

THE PENIS GAME

The Harpur Palate Prize in

Creative Nonfiction Runner-Up

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At Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic School, there was no health class. There was instead a morning when Brother Benjamin took all of the boys into the Parish Hall basement and told them things I didn't understand about how sometimes they'd go to sleep and wake up wet. Mrs. Mallard took the girls into a room in the library none of us knew about, like a secret passage in a mystery movie. She opened a door that looked like part of the wall and made us sit in even rows. The room smelled like the cotton balls and swabs a doctor used. She showed us a video of what was supposedly the inside of our bodies, the pink and red and purple tubes twisting up and around each other like the climbing bars on the playground. According to the video, some tubes sent out eggs like small balloons

and others caught the balloons with even tinier tubes that looked like fingers without hands. Sometimes the tubes grabbed the balloons, which became what at first looked like the pictures of chickens inside of eggs in our science books but later looked like a see-through baby. Sometimes the balloon made it all the way down the tube that made its way out of our bodies and escaped. Then, Mrs. Mallard said, we would bleed, and hard. It would hurt. We would have to stick a cotton pad into our panties. Some people would tell us we could stick a cotton tube, called a tampon, into one of our tubes, but we shouldn't. Betsy asked Mrs. Mallard why and she said it would mean we needed to go to confession, so no one asked anything else.

After the video we met the

boys in the Parrish Hall. No one looked at anyone. We were all very relieved when the lights went out, even though it meant a slideshow, which probably meant a quiz, too. I poked the blue end of my pen into and out of the threads that wove around each other to make my shoelaces. I looked up when I heard the first slide click into place. On the wall, a wash of white and blue light turned into a photograph of what Mrs. Mallard said were aborted fetuses, pulled to limbs and lying in messy red stacks in buckets. I felt my stomach inside of me and it felt like the time I pushed my body too far up on the swing set. I couldn't look up anymore. I sat and looked at the plastic tube that curled around the end of my shoelace. The wall flashed bright and then dark above me. Sometimes I could see some red and I felt my stomach again.

This is what I knew about growing up: you would bleed and it would hurt, and if you used a tampon to stop it, you weren't a virgin any more. This is what I knew about sex: it was made to make babies, and once you made a baby, you should leave it in your body until it was finished. The girls

in my neighborhood knew more, the ones who didn't go to Catholic school, whose health teachers showed them videos with titles like *Where Do Babies Come From?* and *What Is Happening to My Body?* They wore flavored lip-gloss and turned their shellacked lips upward at me, as if they could only smile in pity at me because I didn't know the secrets they'd been told.

At their houses, I tried to learn, watching cassette after cassette filled with movies my mother wouldn't let me watch, rated PG-13 and sometimes even R. The movies all had the same series of scenes. First: a man and a woman touched faces at their opened mouths. Second: a door closed, or a finger and a thumb turned the lamp's switch. The screen went black. Third: the man and the woman lie in an unmade bed. There were always cigarettes. Sometimes the ashtray sat on the bed between them. Sometimes there were two ashtrays, one on each nightstand. I understood that this was the sequence of events but didn't understand what happened in the dark to mess the bed up and make the man and the woman need a cigarette even if they didn't smoke through

the rest of the movie.

Nicole was the undisputed queen of these secrets because she had blonde hair and budding breasts underneath her training bra, a kind of half-tank-top with padding inside that she liked to show off by pulling up her shirt, shrieking, and then yanking it back down. She lived in the house down the street held up by four white columns which my mother said were tacky because they were just there to show off how rich they were, with a swimming pool and a trampoline in the backyard. All of this should have made her popular, but the neighborhood girls hated her for her columns and trampoline and pool and, worst of all, her training bra. Plus, she had moved to Alabama from somewhere up North and didn't know to put ice in her tea or call any of our mothers *ma'am*, and because no one else talked to her, she decided to talk to me.

