

Hymn

Marion Bishop

LATELY I CAN'T GET OVER THE FEELING that there is a man in my bed: a big man with thick, wavy hair and a broad, barrel chest that goes up-and-down, up-and-down all night long as his breath slurs in-and-out and he elbows me in the back with his strong arms every time I creep from the corner of the bed where I have learned to sleep ... when I sleep. And I lie there, one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, holding my tongue and holding my breath, afraid to nod off, afraid of what he does to me when he is the one awake and I am the one asleep.

In my childhood I was the big sister: the best baby-sitter. I remember the Saturday nights, the summer afternoons, and the years I spent caring for my younger brothers and sisters. I remember the warmth and love we felt for each other and the quarters and dollar bills my parents paid me for bathing, feeding, reading stories to, and putting these younger siblings to bed. And I remember waiting, lying awake next to the telephone in my parents' big bed, hoping they would come home soon before I got too scared and calm me by slipping a slim, white Bible under my pillow and saying my name over and over and over again:

"Marion Cathryn Bishop."

Marion Cathryn Bishop.

"Who is Aunt Cathryn Bishop?"

marion cathryn bishop

When a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?

On Sundays I go to church and sit next to my husband and sing hymns and remember sitting next to my father and learning how to sing following his large index finger across the lines, verse after verse, his arm around me: times when I felt loved. And this Sunday morning my spouse, my father's memory, and I sing: "Gently raise the sacred strain/ for the Sabbath's come again," and then my husband's voice and the other basses and tenors leave and the sopranos lead the altos through "that man may rest/ that man may rest." So we can all join in again. "And return his thanks to God/ for his blessings to the blest." Sigh. Breathe. Lie. "For his blessings to the blest."

I have a friend who accuses me of spending too much time in my head. At lunch or dinner parties, or during my office hours or the previews before a film at our favorite movie theater, she argues that the work that matters most for women happens on the level of the world, not the word. She tells me that time is better spent answering phone calls at rape crisis centers and campaigning for candidates who support women's issues than reflecting on the relationship between men and women and language. I try hard to listen to her, and even harder to hear myself, but I never know what to say, so I just tell her I'll think about it, and then I put down my silverware, my pen, or my popcorn, take off my glasses, and rest my right hand under my chin and up against my mouth.

Sometimes I think of all the men for whom I have changed my body: the men who liked nail polish, the men who preferred long or short or more blonde hair, and, worse, the men who wanted smaller waists, longer legs, bigger breasts; and I think of all the men for whom I have starved, wasting down to a body they could worship because it mirrored their own, sans phallus. And I remember all the anger that eventually led me to eat again and I remember shoveling gallons, containers, Big Macs of food into my mouth to shore up for the next starvation cycle: when the only way to make a man love me was to waste away, was to die slowly, was to be a blonde, beautiful, voiceless, waspy Ethiopian teenage boy with big, round breasts.

And so I have been trying to write a Ph.D. dissertation about women and their diaries and how the act of writing to the self can nurture along the development and growth of a woman's voice. And I am reading my childhood journals and I see how time and time again my identity was defined by whoever the most important man was in my life at that moment and how he read me and I think it is a wonder I survived.

"Brilliant." "Bitch." "Beloved."

And I think it is a miracle that I was able to sing or squirm loudly enough in that bed to keep from being squashed.

I have a colleague whose dissertation is also a feminist study, and she asks me to read a draft, please, keeping in mind, she specifically asks, tone, and to mark in the margins, please, every time I sense a change in tone: she can't sound angry. And so I do this for her, with a blue pen, even, but I don't like being the tone-police, and when we meet later to talk about the draft I tell her a story from my childhood about big Saturday and Sunday morning breakfasts when we would have relatives and friends over in the days before we were taught to feel guilty about fried eggs, bacon, and pancakes with lots of butter and maple syrup. And I tell her how in spite of the fact that there was always plenty of bacon, the parents and aunts and uncles assigned one child to be the sheriff of the bacon and to limit each child to two pieces. And I tell her how although

the bacon-sheriff always got the two best pieces, the job came to be despised: it was no fun to police food we all considered so essential—especially since it meant denying our own hunger.

My college roommate was date-raped at the beginning of our senior year. Too ashamed to finish the semester, she withdrew from school and, for nine months after the incident, lived under an assumed name in an Illinois home for unwed mothers. When the man who raped her graduated from college, my roommate gave birth to the nameless baby girl she can only call “my little angel” in the once yearly letters she is allowed to place on file with the agency that handled her daughter’s adoption. Now an accomplished attorney, only in recent years has she been able to call this assault “date-rape.” Earlier her ecclesiastical leaders named it “sin.”

Lately I have this recurring dream that I am smoking, smoking long, white, thin, Virginia Slims cigarettes, and in these dreams I feel guilty, guilty because smoking is against my religion and because I’m trying harder lately to take good care of my health. But I can’t stop: I keep reaching again and again into the slim, slick pack and drawing, withdrawing just one, one, and then one more cigarette. I bring each one to my mouth and wrap my two lips around it tight, then draw. Draw. Inhale. Bring the cigarette and its smoke into my body, and I glance around quickly to see if anyone is looking and I feel sensuous and ashamed and my lips feel full and flushed and I think about the black smoke in my lungs and wonder if I will get cancer. And suddenly the cigarette is not a cigarette anymore but a big, fat, smelly cigar. And before I can even taste it, it is filling up my whole mouth and the end of it touches the back of my throat and it is big and brown and round and hard and I want to bite down; I want to bite down and expel it from my mouth and send it back once and for all to where it came from.

When I was a little girl, I used to worry a lot. I had learned to read before I was always able to make meaning of the words: I knew there was a war in Vietnam but didn’t understand I couldn’t be drafted; I feared the Holocaust but didn’t know what it meant to be a Jew; and for a long time I was afraid I would get VD—even though I didn’t yet know what sexual intercourse was. I passed sleepless nights then too, struggling to crowd fears from my bed with an army of stuffed animals and a series of hymns I sang over and over and over again in my head.

And lately, because I can’t get over the feeling there is a man in my bed, I spend my days looking for words. I read. I write. Like a child who gets hurt playing with her favorite toy, I’m trying to learn what harms—and if it’s possible to heal. For years I have kept a personal journal. At risk of more hurt, I’m considering taking it to bed.