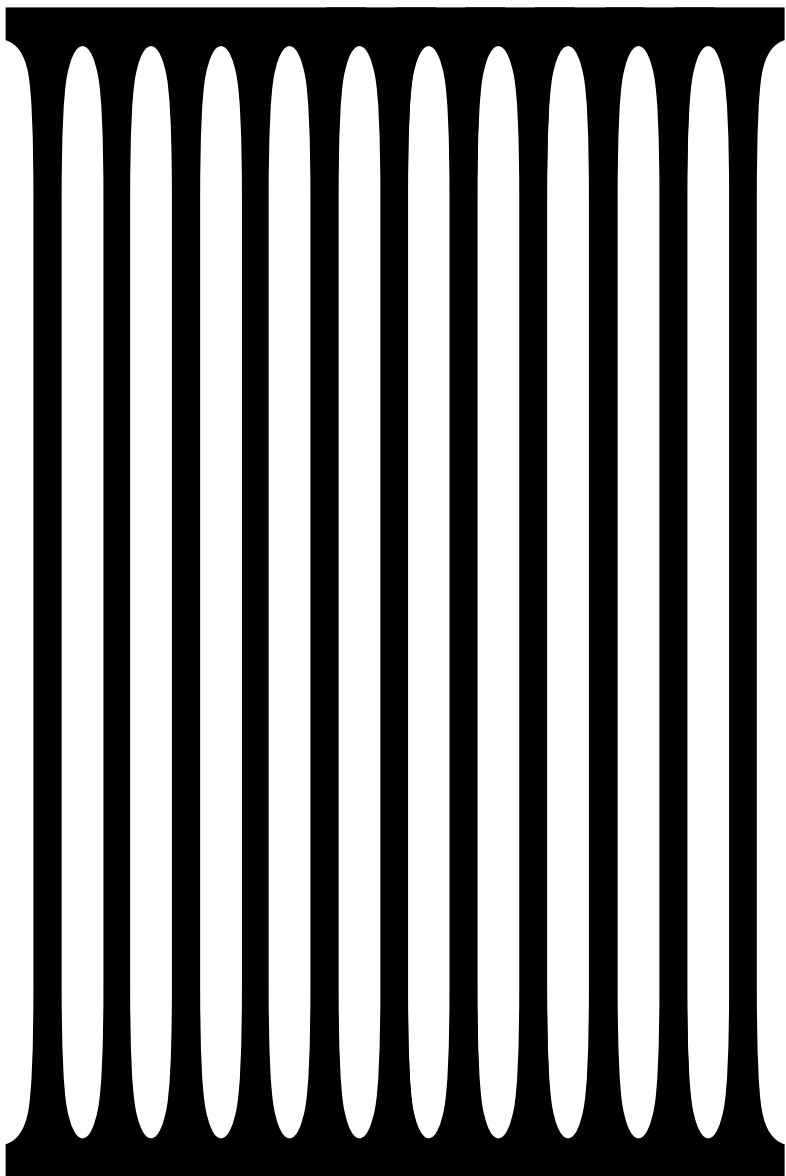


Friends Like These

Francis Whorrall Campbell



Six am in a basement club, several years ago. Tucked with three girls inside a single stall, taking dabs of white crystals—Christie had her snuff spoon (she had once partied regularly), Max used his key—she confessed her conviction that all women shared the same body. Not just all women, perhaps all people. ‘Like, literally: the borders of our bodies are not where they end.’ Directed by Christie’s cupped hand, her hot breath condensed on Max’s cheek.

A declaration. That *démodé* technique of seduction some would call *negging*. ‘That’s just feminism.’

Christie shook her head. ‘We’re interchangeable. Not quite, we’re like, *indivisible*.’ Mercury clumps together into one spherical mass that trembles under its own high surface tension. Max wasn’t thinking of rare metals but of the water droplets misting his ear. They smelt of Christie in a new way from her clothing: her sweat, Max presumed. Christie looked over at the women with whom she shared a cubicle. She had not met any of them before tonight, and yet they stood around her; an arrangement of caryatids on whose shoulders seemed to rest the proof of her theory, embodied as it was to her in this temple to sex and sound. Christie was a lover of women. She recognised these beings as such and she extended her sisterhood duly, as the rules of the temple decreed. Inside religion, physics functions differently. Truths that were decided by Christie’s everyday actions were questioned again, and other credos verbally affirmed: the prince outside was pauper within; the slave, a high priest. Men were like women, indeed, *were* women—conditionally, yet materially so. Even Max was a woman, though Christie would never tell him so, but this was how she could get away with loving him.