After school I'd pull on my jelly shoes and walk the asphalt to knock on the door positioned perfectly in between the two sets of columns. When she opened the door, I'd smell the dusty perfume of flowers and berries from the brass bowls of potpourri that sat on every

end-table in the house, curled shavings of wood dyed mulberry, small pinecones, flat seedpods with wide circles emptied of seeds. Then I'd smell something sweeter, bordering on sickening – Nicole's body spray, the purple kind that the middle school girls would hide in the front pockets of their book bags and spritz under each arm pit after gym. Smelling good, Nicole taught me, was almost as important when it came to attracting boys as growing breasts and wearing a training bra to prove you have them. If a boy told you that you smelled good, you were to blink a few times in quick succession, then smile – just enough so that he could tell you were smiling but not so much that your braces showed – and as you said thanks, you had to lean in towards him. If you followed the steps and positioned yourself correctly, the boy would simultaneously smell your Flirty Freesia body spray and be able to look down the unbuttoned collar of your polo shirt to see the bric-a-brack edged training bra beneath. In that moment he would know you as a woman, a woman with breasts, a woman he should be in love with, both hopelessly

and helplessly. I was technically not allowed to wear perfume, but I told myself that technically it was body splash and spritzed it on my wrists and neck the second I got to Nicole's room, even though there were no boys around except sometimes John and Benjamin Robertson, who lived two streets down and high-fived every time their hamster ate another set of its babies.

Nicole and I spent our afternoons jumping on her trampoline. Usually she would flip up her shirt towards the neighbor's fence when she jumped. She said she did it because she could, because the only person who could see was Theodore, the Henderson's Alaskan Malamute who stayed busy by walking one length of fence, barking, turning slightly, then walking another length of fence. I knew better. I knew that Benjamin Robertson sometimes took a break from feeding his hamster its own babies and walked Theodore while the Hendersons were at work, and sometimes he would stay in the backyard to play fetch with Theodore, which meant throwing a stick at his muzzle so he shook his head and blinked a couple of times.

Benjamin pretended that he didn't see Nicole as Nicole herself pretended she didn't see him and didn't hope he'd see her and her brick-arched bra.

She flipped and twirled her body. I let my knees fold below me but kept my eye on the sod outside the trampoline, careful to not bounce too close to the edge I once fell onto, hitting my pubic bone with a silver-up-the-spine-to-the-eyes-inducing force. We were playing the penis game, which started when her mother walked over from the pool and announced that she had sweated enough for one day and asked if we could avoid breaking any bones or laws long enough for her to shower. We said *yes* in unison, though I added a *ma'am*, and Nicole's mother pointed at me and said, "Nicole. Hey. Manners." Then she wrapped a beach towel over her body and the bikini it wore, a fuschia hibiscus stretched over each breast, and left a line of wet footprints to the door that let her into the house.

We bounced slowly to the edge of the trampoline where we stood, heads pointed toward the door, until Nicole whispered it: *penis*. The idea was to say it

louder – *penis, penis, penis* – and louder each time until you were too chicken or got in trouble or had to stop because you were screaming it in the kind of wide-mouthed scream that hurt the back of your throat. I almost always lost because I was almost always scared. Nicole never was. She could scream penis so loud that I was afraid my own mother could hear down and across the street, and so I had to sacrifice myself to avoid being grounded for a month with no Nintendo or library visits.

“I don’t give a shit if mom *does* hear,” she said. “Then at least she’d pay attention to me instead of, like, licking my sister’s butt all the time.”

“That’s the kind of thing you read about in books, Nicole,” I said. “People doing bad things just to get attention.”

She stopped bouncing and stood for a second, moving slowly up and down with her head leaned to one side and her eyes slid to the sky. “Maybe,” she said. “You don’t have a sister, though. So you don’t get it.”

That seemed fair, so I nodded. We both started jumping again.

“She doesn’t really lick her

butt,” I said.

“She might as well, she loves her so much.” She opened her mouth as wide as she opened it when she screamed, stuck her tongue out until it curved over her bottom lip, then moved her head around and closer to my face.

“Gross meow.” I ran-jumped as close to the side of the trampoline as I dared. She made one big leap towards me then folded her legs so she fell in the center and bounced me upwards. One foot landed on the wire springs that held the fabric to the pipes. I yelped and she laughed.

“Pussy,” she said, holding her fingers up in a V and poking her tongue in between them.

The one time I was allowed to spend the night at Nicole’s, we ate dinner at a Mexican food and bar-b-que restaurant called Pancho’s and Charlies, which was one of the few places her little sister Ashley could eat because they served both quesadillas and chicken fingers, the only two foods without marshmallow filling or sour sugar she ever agreed to eat. Nicole’s mother was a dental hygienist and as we studied the combination platters she

told us about the girl whose parents only fed her off-brand Skittles and full-sugar Sam's Choice sodas. She hated brushing her teeth so much that she kicked her father in the face when he leaned down to put the brush in her mouth himself, so her parents gave up on brushing her teeth at all.

"Every single tooth was rotted," Nicole's mother opened her own mouth wide and pointed inside it. "Every. Single. Tooth." When the waiter came, she told Nicole's stepfather and us that she wasn't driving and wanted a margarita the size of a fish bowl.

