



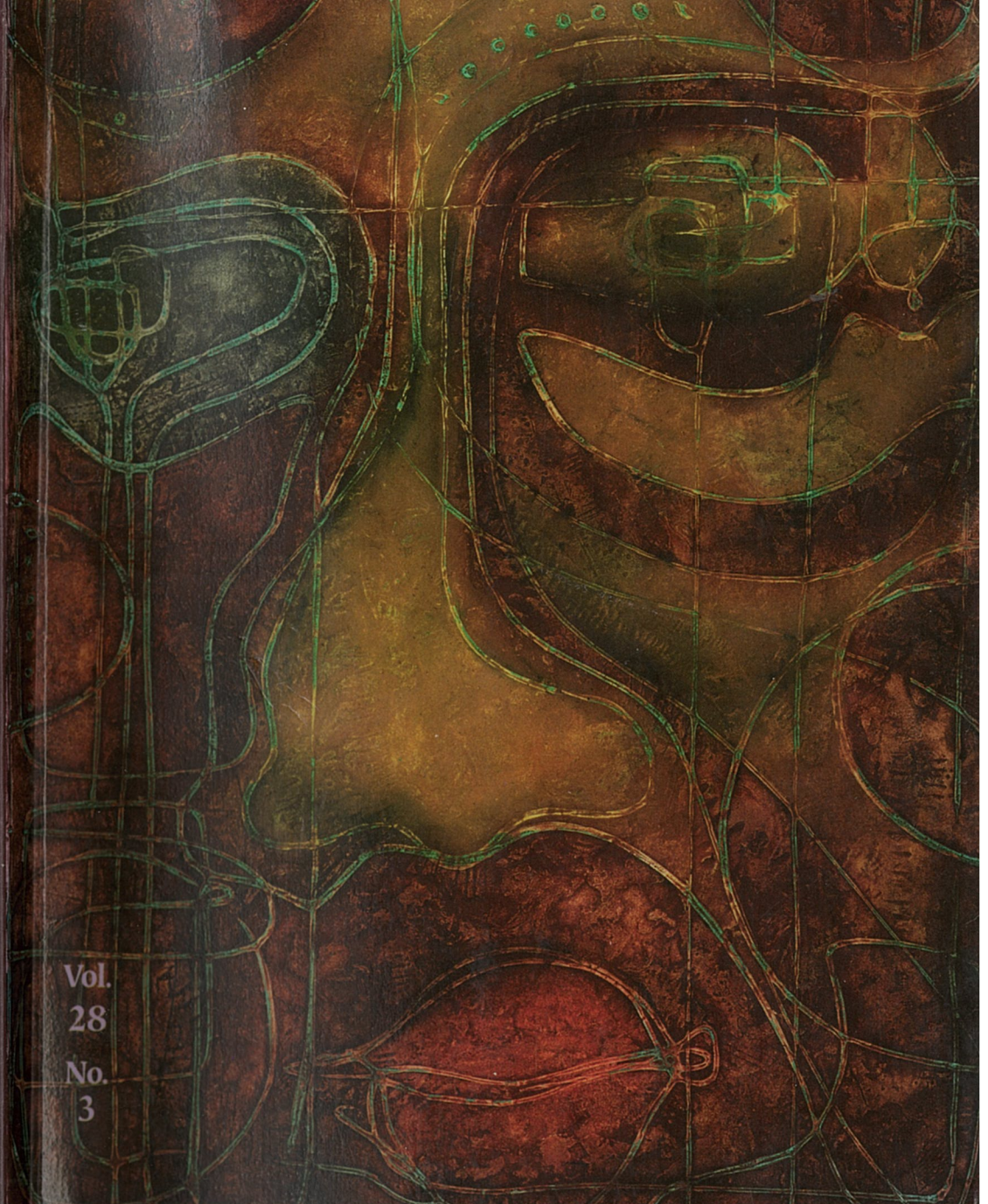
EXILE

The Literary Quarterly

Vol. 28  
No. 3



EXILE  
*The Literary Quarterly*



Vol. 28  
No. 3

\$12.00



*ME,*  
FIRST

II

♦  
TWENTY-ONE



*Lauren Kirshner*

When I was twenty-one Janet Cooley moved into the halfway house next door to us. Word on the street was that she'd served a year in a minimum-security prison for smothering her newborn baby in the gymnastics change room at the community centre. To me she was just this beautiful girl who I wanted.

