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DARKLY HUMOROUS AND UNSENTIMENTAL: AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN STEINBERG

IF YOU WERE TO DESCRIBE THE SUBJECT MATTER of Susan Steinberg's stories to someone unfamiliar with them, they would hardly sound radical: the problems of love, the conflicts of family, the absurd situations of gendered life in the twenty-first century. However, while Steinberg works the main veins of the contemporary short story, she does so in utterly defamiliarizing sentences and terrifying rhythms that force her readers out of sentimental clichés, pleasing identifications, or easy conclusions. The power of her work lies in how it reveals that both her characters and her readers are trapped in the identifications and roles that make the world comprehensible. By revealing instead of relying on those roles, the work brings out their horror. Her sentences become violent formulations of our social relations, revealing how utterly inadequate our roles are to the potentials of the world and how insidiously language can trap us into living out what Lauren Berlant calls the "situation tragedy" of our everyday existence.

Though she usually writes in the first person, her work often reflects the frisson of the second-person, as if the pressures of our social clichés and expectations pull us into situations that bribe us with enjoyment while we nonetheless feel a profound desire to escape identities we did not choose. The power of this technique can clearly be seen in her story "Superstar." The main character is involved in a minor car accident. One man speaks violently to her while another defends her:

> This second guy was walking down the sidewalk and the second guy had seen the whole thing, had seen me scrape this first guy's car, had seen the first guy smack his head and yell at me, and the second guy walked up to the first guy and called the first guy an asshole.

> And the second guy got up in the first guy's face and told the first guy to get back into his car, said there wasn't even a scratch, said, I'll call the cops if you do not get the fuck back into your car right now.
>
> And the second guy asked me if I was okay.
>
> And the second guy called me certain names reserved for women, certain other names I'd been called before and would be called again.
>
> It was then I became some sweet thing.
>
> It was then I pushed something down, pushed something else out.
>
> It was then I knew I owned the situation, meaning I knew I now owned both guys.
>
> It's not something I want to explain.
>
> If you've got the parts you understand.
>
> As for the rest of you.
>
> Just know I knew it was good to be a woman.
>
> Meaning it was very bad to be a woman.
>
> And the first guy squeezed into his car and left.
>
> And the rain slowed.
>
> And the sun, at some point, came out.
>
> Listen.

This exchange is disturbing—for the narrator as well as the reader—precisely because it makes us aware of our expected gender roles, which are simultaneously familiar and yet strangely unnatural.

Raised in Baltimore, Steinberg studied painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art before turning to writing. She received an M.F.A. in English from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and she has since published three collections of stories: *The End of Free Love* (2003), *Hydroplane* (2006), and *Spectacle* (2013). She currently teaches at the University of San Francisco, and the following interview was conducted over email.

David Banash: You began as a painter, and you have commented that your writing is often influenced more by painters and conceptual artists than other writers. Are there particular images that fascinate you? By fascinate, I'm thinking about how artists often have images that create a kind of constellation, touchstone, or provocation that resonates with their own work, such as Francis Bacon's fascination with the paintings of Diego Velázquez, Don

DeLillo's fascination with the paintings and films of Andy Warhol, or Bhanu Kapil's fascination with the paintings and performances of Ana Mendieta.

Susan Steinberg: I like that you used the word "fascinate," and I like that you ask what images, as opposed to what artists, do the fascinating. I wonder if being fascinated by a person is often just being seduced and if being seduced is just being manipulated. In much of my life, I shy away from this or shield myself from this, but when I'm fascinated with an image I want to give up control. I want to feel a kind of vulnerability. So I'm fascinated with the work of visual artists Pipilotti Rist and Cindy Sherman. Their images make me feel overly human and even more complicatedly female. They portray women holding onto extreme and often conflicting emotional states, such as being simultaneously ecstatic and destructive. They deal with rage in beautiful ways and beauty in rageful ways. And they're darkly humorous and unsentimental.

