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Review

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Harpur Palate **Dwayne Lively**

Harpur Palate 5:1 (Summer 2005). Catherine Dent, Editor. Maggie Gerrity, Associate Editor. Accepts fiction: 250-8000 words (address to Fiction Editors) and poetry: 3-5 poems, no more than 10 pages total (address to Poetry Editors). Subscriptions: one year, \$16 for two issues; two years: \$30 for four issues. Single issues: \$10 for latest issue, \$5 for less recent issues. Send submissions to: *Harpur Palate*, English Department, Binghamton University, P.O. Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902-6000. Website: <http://harpurpalate.binghamton.edu/>.

My initial reactions to *Harpur Palate* were pretty much that it was, most likely, too good to be true. It was perfect bound and had a handsome yellow and black cover with a pair of praying *darmas*, one ghost-like, one more solid, in an image that gave hints of *yin* and *yan*. A study of contributors notes revealed several well known names including Steven Corey, Grant Tracey, William V. Spanos, Elizabeth Rees, Anis Shivani, Mira Rosenthal, and Lyn Lifshin. It was 138 pages of mostly prose with 27 pages of poetry and two collections of photographs scattered between the stories and essays. All in all, I had a sneaking suspicion I was about to be disappointed.

I was not disappointed. In fact, rarely has a magazine challenged my literary prejudices and preferences as effectively as *Harpur Palate*.

The issue begins with the three award winners of the magazine's annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction. Although I disagree with the order a bit, all three works are arguably among the best fiction I've read in a couple years. What's more amazing is each is a type of story I normally despise.

Award winner Kate Leary's "A Different Language" at first appears to fit solidly into what I call the *New Yorker's* Sophisticated Sophisticates Genre. These stories feature beautiful and sophisticated people in beautiful and sophisticated places doing beautiful and sophisticated things while smoking Gauloises, drinking latte and absinthe and pondering the difficulties of life in places that don't serve a decent Café Vienna. I have to admit to huffing loudly when I read the opening lines: "A mother and daughter sit in a café in Bilbao, in the Basque region of Spain. They're waiting for their tour guide, who is supposed to meet them any minute now."

Leary's story, however, quickly adopts an omniscient and vivid narrative style that shifts around like the camera in an Oliver Stone film as

it introduces us to the two major characters: Claudia, the mother, a sophisticated sophisticate who "wears gray tailored wool slacks and expensive black leather pumps"; and Andrea (Andy) who is as frumpy as her mother is perfect:

She is maybe ten pounds overweight but she's tall, so it doesn't show much. She would have made a handsome man, but as a young woman she seems oversized and ill at ease. Her elbow is on the table and she's slumped over her café con leche, shredding her empty sugar wrapper.

The real narrative twist comes when Andy imagines the tour guide (who will no doubt be a handsome young lad) seeing them as he walks in the room and imagines him seeing horns of cuckoldry on their heads. This is how Andy admits that 1) both women are having man trouble and 2) she took a Shakespeare class the semester before. Then, when Ramón the guide enters, the point of view starts hopping into the heads of each woman:

Claudia likes the cut of his long brown coat, the way it swings at his feet when he walks. And when he looks up from the closed, dripping umbrella in his hand and scans the café for them, she sees his thick black eyelashes from impossibly far away.

Andy notices that his eyes are a rich brown, and that's when she tears her eyes away from him and looks at her mother.

Claudia opens her mouth, but can't settle on the right greeting, an unfamiliar sensation.

What carries this story is the over-powering voice of the narrator and the sense of place it evokes as it takes the reader on a tour of the Guggenheim Bilbao and offers a quick history of the Basques. That said, the story is far from perfect. Although it is very sexually charged for a while as the mother and daughter react to Ramón and try to decide, without ever discussing it, who will get to spend the night with him (the early odds are on Claudia), the story ultimately ends a bit too easily and on too sweet a note for my taste with Claudia and Andy reconciling (sort of) and overcoming the fact they each speak "a different language."

