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Caroline, by Frances Guerin

6/14/2019 0 Comments



Standing Woman, by Alberto Giacometti (Italy) 1947, and Standing Man II, by Alberto Giacometti (Italy) 1960.

Caroline

"I can't... ugh .. get ... argh ..." Caroline mutters as she struggles to extract her left foot from a bed of cast metal. Her deep-set eyes stare vacantly, across an expanse of grey concrete floor. At the far reaches of the room, floor to ceiling windows give out onto Chicago's East Monroe Street, scorching in the midday sun. Caroline forgets; she is stuck. She drops her hands to her sides, allowing them to lightly brush her generous hips. Her small breasts spill outwards to touch her long, thin arms.

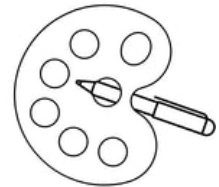
A child stops abruptly and points at Caroline.

"Mommy, how come she's so skinny?" The child asks, looking up and back at her mother.

Caroline's hips and breasts are attractively curved, but her long, slender limbs are all that others see of her body. Her arms and legs are so thin that people often wonder how it is that they don't break.

The mother gently coaxes the little girl away to hide her own embarrassment. She doesn't know how to answer her child.

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- [June 2019](#)
- [May 2019](#)
- [April 2019](#)
- [March 2019](#)
- [February 2019](#)
- [January 2019](#)
- [December 2018](#)
- [November 2018](#)
- [October 2018](#)
- [September 2018](#)
- [August 2018](#)
- [July 2018](#)
- [June 2018](#)
- [May 2018](#)
- [April 2018](#)
- [March 2018](#)
- [February 2018](#)
- [January 2018](#)
- [December 2017](#)
- [November 2017](#)

October 2017
 September 2017
 August 2017
 July 2017
 June 2017
 May 2017
 April 2017
 March 2017
 February 2017
 January 2017
 December 2016
 November 2016
 October 2016
 September 2016
 August 2016
 July 2016
 June 2016
 May 2016
 April 2016
 March 2016
 February 2016
 January 2016
 December 2015
 November 2015
 October 2015
 September 2015
 August 2015
 July 2015

The child reaches out a hand and touches Caroline's lower leg. She traces a sticky finger down the length of Caroline's limb, caressing the undulations made by someone else's fingers: a man from the past has beaten and battered Caroline, marking her body with his obsessive yearnings. The child focuses intently on the cool tingle of Caroline's leg under her own warm, damp skin. She discovers an indentation on Caroline's leg and pokes, once, twice, and again, with a tiny finger.

Caroline senses a tickle on her leg, but cannot bend down and relieve the itch. She remains static, her tall figure emanating calmness as she stares at the distant world beyond the concrete floor.

"Mommy, what happened to her hair?" The child looks up to Caroline's face with innocent curiosity. She stares at the elongated figure, mimicking Caroline's empty gaze. It is as if she hopes to command the woman's attention, to have her fascination returned.

Caroline doesn't move. The deep hollows of her eyes remain stuck, like her foot in its iron bed. Her left ear is lower than her right, thanks to an accident with a girder years ago. Caroline had lain on her right side for the procedure that replaced a shredded ear left hanging by a thread. The man performing the operation had sacrificed symmetry for an ear that could hear. Caroline thinks it her most interesting characteristic and waits for the child to notice. But the mother is irritated by her daughter's insistence, and becomes assertive: she takes the girl's wrist and drags her across the concrete floor.

"Nooooo!" The child screams, as her red cardigan is yanked over her head by her embarrassed mother.

'Well, that's the end of today's inquisition,' Caroline muses as mother and child move on and silence returns.

The men in Caroline's world are of the same delicate build. Their bodies are feather-like, so slight that they might be mistaken for twigs, daring a gust of wind to blow them away. The men do not have Caroline's shapely hips and breasts; their humanness is caught in other ways. The men are always in forward motion; their long fragile legs advancing across the floor, bodies leaning forward slightly, in resolve. The men embrace their ability to walk where Caroline cannot.

"I can't... ugh .. get ... argh ...ugh," she moans as she tries again to step forward. Caroline forgets herself, and is pulled into the rhythm of the men's stride, only to be reminded: "I am stuck."

Caroline was born in 1947, as Europe's darkest hour came to a close. Her conception marked the beginning of a new era; she emerged on a cusp of hope, abundance, and the anticipated expanse of days without war. Her ethereal body has always been slender, but not wasted. It represents the promise of peace, if not the abundance of the postwar generation. The men around her, however, are charged with action, agitation, and the need to press forward: they are bearers of the future. Caroline's legs cannot move, it's true, but her more generous critics recognize her hips as the expression of strength, and her breasts as the promised prosperity of European reconciliation.

Caroline has heard talk of anorexia nervosa over the years. The women who visit in pairs are compelled to discuss the size of her body. The male figures never attract such conversation; they may be stick thin, but they are always in motion.

"Oh, she's very thin," whispers a middle-aged woman as she approaches Caroline. The woman's cork wedge sandals match her peroxide hair, white pant suit, pearls, and fuchsia nails. She vigorously waves a piece of paper to cool her face, her body not yet adjusted from the hot, dense August air outside.

"Do you think?" her companion questions. Unlike her friend, she wears jeans, sensible sandals, and hair casually pulled off her face.

"I can barely look at her."

"She has such generous hips," muses the friend.

"Yes, but look at her arms."

"What's wrong with her arms?"

"They are sticks."

"Like yours," the woman exposes her companion's denial.

