

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 13

October 2022

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Benjamin Gebhardt

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Recommended Citation

Gebhardt, Benjamin (2022) "One Spinning Second," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol2/iss2/13>

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One Spinning Second

I have these pictures of my mother. I can remember being suspended by the driver's side seatbelt, looking down at her. Her back was against the passenger door, which was pressed against the asphalt. She was unconscious, but her lower jaw hung open as though paused before telling me something important. Soon blood began to trickle down her forehead from a split just below her hairline and I realized we were in an emergency. But before that, when it was just me looking at my mother about to speak, I felt peaceful, ready to listen. She was wearing jeans, still a deep indigo, and a puffy powder blue coat with chrome snaps. Her hair was a respectable balance of gray and dark brown and a single lock had fallen forward beside her sharp nose. Altogether—at that moment—I thought she looked very rational, maybe even a little bit wise, and then the blood came.

My mother's divorce—that was how I thought of it, something she owned, like a kettle or a purse—occupied no space in my mind and had nothing to do with why I had visited her. I was turning twenty-eight and I went because I worried she was getting loony out on the peninsula, becoming some kind of eccentric. The sort of person you see from your car and feel sure you'll never know someone like that, because all of your friends are so normal, so level. I planned to go as a stabilizing force, a touchstone to the rational world if indeed she was that far gone.

The day of the accident I was angry with her. I was angry with what she was letting herself become and I didn't have the guts to say anything about it. I just smiled as she explained her birdhouses to me. We had finally gotten into the car when she began her discourse. She had chosen this craft as the object of her unraveling; she made and made and made these cubic houses from pine boards, and painted them in solid colors with the

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glossiest paints available—orange, purple, lemon, lime, fuchsia. They looked like fruit chews hanging on the trees in her backyard. If she had been a man, perhaps it would have been young women instead of birdhouses—bright, glossy girls, one after the other—and I might have been okay with that, because I craved something normal, some kind of depravity that was labeled and well known. But the birdhouses disgusted me; I can remember the feeling as she talked to me in the car, feeling sick beneath the anger, like I was somehow implicated by her neurosis.

She made boxes for birds. They weren't houses except by some great abstraction of the term. She had spent the morning cutting a 1x8 into squares. Enough wood for two bird boxes. After two hours I joined her in the garage, watched her trim lengths of dowels for the perches. Her methodic cuts annoyed me. She had a little jig set up to establish the appropriate length, then three slow passes with the Japanese handsaw and another perch dropped onto the workbench. She arranged these as she progressed in two neat rows. I watched for ten minutes not knowing whether or not she knew I was there.

"Hey, why don't you take a break for a bit?"

She wasn't the least bit startled when I spoke. She kept her head down and said, "Let me finish with these dowels, honey, then we can drive to town for lunch."

I nodded and hit the garage-door opener. The gray brightness of a hazy morning drowned out the incandescent light above her workbench. I walked out to the driveway and looked across the road. I had forgotten how thick the forest was around her. Just down from her house two giant cedars seemed to reign over the firs that packed in around them. They grew so close together their foliage was indistinguishable on their adjacent sides. Red, stringy bark encrusted the trunks like barnacles on sea rocks. They seemed as ancient as rocks to me, bark and soft flat needles perpetually sloughing off while their hearts remained.

I drove us in her car that day, an old blue and silver Japanese hatchback with brittle vinyl seats and dull paint. It had started to rain lightly, and the road had gone from gray to a deep charcoal color. I brought the aging car up to speed on the two-lane highway and had to hug the right side of my lane to diminish the blast of air as a truck sped by. There is a sawmill fifteen miles past my mother's house that receives a dozen or so logging trucks a day. They seem to accelerate wildly through this last semi-unpopulated stage of the drive. My mother talked to me as I drove the winding road toward town. The Doug firs were dense on either side of the road, and reached high above the earth—I couldn't see the tops through the cramped windshield.

She started in about the birdhouses again, this time positioning her hands above the dashboard displaying one plane and then the next of her craft pieces. She talked about symmetry and the pros and cons of using knotty pine. It paints well, and she can select pieces with large knots to knock out for the doorway, but it can warp on her unexpectedly, destroying the tidy look she's after. And what was it I felt in my throat as she spoke? Something sickening, confirming, an oily taste that felt like hunger and nausea simultaneously.

Over what? Was I afraid of her hobby? It wasn't the wood-working as much as the way she talked about it. Like I should understand, or rather, understood what she was going for with her craft. My reaction was almost entirely physical, somewhat dizzy, removing me from the actual steering of the car. We were taking a long curve to the right that seemed endless in the thick forest, and the car was edging closer to the centerline. I was vaguely aware of this, but from a distance, from somewhere outside of the vehicle.

The oncoming truck blasted an air horn just as our wheels crossed into the paint. I jerked the wheel to the right and somehow missed the truck. The car was sideways for a split second

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as all four tires lost traction. In a moment they would grip the asphalt and flip the little hatchback into the air for one silent, spinning second before we landed passenger side down, skidding to the side of the road like an upturned brick. Before we went airborne, I remember looking at my mother and feeling guilty as though it was something deliberate I had done. In this picture, she was far away from me. Her eyes were shut and she looked more sad than afraid. Her hands were flat on the dashboard and her posture was apologetic, and then the car lurched violently off the ground.