For months I watched her chameleon-like movements over the fence. In the daytime she wore cut-off jeans and sandals, but at night she was transformed, becoming a shadowy sylph that moved across the grass, the shine of her white teeth and the reflection of her hair incandescent. Sometimes one of her boyfriends would pick her up in his Coupe de Ville and she'd appear on the steps wearing a sequined dress, a dew-wet tiger lily behind her ear. There was nothing murderous about her.

One afternoon I was riding the Bathurst bus reeking of all my indiscretions when a turquoise and inlaid opal bald-eagle buckle and the crotch of confident cowboy jeans stepped in my line of vision and just swayed there. There was an empty seat beside me.

"Mind?" he said as he sat down.

I was coming home from Honest Ed's, the house of bargains, with a bag of cheap groceries, and a long baguette stuck out of the bag like a middle finger to all the dozing passengers. I could

hear a voice at the back of the bus saying, "I ain't done no drugs or alcohol for two years." A man had his feet propped on a TV wrapped in cords as he flicked through a *Good News* bible. Across from me two deaf mutes sat jiggling over the wheel seats having a tender-hearted conversation with their hands. Suddenly the air was perfumed by the green odor of marijuana.

Through the windows I watched the familiar streets slide by me. It had been three years since I'd been back in this city, and I was harder, more world-weary than when I'd left. But somehow each passing block was subtracting from the sum of my experience, and I was left feeling ten years old again, the latch-key kid with a grape-juice mustache and a very heavy heart. Being home had the strange effect of forcing my desires down to their lowest common denominator. I was on a mission. I was home to save my mother. Beside me the cowboy was shifting to adjust something in his pocket.

"Need?" he mumbled into his shirt collar.

"You're Janet Cooley's boyfriend," I said suddenly.

"Depends on who's asking," he replied. "Dime bag?"

"I live next door to Janet," I explained quickly. "I've seen your Coupe de Ville."

He looked at me, his wolf-grey complexion slowly draining white.

"Need?" he repeated, and when I shook my head he got up, and began to slowly move away

It was the inlaid opal eyes of the bald-eagle belt that I was staring into when I heard him speak again. He sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

"Janet's a slut," he whimpered. "So how could I be her boyfriend anyway?"

• • •

When Janet was with one of her boyfriends, there was something effortless about the way she moved. I guess the halfway house didn't allow visitors because she always sat with them in a corner of the front yard, secretly drinking beer, smoking, and stretching out like a cat under the waning citronella candles. It was only when her boyfriends zoomed off in the early morning hours that the lost expression overtook her face again.

Meanwhile I'd started hanging out in all my old haunts again, moving spider-like through the pool halls and massage parlours, decrepit movie-houses and pawnshops. Meeting guys who bought drinks steadily and drove cars they would never fully own, used money clips and could never say just how they felt. Everything had fallen apart, but no one would ever see me out of the house without my roots done and wearing my lipstick and eyeliner. Pills make you radiate, too. At least for the first few weeks.

I kept obsessing about Janet's body and the more I did, the more I wanted to fade myself out, because all my effort had become unrequited. When I saw my reflection in the pawnshop windows that I passed daily, all I felt was disgust, and at the same time, the desire to own something golden myself. I would see Janet leaving the halfway house in one of her tight dresses and imagine the baby that everyone said she'd done away with. It seemed such a strange equation, how Janet made a life just to end it when I was giving mine to keep one alive. There was nothing for me to do except to continue to carry the tray of soup and pills upstairs to the sick room.

