shape of red.

After her first success with the daughter of a local—sweet, sunny-haired little Annie—Julia had started taking slightly out-of-focus photographs of numerous girls. When coming upon something very beautiful, she stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus. Old Dodgson had seen her prints at the French Gallery in Pall Mall, had called them "scanty and poor." She knew that phrase by rote.

Yet two mornings ago, through a window of her glass house, she'd glimpsed Mary in the gold of a warm November morning, unwinding her headscarf to fan her hair. Mary had closed her eyes and opened her face to the sun, as wide-warm yellow as the buttercups that Julia knew flooded her native islands each summer. No choice but to be the day, Julia had thought—the sun, the lost buttercups. For a moment, Julia had entered the blood of Mary's hair, and the feeling had felt like a sign.

So many young women, girls she had posed as Beatrice and Alethea and Christabel and Guinevere and Echo and Juliet, but none heavenly, none divine. They remained solid about the jaw, arms heavy as earth. And yet Ophelia, Julia thought. Perhaps Mary as Ophelia, sad but sure.

"Let's try the cloak," Julia said, knowing a rill of sweat would course

down the long bone of Mary's back. "And here. The white roses at the nape of the neck."

Julia worked her larger camera with the Dallmeyer Rapid Rectilinear lens, a clockwork pulse in her ears. The girl's own breath was like a cleaning cloth over a table, back and forth, back and forth. Ophelia—a girl who cast her loveliness into the future. Julia felt a quick rush of love for this Mary, this unknown girl in a rough cloak.

This would be the photograph.

"Try not to move your eyelids," Julia said. "It is best not to blink."

VJA, 5 August 1991

Virginia was Ginny again and took up collodion. "An alternative process" was what her professor called it, but the collodion, the ether—they were controlled substances. A criminal process, more like it. With paperwork and permits, Ginny could get both, but it was cheaper if she bartered a little, and she flat-out smuggled in the grain alcohol, her developer. She had considered switching to cyanide, above-board and close-at-hand. It fixed plates just as well. But there were her professor's stories about wet-plate deaths, photographers who mixed up their drinks with their poison. And in most things, Ginny just wasn't careful.

All through art school, she had photographed the usual suspects. Naked girls, naked boys, chains of paperclips and shiny gas pumps. Now, though—now she photographed the ruined. Bitter end of her senior year, she'd come across an old photograph in one of those coffee-table books, a Hershel-somebody looking positively Einsteinian: startled, rumped. His skull a skin's cage. That moon-pocked chin, those eyes starved wide, April of 1867, but it so easily could have been now. Ginny's own chin, her own wide eyes.

Answering phones during the week, on Saturdays and Sundays she took her black box everywhere. A blasted tree, a washed-out road, furred frost where someone's lips should be. If there was a sour sky, Ginny took pictures. When she accidentally broke the lens of her Victorian camera (so hard to come by), she made her glass negatives anyway. A cracked world.

Today was a Sunday, and Ginny was walking the curve of a crescent-shaped beach, hot as hell. She bent to pick up a shell, running her thumb up inside. Too perfect to photograph, concentric circles neat as a farmer's field. And then the sunset coming on. A postcard.

She set her heavy camera on the dunes and turned back to the

water. Ginny looked—she looked hard and long and without a lens. Blink. The sea as blue-black as a mussel shell. Blink. A far-flung sky, carnation pale. Blink. Sand like powdered buttercups. Blink. The sun, rimmed in red.

Ginny turned to pick up her camera and thought the old thing looked a little like a washed-up accordion, lonely for hands. The broken lens might have been an eye. A Dallmeyer Rapid Rectilinear lens—her professor's words. What had it seen, Ginny wondered. All this? Any of this?

Maybe just this, thought Ginny. This sand, this sea, this sun.

She bent and picked up her black box, its sides hot as an oven's. Taking no pictures but carrying the camera up against her, Ginny continued along the beach, shaped like half a heart.