

# Love and Gusto(n)

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*That that is the womb and this is the world is not as easy to grasp as one might imagine.*

—Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*

## DISAGREEMENTS

In November, 2003, my husband and I are visiting the Philip Guston retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where I have come twice in one week, the second time to share my excitement with him. When he declares he doesn't like Guston's work—doesn't like it at all—I am devastated. Just last night we made wonderful love, and today he doesn't like the artist I find fleshly, funny, and thrilling! Sure, I say, he's kind of horrifying, but how I admire the ready admission of something bloody and untamed in the psyche, bursting through flesh, spilling from lips, disgorging bones and garbage. Isn't that who we are, me and you and everybody?

Neil, unconvinced, replies that Guston is “hamfisted.”

“But hamfisted is exactly the point!” I say—for there they are, hands like hams, fingers like fat sausages, heads like mushy beans, and all the aggression you could look for.

“Tell me,” he says, “what you see,” but when I start to hold forth, I feel like a preacher. It is an odious feeling, and I stop in mid-sentence. Neil is sharp as can be. Maybe Neil is right about Guston. But no, I'm right! I have to be right, something is at stake in my being right, I'm just not sure what.

A few days ago, I came to the exhibit with my mother and a friend/ex-friend. My friend became ex-friend a couple of days after Guston—maybe Guston is dangerous to relationships. That word “friend” can begin to look funny, and I think, what is a “friend” really? And why isn't it spelled the way it sounds, “frend”?

Essence of Philip Guston: “He strips away the way we learn to see things as adults and makes himself a child again,” I say to Neil. I say, “He denies all that man-is-at-the-center-of-the-universe stuff the Renaissance insisted upon.” He reduces his own face to the elemental; he spells

it like it sounds, without embellishment.

“Way too much pink,” says Neil.

“But that's just it!” say I. “It's pink, it's flesh, all flesh is pink beneath the skin! Besides, you wouldn't look at Picasso's pink period and say ‘Too much pink,’ would you?” Ha! I think, Got you there!

“Cartoonish,” says Neil.

“Yes, cartoons, exactly, humans boiled down to their crude essence!” I say. “Hunger, meat, self-destruction, inevitable decay. The liquor bottle and the cigarette. Lying in bed and gorging the gut on a plate of cake. Belching.”

I find myself thinking in Anglo-Saxon words, like “belch” and “rumble” and “grope.” What do we discover in Guston? Nothing transcendent; instead: Shoes, soles, knees, nails, lightbulb, finger, cigar, red, black, gray, blue, pink. Not much orange or yellow, the celebratory colors. Some notable dragony greens. An emerald rug with its fringes standing straight up like a horrified head of hair.

Here I wandered a few days ago with my mother and my ex-friend. And here are little boys with swords and with garbage can lids as shields, and they are like my friend and I, who met at sixteen, fell out at thirty-six, fell in again at forty, fell out again a few months later; sparring, fighting to the bloody death of friendship. I thought we were getting along so well at the Guston exhibit, the friend and I, but later it turned out she found me domineering and egocentric; she found my “vehemence” offputting. But she and I both liked the colors in Guston, the big blue sea on which a ladder rises with a twisted leg and feet at both ends of said leg. We had that in common, that wondering response to an oceanic blue, so why couldn't we stay together? Was I domineering when I said, “I love that blue, don't you?”

When I think about it now, perhaps we weren't really talking. Perhaps words were just coming out of our mouths in hermetic balloons that could never meet. And

that's Guston, too, isn't it? Our un-meetingness. "Very little eros in Guston," the ex-friend observed. The one couple-in-bed picture shows him and his wife after his wife's stroke, his knees bent and red, his hand clutching three paintbrushes, the wife's face invisible. The two of them there are symbiotic, trying to stay alive beneath the thin blanket. Next to that painting is one of Guston alone in bed, his foot-long, child's eyelashes protruding over the red blanket—again the fetal position, the bent knees, and always the great big clunky shoes like a child's fetish: "If I remove these, the monsters will get me." *If I uncoil my body and throw off this blanket, death will come for me and for my wife.* Under the blanket, death has already come; *I can't fear death, because death is here.* For a man with such apparent gusto, it's true, very little erotic appetite is evident. Or that is how it seems to me at first, for none of his images convey women in the usual way, as curvy flesh. Flesh in Guston is all gristle, at least one layer beneath the epidermis; "nothing but sausage meat" is what one critic called his work.