"Maybe. But it's not right."

"What do you mean, 'not right?'"

"Something's wrong with her."

"She doesn't look uncomfortable or unhappy to me. What do you think's wrong with her?"

"How would I know? Anorexics are very good at hiding things. They have a distorted sense of reality."

"How do you know?" The friend's face shows her puzzlement.

"I just do."

"How many anorexics do you know?"

"Come on, let's go over here," The woman in the white pant suit trembles, the perspiration on her face has dried, and she moves on.

Caroline feels no self-consciousness. She sees the woman's self-obsession in the perfection of her outfit, and the nervous attempt to stop her makeup from running in the heat. Caroline is happy to see them go; their loud, mid-Western voices create discord in the air. Caroline is in possession of who she is; still day and night; watching, dignified, interested in life beyond her, not in the musings of others. Caroline finds such women to be insensitive, indifferent, and consumed by a misplaced passion for their own overwrought image.

Her own body represents poise and the ability to balance quietly for hours on end. Its size is not fashioned by illness; it is simply who she is.

During the day, Caroline watches the steps into the garden on the opposite side of the street. She looks forward to 3.30pm; the end of the school day. Children of all ages with their clothes in varying degrees of disarray emerge, throwing their backpacks on the ground, or using them as weaponry in struggles, both playful and serious. There is always a boy or two, sometimes a girl, smoking a cigarette, playing cool for the audience of classmates. Then, there are the loners, the boys and girls who stand at a distance, or sit on their bags, their heads in a book. The loners and the lovers, exploring each other's secrets, are disinterested in the ruckus made by the cool kids a couple of yards away.

After five pm, the Art Institute students walk down East Monroe Street. Many also move in groups on their way to the lake. Like the school kids, some are alone, grooving to the music on gigantic headphones. Caroline spots the Art Institute students from a distance: they carry clumsily shaped portfolios, tubes, and big misshapen bags. They hold their heads high with pride and joy, their artistic creations under their arms.

A boy appears at the base of the steps. He stands in front of the school kids, but he is not one of them. Dark curls fall to his shoulders and over his face, he wears black pants, and an oversized hooded sweatshirt. He stands with his skateboard under the ball of his left foot. Caroline sees a tattoo on his hand as he raises it to take a drag on a cigarette. He is too young for cigarettes and tattoos, but he has them anyway.

"The boy is looking for love," Caroline thinks to herself. "He thinks that creating trouble will bring him attention." She has seen his type before.

Just then, her line of sight, and with it, her thoughts, are interrupted as a group of school children starts to huddle around her.

"Shhhh," warns the teacher, as she juggles her bag and a pile of sketchbooks under her arm.

The girls continue to giggle and twitter, making a pleasant chirrup. The boys scuffle as they try to steal each other's pencils, rulers, and erasers.

"Boys, calm down. You should all have your own pencils," the teacher's repeated command for silence is louder and more disruptive than the offenders themselves.

Caroline knows the habits of students and their teachers: the teacher doesn't have as much control over the boys as she imagines.

Caroline finds school trips overwhelming; too many 13 year-olds in her space and she feels swallowed up by unacknowledged desires and unchecked emotions. The group settles; each child takes out a sketch pad and begins to create with varying degrees of concentration.

The already fragile silence shatters violently. From nowhere, the odd-boy-out from the street strides across the cement floor, his skateboard under his arm.

A chill sweeps through Caroline's body. "I will not survive this," she thinks as panic sets in, and she fears for her existence. The boy is heading towards her.

The children encircling her jump up, and disperse like marbles to the safety of the room's extremities. The sound of his footstep gets louder, and as if to disappear from the approach of certain violation, Caroline freezes. She instinctively removes herself from her delicate body; turns off her emotions and shuts down her thoughts. She is numb.

The boy picks up his step, and in a single movement, as if through the pull against gravity, strides onto her plinth and cups his tattooed hand under Caroline's right breast. The caress of his taut young skin might be tender if it weren't for the violation of his touch. He slams the skateboard to the floor, and raises his arms in celebration of a dare accomplished.

The school children applaud the desecration, and their smiles break the tension in the room. They instinctively begin to cheer the boy; his rebellion enflames their adolescent spirits.

19/06/2019

Caroline, by Frances Guerin - The Ekphrastic Review

“What do you think you are doing?” The teacher places her body as a barrier between the children and the skirmish; her voice seething with anger, and her face reddening. “Do you not understand what this is?”

The children immediately fall silent. Their faces return to stone, and they bury their heads in their sketchbooks.

A security guard and three attendants saunter in to see what the noise is about.

It's too late. Caroline has been vandalized, humiliated, and tainted by the shame of the vandal. She can do nothing about it. She is stuck.

The men around Caroline, in motion, will remain forever unaware of what it feels like to hold in their stomachs the shame of an act committed against them. No one has ever dared to interfere with their body parts. The men in Caroline's world are not mistaken for waiting; they are in motion, they do not stand still, and they have no breasts and hips to seduce their onlookers, unintentionally.

By night, Caroline watches the audience pouring out of the Symphony Centre opposite. The women wear diamonds and clutch purses under their arms. The men are clean shaven and well dressed; they hail a taxi or hold open the door of a limousine. The couples walk together, arm in arm, or not touching at all. She wonders if the women, like her, have secrets that dissolve into the spaces between them and their men.

Frances Guerin

Frances Guerin is a writer and professor of film, art history and visual culture at the University of Kent. She has published widely on art and visual culture, including books, essays, articles and short stories. She lives in Paris, France.

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