

On Beauty

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In the 1950s and early 1960s, growing up in Steubenville, Ohio, at the time one of the most polluted and environmentally degraded towns in the United States, I was aware in only the smokiest, haziest, vaguest way of how beautiful the girls were there. I had even less of an idea about *why* such beauty—and such varieties of it—existed in so relatively small a town. But as I gradually learned the ethnic diversity of The Ville, as we called it, and as my hormones balanced with that more intellectual segment of the brain which shapes physical responses to beauty, intensifying curiosity, focusing awareness, sharpening pursuit, the answers as to how and why such loveliness prevailed, at least to my consciousness, gradually became a little less obscure.

Despite the fact that my family lived in the far South End of town, on a high ridge-top that required the navigation of several severe switchbacks during the ascent to it, a road which city buses attempted only at irregular intervals during my boyhood, I attended St. Peter School, in the town's far North End. The reasons are clear: ethnic Catholic habits and Irish working-class clannishness. St Peter's was a predominantly Irish-American parish—there were Carrigs, Coulters, Kirkpatrick's, Joyces, McGoughs, McDonoughs, Cavanaugh's, and Egans—so according to family logic, and who knows, a bit of bias, it wouldn't have made sense in those days for me to attend St. Anthony, which was much closer. Because of this, though, the female beauty at my school was of a quite fair-skinned, often blue-eyed kind. Linda Kirkpatrick, for example, was a raven-haired, blue-eyed lassie who sat in the first row in our Baby-boomed and combined 4th and 5th grades; I remember her glossy curls and her smart voice and her shiny patent leather shoes against the white of her pert anklets. Now it is true that among us were also kids with last names like Abramowicz and Habash and DiCarlo, but generally their moms were Irish, and so, more often than not, they qualified to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with the McDevitts and McPhersons and Doyles.

As I have suggested previously, there were other ethnic parishes in town; not eight blocks from St. Peter's stood St. Stanislaus School. These were mostly Polish kids, and

the steep hillside the church and school clung to was known, with no slur intended, as Polack Hill. (In a recent Internet visit, I see that the description of the old St. Stan's refers to the neighborhood, more politically correctly, as Polish Hill. Never heard it that way in my neck of the woods.) The Polish Athletic Club, a bar and eatery in that part of town, counted among its members my own much younger brother Dennis, many years after I had moved away. (We did not know it at the time, but we were part Polish; my mother's father's name, before it was Anglicized to "Heights," I suppose by some immigration official, was spelled H-A-J-E-C and pronounced *high-yech*. (My mother had long thought that, like the heftily-handled namesake of our town, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin von Steuben, we were Prussian. Alas, it was not so.) Great beauties attended St. Stanislaus, too, though until high school, where we all found ourselves tossed ecumenically together at Catholic Central, I didn't see or know many of those girls.

Not another eight blocks from St. Peter and St. Stanislaus stood St. Anthony, the Italian parish. It, too, was set into a precipitous hillside overlooking the South End of Steubenville, and, as I mentioned earlier, much closer to my neighborhood than St. Peter's was. There such folks as Dino Crocetti (aka Dean Martin) and the mellifluously named Dimetrios Georgios Synodinos (aka Jimmy the Greek, the infamous oddsmaker and gadabout whose career was destroyed by a racist comment on national TV) had grown up. Kids at St. Anthony bore such names as Ciancetta, DiFederico, Antinone, Carinci, DiBenedetto: names that fell as arias and cantatas on my ears. I had a most thrilling encounter with a signorina of Mediterranean descent from there, one Saturday morning in 1960 or 1961. Aboard the bench during a St. Peter/St. Anthony CYO basketball game, I looked up to see, passing no more than an arm's length from me, the astonishing and already legendary Carol Speaks. Black-haired, dark-eyed, but with cheeks as sweet and fair as ricotta, she held herself, in her crimson cheerleader's outfit, like a Roman empress. She couldn't have been more than 14 at the time (the same age as that earlier Italian beauty, Juliet Capulet) but her glandular development, if genuine, was remarkable. It left us pigeon-breasted mid-pubescent ballers agog. Could they be real?

