

– Strip Search –

1

Recently in New York City an arrested man was strip-searched – standard procedure – on Rikers Island. The arraigned man said, ‘I was put into a cage and told to take off my clothes.’ He was ordered – according to *The New York Times* – ‘to squat and spread his buttocks.’ The accused, who’d been arrested for possession of marijuana, described the strip search as ‘horrifying’: ‘Being a grown man, I was humiliated.’

2

‘Humiliation’ means ‘to be made humble.’ To be made human? ‘Human’ and ‘humiliation’ do not share an etymological root, but even in Latin the two words – *humanus* and *humiliatio* – suggestively share a prefix.

3

Repeatedly I watch clips of Liza Minnelli on YouTube. I want to see her humiliation. And I want to see her survive the grisly experience and turn it into glory.

## 4

Being humiliated is an experience, I presume, that you don't want – unless you're a masochist. And then your humiliation isn't dire. It's pleasure. Humiliation, if passed through the masochistic centrifuge, becomes joy, or uplift – all emotional dissonances resolved.

## 5

An oft-repeated legend: the writer Colette was locked in her room by her husband, Willy, so that she'd be forced to produce her Claudine novels. Need I humiliate myself to write this book?

## 6

Michael Jackson's father beat him; MGM fed 'uppers' to Judy Garland. The performer must be coerced or brutalized to perform. 'Beat It' and 'Over the Rainbow' reverse the humiliation, or continue it.

## 7

Performers spawn performers, an intergenerational saga of distress. Liza (in the eyes of a shame-hungry public) is humiliated by inability to reach her mother's pinnacle, or by inability to reach her own former pinnacle. Past triumphs rise up to humiliate the present self.

To prove that humiliation exists, we don't need to hear from witnesses. Everyone has been humiliated, although the texture of each person's experience differs – like Tolstoy's unhappy families, each unhappy in its own way.

Imagine a society in which humiliation is essential – as a rite of passage, as a passport to decency and civilization, as a necessary shedding of hubris.

Any writer's humiliation I take personally. 'I don't want poets to be humiliated,' writes poet Ruth Padel, about the smear campaign against rival Derek Walcott, accused of sexual harassment. But then the press revealed that she'd helped spread the bad word about Walcott, and she, in turn, was disgraced. Retelling this story, I wince: I'm tainted by the news I leak.

According to feminist Mary Daly (quoted in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*), 'Many would see abortion as a humiliating procedure.' Many would see insemination as a humiliating procedure. Many would see death as a humiliating procedure. Many would see literacy as a humiliating procedure.

I approach this vast subject from a limited angle – the angle of fatigue. I am tired, as any human must be, after a life spent avoiding humiliation and yet standing near its flame, enjoying the sparks, the heat, the paradoxical illumination.

Not merely because I am tired, but because this subject, humiliation, is monstrous, and because it erodes the voice that tries to lay siege to its complexities, I will resign myself, in the fugues that follow, to setting forth an open-ended series of paradoxes and juxtapositions. (I call these excursions ‘fugues’ not only because I want the rhetorical license offered by invoking counterpoint but because a ‘fugue state’ is a mentally unbalanced condition of dissociated wandering away from one’s own identity.) Some of my fugal juxtapositions are literal and logical, while others are figurative, meant merely to suggest the presence of undercurrents, sympathies, resonances shared between essentially *unlike* experiences. If there is any reward to be found in this exercise of juxtaposing contraries to detect the occasional gleam of likeness, that dividend lies in the apprehension of a singular prey: the detection of a whimpering beast inside each of us, a beast whose cries are micropitches, too faint for regular notation.

When I see a public figure humiliated, I feel empathy. I imagine: *that martyr could be me*. Even if the public figure did something wrong, I empathize. Even if Michael Jackson slept with children. Even if Roman Polanski raped a thirteen-year-old. When I see the famous figure brought to trial, even if only trial-by-media, *especially if the crime is sexual*, I'm seized by horror and fascination, by pity, by terror: here again, as if at the Acropolis or the Roman Colosseum, I see the dramatic onset of a familiar scene, an unveiling, a goring, a staining, a stripping away of privilege.

Speaking, I'm on display – a pornographic exhibit. I'm a centerfold, my legs spread. If someone sees my nude photo on the Internet, then I'm humiliated, or else that Web trawler, finding my photo, is humiliated on my behalf.

When I found a student's nude photo on the Web, and when I jerked off to that photo (I could be making up this fact), I worried that I'd humiliated him. Or perhaps I'm humiliating the student by telling you this story now. Lest you wish to prosecute me for my fantasies, please know that the student was in his late twenties and was advertising his sexual

services. In the photo, he smiled with what seemed authentic gladness.

17

After a fight, an eighteen-year-old boy in Florida sends a nude photograph of his underage girlfriend (she is sixteen) to ‘dozens of people, including her parents’, according to *The New York Times*, whose pages I cruise for humiliation. By clipping the news stories, I become a guilty party.

18

Sexuality, in any of its guises and positions, is potentially humiliating. At least the Transcendental feminist Margaret Fuller thought so. Elizabeth Hardwick, who wrote eloquently about seduced women, quotes a telling passage: when Fuller’s boyfriend or husband forced her to have sex, she experienced ‘what was to every worthy and womanly feeling so humiliating’. And in Harriet Jacobs’s now-canonical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, the writer reserves the word ‘humiliation’ for instances of *sexual* degradation. The fact of being enslaved she doesn’t refer to as humiliating. What is humiliating is the sexual body itself, its humors and swellings, its pulsations and emissions. Theorist Julia Kristeva uses the word ‘abject’ to describe this fetid, wet, organ-centered process.