"I would like one of those, too, please," Nicole said, and Ashley nodded. They both said please and please and please until her mother rolled her eyes to her ceiling and lifted her index finger.

"One sip," she said, "but only one – and Emily, if your mom would let you, you can have one too." I shook my head and didn't open my mouth. I was afraid if I did one or both of two things would come out of it: vomit, or else the words which were behind the urge to vomit, the memory of my father and I in the backyard cleaning out my fish bowl with a hose, the curled strings of

fish shit, the dirty bath-tub smell of it. I ate a quarter of the burrito I ordered and listened to my stomach push against itself the whole dinner, the whole drive home, the whole time Nicole's mother stood in front of the linen closet, humming the song Frankie sang about relaxing and filling her arms full of Family Game Night Games.

"You two enjoy these and stay up here, and for the love of God let Ashley play if she asks you, for once." Ashley shouted from her room that she didn't want to play with us and Nicole shouted back that that was just fine, assface, and Nicole's mother closed her eyes for a second, during which she apparently decided not to get anyone in trouble but instead to start singing Frankie's song – "Relax, don't do it, when you want to go to it" – and walk downstairs. Both Ashley and Nicole slammed their doors after her.

I took Connect Four out of the box. It was a game I didn't understand and Nicole said was lame anyway, so I made it into an art challenge, sliding in coins in patterns of black and red. Nicole lay stomach-down on her bed and propped herself upwards on her

elbows so that you could see the curves of her barely-there breasts through her shirt's V-ed neck. She gazed with rapt attention at the notebook in front of her and at the pen in her hand, the too-thick kind that would write in all different colors if you pushed a button and sent down the right tube of ink. She would write, push the pink button, write, push the purple button, and even though I couldn't see the page in front of her, I knew what it said: "Nicole + Benjamin = 4ever" and "Mrs. Nicole Benjamin Robertson 4ever," a swarm of hearts attacking each set of words.

I decided to lay in the same position on the floor, wondering if maybe that was Nicole's secret, if that was the reason Nicole had curves of breasts which, even if barely perceptible, were still impressive, and had, reportedly, had them for two years, since before she was my age. I was trying to make a new pattern – diamonds of red with one black circle in the middle – while Nicole pushed her lips together and then wiggled them around the way she said you had to if you wanted to make sure your lip-gloss was applied evenly. She was so busy sicking a swarm of pink then purple

then pink hearts around Benjamin Robertson's name that I could stare at her as much as I wanted, which I did, wiggling my lips the way she wiggled hers, even though I wasn't allowed to wear lip-gloss. I moved my bottom lip to the left at the same time as I moved my top lip to the right, concentrating so hard that I didn't notice when the blue light came into the room until it slid up the wall and onto the ceiling, then split itself into waves of lighter and darker blue, like we were in an aquarium looking up.

"What is that?" I said with my bottom lip still to the left and top to the right.

"Why are you talking like that and what is what?" Nicole asked with the same slow exasperated tone she used when Ashley asked if she could use her hot rollers. I put my lips back where they belonged.

"It looks like an aquarium on the ceiling," I said, and Nicole looked up then shrugged.

"I don't know. The pool light. Whatever," she said, then held the notebook out in front of her face, which she tilted to the right and then to the left. "How does this look?" She turned the

page towards me and there it was: both Benjamin Robertson's heart-swarmed name and ten lines of her re-naming herself: *Mrs. Nicole S. Robertson, Mrs. Ben Robertson, Mrs. Benjy Robertson the Third.*

"I didn't realize it was that serious," I said, and Nicole made a noise in the back of her throat and shrugged again. Most of the time, it didn't matter that I was two years younger or, more importantly, that she was two years older, but I could tell that this was one of the times it did. She flipped the notebook page with an exaggerated gesture, flicked the pen to purple, and went back to work. I started feeling bad about being in the same room with her and wished I would shrink myself to the size of her goldfish, or even smaller, so small that I could fit through the tiny opening and closing door in the plastic castle which was too tiny even for her goldfish to hide behind – one of his fins always showed through. I went to the window so I wouldn't have to think about it any more. With one finger I pushed apart two blinds enough for me to peek through to see that Nicole was right: it was the pool light. Its reflection kept appearing and

disappearing because the person inside of the pool kept shifting in front of and away from the light. "There's someone in your pool," I said.

"Yeah?" Nicole didn't stop telling the notebook page what she was telling it.