My pick for best story in the issue is Grant Tracey's Honorable Mention earning "When Characters Die" that also confronts me with a kind of story I normally hate: Clever stories over-stuffed with contemporary references: *He pulled a Budweiser out of his Chinese-made Haier refrigerator and sat down on his Ikea couch to watch Friends on his 51 inch Samsung Plasma TV from Best Buy. He turned on his TiVo in case his Motorola cell phone rang, opened up a bag of Cheetos and got ready to watch etc.* (n.b. This bit of blather is not from Tracey's story.) Such stories

are typically based around thinly disguised real events or TV shows that deal with the reality of TV versus the reality of, well, reality. I huffed (yet again) as I read the opening paragraph:

Nick Patterson is starting to think that his character isn't going to be around next season. He plays Chris Swados, head of UNTSO (United Nations Theatre of Special Ops), a counterterrorist organization that protects the globe from attack. This is the third year for the series *Hard Rain*, and Swados is dying from exposure to a nuclear isotope. Special Agent Rick Furey is searching for an antidote, but time's running out.

The very next line, however, put my mind at ease: "'Man, I wish they'd serve French fries with gravy,' says Colin Dewars, who plays Furey, the series star." Not only is this incongruous from what's been going before, it tells the reader as much about the characters' personalities as we need to know to enjoy the rest of the story

Nick, too tall, too acne-scarred, and too stoop-shouldered to be hero, is the perennial character actor whose job is to recite exposition while being upstaged by the scene hogging Colin Dewars. Even in what should be Nick's big scene and his one and only shot at an Emmy, Dewars manages, perhaps without even realizing it, to upstage him. It's as much a part of his nature as wanting gravy on French fries while his friend worries about his death.

Once again, what carries the story is its powerful voice. Tracey weaves an entertaining tale of how Nick comes to terms with his character's death. (Fans of *24* will quickly recognize the situation, although things unfold somewhat differently than in the series.) The story also recounts Nick's previous attempt to be a hero way back in school. By stealing something and drawing attention to himself, he hoped to give his favorite teacher (who couldn't keep from crying when teased) a break from the boys in the class who taunted her just to see her cry. He is ultimately upstaged in this act as well and the results are, at best, ambiguous.

The story is about minor characters and the parts they play in life and how they may be more important than we give them credit for. It asks, but never answers, "who is the hero; who is the minor character; and who is stealing the scene?"

Also terrific is Shivani Manghnani's "The Paying Guest," which avoids getting my Jumpa Lahiri Anger up by actually being about something. Instead of faux exotica about Indians dealing with trying to find curry ingredients and apartments in the suburbs, Manghnani gives us highly sensual and sexual people in impossible situations they gladly create for themselves.

The story risked my ire early on by adopting a faux "second person" narrative style: "The first room you rented was on Marine Drive, in a flat that belonged to a new divorcée." The first two paragraphs, however, establish a character who seems to be playing games for reasons even she doesn't understand. She steals from her landlady (who also stole from her) and gives to the landlady's daughter. In the next scene she moves into a house with a famous former Bollywood actress and her handsome middle-aged son, who's staying in India for a few months while his Irish-American wife waits back in San Jose. The opening scene is never fully explained, and never referred to again, but it sets up the narrator's attitude perfectly and lets us know that, even to herself, she is not exactly the person she seems to be.

What the reader does know is that the narrator is an Indian-American who grew up in Texas and now finds herself in India. Rather than live with her aunt, who runs a clinic so controversial it caused her uncle to move away, she chooses to live with strangers. She also chooses to "re-virginate" herself by pretending she doesn't know what's going on when they celebrate Holi. She lets them tell her things she already knows as part of her quest to experience things in a way she's not experienced them before, even though, technically, she has. She soon starts a doomed affair with Roshan, the handsome son, who treats her only slightly better than O's boyfriend treated her in *The Story of O*.

