

Segue

online literary journal

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The Dark Night of Synecdoche

However we follow the printed directions of sex.

—Philip Larkin

I Diaphragms

She discovered it in my brother's dresser, stuffed beneath the tube socks, only partially concealed. She'd been putting laundry away, lost as usual in the etherized loneliness of housework, when the saucer appeared, darting between the cumulus socks and stratocumulus underpants. "It's here to take me away," she cried, "a UFO!" Or so I imagine, the pathos of the incident pushing back, these many years later, against the comedy.

And take her away it did. When the object's actual identity at last imposed itself on my mother's consciousness, she felt faint. She had to lie down on my brother's bed, the very spot in which the saucer had landed. A diaphragm? Her fifteen-year-old son was having sex. Her fifteen-year-old son was having sex with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend. "Good God," she whispered, as if trying to keep the revelation from herself. Little did she know that an even greater shock lay ahead. Although hardly in bed *with* her progeny, shouldn't she have sensed, lying atop his comforter, this final outrage? Wasn't there something about the diaphragm she ought to have recognized?

Standing in the master bathroom, manipulating the unfamiliar object, my brother had envisioned a catcher's mitt: his girlfriend squatting over home plate, ready to stop even his most errant fastball. The Thurman Munson of sex, only better looking and obviously feminine. (My brother loved the Yankees.) The goal was to score while somehow striking out the batter. He hadn't a clue that one size doesn't fit all or that a prophylactic substance must accompany it. Remember that disgusting goo, which you had to apply in the throes of passion, making sure that you were done, completely done, with the oral part of the program? A friend in college actually burned his tongue lapping at the leaves of grass—forgive me, I taught Whitman this morning.

Nor did my brother understand the hygienic, let alone the Oedipal, implications of such an act. "What's the big deal? You weren't using it," he'd yell. And by that he meant she wasn't using it *presently*, though the fact was she wasn't using it at all because she and my philandering father were estranged and maintaining separate bedrooms. The remark would slay my mother: the woman had been humiliated enough, if this time only inadvertently.

Beyond the humiliation, however, lurked the shame of that universal taboo: incest. Theirs was a metaphoric violation to be sure but still not something my mother could get her arms around. By the transitive property of sexual contact alone—his penis had touched an object that had touched her vagina—the two, she believed, had slept together.

My brother, you might say, was criminally incognizant, and he'd remain so for years, even after he'd grown up, gone to college, and bedded countless other women. Well into a career as a financial consultant, he'd ask, upon hearing that my best friend had cancer and would have to have

his testicles removed, “What’s a scrotum?” As a boy, his favorite book had been *James* [his name] *and the Giant Peach*. When I think of the story’s fuzzy, testicular resonance, I want to laugh. I want to make a case for the unconscious. Apparently, as with the grammatical parts of speech that comprise language, you can deploy your genitals without knowing their proper names. I say “apparently” because having read my students’ prose, I can only imagine their lovemaking.

Though a year younger than he, my brother’s girlfriend was a willing, if equally ignorant, accomplice to this sexual adventure. For weeks, the pair had planned their raid on virginity: a trip by bike to the local drug store, condoms procured under the cover of darkness or, rather, under several boxes of *Jujubees*, the girlfriend’s favorite candy. The raid, however, proved unsuccessful when the cashier turned out to be our former Sunday school teacher, and the love-bird commandoes had to abandon their mission. Clueless though he might have been, my brother understood the Catholic prohibition against pre-marital sex—this much the Church had drilled into him. “Abort! Abort!” he actually whispered into his girlfriend’s ear, but she’d begun eating the *Jujubees* and wasn’t paying attention—the candy stuck to multiple molars.

