

**Suzette and Geoff wonder, “What Makes a Good Painting?”**

Geoffrey Hunter, that slut in grad school, drank a lakeful of Kokanee all through his master’s degree until he realized Kokanee changed the smell of his farts and was giving him a gut. But the day Trudeau died, he cracked out a Kokanee and slid tears into it, and when the tv broadcast the funeral, Geoff Hunter stayed home from work and Peter Mansbridge held his hand for two whole hours. Geoff downed another, then taught his afternoon class with only half a head and half a heart.

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And so Geoffrey Hunter lies on the beach, his red and white polka-dot bikini top over his jersey. Geoffrey Hunter, a.k.a. a mulatto lesbian with more money than brains, lying in the sun, a colourful bra over his sweater because he doesn’t like people looking at him *that* way, like they own him. His body speckled with the hairs of unrequited love and the pimples of indifferent affection. He leans on his side, but gets sand in the waist of his pants, “Fuck!” he says, and he hates this because the last time it happened, sand got into his yoni and he scratched and was sore for days (nothing about it was delicious).

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Geoff Hunter, his blood type O positive, remembers he is descended on his mother’s side from slaves. On a visit to the Caribbean, he visits the cages and wonders if anyone he’s

related to could have died in there. What to make of this? Geoff Hunter is, frankly, verging on middle-class, smug North American. He looks at the stone walls behind the iron bars. Two hundred years earlier and *he'd* have been sold, probably murdered. He buys a postcard that says "Bahama Mama," fills the back with jokes, sends it to Nicky in Rocky Mountain House.

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Geoff Hunter, 14 years old, gets his hair straightened for the first time (nowhere near the last). His soft afro gets chemicalled rigid and he's glad because he plans to look like all the other white girls. At 16, right after he's been kissed by a football player from Ogden who later becomes some kind of homely telephone stalker, Geoff gets all his hair cut off.

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Geoff Hunter, 12 years old, hit by a truck on Crowchild Trail and 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Or thereabouts. In his delirium, he worries that his hair is mussed, his mother spent a long time getting it *just so* – the ponytail shaped into a fine Portobello mushroom cap with the help of bobby-pins and barrettes and all that hair-spray.

"Do you have a comb?" he asks the paramedic. Tears poke from Geoff Hunter's eyes, and drip into his ears. He can't seem to get up from where he and his school bag lay on the meridian. The elastic and barrettes hurt his head.

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Geoff Hunter, that Albertan Trudeau lover, wonders about this thing called autobiographical art – what makes a good painting and a painting good, why should he care? Is autobiography even possible when the alphabet you use does all the talking for you? Magnetic poetry scrambled all over the fridge. Confession. Pants on fire – who wouldn't long for teeth bucked, a cloth mask covering half a face?

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When Geoff Hunter worked as a dishwasher in Waterton Lakes, he dropped a tray holding 5 tumblers of water on a small girl's head. Would it have been

a) *romantic*

b) *perverted*

if he'd married her years later and this was the story the MC told at their wedding reception? Would it have made

a) a *good painting*

b) the *painting good*

c) *autobiography?*

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Geoff Hunter, 5 foot 6 and 3/4s, squirts out of a tree like a fibroid tumour on a stalk during a DNC; tumour twisted off, wound cauterised, patient released. His own fibroid tumour makes him wonder can he still have a baby. Or have his chances been ruined? Before the DNC, his periods were long and pukily painful. He didn't think about babies then. Back when he was straight, he worried about getting pregnant and made his first boyfriend (Calvin) wear 2 condoms at a time. Geoff Hunter didn't mind being on the Pill. Though he had tried the Contraceptive Foam. The integrity of his womb's muscles have been compromised. Is the tree his mother?

Geoff Hunter's last girlfriend didn't believe in using Chap Stick. Afraid of her lips getting addicted. Kissing her was like kissing bark on a sexy tree trunk.

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Geoffrey Hunter – 33 years old. A centennial baby, Bobby Jimby singing in the waiting room during the Hunter birth. This Geoffrey Hunter lies on a carpet and thinks about unrequited love. He feels better when the lights are out; when there's enough Coke in the fridge to carry him through the week. Everyone tells him he's a good-looking woman, a real catch. He thinks of that girl named Johanna, eyes like *jewels*, who accepted the bouquet of stargazer lilies but wouldn't let him kiss her, she was into giving him friendly hugs. Where did he go wrong?

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Geoffrey Hunter, a home-owner by 31, worries about this thing called autobiography.

