

From the beginning he ate her books. He borrowed volumes he thought she would not look at again and ate the end papers and several random pages. He razored pages out of the hardbounds and pulled paperback pages free from the glue cleanly. He kept a few books she would not miss and ate them when his borrowings became too frequent. She had a sizable library and kept her writing to herself, and so he knew he would have to marry her.

Inevitably, she discovered his vice. One Sunday she walked unexpectedly into the living room and found him on his haunches in front of the bookcase, the bottom half of a page from a quality paperback sticking out of his mouth. Like a little boy caught in a dirty deed, he was awash with guilt and fear, while he was also half conscious of the capillary action carrying his saliva farther down the page. She had suspected for some time that he was not only stealing pages, but whole books as well, and she was more curious than judgmental about what he was doing with them. Her memories of childhood made her tolerant of what others might have called deviant behavior, and so she went immediately to him, held his head to her breasts, and told him that her books were his to digest as he pleased.

They lived almost as cheaply as one. His need for food was inversely related to the amount of paper he ate. She bought many books, read them quickly, and fed them to him. She tried to find out what pleased him. She tried hardbounds and paperbacks, gothics and westerns, economics and sex, and finally decided it did not matter. He would eat any paper and, when particularly hungry, light cardboard. They probably had less garbage than anyone in the city. He displayed such great appetite and such lack of taste that she took to buying used paperbacks at the lowest possible cost and dumping them by his favorite chair.

He viewed the cheap menu as a sign of diminished ardor, but his plan was working. The less attention she paid to him, the more she gave to her work as a freelance journalist, essayist, and writer of occasional fiction. He had discovered her in her first appearance in the Sunday supplement and had taken off the following Monday to eat everything of hers that he could find in the public library, hiding in the lavatory by the reading room and stuffing himself until he had the dry heaves and could barely walk out at closing time.

When they were first married, she let him eat her rough drafts as soon as she revised a copy. He carefully concealed his joy. Nothing he had ever eaten compared to

the fresh, keen taste of her prose done by her own hand. He ate the piles of paperbacks just so at night, when she went to bed tired from working on her latest article, he could revel in her wastebasket, rolling balled scraps against his palate, sliding long sheets against the back of his throat, nearly inhaling the flimsy carbons. He feared that she would find out that he did not love her for herself.

His taste became more refined. Although anything she wrote had for him the richness of chocolate mousse in comparison to the bread pudding of even the best magazines, he ate her finished manuscripts like the finest full-course French dinners. The rarity of savoring a completed manuscript added to his delight. They were only available when a rejected story or article had to be retyped before it was sent out again, or when she agreed to a revision for a particular magazine. He knew the rejected or unrevised copy would eventually go in the wastebasket, but was anguished by their being in the apartment and not yet available to him.

He nagged her to get on with her work. She tried to find out what was annoying him, cooked him a good meal, or was especially appreciative in bed, but that kept her away from her work and made him even more irritable. He considered telling her, but the fear of losing her kept him silent. After one particularly difficult evening, he ran from the apartment and drove from one adult bookstore to another, eating what he could get away with inside and then using his admission fee to buy something to eat in the car as he drove to the next one. He gorged himself on the cheap, coarse, poorly prepared prose and went home bloated, nauseous, wrung out.

Unable to understand and finding him increasingly angry and depressed, she proposed a separation. He was terror stricken, and she relented. But the next time he returned from a binge he found a note on the coffee table telling him she was gone. Worn out from his debauch and too agonized to think, he ate the note and fell asleep on the carpet.

Soberer when he woke, he took stock. A few of her files were left, and many of her books, and he decided to take his time about what to do, using the remnants of her library and writings for sustenance. He made two attempts to talk with her -- one after eating the first service of divorce papers, the other when the last of her essays was gone and only her index cards remained.

He haunted libraries in search of another who might compare, but it was futile. He had grown so accustomed to her taste, so intimate with her nuance, so satisfied with her, that no one else would do. He spent the holiday season

buying huge amounts of wrapping paper at discount houses, but it did not cheer him. Then he took to eating scraps, gnawing labels off bottles, picking up discarded transfers in the subway.

She saw him early in January, fighting the garbage man in the alley behind her apartment. He lost the fight, staunched the blood from his nose with a scrap of paper, ate the paper, looked pleadingly up at her window and, when she closed the blind, walked sadly away.

He became a teacher of composition at a suburban community college, forever unsatisfied with his students' papers, searching vainly for the one writer who would once again satisfy his appetite for fresh, keen prose.

-- Michael R. Brown

Chicago IL

IN HER SHOP HANG PICTURES OF GERONIMO AND JESUS

Eating in my truck under
the salt cedars
I am surprised to find that the Mexican woman
who sells me tamales
has also put in
green olives.
I must remember to thank her.

COPPER AND BRASS

Bald, arms thick as tree trunks
(used to keep a junkyard,
almost killed a drunk who
stumbled in to sleep), Dell,
now heavy-equip. operator at the plant,
all day loads cinders
from the mound behind the mill stacks
into two dumps I drive,
racing one to the landfill
just down the road, emptying it,
roar back just in time to
jump out and into the other
as he rocks it with the final scoop.