

# Partial Genius

prose poems

MARY BIDDINGER



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*For the French club presidents: past, present, and future.*

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# HISTORICAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Very few lives of the presidents mirrored lives of the saints, but there are exceptions. Certain children fall into step after anything titled “a challenge.” The rest of us sneak out the back door and watch it close behind us. Generally speaking, the presidents conformed in choice of garments and complied with rules such as what to burn and what not to kill, which was most things.

I found myself at a bar asking anyone who would listen about whether today’s children still play with paper dolls, and surprisingly this was taken as a brash come-on by the men and women surrounding the only pinball machine that still functioned. I would have demonstrated how I used to balance my smoke while on the commode but then remembered the paper dolls and didn’t.

Waiting in the vestibule of urgent care sent me back to a show about a country veterinarian where once somebody found an unidentifiable animal and attempted to let it name itself, and then to direct the nurse how best to feed it, and eventually they realized it wasn’t alive after all, much like the results passed to me in waxed paper, except I was thrilled and strutted out like an elk.

In the future all my friends would be painting the same fake sunflower and calling it art, while I continued waving from atop my pile of deconstructed charcoal kestrels. Someday the right old rich man would find me, and the street value of my

juvenilia would skyrocket, while the wrong old rich man told jokes about lives of the presidents from a damp bar stool of complete ignorance.

I watched a film where the highway was the protagonist and was supposed to garner our pity, but I was so jealous I took off two of my three shirts and stood up before the credits. One year I wrote “mouth” across my knuckles for Halloween and exited the pep rally before the microphone was switched on, flocks of balloons still humping the plastic bags designated to contain them.

# THE JOLLY ANCHOR

It was no place for a girl. You couldn't use your words. Somebody exhaled a story involving a shipwreck and a sandwich, no idea which came first, and certainly not the woman wearing a fetishist's latest metallurgy. We were all waiting for "the crisis" to arrive. Sweating on it. Trying to catch it in our lungs. Making it into a fish, then netting it. Or maybe that was me. And maybe the captain was you.

Everything short of writing me a vocabulary list, tying a blindfold, walking around the room with a lit match, a game of *identify the song I'm humming incorrectly*, too small to be a lemon but too big for a lime, quick allusion to turn of the century (the sexy one), pathos regarding bookish tendencies or a history in dirty little towns, rudeness to the wait staff, a stolen soup spoon, naked beneath greasy overcoat.

Do not omit certain grandiose statements. Not delusions of grandeur; those are implicit. Where to begin? With "I am Jesus and you are my sister and my wife." With intercepted calls that supposedly ended up on your rotary phone, as if by divine providence. If I could say one thing to the President it would be that you are a terrible girl and need punishing quick before you change back into a lake I forgot you said.

Take two somewhat gorgeous strangers and put them in a gorge. Conjoin two lethargic wasters and sit them at the bar. Place one bear on the ridge and the other on her back with a fish. Give her a fix. You keep talking about when the boat would

come to take you away, and at first I thought it was a song, and gave you credit for proficiency in Americana, but that, like everything else, was an artifact of a fraudulent bygone time.

Imagine being hospitalized on a boat. The infirmary the size of someone's back. All you could hold was ropes and your own knees. Someone giving both of us tattoos. Things can be surprising and sore, but what matters is who is in control of the ship's wheel, and who is bailing down below. Who dashes the brains of the violin on her way out the door. Who is left like a blood stain on a bale of burning straw.

# SKILL GAMES

My earliest memory was a costumed prospector biting into a bullet of golden chocolate. By then I was already too large for the ornamental railroad, but that didn't stop my father from folding all my folds into the front seat, then waving as the engine croaked forward. I wasn't a baby's baby. At christening I gripped chain crosses that relatives slathered around my neck. My mother refused the heirloom ankle bracelet, claiming it looked like bondage, but I don't think she meant it that way.

Decades later I would garner recognition for my scholarly article on the withdrawal method. It involved substantial field research and observable outcomes. I pasted Venn diagrams on the walls of my carrel in the library. Thankfully the philosophy professor who shared that space never tampered with my wet mounts. I had to relate everything to back to post-structuralism. My prospectus earned a special commendation from the graduate college.

Sometimes I have a dream of walking onto the stage of an amphitheater, thronged by fans of my intellectual property. And then I realize it's just another job interview. No matter how many times I do it, and how much the jitters fade and the adrenaline kicks in, whatever the operating system, hooking up projection cables will give me palpitations. I pretend to be in my previous incarnation as figure model for the rehabilitative art class, where I was just a series of widening circles.

I didn't expect infiltration of the natural family planning seminar to be so depressing. Sure, I made great casseroles, but they were for somebody else's husband. I stuttered and told everyone my name was Madrigal. Like the feast. We started with a familiar prayer. Halfway through I shimmied out the rectory window and landed in a boudoir of wet, trembling yews. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that it was all old news to me, or quoted my substantive findings.

Of course there were one or more men who made up the control group. Afterwards we'd ride the train together, intentionally choosing the un-flocked seats. There was a downtown apartment building where children packed the rooftop pool at all hours. I'd cross and un-cross my legs according to what emanated from my headphones. Maybe I would also sing a little, then phone in an order for spicy take-out. Next door to the restaurant, ninety watts of blue neon shouted: skill games.

# APOLOGY TOUR

Maybe I'm a little rusty in the saddle. Maybe I'm the little rust stain on a pair of white pants. A customer always has a right to be right. I was not the ideal girl for a spinning basket or giant sugar cone. My background was not in wastepaper management.