"They keep moving in front of the light and away from it." Nicole made her noise again, so I kept looking and hoped she'd forget how lame I was. I wondered how the person felt in the pool, how a pool felt at night. I imagined the water was warm around the light, and the person kept moving toward the colder water to feel again how the warm water felt, how much nicer it was. I practiced feeling it with them: *brr, the water is cold over here. I'd better move to the light. Yes, the water is warmer here.* But while I was practicing being the person, the person became two people: first there were two heads, then two backs, one which stood straight against the pool's walls and one which arched its way backwards, and that back arched upwards to a head with its hair falling backwards, an opened mouth. "Um," I said, then stopped and watched to make sure I was seeing what I was seeing. Then

one of the backs moved sideways.
“There are two people in the pool.”

“Yeah?” Nicole said. “So what?”

“So, I mean, there are two people in the pool.”

Nicole threw the pen down on her bed. She raised herself up higher on her elbows but didn’t turn to look at me. “So it’s my mom and my step-dad.”

“Okay,” I said, and the two people became one person again, and that one person moved a little backwards and forwards and backwards again. “But what are they doing?”

“Um, gross.” Nicole went back to her notebook. “It.”

I wondered if “it” was the water moving them or their bodies moving them in the water. “What’s ‘it’?”

“You know, *it*.” I didn’t know and told her that, which made her put down both the pen and the notebook and even though I asked her in my head to not turn around, she turned around. “Um, *it*. You know, like, they are doing *it*, okay, *it*, and can you please take a minute to not be so totally creepy and gross and spying on them like a freak would do?” I pulled my finger

away from the blinds and walked back, staring at the carpet and my Connect Four game, which now seemed lame to me, too, but I kept looking at it until Nicole asked me to admire her hearts again. I looked at them and nodded.

“They’re the best I’ve ever seen.”

Our friendship was over. I knew this even before the next Tuesday, when her mother answered the door in an ironed white shirt and jeans and said hello in a voice just as starched and crisp as the cotton of her collar. When I asked if Nicole was home, she said that she was sorry, and then raised her voice to say that Nicole couldn’t come downstairs and wouldn’t be able to for the foreseeable future because she just didn’t know when to stop and obviously had no idea how to act around people, so why should she be allowed to be around them? Upstairs, Nicole answered by slamming her door and then letting Aerosmith say that she was *F-I-N-E fine*. I tried to play with Ashley, who was two years younger than me, but all she wanted to do was make her Barbie jump off the roof of her three-story Dream Home

Playset. I agreed that this was a good idea but got bored once she'd jumped sixteen times and didn't stay dead, since I'd set up the other Barbies to sit in perfect rows for the funeral. I tried to explain this but Ashley just looked up at me the way that fish look at you from the inside of an aquarium and said she wanted to make Barbie jump because the roof of her house was a trampoline.

"But a roof *can't* be a trampoline," I said, "and plus the funeral is a lot more fun because everyone will cry and take pills and tell each other about how they secretly loved Barbie."

Ashley kept looking at me like a guppy. "But I want the roof to be a trampoline because *that* is fun." I didn't understand why she couldn't understand. I just nodded and listened to Aerosmith singing to Nicole about Janie and her gun in the song I never understood because my mother always changed the channel when it started and said there were things I didn't need to know yet. It seemed like Janie and her gun and all of the thousands of things I didn't understand were just down the hall, locked in the room with Nicole and Steven Tyler and Joe Perry and all the other beautiful

bad long-haired boys in Aerosmith who had names that no one knew and lip-gloss as shiny as Nicole's. Nothing was fair. I was about to either scream or cry or both and didn't want to be in Nicole's house when I found out which. I pushed all the Barbies down and said "Fine, they're going to bed," and then left without telling Nicole's mother good-bye or turning back to see Ashley, who was making the sound "but" with her wide guppy mouth as she followed me as far as the front door.

My mother spent the next afternoon across the street with the neighbor she told me to call Miss Gina, who always kept a pack of wine coolers in the refrigerator and smoked cigarettes over the stove with the exhaust fan on, and when she came back she told me that I wasn't going down to that tacky white house to see that Nicole girl ever again. I told her that was fine by me, because I'd started to understand what I didn't understand, and what Nicole did, and that separated us more than a wall or a door or a lock ever could. I didn't own a single tube of lip-gloss. I didn't shave my legs. I didn't even know what doing it meant, which

meant I'd be better off jumping off a third story roof because I imagined it was a trampoline. Everything was too embarrassing. I wanted to stay in my room with my multiplication tables and bald baby dolls and books about how I shouldn't talk to strangers forever, and I managed it until my father came home and said "hello, hello, hello" to my mother, in a voice like he was singing, like he did every time he came home, which was also embarrassing. She sang "hello" back and then said "let me tell you about that *girl* Emily's been playing with." Their voices vanished until I heard my father say "no shit." This meant that things were interesting, which meant I had no choice but to open the door enough so that my ear and the side of my head could stick out of it.

