

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

*Adam Matson*

### **Throws Like A Girl**

CHRIS STARTED GROWING HIS HAIR LONG in the seventh grade, and that was the beginning of it. Next he began wearing girls' underwear beneath his clothes, pilfered from the clearance rack at Mardens'. By eighth grade he had switched to girls' outfits entirely, including skirts and dresses, which he modeled with a slight, defiant swing in his hips, as if the hallway of the middle school was a runway.

He was an only child, and lived with his mother on the outskirts of Jasper, Maine, a small town. His mother did not know what to make of her son's make-over. Chris' father was not in the picture, and nobody quite knew that story.

His differentness became scandalous in middle school, when Chris started covertly using the girls' bathrooms, which made the girls nervous, and alerted the teachers that a situation was brewing. Chris usually made sure to check the girls' rooms before sneaking in, and the girls started keeping an eye out for him. It was difficult for them to sit there with their legs squeezed together, their bladders pinched and frozen, knowing a strange boy in a dress was squatting in the next stall.

Chris' classmates launched a campaign to torture him back to normal. The girls shunned him. The boys taunted him, threw his dresses and blouses in the locker room showers, used words like "queer" and "faggot" with liberty and relish.

In gym class the abuse was the worst. Chris' utter lack of interest in sports, combined with his general physical awkwardness, misled the other boys in his class to the false conclusion that Chris was nonathletic because he was feminine and probably queer. To cure him of his non-athleticism the boys in the class pegged Chris with baseballs until his skin blossomed with welts.

Only one person in gym class stood up for Chris, and it threw the boys for an uncomfortable loop. Anita McKinney was shy, skinny, and could throw a fastball like Doc Gooden. She considered it a personal insult when the boys told Chris he threw balls like a girl. In an attempt to enlighten them on the potential of a girl's arm, she hurled a fastball at Blake Pettin-gill, the star pitcher of the junior high baseball team and Chris' most fervent tormentor. Anita's pitch hit Blake in the ribs, causing him to crumple on the field like a doll. Afterwards the term "throws like a girl" vanished from the gym class vocabulary.

Anita attempted to teach Chris how to throw a baseball properly.

"Snap your arm at the elbow right before you release and point your fingers where you want the ball to go," Anita said.

"Thanks," said Chris. "But I just don't like baseball."

The "situation" of Chris came to a head when he wore a dress to the eighth grade semi-formal dance. The administration had a discussion. Rumors of Chris' anticipated attire had spread through the school before the dance, amidst great snickering. The administrators quietly agreed, at

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their clandestine summit, to let Chris attend the dance wearing whatever he pleased. Afterwards the middle school superintendent would receive a volley of phone calls from concerned parents stating that a potentially poisonous transsexual influence was infecting the halls of the junior high. In that corner of Kennebec County folks were not always receptive to the exotic.

Biology teacher Fred Hamilton saw Chris dancing by himself in the gymnasium at the semi-formal, and later crying alone beneath in stands, and remarked to Algebra teacher Carol Kearns that the boy "had a hard row to hoe." Mrs. Kearns wondered if there was a pun in there somewhere, but did not remark on it, and did not voice any opinion on the life Chris was leading in middle school. Collective silence became the administration's approach to Chris thereafter.

Chris departed junior high without any permanent bruises. He decided to shun sports, which had never appealed to him, and focus more on creative pursuits. In high school he signed up for art classes. He had always been curious about his artistic abilities, about the idea of creating something colorful and beautiful out of a blank sheet of paper or canvas. And he was curious about Anita McKinney, the girl who had saved him from ridicule in gym class.

IN HIGH SCHOOL THE BOYS BEGAN TO LEAVE CHRIS ALONE. The novelty of his conversion had worn off. Older, cockier, and busy pursuing their own sexual gratification, the boys now regarded Chris with the knowing smirk of a joke that everybody was in on, including the target. Chris realized that they all simply considered themselves superior to him because they believed themselves to be straight and him to be gay, and therefore berating him would have been redundant.

But Chris did not believe he was gay. He was not attracted to the boys at school, either individually or as a group. Instead he wanted Anita McKinney, who was tampering with Jasper's gender frequency in her own way. Due to what the high school coaches all agreed was a phenomenal natural arm, Anita was allowed to play both softball and baseball, switching arm mechanics effortlessly to accommodate both under-hand and over-hand pitches. Though Chris had disowned sports, and baseball in particular, he found himself sneaking off to watch the baseball games, especially on days when Anita pitched. No one else in the stands engaged him in conversation. Everyone kept their distance, assuming he was there to watch the boys. He sat silently in the bleachers in his skirts and blouses, surrounded by none of his peers, watching the skinny girl on the mound.