Christie observed the girl nearest to her. The others—one black, one white (a white she didn't gravitate to, something Slavic perhaps)—were taller and assuredly more beautiful, but Christie was interested in this plain example of womanhood. The waspy girl wore the darker of the others around her like a shaded arbour, under which a pallid rose grew. *How did they love each other*, Christie wondered. Did they also love each other as two women, as she loved Max, and he (she supposed) loved her? Part of Max's manhood meant that he would never ask such questions. He had learned to accept that what lay behind appearances was none of his business, unless shown otherwise. Friends with this girl and friendly with the others, he knew too much for his soul to be soothed by Christie's doctrine, though he tried to practice her abandonment of sense. He identified in his lover's words an untutored desire to merge with the scene she observed; to not simply add to or replace, but to become a strut in the trellis upon which each virginal blossom might stand proud and offer itself to the God of its nature. He recognised in this wish part of her desire for him; felt them to be part of the same longing. Just as she could be his reminder of what he once was, he could carry her toward what she might be; and to honour that mutual service, he would mark her out as specially chosen above all possible deities. And so, he slipped his fingers beneath Christie's shawl and kissed her.

Poor, sweet Christine. Wannabe-Miss Thing, twenty-nine-year-old juvenile and unashamed, throwing her skinny arms around him, bent at the elbows like twigs. Or, alternately, poor Maxim. Thoughtless sceptic, too neurotic to meet poetry's hysteria, always righteous and critical, in flight with his own obsessions. Each a stereotype,

unfair perhaps, but true. Even at that very moment both were engaged by their own narrations, clipping life into shape like a bonsai (it eventually grows that way itself). Such pruning drew their lives away from that of other people. Looking out, Max incomprehensibly imagined Christie's arms a sparse canopy of branches, stopping at the limits of its own perforated ring. But bonsai are potted trees and can be moved around; one swapped out of its alcove in favour of a more agreeable arrangement.

Someone banged on the stall's aluminium door. The girl Christie thought was short and plain banged back. The outside hand stopped. This was in keeping with what Hope expected, for—despite appearances—she always set the tone of any gathering. Day-to-day, she wielded this power most often in her classroom (she was a research fellow at a prominent university), but as Buddhists are wont to say, *we are all at any given moment someone else's perfect teacher*. Hope might have misremembered the Tibetans, for it seemed to her that at all given moments someone awaited her perfect teaching. A disquisition on ikebana would have followed, for example, had she known Max was dreaming of Japanese trees. If he pruned, she arranged. Experience laid before her a vast, variegated meadow from which she chose judiciously with an eye for the exotic, conjuring from diverse elements a scene of logical harmony which she could show to herself and others to remind them all of life. As with floristry under any flag, Hope's presentations were but a facsimile of the vibrant variety each could encounter outside them. Her will to form often killed its subject quite dead, a petrification she left to others to reverse, which they could rarely do without compromising its beauty.

Because she knew of this tendency to communicate almost exclusively through a collection of readymades, Hope worried that her conversation, like most art of the conceptual variety, was tedious and did nothing to augment her ordinary personality. This worry, as with many narcissistic quibbles, only grazed the surface of truth, as those who sat at the back of her classroom (or indeed beside her in this stall) would have been able to explain. Hope was not boring to her detractors, but rather boorish and controlling—an opinion not allayed by intimacy. But friends forgive crimes of personality more easily, for they know the mitigating circumstances of the defence. It is well within a lover's power to pardon the prejudices which lead to desire, and Hope's lover had accepted and understood what she conveyed upon her collector. Happily, circumstances (and other substances) also conspire such that small cubicles are often occupied by amicable or otherwise impressible sets; so when Hope produced the tiny Ziploc of white crystals from behind inside her bra, it was not with the ostentatious notice that signifies the completion of a private bargain, but a magician completing a new, enthralling trick.

Hope passed the bag first to her lover. This second girl was driven so tight into the bare shoulder of the first that a cartographer would have been hard-pressed to assign the pair different geometric coordinates. Her excessive proximity, more than the cramped architecture necessitated, was ordered by social dictat; a sign of ownership that marked her a notch lower but a relation closer than Hope's girlfriend proper. It seemed the pair were made for each other, for neither Charity did give easily to sharing. Her name was the only magnanimous thing about her, a useless gesture to the kind of person she once aspired to be.