At our age, we thought we knew a lot more than we actually knew. The most intimate details of female anatomy, outside an occasional glimpse of a stolen airbrushed *Playboy*

or one of my friend's dad's carelessly misplaced copies of *Gent*, were pretty much blurrily, optically, a bit unresolved. This was, of course, just a few years before the Women's Liberation Movement; it wasn't to be that long until my junior or senior year in high school when I first dated an obviously bra-less girl. Still, when Carol Speaks walked before the bench on the gym floor, a kind of blaze of sublimity occurred; our brains registered a seismic anatomical event, but with little to no realistic, hands-on possibility. Nevertheless, in such proximity, our cells popped with a biological, subliminal *Wow!*

But was she beautiful? That's the question. Certainly this girl was attractive, even to us larval early teens; even somehow sexual. But was she beautiful?

Havelock Ellis, the pioneer British sex researcher, came into this world in 1891, the year after my house in Madisonville was built. (Despite this coincidence, he never visited any of my home's former inhabitants. Nor did Geronimo, who could have, or Cochise, or Walt Whitman, or Herman Melville, all of whom were still alive. Ever since learning the building date of my house, I have held somewhat acerbic and anachronistic resentments toward all those historical figures who walked the earth at the time, and yet who deigned it irrelevant and unimportant to stop by for a chat with the burger who erected the place I now live in and which visits I, generations later, could have bragged about. Plus it would have been a great selling point if I could have dropped a couple of names—Carrie Nation, for example, or Literarian Rutherford B. Hayes—during visitations by prospective buyers if I ever decided to sell.) At any rate, among Havelock Ellis's many achievements, he wrote the first book ever about transgendered persons; he also complained about the ugliness of the word “homosexual,” which, in his way of thinking, forces unnatural verbal union between a Greek root and a Latin one. More to my point, Ellis composed “What Makes A Woman Beautiful?” which I first ran across in a volume entitled *Great Essays in Science*. Among other provocative ideas, he claims in it that, “The absence of flaw in beauty is itself a flaw.” This seems clearly to echo the much earlier observation of that seminal English essayist, Francis Bacon, who wrote, “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.” I think of the gapped front teeth of former supermodel Lauren Hutton, the zaftig abundance of the mature Elizabeth Taylor, the off-kilter nose of Meryl Streep, and most stunning of all to me, the Roman, startlingly hooked beak of the much-painted Russian Modernist poet Anna Akhmatova—all public

persons, their images well-known in their times, yet all less than “perfect”— if such a state actually exists in the physical world. Scholars have shown that totally regular features do not exist in nature; the left side of our face never exactly mirrors the right side; a veteran mechanic’s right hand may be a glove size larger than his left, a woman’s breasts may differ in size, shape, degree of uplift. Absolute symmetry and perfection do not seem to be necessary to beauty’s bargain.

So perhaps the asymmetry between Carol Speaks’s pronounced chest and the relatively delicate rest of her pubescent self was the flaw that Ellis says is required for true beauty. Carol’s facial features were regular, even pretty, I think, but it was the abundance of her bosom that unbalanced and finally ravished us.

The girl most thought the prettiest in grade school—and “pretty” is different that “beautiul,” and worth its own essay, I think, though I will not digress that way right now—prettiest was the blonde Karen Harris. She lived only a few blocks away from St. Peter’s, on North Fourth Street, and was one of the many girls who walked to school. I have vague memories of passing her house and imagining her as a kind of Rapunzel; her old Victorian mansion with a turret where I was sure she slept made the fabulous thrillingly real. But her prettiness was, for me, at any rate, disqualifying. No one so attractive would ever be interested in me—no way. So all during grade school and into high school, I admired her from afar, her creamy skin, her silken hair, her svelte, shapely body. As I understand it now, perhaps she was too perfect in her prettiness; it kept me and other boys at a distance. I wonder if she wound up lonelier than other girls, ironically cursed by her good looks in the terrors and storms of adolescent emotional and social development.

