

The Snow Woman

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One Saturday in January of 1962, a week or two after I turned twelve, some neighborhood pals and I decided to build a snow woman. We knew that it was a mildly wicked thing to do, especially since our plan was to make her unmistakably recognizable as a snow woman. To preserve our anonymity and to reduce the odds of her premature destruction, we built her on the tree lawn of a vacant lot next to my house, sufficiently close to the street to ensure that passers-by would be appropriately shocked. It took several hours to complete the work, and by pre-adolescent standards she was impressive. Slightly larger than a life-size grownup, she was endowed with a grotesquely exaggerated anatomy inspired by some *Playboys* that we had recently discovered in a neighbor man's garage. The image that remains in my mind's eye is an icy Venus of Willendorf, massive and gleaming.

We got carried away in the creative act, maybe even a little scared by it. It was almost disturbing to see how well she was turning out, and I felt my embarrassment grow as we shoveled and packed and shaped. When we finally stepped back to appraise our work, the one thing wrong was her hair, which proved impossible to render in snow. We solved this problem when I found an old rag in our garage and tied it over her featureless head. It was the crowning touch: she looked like the newspaper photos of Khrushchev's wife.

What does a pack of pre-adolescent boys do with a snow woman once they've built her? Nothing more—or less—than you might expect. When cars came by, we took turns standing jauntily beside her with arms reaching up around her shoulders, smart-ass kids on an unlikely date with an impossibly voluptuous woman clad only in a babushka. Some male drivers honked and grinned, but a woman around my mother's age slowed down, lowered her window, and issued the inevitable scolding: "You boys ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" As she drove off, we pulled down our stocking caps to conceal our faces before the next car came along. Her reprimand reminded us that we could easily be recognized in our small Ohio town—and in those days, grownups did not hesitate to tell a parent whenever

they spotted his or her child doing something amiss.

Judged in terms of the bad-boy thrills that we hoped she'd provide, the snow woman performed her office. Pleased with our efforts and eager to warm up, we all took one last look and went home. The reaction we sought was articulated an hour later by my older sister as she came in from her weekend job at a pharmacy. Her comment to our mother pretty much said it all: "Some creeps just built a snow woman."

Mom went to the window to take a look. I couldn't resist peering out behind her, and from our vantage point, the snow woman revealed herself in grotesque profile. Mom frowned, sighed deeply, and said, "Oh for Pete's sake. Did you do that?" I denied any part in it, though this was hard when my father glanced out and remarked that whoever built the snow woman had done a "pretty good job." I claimed that some high school kids must have done it.

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There's nothing new about males constructing the females of their dreams, as Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* attest. We kids couldn't know that our snow woman might have reached back to the first telling of the story, in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. We didn't exactly fall in love with her, as Ovid's *Pygmalion* did with his ivory statue, but I do remember taking pride in her beyond all reasonable expectation. I even regarded her with a measure of awe, a surprising response given that we had built her ourselves. Ovid's sculptor was also driven slightly mad by artistic vanity: "and with his own work he falls in love." The obvious lesson about objectifying women's bodies certainly applies, but something else may have been going on as well. The snow woman may have taught a pack of small-town Midwestern boys an unexpected lesson about the power of art.

Play, of course, reveals all sorts of things. And since middle age is a season for visions and revisions, the snow woman holds a small but significant place in my inventory of deeds that need revising. The earlier tellers of her story all agree: if you build a woman, whether from ivory or snow,

you'd better be braced for some unsettling revelations about art and sex—or about sex and art, depending on whom you read.

My remembered unease makes it clear that my sister was right: there was indeed something creepy about our afternoon project. I can attest that a boy Methodist industriously packing snow onto two enormous breasts will feel discomfort along with bad-boy glee. Robbie, the wildest and most precocious of our group, merely acted out what the rest of us were thinking when he went beyond our prom-date posing and actually fondled those breasts as cars went by. He was the one, I'm almost certain, who prompted that woman to scold us. And truth to tell, I *did* feel ashamed of myself. As the snow woman took shape, something changed: once she was completed, I wouldn't have fondled her breasts for the world.