It was only on the way home that he had his epiphany, recalling the unidentified hanging object in our parents’ bathroom. If not the mother of invention, necessity is certainly the mother of remembrance because our hero, with almost as much fuzz on his face as on his ripening peaches, suddenly retrieved a fragment from health class. “Isn’t there, you know, some rubbery whatchamacallit we can put in you?” he asked. It was as if he’d come up with the answer to a question on a test, an answer he had no right knowing since he hadn’t studied, hadn’t even been paying attention, when the unit on reproduction was presented. This lack of conscientiousness, however, in no way prevented him from feeling euphoric, and he immediately sensed some movement in his loins.

And so, Oedipus climbed the stairs and entered the master bath. The diaphragm hung from a peg for all the subway tiles to see, like a girl backed up against a gymnasium wall while everyone else is out dancing on the floor. Or like a bag lady (what my mother feared she’d become if she ever left my father) stranded in the underground as love’s purposeful commuters rushed by. I knew way too much about my mother’s unhappiness. For years, I’d served as confidante and coach. Once, I dreamt that I had to lug the heaviest of backpacks to school. I mean I couldn’t even lift it off the ground. Upon arriving, I unzipped the pack and out popped my mother in her nightgown. “Hi, Mom,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

To my brother, the diaphragm was simply an object to be used. He was flexible; *it* was flexible. Still, he worried that he might not be able to get such a large object inside of such a tiny girl. Having inspected his girlfriend, he found the opening especially small, and he had to console himself with the image of a bat folding its wings and compressing its spine in order to enter a house. The girlfriend informed him of the need to break her hymen *before* the bat could go anywhere. “Pull up! Pull up!” she screamed. No—that’s what the cockpit voice recorder shouts when a plane encounters windshear. Here, the injunction was “Pull out! Pull out!” following the unceremonious rupture.

At last, opening day. Catcher’s mitt in place, my brother strolled out to the mound and readied his first pitch. He was at once like some dignitary who can’t reach home plate and a Cy (very) Young Award winner. Absent an umpire in *that* arena, no one could say whether the mitt had stopped the millions of descendents he’d sent its way. The inning had lasted just ten seconds. In

the midst of his “Wow, that was tremendous” and his girlfriend’s more private disappointment, the sound of a car could be heard. My mother was home. The catcher’s mitt-turned-spaceship never moved faster, finding its ultimate refuge in the clouds.

When, some two days after first discovering the diaphragm, my mother divined its rightful owner, she took to her bed, crying. Even though he’d been caught having sex, my brother had kept quiet about the object’s origin—not because he feared the significance of his action but because he adhered to a strict policy of never disclosing anything to his parents. As a result of my mother’s frequent tirades, information was released on a need-to-blow basis.

She had been sitting on the toilet, looking up at the wall, when she noticed the unencumbered peg. The peg, let me state unequivocally, was delighted to have been relieved of that unbearable weight. What followed I almost can’t describe: the screaming and hollering, the nearly incoherent allusions to Freud. (A cultured person, my mother often sprinkled her conversation with the greats—and semi-greats—of western civilization.) She couldn’t fathom my brother’s cavalier attitude, telling her to sterilize the thing and then reuse it. “You’re just like your father,” she barked, “totally oblivious and insensitive!” And yet, his obliviousness seemed willed. Even after he’d been tutored in the finer points of Freudian psychology, he remained as indifferent to her hermeneutic as he was to her suffering.

My mother’s horror, of course, was predicated on the principle of synecdoche, a figure of speech in which, as I explained this morning to my gaggle of freshmen, a part of something stands in for the whole. “You have a nice set of wheels,” we used to say when complementing someone on their car. “What do you think you’re doing when you call me a dick under your breath?” I asked, trying to be funny. I didn’t tell them about the diaphragm, itself an example, albeit a tricky one, as the object isn’t technically part of the woman, though it is—ha, ha—a part for the *hole*. (Puns are like children in a Catholic family: there’s always another on the way.) My more fastidious colleagues would insist that the diaphragm is a metonym, a figure of speech in which something associated with an object or person stands in for it: “The White House rejected tax cuts,” say. But how about a compromise: either a postmodern synecdoche or a metonym overcome with longing?

