

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 6 | Issue 2

Article 42

January 2007

Doing Fence

Meg Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Meg (2007) "Doing Fence," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 42.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol6/iss2/42>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Thompson: Doing Fence

DOING FENCE

Meg Thompson

Those Mornings, Before We Did Fence

When the day was still new, still cool, we already guessed we'd go to bed with sunburns tight on our shoulders and necks. All of us sisters: fair-skinned with strangely placed freckles. Flecking the lips, inside our ears. Carrie and I have red hair. Amy and Rachel, younger than us, are dark blondes, about the color of wheat. After breakfast, we passed sunscreen around the kitchen, slathering it on each other's hard-to-reach places. The room filled with the scent of cocoa butter. Even today, whenever I smell sunscreen, I think of our kitchen, the palms of my sisters' hands thick with lotion, slapping it on my back. We've all had burns that blistered, we've been afraid of the sun. I remember our daybreak mantra as summer heated up: *Don't trust the cool, it's August*. When we all lived at home, our low-pitched voices filling the rooms, it was so easy to talk to each other.

Now, mornings in my own kitchen, I notice how small a room it is, how quiet and empty. I wash dishes. My fingertips soften and crinkle like laundry in the warm, lemony water. My nails are clean, pink-white, and I miss, strangely, using a hairpin to scrape out the grime that built up when I pried fence posts loose from the earth, carried them in a bouquet of long, dirty poles to the bed of a pick-up. I rinse a mug and gaze out my window to a wide sea of gravel, the parking lot. It's a sea that slopes into a steep hill, like most terrain in West Virginia. For a half-moment I hate that I grew up on a farm, how I had the luxury of opening the door and running for a minute in any direction, knowing the land belonged to us. I can't do that anymore, and when I long for a yard, I dry my hands, press both palms to the small of my back and lean, stretch, in the newborn morning. I think about where I will move to next, what the weather will be like there, if I will be far away. I think of my sisters. Our bare feet on the kitchen's stone tile, the sun just beginning to warm up

the house. Women in the morning. Our legs unshaved, hair unwashed. No bras. Our mom raised us to be feminists, but I think she regrets it. Now she calls Carrie, Amy and me every week to read engagement announcements from the newspaper. Rachel, a senior in high school and the only one still at home, listens from the kitchen table while she does her physics homework. Sometimes I hear her make a sarcastic remark, but our mom, a farmer who wants grandkids more than a retirement plan, is not deterred. Sometimes when she calls I cite divorce rates, the statistics, how it has become more common nationwide to wed *later*. Sometimes I let it go. Our dad, less vocal, only had to say once, in his small, deep voice, his lips barely off the coffee mug, that he wouldn't mind holding a baby again, for my staunch feminist principles to dissolve. I ached, for a minute, anyway, to be pregnant.

The summer after Carrie graduated high school, she surprised us all and moved to Charleston, South Carolina, for a degree in culinary arts from Johnson & Wales University. All I need is a hint, the smell, ham and cheese sandwiches searing in the broiler and I remember how she used to make us lunch every day, hair in a loose braid over her shoulder. The day after Carrie left Ohio, our mom, arms crossed and gazing out the window to her eighty head of sheep milling in the field, said she would never let any of us leave the state again.

Our Family has a Hard Time Understaing Boundaries
We have such a hard time our livestock might as well be free-range, because the fences we make never seem to work. There is even a popular family joke that asks where mom is. The punch-line is: doing fence.

According to my rough calculations, our mom has spent years of her life setting up fences, dividing fields to keep livestock in and coyotes out. She is, still, terrible at it, as are the rest of us. In addition to not being able to build them, we also can't remember where they are. How many times did I run full-force into an electric fence playing hide-and-go-seek? My body stilled

Thompson: Doing Fence

in the bend of the wire and a current surging from my waist, a jolt like cinching your belt too tight.

About once a month someone knocked on the door to tell us the sheep were out, the pigs were out, the cows were out, or there was a flock of white geese in a huddle on the road that didn't want to move. Sometimes the person would help us shepherd the flock back to their home. I remember a woman in high heels running through the barnyard because she feared for the life of the pretty, pink hog she saw ambling along the side of the road. When she got back in her gleaming, black Mercedes, she didn't seem to care about the clumps of manure on the bottom of her shoes, and I suppressed the urge to ask where she'd grown up.

Sometimes I wonder if we weren't that bad at building fences, but our livestock was just particularly clever. Then I think about the logic of sheep. With no way to defend themselves, they are afraid of everything, even water with ripples in it. Once my mom told me that when barns catch on fire, the animals have to be forced out. They don't want to leave. They can sense panic, but the barn represents safety, even when it's being destroyed. I wanted to ask why then, if our animals so loved their home, they were always trying to get away from it.