Was this nascent morality or flat superstition? The beginning of a conscience, or its end? And if the builder of a snow woman is a kind of artist, what makes an artist go bad? Something besides prudery must have made me feel embarrassed by Robbie's lewdness: I didn't understand his actions sufficiently to be as upset by them as I was. More to the point, perhaps, is my memory of something strangely animate about the snow woman, as if the final placing of that rag on her head had effected some sort of transformation, a minor-league metamorphosis right there on East Sandusky Street. Pygmalion, torn between what reason told him and an odd sensation that he just couldn't shake, was similarly confused: "Often he lifts his hands to the work to try whether it be flesh or ivory; nor does he yet confess it to be ivory." It may have been this weird feeling that the snow woman was in some sense *real* that made me deny building her. This feeling surely made me feel unaccountably sad in the days afterwards, as she melted beyond recognition. It seemed strange that the rag would survive but not her.

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I'm relieved to find that Ovid's Pygmalion, at least, had good intentions. Wishing to live chastely, he created his statue as a substitute for real women, whom he considered to be immoral and depraved. If we replace moral outrage with rampant insecurity, such an impulse easily applies to a boy who had reached the age where girls were beginning to seem vaguely desirable but definitely scary. My fascination with the snow woman surely owed something to the fact that I had never seen a real woman naked. Apparently, Pygmalion

was just as inexperienced. Ovid says that the sculptor fell in love with his creation because he was incapable of dealing with real women—and of course, so was I. In the list of unsocialized males given to delusional obsessions, reclusive craftsmen and boy Methodists rank fairly high.

Pygmalion got duped by his own skill. The statue was not *trompe l'oeil* so much as a thing that fooled the heart, even for its creator: as Ovid says, "his art conceals his art." The sculptor also got carried away, adorning the statue with robes and ornaments in a foreshadowing of my excited discovery of an oily rag for the snow woman's head. Pygmalion caressed the statue as if it were alive—and didn't I join the others in leaning against the snow woman and mugging for passers-by? Although I'm thankful that I did nothing worse, Robbie performed what we were all half-thinking.

It's tempting to excuse my former self by following Ovid's lead and claiming that, like Pygmalion, we were all under the spell of Venus—or her modern counterpart, incipient hormones. But that woman driver was unquestionably right: shame was indeed in order. Some early commentators on the *Metamorphoses* recognized this despite Ovid's sympathy for the sculptor. It took a medieval woman, one who didn't drive, to see through the pie-eyed artist who lusted after purity and then, supposedly through no fault of his own, just plain lusted. Christine de Pisan, who saw Pygmalion's misdirected affection toward "a made ymage" as a shameful neglect of the vows of knighthood, would have declared that any budding chivalry on East Sandusky Street had been corrupted by idolatry. John Lydgate was equally uncharitable in his *Reson and Sensuallyte*: for him, Pygmalion was one of those perverters of love who succumb to the many dangers inhabiting the garden of Sensual Delight, or "Deduit."

However unformed or unacknowledged, Deduit was hanging over Findlay, Ohio, that January afternoon like the acrid smell of the Cooper Tires plant. A young Methodist should have known better than to obsess over "a made ymage," like that neighbor man saving his old *Playboys*. But isn't sexual obsession a natural part of growing up? What's clearly a case of arrested development in a grown man with girlie magazines in his garage might not be so damning in a pack of young boys looking for something to do on a cold day. This more sympathetic interpretation, almost Freudian in its all-forgiving, boys-will-be-boys attitude, comes from

14th-century commentator Giovanni del Virgilio, who saw the Pygmalion story as an allegory of normal sexual maturation, in which the statue is a real woman who remains as “motionless” as a statue. If Giovanni had been driving down East Sandusky Street, he would have given us a leer and a thumbs-up. Observing the snow woman’s patient immobility, he would have seen her as a kindly soul indulging the curiosity of pre-adolescent Pygmalions groping their way from innocence to experience.

