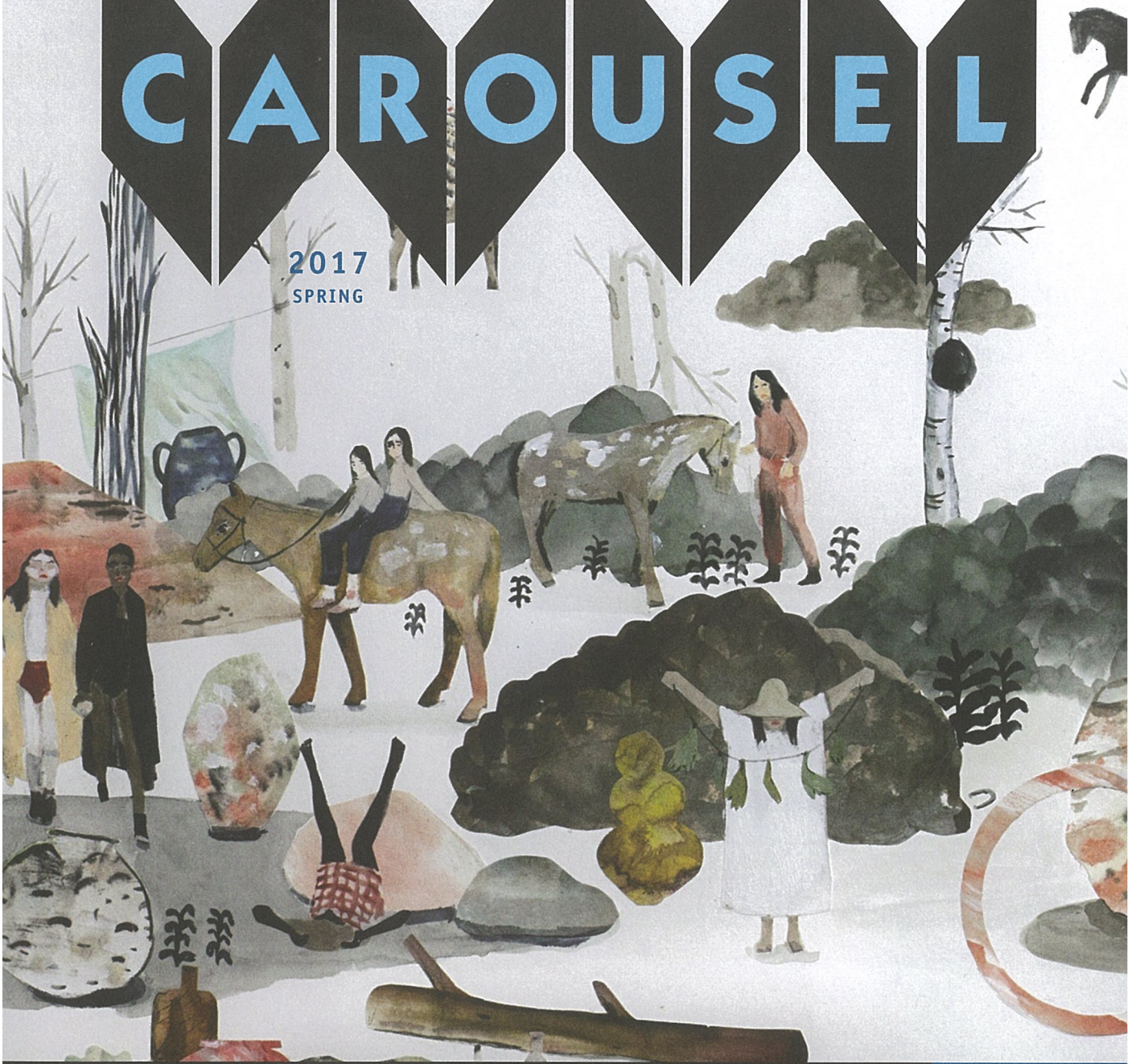


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# CAROUSEL

2017  
SPRING



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overhead the stars keep time hold their familiar place for as long as possible the span of that but the tail end of something much longer time has no master no child or mother no birth place no death scene no obedience to light no shepherd in a storm no trio of blackbirds and yet has all that and every thing else time is the thread through it all and yet joins nothing time is fluid so flows doesn't undulate or pulse we stand in the midst of it never reach an outer edge

## LAUREN KIRSHNER

### Night Flight to Romania

When I started at Bluewater Spa, my knowledge of love was sub-zero. It jostled with the penguins. I thought I could make it by wearing cut-off jeans and a promotional T-shirt for a defunct spaghetti company. This was not arrogance. Like them, I thought being wanted would make me happy. And why not? I was Clearasil free, a month out of high school. My heart was a jujube flayed by jocks and weak relationships with women.

I learned, mostly from Bronetta, that the heart is an extracted tooth. It longs for things it has no rights to. It has no rights. It is rootless.

In these waiting rooms, we have extended metaphors. We have Diet Coke.