The story only slips up at the very end when it literally says one word too many and reveals the exact nature of the aunt's clinic as if the reader couldn't figure it out. It also seems to end a bit abruptly.

I've spent a great deal of time on these stories as I think they represent what this particular issue of *Harpur Palate* is all about: voice. The stories cover a wide variety of types: comic, tragic, whacky, serious, and coming-of-age, and all are carried along by narrative voices that often help the reader forget how silly the stories may otherwise be.

A good example of this is Kristie M. Betts' "Luck Be A Lady" which explains how Jebediah Turner got his wife's leg back. The opening is great: "Although we gasped and shook our heads when Jebediah Turner ended up in jail for stealing his wife's severed foot, we all wondered if we would do the same thing. Or more to the point: if anyone would love us enough to steal back our body parts from County General." Only a confident author can carry on a story after an opening like that. Betts does an admirable job although, once again, the story ends too quickly. That could, however, be my desire to read more.

Also good is "Beasts of Eden" by Jennifer Spiegel that opens with "Picture me. I have flaming red hair and a kick-ass body. A body that says, 'Beg me.'" The narrator also has "a mangled arm. It's grotesque, discolored, an anomaly, something to make you reconsider. All of your

previous fantasies contested. . . . I think of it as raw meat, chewed-up hide left over from a rabid dog's midnight snack." This story may end a bit too happily for some, but I think it does earn its happy ending.

Mutilations also appear in the concluding story. Robert Vivian's "Burned Up Heroes" is a remarkably funny and touching story about a man who burned off his hands by holding onto his true love as she burned up in a car fire. (The story explains why he couldn't actually rescue her or put out the fire.) It makes the gruesome description of the woman's burning death into a wonderfully romantic and poignant moment:

First her lips popped from the heat and then it was like her cheekbones were made of paper for how fast they went up in flames, her nose dissolving in front of him to leave a gaping hole like a brand new mouth. He started to tell her how much he loved her, how sorry he was that she had to die in an agonizing fireball while his own hands fried. He shouted apologies and regrets and tried to whisper sweet nothings in the wasp socket of her raging ear that nothing would separate them again, the fire had made them one as the smoke of her flesh and bones filled up his lungs. You wondered if he wasn't making certain parts of it up to cover himself somehow. . . .

Although none of the issue's stories are particularly bad, not all of them are as effective as they could be. Rachel May's "In the Black Pond, Swimming" about a girl encountering a ghost is lush and suspenseful for a while, but as an excerpt from a novel it ultimately goes nowhere. Also competent is Josh Weil's boy-coming-of-age story "John Henry's Headlamp," which suffers from being a bit too obvious but which nonetheless captures the sense of childhood innocence and packs a nice punch at the end.

The poetry in the issue is also dominated by voice and covers every form from prose poetry to formal to experimental. The poems generally seem to have no secret or implied meanings and instead focus on powerful images designed to capture moments and invoke feelings. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" has been replaced with "I let him out. He pees" (from Jack Ridl's "The Ontology of Dogs").

The poems in this particular issue seem secondary to the fiction and prose, and the poem after every prose piece seems to have been chosen specifically to follow that story by capturing a similar phrase or recurring theme. "A Different Language," in which husbands and lovers are an influence even in their absence, is followed by Jack Ridl's very nice "Sorting Through the Records," in which a husband's absence becomes central to the memories evoked as the narrator watches her mother clean house.

I can see my mother dusting each record, setting aside the ones she doesn't remember, finding ones that take her to the dance floor where she jitterbugged, fox trotted, slow danced with my father.

