

The Everyday Suicide of Ordinary Existence

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Jo Carol Pierce's *Bad Girls Upset By the Truth* is a bittersweet celebration of the Panhandle-South Plains that dances just this side of damning with faint praise. It is representative of a tragicomic musical tradition often lost in the Austin sound, an expatriate voice that is Lubbock all over. Pierce's take on the tradition is a serious contribution to feminist theology that locates God right in the middle of the everyday suicide of ordinary existence, which simultaneously takes our life and makes it possible to go on living. In Pierce's performance, a young woman finds Jesus in each of her many lovers—not an approach one expects from Bible belt West Texas, but more orthodox than it first appears. What “these boys” are for is finding God—and that's pretty much what everyone else is for as well. The tragic dimension of this is that every encounter with God—every human encounter—opens a vein. The singer finds herself in the Garden praying that this cup be taken from her, a new twist in a religious tradition that insists on “personal” encounter with Jesus: God loves the world so much, God just loves it to death.

I

This is an Advent meditation triangulated with reference to three texts: Albert Camus' retelling of the myth of Sisyphus, Butch Hancock's “Just A Wave,” and Jo Carol Pierce's *Bad Girls Upset by the Truth*. In deference to Christian homiletics and liturgics, the meditation takes place in a reading that weaves old stories, good news, and correspondence into a rhythm celebrating the presence of divinity in the condition of humanity.

As is customary in this tradition, I put the old story first:

Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to an eternity of rolling a boulder up a mountain, watching it roll back down, then rolling it up again. His offense, as Edith Hamilton delicately put it in the text from which I first learned the myth, was that he once “betrayed a secret of Zeus.” As the story goes, he saw a huge eagle carrying Aegina, who was the young daughter of a lesser god, to an island. Suspecting (rightly) that the eagle was Zeus, Sisyphus had the nerve to reveal this to Aegina's father, Asopus, who came looking for his daughter. Sisyphus was condemned for witnessing a rape and naming the rapist. Camus takes up the story, attending not so much to the condemnation of Sisyphus as to his punishment, in an essay on suicide that is simultaneously an essay on freedom. Camus declares Sisyphus happy in the instant at the top of the mountain, when he sees the world “whole” while the boulder rolls down to the bottom. This instant, like the rolling stone, repeats eternally.

After the story, a fragment of correspondence:

Here, Butch Hancock stands in for Paul. Both write eloquently of broken relationships and bring their reflections on local conflicts to bear on global realities, particularly in catholic epistles such as Hancock's "Just A Wave," where he writes: "I would've killed myself but it made no sense/ Committing suicide in self defense/ But I lost everything I brought her/ When she said babe, you're just a wave, you're not the water." By identifying her old lover—the narrator of this lyric—as a wave, not the water, the unnamed woman of the song puts him in his place, and he knows it. The place is a comment on sense and nonsense as well as suicide: committing suicide in self defense does not make sense. But what is it about being identified as a wave, not the water, that constitutes loss and puts the self of the narrator in a defensive mode?

And then the good news, from the gospel according to Jo Carol Pierce:

Prepare a place for another bad girl
She's on her way down here
for communion in this dark hall
with the bright flesh of despair
the bright flesh of despair
the bright flesh of despair.

For God so loves the world
that he gives his only daughter
to be upset by the truth
He put her in a bag
to deliver like a letter
to grow up and do what bad girls do.

They give their bodies to the music
cause the music knows what to do
for the bad girl who has forgotten
who she is and who to give it to
the music knows what to do
the music knows what to do
the music knows what to do.

This is a fragment, three of eleven verses from a lyric called "Vaginal Angel," embedded in a performance piece consisting of eleven songs interspersed with narration that begins by dedicating a song to all the guys "out in the world who have not had the courtesy to fall in love with the bad girls yet." The song is a simple list poem that identifies the "other" in relationship with a series of everyday annoyances (a lost dime, wrinkled clothes, runs in stockings, uncomfortable shoes). But the annoyance is not the heat; it's the humidity—ambiguity, not love. Nothing could be more mundane; but it ends with a chilling image of the singer looking in a mirror "seeing you there instead of me" and leads into a monologue in which Pierce introduces herself, the band, and the

story. The story begins with the singer's suicide, a life changing event (a beginning, not an end) that occurred while she was in high school in Lubbock, Texas.

After committing suicide, she says, she started seeing things in a whole new light, and this leads to some practical advice: "It's good to commit suicide when there's something you just can't figure out, like when I hit high school and I found out that you're a bitch if you don't and a whore if you do. Commit suicide when you've got a burning question that no one can answer for you. Mine was 'What are these boys for, and what am I supposed to do with them?' Don't get upset about the war in the Middle East. Do something. Kill yourself. It's good to commit suicide over small things that other people might neglect—like grocery shopping. I can't imagine walking into that HEB without first committing suicide. Think about it. Commit suicide first thing in the morning, and that way you'll feel better all day. Do it your first day on a new job and the next day you can call in dead. Do it early in a love affair and just get it over with. That's why me and the boys are going to commit suicide right now, and we hope that you will join us. Just start getting really pitiful and morose, and in the third verse we will slit our wrists."