The leeway granted by his classmates led Chris to extend his female behavioral liberties. He began talking with female inflection, a strange accent he had learned somewhere outside Jasper- on television maybe. He wore perfume. As a sophomore he began calling himself Crystal, and encouraged everyone else to do likewise. This begat a renaissance of ridicule and name-calling, the most popular moniker being "queen." Kevin Ducharme, who was more of a class clown than a bully, and would one day grow up to manage a gas station, nicknamed Chris Crystal Clear, the Tranny of Jasper, which even Chris privately thought was kind of funny.

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Crystal continued to nurture an unrequited and seemingly hopeless crush on Anita McKinney, who was in her art classes every year. As time passed, the crush became increasingly frustrating and painful. Crystal experienced real self-hatred for the first time in her life, believing there was no way a seemingly normal girl like Anita would ever reciprocate romantic feelings for a freak-boy wearing Chanel # 5 with stubborn facial hair and a sizable penis stuffed into his panties. Hormones raged through the halls of the school, and everyone seemed to have an outlet except Crystal. The other kids talked about getting laid so frequently that Crystal assumed sex must be happening all the time, between classes, for example, or on the bus, or every night in every house except hers. She saw herself as a shameful island of virginity in a sea of torrid intercourse.

Most of what Crystal assumed about Anita was garnered through quiet observation. Anita appeared to be a shy girl without many friends, largely overlooked by the school's various cliques. She managed to be both a jock and an art geek, and since nobody seemed to know how to reconcile this ostensible contradiction, nobody bothered to talk to her. Except Crystal, who saw Anita as the silent heroine of the school, and moreover, as someone she (Crystal) wanted to climb inside and touch in every way it was possible to touch a person. She would talk to Anita in art class, about school and art and TV. But she did not know how to up the ante.

A window opened when the art teacher assigned everyone the project of completing a portrait of someone else in the class. Crystal and Anita picked each other, to their mutual relief, as the assignment brought out the class as a whole's teenaged self-conscious terror of rendering a peer inaccurately. Crystal relished the opportunity to spend sanctioned time staring at Anita and studying her soft face, though she knew it was paramount that she not butcher the final portrait. When early drafts of the rendering proved difficult, Crystal suggested that she and Anita exchange photographs of each other so they could practice drawing at home. Anita thought this was a good idea, and gave Crystal a picture of herself smiling at the beach in a bikini top.

Crystal took the picture home and spent hours drawing it, meticulously sketching every curve of Anita's face. She dabbed her favorite perfume on the photograph and some nights after drawing lay on her bed naked, smelling it, masturbating in the darkness, never watching the explosion of her own semen, but joyfully indulging the fantasy of Anita, like slipping into a hot bath.

Crystal composed Anita's portrait with a vibrant blend of soft pastels. Each complicated emotion she felt for Anita became another layer of color on the canvas, until the final product was not so much rendition as deification, a portal into another person's beauty. The class stared at Crystal's portrait in breathless admiration. But the thrill for Crystal came when she saw Anita's rendition of her. The image, done in oil paint, captured Crystal's complex but strangely harmonious contradictions; the square, boyish jaw; the smooth, feminine skin; the broad male nose; the cascading auburn hair, long eyelashes, lips pressed together in a practiced purse. There was an undeniable confidence in Crystal's gaze that was compelling and sexy.

Everyone in the class, including the teacher, Mrs. Fenster, agreed that Crystal and Anita's portraits of each other were the project's most accurate

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and truthful. Many compliments issued forth during the final critique, none of them reluctant or ironic.

Crystal and Anita started spending more time together outside of class, going for walks through the nature trails on the school grounds, talking about art, their classmates, their plans for college. Crystal admitted that her grades were not stellar, and hoped she would at least get into the University of Maine, which would be a stretch. Anita was also applying to U-Maine, but other schools as well, and had not decided what to do about her future. She hoped some school would give her an athletic scholarship. She had been approached by college coaches of both softball and baseball teams.

Secreted away from the whispering corridors of the school, protected by the pine veil of the forest, Crystal decided to be bold and reached out for Anita's hand. Anita took the hand as they walked, her heart pounding. When they stopped by the wooden bridge over Marten Creek Crystal kissed Anita, and Anita reciprocated warmly, slipping her tongue into Crystal's mouth. Crystal quickly grew hard, and pressed herself against Anita, and Anita rubbed the stiffness beneath Crystal's dress. Anita reached up along Crystal's back, her fingers stopping when they reached the clasp of the bra strap. The bra, both of them knew, supported nothing. They separated momentarily and giggled, Crystal staring at the dirt path where their shoes stood intertwined. Anita leaned forward and they kissed again.

