

The Silencing of the Lamb Faces

by Marianne Gingham

It's 1964 and I'm sitting in Miss Peggy Joyner's AP English class, word drunk as usual. I've been researching the love affair between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning for my term paper and have glutted myself on *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and the letters that flourished between the two smitten writers. I've begun to write a few sonnets myself. Miss Joyner passes out one of her weekly vocabulary lists to help us prepare for the SATs and I eagerly scan its offerings: *cacophony, mellifluence, aesthetic, tantamount, pulchritude, malfeasance, timorous, tintinnabulation*. But what normal person walks around inserting such marvelous sounds into ordinary speech? People from a more eloquent, word-centered century, that's who. I picture consonant, lean men wearing top hats and shouldering capes, women fluttering plumed fans at their delicate lily-stem necks. I imagine sabotaging myself socially with a public comment like, "The cacophony in the cafeteria today is tantamount to aesthetic malfeasance." If you want to actually *use* these words in real life, best to slip them into poems that are destined to be thrown away, like this regrettable fragment from my incompletely lost sonnet about a pianist:

In *pulchritude* his soul of music grows
And nourished by sincere *aesthetic* loves
He plays a *mellifluent* tune on rows
Of *tintinnabulating* keys. O, gloves
Could never warm his *tim'rous* hands so well . . .

Freddie, who sits behind me, taps my shoulder. She wants to know who I'm writing my term paper on. Her father is a college chancellor, and she's destined to cut a brilliant swath

herself in the groves of academe. She spits on the grave of Elizabeth Barrett Browning for being a frail second rater of a poet, actually more a *balladeer* than a poet. Everybody in our AP English class knows that a balladeer is on the level of Mr. Bojangles, not Keats. "Don't you find her love poems *sappy*?" Freddie asks. I will never again hear the word "sappy" in quite the same way. I will hear the "yellow-bellied *sap-sucker*" version of the word. As if sentiment is a form of cowardice. Meanwhile Freddie is writing her own term paper on something like "Einstein's Theory of Relativity as Applied to Metaphor."

Freddie serves as literary editor on our high school yearbook staff of which I am a new recruit. My job is to write copy that describes the meritorious deeds of campus service clubs. It's a boring assignment because the clubs themselves are boring, populated by a slew of candy asses and pious dogooders. Besides, when I write, I get squirmy when straitjacketed by inflexible facts. She taps me on the shoulder again. "While we're on the subject of writing," she says, and passes me the article I'd turned in to her about some club's wildly successful sale of doughnut holes. "Needs *tons* of revision." But that's not the worst of it. Written across the top of the paper in a tonnage of red ink is one word: CRUMMY.

Perhaps it's a gentler wrecking ball of a word than, say, "miserable," "filthy," "cheap," or "worthless," but as I take the paper, I feel pulverized. CRUMMY: a trifle built of crumbs, half-baked or it wouldn't be crumbling apart, of no more value than a pellety little pile of cockroach fodder. CRUMMY. I know of no more dismissive word in the language of literary criticism. Well, maybe "sappy."

More about Freddie later.

That spring, as we await college acceptances, my friend Janet Turner and I, encouraged by our parents, sign up to take vocational guidance tests at Saint Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina. We're hoping to learn whether our ambitions coincide with our talents. Unlike Janet, who was voted Most Likely to Succeed and whose range of abilities makes narrowing her options seem like clipping her wings, I'm spared the dilemma of broad choice. I'm only good at two subjects: art and writing (Freddie's opinion notwithstanding). The vocational guidance tests will tell me, once and for all, whether I should focus on art or English in college, simple as that. Meanwhile, I've honed my sonneteer's skills, experimenting with both Italian and Elizabethan forms, under the pen name of Angela Farrington. I have no idea where the name Angela Farrington springs from, but the two initials—A and F—suggest icons of success and failure, the extremes of judgment to which I submit my writing. Either I'm excellent or I'm crummy. Mediocrity is not a possibility. It's all or nothing.

Lately, I've gushed forth a compulsive kind of autobiographical prose too, in which I document in detail my life as a preener, daydreamer, wallflower, and malcontent. The previous summer I'd kept a journal titled *Saga of My Seventeenth Summer*, which I wrote entirely in green ink, often by candlelight while listening to the orchestral tsunami of Rachmaninoff on my stereo. Completed, the tome weighed in at over four hundred pages. *Saga of My Seventeenth Summer* was all about slouching toward something wonderful—in masculine form and preferably a sensitive poet type—in order to illuminate my reason for being.

Tests, schmests. Who are we fooling? The real reason Janet and I are eagerly driving to Laurinburg is to indulge in the lark of a road trip, a chance to stay unchaperoned in a tourist home, to smoke cigarettes if we're so inclined, to break curfew and cruise for boys.

The phrase "tourist home" sounds subversively itinerant and makeshift. All we know about Laurinburg is that it's a small college town halfway to the beach, which makes it a good hundred miles closer to romantic possibilities than home.

My mother loans us her sporty gold Chevrolet, and Janet and I roar off into the sunset, the radio blasting Sam the



Sham and the Pharaohs singing "Wooly Bully." I'm possessed by the luminous certainty that I love to write and the tests will prove I'm good at it, that an intellectual snob like Freddie can't squelch my desire, that Janet and I are going to have the time of our lives in Laurinburg, and that freedom feels precisely like writing, an unspooling of oneself not only toward significant discovery but also a sense of amplitude. I yearn to hang my wooly bully head out the window while I drive because I feel like blowing in the wind, whichever way the wind wants to blow me. I don't yet feel shadowed and cramped by my ignorance, but it's lurking in the here and now, waiting its chance to have at me.

When it shows up in your life, ignorance feels a little like the guest you'd never invite but who aims to crash the party anyhow. I've come to think of pure ignorance as the shaggiest, most unshaven, unkempt form of political incorrectness, before shame's gotten the

chance to slick it up and teach it some manners.

In 1965, I have the nerve to think of myself as a poet and yet I remain ignorant of poems by James Dickey, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Elizabeth Bishop. I know nothing of Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty's *Thirteen Stories* or Katharine Anne Porter's collection for which she wins the Pulitzer Prize in 1965. The critical celebration of recent books by James Baldwin, Kurt Vonnegut, Saul Bellow, the praise for Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, will elude me for the time being. Significant contemporary books are not yet on my radar. When I leaf through my parents' *New Yorkers*, I only read the cartoons. No teacher or friend will recommend current newsworthy authors to me, but, too ignorant to find them on my own, I will delight a while longer in my zealous aspirations unimpeded by humility.

By the time we arrive in Laurinburg it's rainy and dark. We hadn't planned for rain. Now our hair's going to frizz or go limp. We'll have to cruise for boys with the windows up; if we smoke, it will stink up the car. The proprietor of the tourist home tells us that there is, indeed, a curfew. If we aren't inside by eleven o'clock, we'll be locked out. The good news is that smoking is allowed. There are Bakelite ashtrays in our bedroom.

We unpack our travel cases, take showers, spiff up. It feels like we're dressing to go out. Out with whom? Whatever boneheads Destiny throws us. We're a mere hundred miles from the beach, so close we can almost smell the salt jingling in the air, the suntan lotion on the handsome suntanned skin of boys. As I recall, it's March—not even beach weather at the beach. Never mind. Just the word "beach" seems twenty degrees warmer than most other words.

We drive up and down the main street of Laurinburg—which is about three stoplights long. Is it really the main street? It can't be the main street because nobody's on it.

End of excerpt