This monologue introduces "Blue Norther," which, on the face of it, is nothing more than a song about a characteristic feature of winter in the Panhandle of Texas. But "Blue Norther" weaves landscape into experience and singer into landscape. Leaning into the sudden, bitter cold wind that sweeps down out of the mountains into the Texas Panhandle, Pierce evokes a sacrificial watering of the earth. The sequence in the refrain is instructive: let me go/ I need to scream/ I need to rain. Wind, voice, rain, and snow renew the earth in the process of flowing toward the sea. This is a geography lesson and a popular introduction to West Texas meteorology, but it is also a comment on the sacrificial character of ordinary existence. This is explicit in the third verse, the one where we've been invited to join Jo Carol and the boys in slitting our wrists: "Storm clouds are gathering/ Jesus I need to rain/ Close my eyes, open a vein./ Let me soak your gardens wash your windowpanes/ Storm clouds are gathering/ Jesus I need to rain."

Pierce has connected this with a conversation she had with a Catholic priest about ordination of women. To his ritual repetition of the old line that Jesus wasn't born female, she responded "Oh, I think he was." *Bad Girls Upset By the Truth* is a more extended response, a representation of an economy of sacrifice in which women in particular (but not women alone) are routinely conscripted.

II

Martha Reineke's *Sacrificed Lives* is an illuminating discussion of this economy of sacrifice that draws on Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Melanie Klein, Rene Girard, and Mary Douglas. In Lacan's influential reading of psychoanalysis, the signs that make up language (whether spoken or written) are not to be understood as representations (of something "out there") but as producers of "social, signifying space." Human being, which is being at a loss, both occurs in this space, the space of language, and contributes to its construction. Lacan and Kristeva recount a history of the subject in which the "I" gradually emerges out of the fragmented and undifferentiated experience of infancy, a nexus of experience Lacan refers to as the Imaginary. The development of the subject

occurs in transition from this chaotic Imaginary to the more orderly Symbolic, a field of exchange, language, and law in which the human subject is capable of taking a position in the world. Taking a position is not quite the same thing as finding a home, a difference that fascinated Freud and continues to capture the attention of psychoanalytic theory. The difference carries with it something of the unsettling quality of settling (Taylor), a paradox of human existence exploited by Lacanian theorizing: human subjects achieve identity only in experiences of difference and unity only in contexts of alienation (Reineke, 18).

Lacan theorizes a “mirror stage” to describe the founding alienation of human subjects. Confronted with a unified image of an other (whether in a mirror or in the mirror of another’s gaze), the subject establishes itself at the site of that image. Note that the “mirror” of the other does not reflect and confirm an already existing identity. An identity that was not there comes to be in the confrontation with the mirror of an Other that is. Identity is always elsewhere: human being is always coming to be where it is not.

Kristeva takes up Lacan’s image when she describes human subjects as intertextual practices. Human being is always between texts, never fully contained in them. In the tension between containment and perpetual excess, human subjects become aware of the elusiveness of full presence: always coming to be where we are not, we can never simply be. Our identity is constituted not in presence, but in absence. Kristeva associates this negative experience, the human practice of absence, with death-work (Reineke, 25).

That the basic stance of the human subject is a practice of absence, an orientation toward death, does not preclude human agency or reduce it to a passive coming-to-terms. It locates both identity and transgressive possibility (associated in Kristeva and Cixous with the inassimilable playfulness of *jouissance*) in a place that is always defined by encounter with an Other. We always come to be where we are not, and that carries the possibility of play as surely as the necessity of resignation.

Kristeva’s discussion of the human practice of absence, associated with her theory of the unconscious and the centrality of death-work in the formation of human subjects, attends to the founding estrangement of Lacan’s mirror-stage which requires all human subjects—in confrontation not only with the Other but also with language and law—to come to be where we are not. What is required in this founding estrangement is that we come to be, meaning that the requirement functions as a foundation for human agency and as a matrix for the nascent human subject. Sacrifice designates problematic instances of death-work that undermine agency. In a sacrificial economy, human death-work is conscripted to hostile forces (Reineke, 26). This happens at least in part because the death-work by which human beings come to be where we are not is also the boundary work by which human communities come to be where they are not. Our coming to be is circumscribed by the coming to be of communities in which we live.

III

Immediately after “Blue Norther,” the narrative of *Bad Girls* turns to a remarkable description of falling in love. That Pierce chooses to get suicide out of the way at the beginning connects both the

falling and its description with Reineke's boundary work and its relation to the conscriptive violence of a sacrificial economy. The frequency with which Pierce's character falls may put some listeners off. But she describes the repetition as falling in love over and over again with the same guy—a singularity that stands in tension with the frequency, then wryly asks (in "Secret Dan") whether it's the guy or what he's got ("Is it you I want or that Coupe de Ville?"). That question juxtaposes the free fall of boundary work with the conscripted acquisitiveness of sacrifice. One of Secret Dan's incarnations suggests that the repetition doesn't trivialize the falling so much as it reveals "a great capacity for love." Pierce's description is a tribute to intertextuality and a case study in the production of social space: "All the different ages of him would come out and play with all the different ages of me. Our little babies would be crawling around on the floor together, just barely able to see each other. And our ten year olds would be out kicking the can all night long under that Halloween moon. Our thirteen year olds would be spinning the bottle and kissing out behind the playhouse and by morning the whole gang of me would be completely in love with the whole pack of him."