The first time they had sex, Crystal did not look at herself as their two bodies thrust together. She looked instead into Anita's eyes, her own eyes smiling, her lips kissing Anita's lips and cheeks and neck. Crystal gave only a minute shudder during ejaculation, then quickly tucked herself away once it was over.

They made love frequently in the fleeting months before graduation. The bedroom was an arena of conflicting truths. Her penis was one reality, and she thrust it into Anita was obvious vigor. Anita responded with squeaks of pleasure. But naked Crystal felt strange, her pale body bony and male, not curvaceous like a girl. With the lights on Crystal felt fully exposed, her long hair and make-up a strange defiance of the penis. In the dark she was bolder, dangling her hair over Anita's face and body, caressing her warm skin. She kissed Anita's body and imagined the body as her own, imagined herself with breasts and a vagina, imagined someone slipping their tongue into her own pussy as she performed on Anita. In darkness this second reality flourished, where Crystal's mind, and thus her body, were free.

Lying in bed on a rainy Saturday afternoon, Anita finally asked her the fundamental question.

"If you consider yourself a girl, how come you're not attracted to boys?"

"I don't want what they have," Crystal replied. "I don't want what I have. I want what you have."

"What do I have?"

"A pretty face. A gentle soul."

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Anita pulled Crystal into her arms.

"At least change your name," she said softly. "Crystal sounds like a stripper."

"I know!" Crystal replied. "But I didn't want to change it again. Every time I turn around it gives them new ammunition."

"How about Christine?" Anita suggested. "Just a girl's name. Not a stripper."

"I like Christine," Crystal said, and that's what she called herself from then on.

When Christine told Anita that she wanted what she (Anita) had, this turned out to be true in more than one sense. Christine started wearing Anita's clothes, using her perfume, emulating her phrases and gestures. Anita found her own words sometimes coming out of Christine's mouth, and at first she thought this was cute, but then worrisome. When they had sex Christine moaned like a girl, molding her orgasm to match Anita's breathless chirps.

The bedroom became their shared creation, a space in which they could experiment and celebrate. Christine confided that she could not wait for college, when she could leave her mother's house, leave Jasper, exist in her own space. For months she had been counting the days until graduation. Together she and Anita drew red x's over the days on Christine's wall calendar.

"So you'll be excited," Anita said as they flipped the pages of the calendar ahead to September. "I was offered a scholarship to play ball for U-Maine."

"Oh my God, yes!" Christine cried. As she had predicted, U-Maine was the only college she had gotten into. "We can walk the quad together. We won't have to hide in my mom's basement. The creatures of the basement can leave their cave!"

Anita laughed, but her arms were shaking.

"What's the matter?" Christine asked.

"It might be hard," Anita said. "Not hiding."

"What do you mean?"

"My team will know," Anita said. "They already give me a hard time for playing baseball."

"Who gives you a hard time? The boys?"

"They're not so bad. Routine shit. Telling me to choke up on their bats. The girls are worse. They call me a dyke."

"They're jealous because you're better than them."

"I know. But I don't really want to stand out."

"With me you can be whatever you want," Christine said, and she pulled Anita in for a kiss. "I always do whatever I want, and look how well it works out!"



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They laughed, but Anita did not match Christine's smile.

Christine attended all of Anita's baseball games, cheering from the stands, drawing attention from spectators. Anita stood on the mound with her face composed, hurling blistering fastballs past rival batters. After a particularly notable win in which Anita pitched a shut-out, Christine ran down to the field to give her a congratulatory hug. She wrapped Anita in her arms, and for a moment it was a glorious public display of affection. Christine had long envied her peers being able to hug and kiss each other at school with impunity. She wanted to hold Anita in the daylight the same way she held her in the dark. When they broke apart it was amidst a collective swirl of snickers from the rest of the team, a whispering sound like a flock of birds taking flight. Anita turned away and headed into the locker room, her head down.

Everyone at school inevitably discovered the relationship. With two weeks left before graduation the class unleashed a coda of mockery, this time extending the ridicule to Anita. Christine absorbed the smirking with her well-honed and long-suffering pride, defiantly standing her ground against a school so white-washed and straight it was like a billboard on which nothing was painted. But it pained her to watch Anita trying to dodge accusations thrown at her like cut-fastballs.

"Which one of you has the bigger cock?" the kids taunted. "Who buys the tampons?"