I heard enough to make a story out of it. While her mother was at work scraping plaque off some kid's teeth, Nicole paid Ashley two week's worth of her allowance to stay inside and watch *You Can't Do That on Television* while she spent the afternoon turning flips on her trampoline. She wasn't showing off her athletic skills but her training bra, flipping her shirt up to show it to the Henderson's fence

and backyard and the Alaskan Malamute that ran in circles inside them both. When she heard the Henderson's back door open, she steadied herself and grabbed the ends of her shirt, counting the seconds to time her jump perfectly so that Ben Robertson could watch as the air took her up into itself and the sun hit her body and highlighted the perfect curves of her new breasts. I knew what she expected would happen: he'd ask her to marry him, and they'd drive to the Mississippi state line and elope immediately. I knew this because I'd heard her say it so many times, then seen her fly with her hair upwards until her skin was one long streak of gold. Ben Robertson had sometimes seen her and once made a sound like choking, but he'd never asked her to marry him, which Nicole said was just because he was shy and he knew he'd blush and he didn't realize yet that when that happened he was like *oh my God like infinity hotter*.

The story my mother told didn't end the way Nicole had expected. Ben Robertson hadn't asked her to become Nicole Robertson, not because he was embarrassed to the point of

blushing but because he had come down with strep throat and was lying on his couch with a wet washrag on his forehead watching *Voltron*, and therefore he wasn't the one in Mrs. Henderson's back yard. Mrs. Henderson was. She was not impressed by the sun and the gold and the training bra and the perfect curves curving inside of them, and she was not embarrassed. She looked straight at Nicole and yelled at her to put on her shirt and march her fanny right back into the house immediately if not sooner. There, Nicole and Ashley sat on the couch and looked at the television, which wasn't even on, while Mrs. Henderson paced and paced and said she would stay and make sure everyone kept their clothes on until their mother came home, at which point she would hear all about this, she would.

"I mean, can you *believe* that," my mother told my father. "She didn't even *cry*, and Gina said that Lori Henderson said that when her mother asked her if she understood what she'd done wrong, she said she hadn't done anything wrong." It was the same voice she'd used when she told my father

she'd caught me pulling out the less popular letters in his encyclopedia set, like *K* and *H*, which no one ever looked at anyway, then scrawling over a random page with a red crayon before closing the book and putting it back on the shelf.

I closed my bedroom door, slowly, both so that my parents wouldn't realize I'd been eavesdropping and because it seemed like the right thing to do, the right gesture, a slow close to an opportunity I'd only just been given, the chance to know all the secrets Nicole kept hidden with a Camel Light in her nightstand, that had only just been taken away. It was almost like I had died. I sat on my bed with my legs crossed underneath me and pulled my journal from its place between my box-springs and my mattress, where I hid it because I knew it wasn't really hidden and my mother might see what I wrote and realize how unfair she was, especially when it came to not letting me wear lip-gloss like every other girl in the state of Alabama was allowed to do. I wrote *everything is so not fair* at the top of a new page, then sat and thought for a minute. When I couldn't think of anything else I could say that was mean enough to

be satisfying but not mean enough to get me grounded, I underlined *so* and *not* and then *fair*, twice, for good measure. Then I realized that it didn't matter if I was grounded, because besides Nicole I didn't have any other friends in the neighborhood, and never would, with my bare lips and complete lack of knowledge about things like training bras and periods and how to smoke a Camel Light or successfully hide it in my nightstand. I didn't even have a nightstand.

I turned to a new page and wrote at the top, in the corner, in letters so small that they looked like a line if you pulled your head back and squinted a little: *penis*. I wondered if I was brave enough to write it bigger, and before my mind could answer, my hand had written it twice – *penis* and *penis*, bigger each time. And then I was writing it over and over, bigger and bigger, moving from page to page and to page, the letters growing until I couldn't fit them all on one line. Finally there was one letter stretched across the length of an entire page, then five pages of letters, from *P* all the way to *S*, and when I was finished I sat on the bed and stared at it. I asked the *S* if I felt guilty. It said I didn't,

and it was right. It was just a letter, a line curved then curved back again, and more empty space than writing, more nothing than anything I could read or understand.