Banash: I have never thought about Sherman's photographs together with your stories, but now that you say it I immediately feel the rhyme there. I wonder if part of what makes Sherman's images so unsentimental is that she seems to put herself into the second person, always explicitly marking in the photograph how the experience of "I" is unfolding through the "you" of overdetermined histories, expectations, and desires. Most of your stories are in the first person, but I think part of their power is how they make readers feel as if they are being directly addressed in the second person. Yet sometimes you do choose to write explicitly in the second person. How do you think about the difference between writing in the first or second person? Have you ever been tempted by the sentimentality that the first person can produce so effortlessly, or sometimes inevitably, for many writers?

Steinberg: I have mixed feelings about second-person narratives. The type I most often see seems to demand an awkward and artificial collaboration with the reader. The "I" slips away, and the reader is now the implicated main character, feeling and doing whatever the story says. In these narratives I'm generally ejected from the text at the first sign of something that rings false: if the narrator says, "You love to hike," and I don't love to hike and I don't want to pretend I do, I sometimes can't find my way back into the story. That said, I often like second person when it works on more than

one level, like when it's used to show a narrator speaking to herself or a character speaking to the narrator, or when it's used as a command or a how-to. I tend to write in the first person because, as a female writer, I love to exploit the notion and expectation of confession, but I'm not tempted by sentimentality.

Banash: I'm really interested in how you say that you "love to exploit the notion and expectation of confession," yet you emphatically reject sentimentality—which you do! I'm not at all suggesting that your stories are sentimental; however, I've always thought of the confession as trafficking in sentimentality, such as St. Augustine in the garden, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wringing his hands over his adolescent transgressions, or even Humbert Humbert's fictional frames, though I guess I'm thinking about the male side of that genre here. Are you thinking of a different tradition of confession with women writers?

Steinberg: I think it's interesting that you bring up these male confessions, and I wonder if there is a gendered difference in how they're portrayed, how they're received, and how they link back to the author. I do believe that fictions by women that follow a first-person narrator often run the risk of being read as confessional, and the risk extends far beyond just being read as sentimental. If I give a reading in my female body and the text includes a fictional account of a girl doing a questionable thing, I will always be asked if—or told that—I really did the things my narrator did. So are these readers suggesting that I have no access to imagination or to voices that aren't necessarily my own? Is there actually a desire for female confession, and is it related to power, punishment, or rescuing? Is it sexual in nature? Either way, I find there's something incredibly gendered and problematic about it, so I just keep pushing it harder.

Banash: Of course, from reading and teaching your work, I know you do not traffic in sentimentality—this is one of the reasons my students are often so shocked and frankly shaken-up by your work, steeped as they are in sentimental nineteenth-century fiction or, from their own reading lives, paranormal romances and sword-and-sorcery fantasy. Still, I've always thought of confession as a genre that exploits the sentimental. Can you say a little about what you mean by the "expectation" of confession?

Steinberg: Another way of answering this is to say that I have no interest in writing confessional narratives, but rather want to play with the idea of confession. I agree that the genre is often sentimental, but I'm more interested in alluding to it, exaggerating it, or exposing the vulnerability of it.

Banash: Confession works in so many different ways in your story "Underfed." On the one hand, it seems to create an intimacy and vulnerability between the reader and the narrator; after all, she asks for judgment and even punishment from the reader and, later, from the "girlfriend." On the other hand, the narrator deploys the trope of confession aggressively, as it becomes an affirmation of her power and maybe even a kind of attack, narratively rhyming with the references to battles. Beyond this, there are also religious connections to confession in the story—from creation to the law. How did you first come to think about the concept of confession? Was it in a religious context, a legal context, a literary work, a family trope, or something else entirely?

Steinberg: I was raised with a lot of religion—I'm Jewish—and confession. I was always intrigued by various cultural portrayals of it, and my only access to it was what I saw in movies, books, and visual art. I guess the notion of forgiveness appealed to me, but so did the act itself—sitting in a dark booth, talking, someone listening. In my writing, however, I address it just as you describe: the act becomes part vulnerable, part powerful, part aggressive, part submissive. Meaning all conflicted.