By high school, with its mixing of all the groups from their relatively insular ethnic neighborhoods, more stunning Italian girls, far different from Carol Speaks, came into my ken. There were the Sfarella sisters, for example, Theresa and Roseann Sfarella, (that’s *es-ef-arella*, no vowel between the initial two letters, just those two consonants stuffed together in a kind of sweet sibilant-then-fricative verbal cannoli.) Adolescent Sophia Lorens, they were blessed with gregarious personalities, friendly smiles, lush hair, flashingly dark Sicilian eyes. Scarfed up quickly by Steubenville boys, athletes, mostly, at the height of their hormonal imperatives, with their partners they floated, welded

together, at the English Leathered and hair-sprayed Friday evening St. Aloysius Club dances at the downtown Knights of Columbus Hall. We puny, hyper-brained mortals gazed upon their Olympian beauty from the dimmest and most distant corners of the dance floor like outcasts peeking into the heart of Paradise.

Perhaps the most beautiful of them all, though, was Janis, the Italian girl friend of my buddy and fellow member of One Two Few, a, how shall I say it—semi-pro folk-rock group. Charley Joyce and Tommy Ciancetti and I wore matching blue chambray shirts, jeans, dark shoes, and performed an eclectic mix of folk tunes, Bob Dylan, and early Beatles, all featuring tight harmonies. Our most memorable paying gig was at the Knights of Columbus Youth Camp, out in the coalfields west of Steubenville, not far from where just a couple of years ago a cult of rogue Amishmen hacked the hair and beards off allegedly uncooperative members of their community. It was all peace and love and Kumbaya at the Kof C camp, though. The operation consisted of about a dozen cabins, even smaller than the wretched company houses in a coal camp, each bunking eight or ten girls (there were boy's weeks, too, earlier in the summer—but never the twain must meet out there in the unchaperoned wilderness), so six or eight girls plus their counselor, usually a perky nymph of late high school age, and a cafeteria and canteen where you could buy candy and hanks of those long, gleaming plastic threads out of which we learned to braid vivid lanyards so *outré*, so utterly and literally *square*, that I never saw one, not one, ever worn in public outside the camp. Small fortunes of weekly allowances lay forever tangled in unopened dresser drawers all over Steubenville and Toronto and Bergholz and Amsterdam and Cadiz. The night we played there, many of the girls sported freshly-made bracelets of this very material. They actually looked good on their tanned arms, and for a moment I missed those hours of crafts, and could even smell the smoke from woodburning tools and the scent of sneaked cigarettes late at night beyond the dining hall. But most memorably, that night I met Molly Maguire—I'm aware of the alleged Irish troublemakers who called themselves by the same name in the anthracite coalfields of eastern Pennsylvania—but, I was assured at once by her gentle manner and inviting smile, that she was no kin to those long-gone maligned and slandered strikers and unionist donnybrookers, but just a black-haired blue-eyed strait-laced Catholic

beauty from somewhere out there in the strip-mined Appalachian reaches of the Diocese of Steubenville.

Tommy's Janis, on the other hand, delicately featured and soft-spoken and incredibly beautiful, lived across the river. Her hometown of Follansbee, West Virginia was another of the planet's ugliest places in those days, being the site of huge coke ovens which supplied the steel mills up and down the Ohio. By day and night, the coking process, the stage called "quenching" in particular, filled the entire town with acrid clouds of sulfurous smoke and steam so thick that traffic on Route 2, Panhandle West Virginia's river road, would come to a halt. Follansbee was a part of West Virginia the songwriter John Denver overlooked; in fact, it was much more reminiscent of a remark Charles Dickens made when asked his impression of nearby Pittsburgh after a visit there. His characterization of the place was simply, "Hell, with the lid off." Follansbee, rather than being "almost heaven," was Pittsburgh's dark Satanic suburb.