A poetess, Charity lived with her gallerist husband and two dogs. Rather typically metropolitan gentry (the husband, not the dogs), he provided them with an apartment the lease of which had been long in the family. Born in relative—but not absolute—poverty, old habits die hard. Even though Charity had not seen her mother in England in over a decade, it appears that short arms and deep pockets are a genetic trait; albeit one acquired somewhere between sunny Jamaica (the country, not the neighbourhood in Queens) and Peckham, where Miss Durrell had been cruelly conceived—it so happened—on the wedding night of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. Miss Durrell would therefore have certainly approved, if not the nature of her daughter's sexed affirmation, then the means with which she funded it. Her husband sold (across the river to the MoMA) a drawing of Hecate by Vaginal Davis. Afterwards, Charity did not sleep for ten days. To pass the hours between midnight and four a.m.—the witching hours, her mother called them—more prosaically known to Charity now as her only spent alone, between her husband's Ambien and Davide's kibble (the dog, not the husband; Charity was a secret admirer of French neo-classicism)—she invented complex numerical equations which she sought to cross-reference with the patterns of the planes she could see trailing back and forth from Jamaica (the neighbourhood, not the country). When she added up the value of all the vowels in the labelled 'medium'—*nail polish, glycerin, hydrogen peroxide, coconut oil, lip stain, mascara, blush, nail varnish, eyeshadow, make-up pencils, hair spray, perfume, and metallic acrylic on board*—and found them to total that of the flight number of the plane Miss Durrell had vociferously declined to

board last summer, which later crashed into the Hudson en route from Heathrow, Charity promptly vomited down the front of the tee she wore as a night shirt.

Like mother, like daughter. Pride had grown like a tumour on the uvula, allowing only for acidic expulsions of reality which later had to be washed away by soap or by tears. The nasal passages were unaffected, however, and Charity welcomed the chance to partake and to dissolve on contact with the crystals, like red wine stains applied with detergent. Awaiting altered spirits, she flung the bag on to her European sister, but the third girl refused to complete the ritual. Gloria was a lot of things, but petty numbered not among them, and her demurral was supremely uninfluenced by Charity's hasty change of heart. She stood alone, rather apart, unconcerned with public displays of relation. In truth, Gloria preferred to bracket her time as a series of numerous voids; the depths and contents of which were impenetrable, most of all to her. In this particular moment, a fancy appeared to her (and for unknown reasons she honoured it) that she should decline the communal spoils. It was in these insipid intuitions that Gloria located her own mysticism. Because she let herself be taken into them, she presumed them to be powerful, not recognising that the force she acquiesced to was squarely determined between her own two ears. For Gloria believed God was in her ass. Any other sensate organ would have done just as well, but Gloria had a penchant for the heretical, and as the single-minded often do, a wish to increase her heterodoxy. Contrary to the writs of all major world religions, Gloria had developed an avowed credo into which she sought to convert. Saints Catherine and Teresa had nothing on the passion of Gloria, which made

its noviciates wish they were also all on fire with the great love of God, rather than plunged up to the waist in Gloria's frozen hole. To many Gloria was—according to Charity's fruity Britishism—a 'tight arse' even though she had, in fact, received a course of botox in her rectal sphincter to relax the muscle there. A change in her body, not her mentality, was sought, and if any had hoped that the latter might follow, they were disappointed. The ossification of Gloria's personality continued apace, and she lapsed further into a lapidary dispassion occasionally shaken by some deep rumbling of the will.

By interrupting the bag's carousel, Gloria had firmly placed her void within the circle. She was a punctuating gap—a full stop, or perhaps a comma—ending one clause and introducing another. For the pause she introduced into the group's circular choreography provided space for the contrapposto of the whispered words and the kiss. Reflected in the firm particularity of the three women, Christie and Max's intimacy took on the shape of a contrast. How many kisses had been given because of the extra blow? Or as a Chiaroscuroesque solution to the otherwise mid-tones of abstinence? The lovers' collision set another force whirling, rippling through the other three; binding them as witnesses. Each felt their exclusion as accorded with their natures; and at the same time, though they were bound, they slipped through their knots, dissolving into the precious inner image of herself each carried within.

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