

Brooklyn, New York
December 22, 2004

Young Male: I like the name Lindsay; it's pretty.

Mom: That's Lind-ZEE, with an 'e.'

Young Male: So tell me about your daughter.

Mom: Well, you could say she has a *chest*.

Young Male: Do you mean big boobs?

Mom: [Laughs]

Young Male: [Aside to camera] Uh oh, big breasts usually mean big hips.

Young Male: So how much does she weigh? What's her body like?

Mom: I don't know. . . she's voluptuous.

Young Male: [Aside to camera] Voluptuous really means FAT!
I have a very specific body type that I go for in a girl. And the other girl is a runway model, which fits more my type.

[Cut to commercial]

Selection Time: A limo door swings open, a skinny leg zoomed in on. Slit down dress barely swallows breasts. Young female embraces young male.

Young Male: [Aside to camera] This girl's hot as sin!

Dear Eileen,

I couldn't sleep last night so I turned on the TV and found myself watching, *Date My Mom*, where three moms go on dates with a dashing young male and try to convince him to ask out their daughters. I know I shouldn't be too surprised; after all, this is our "reality" right now. I think there's even a show about dwarves and dating, but I found *Date My Mom* particularly disturbing. Maybe because it seems to be yet another lesson on how to market sex and stereotypes, but this time the handiwork or the "sales pitch" is done via the lips of the very women who gave birth to their young, perfect, and marketable progeny. All in the name of money, fame . . . a date? I felt somewhat sickened by this freak show, imagining my students having a steady diet of it, hearing language carelessly thrown around, too many hair flips, lipglossed smiles, handshakes between mom and male; the deal is done. It's like a recent class I taught. My students were more critical of the female poets we were reading, saying things like, she seems "wacked," "angry," "a bit of a freak." I've been teaching the New York School, and everything's going okay until we arrive at our first female poet, Barbara Guest. I tell them that I see

Guest's writing as imaginative and surreal yet precise. I explain how editors and critics excluded Guest from several books about the New York School, even though she was in the thick of it. I send out feelers and nothing, not even a little tiny shock comes back. Dismissal.

Once I had a famous male poet come to my classroom. This class had been relatively apathetic. The more I jumped, hopped, explained, expressed, the more their pupils crossed. Then the male artist entered. He scratched himself and looked down, he coughed, drank water, and asked what it was we wanted to know. He was unprepared. He referenced Shakespeare. He recited his favorite poems from memory. My class LOVED him. They thought his lack of preparation, his nonchalance took the cake. I called a good friend and she said, "This is how 'female hysteria' begins."

Your book, *Cool for You*, tracks the treatment of females within institutions. As a female artist working within the university, have you been confronted with this kind of dismissal, and if so, how do you address it? I'm reminded of something you wrote in "The Lesbian Poet," from *School Of Fish*, "I want to say something else about my femaleness, which is what interests me, not feminism. Femaleness is owning my woman's insides." Can you tell me more about this ownership?

I first became interested in your writing back in grad school in 1995. You wrote about being a poet, a female poet; you were sure you were one. Each time I read the word "poet" I felt silly. Like being eight,

wearing Wonder Woman underoos under school clothes. I had secret powers. You have said you moved to New York to become a poet. To me this sounds permissive, powerful. It seems also self-made. No royal carpet rolled out. You decided, you desired, you did. I'm interested in where are you now with this desire, gumption, how it shifts and gets played out in the poetry world, and how the more you become wedded to and webbed in this world, how easy is it to keep desire, female desire (?), afloat.

In *Maxfield Parrish*, there's a great passage from the prose poem, "The Poet," "It is not lost my century, thanks to us. We are the liars & thieves, we are the women we are the women I am full of holes because you are. I am the only saintly man in town. Don't be afraid to be feminine. A girl on a rowboat, full of holes. She saw words shooting through." Brighde Mullins (with whom I studied at SFSU) writes: "This final, visionary image, of a girl in a sinking rowboat, is at once tragic and hopeful. The boat is going down, after all, but the girl in the boat is seeing and saying, not just sinking. This articulation is sustenance, is proof that "poetry is strong enough to help." I agree with this and read your passage as an invitation to a world of imperfection, but one where there is a connection with others about the imperfection and possibly even a transformation of this imperfection through imagination into art. I see the boat go down, and at the same time the holes are windows, openings to other arenas, particularly to the imagination. Though these holes don't necessarily offer escape, they are open and breathing. They also appear in another poem of yours, "Holes," "But I remember

those/beautiful holes on/my back like a /beautiful cloak/of feeling.” Even the repetition of the word “beautiful” acts more as a command than just an expression, where the speaker is able to understand and envision the holes as something that allows her to rise above, endure.

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Thinking about femaleness, I picture our first lady, and think, “Thank some great god up above that we have Laura Bush to show us ladies the way.” Would Mrs. Bush try to “win” the best date for her lovely twins? The answer is “probably.” I can see her in a pink suit, with rosy cheeks, clenching a hanky as she waits for the male date to arrive, notwithstanding all her so-called “feminist beliefs” and marketing of the Bush Administration’s war policies as a “fight for the rights and dignity of women” while ignoring its undermining of women’s rights. Hypocrisy wins again. Eileen, what did you mean by the line, “Don’t be afraid to be feminine”; how do you access this idea in your own life and work? You once said something along the lines of, the older you get, the more you are in touch with your mortality and fear of being obliterated because you are a female poet. How does this motivate you? How do you write/act against this obliteration? What do you tell yourself?

This brings me to a recent conversation I had with Dana Teen Lomax. We were comparing notes on the documentary *Rivers and Tides*. We

like Andy Goldsworthy's art and commitment to his vision, yet we were both struck by one scene where Goldsworthy's wife is cooking breakfast, the kids are running in and out of the kitchen, and Goldsworthy seems disengaged as he looks foggily into space, perhaps conjuring up his next environmental inspiration. Later, Goldsworthy leaves for the day to work on his art, leaving behind his wife standing at a long counter eating her breakfast, while one kid sits at the kitchen table, which is cluttered with several dirty plates. This made me think, how selfish does a female artist have to be, how narcissistic? What sacrifices must she make? Many of my female friends experience shame about taking up space with their art. How much space is "acceptable"? How much is needed?

You've talked about being inspired/mentored by a line of male mentors. I'm thinking of Jimmy Schuyler in particular. How has the male mentorship affected your relationship to your art? Are you able to be selfish and still communal?

On a final note, it seems you're willing to put yourself (or a version of yourself) in your work if it allows you to get closer to the emotion and immediacy of an experience. That you communicate through a tangible "voice." In writing my manuscript, *Holiday*, I struggled with how to address the issues I had with *going on a holiday*. Although the writing takes a somewhat detached and journalistic tone, the self was also mixed in. I felt it would be disingenuous to write about issues of consumerism and travel without implicating myself in the process: after all, I *did* have the privilege to go to Europe, which *did*

give me the ideas for these poems. Yet it's difficult to incorporate the self, knowing the criticisms that can trail behind. Though erasing oneself out of one's work in order to comply with certain poetic trends doesn't seem the best approach either. What's your take?

Eileen, I've never met you. I'm writing to your persona, inundating it with questions, and projecting onto it who I think you might be. This seems false but it's what I have to work with. This falseness. And yet at the risk of asking too much, I'm thinking of something you once wrote. "There is a word in Italian, *affidamento*, which describes a relationship of trust between two women, in which the younger asks the elder to help her obtain something she desires. Women I know are turning around to see if that woman is here. The woman turning, that's the revolution. The room is gigantic, the woman is here."

Warmly,
Jennifer