The night of the second shock, my mother dreamt that she’d been appointed to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and charged with the disposal of some very dangerous waste. Because my father had done some work for Reagan, this element of her dream seemed totally believable. While her family slept, she dug a deep hole in the backyard and lined it with concrete. Then, she placed her diaphragm inside, hoping against hope that the meaning of mother might somehow be contained. “Motherhood is radioactive,” read the talking points. “Mothers can pollute our drinking water.” Though she didn’t agree with the policy, she executed it faithfully. “Why have I taken this job?” she thought, struggling to emerge from her dream.

Enter my brother, waving a tube of spermicide, in a clever inversion of the facts. He was a hundred feet tall, Godzilla with a fire hose, spraying the disk on which civilization had been written. “Never again will the world be pregnant with meaning!” he cried. “Sex means nothing; even sex with your mother means nothing!”

Thus, Jocasta awoke even more alarmed than before. Clearly, a son with Oedipal urges was preferable to a son with nihilistic ones, and she appeared to have spawned the latter. When she thought about it more, she decided that she wanted him to want her. What was Freud anyway but a

metaphor for lost intimacy, a desire for connection? The woman had given up everything for her kids, and her kids—her parts—had forgotten her.

If I've moved from the synecdoche of the diaphragm to the still more complicated synecdoche of children it's because I now understand what was at stake in this crisis. A shattered pot cannot abide the presumption of the piece, parading its independence. To my mother we were ungrateful synecdoches—even I who tried to fill the absence in her life, an absence both synonymous with my father and far in excess of him. To riff off of her dream, she was like an X-ray machine, a giant MRI tube, into which I was repeatedly inserted. How much motherhood can a person take? How much before the cancers come? "I still remember you coming out of me," she'd say whenever I seemed most distant. At such times, I could feel a phantom umbilical cord around my neck.

II Diagrams

Until this point, I'm sure I've come across as especially unkind to my brother, exposing a most outrageous *faux pas* and enjoying myself in the process. But I am in fact an egalitarian in matters of ridicule. Not six months after my brother's transgression, a letter arrived, addressed to one Ralph Savarese. Thinking it belonged to my father, after whom I'd been named, my mother opened it. Unfolding a sheet of notebook paper, she saw a drawing in pencil—indeed a kind of diagram. The words "vagina," "labia," and "clitoris," each with an arrow pointing to what clearly was a representation of the female genitalia, glared at her. In script below appeared the phrase "If you can't find the clit, you can't find the girl." Enraged, my mother believed that one of my father's lovers had written to criticize his performance. The fact that my father had been such an ignorant and selfish lover only encouraged this line of reasoning. The old man had rarely found the girl, and when he had, it was largely by accident. All of this my mother had shared with me in agonizing detail.

At dinner that night she pounced, producing the diagram as if it were an extra vegetable. My father protested vehemently. "I haven't a clue what this is. Besides, I know what I'm doing in that arena," he yelled—before recognizing what he had copped to implicitly. And then, as if desperate, he added, pointing at me, "He's named Ralph, too."

I knew I was the intended recipient; I had recognized the writing on the diaphragm—I mean, diagram. It belonged to a girl I had taken out the previous Friday: a beautiful, cosmopolitan Pakistani girl way beyond her years and my experience. When my mother saw me blush, she knew. "O my God, you're just like your father!" she shouted, an accusation I abhorred. I felt like answering, "But I'm a beginner. I'll learn." My mother's tone implied betrayal: both in choosing someone other than she as my lover and in revealing an apparently hereditary lack of technique. Suddenly, my name—a source of resentment but also of secret, Oedipal strength—suggested an unavoidable fate. I looked like the man, even spoke like him. Why shouldn't I be as unaccomplished and insensitive in bed? Her dream of having me take my father's place—or what felt like her dream—wilted on the spot.

