

again at her small breasts. “Who cares?” She laughed, winked at me, and turned back to her locker to fiddle with the dial.

Perhaps only young women of my same conniving and tragic nature will understand that there could be something in such an exchange as mine

[Poem]

THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

By Jeff Dolven, from A New English Grammar, a collection in progress. Dolven, who received a 2015 Guggenheim Fellowship, is the author of Speculative Music, published by Sarabande in 2013.

The custom of the country is to twist
a length of plain white thread from the wooden spool
set on each table;
to make a simple net, a sketch of a harp,
strung taut between the thumb and the first two fingers;

to catch up, next, into the air a portion,
suspended above the plate, and then by a quick
slacking of tension
to make of it a simple gift to the mouth.
Properly done, the fingers need never touch.

They are about the meal like seamstresses.
Two hands, cat’s cradle-wise, may painlessly
pare a red apple;
a loose strand may be trailed through a dish of spice,
and then across a still and civil lip.

And all in silence, save for the scissor-whistle
of the threads as they cross, recross, and never knot,
rising and dipping,
composing a sweet aeolian oversong
that is at meals the only conversation.

By this the natives keep a cardinal tenet
that the major functions of life be held apart
each from the other,
that the mouth, for example, when taking nourishment,
be reserved from the sibling art of making talk.

Each length of thread is discarded between the courses,
between each taste, and placed in a wooden bowl
laid for the purpose.
I admire them, but from a distance: as you can tell
from the rude pleasure I take in telling you.

with Rebecca that day that could unite two people in conspiracy. After years of secrecy and shame, in this one moment with her, all my frustrations were condoned, and my body, my very being, was justified. Such solidarity and awe I felt, you’d think I’d never had a friend before. And really, I hadn’t. All I’d had was Suzie or Alice or Maribel, figments, of course, imaginary girls I’d used in lies to my father—my own dark ghosts. “Of course I’m not embarrassed,” I told her. To declare this took more courage than I’d needed in years, for it required the brief removal of my mask of ice. “I completely agree with you.” What is that old saying? A friend is someone who helps you hide the body—that was the gist of this new rapport. I sensed it immediately. My life was going to change. In this strange creature, I’d met my match, my kindred spirit, my ally. Already I wanted to extend my hand, slashed and ready to be shaken in a pact of blood, that was how impressionable and lonely I was. I kept my hands in my pockets, however.

“Well, good,” said Rebecca. “We have better things to do than worry about our figures. Though that’s not the popular opinion, wouldn’t you say?” She raised her eyebrows at me. She was really remarkably beautiful, so beautiful I had to avert my eyes. I wanted desperately to impress her, to elicit some clear indication from her that she felt as I did—that we were two peas in a pod.

“I don’t care much about what’s popular,” I lied. I hadn’t ever been so brash before. Oh, I was a rebel.

“Well, look at you,” said Rebecca. She crossed her arms. “Rare to meet a young woman with so much gumption. You’re a regular Katharine Hepburn.” The comparison would have sounded like mockery if made by anyone else. But I wasn’t offended. I laughed, blushed. Rebecca laughed too, then shook her head. “I’m kidding,” she said. “I’m like that, too. I don’t give a rat’s ass what people think. But it is good if they think well of you. That has its advantages.” We looked at each other and smiled, nodding sarcastically with widened eyes. Were we serious? It didn’t seem to matter. It was like all my secret misery had just then been converted into a powerful currency. I’m sure Rebecca saw right through my bravado, but I didn’t know that. I thought I was so smooth.

“See you around,” I said. I figured it was best not to come on too strong. We waved to each other and Rebecca flew off back through the office and up the hall like some exotic bird or flower, utterly misplaced in the dim fluorescent light. I walked mechanically, heel-toe, back to my desk, hands clasped behind my back, whistling nothing in particular, my world transformed.