Christine decided she would finally tell her classmates to go fuck themselves. For the last two exhausting weeks of school she held her head high, sashayed through the hallways, cat-called anyone who stared at her. High school had been a battle, but Christine would win. In September she and Anita would continue on together at college, leaving Jasper to dwell in the past, where it seemed comfortable.

Anita pitched the final baseball game of the season, going the whole way for a complete-game win. Her teammates surrounded her. Christine poured applause onto the field from her lone spot in the stands. The opposing spectators grumbled a mixture of scorn and reluctant admiration after watching their boys cut down by a girl.

Christine watched as the team carried Anita off toward the locker rooms. She eagerly waited for Anita to shower. They were getting pizza after the game.

Usually the baseball team parted ways with Anita beneath the gym, letting her change alone in the girls' locker room while they changed together in the boys'. But after Anita's complete-game they dragged her giddily into their territory. Pushing away, she laughed with them, assuming the joke would fizzle out. But they held her down. Blake Pettingill, who had never enjoyed being shown up by a girl, pulled a permanent marker out of his sports bag. While the others pinned Anita's body to the floor, crushing her arms with their knees, Blake scribbled a black beard and moustache onto her face. She screamed and kicked, but they did not let her up until Blake was done.

"This is what you always wanted, bro," Blake hissed. "Now you got it."

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There was no pizza after the game. Half an hour in the shower could not wash the marker off Anita's face. Tear stains ran down her neck. Christine found her in her car in the parking lot. For the first time perhaps in her life, Christine boiled with rage. She suffered the abuse heaped on her because she knew one day she would escape. But she could not see Anita beaten.

"Tell me who did it," Christine seethed.

"It was Blake," said Anita. And she drove away.

The next day was the second-to-last day of school. Christine waited outside Blake Pettingill's locker for three periods, staking out the hallway, skipping her last few classes. When Blake appeared, surrounded by a cadre of lackeys, Christine sprang, surprising everyone. The gawky freak-boy they had tried so hard to corral had somewhere learned to fight, and the others watched, astonished, as Christine pinned Blake to the floor. From her pocket she produced a tube of Revlon lipstick, and while Blake writhed in protest, Christine painted his lips a fiery red. Then she leaned down and kissed him.

"You kiss like shit, bro," Christine said. She stood up and walked away, and the other boys stared apeline at her receding shadow. Everyone expected a prompt ass-kicking to commence, but the collective courage deserted them.

IN AUGUST CHRISTINE FRAMED THE PAINTING ANITA HAD DONE of her, and invited Anita over to see the result. They had spoken infrequently over the summer. Anita went away to a softball clinic. Christine spent two weeks in Connecticut visiting relatives. What contact they did have was alternately passionate and awkward, trysts followed by silences. They did not talk about the baseball game, or Christine's retaliation. College approached, and neither one of them wanted to think about high school at all.

In the bedroom they stepped around each other, neither really committing to a hug or a kiss. It was daylight, a hot August afternoon, nowhere to escape from the heat. Christine produced the framed portrait and handed it to Anita.

"I'm going to hang it on my dorm room wall," Christine said. "This is how I want to see myself."

Anita stared at the painting and started to cry. "You know how I want to see myself?" she asked. She turned the portrait over and showed Christine the blank white back of the canvas.

Christine wrapped her arms around Anita. "That is not how I see you," she said.

Anita gently broke away. "I'm going to the University of Oregon," she said.

Christine felt a sting like all those old gym class baseballs all at once, a hundred punches all over her body. Her mind swirled with questions, reprisals and declarations, but all she managed to say was: "Why?"

"They have a better softball program," Anita whispered.

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"So what," said Christine.

Anita stood up and wiped tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry, Chris," she said.

IN THE FALL ANITA ARRIVED IN OREGON, WHERE SHE KNEW NO ONE, and unpacked her things in her tiny dorm. She cried for a few nights, being somewhere new. At the bottom of her suitcase, folded into a pair of sweaters, was the portrait Christine had composed of her. She did not call Christine or speak to her again, but eventually she did hang the portrait on her wall. She decided that was the way she wanted to be seen.

AT U-MAINE CHRISTINE DYED HER HAIR, BOUGHT NEW CLOTHES, STARTED SMOKING PARLIAMENTS. A few of the kids from her class in Jasper started at U-Maine too, and she could see them snickering at her in her peripheral vision as she walked the quad.

She did not hang the portrait Anita had painted of her on her dorm room wall. Half-way through freshman year she moved into a single, citing irreconcilable differences with her roommate, Mark. She decorated her single any way she wanted, the one space she could create as her own. By senior year she could stare down anybody, and the distant snickers became merely the chirping of birds. She no longer thought about the portrait Anita had painted of her. She did not even know where it was.



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