The poet Guillaume de Machaut would have agreed that we were just boys looking for love. He would have seen the snow woman as an inferior precursor, essentially harmless, to the real girls whom we would take to the Millstream Drive-in Theater in later years. Conceding that “there is no equal or second to the image that Pygmalion made,” Guillaume nonetheless insisted that the woman who had captured his own affections “is a hundred thousand times more beautiful and pure.” It’s tempting to see the snow woman as just this sort of try-out, a wholesome exercise in appreciating girls before we entered the frightening world of dating. I imagine that the snow woman might have enjoyed seeing “North to Alaska,” followed by a trip to the Dairy Queen.

Boccaccio took this interpretation—a pack of boys just trying to grow up—a step too far by stretching it to encompass spiritual as well as sexual maturation. Since Pygmalion was “indignant at the sins” of women, and thus created the statue “in every way according to his own desire,” the figure embodied ideal purity in the woman as well as in the man who created her. Not only did Pygmalion make a statue of “a young girl who had not yet reached the age of suspicion,” but he prudently waited until Venus had effected her maturation before he enjoyed her sexually. I can see Boccaccio pulling over and giving us medals: we weren’t just normal kids, but exceptionally moral kids. How cute to see boys building a snow woman instead of trying to finagle dates with a real one. Weren’t we just finding a way to stay out of trouble during this risky phase in our development?

Another approving driver would have been the anonymous compiler of the *Ovide moralisé*, who stressed the kindness and pity of Pygmalion, *li riches homs* who protects and educates a poor and ignorant girl until she is worthy to be his wife. This is a clear harbinger of *My Fair Lady*, with the harmlessly urbane Rex Harrison improving a poor girl’s lot in order to win a bet. Boccaccio and the *Ovide* moralizer may have meant well, but their interpretations

smack of playground cruisers, trophy brides, and inflatable party dolls—nasty embodiments of the bad faith that many of us have come to see beneath the ostensibly benign manipulations of Professor Henry Higgins.

Giovanni del Virgilio, a fourteenth century Robbie if there ever was one, went so far as to claim that it was not Pygmalion who needed to learn a lesson, but the statue itself. Giovanni asserted that “Pygmalion had a certain wife who was as beautiful as ivory. But she was motionless—that is, without allurements—and did not know how to perform like others in intercourse. Therefore she was said to be a statue.” This reading is so outrageously sexist that I’m giving the original in full, if only to prove that I haven’t made it up in an attempt to get my younger self off the hook: *Pigmalion habebat quamdam uxorem pulcherrimam ut ebur. Sed erat immobilis & sine blanditiis, et nesciebat operari sicut alie in coitu et ideo dicebatur esse statua....*

For Giovanni, the statue was just another female who hadn’t learned Venus’s lessons and wasn’t putting out. Charles d’Orléans took this creepy notion a step further by using it to blackmail his girlfriend. After comparing his prayers for consummation to Pygmalion’s, Charles scolds his lady by claiming she has far less reason than the statue for discouraging his overtures: “But ye the whiche seme flesshely of nature / For ought I pray I fynde yow but a stoon.” I would come to know many Giovannis and Charleses in high school: this 14th- and 15th-century duo would not be the last guys to accuse their dates of being “cold” as stones. The snow woman did not respond to Robbie’s grotesquely ardent caresses, but even as a twelve-year-old I was smart enough not to blame *her*.