Let's listen to Black Sabbath and inhale the rage of vinyl car seats. Please forget how I stormed the bank in my sugar-colored nightie, trying to cash in. Remember me the way I was at the bonnet festival: perfect dimensions for filling anything bound with ribbon.

If somebody offers to buy you a drink called All My Promises Are Bullshit, recall the time you got in a scuffle with the bus driver over cotton candy. Today teenagers drink cotton candy vodka and wear clear, potent undergarments. You don't need to know how I know this.

At my high school reunion, everyone wore the same t-shirt: *Same Crap, Different Century*. I think they meant *decade*, but 1992 was not a year of precision. Even the virgins were divorced at least once. I provided my concise biography in two words: near miss.

In the university that I shall invent after becoming rich, every class will be as classless as the last. Perhaps occasionally I will offer a seminar. Education is the last luxury you said before peeling off your shirt and captaining a boat to the edge of the world.

Describe your genius in thirty words or less. Eat the best page of your favorite book. Go camping but with no water or twine. Make your skirts into a sort of tent. Bless those who curse you. Slap your freedom down then let it ride.

# SACRÉ-CŒUR

Back when I was getting high I kept losing my gloves—not one, but both of them, every time. So much for the theory of a mysterious other in your duplicate bedroom hoarding all the lost gloves, and the hope of some day getting married next to a rain barrel and some grackles.

When the social worker asked about how my life had been effected (sic) I mentioned that all food tasted like Windex and sometimes the sound of clocks was a powerful aphrodesiac (sic). I went to class and then purchased large scoops of cherry ice cream, but only to watch them melt.

The only subject that resonated was French. I found some dough and gave my skit about the Bois de Boulogne extra verisimilitude, which meant a man with a weapon, the wrong phone number, a red scarf (not too tight!), and a door that wouldn't yield to the sound of muffled accordion.

I decided I would sit in the library and sneeze until somebody stopped me. I decided I would lurk the quad and contemplate the big questions. The funny thing is that I did way better at mandatory brunches. I didn't wear sweaters. I was not intimidated by lengthy menus.

I managed to desecrate a number of unholy texts, but in a holy way that demonstrated “an advanced sense of presence . . . determined to no longer use sex . . . self-diagnosed genius . . . internalized feelings of superiority.” Everyone gave me legal pads for my birthday.

Legend states that if you kiss the marble steps at 4 am during your first week, you'll stay in school forever. Alternately, it states that you may consider this previous gift to be much like living inside a whale. When you find your whale, it will be packed with gloves.

## SOME TRUTHS

All the other women had husbands. Instead I talked about my collection of pig masks. It was clear I was a city girl. You just had to look at my fingernails and the corners of my mouth, which were both square. Clearly I didn't get the dipstick joke. Maybe that joke was on me, like a wet sweater, a therapeutic leach.

Once I had a job serving lunch to old folks. The application process involved whistling and arranging wooden spoons in order from largest to largest. Mostly I sliced bananas into coins and dehydrated them, picked up the green phone and breathed when callers asked what my name was, what was for dinner.

My roommate signed us up for a puppetry workshop. Anxiety attacks began about ten days before the first class. All those Styrofoam balls without galaxies. Suddenly I was topless again, attempting to bend over and fetch a stray balloon string. Who has a birthday party on a balcony in mid-January?

I loved being around smart people when they were neither pontificating nor mansplaining. Except if they were discussing Nietzsche as if he was William James, the entire world a conspiracy tapping holes in pint glasses and hollow legs, like my beauty was something constructed by a god and not two bored teenagers.

When I walked into the hallowed basement of the courthouse, I felt like a manifesto or a particularly bold haircut. Perhaps it was the absence of religion, or the compressed dimensions of the bathroom stalls, where nobody could have ever worked out a way to fuck, regardless of previous circus employment.

The best part of figure skating was getting cut. Not by an errant skate, but by the cruel rim of sequins on every elastic opening. Even now, if somebody utters the word *footloose* I'm a bodice of thorns. My back covered with shimmery polyester bologna. Something stirring the confines of my braided hair.

# TROUBLE SHIRT

Mailing heaps of paper isn't unusual, but when the pants started arriving in my office mail slot (postage due) I couldn't blink them away. I swear one crumpled set of brown corduroys was still warm from your knees, or maybe it was hot in the van that day. I've forgotten most of what might be deemed tender, because I wasn't looking for it. Nobody cares if you're loved when it's just a little.

Various past mistakes wanted to make amends. Yet I was no longer the girl with a hammer in her hand, teetering in front of a stained glass depiction of the Last Supper. Restaurants that had housed our fondest memories were boarded up. In the old days that never would have stopped us, but now I had a mortgage and you had your various failed campaigns, including me.

It was just like a shell game, but with hands. And maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but it lasted a lot longer than expected. Suddenly we had to imagine what the future fashions would be, to avoid wearing them on accident. Such as really boisterous scarves, an oversized watch that you hitched tight around my ankle, then some reference to Faulkner and a whole lot of exhaling followed by distant interjections from the bell tower.

When I said I wanted arugula for my birthday, I wasn't being whimsical. A man can trouble you all year, a bee in the bedsheets, a bucket of paint in your mushroom soup. And to say that you were my ally was at times a specious claim. Wars have been waged over less than clandestine attendance at a funeral with a woman described as *a pile of outdated bylaws*.

Perhaps you should know that I still have my trouble shirt. In our messages about past outfits, we have been careful to avoid it. Let's go back to the day that we tried to find the magnetic springs. Instead we lost the wheel of the truck and talked about the plastic music box you loved as a child. And how then I danced like a coil of ribbon wrapped around a tree.