What makes a good painting? What makes a painting good? Who's asking these questions? Who needs to know?

“Pants on fire!” he shouts, then bends, puts on his sturdy boots.

He has to clean the lies out of the eavestroughs.

### **Catalogue of Spinsters**

You rifle through the books as though through a catalogue, trying to find the right spinster, the one who can speak for you, with you, maybe even to you. Spinsters on esplanades, sheltered by parasols, the heels of their shoes striking the wooden boards of the sidewalks loud and hard. Spinsters accompanied by dogs, other people's children – wombs perched like waiting gourds, the size and shape of pears.

Spinsters most obvious as tourists in books: visiting cathedrals that smell of stone, memorials to unidentified soldiers, “Loved always by Fan, Mill, and Bren. R.I.P.” Going to the seaside to convalesce from an unexpected bout of lust. Watching chaperones eat whelks and periwinkles with pins. Spinster not a legal designation, but a state of being.

Spinster guarding parents, relatives, the house when everyone's gone. A spinster's time never her own unless she's lazier than sin and selfish in her boots.

Nowadays they call them cougars, the women who just won't settle down, who snort at the very word 'fiancé.' The old, untidy ones, who stalk then fuck their 20-year-old male prey.

A lazy, beautiful spinster who won't see you out the door the next morning. She stays in bed. Says, "Let yourself out." No one will ever want to marry her.

1. A good cry in the middle of a Tim Horton's somewhere on Highway 2. Between Edmonton and Dead Reer; she cries over her brown mug full of steam and tears and into her Berry Explosion and all the waitresses think the man with her, a gay porn star known for his sailor suits, has broken her heart. She cries because what is she doing back on this road travelling from failed relationship to failed relationship, every rest-stop another kiss-off with more crying and an inexpensive meal?

At her back clatter the Furies. They've been on her ass since Mother's Day because all she gave her mother was a card – the last break-up happened last Mother's Day. Too devastating to think of flowers or a gift. She has been crying for three days, no time in her heart to think about her mother. What a selfish daughter.

“Did you roll up the rim to win?” asks the porn star. He has very large pectoral muscles. He is an only son and worth his weight in wet gold.

2. You hold a 5 foot, 10 inch piece of wood shaped like a woman, shaped like the old love of your life in her arms. You smell the cologne, smell the cashmere of the second-hand coat. You smell the fresh hair; you can even smell the leather of the brand new shoes – and you know Juliet is all tricked up and smelling so good because Juliet is about to go on a date. Juliet always wears cologne when she’s looking to get fucked, always dresses inappropriately at the possibility of fucking. A thin coat in thin, November air. Eyelashes frosty with breath.

You act like some kind of fucked up computer hacker, the quirky ones who wank off in front of their monitors in spurts and drips. Sit and scan the screen because there’s no fireplace to throw Juliet’s things into: letters, art, clothes. You read the screen until your irises bleach albino red. The trap of Juliet’s face and the Laundromat.

3. Mother’s guilt so strong it clings to your skin and, at night, burrows in. The Furies swing their whips like cats’ tails and when they yawn, their dogs’ mouths show their fangs and their black lips. 109% of North American lesbians own pets. Except for violently allergic lesbians. Except for lesbians who grew up on farms.

The Furies’ mother guilt is the most effective and poisonous fruit of all. Mothers brandishing those whips, making you so crazy you bite your finger off in frustration.

Tisiphone, Megaera, Alecto: your mother plus her friends at her aerobics class. Megaera, Alecto, Tisiphone: your grandmother making your mother kneel on raw rice, the raw pain of the raw rice digging into kneecaps. Alecto, Tisiphone, Megaera: “Coming out to your mother! The best way to break her heart!” Where did she do wrong? What did she eat while she was pregnant to make this daughter turn out? The best way to get into shit with the Furies and conjure up the miasma is to come out to your mama.

4. Juliet’s so fucking tired she puts the rubber nipple in the baby’s nose (his name is Frank, there are so many babies named Frank) instead of his mouth, and that’s a lawsuit clean and tidy. Luckily Frank screams, formula gushes out his nose and Juliet stuffs the nipple into his mouth. Frank perfectly frank about where a nipple should go.

Juliet tells you stories, takes your heart out for a ride in the pocket of her white broad-cloth uniform. In the morning, or on night shifts, she puts on her face in front of the mirror, the smell of face powder and Cherry Hound lipstick. Cigarette and coffee for breakfast and dinner.