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These medieval-guy defenses of Pygmalion are starting to wear thin. I’d say that Lydgate spoke the truth of it: whatever you do, don’t be Pygmalion, “Of whos fooly thou mayst here / To be war and come no nere.” But I *was* unwary and had indeed come near to the sculptor’s folly, and I’d be lying if I denied how impressive that snow woman was. This raises an aesthetic question: is it possible to make a snow woman too well? Charles d’Orléans seemed to think so. Despite comparing the statue with an uncooperative woman, he conceded that Pygmalion had succumbed to an irrational and unchecked desire—a love “hoot out of mesure”—for his own art. If the statue had been second-rate, he wouldn’t have gone mad.

The unnatural nature of art—and the artistic pride of some Ohio Pygmalsions—may play a critical role in the snow woman’s story. I knew from Sunday School that only God—or “nature” as God’s less frightening stand-in—could make a woman capable of generating awe. Though no Methodist, Chaucer knew this, too; he cited Pygmalion’s statue as a monstrous foil to natural beauty as the proper source and object of aesthetic pleasure. In the *Physician’s Tale*, Dame Nature boasts that she can “forme and peynte a creature, / Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete? / Pigmalion nought, though he ay forge and bete, / Or grave, or peynte.” Jean de Meun, in his earlier portion of the *Roman de la Rose*, agreed that not even a renowned artist like Pygmalion can duplicate what Dame Nature makes. The fact that Pygmalion tried to do so makes him an icon of futility, an artist of the beautiful who falls into the Hawthornian trap of overweening pride in his own talent.

In retrospect, the snow woman’s unnaturalness seems patently evident. She wasn’t even based on nature, but on other images—the creation of twelve-year-old minds extrapolating a wildly idealized figure from those already-idealized figures in *Playboy*. To be this estranged from nature does not bode well for any Pygmalion, not even a young one working in snow. True art, as Pope remarked, is “nature to best advantage dressed,” not Miss January to best advantage *undressed*.

Nothing could have been more doomed to failure than our childish attempts at what we saw as roadside realism. Of course this didn’t keep us from trying, and an afternoon of intense labor in subfreezing temperatures surely represents a species of trying. Pygmalion’s laudable perseverance figures heavily in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. Affirming that “Whoever ventures nothing, gains nothing,” Gower praised the sculptor’s persistence as a lover and a sweet talker. Nobody gains the rewards of love “with a silent mouth”; on the contrary, “the man who is stingy with the words of love will not be favored by love.”

Gower, cruising by with Dean Martin’s “That’s Amore” on the radio and saluting our creation with two brisk taps of the horn, would have been pleased at the thought that these naughty boys would someday be repaving the streets and repairing the water mains with equal industry. In our minds, however, we were definitely not working but playing—and who’s to say that the impulse to play doesn’t constitute the origin of all art? Although we lacked Pygmalion’s skill, we

certainly shared his artistic passion. And can a figure whom Chaucer, Eustache Deschamps, and Jean de Meun cite as a symbol of intellectual and artistic excellence be so terrible a role model? In the *Roman de la Rose*, Jean underscores Pygmalion’s genius as an accomplished artist: “no other man/Has shown such cunning or such honor gained.” Jean would undoubtedly praise all builders of snow women for their energy, their perseverance, and their ardor. Although Pygmalion’s efforts to animate his statue were almost comically maniacal, Jean insists that these efforts merely proved the sincerity of his love.

Whatever it was, exactly, that we kids loved as we were building the snow woman, we knew that it wasn’t entirely wholesome. Although we were ardent, after our fashion, and industrious to a fault, what we mostly were was *cautious*, packing the snow with furtive glances toward our houses, eyes peeled for irate parents who might storm outside at any minute and make us stop. But the longer we worked, the less we worried about getting caught. Ovid’s sculptor also grew increasingly indiscreet as he gazed upon his creation. He began to kiss and caress the statue, “addressing it with fond words of love.” He brought it various “gifts pleasing to girls,” adorned it with robes and ornaments, and—in a Michael Jackson moment—placed it on his bed as “the consort of his couch.” Unable to stand it any longer, Pygmalion finally took a sacrifice to the altar of Venus, along with a fervent prayer: he begs her for a wife “like my ivory maid.” Here, at least, Pygmalion and the Ohio boys part company: I don’t remember praying anything as we worked, except maybe to finish the job before anyone spotted us.