But the very totality of the falling precludes its finality: the "gang of me" can never be whole any more than the "pack of him," which means that being "completely in love" is always a falling (as suggested in "Across the Great Divide").

What the singer can feel "just beyond the circle of light" is the next incarnation of Secret Dan, with whom she is already falling in love. But the monologue that follows makes both the theological significance of the narrative and its situation vis-a-vis a sacrificial economy hard to ignore: "My friends that weren't real mad at me were real worried about me and everyone was discouraging me from falling in love. They'd say, 'Jo Carol, why don't you do something you're good at?' So I tried to explain to them why I had to do these very upsetting things. I said, 'Look. The reason I cannot pass up a single Secret Dan is that each one of them is just another side of Jesus and I know that because every time I kiss another one I can feel Jesus right through his skin, and I need to know Jesus fully.'"

This is not a free fall.

The evangelical language is unmistakable, and it is unmistakably confrontational. The narrator speaks a language familiar to her Lubbock audience, including Joey, the only Secret Dan who gets a speaking part in this performance. Jo Carol and Joey both do what they do because they "need to know Jesus fully" and because God tells them to. This paves the way for either or both to blame God:

I can't blame you for leaving me
especially since I drove you to
Can you blame me for my part,
which was just to be born
too stupid to know my own heart?
If we tell the truth, can't the blame be laid
with the creator who made
this world without end

His original sin,
this world in which you and I live, Apart?

I blame God
He's the only one original enough
to make a mess like this
even He can't clean up
I blame God
I didn't do this by myself,
I had Divine Assistance, yes I did
and I blame God.

I know you were tore up
by all of those things
Jesus Christ told me to do.
I don't blame you for blaming me
for all this pain,
but the things that I did tore me up too.
I know we were meant to be together eternally
and we would be if it weren't for Him
and his world without end
His original sin
his world in which you and I live, Apart.

Reineke criticizes Girard for failing to adequately take account of sexual differentiation in the sacrificial economy of patriarchy. That Jo Carol Pierce takes account of it without essentializing it is reflected in the contrasting images she paints of characters whose experience of alterity derives from God's original sin. Joey walks to Alaska and back "to begin to forget." Jo Carol stays in place,

Flipping like pancakes on my own greasy griddle,
like parthenogenesis, I split it down the middle,
Broke my yoke, shattered my shell.
I bet they got a call into the mental hospital.

It's interesting, isn't it, that Joey's identity (whether successful or not) depends on a socially sanctioned struggle to forget while Jo Carol's depends on the burden of memory?

IV

Advent is always about waiting, always entangled with remembering and forgetting. What is remembered in crowds of people standing with the livestock in countless nativity scenes? What is forgotten? The questions are matters of boundary work, because they are concerned both with what (and who) is included and what (and who) is left out. Leaving out, as Girard has suggested, is ritually associated with the scapegoat, which is driven, not simply left, out.

What is born in our cultural remembering?

Jo Carol Pierce addresses this with the priest's ritual repetition in mind: Jesus was not born as a female. "Apocalyptic Horses" is a response:

Once in two thousand years
I get an invitation to ride
Apocalyptic horses across the Great Divide
and my RSVP will ever be
Are you crazy?
Do you think I like to be crucified?

I'd lay down my life
make a blood sacrifice
for just one more chance
to go dancing on the other side.

All subjects, Reineke and Kristeva remind us, live at a loss, but not all death-work is sacrificial (Reineke, 49). Put another way, good fences, which make good neighbors, are not exclusionary walls, but boundaries from which we begin our presencing. The interplay of particularity and repetition in memory is often the location of exclusion, and this is what Pierce addresses creatively in *Bad Girls Upset By the Truth*.

In Reineke's words, Kristeva suggests that "an effective subject position—a position oriented toward emancipatory agency—is a position of permanent strangeness," always on the other side of the fence. Reineke takes up Patricia Elliot's suggestion that the stranger is "that in me which wants the truth" (Reineke, 178). Jo Carol Pierce translates this into performance: the "bad" girl is the permanent stranger, always falling, never upright, because she is perpetually upset by the truth.

Pierce joins a deep and deeply subversive theological tradition when she conflates "Mother Mary" with "Virgin Mary Magdalene." Mary Magdalene is the quintessential "bad" girl who displaces every discourse of mastery, and that's the kind of seditious death-work that might make it possible for us both to "reside as strangers among strangers and to do so less violently" (Reineke, 198).

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