Banash: You grew up in Baltimore, and many of your stories are set in Baltimore. *Hydroplane* traces a movement west, in which landscape plays an intense role. You went all the way west, to San Francisco, where you have been teaching for many years now. I grew up in Wyoming, but even there my adolescent imagination was overwhelmed with the images and music of California—everything from surfing and surf rock to custom cars and the summer of love. Did California play an important role in your imagination before you lived there? Is there a California landscape that has become important to you? Do you ever think of yourself as a California writer?

Steinberg: The longer I work with California writers, the more certain I am that I will never be one. They have a connection to this amazing and varied

landscape that is understood and embodied in the way that Baltimore is for me. That said, I wonder if my desire to set my stories in—and now around—Baltimore also comes out of a sense of loyalty. I've been thinking a lot about the effects of setting and landscape and how Californian characters in a car by the ocean want the same things as Baltimorean characters in a car on a city street. My characters could be right here by Golden Gate Park, experiencing the same longing, but it feels just off somehow. I don't think I could write it. And yes, I, too, always dreamed of California as a kid. My happiest childhood memory takes place in San Francisco.

Banash: Of course I can't resist asking: What were your California dreams growing up? How did you come to San Francisco as a child, and what is that memory?

Steinberg: I guess I first dreamed of living somewhere warm like L. A., where you could wear shorts all year and meet movie stars. I then dreamed of San Francisco because it was my favourite city as a kid. My family visited the week I turned eleven, and I remember that we rode a cable car in the rain and ate noodles in Chinatown. It was this beautiful high point just before my parents' divorce.

Banash: I think you really get at something about how we learn the emotional registers and possibilities of particular landscapes. It is almost like the landscape provides a whole language to us, and we have to become fluent in it to speak it. I'm sure my metaphor is about to break there, but I think that is what you are getting at when you say your characters could be in Golden Gate Park, but you write them in Baltimore. It reminds me, too, of expatriate writers like James Joyce always speaking the landscape of Dublin. He of course had to be out of Ireland to really write it, too. Do you feel like a Baltimore expatriate now, or would you prefer to live in Baltimore? Does that distance help you to write through that landscape?

Steinberg: No, I wouldn't want to move back to Baltimore, though I love it. And I do have the accent.

Banash: It is interesting that you are so emphatic in stating that you are not a California writer. Though the California landscape isn't present in your

work, there is something about the traditions of California women writers that seems like a powerful context for your experimental work.I'm particularly thinking of Joan Didion, Kate Braverman, and Eve Babitz, whose works employ experimental forms to represent women's experiences. They are all very different (Didion a minimalist, Braverman a maximalist, and Babitz working out creative non-fiction before there was a name for it), but it seems to me that their urgency in innovating forms capable of expressing their themes points to a tradition that provides a context for your work. Were any of these California writers important for you when you were growing up?

Steinberg: This will likely disappoint you, but I didn't read any of these writers when I was growing up. I mostly read trashy novels, YA fiction about troubled girls, magazines about celebrities, and Ray Bradbury. Perhaps some of those writers were from California, but I wasn't aware of it then. I guess my interests were all about a need to escape my current situation—the city I was in, the family I was in. And while California was part of that fantasy for sure, so were fictional girl cliques and space travel.

Banash: No, indeed, not disappointed at all! I've always loved Bradbury, and I'm really interested in the reading lives of young people. Do you still have vivid memories of any of the YA books that were important to you? Have you ever returned to reread any of them as an adult?

Steinberg: I still own some of the books, and I have vivid memories of specific scenes. I haven't gone back to them in a long time, though perhaps I should. I was just talking to my students the other day about how hard it is to read the books you loved as a kid once you're a harsher critic of writing.

Banash: What California writers are you reading these days?

Steinberg: The only California writers I'm reading now are my students.