Bronetta was 17 when she started here. That was a year younger than me but already she had grey hair. Not on her head, but inside. That first day on the couch, she showed me a photograph, medical. The ovarian cyst would not kill her but it looked like it was trying. Shaped like a bank robber's face smushed by pantyhose. Filled with teeth, thick, grey oxen-like hairs. It was called a dermoid. She carried the photo around, like a pet. Other girls had small orange dogs that frothed from designer purses, plans to open a tanning salon, or were paying for college. Bronetta had the dermoid. I was high or drunk.

"Listen," I told her, "if you carry that thing around because it reminds you that you're healthy, that it's benign, I think that's great. Me, I'm right now looking for some sort of protection myself. I used to have an amulet of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travel, but it turned green, despite being advertised as silver. Maybe I could get a photograph of my heart. Would your doctor do that for me?"

"I don't carry this around like some lucky charm," Bronetta told me. "I show it to assholes who don't tip. They feel bad for me or they get grossed out. Either way, I win."

After, I started asking for the money first. Guys don't like it, but I have no dermoid. My ass, I have been told, is 7.3 out of 10.

Breasts, they don't even go there. What original scientific contributions can be made to the study of Death Valley?

Bronetta is fat. So we're opposite, yet even.

I'm not the aspirational type, that's the thing. I just want what I am owed. But Bronetta, she has big plans. She talks about improving her lot in life. She wants shower curtains that need their own shower curtains.

I tell her what we have is what we need, our hands and our hearts, no different from many popular U.S. presidents.

I had to become inventive about getting them to pay first.

"This is a love machine. You need to take the quarter out of your pocket and put it in the slot. Then I'll pull your lever."

Otherwise, they hem and haw like a see saw. They tell you the pants are so far. The pants are in Australia, they're sitting in O'Hare. They say later, baby, love first. They say greedy girl. These are not my words. These are words I have been called.

Once I asked such a man. He was the owner of a well-known freshwater fish warehouse specializing in frozen sea products. I asked him if he would judge a salmon fisherman who asked to get paid for his stock of fish upon delivery to the warehouse. This man said that he would pay the man.

I said, see me as a load of fish, then. I am fish just by showing up.

He didn't call me again. I was surprised yet hurt. I am secure in my brains. Other assets, another story. But clearly this man valued neither. I am selling hot dogs, but I have to pretend that I am selling love. With love, there can be no agreements in advance. Every room I enter I fly off the diving board headfirst, a pauper. Soon, I tell the other girls, I will stage a grand production. I will be Cosette from *Les Miserables*, the aquatic production. I will fill the Rose Bowl, I will fill Madison Square Garden, the Hague.

They will all pay first.

Where we work, you need a good grip. It helps if you have an act, a fresh angle. Mine is flustered virgin. I make references to my cat, Bobo, at the crucial transitions

(in a pop song, this is the "bridge"; in rooms, this is "reach for baby oil"). I tell my customers, "If you met this hot shot Bobo, you would mistake him for Warren Beatty, and I am talking *Splendour in the Grass*." When you talk like this, your grip needs to be excellent.

People don't kiss here. That is myth thought up by a Hollywood executive who has a picture of his wife on his desk and a bobblehead underneath it. A kiss is the stream of hard water on your hands when you scrub ten times a day.

Bronetta and I agree on a lot of things. We both like loading our hot dogs with sauerkraut. We both think the job is mediocre, but it pays better than everything else right now. But where Bronetta and I diverged was on the topic of love.

Bronetta thought that she might meet her future husband in one of these rooms. Balls I'm used to, chains no thanks. But Bronetta, she pretended she was dating on the job. She allowed herself to trapeze into the possibility of falling in love for good tips. Me, I was all about the money. I want to know people, but only to the extent that I can give them what they want, so they leave.

It was in this climate of yin and yang that Bronetta fell for him.

I was drinking Diet Coke while the guy claimed to be an Andalusian ER doctor. The first time he came, he gave her \$300. Visit two, he escorts in a big beige teddy bear. A guy who makes a big show of giving you a big teddy bear you must always run from. That it looked secondhand IMHO I kept to my lonesome.

Bronetta knew where I stood, anyway, through my modest body language, which involved rolling my eyes like a croupier's dice in a washing machine. Me, who read e.e cummings in the dark stacks of the library on my invalid university card, me who dreamt in *Dr. Zhivago*. But this was not love. This was a violation.

"Listen, Bronetta," I said, "this is not the business of falling in love with guys. This is the business of getting them to the frosted shower. Forget about this yahoo."

"You don't understand love," Bronetta told me. "You just get high and talk about why professors are against you."

“Bronetta,” I said, “there is a great film with this very theme. It is called *The Heiress*. He may come back, mark my words, he may, with his pompadour and heartbreakingly soft chest hair. And when he does, I want you to slam the door on him. We will get the wedding dress and you will look breathtaking, but still slam the door. Can you promise me you will slam the door?”