In contrast to the irrational content of Pygmalion’s prayer, Ovid underscores the sculptor’s extreme care in phrasing it: he asks Venus only for “one *like* my ivory maid.” The fact that caution had its uses in ancient Rome no less than in Findlay, Ohio, raises the possibility that the crafty artisan may have known what he was doing all along. After all, his morally ambiguous behavior wound up being rewarded handsomely—even though he paid for his zeal by becoming, for some, a textbook exemplum of madness, pride, and lust.

Not surprisingly, Giovanni del Virgilio states the story’s outcome with particular bad-boy relish: “Pygmalion intertwined himself (*se commiscebat*) with the ivory statue whom Venus gave to him alive, as a woman” (*vivam pro muliere*). This lusty conclusion might be softened, somewhat,

from the fact that in Latin *mulier* can mean “wife” as well as “woman”—but no matter. Either way, Pygmalion received a reward that we kids wouldn’t have known what to do with. It’s truly a blessing that snow women do not come to life—that ours refrained from asserting her full powers and making a kid deliver the goods when he didn’t have a clue what those goods were.

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There’s no denying the satisfactions that the snow woman brought, though it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly what they were. We boys found something to do on a winter day that was more fun than shoveling the walks. But didn’t the snow woman also produce something more lasting: the lesson that creating a thing can bring an astonishing if disturbing sense of fulfillment? I acknowledge the sexist impulse behind building a snow woman, and take full responsibility for what Christine de Pisan, John Lydgate, and that woman in the car have taught me. But this other lesson—the one about making something beautiful—is not so easily dismissed. I know that I should reject utterly the building of snow women and everything it stands for. I would gladly do just that, if it weren’t for a memory that I cannot revise or suppress: how magnificent she was. You really should have seen her.

There’s some comfort, at least, in being reminded that I’ve grown up a little since then. In a few years I would buy my own *Playboys*, like that neighbor man, but a few years after that I would leave them behind as well, gradually finding myself more attracted to real women than to goofy idealizations of them. Of this progression, Eustache Deschamps would have approved. Deschamps saw Pygmalion as a figure of wisdom and ranked him with Hippocrates, Philemon, Argus, and Socrates. Deschamps was savvy enough, however, to confirm that not even these worthies could judge the “goodness, honor, beauty, and manners” of his own, real-life beloved, whom he hailed as “the Goddess of Love.” Despite his penchant for hyperbole, Deschamps was a grown-up man capable of appreciating a real woman, no awkward fumbler in snow with gauzy visions of improbable anatomies in his head.

Deschamps may also have tapped into a deeper lesson issued by the snow woman herself—or more precisely, by the oily rag that outlived her—when he incorporated the sculptor into an *ubi sunt* lamenting the passing of all things. *Qu’est devenu Pymalion?* What has become of Pygmalion? This question makes me wonder where that twelve-year-old

went. And what about the snow woman? Did she haunt the boy Methodist for the rest of his days, periodically imposing her cold bulk into his adult complacency as revenge for creating her only to gaze at her and then do nothing as she melted away?

I could make such a claim, but it would be utterly false because real life is rarely so dramatic. My proof for this resides in the fact that while Mom was irked by the snow woman, she was not outraged. Apparently nobody was, because the snow woman was not pulled down by irate grownups but instead melted on her own. A large lump of dirty slush simply dissolved into the storm drain and then into neighborhood lore—and unless another snow woman was built on East Sandusky Street during the forty-six years since, she has passed from that lore as well. The one place where she still lives, gloriously threatening in her babushka, is in the mind of a middle-aged man who recently shoveled his driveway and remembered, with a twinge of guilt, a much more interesting if disturbing thing to do with snow than scraping it from an asphalt surface.