5. Juliet spins her yarns: Has mummified sperm ever been found inside the vaginal canal of a mummy? Juliet suspects yes, because the world is full of pervs, and embalmers would certainly be no exception especially when faced with a plethora of deadlines during a plague for instance. Such tame fruits and vegetables – apples and Brussels sprouts grow under the snow and enter via the window. Not so easy as germ warfare and

the luck of the Irish Spring. Don't know how effective would be a wooden stake through the heart or a skull carved from boxwood.

6. Juliet whispers her Code Pink until all the nurses encircle the surgeon like ants ready to fuck over a caterpillar.

“All I did was throw a cotton wad,” the surgeon says. “It's not like I threw a scalpel.”

And he looks at Juliet that asshole, better off when she was in pediatrics trying to drown babies. So the surgeon apologizes, but can't stop his hands from shaking.

Juliet tells stories about interns throwing rib cages and severed breasts because they are delirious from their work, no sleep, and too much coffee and injections, doctors going crab-fishing with a patient's amputated foot as bait. Juliet disciplined for taping a pacifier to a screeching baby's mouth because she has sixteen babies to look after and just one of her – it's not humanly possible, who would think it is?

And so it turns out that Juliet's some kind of Death Angel, a sister who slays, but only the ones who ask, she emphasizes. “Only the ones who really mean it because everyone at some point says, I want to die.” You eat your muffin. Juliet wipes lipstick from the corners of her mouth.

7. You go for the milk. Her husband's love letters posted on the fridge. The hard blue and white triangles on the floor. The ceiling so high it smothers. Chin stubble, cigarette breath as decoration. Dust for fingerprints on the fresh insides of her. It was only sad sex only only. Reel six? The number of fingers on Anne Boleyn's left hand. Sinister and Fathers Grimm. Mistress made good until she made bad. You walk back to Juliet. Spinster wannabe.

What can spinsters do on their own but be sexually-frustrated blue-stockings, hobbyists, too bitter, picky, ugly? Or get married quickly and shut all the loud-mouths up. A man without a woman is an owner of a playboy mansion. A woman without a man is like a dog without an owner, without a name, without a stick to chase. A fabulous ice wine.

8. The trickle of disappointment. The clicks and gurgles of last ditch efforts to save a relationship as tenuous as the concept "Relationship." Pull from the cart, slide in a bag and weigh. How to tenderize a friendship? Dust it with flour and seasoning. Gently drop in hot fat and watch the edges puff.

Juliet is a book that's been read and put away. The subscription that never ends. You get to miss the weight, the breath, the naked skin, the taste of someone else's mouth, stray hairs. The road leading through the grassy, hairy coulees. Rain water you don't want to drink because in a year it can melt down the caps of telephone poles.

Juliet marries a man, his head white and round as Sunday. His name matches the furniture. She will always be a spinster if she isn't careful. Pregnant. The new story is that she didn't have sex before marriage. The new story is that she didn't have sex *after* marriage. Juliet surrounds herself with the walls of her husband's house, the shining roundness of his head, the cloned dome of their son's scalp. Her body, haunted, spits out milk and brains.

Hold steady the bulk of baby, look into his face her face search his face for her face an ear an eye a misplaced pore. Three-month-old head flops a dangerous bowling ball on a gerbera stalk. Drooling grenade in her arms.

Your mother's hands have never seemed more claw-like. Juliet's mother's hands have never seemed more happy -- the veins and tendons so clearly in relief as she chants "What a good mother a born mother a beautiful mother a natural the best." Juliet's mother is in relief, her skull apparent when she opens her mouth the smile her daughter under control now, safe in her crib.

The Furies only care about blood congenital. They crowd around the pictures.

Their talk elbows with indoor rain, snatches of see-through plastic and child-proof snaps. Stories of morning-sickness collected by the glassful.

The Furies substitute pop-o-matic husbands for friends because it's too trying, too puzzling, to see a woman without her man. That singleness of an exclamation mark, the spiral curve of a question mark and not enough food for everyone at the banquet table. You prefer spinster. You, the perfect pronoun for a catalogue of spinsters: the echo of spinet. Spinet: an instrument or a jewel? The plucked harpsichord and only one string for each note. Queer the edges of the stone in her ring and why did the first wife leave again? Be sure to cover all the exits.

9. You fear you shall die unloved and untouched.

Spinster. An unmarried woman of gentle family. A woman who seems unlikely to marry. Excellent at making notes and gingerbread and berry preserves and leaving behind trunks full of hand-sewn poetry. Catalogue. Stuff with sex and grammar. A woman whose occupation it is to spin.