Aafia, my mother's chief competitor, was the daughter of a diplomat. She had stunning skin and hair and the most acerbic tongue I had ever encountered—even after it invaded my mouth. She went to my sister school. I'd been confused when she asked me out because everyone knew she was

dating a girl, and when I fumblingly alluded to this fact, she quipped, “Tell me you’re not bound by conventional sexual mores? I like sex. I like girls *and* boys. Get it? Pick me up on Friday at six-thirty. You can take me to dinner and then...” Her voice trailed off. I imagined a bone-white blouse hitting the floor.

Not three blocks from her parents’ house, she told me to pull over. We were in front of a park. I knew, or thought I knew, what was about to happen. “Let’s get in the back,” she said, “there’s more room.” Before I had even closed the door she was pulling my head into her lap and hiking up her skirt. To my shock, she wasn’t wearing any panties. “Lick,” she commanded. My first scuba diving lesson and instead of receiving a gentle introduction to the pleasures and perils of this new sport, I had been thrown right into the ocean. No oxygen check, no mask, no flippers, no spear should a shark approach.

Aaifa’s “rose-wet cave” (to borrow a line from Adrienne Rich) threatened to engulf me. I knew nothing of this space, nothing of its contours or depths. This was my first vagina. (Well, technically my second.) “Lick,” she repeated, and I did, though without much direction or strategy. After a while she sighed, “You’re no good. Let me show you how to give someone pleasure.” And then she proceeded to undo my belt, at which point... “You’re pathetic,” she declared upon discovering my dampened underpants.

I’d get better, of course, at scuba diving, though not with Aafia, who dropped me for a college student. The rejection only made me want to prove her wrong about my talents. And so I practiced every chance I got. I read up on different techniques, found a copy of the *Kama Sutra* and devoured its diagrams. Halfway through my second year of college, I passed the open water diving certification test with a girl who, strangely enough, would also become an English professor. O the bubbles we made! Only later would I recognize that even sexual proficiency could be marred by a persistent ignorance and egoism. However enthusiastically I attended to my partner’s pleasure, the act was finally about me, about my getting off. A curious idiom “getting off,” one that suggests, in its secondary meaning, not paying the proper price for a crime. Here, the phallus would be akin to a slick, well-paid defense attorney.

In seeking to get off, I was also seeking, I now realize, to get away from my mother, which meant renouncing emotion. Her emotions seemed less like a dark cloud that followed me around than a giant, chemical plume unleashing its rains. To be close to a woman, I concluded, was to drown in need and, especially, sorrow. I wanted none of it, having already sunk to the bottom of that pond.

I remember one Easter morning wheedling my way into an acquittal. My girlfriend wanted to read the paper and then go to Mass. She thought it tacky to engage in premarital coitus on the most important holy day in the Catholic faith. I made an awful joke about resurrection, and then pointed at my tented underpants. “Let’s have a revival here,” I said. I drew out the long “e” in “please” while kissing her neck, which seemed to do the trick. “Please? Just a quickie.” She went and got her diaphragm. (Yes, that horrible object returns). “We have only twenty minutes,” she reminded me, and I complied. I complied with minutes to spare, demonstrating the schoolboy’s cheerful alacrity.

After we were through, I heard, from the bathroom, a shriek, followed by an expletive. When my girlfriend sat down to pee, the diaphragm emerged with a vengeance from her vagina. It became airborne and then landed under the sink: a truly ultimate Frisbee. Some sort of suction

phenomenon was apparently responsible. No fan of the miraculous, the philosopher Spinoza remarks, “As nature preserves a fixed and immutable order, it most clearly follows that miracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us or, at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle.” The coincidence, however, was extraordinary: on Easter morning a diaphragm, of its own accord, fled the tomb of its imprisonment. “I’m gonna fucking kill you if I get pregnant!” my girlfriend announced, and so at the conclusion of Mass we went to the student health center where she took a morning *of* pill. The whole way there, I had to suppress a laugh as I visualized the airborne diaphragm. Obviously, I still had some work to do in the sensitivity department.