• • •

The only time I ever brought Janet home, my mother knocked on my bedroom door and pulled me into the hallway.

"Who is that girl?" she rasped in the darkness, the white mouth of the open linen closet the only light. "I don't like the look of that girl. She looks coarse."

"She's my friend," I said, "And she's sleeping here. She's a chef and she's going to make us pancakes for breakfast before she goes to work at the Best Western."

"I want her gone by 6 a.m.," her voice seemed disembodied.

"But she's making us pancakes," I insisted. "First thing in the morning."

"You're going to do drugs with her. I know," my mother cried. "I can smell them already. You're going down again like you did before."

• • •

My mother used to tell everyone that her teeth fell out from prenatal gingivitis when she was pregnant with me, and oh, wasn't it even sadder when a beautiful woman lost her teeth? A plain Jane with dentures was no big deal. Even I believed her story until I was ten years old and found her cup of methadone mixed with orange juice, took a sip, and collapsed woozy on the bed for the rest of the day. I guess no apple falls far from the tree. It took me three years to get addicted.

I couldn't see it for a long time, though my body was telling me something. I could feel sneaky knots of commitment twisting itself into the fretwork of my bone and soul. But the heart of my decline was this gorgeous order that made it all seem so workable. I had equations in my head that would keep me from slipping. I rationed out every gram of drug, every drink and so on to make myself safe until those knots of commitment forced me out again with no socks and an awful taste in the mouth. This is the need.

I went downtown, I went uptown, I slid around the city like a leech. I went anywhere until I found what I was looking for. The exchange was the best part, the peak of something terrible and sexy that was the closest I could get to relief. On the walk home my mouth would feel as dry as the pages of all the pulp fiction I read when I was fifteen and dreaming of getting Aids and fucking the high-school hero.

During the three years on my own I shared an apartment with three strangers, city living being so expensive. They were all twentysomething, windblown, skeletal, and burning with promise their bodies were too wrecked to realize. We all used, ate organic and felt guilty if we didn't hit the gym four times a week. Our most steady form of communication was to leave terse notes accusing so-and-so of using up all the soy milk or brown rice pasta. Sometimes we deeply mistrusted each other. Other times I could barely tell us apart.

• • •

When I came home after three years, my mother was unrecognizable. She looked like an anorexic preacher, wrapped in loose layers of cloths and unevenly buttoned sweaters. On her head she wore several rags and scarves tied like a turban. Her voice was slow and loose from painkillers, but she had plenty to say.

Some thoughts petered out after the first explosive point — others got verbose and lost their volition somewhere before the final condemnation (every thought ended with someone being slandered); other times she would forget where she was in space and time and discard the thought altogether. I stood trying to convince her to drink a can of Ensure.

"Your doctor said," I kept repeating. "You're so weak you can't even finish a sentence. Come on. Be reasonable."

"Fuck the doctor," she mumbled. "And I can't finish a sentence because you keep goddamn interrupting me. You have the same habit as your father of always thinking you know what the person's about to say."

"I don't think that. I just know your needs and I'm trying to meet them."

She reached for her water bottle beside the Kleenex, but instead knocked over her pills. She grabbed a tissue, coughed wildly and spat something dark into it.

"Needs?" she said. "I don't think you know anything about them because when I had a cancer growing in me you left to become a drug addict god knows where and the things you did."

"No one knew you had cancer then," I whispered. "No one fucking knew that."

"I knew," she spat. "I felt it in every bone."

I put the can of Ensure on her night table, turned away and flicked off the light when I left.

She screamed after me, "Leave the dimmer on. Don't leave me in here like a dog in the dark like you always do and make sure you come back to take my teeth out. I feel weak."

• • •

If there's no trust, your love can't be beautiful. It'll turn inwards like a locus in the rain catching big tears in pods shaped like ageless eyes. It may be orderly, it may turn out straight, it may do the dishes and not come home too late — but it won't be beautiful.