I have a thousand memories of running down the road, laughing, my arms stretched wide, to guide sheep back into their pasture. We come from generations of farmers. Our mom can take one sweeping look at a flock and tell you which ewes have worms; which have full, meaty loins; which are pregnant and likely to prolapse. And once, when our dad broke his leg he devised a pulley system on his tractor so he could still get himself up into the seat. During the blizzard of '78, the white-outs were so bad, so constant, he tied rope from the garage to the barn, following it hand-over-hand so he wouldn't get lost in the fierce, white wind. But we can't build a straight, reliable fence line, string a length of wire through a row of posts, to save our lives.

There were times, usually when it was raining, that I wished we could figure out how to keep our animals in. But most of

the time these escapes made me feel happy, even lucky. I would be mowing the lawn, circling around and around our house, when a pack of baby pigs would dart out from behind the lilac bush and sprint down the driveway, their tiny hooves in a whirl of dust and stones. I couldn't hear myself over the whir of the motor, but I told them to run. Go, I said, just come back sometime and visit.

At Heart, I am a Hypocrite

I am also a homebody, but for some reason I love to talk about rootlessness. I say that I would move anywhere, but what I really mean is I would move anywhere in the Midwest. Part of the reason is the climate, another is I just can't drive over certain fences.

Sometimes I think the only reason Carrie could leave Ohio was because she never got her driver's license, so she didn't have to leave by herself. Our dad went with her, drove the 700 miles to her apartment in Charleston and dropped her off. I could never do that. I need the weather of each season, every year. I need to know that where I live, I will watch the season melt into another and overlap. The idea of having nine winter months out of the year, or even summer, makes me uneasy. I need, also, the greens, the acres of alfalfa shaking in the breeze, trees I can't fit my arms around, and deep, healthy grass. The first time I saw Spanish moss, swaying gray beards in the streets of Charleston, I felt strangely betrayed and never so glad to live in Ohio.

I visit Carrie at least once a year. I know the trip by heart, and it takes me about ten hours. Last October, I went down because she needed my signature. She was applying for a passport, and because she never got her license, she needed an immediate family member to come to the post office with her, present a valid driver's license, and sign a document promising she wasn't a terrorist. We sat in the Charleston post office for an hour and a half, just waiting for the family ahead of us to get their passports. When it was our turn, it somehow took 25 minutes for me to write my name and Carrie to pay \$200. It occurred to me how

the U.S. Government is similar to our mom, desperately trying to keep us home and making us feel guilty when we finally trample the fences, leave, and on top of all that, fail to reproduce. That last one is probably more societal than governmental, though.

After the papers were signed, we went to eat at a French restaurant. Carrie wanted to take me to a place I'd never been. When I opened the menu, I searched, instinctively, for something inexpensive and familiar. I tried to order a ham and cheese sandwich with a Miller Lite but she wouldn't let me.

"Get something you've never had before," she said.

Carrie and I both think the other one is daring, adventurous. She thinks I am because our phone conversations often begin with where I recently visited: Chicago, Lansing, Madison, Shenandoah, Washington, D.C. And it's true, sometimes I just pick up and go, but I don't like to leave for long periods of time. When she asked me if I would come down so she could get her passport, I said yes, immediately, without even thinking about it. The places she travels to are richer, more wondrous: Amsterdam, New Orleans, Disney World. She has told me she doesn't want to live in Charleston forever, and I believe her.

I ordered a salad with shrimp and scallops. We drank raspberry rickeys and got drunk in the middle of the day. When we walked home I threw my bare arms in the air and raved about wearing a tank top in October. At the time, I thought I could live like that. I said I wanted a house on the beach and to wear flip-flops year-round, but it was just the moment. I didn't mean it.

One Time We Were Doing Fence Along Biggs Road
It was mid-day in August, everything soft with heat, our freckles dark orange from the sun. In two years Carrie would be in South Carolina learning how to make flowers out of cake frosting.

A mile of Biggs is surrounded by our fields. In the summer, the road is a warm, gray ribbon, burning straight through a field of yellow-green. Underneath the road, half a mile from the railroad tracks that cut across the fields and divide Biggs Road, is a dry, rusty tunnel just wide enough for the squirming bodies

of the two who lost the coin toss, Amy and me.

First we shut off the electric fence. One flick and all the wires connected to that power source lost their juice. Using the tunnel, our job was to link up the fence in the south field to the fence in the north field. Amy stood in the south field, I stood in the north. With one hand we waved to each other, pretending we were far away, though it was only 20 feet. With the other hand we each held onto our respective wire. Carrie and Rachel watched for cars, told us when to go. We didn't want to be in the tunnel when a car passed above us.

Go.