So out of that fuliginous place, the transfixing Janis emerged like Venus from some smoke-troubled sea, and the vision of her swept Tommy and all of his friends away. Despite her beauty and youth and she and Tommy's promises, they divorced sometime after I left Steubenville. Janis, like Karen Harris, was goddess-like, and thus perhaps doomed to disappear back into the mist and smoke of some Appalachian Hades or Avalon, too perfect for the flawed world we inhabited. The playwright Eugene Ionesco has lamented, "Beauty is a precarious trace that eternity causes to appear to us and it takes away from us. A manifestation of eternity, and a sign of death as well."

Indeed. There is a recent addition to the book series *Images of America*, recently out from Arcadia Publishing. Arcadia? The ideal landscape of ancient Greece, the setting of pastoral poetry ("Come live with me and be my love/ and we shall all the pleasures prove") from classical times to the Renaissance, a place very similar physically to the steep hillsides of Northern and Central Appalachia, rivulets plunging down to green-copsed valleys, through which fish-choked rivers run, a place of song and sheep and dalliance. When Henry Clay visited Steubenville in the early 19th century, after the first Merino sheep were brought to North America by Bezaleel Wells, one of Ohio's original industrial capitalists, Clay praised the town and its surrounding bucolic landscapes for its

“flocks and fleeces” and the general beauty of its (pre-Industrial Revolution) Arcadian landscape.

In the new book, the little town of Mingo Junction is presented in hundreds of photographs with brief captions. Mingo Junction is directly across the river from Follansbee, and one mile south of Steubenville; I went to school with a bunch of Mingo kids, and the facts of geography in our Appalachian town put my ridge-top neighborhood much closer, at least as the crow flies, to Mingo than to Steubenville’s northernmost and easternmost reaches. Mingo too was a mill town, and its tiny Main Street, the towering stacks and vents in the background, provided the setting for several scenes in the famous Vietnam-era film “The Deer Hunter,” starring, among others, the previously-mentioned beauty Meryl Streep. Poring over the *Images of America* photos, I notice in two of them a pair of sisters, Grace and Nina Gulino, Italian cheerleaders and bathing beauties, posing as the latter at a place called Second Bridge, beside the wide, fast-running Cross Creek where my friend Roger Swartz and I later traveled often as boys with his dad Mike to catch hellgrammites, a popular fish bait. The girls, in what have to be some of the first two-piece bathing suits seen in rural Ohio, are incredibly thick-haired, vivacious, “stacked” as the local slang described curvy and full-bodied girls, smiling and comely. My publisher and friend Larry Smith, a Mingo Junction native who compiled the book with his buddy Guy Mason, tells me the Gulino girls were by all reports great kids. I suppose it is a bit weird that though they are already nearly fully-grown women in 1947, the year of my birth, I have nevertheless included them in my personal pantheon of Ohio Valley beauties. Equally weirdly, as if to inject myself into the past, I tell myself that I probably dated, or knew, in my time, at least one of their nieces or cousins. Whatever, there Grace and Nina stand in that familiar setting, captured in their youth and beauty, as much as are the Arcadian “maidens loath” on Keats’s Grecian Urn. Unravished brides-to-be, “manifestations of eternity” in their time, they perhaps now lie moldering in their Mt. Calvary Cemetery graves in Steubenville.

Another Italian girl of my own generation and first-hand experience needs mentioning here because of the startling music of her name. She was the niece of one of Steubenville’s most infamous native gangsters, Tito Carinci, the nemesis of George Ratterman who had come to Newport, Kentucky in 1961 to clean the place up and

expunge the Mob. Tito was later to be involved in, among many other syndicate actions, a New York City heroin bust of a magnitude second only to the one immortalized in “The French Connection.”