#### SELF-HATRED

It bothers me no end that Guston changed his name from "Goldstein," especially since Guston sounds so much better to me: French, mysterious, intense. But what if we all went changing our names? What if I changed Rosenfeld to Champsdesroses, like a certain scholar who changed his name from Rosenberg to Montrose? Or what's that English screenwriter's name—Ronald Harwood? Those English Jews all did it: Lazar to Lawson, Rosen to Richmond, Roth to Ross. I understand, to some degree, the self-hatred, the ambivalence. The figures in Ku Klux Klan hoods in Guston's earlier paintings include himself. *The hater is inside me; he seems to say, the murderer. The world is inside me, so that I am both victim and victimizer. Racism horrifies me, so I too am a racist. I am raw, I am capable of cruelty.* Maybe my ex-friend heard *this* in my "vehemence," and ran for dear life.

It turns out that later, Guston was sorry he changed his name. Apparently, he did it in anticipation of his Gentile wife's family's dislike and disapproval. Well, I can understand that. I suppose "Rosenfeld" might be mildly more palatable to the gentiles, since it rings of the pastoral and my English in-laws are fond of the pastoral; though it does, at the same time, speak of excess and decadence—after all, there is no such thing as a field of roses (or not

outside some undiscovered manuscript of Oscar Wilde), and if there were, it would be as full of thorns as of crimson petals. (Which is precisely me in the eyes of my in-laws. Or so I think. My ex-friend apparently sees only thorns.) "Goldstein," on the other hand, suggests jewels and money and reminds the gentiles of their own acquisitiveness, which they displace onto the purveyor of the acquisition.

Guston's daughter, Musa Mayer, couldn't figure out why he changed his name. His friend Ross Feld wrote: "He had spent a lifetime in the cycle of maskery and then self-disclosure. . . . To change a name is both to overvalue and undervalue the I, the specific identity that we hide behind yet also are known by." One of Guston's relatives shrugged—Guston grew up in LA, after all, and in Hollywood name changes are as common as face changes. If I ever go to Hollywood, I'll call myself Nadine Rayburn, a name so obviously false that everyone will have to take it at face value. I get tired of my many Jewish syllables sometimes, self-conscious about naming myself to strangers and about the confusion induced by my elusive first name. Two syllables for each name, an ending that's not "berg" or "feld" or "stein," and no battles to fight. I can see the temptation.

#### CRUDE WORDS

In this next painting, a gray-blue terrier with a huge, avid eye roots in the garbage for scraps while dozens of fat human feet pass him on the pavement. The terrier is Guston, because the enormous, bloodshot eye is always Guston's, and it says, "Stinky-sticky-yukky-YUMMY! I want this, this junk down here!" And the people walk past with their silly fat feet, missing the delicious crap.

I navigate happily, in these rooms of Guston's late work, the land of Ham Hands, the land of knees and rumps and bumps. Some days, I think the essential difference between my lovely, greeneyed, sharp-nosed Anglo-Saxon husband and myself is that I, in fact, am all Anglo-Saxonisms while he is—not Latinate, perhaps, but discerning and fine. I am all appetite—no, ravenous hunger—*gimme gimme*: rumpy-pumpy, ham and eggs, expletives and bowels, hard consonants, round vowels. But the opposition of temperaments is never that simple, is it? He doesn't like Guston. I do. Disagreeing, we will love each other to the grave, whereas my friend and I, who appeared to agree, will never speak again. I'm

so unhappy about this, I feel like lying down in a fetal position. I wish no one disliked me.

