

Selection from

Postage Due

by Julie Marie Wade

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

Rapture

I haven't had zucchini bread since Lynette Smith's house in the summer of 1984—or was it '85? I remember she had two sons, Brian & Russell, & her husband planned to leave them each a million dollars when he died. Lynette wasn't interested so much in the money, but in baking with berries fresh from her garden, shuffling plums into baskets & letting them stew all afternoon in an elegant, silver strainer. Len drove a station wagon the size of a train, so when fast travelers attempted to tailgate, he slammed on the brakes & let them slam right into him. Never got hurt. Laughed all the way home. "Another dent, another dollar," he always said. But Lynette laid out in the half-shade, half-sun of the sprawling backyard with her hair pulled back in a purple bandana, reading *The Thornbirds* & waiting for the bread to rise. And I thought, even at my young age—*A woman is a rapturous thing.*

Vertigo (Or A Letter to the Man I Almost Married)

Dear C—

belated, a little more than 10 years

(I've heard women in love default to flattery; after love, allegory.)

Here in the future I find I have not much to say to you. It is as if all the while I was loving you, or calling it love, or wanting so much to believe, I was climbing a ladder toward an attic window—rung by rung—the worry of unfulfilled obligation guiding me fist over fist. And what is love if not, at least in part, obligation?

So I kept climbing, despite the rattling & the wind, despite the fact that sometimes you were not even watching or sending down words of encouragement or cups lassoed in rope of water. And at the top when at last I reached it—the ledge, the sill, the Utmost—I made a turn & saw for the first time in aerial dimension the distance I had grown—the devastation possible at such great height.

Then, your hand was stretching out to me, but I didn't want to go in. I could see clearly how the pickets of the gray fences were really spears, & the oak trees, despite their majesty, suffered at the spine, & I remembered something Roosevelt said about fear during the Great Depression & how his wife had urged the embracing of it, not the turning away.

So which did I fear more—loving or not—to be certain & dissatisfied or un-certain & (perhaps) equally so?

And besides all that, white is not my best color. I like something blue or violet maybe—a gentle, fierce, & sordid purity, which is saying something, coming from me.

I could not permit hesitance. I could not afford brevity or lace.
There in the window your face, the chestnut-brown of your boyish curls,
& your thick man-hand, which I had intended, after all, to exonerate.

At that moment, I wanted nothing so much as to leave you, never to see you again.
—To forget what I had (mistakenly) promised.

It was not malice: of this I am certain. It was simply desperation in an unrealized form:

Desperate, at first, to reach you.
Desperate, at last, to fall away.

My Apology,
(without regret),

J

Vanna's Dream

Morning's oyster gleam, & a star rising over North Carolina. Cheer season & sixteen again. When the words were hers, she still believed they mattered. The light slipping in soft now between the curtains. A boy she kissed & stayed the night with is now long gone. But there was heat in his body given over to her—like a blessing, like the Holy Ghost taken on human form. *Go team! Go team!* And oh, how she dreams of the sidelines! Looking pretty, her mama said, was the best revenge; *they have to hate you a little while 'fore they love you.*

2, 4, 6, 8, *Who do we appreciate?* The lions, the tigers, the bears...Her skirt flounces up in the air, but the briefs are there, which is good, which is safety & modesty for a PG-13 kind of girl with thin blond hair & a Bible epigraphed by Jesus. "And the Word became flesh," & the boy became distant, & the cheer squad limped along to the semi-finals. She knew the words then, like a glossy coat of paint across her tongue. She knew how to smile when they threw her higher than she liked, how to kick & curtsy, clap & count back to the next song...

When the angel came to her in a dream, Vanna wondered what did he mean in the future—"Every night will be prom night" & crisp dollar bills.

"The word is in you," the angel said. "And you will reveal it, letter by letter."

The Note

Everyone always thought I was a Good Girl. Teachers especially. Good girl, good grades, good manners. My mother knew otherwise but was content to let them believe the lie. *Oh yes*, she'd smile, *such a delightful child*. But underneath that pretty, painted hide, I could hear her growling.

Once, in fifth grade, Mrs. Kolbe sent me downstairs to the Principal's office. She had a note she needed signed—one piece of white paper folded in half & slipped in an unlicked envelope. And I could speculate what was written on that page had something to do with Steve Mortenson who sat next to me & always shoved his hands a little too deep in his pockets, kept them there through all of Language Arts & most of Science.

What I should have done, I'll tell you now, I should have opened it, read for myself the contents of the teacher's controlled & nuanced pen, tucked it back in the envelope like a Barbie doll to bed. If I had—such a simple act, alone in the stairwell with no one watching—this would be a poem about transgression & not regret; a poem about the courage we find, in small ways, to change ourselves.

Steve Mortenson & what became of his dusty blond head, & his teeth begging for braces, & the warm, temporal bliss of the body that can give so much & feel so good when we are permitted, at last, to indulge. In his future: a fall from monkey bars that nearly breaks a rib; his mother's cancer eating away her skin; & the one time at the Christmas party when he reached over, drew out his hand, & placed it ever so cautiously on my partly exposed knee. Perhaps I wish also I hadn't brushed him away, hadn't turned abruptly fearing that someone would see.

Everyone always thought I was a Good Girl. Except my mother. When I got acne, she said, "It's the meanness coming out of you" & squeezed her tweezers. She wasn't fooled by double dimples & a pleated skirt. She told me I could schmooze anyone for a while. But then the nuns began to distrust my dialect of *doubt* & *eulogize*. And the paper against annulment took a hit of hard-won red lines.

"Are you trying to ruin everything?" my mother cried. "Don't you know a thing like this could keep you out of college!"

Just this morning, in my eighth collegiate year, my third degree, I sat down & wrote a note. For Mrs. Kolbe & Sister Mary Annette & for my mother, who would not open it even if it came on daisy-yellow stationery with calligraphy spelling out her name.

"I am tired of pretending," the note said.

And as for Steve Mortenson—who learned how to love himself far better than I did—this poem: about Good Girls & what we remember on rainy, Pittsburgh mornings with our hands shoved a little too deep in our pockets.