I also liked John Smelcer's "Dream Walker," which followed Tracey's "When Characters Die." It describes a boy spinning a hoop down the road and, despite being infused with what I consider painfully obvious symbolism (the boy's name is "Silas Carries-A-Dream"), it works best when read aloud: "It was a good dream as dreams go. / He was rolling his dreams / rolling his dreams / toward a dark and crumbling horizon." Also good was Nancy Thompson's "Nikita Khrushchev Buys Sheets," which imagines the man who swore to "bury" the West buying sheets: "Still unable to bear the thought / of king or queen, / he chooses full, / dreams of bigger."

Some of the poems seem to serve primarily as experiments in sound. I liked Lyn Lifshin's poem "All Night the Night Has Been" better when I started reading the poems out loud my second time through the issue. "What would have been / nuts looked like limes / on the white stones, / it sounds like some / one tapping on a glass / coffin. It sounds / like someone tapping / from within the tree." The same goes for Matt Zambito's excessively clever "Trying to Make a Long Story Short": "Et cetera, forever. Then a hullabaloo, a *whoosh!* / into your single cell, & a cleaving, an exponential / reaching of neck & hands, of eyes & a mind fresh / as a honeydew, wet music, a wail, a name. Suck milk." Not my kind of thing, although I did appreciate his use of the word "blah" later in the poem.

My favorite poem is Mira Rosenthal's "At The Estate Sale," a formalist poem that seems to be trying to be a *terza rima*, although it doesn't follow the aba bcb cdc etc. style. Instead the center of each tercet in the poem contains the same rhyme (or at least the same approximate sound).

In the kitchen every cupboard stands bare
for want of dishes, now tables replete
with stacks of plates, glasses and silverware.

At an open drawer, a young woman stands
head bent, hair mostly brown with one gray streak
hanging forward as she inspects the brand

on a silver serving spoon. *How 'bout this?*

Is this one antique? Her friend dismisses it
and she looks again, not wanting to miss. . . .

Not everyone is as shallow as that woman, however. The narrator eventually discovers people trying to find something more than prestige from the goods on sale:

It's how we expect the spirit to come in:
knitting needles, blue yarn, stitching, a plate
drawn from a different life, taken home, scavenged

from the dead, a vest, a word, a ladder
to bring us further to the firmament
even if our hands grasp only matter.

The issue is rounded out with two memoirs. Stephen Corey's "The Three Musky Tears" gives an inspiring description of his career as an editor and explains the origin, more or less, of the issue's yellow and black cover. It also discusses, rather neatly, the importance of "voice" in fiction. (This fits almost too neatly with the issue.) His poem, "Editor of Death," which follows his essay, is less impressive, but works by adding a different spin on the notion of "editor."

William V. Spanos' "Persephone's Pomegranate" comes the closest to being annoying of any work in the issue. It describes beautifully his memories of a trip to Crete. Despite its vivid descriptions, it ultimately is filled with false profundities. At one point Spanos describes dancing with Cretan shepherds in the valley atop Psiloriti. He and his son struggle and fail to follow the dance: "But our American ungainliness, certainly the result of our alienation from the earth and sky, fire and water—the very elements invoked by most demotic Cretan songs—was not entirely disastrous." Well, of course, the ungainliness must be the result of some spiritual absence caused by being American rather than a lack of knowledge of the dance. (Translation: I got drunk. I started hating my hometown. I wrote a poem.)

Despite such anomalies, I can safely say I've rarely enjoyed an issue of a magazine from front to back as much as I enjoyed *Harpur Palate*. The poetry is not completely to my taste but there was a lot to enjoy and many of the poems came alive when I started reading them aloud.

Similarly, the photography is competent and, at times, brilliant. I especially liked Allison Miller's details of aging machines, especially "Sheet Glass, 1952" and Jose Fernando Flores' "Stray Dog, Salama." Both works take ordinary things (a truck in the former, a dog in the latter) and then use seemingly misplaced focus to great effect. Both artists manage to

turn their ordinary subjects into abstracts and force the viewer to see things in a different way.

That may be the best description of the work in *Harpur Palate*. And that's exactly what I'm looking for in a good read.