Tito had attended Xavier University, later my own alma mater, as a special case sponsored by John King Mussio, a native Cincinnatian, a graduate of Xavier, a former English teacher at Elder High School, and at the time Bishop of Steubenville. At Xavier, Tito achieved All-American status as a football player, and for his combined scholarship, athletic achievement, and Catholic practice, he was placed in the university’s Legion of Honor, his name inscribed on a special plaque that hung at one of the entrances to Schmidt Field, the old football stadium on Victory Parkway. Just a few years later, he was arrested in Newport for slipping Ratterman a mickey and having him photographed, *deshabille*, with the less-than-winsome April Flowers, a local B-girl, in an attempt to discredit Ratterman and forestall his and U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s Mob-busting activities in Campbell County. Tito returned to Cincinnati within recent memory, invited by Jeff Ruby to the opening of the New Tropicana Bar at Newport on the Levee. “A nice old man,” Ruby described him to the local amnesiac press. It was this same Tito Carinci’s niece who became my girlfriend briefly during my senior year. I remember her as quite petite, but buxom, with dark blond hair, a round open innocent face, though I did not fully appreciate her physical charms at first. The uniforms required for girls at Catholic Central High School were utterly successful at making otherwise voluptuous young women look like rural mailmen. But she showed up at Bellevue Park one early summer’s day in 1965 in a pink one-piece swimsuit that blasted those frumpy blazers and boxy blouses to Kingdom Come. “Jesus,” one of my friends murmured as she smiled our way. “Who’s that?”

“My girlfriend,” I answered, in one of the most proudly vain moments of my brief life up until then. “That is Miss Desolina Casini.”

Is it not like a song? Could a pimply Irish-Polish boy enraptured by the musical Latin of Catholic ritual (*pange lingua, gloriosi*) and equally enraptured by the choice, swift, and vulgar Italian (*figlio di puttana*) spoken by the grandmothers of so many of his friends—could such a boy not be absolutely swept away by the sound of that name? Desolina Casini. Desi, for short: Desi Casini. Her father was a tailor: “Casini The Tailor”

his sign read; his shop was just a couple of doors down from the office where my father worked for Ohio Bell on North Fifth Street In Steubenville. She was a friendly, generous, sunny girl, who, when I showed up back in town to do a reading from one of my books more than a decade ago, herself in her early 50s by then, stepped forward out of the audience to greet me with all her youthful smiling beauty still intact.

Another girl from my high school years, Susan Pavia, sat in front of me in a couple of classes. She was so southern Italian looking that she may well have been Sicilian. She had glossy black-brown hair, very dark skin, brown-to-black eyes. Her nose was exquisite, a strong Roman beauty. Less than five feet tall, shapely and elegant in a compact way, she remains voiceless in my memory, for she either held herself at such a distance or I was rendered so agog by her looks, that we never spoke to one another. Nor am I happy to say that there existed a reluctance on my part bred of embarrassment and insecurity because of her one “flaw,” which never to me diminished her: she had a prosthetic arm. She could not have been a Thalidomide baby, since the effects of the drug which, among others, the Cincinnati firm William S. Merrell wanted to distribute as Kevadon, a sleeping pill for pregnant women in the early 1960s, did not show up until about a decade after Susan had been born. So, a birth trauma? A horrible childhood accident? I do not know. But the tone of her false arm and hand, jutting from the sleeve of her navy blue uniform blazer, was a kind of strange pink Northern European blandish putty-like color which ill fit her rich Mediterranean coloring. I was unsettled by it, and perhaps all the more attracted to her genuine, in-skin, flesh-and-blooded gorgeousness. But I was speechless in her presence, and still wish I had at least once heard her voice.

I am not so proud of these boyish reactions primarily to the physical traits of these girls; I am simply trying to be accurate in my reporting of them, which I know are and continue to be conditioned by cultural ideals of beauty which may be far removed from any “scientifically” established criteria, Havelock Ellis notwithstanding. Besides, it is the individual response to beauty which ensures the vigor and variety of the species, the mixing of genes that fuels evolutionary progress. The good nuns of St. Peter’s, were they to read these descriptions of the girls I shared my youth with, would tighten their eyes and purse their lips in censure of the accounts’ crude physicality, their utter failure to reveal the inner (and therefore more worthy and spiritual) beauty of these virginal souls.