My sisters' voices sounded so calm in unison. But we're all like that, terribly calm, even when we don't have to be. I got down on stomach and elbows, started writhing through the tunnel, wondering about the lives of earthworms and moles. This, I thought, is why farmers have lots of kids. They need small bodies to crawl around under roads. I kept a fierce grip on the wire, which was insulated in case it touched the walls of the tunnel after we turned the fence back on. I could barely see Amy's body wriggling through the half-dark. As we got closer, I could make out her face. It was smeared with rust. She must have wiped her forehead with her arm. Her eyebrows looked singed, rust streaked down her cheeks like dark tears, and I started to laugh.

It took us four tries before we were able to connect our wires. The first two times it was Amy who lost her grip and the wire zipped back out of the tunnel. We crawled, backwards, into the sunlight. I thought about birth. The third time it was my fault. I claimed delirium, but really I wanted to do it again. I wanted to make my childhood last as long as possible. I wanted to keep all of us together, even if they were mad at me for making them stand out in the sun, even if crawling in and out of that tunnel meant it would take days to wash the rust out of my hair. I didn't want it to end, but I learned, crawling underneath the road, imagining the earth rumbling with the weight of passing cars, that when you finally make contact, hook one line of fence

to another and twist them, more tightly than necessary just for good measure, you should be glad the other person wanted to meet just as much.

Sometimes All My Sisters Call Me On The Same Day

It makes me feel like I'll never need to eat, grocery shop, walk slowly through each aisle wondering what I don't have. It's not planned; it's not every Wednesday after it gets dark, or every other Sunday afternoon. It happens, like waking up happens. Amy calls Carrie. I call Rachel. Amy calls me. Rachel calls Carrie. It lasts the night. By 11:30 my ear is damp and red, my shoulder aches from squeezing the phone to my cheek so I can wash dishes with both hands. I rummage through my kitchen for soft, noiseless foods, so I can eat without distracting them: yogurt, raisins, and when I'm desperate, marshmallows. Their voices drift into me like radio songs. I imagine them at their homes doing the same things. I walk around my apartment, grazing the walls with my fingertips. I sit on the futon with my legs tucked up under me. I sprinkle fish food in the tank, watch Allison and Jealousy, a painted glass and a tetra, flutter to the surface, their sheer bodies thin as dimes. We are content, for hours, talking about nothing.

"I wore that sweatshirt you gave me."

"The one that says *Proud to be a Farmer's Daughter*?"

"Yeah, big hit with the ladies."

"You mean Mom."

Our favorite conversations, those rare times when we're all home, Christmas, a week in the summer, revolve around pointing out who is most like Mom, who is most like Dad. Rachel chews gum a half-stick at a time. She is like Mom. Amy's good at math. She is like Dad. The one way we all differ from our parents: we lack their ability to tan. Our dad's farmer's tan: a sight to behold. Our mom's tan, less strange, covers more ground because of her shorts and sleeveless shirts, clothing items our dad has never owned.

I Never Believed My Mom
When She Said We Couldn't Leave Ohio

At the end of the summer, Rachel will leave for a college she's yet to choose. She and our mom have been traveling, visiting schools, sitting in auditoriums to listen to financial aid seminars, Mom whispering to other parents at every one: "I could *teach* this class by now." Secretly, I want Rachel to go to my alma mater, Muskingum College, because I selfishly want someone close by. She would be only two hours away, right off I-70 in New Concord, Ohio. A dry town, hills swelling the landscape. It is a drive I would make in the fall anyway, to see the leaves burning yellow and orange, falling off trees and sweeping across the fields like flames.

Amy will graduate in two years from Kent State, a university 40 minutes from the farm. She plans to move west. She started in art education, but she dropped it for fine arts with a focus in printmaking. No one was teaching her how to teach a kid to draw, just how to teach inoffensively and multi-culturally so she wouldn't get sued. She saw her future: a closet full of crafty, holiday-inspired sweater vests, drawers brimming with ruler socks. I imagine her as a museum curator, hands clasped behind her back, gazing around a room of Warhols. Over the phone she tells me that in her sculpture class she is building two sheep, one out of steel wool, one out of lamb's wool sweaters. I asked her what she would use for the eyes.

"It won't have eyes. It's just a form."

I didn't understand. The thought of a fake, blind lamb depressed me. It wouldn't be able to stare. I imagined it running into the walls of some art gallery, trying to get outside.

I like to know at all times where the walls and fences and boundaries are, but sometimes, deep in the lull of highway driving, contemplating mileage and when I need to stop for gas, I pass over state lines without even noticing. There isn't a jolt like the one I used to experience playing hide-and-go-seek. I move from one landscape to the next, knowing the mountains are softening, or rising, depending which direction I'm headed.