When my mother died it was the beginning of spring and the shoots were saying hello for the first time out of the ground, reaching up with a green innocence that flavoured the air with

a scent of forgotten items now found. Only a distant uncle flew in from Miami Beach for the service. My father was unreachable.

The night of the funeral I went into her room and found the bottle of painkillers in her jewellery drawer beside an old methadone script. I unscrewed the bottle, ate a handful, and just stood there for a minute running my fingers over her necklaces, feeling the cool of the jade and the smooth of her string of wedding pearls. Beside the necklaces was my parents' wedding photo, framed in a cheap wooden ashtray, a gimmick of the early Seventies even though neither of them smoked. I stood there grasping her pearls and thought about this incongruous fact for what seemed like hours, pursuing it with a warm ambition that made me want to know. I wanted to know why two people would set up their love to be ashed out on, why lovers would want to trap themselves under heat and glass forever. Hot tears rolled down my face the whole time.

Then I went to the kitchen where all the sympathy food was laid out, and stared at it with very hungry eyes. My stomach contacted an apparition waitress in my brain and the order was huge.

I found one loaf of bread wrapped in plastic. I ate it all. Then I angrily shoved a hot Italian salami down my throat. I drank milk carelessly, spilling it down my shirt. I picked up chicken with my hands and ate and ate, barely swallowing, just intent on the next bite. I ate a box of Jos-Louis, four bagels with peanut butter, a bag of popcorn and an energy bar. Then I gutted a chocolate cake and sucked the residue from my fingers.

I ate spaghetti out of the crock-pot and apple cake dipped in chocolate and stuffed peppers with rice. I ate pecan pie and noodle kugel, the dish of stewed prunes and apricots and the chocolate rose that read "With Sympathy." As I was chewing

the last of the stem I heard someone knocking loudly on the back door.

I didn't bother looking through the peep-hole. My grief had made me fearless; it was like I was eighteen again and trusted that the rest of the world's intentions were as pure as my own. I had tried to be good. I had tried to save my mother. If things were supposed to get worse now all I could think of was bring it on. I unlocked the door and swung it open.

Janet Cooley stood there shivering, her sequined dress ripped and falling off her skinny shoulders, caught with leaves and branches. Her nylons were torn and she held her heels in one hand. With the other she tried to cover her breasts. Near her temple, her hair was stained dark purple.

"It happened again," she said simply.

I moved out of the doorway and she walked into the kitchen. I followed her. Everything had become cloudy and muddled. Suddenly I couldn't figure out whose house I was in. Janet dropped her shoes onto the tile floor and they clattered in the silence. When I remembered my mother, a sick lump caught in my throat. "This is my house," I had to keep reminding myself. This is my life. My life is in this empty house. All this emptiness is mine. Janet and I had stopped in front of the sympathy buffet.

"Holy cow," she said, reaching for a chicken thigh on a platter. "Nice spread. Did someone die or something?" She laughed and sunk her teeth into the meat.

It had been a long time since I looked at a calendar. When someone you love is dying, it becomes a burden, time, and tempts you with all the spaces that haven't been filled. It dares you to look back at those that are and wonder if you would've done it differently. If the things you put in were the things that you needed most of all. And in the cruelest case, if the things you put in just left you hungrier.

I stood with my back against the wall and watched Janet in her sequins and rags begin to devour the buffet. She didn't bother with utensils, instead savagely grabbing morsels with her hands, licking her fingers clean between each dish. We shared our loss in the silence.

When the phone rang, Janet immediately answered it and passed it to me. "I think it's your dealer," she said and winked at me. I'm not sure she realized she had a black eye. I took the phone.

"Hallo?" a voice bellowed. "Who iz dis?"

It was my grandfather. He had speed-dial on his phone at the nursing home and had forgotten whom he'd called. Before I could explain I heard the dial tone.

Janet began to eat again, and I just stared at the calendar on the wall and imagined myself as an elevator falling through the sky as fast as the wind, but with the emotion of pure trust.

Tomorrow was my birthday. I would be twenty-two.

