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PROVINCETOWN ARTS

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Most of *Provincetown Arts* is freelance written. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome and will be considered between September and December. Enclose SASE for writers' guidelines. The best guide for content and length is a study of past issues.

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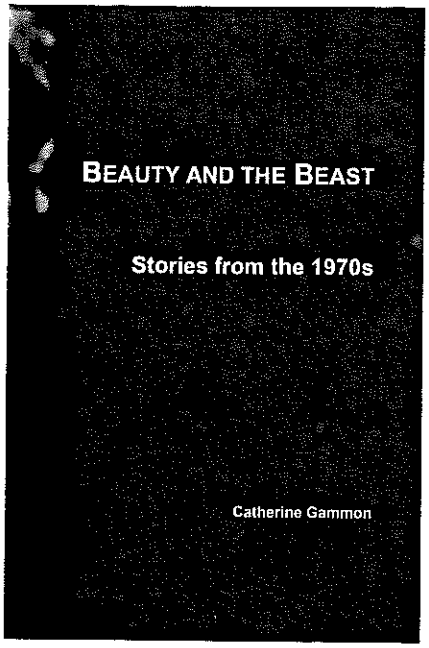
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: STORIES FROM THE 1970S

By Catherine Gammon

lulu.com, 2012

A Book Review by R. D. Skillings



WHAT STRUCK ME first about this book and has never ceased to hold my admiration is how unobtrusively but strongly it is written. Exacting, excruciating realism is *Beauty*'s mode, its initial focus the hippie lives of the Vietnam Era—heedless promiscuity, welfare ménages, drugs, lost children, psychic refugees, futile attempts to regain a wrecked equilibrium, a bereaved search for the rebirth of wonder, a mettlesome underclass amid the ever-accelerating consolidation of American power.

"Maggie and the Cyclist," in just six pages of tremendous compression, paints an unforgettable canvas of the teeming trajectory of one powerful woman's attracted tribe of drifters and spongers, kids, lovers, dogs, ex-husbands, and hangers-on under one disastrous roof of sporadic, exasperated violence, restless roamings and returns, habitués finally brain-dead of their own illusions.

In "Silence," a wistful child in a broken marriage, who learns that "happiness is not all there is to wish for, any more than love was," finds her addict mother dead in bed in her shit and vomit, and "knows that even with daddy she will be alone—no matter where . . . or with whom—she'll never find enough silence to hear one voice that really speaks to her."

Several of the stories are very short, shocking in their condensation and consequent force. In "Skinflick," the casual brings enduring catastrophe:

> "Are you single tonight?" I said to him.
> He grinned. "I'm always single," he said.

Within the year, she scars herself with a cigarette, vowing to God—God discovered to her own astonishment—"to concentrate the pain of love with the secrecy of un-lived sex," till in time "breaking the vow was harder than keeping it," something undreamt of. She dons her "whore's necklace" in the paradoxical pursuit of escape from her "willful deviation from the normal promiscuity." She's caught in the vale between free love and the knowledge that there is none, rising to the pathos of seeing his "inability to live love. And hers."

Tortures of love take perverse forms. In "Susanna Fasting," she aims to defeat faithless love by physical diminishment, laughing, laughing madly, refusing rescue by concerned Samaritans.

Gammon is master of the mundane. "A Chinese Divorce" chronicles the lost love of a graduate student, a welfare recipient beset by fears of the nonexistent babysitter she didn't pay, her unreported student loan—while typing papers on divorce for a China scholar, which pays too little.

Driving past her ex, Diane wants to "scream, leap from the car, strangle him and beg for mercy, all at once." She's so upset she drinks several beers in the tavern downstairs, thinking to bring the young, friendly bartender upstairs to her rooms at closing time. She can't forget how she'd waved to her former lover, how he'd waved back, blithely unaware of her misery.

She muses on China, where, before divorcing, a couple must be counseled. She imagines them conspiring to achieve a divorce. They had this loss of love in common. Perhaps it could save their affair.

Try as she will, she can't put her former lover from her mind, not for one moment. She feels "on the brink of something—vision, illumination. If she stands up it will break the spell." But nothing comes to mind, no hopes, no resolves, no escape. Amid onerous choices, staring at the display of Rolaids and Clorets, she can only suffer the reminder that "her former lover sometimes smoked cigars."

For all its rue, this is a tale of considerable complexity and charm, one aspect of the author's wry dolor.

"The Waitress" may be unique in fiction, a non-love story that purports to be about men, its first sentence, "When she was younger she played them for the tips."

