

My English professor's ass was so beautiful. It was perfect and full as she stood at the board writing some important word. Reality or perhaps illusion. She opened the door. With each movement of her arms and her hand delicately but forcefully inscribing the letters intended for our eyes her ass shook ever so slightly. I had never learned from a woman with a body before. Something slow, horrible and glowing was happening inside me. I stood on the foothills to heaven. She opened the door.

There were a bunch of us in Eva Nelson's world literature class who had gone to catholic school. Nobody was that different, 18 year old kids who had grown up going to the Blessing of the Fleet, hooting and drinking beer, who went to Sacred Heart, who played against Our Lady. Hardly anyone in the class was really that different. Everyone it seemed to me lived in a roughly catholic world. But those of us who knew nothing else – we were especially visible. When we had a thought, an exciting thought we'd go: Sst. Sst. Like a batch of little snakes. We meant "Sister." Sister, pay attention to me. Call me now.

Eva Nelson had been teaching Pirandello. What we really are considering here: and now she faced us with her wonderful breasts. I know that a woman when she is teaching school begins to acquire a wardrobe that is slightly different from her daily self. How she exposes herself to the world. For instance later in the semester I went to a party at her house in Cambridge and she sat on her couch in her husband's shirt. He was a handsome and distant young man named Gary, he was the Nelson and she wore his shirt and you really couldn't see her breasts at all but she had a collection of little jerseys, tan and peach, pale gold and one was really white I think. Generally she dressed in sun tones – nothing cool, nothing blue. Nothing like the airy parts of the sky, but the hot and distant tones of the sun and her breasts were in front of me, I was looking at her face and I knew I was alive.

On television in my favorite shows I already begun to see how things could be slightly different – or utterly different like a man could flip his daily quarter towards a newsstand and it would land just cause it jounced against all the other shiny coins and it landed on its edge. And all that day the man could hear the thoughts of people in the street, his wife and his secretary, even his dog. It was crazy and the next morning he threw his coin again. Hey said the regular Joe who sold him the paper every day. Some guy did that yesterday and I've been – hey you're that guy. The two guys faces really human faces got big and the music you never noticed till now, the music stopped playing. Hey you're that guy. Yeah it's me.

There was something really covered about childhood. I think it was the nuns. With their pint of ice cream hats with the black thick flowing cloth that grazed the surface of the schoolyard and the oiled wood floors of my school, the nuns enclosed the world with sanity and god. The rules flowed up and down the calendar and around the clock and in the day the sky, the world was rules – known by god the nuns said.

Eva Nelson had fantastic breasts that jounced in her explanation of modernity, of no way out, of vagueness, of the burden of insecurity and the possibility of something else – that this could be a dream, all of it. If the flip of a coin could release a torrent of multi vocal glee – well maybe it was a dream. We didn't know, we couldn't, this was our condition.

The next book we will read she said, pulling the shade on existentialism for the moment, is a much older text. It's part of the tradition, but is a very modern book, quite political. She had this cute glint when she was being smart which was always. She wasn't big smart, she didn't clobber you with words. She just kind of befriended us like wolves but she believed that wolves were good and could be taught too. But she was from New York, was Jewish and had been born intelligent. She was blonde. Are Jews blonde. I didn't know. I would learn so much more. Sometimes her jersey was nearly green but that was as dark as it got.

Dante really had no other way to talk about his time except in a poem. *Inferno* (A Poet's Novel) is a heavily coded poem. It's not about censor-



ship but something else. It was an age of not even satire but allegory. His beliefs were fixed in the structure of his poem like the windows of a church. Her eyes twinkled. Oh my god.

And I'll give you a clue. She paused while she spoke so that each phrase could catch up in our thought. It wasn't like she thought we were dumb. I could feel her eyes meeting mine. You're not dumb Eileen. She knew me. And this was the best moment of all. Before any of the incidents that would change my life irrevocably I felt she already knew me. I sat in her class on Columbus Ave. in the Salada Tea Building in Boston on a Tuesday afternoon and I was seen – before words before anything. She would pause and let the words catch up. We had time.

I want each of you to write an Inferno. The class groaned. It's just his time. This is yours. She smiled.

It was ours now. I would show her my hell.

{ . . . }

So I had to write a poem. Dante did this thing called terza rima which meant each stanza was in three lines. And then of course there was a whole rhyme thing. When I was in gradeschool I could write poems about anything it was just a thing I could do. I was like this joker and it got around that I could do this thing and kids would ask me to say one. What about her? It was like some girl across the street in her scout uniform. Girl scout, girl scout dressed in green/never think a thought obscene...

I didn't get why this is so hard. Weren't all catholics counting and measuring with their bodies, all day long in and out? Poetry was probably different now. Because Eva Nelson is thinking about the whole world. So I probably could put in Eldridge Cleaver, and Teddy Kennedy is kind of a jerk, so I should let her know that I just don't like anyone because he's catholic. I'm not easy like that. William F. Buckley is kind of smart...

But the poem. Exhilarating. Typing was always the hard part. The paper

was so soft and sticking, the little correction pieces always looked better than the page with the little letters flying around. I think I had never typed a poem before so it was hard to return to the left side exactly because my royal slipped.

However I knew because I made a map of the poem and I used my fingers as well, counting, and it fit and it sounded good and the poet was tired and I was tired and I had stayed up all night.

Eileen, didn't you go to bed?

{ . . . }

I remember feeling a little flipped out when I saw everyone else dropping their infernos on Eva Nelson's desk. They had written papers. Oh my god. Did I do something wrong. It was easy for me to do the play thing: I had done this for years. Whenever I could draw or write in school, do a play or something I would do it – a special project. The nuns assumed I was a little bit retarded so someone dumb would be allowed to be different if they were quiet and I wouldn't flunk out.

If you did something special then time would stop and you felt you could dream. The thing I had hated about growing up was that everyone wanted you to wake up and pay attention. I would only worry, worry all the time and this would just get worse and worse. That school could be about books, that your work could be thinking and dreaming gave me so much hope but what if I was wrong. I felt sick and didn't talk about it at all in Louise's Corvair swinging around Fresh Pond, up route 2, I was home.