

2016 | TRAUMA & TRÄUME



THE  
VASSAR  
REVIEW

VASSAR | REVIEW

# THE VASSAR REVIEW

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# Not a Problem, Nope, Not a Concern

*Christopher Gonzalez*

In the weeks leading up to our son's birth I hadn't slept much, and I spent those restless nights staring at Julia's expanding stomach in the darkness, praying peaceful dreams would await me on the other side of exhaustion. I tried to map out an ideal dream: the three of us walking through a scenic park in autumn, Julia stopping to set the baby on top of a slide slippery with morning dew. I would kneel in the mulch and wait to receive him in my fatherly arms. Though I knew this picturesque moment of father, mother, and son to be a cliché from someone else's life, I could not conjure it up for myself. Every morning I woke with no recollection of such a dream, not even a warm aftertaste.

\*

As the due date approached I would devote entire afternoons to pacing back and forth near the foot of our bed, gripping the carpet between my toes with every step. "What's got you so worried?" Julia asked late one night. On her belly she balanced a small plate of green grapes. She had been flipping through a catalogue of baby clothes, name-brand items we couldn't afford on her substitute teacher salary or the money I earned installing drywall. But it wasn't the money that worried me. With a blanket pulled up to my chin, I asked her, "Aren't you afraid we'll fail?"

"Well, not exactly," she said. "The fear comes in waves. Like last

week I told my sister I could take Veronica to pick up some supplies for her school project. She had to build a solar system model. Pretty standard stuff. We went to the Pat Catan's about fifteen minutes from here—you know the one—and as we were walking through the aisles I had this moment when everything faded away and suddenly it was six years in the future and I was shopping for school supplies with our son! Can you even imagine? I'll be a mess the day he learns to crawl and there I was preparing him for the first grade!" She adjusted the pillows supporting her back, which caused a grape to roll over the lip of her plate and plop down into the sheets, abandoned. "We get the book bag, the notebooks, the pencils and crayons and the colored pencils and the many folders that will probably go to waste. But I can't for the life of me find those erasable red pens. We do at least three laps around the store before heading to a second and third store, round and round the city we go in search of this pen, turning up empty-handed every time. Why do these pens exist at all? The whole purpose of a red pen is to mark, to stain and slash, to leave a trail of permanency. An erasable red pen is a fucking oxymoron. So we give up."

"That's not like you," I said, resting my head on her belly.

"Anyway, we get to the first day of school. You and I are getting him situated at his desk; all around us other parents are doing the same with their kids, unloading plastic Walmart bags and laying out the various products in the gut of their desks. And it's so apparent that I screwed up, because every single one of them has a pack of erasable red pens. And I swear the other parents can see it on our faces, and they know that I'm a terrible mother, that I failed my child who will now have to grow up always a step behind."

"Because of a red pen?" I said.

"You see how insane it is."

"School shopping hadn't even occurred to me."

"But my point is that no matter what doubts you have rattling around in that thick head of yours"—she swatted me on the forehead—"we're going to be just fine."

\*

At a cookout I was called to join the fathers in a semi-circle around the grill while Julia was lured into the shade with other mothers. She still had about two months left before her due date, but we appreciated the early membership to this club. The drippy humidity in the air would have made for an excellent day in the middle of August, but it was the end of September and the heaviness of the heat left me feeling unsettled. Adding to my discomfort was the depthless chatter: conversation about sports, new cars, and one father expressing woe over being switched from one big-name account to another big-name account at his nondescript job. I swayed in the heat and sipped from an icy beer because there were no water bottles stored near the grill, and hoped I would get by with an occasional nod of my head. It was clear I had entered an unspoken-of hierarchy when one of the men who had been a father for over a decade, and who was not the owner of the house, stepped up to the grill. We were given the privilege of watching him handle the various cuts of meat, decide when they were ready to be flipped, add a dash of salt or sprinkle of garlic powder, and hold power over which burgers remained cheese-less.

Behind us kids were screaming around the pool area. On the long diving board the spatula-wielding father's son made several half-hearted bounces before throwing his weight into a final hop; he flew maybe a foot in the air and plunged into the water, splashing a younger boy who sat on the lip of the pool. All of the other adults applauded the diver's athleticism, which was, admittedly, fantastic, but no one else noticed the younger boy, who violently screamed and shook, his arms swallowed by water wings. He was the youngest of the kids, and so I knew his father to be the man whose face was cracked from an inadequate amount of sleep. This tired man kneeled down to whisper something in the boy's ears, but the boy continued flailing about, disturbed for reasons beyond our scope as adults, and his father responded by slapping his hand.

I don't recall ever being slapped on the hand. It would be untruthful to say my father never got physical with me—how else to describe his yanking me by the shirt collar when his eyes were bloodshot from too much wine?—but for the most part he preferred the act of humiliation, name-calling, belittling, any opportunity to shame me for existing.

My mind, like a sad ghost forced to haunt the same domain day in and day out, circles back to the time he told me to get out of his car and stand in an empty movie theater parking lot to finish an ice cream cone I had purchased after the comedy we'd watched together. He had wiped down and vacuumed the car's interior that afternoon, but I wasn't holding the ice cream over the mat where my feet rested. I kept my hand tucked close to my chest so that if any drippings were to trickle down my arm they would splatter on my shirt, yet he perceived my decision to buy the ice cream as foolish, a fatty choice that would inconvenience him. I stood outside, alone. A family walked by me, their heads cocked awkwardly in my direction, and at one point the father told his youngest daughter to look away from me, I was nothing to see.

I still feel the intensity of that moment rise up within me, sometimes unexpectedly or after an argument with Julia over such trifles as the baby's first pair of booties or which cartoon should be featured on his new sheets. It's there, collecting poisonous rage at the base of my fist, and I'm fraught with a desire to hit, to hurt, to harm. Instead I remove myself from the situation, maybe hide in another room, and wait it out. In the time it takes for me to calm down, I'm overcome by loneliness similar to what I felt in the parking lot, or what that little boy must have felt in a corner of the yard, not crying or talking, perhaps too careful of taking more breaths than necessary in the presence of his father.

\*

We were in a room filled with breathing. Julia reclined into me, as the mothers were told to do, and I struggled with an ache in my lower back. "One, two three, hee, hee, hoo," the instructor counted, exhaling until the vein in her neck puckered blue-green. The partners were instructed to be a source of comfort, so, thinking I would give Julia

a massage, I squeezed down on her shoulders with my fingers and pressed with my palms, but after a few seconds of this motion she writhed. “Gabe, stop. You’re hurting me.” I released my grip and tried to hover for the rest of the session.

That night I didn’t sleep again, but instead of staring into Julia’s belly I traced the swirling patterns in our textured ceiling with my gaze, searching for some kind of fortune, as I might in the bottom of a tea mug. Maybe, I thought, I will need to wear protective gear, oven mitts duct-taped to my hand, so that I can hold my son or hug my wife for a moment without causing damage. Or maybe in family portraits, I’ll stand off to the side, and future generations will look back on me as the man who kept his distance.