Martha never decides not to marry, it's "just a pattern that hardens into fact, without her giving it much thought." She gets a job right out of high school, in a café where she becomes "as much a part of the place as the red vinyl booths and the gold formica counter-tops." She attends her widowed father, helps her sister through college, has minor loves, only one that makes her want to marry, but that one disappeared, never to return, consigned like the others to the past.

A new teacher comes to town. Amid her telling him about her high-school days, he says, "And you've never married?" She's stunned, doesn't know how to answer. Something in his saying, "felt wrong, terribly wrong, as if she'd been insulted, more even than when some out-of-towner tried to grab her ass."

At her reaction he tries to smile. "I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have asked. . . ." But his apology can't undo the sense of insult, that there is something wrong about her life. She meets him again in a bar. He sits a long time, finally says slowly, only once, out of nowhere, "I am an unhappy man." She doesn't know what to say, he says it so simple and soft.

Another time the sad man sits down again with her, "softly, briefly touches her wrist, again says, 'Forgive me.'" She tries to laugh. "For what?" His eyes make her uneasy. She looks and looks and sees nothing. "Forgive me," he says finally, "I didn't know you didn't know." She can't imagine what he means, tells a friend, "It's made me unhappy knowing him."

Impossible to do justice to the eerie strangeness and power of this double sorrow. One feels, one wishes, fate could have allowed these two sad souls to escape themselves and merge. But that would not be real life, which is all Gammon trades in.

These are stories of commonplace extremity. Things learned only in the grief of folly, fatalities profoundly familiar that reach an eloquence of unbearable anguish, tears redeemed as diamonds in art.

On page 109 of 197, the book turns toward the public sphere and takes various forms, including "The Confession of Stephen Priest," an impressive literary construct, a brilliance of sheer style, tangles of paradox blent perhaps of Poe, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard, a perverse rant at bland jailors bent on proving a sane wife-murderer mad against his own demand for due judgment.

Two of the last stories are, in opposite ways and complexities, like situations some diabolical genie of literary adventure had dreamt up and dared Gammon to make fiction of.

"The Spokesman" of an interminable crisis finds himself the "electronic me" the crisis has spawned, its servitor, for which he has been trained, throughout his career prepared, his television face with no control over content, only form, finally seeming its own incarnation of the crisis. The crisis itself is never divulged, only its titillation of nation and press, which track its every hint and twist as the months go by and he says nothing "in as baroque a syntax as possible." An old woman suddenly, astoundingly, appears center stage, her every relative dead in war, starting with her father in Vietnam, then husband in Libya, sons in Somalia and Kuwait, the ultimate subject turns out to be just this hysterical old crone, living on her widow's benefits in a tacky apartment in Tucson, drinking, smoking, watching TV, foregoing her Jack Daniel's, saving for vengeance. Her bullet harmlessly strikes the Spokesman's tie clasp, only imprinting his breastbone with the American eagle complete with clutch of arrows, herself ending locked away with the loonies as mad and sane as one who knows everything.

This is a bold tour de force, original, fearsome and true to things as they are in darkest essence, an apocalypse of spokesmen broken free in one voice, all howling bloody murder.

"Testimonies," an equal extravaganza, limns the tangled loves of six more-or-less casual, more-or-less intimate, vividly individualized, urbane friends in New York, in their thirties, or early forties.

Elizabeth, the main character, who "regarded sex as exploration, expansion of the mind," dies in a plane crash on page 1, leading to retrospects of ongoing moral and erotic philosophies and behavior, done with impeccable realism and variety, brilliant and adept, rich in range and depth. All drink, dance, romance, scheme, and dine together. In its way, this is supremely a writer's concatenation of distinct personalities with vivid notions of selves and each other. It does not weary or wear out, ends only with one's regret that it ends at all. I know of nothing like it.

Two stories, "Crazy Sammy" and "Dragons," both set in Provincetown, open with the lines: *This is a town where women wait* and *Town Hall looks in our bedroom window.* Both enact arduous, strung-out loves familiar to devotees of the turbulent P-town of earlier days.

This book and author warrant attention on a second count. Self-published, the book is a model of professional quality—plain, pleasing, dignified, flawless. Such can be done, not without effort, to be sure, but formatting is provided, if wanted, and there need be no expense beyond the copies themselves. Simply go to lulu.com and click on "publish."

Once branded vanity publishing—before the disappearance or decay of the venerable houses devoted to high quality alone, the volume of literary works going a-begging, and contests, contests, contests, having crowded out hopes for more conventional means of acquiring print and readers—it now serves as a natural, saving resort.