It was important for me to deny the possibility that those closest to me could fall in love because I had no faith that anyone would ever fall in love with me. By denying the possibility of love for others, I effaced the holiness of love, and my cup of safety runeth over. It wasn't that I didn't want her to be happy. I was just worried that her actions would supply me with proof that I was not living as if I were alive and I didn't want to deal with this. I preferred to eat honey peanuts and count my cash.

The ER doctor was handsome in a way that made him look backlit, like there was a plutonium refinery directly behind him. He always had to leave early because he had to go and see his daughter in a play. She was three and playing a fairy godmother.

In magazines for girls, they talk like falling in love is better than a painless Brazilian and bucket of Skor ice cream. But I scream more for ice cream because watching someone fall in love is frightening. Their face smears around like a load of blueberry jam that the bread has exonerated. They're out of breath, the lungs scrunching like a Swiss accordion. They opine like 20-word reviews of Neruda in *O Magazine*.

The days on the couch I spent with Bronetta, riding the Unagi Plum Ferry.

The doctor recommended a change of diet. Japanese pickled unagi plums, purplish devils shaped like spades, flavoured with the puckish vinegar of empire. Bronetta bought a bicycle. The doctor recommended a hybrid.

“You have to understand that he is going to leave his wife,” Bronetta told me. “He says that after children, what it becomes is a partnership. The way he feels around me, he has never felt before. He felt high after we met. He told me it is not about sex. He told me that he would like to just be in a room with me, in silence, while I cut up a peach. He says he would like to sit in bed with me and read the book *Ulysses*.”

“He sends me emails,” Bronetta said. “He sent me an email that said his body and soul are one with me. The email said, ‘Body-soul-now-twins.’ When he misses me he prints my name out on his printer. Bronetta, again and again, all night.”

The fact that this doctor was commanding his deaf printer to write Bronetta's name moved me. I wanted a Brother to spill its guts for me. I wanted to live on 1970s Bantam softcovers. Soft focus lighthouses, seagulls in oil paint nubs.

Outside Bluewater Spa I saw romancing people with Band-Aids on their faces. Men who looked like they'd been walking for months. Adults giving each other piggy-back rides. Somebody riding by on a trike wearing a gas mask. An obese cinnamon teen angrily eating ice cream. A man with cerebral palsy who looked like he was dancing with himself. A smooth gay like Paul Newman in the red light of the drugstore. I felt like my body was housing extra bones, organs, so it hurt to breathe; the skin held nothing in; you could drop a penny in and it would fall straight down.

It was a man in a room who once told me that I have trouble expressing my feelings with my face or my body. Reaching for the baby oil — my transition pivot on a snakeskin heel — I pointed out that the facial masquerades of Joan Crawford are not a requirement of this job. But I still thought about it afterwards.

When in love, other girls, they open their hearts like the padded lids of cherry red sewing boxes. They show the spools of artery love-pulsing pink, the coils of blue for you, the rust red of waiting, waiting, waiting. Me, I show you an episode of *Rhoda*, make guacamole and pray to God you know. Bronetta reads books with gold embossed covers that say it's all about risk. You have to be ready to die for it.

Bronetta, god help us, I am 18, not ready to die.

Bronetta tells me that it is not necessary to share my life story with a man I am falling in love with. She says that is TMI.

Not Turner Classic Movies.

Leave some mystery. He is not a psychiatrist, he does not want to just talk.

When Bronetta is feeling sad, I tell her stories. Right now I'm telling this story. I tell her there are just some things that you don't hope for. For example, you don't hope for a clam that ties its own shoes. You don't hope for a night flight to Romania. There is only one flight today from Frankfurt and it leaves in the morning. You don't hope for a popsicle that will not fall apart on your hand. You don't hope for affordable Morrissey memorabilia. You do not hope for these things not because you are bitter or angry. We would just rather be brokenhearted vixens on earth than delusional ditzes on Mars.

Truth is, I am speaking in bullshit. I don't actually know if clams have fingers and Fraulein no, there might just be a night flight to Romania. I hope there is, because I would like to go there one day, even if it's just to buy weird painted eggs and try Romanian drugs if they have any. But I don't tell any of this to Bronetta because she is sniffing her little rabbit nose and asking me questions, she is asking me what we have left then and the credits are rolling on our soap opera. Holy shit, we're down to the lighting guy's name and I don't have any time left!

Sometimes when I don't know who I am or what I am doing with my life I look down at my hands. It has always been a reflex of mine. In a certain state of mind the hands can look very separate from the rest of me, like they belong to a different person. When I was a kid and everyone called me ugly at school and said that I peed in my pants, I used to hide in the lost and found bin, deep in that cedar and rubber smelling gorge. If I raised my hand to the lid, the lines on my palm would illuminate and I would pretend that I was a palm reader. I would put on a wise old lady's voice and whisper, "One day you will be happy. One day you will be so happy you will read palms for the whole world. And you will say anything to them to make them as happy as you are."

In lieu of lying, in this moment, I simply take Bronetta's hand. ✎



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