So I had these two pictures of my mother, like bookends with nothing between them, which I owned now. It was the beginning of really seeing her.

In the emergency room all I could do was focus on what the doctor was telling me. It had taken an hour for my mother to regain consciousness, and apparently she was paralyzed in both arms.

The doctor took me out to the corridor to talk. “I have to say it’s a bit mysterious. The X-rays came back completely normal and show no sign of spinal or shoulder injury. Apart from the obvious, there’s really nothing to indicate any damage was done to the nervous tissue.”

I looked at the door to my mother’s hospital room before responding to the doctor. “Yeah, but the ‘obvious’ is that she can’t move her arms, and she doesn’t feel it when we touch her. So what is that—is this all psycho stuff or what?” I could feel a twisting in my stomach as I thought of my mother’s birdboxes and glossy paints. The doctor had not wanted to talk in front of her. She was that delicate.

“Your mother has what appears to be a psycho-somatic paralysis, which I admit I’ve never seen before. But I have to believe it is temporary—shock related. The psychological trauma of the accident was overwhelming and her mind is choosing

this—temporarily—to cope.”

I stared at him. I wanted to know how long it would take, I wanted to go back to work, I didn't want to be stuck on the peninsula taking care of her like this.

“Her arms will come back Tom; her reflexes are all there...”

I worked at a mechanical engineering firm in Seattle. I rented an apartment in an overpriced brick building a stone's throw from the uptown neighborhood. There was a plethora of clubs, bars and cafés there, whose noise soothed me to sleep at night. Financially speaking I should have been looking at getting into a house, but I loved the hubbub. As a rule I never went, I drank beer at upscale bars downtown before I came home, if I felt the need. I'd sit with my fellow men, my peers—though I was the most junior among them—and talk about sprinkler systems and college football, sewage problems, the horror stories of design flaw. At home, the noise from the populous streets nearby provided an antidote for loneliness while remaining alone. Like a blanket, it filled the space around me until two a.m., when I would fall safely asleep.

I played basketball on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I ran the steep flanks of Queen Anne hill once a week—three times on an especially good week. There were times when I hiked with old friends from college. I had a life to get back to.

My mother didn't know anyone on the peninsula very well. She had moved out there five years ago and never made any friends, never saw the need I guess. She had consigned herself to a state of meditative loneliness, and now I was going to have to pay for it. We were released after six hours at the ER. The doctor gave me the number of a physical therapist to call if her arms weren't back in a couple of days.

We sat on a concrete bench waiting for a cab to show up. The doctor had put her coat back on for her and we sat side by side without talking. Her arms hung into her lap, palms out on

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the thighs of her jeans. I watched her hands, anticipating movement.

“You trying to move them?”

She shook her head slowly, without speaking. I thought about her birdhousing. My dad had a complete woodshop in the garage when I was growing up. He wanted to teach me everything he knew along this line, and I remember many Saturdays spent listening to him drone on about safety with the power tools. We always wore plastic eye goggles and dust masks. We pushed boards through the table saw together, slicing long thin strips off the sides. It’s called a rip when you cut a board parallel with the grain. My mother and father ripped apart this way.

My mother would flick the lights off and on when she wanted us to come in for lunch, rather than try to make herself heard over the saw. I always thought it annoyed her—all the cutting, the dust, and the long hours of concentrated silence. It all seemed intolerable to her. It was for me. When I made it to high school I realized I could decline my father’s invitations and I never joined in again. He was a fabulous wood worker. He made a rocking chair one summer, and even carved the back-board with a kind of sunburst that was perpetually rising or setting in a choppy sea. But there was a tyranny in it too. His rules, his decisions: he didn’t take suggestions. I envied my mother for never having to be subjected to the repetitive teachings on tool maintenance and respect for your materials. She was smart about it. She would flick the lights and by the time I looked up she was gone. Which is why I was surprised to find her so taken up with the birdhouses. If I ever thought about it, I thought carpentry was one of the reasons she left. I never asked.

I fixed a can of instant soup and spooned it into her mouth for dinner. The silence between us was thick. It seemed to emanate from her lifeless arms and fill the house. The paralysis

wasn't real. The doctor had said that. *Move your arms, Mom.*

I wasn't in the habit of drinking tea but I was struck with a memory of my mother drinking tea and reading late at night, so I offered. I fumbled in her kitchen, finding the right accoutrements, feeling sudden washes of familiarity when I came across old utensils so that opening drawers in there was like looking through a photo album. The teapot was one of their wedding gifts. It had a copper bottom and a black plastic lid spring-loaded over the spout. It was the kind where the spout is the only opening. As I filled it with water I realized that in all my life, I'd never done that. Never held back the lid, never had to peer in and listen for the rising pitch as the water filled in the dark space.