But I am not writing about high notions here, nor interested in half-true confessions about these matters. The origin of this essay is in the proddings of memory, the secret agendas of the unconscious, the desire to tell a possibly interesting story among men. So if, while indulging these vague forces which drive the writer, at the same time, I am learning something about myself, then and now, so much the better. For the essayist, writing is a process of both self-recovery and self discovery. I return, reflectively and meditatively, to those boyhood days and the indelible contrast between the ravaged physical environment of the Upper Ohio Valley and the physical attractiveness of the girls there. Recall, for a moment, and once again, the radiantly young Meryl Streep. I refer now to some early moments in the five- Academy-Award-winning film “The Deer Hunter.” The bar scene, in which Streep appears and in which a Green Beret, home on leave, curses the war, was, as I have already mentioned, filmed in Mingo Junction, exactly like Steubenville in every way except its size.

Streep is, at the time of filming, 27 or 28, her character Linda a bit younger; the actress lives in her scenes like a burst of St. Elmo’s Fire. Perhaps something similar formed my notions of beauty in a despoiled and denatured mill town. The bleak deforested hillsides in winter, the graphitic air weirdly twinkling with particulate pollution so bad that in the famous Six Cities Study, which in part led to the forming of the Environmental Protection Agency, Steubenville was determined to have the dirtiest air in the country—these, and the red smoky skies at night, the rusty warehouses, mills, and smokestacks, the oil-stained and coal-littered railroad spurs—all formed a vividly contrasting background to the glowing close-ups my mind’s camera captured of the radiant girls I wandered among.

This striking contrast between the loveliness of the girls and the ugliness of the towns requires me to clarify, in an apologetic way: I intend no malice toward Follansbee, or Weirton, or Steubenville, or Mingo Junction, or any of the places I describe. Certainly they have suffered much under the great weight of industrialism, and I do not blame these towns or their citizens, generally; I blame the companies that exploited them, that polluted their air, that fouled their water, that dumped their slag and scrap iron and mine tailings all over these cities’ outskirts and innards, and that now jockey for position to inject their fracking chemicals willy-nilly into the ground beneath their homes,

companies that fed then and and continue to feed now a macho, muscular, and often violent culture. I blame the administrators of these towns who could not or would not stand up against the worst practices of such corporate juggernauts. The price of employment, the cost of doing business, the wages of domesticity, should not be the health of the people and their land. Such beauty as was born and bred in the upper Ohio Valley should not have had so coarse a setting in which to shine.

More painfully, I blame myself, my brother and sister, my father and mother, the good nuns of St. Peter's, even Monsignor Cronin T. Molloy himself, a graduate of the same school I taught in for forty-five years, and a Cincinnati native who once jaw-droppingly told me, "When I was a boy, I had a friend who lived in the house you live in now." These are all good people, revered people, but we were all then, and continue to be now, complicit in the environmental desecration that so contrasted with the human beauty of the children of coal-mine operators, high management types of Weirton and Wheeling Steel, the bosses of the coal-burning sulfurous, forest-destroying smog-engines of the Ohio Power Company.

Tommy Ciancetta's Janis still lives in my memory as the most brilliant gem in that horrid setting, but now I must digress. For Janis's beauty was of a magnitude comparable to that of Olivia Hussey, who, back in my college days, herself just 15, played Juliet in Franco Zeffereilli's sumptuous production of Shakespeare's drama of star-crossed lovers. Swept away by the language and the tragedy, by her youth and beauty ("these winds will blow us from ourselves") I wrote a long, cathartic, hormonally charged essay-review of the film for the *Xavier University News*. I don't think I've ever fully recovered. Such a sweet disease, this infection by beauty, and such a chronic arc of mixed pleasure and pain. Maybe ten or fifteen years ago, when I was already past the age of 50, I sat up through a long Arctic summer twilight with my now dead friend, the poet Joe Enzweiler, watching the film once more. There we were, two just-off-the-Denali-Highway-unwashed, mosquito-bitten roughnecks in the boondocks outside Fairbanks, drinking slow cans of beer, squatting on piles of firewood in a home-made shed, to which trailed a fifty-foot extension cord for the TV-VCR. For the last hour of the film, we wiped our eyes and sniffled. What is there to be said? She is lovely, and she dies. And with her, youth dies, all of it, all across the world, and beauty, and so a part of us who watch is

forever taken away, into the grave with that heartbreaking, heartbroken girl. “The death of a beautiful woman,” Poe wrote a few centuries after Shakespeare,” is the most poetical topic in the world.”