Reflecting on the adolescent foolishness of the brothers Savarese, I’m reminded of what my mother said a couple of years ago: “I’m done with sex.” She had finally divorced my father, and I had asked her during a visit if she intended to date again. “If you think I want another man, you’re nuts!” she yelled. “Who needs ham-handed bravado and a fear of intimacy?” Though no longer oppressively miserable, she carried with her that turtle’s shell of unfulfillment, which offered protection from future disappointment precisely by ensuring more unfulfillment. I’d held out hope that someone might still find the girl. I hadn’t meant just sexually. And I hadn’t meant just me. Actually, I hadn’t meant me at all. By this point, I’d escaped my mother’s melancholic clutches, or so I’d thought. I didn’t understand that in refusing to be found, or at least searched for, my mother was, in effect, sending a message: *Meet me in the garden when the clock strikes twelve and the moon is a medallion of love*. Nor did I understand her connection to the thing I’d become: a literature professor.

This morning in class, while discussing section #6 of “Song of Myself,” a kid blurted out: “You don’t really expect us to like this shit, do you?” And when he did, I felt as if I were a police officer who’d been shot with his own gun, my customary sarcasm missing from its holster. Or, rather, I felt—and I don’t think there’s any other way to put it—like someone whose mother had just been insulted. “Let’s take this outside,” I wanted to say. In the figure of the grass, I’d suggested that Whitman was playing around with synecdoche: trying to find not so much the girl or the boy but the nation. (With Whitman, of course, America is one big erogenous zone.)

After writing of the “beautiful uncut hair of graves,” the poet laments, “I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,/And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.” “Don’t you get it?” I responded. “Doesn’t this move you?” We are *all* offspring taken soon out of our mothers’ laps. We chase a dream of wholeness with our bodies and our words, never quite catching up to others or ourselves.

Even as my mother approaches the end of her life, I see that she’s still holding me—or trying to. Indeed, I see what she’s bequeathed: this love of literature, this mother poisoning. I picture men in Mylex suits preventing the spread of poetry. “Hurry up, evacuate!” they moan through their Martian ventilators. Why relish what makes you sad? Why try to piece together what can’t be made whole? Hair of the dog, we tell someone with a hangover. And so, I’m not the least surprised when my mother shows up in class, as she did this morning, ready to take on that kid—a guest, or is it a ghost, lecturer? I no longer even have to unzip my bag; she manages to do it from within, emerging, like a magician’s assistant, in her familiar nightie. “Hi, Mom,” I say, though my back has long given out. “Glad to have your company.”

Author Notes

Ralph James Savarese is the author of Reasonable People: A Memoir of Autism and Adoption (Other Press 2007). His poems, creative nonfiction, and opinion pieces have appeared, among other places, in American Poetry Review, Sewanee Review, Southwest Review, Southern Humanities Review, Southern Poetry Review, Modern Poetry in Translation, New England Review, ACM, Stone Canoe, the LA Times, Houston Chronicle, Atlanta Journal Constitution, and the Des Moines Register. He teaches 20th-century American literature, creative writing, and disability studies at Grinnell College in Iowa.

About the Work

I wrote “The Dark Night of Synecdoche” as an attempt to be funny in prose. I grew up in a family whose craziness could rival that of David Sedaris’, and though I liked his work, I wanted to produce something that was ultimately both sad and philosophical. I didn’t want the humor to be the point; rather, I wanted it to be the vehicle for a deeper understanding of family relations and, as important, a strategy for disarming the reader. A writer of memoir can’t *begin* with philosophy; it has to be smuggled in and rendered essential. I also wanted to see if I could write about sex—not just any old sex but teenage sex: that bumbling and charged alacrity with which the young reach for one another’s bodies. The most challenging aspect of writing such a piece was making the different registers fit and managing the transitions. I also had some difficulty sensing when the humor, which is rather masculine and jejune, went too far. How far is too far in a story, a factual story, that is already over the moon? The most pleasurable aspect was working with metaphor, allowing the piece to be richly lyrical. I favor nonfiction that is poetic without abandoning narrative drive or plot.

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