Yes, we are cannibals to the end. I am so hungry for flesh I think sometimes I will never be full. “Jesus—” wrote Guston the Jew in a letter to Feld, “I could (right now) grab an ax and WITH GLEE chop up people into pieces—make those limbs into chunks—that I can eat! I’m going crazy—on the edge of madness I think. I feel savage and absurd . . .” I wonder what could be more human? I wonder whether such admissions of ravenous, murderous desire (drunken or not, for Guston frequently was) could prevent massacres actually occurring. The lynchings of black men that haunt his early and late paintings, the mass graves that make an appearance in pictures like “Pit” with its innumerable hacked-off legs. One could contrast “Pit” with “Painter’s Forms II,” where a horrible, lovely feminine mouth is either vomiting or devouring eyeballs and legs upon legs. “Compare and contrast,” as teachers say to students; where does it all lead? In Guston, it leads to an honesty about what the writer David Grossman calls “the Nazi beast within,” who has his place in the most seeming-virtuous of us.

#### PLANNING AND PLODDING

“They are self-portraits,” Guston wrote. “I perceive myself as being behind the hood. In the new series of ‘hoods’ my attempt was really not to illustrate, to do pictures of the Ku Klux Klan, as I had done earlier. The idea of evil fascinated me, rather like Isaac Babel who had joined the Cossacks . . . I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan, to plot.”

I am groping my way toward a possibly questionable distinction here. The difference between plotting and entertaining—entertaining a thought, I mean, which involves both engagement and play. (Guston also entertains in the other sense. With his borrowed images from “the funnies,” he is funny.) Plotting is earnest and detached, singleminded, humorless. One knows how carefully the destruction of the Jews of Europe was plotted. Truly spontaneous massacres are rare if they exist at all; there is always at least one exploiting mind behind them, the one that enlists the savage energies of others. The most frightening thing about modern genocides is the bureaucratic precision that goes into them. The lack of fleshiness in the burning of all that flesh. The prudishness

of the Nazis about the “inferior race.” The deliberateness of the rape camps in Bosnia. The radio broadcasts in Rwanda.

Better to sit behind a canvas and entertain it all. Go ahead and entertain the very worst, in the roles of both victim and victimizer. And for God’s sake, mix in eros and longing, all that’s denied in plotting hatred. Plotting seems to me the opposite, finally, of what those shoes do in painting after painting of Guston’s: plod. A wonderful word, *plod* (“apparently of onomatopoeic origin,” says the O.E.D), so immanent, so unrelated to dreams of transcendence or perfection. It sounds like *puddle* and *turd*, like mud plunking. All those heavy-soled shoes, plodding to the place we all go in the end. Plunk. Mozart, plunk, in a pauper’s grave. Beethoven, plunk. Shakespeare, plunk. Hitler, plunk. And where do they go? Feld wrote to Guston in 1978: “The pictures seem to ask: what if you jumped off the world and didn’t find just nothing? Suppose you found another *something*? Like that mouth, or box of swords, or spindly machine, or ashcan lids. What then?” God help us, what then? (My grandmother’s last words, when she couldn’t breathe: “God help me.”) Meanwhile, though, I believe ’Tis better to have loved. Clutching, grappling under the blanket; side-by-side plodding, agreeing or disagreeing, here we are together, risking our necks to love one another.

And my ex-friend? I think I can almost grasp what her problem might be. She had lost her mother to breast cancer in early adolescence, a terrible, scarring experience. Eternally longing for the whole, undamaged breast, my friend was and is perpetually hungry. She cannot stare her hunger in the face, and stare it down, but must turn against other people for not being full of milk, or, in her words, for failing her at the times she needs them most. I share her hunger and her fear; I am lucky never, yet, to have lost anyone. But the loss of friendship is a small, undeniable tragedy—one of those reminders that there is no breast we can depend upon.

Guston made illustrations for Philip Roth’s novel *The Breast*. They are grotesque, silly, and full of longing. They speak simultaneously of presence and of impossibility: a person-sized breast, ever-present!? The drawings are also a bit cruel, as we all are toward the breast that fed us: offered love, we bite in return. Guston records that biting, complete with slobber, and goes a tiny way toward saving us.