Throughout my adult career as a teacher, I encountered such beauty regularly enough to keep the Steubenville memories smoldering inside me. It is not only in my students that I often behold beauty, but in the texts I teach as well. In Thomas Hardy’s masterpiece, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, for example, I am arrested by passages such as this, which seems to confirm Havelock Ellis’s notion of female beauty once again: The subject is Tess’s appearance (I have heard among scholars that Tess is based on an actual early love of Hardy’s, a country girl from his district, perhaps even a cousin). The narrator lingers over her eyes, her skin, her hair, and then tells us that Angel Clare, Tess’s suitor and future husband, “had never before seen a woman’s lips and teeth which forced his mind with such persistent iteration the old Elizabethan simile of roses filled with snow. Perfect, he, as a lover, might have called them off-hand. But no—they were not perfect. And it was the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect that gave the sweetness, because it was that which gave the humanity.” “The touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect.” Yes.

That an intricate collection of molecules, spun on a double helix then set into interaction with another set of equally complicated molecules should somehow result in Susan Pavia’s skin, or Linda Kirkpatrick’s voice, or Tess Derbyfield’s teeth and lips—this is the mystery, the allure, the unpredictable essence, which complicates the idea and reality of beauty. And of course upon the manifold biological factors that create beauty are heaped the myriad cultural variables that are a part of the consideration, resulting in vastly different notions of female beauty across cultures and throughout the ages—think of Kate Moss, or of Twiggy, then think of the skinny wraiths of Lucas Cranach the Younger, then again think of the abundant goddesses of Rubens or Titian, and finally dwell a moment on the present marvel that is Beyonce. Beauty is one of Creation’s most varied products, rivaling, I am tempted to say, the diversity of fishes, butterflies, beetles.

And so one most remarkable and entirely different beauty was a brief part of my experience during the high school time of my life. I will end with this anecdote because it brings me back again to the recurrent proposition of this essay—that some oddness of

proportion of one or another physical aspect, is at the heart of the notion of beauty—that beauty without flaw, without some strangeness of proportion, is inhuman, untouchable, unreal.

Her name was Jacqueline du Something—I can't remember whether it was DuBose, or Du Bois, or Deuchamp—but it was, as she was, undoubtedly, unequivocally, French. Actually, French Canadian, Quebecois. Tall, blonde, quiet and fragrant in her coconut-oiled skin, she lay next to me on a sunny blanket in Evanston, Illinois, on the campus of Northwestern University. We were taking a break from our classes in the Summer High School Journalism Institute at the Medill School of Journalism to which about fifty of us rising high school seniors had been invited from all over North America.

There was a short, dark-haired girl from Anchorage, Alaska whose household had been wiped out in the Good Friday Earthquake just a few months before; there was the urbane Meta Stickler from Scarsdale, New York; there was my roommate Colin from Canton Timken High School here in Ohio; and the sharp and friendly Harriet Harte Cook, from the Cincinnati suburb of Wyoming.

But most of all, there was Jacqueline, and sun, and (am I remembering, or wish-fulfilling?) the smell of the lotion she'd asked me to rub on her, even up under the straps of her bikini top and down to the small of her back, just where her bikini bottom began.

And there was her long curly blonde hair, damp with sweat and oil, and her long legs stretched out there on the blanket, and her accent, and her effortless *savoir-faire*, and her blue eyes clear as Arctic air, and me, nearly stupid with an aesthetic trembling morphing hornily into the churnings of desire.

And all the time, I was trying to come to terms with the fact that she was the hairiest person I'd ever met—hairy armpits, unshaven legs, even a fine thick flow of hair down the middle of her back. This was not black coarse hair, but hair as bright and Botticellian as the cloud of silvery gold on her head. But there was lots of it and the lotion dampened it and darkened it, and my rubbing of her back disheveled it, and I was crazy, gone—and she?—she was a girl with a pelt.