

DUCT-TAPED ROSES



Billeh Nickerson

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Six Years On

At my neighborhood coffee shop,
wedged between exchange students
and scenesters with strollers,
I realize if I had conceived a child
with my best friend on the day he died
she'd start kindergarten this September.

We used to joke we'd adopt
or ask one of the Jennys to surrogate.
Jen or Jenn or Jenny, so many Jennifers
I've contemplated collective nouns –
a picnic basket of Jennys,
a jackhammer of Jennys,
an orchestra of Jennys
to talk to our daughter about menstruation,
training bras, her changing body.

I've often discussed the loss
of mentor figures for gay men,
how those who would have naturally taught us
what it meant to be a fortysomething
never made it that far,
but have rarely spoken about the void
felt by a middle-aged man who loses
his gay best friend
to an accident in a bathtub.

The day we cleaned out his apartment
I looked for additional rooms,
secret passageways filled with his stuff.
The women held up his shirts
and inhaled him, but no matter how hard I tried
I couldn't resurrect his scent.
Friends ask if I expect to find him
hidden somewhere, but it's more
about my shock he's been reduced
to things that aren't enough
to capture all he means.

In this photograph
he's mysterious
lanky and shirtless
as he plays his vinyl

of Liz Phair's *Fuck and Run*.

In this photograph
he takes off his shoes
to make sock puppets
for a karaoke version
of the theme song
from *The Muppet Show*.

In this photograph
he holds up the chinchilla
he named *Hat*.

In this photograph
my hands rest
on his hips,
my thumbs
along his pelvis.

In this photograph
I ask him
what the tooth fairy paid
after his childhood dentist
extracted a row of extra teeth.

In this photograph
he spells out a long word
on our whiskey stained
Scrabble board.

In this photograph
we're in the emergency room
and he's about to tell a woman
whose breast implant ruptured
that he cut himself
slicing a bagel.

In this photograph
we've convinced
tourists from Seattle
that Canadians celebrate Pride
by pulling out their cocks
to make penis flowers
on table tops.

In this photograph

I try to recreate
his recipe
for Shepherd's pie.

In this photograph,
the first day of school,
I can't find
our daughter
and I can't find him.

Pretty in Love

*Envy will hurt itself
Let yourself be beautiful
Sparkling love, flowers
And pearls and pretty girls*

from “The Power of Love”
by Frankie Goes to Hollywood

Pretty in love with you back then
meant waking in the same position
we’d fall asleep in.
I was twenty-three or twenty-four
and you twenty-two with cheekbones
worthy of Aphrodite herself,
though my love transcended the carnal
and the pictures of you modelling
in the magazines that filled my bookshelf—
Envy will hurt itself

trying to understand how much
I’ve craved your embrace,
how in these twenty years
I’ve damned every continent
you’ve lived on away from me.
I have no doubt your life has been bountiful,
filled with men who have loved you
and men you have loved,
though I hope you were able to be truthful,
Let yourself be beautiful

in the face of the demons that plague
boys who grow up misunderstood
for being as much sugar and spice
as snakes and snails and puppy dog tails.
Or cocaine rails. Or champagne pain.
How many friends of ours
have we lost to the bottle, the lines, the need
to live full throttle, nonstop never-stop?
Here’s my hoped-for super power:
Sparkling love, flowers

in full bloom on command, room after room—
just like the actress, now sober,
who calculated what she once spent daily
on cocaine and filled her house each day
with roses in that amount.
You are on the other side of the world
waking without me, and I'm still pretty
in love with the memory of our joy glistening
pretty boys and pearls
and pearls and pretty girls.

Leather Bar

There's a giant wicker basket
filled with sex toys

and small bottles of wine
that make me blush

once I figure out
they're big bottles of lube.

On stage a Leather Daddy
announces ticket numbers

he's commanded his submissive
to retrieve from a plastic beer jug

but whether from apathy
or the sad fact

chaps lack pockets
no one claims the prize.