I tipped the cup to her lips. She blinked when she'd had enough. We didn't speak to each other; we focused on the physical task. I helped her change into her pajamas, undressing and dressing. These things I hadn't thought of. The bra. The toilet. I wiped her, pulled up her pants. I told myself she had done this for me. I told myself I did this to her.

Her silence seemed inscrutable to me as I lay awake in the guestroom. The pictures came back to me then. My mother apologetic. My mother wise and wounded. The bookends with dark space between them. My frailty in the face of all this: the trembling water of her teapot, rising in pitch.

We had come home from the hospital Saturday night. It was Monday before my mother got out of bed. I called my work and the elementary school where she was a nurse, and told them what had happened: I was stuck, she was stuck until further notice. I wasn't planning on waiting long.

I called the physical therapist immediately after we ate breakfast. The earliest I could get an appointment was the end of the week but they said to move her arms as much as possible in the meantime, for circulation. I looked at her when I hung

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up the phone. She was slumped on the sofa, still in her green pajamas—darkened at the chest from where I spilled a spoonful of cereal on her and had to clean it with a wet sponge. Her arms looked boneless at her sides.

“The PT said we should move your arms around so your lymphatic vessels will keep going and the tendons and all that. Here.” I crouched in front of her and lifted her arms up and down like she was dribbling basketballs. “Can you feel that?”

She shook her head and sighed, watching her arms swimming in front of her. Her lips curved into a smile and she said, “This is ridiculous, Tom.”

I ignored her; I wanted the whole thing to be over. I kept going, watching her shoulder joints and then her eyes, half-expecting her arms to kick-start from the movement. After a minute I stopped and said, “Unless you have a better idea, I think we’ll just have to do that once in a while.”

She nodded and turned toward the window. There were maybe two-dozen birds scattered on the yard and among the fir trees, scouting out what remained of the seed. Where the Stellar Jays perched on some of the orange enameled cubes, their bright blue bodies crackled with contrast. She watched the birds come and go between the forest and the many colored boxes for the rest of the day.

I watched TV and shook her arms out once an hour. There was nothing else I could do. After dinner I couldn’t take it anymore. She seemed too complacent, like she wasn’t even trying, just watching the birds. I bent at the waist and grabbed her wrists, dragging one at a time into the air. She glanced at me and then looked back to the darkening forest.

I threw her arms down and said, “Come on Mom! There is nothing wrong with your arms. Everything’s connected okay? You have to do this with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong except I can’t move them, you mean?” She looked around the house, appealing for support. “I don’t

care what the tests say, I can't make my hands move. I tell them to over and over and they lay there like they don't know me." She leaned forward as she talked and then heaved back against the couch between her motionless arms.

It was all I could do not to yell at her. "Look, Ma," I growled, "I need to go back to work and so do you. Stop watching the damn birds and try to move your arms. You are not paralyzed. It's in your head." I pointed at my head for emphasis and glared. My father made this gesture, usually indicating something was inexplicably crooked in the person he was talking to. She recognized it before I did.

She turned and caught a Flicker taking off from a lemon-yellow box, the last one visible in the encroaching night. She continued looking at the windows, now nothing more than dark mirrors reflecting her living room. She said, "Tom, those birds are free in a way that you and I can never understand freedom. I try to approach that. I'm trying to learn something, okay?" She was looking at me in the black reflection of the window. "If you want to be like your Dad, that's fine. But you'll never get to be you, and someday you'll want to."

My stomach twisted, bilious and tight. "What are you talking about, Ma? I'm not the one with a woodshop in my garage making stupid bird boxes!" My heart thumped audibly as I spoke to her; I could feel the blood flaming up my neck. All the disgust swelled up in my head and I wanted to kick something.

My mother's face trembled; the rest of her was motionless. "Thomas, you will not speak to me like that in my house," there were tears on her face now, "you don't even know what you're talking about—how could you? You never even bother to think about it!" She shook her head to get the tears from her eyes, sending ripples down her dead arms. "It's true. I miss him. I'll never be the same without him. He's good at things, Tom."

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I was silent. Suddenly her divorce had ripped open the ground beneath me, and I fell in. It was a place she'd been before; I could see that. A place she'd climbed out of once, that I never knew was there. It lay beneath me these many years and now swallowed me up. I had to keep an eye on her for balance, the living room was threatening to spin upside down. She continued to talk and cry.

"But he's not good with me alright? He'll never be good with me. Never." And here she began to bounce her hand on the seat cushion beside her while she sobbed, "never, never, never," and she was gasping for air, wiping tears from her eyes with her delicately thin, calloused fingers. She looked at the ceiling and swallowed, wiping her fingers on her shirt.

I saw that her arms were working again, but I was too overwhelmed to speak. I backed away from the couch and left her there, my mother breathing heavily, looking up. I found myself outside on the granulated asphalt of her driveway. I shivered in the wet dark, facing the trees. They spread out beneath the vast clouded sky like a cold multitudinous army. The cedars and the firs. It seemed to me that there were not enough trees in the world to fill the space around me.

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