But why no publisher would venture on this extraordinary book is one of those mysteries that grind teeth to dust.

Catherine Gammon was a Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in 1977 and 1981, lived and worked year-round in Provincetown for about five years, was a mainstay of the writing side, edited five issues of *Shankpainter*, redesigned its format, got the magazine a $5,000 grant from the NEA, and edited the Work Center Anthology with poet Bruce Smith in 1994.

She was Arts and Entertainment Editor of the *Provincetown Advocate*, typeset and wrote for it, took minutes for the Selectmen and Zoning Board of Appeals, and, like generations of Fine Arts Work Center Fellows, cleaned apartments at the Bull Ring Wharf. A Soto Zen priest, she was ordained in the lineage of Shunryo Suzuki Roshi in 2005, and now divides her time between Green Gulch Farm Zen Center in California and Brooklyn, New York. A young grandmother, she is also the author of a novel, *Isabel Out of the Rain*, Mercury House, 1991.

A new novel called *Sorrow* will be published by Braddock Avenue Books in August, a new press, this to be its third imprint.

A life of literary transience has led Catherine Gammon to abodes in Pittsburgh and Brooklyn, thence to residencies at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Amherst, Virginia, and the Wellspring House in Ashfield, Massachusetts, while the Fine Arts Work Center hopes for a visit from her in the spring.

Beauty and the Beast deserves and should grandly reward a substantial readership. Order it at lulu.com.

R. D. SKILLINGS is a Trustee and longtime Chair of the Writing Committee of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. His eighth book, and fifth collection of stories, Summer Nights, *will be published by Pressed Wafer in the spring.*

THE TURNER EROTICA: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

By Robert J. Begiebing

Ilium Press, 2013

A Book Review by Christopher Busa

WILLIAM JAMES STILLMAN, the narrator of this riveting historical novel, set in the turbulent contradictions of the Victorian era, offers a testament to his time, one he might himself have written if he had had the belated understanding of his posthumous biographer, Robert Begiebing, whose mastery of his voice brings the real-life man, and his fictional adventures, to life. Stillman's quest in the novel shines fresh light on a mysterious censorship: the alleged burning in 1858 by John Ruskin of erotic drawings created by J. M. W. Turner. This controversy drew the attention of the *New York Times*, reporting in a headline in 2005, "A Censorship Story Goes Up in Smoke." The piece cites an article by Ian Warrell, Turner curator at the Tate Britain museum, suggesting one interpretation of the evidence that might make us question whether Ruskin made a bonfire of the erotic sketches, as he declared, or helped sequester them for future preservation.

Whether or not some of the drawings were burned is less important than what happened to the many that survive in the collection at Tate Britain and are available for viewing on their website. The muted marks, as mysteriously shrouded as the artist's storm-tossed ships, substitute the solid for its existential aura. In 1857, the year before the alleged conflagration, Britain passed the Obscene Publications Act, making it illegal to possess "pornographic" images. It is possible that Ruskin, rather than destroy the drawings, kept them concealed, since one portfolio was marked "kept as evidence of a failure of mind only."

The narrator is an odd duck. A person of modest distinction in his lifetime, considering the high circles he traveled in, Stillman lived from 1828 to 1901, dying the year after Queen Victoria expired. The most enduring pleasure of reading a well-researched and factually accurate account of a culture in transition is to experience it through the emotions of an eyewitness. The year before Stillman passed away, Sigmund Freud published the era-defining *Interpretation of Dreams*, offering the inscrutable for cogent analysis. Begiebing's book brings belated wisdom to the conundrum that perplexes the narrator: what is the relation between sexual repression and creative expression?

The "Turner Erotica," the catalyst for events in this novel, are a cache of dubious sketches by J. M. W. Turner, discovered when his estate was inventoried, after he died, by the eminent art writer John Ruskin, Turner's staunch champion. Turner was revered in Britain for his way of painting ships in storms at sea, showing them as shimmering glimpses, almost without substance, and transforming modern painting in the way he created stomach-churning feeling in an abstraction.

The "secret" drawings showed couples in various phases of copulation. Turner, who never married, disappeared for periods when he visited brothels for observation. In drawing sessions Turner himself taught, he sometimes posed a live model beside a plaster mannequin so students could directly experience the difference. One unsolved issue concerns the definition of "erotic," since many drawings were made from life class studies at the Royal Academy.

Stillman lived an intercontinental life, serving as America's consul to Rome and Crete, reporting