*000674, Anyone? Anyone?
Going once
Going twice
Last call for 000674....*

Between numbers I ask
Mister Seattle Leather Daddy

if he's envious his partner
Mister Leather Washington State

is a whole state
while he's only a city

and he growls
No, because he's MINE.

*000587, Anyone? Anyone?
Going once
Going twice
Last call for 000587....
000655 Any-one? Any-one?*

Going once?

Going twice?

Last call for 000655.

After the fifteenth ticket
the Leather Daddy

grows increasingly annoyed
and I worry for the safety

of his submissive—
even if he consents—

as he'll surely be punished
for picking such bad numbers

but then someone screams
maybe we should all share

the sex toys and lube
amongst ourselves,

that way everyone wins
again and again and again

and apart from the two old guys
who fight over the wicker basket

everyone agrees it's the best
leather bar raffle ever.

Pickle Farmers

I was walking down the street
when a stranger in a passing truck

screamed out
Hey, Pickle Farmer!

which surprised me
as I wasn't wearing my gumboots

or overalls, none of my usual
pickle farmer paraphernalia.

It always surprises me
when folks who don't farm pickles

feel the need to identify me
as someone who does.

I mean, nobody screams out
Hey Dentist! or Hey Butcher!

It's not as though we're special—
a lot of people farm pickles,

some of them occasionally
some of them secretly,

like after a baseball game
their team has lost

and they think to themselves
I'm pickle farming curious

as they stumble to the pickle field
to cultivate a few of their own.

Me, I'm more than a farmer,
I'm a pickle whisperer

who helps my fellow farmers
overcome pickle-related dilemmas

like this one farmer who loves
stuffing jars with pickles

though he often struggles
with the last one

so I whisper *just relax, breathe easy,*
and that pickle will slide right in.

That guy in the passing truck's
just jealous of my well-kept field.

He will deny it for a while
but eventually stumble

down to the pickle field
and I'll be there to greet him.

Kissing in New Zealand

is the same as kissing
anywhere else,
your tongue doesn't
circle in the opposite direction
and you still oscillate
between not knowing
whether to open
or close your eyes,

but I needed to experience this myself,
not just read it
in some traveller's guide,
so when my travelling companion
went on a Lord of the Rings tour
I slipped into a sex club instead.

Who wants to fly for fourteen hours
into another hemisphere
without kissing someone there?
I guess I'm old fashioned that way,
though I should be more specific
in my desires

as the first guy I kissed
hailed from Saskatchewan—
which is akin to travelling
halfway around the world
only to find yourself
eating at McDonald's.
Like good Canadians
we apologized
then moved on to find Kiwis.

Cheam Curling Club Circa 1988

In retrospect the curling club
seemed much farther away
than the forty-five-minute drive

from my home
to the army base
named for the Cheam Nation

though no one mentioned this
nor the unceded lands
just the curling

and how nice it was
for service members
to have something

to occupy their time
when not busy
defending our country.

As our bonspiel took place
on government property
our welcome bags

included not only the usual
maps and two-for-one
restaurant coupons

but personalized envelopes
with solitary
condoms

that drew screams
of laughter
from the older curlers

and silence
from me
as I'd heard about condoms

stumbled upon them
in the playgrounds
of my youth

but I hadn't touched one
or owned one
so publicly.

At some point
a drunken curler
threatened

to roll his condom
down the end
of his curling broom

which made me think
about my friend whose mom
had her roll a condom

onto a hot dog
that for some reason
I imagined

as boiled
but it must have been fresh
from the fridge

still slippery
in her young
mortified fingers.

I recall little else
from that bonspiel
other than it took place

in grade eight.
I'm not sure if we won
or if we lost.

Occupational Therapies:

The Dancer

His feet were an extra pair of hands,
so even though it was the two of us
it felt like a threesome.

I wanted to be more responsive,
wanted to be more
than a giant starfish.