

# The Girl Eating Oysters



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## Stewart Florsheim



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## ***The Girl Eating Oysters***

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*In memory of my parents*

Open closed open. Before we are born, everything is open  
in the universe without us. For as long as we live, everything is closed  
within us. And when we die, everything is open again.  
Open closed open. That's all we are.

from *Open Closed Open*, by Yehuda Amichai  
(translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld)

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## ***The Girl Eating Oysters***

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## Mother to Son

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On Kristallnacht,  
your grandfather had his bag packed  
and was ready to go.  
The Gestapo beat me up too  
but back then, they left little girls  
with their mothers.

*Hoppe hoppe Reiter  
Wenn er fällt dann schreit er*

Mr. Woolf, the man down the street  
who lost his leg defending W.W. I Germany,  
never imagined he would be taken.  
*Der Dank des Vaterlands ist euch gewiß*, they said.

*Fällt er in den Graben  
Fressen ihn die Raben*

Six weeks after they took your grandfather,  
I jumped up once at 2 AM. I knew  
he was coming home. I ran outside,  
down the street and there he was,  
crying, crying, he cried for weeks.

*Fällt er in den Sumpf  
Da macht er einen Plumps*

And then what happened?  
I keep asking, pushing through  
one dark velvet curtain after another.

## The Elevator

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The man's pace quickens as he approaches me  
in the lobby of our apartment building  
next to the Port Authority,  
the entry with the fake marble walls,  
floor tiles in the shape of tiny diamonds  
and the small elevator that creaks up  
the six floors where everyone feels safe,  
refugees from Dachau and Auschwitz,  
the neighbors my mother invites over  
to parade my skinny seven-year-old body,  
comparing me to someone just out of the camps.  
My genitals shrink as the man holds onto them, smiling,  
*I live on the sixth floor, my apartment is filled with candy,*  
the slits of his eyes open no wider than a knife blade.  
*You don't live here, I say, I know everyone in the building,*  
and then his grip tightens as he pulls me toward the elevator,  
the one he wants to use to lift us above my village,  
above the morass of the city--  
the teenage boys who punched me in the face on 180th Street,  
or the ones who stole my UNICEF box on Halloween.  
The man trembles now as he mentions the roof  
where we can watch people get on and off buses

from cities like Englewood and Tenafly,  
the rich people, unlike the two of us.  
And as the light descends slowly down the shaft  
I pray that the elevator is not empty  
so when he pulls open the door  
and Mrs. Duddel shuffles out demanding  
in her wonderful Hungarian accent, *Where is your mother?*  
I promise God I will not be angry with mom  
for being late again, as the man rushes out  
into the heart of the city beating wildly  
along with the souls of frightened little boys.

## Initiation

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With my father in his meat locker—  
the sides of large animals hanging from their muscles,  
the sinews that define the red meat  
articulating former strength.

My father gives me the tour:

*This is the piece that will become the filet.*

*This, we will sell as sirloin.*

The sides swing around as my father knocks into them,  
unaware as they hit me when they swing back,  
a nine-year-old tagging close behind,  
hands covered with grease and blood.

## The Cub Scout

---

All my friends are moving up to Boy Scouts  
but my mother doesn't think I'll make it  
and how could I anyway with a father like mine,  
*as dumb as they come, he can't even spell the word camping.*  
She challenges him to teach me the basic knots  
so we study the illustrations in the handbook  
nights after he gets home from the butcher shop,  
those big hands that cut up sides of beef  
unsure whether the rope goes over or under the loop.  
At the Scoutmaster's, we sit around  
his formica kitchen table, the fluorescent light  
flickering, and I can see my father  
begin to sweat as the man pulls out the small rope,  
my father already thinking of the words he will use  
to haggle with the man when I can't tie the knots,  
the way he haggles with customers who complain  
the meat is too expensive, or he put his finger  
on the scale while weighing the pastrami.  
When we get home, my mother is waiting at the front door  
and I think now how I was conditioned to be loved too much  
by women with as much self-contempt as she had.

## Parting Words

---

Before I go off to college  
my father gives me the only advice he ever will:  
*Don't get venereal disease.*  
We are standing near the front door  
of the old apartment, my cartons packed—  
books, journals, clothing, records,  
the old stereo that folded neatly into a box.  
My father had never spoken to me about sex before,  
he had never spoken to me much at all,  
my mother always managing to prevent that:  
*You can't talk to him, what does he know anyway?*  
*Farmers. His father had a cattle ranch in Hünfeld.*  
She would always emphasize the unlauted “u”  
to make sure we heard the reference to “chicken.”  
But that comment always drew me closer to him,  
a farm life to a boy growing up in New York City—  
my father getting up just before sunrise  
to milk the cows or go to cattle auctions with his dad.  
My father and I are standing face-to-face now,  
18 years of being in the same apartment,

my mother and sister fighting day and night,  
the screaming, slamming doors, slaps across the face:  
*Don't get venereal disease.*

When I was a boy, I heard noises on the other side  
of the same front door where we are standing now  
so I opened the tiny metal blinds that covered the peephole.  
A strange teenage girl was outside wielding a knife  
and when she saw my eye, she lunged for it.

## The Girl Eating Oysters

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after the painting, *The Girl Eating Oysters*  
(Jan Steen, 1658-1660)

It is not this moment that matters:  
the girl looking up, suddenly,  
as she sprinkles pepper on an oyster  
in the backroom of the oyster shop.  
Her eyes say that she deserves this fare—  
the oysters, already opened  
lying neatly on the tablecloth,  
the bread and screw of pepper on a silver platter,  
a glass of white wine.  
In a second, she will begin her feast  
and already her body is tingling  
even before she takes the first oyster in her mouth.  
And as she takes the first,  
she will anticipate the second,  
then the third.  
She will eat the last oysters quickly,  
then rush out through the oyster shop  
looking both ways before she leaves.  
She will run down the cobblestone street,  
up the narrow flight of stairs  
and, ever so slowly, open  
her lover's front door.

## The Psychiatrist

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He sways through the room like a peacock,  
opens his feathers, then sits down.  
It's his power strut, the one  
disguised as beauty and sensitivity:  
he wants to hear my dreams.  
I read them from my journal  
and he doesn't say a word until I finish,  
a whole week of the unconscious,  
*You're doing much better.*  
He struts to his desk for a phone call  
and returns. *Where were we?*  
*Your dream about Tunisia...*  
*No*, I say, *Morocco*. He cocks his head,  
offers a few words—*anima*, mother complex.  
He wants to know why I don't settle down,  
says he hates to travel, even hates to drive,  
makes him nervous. He rests his bird legs  
on the ottoman and studies me, and I am gone,  
into the labyrinth of the medina in Meknes,  
around one corner and then the next.  
The rain beats down, and not one thought  
about ever finding my way out.

## Munch, on Dagny Juell

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after the lithograph, *Jealousy II*  
(Edvard Munch, 1896)

Everything about her is irresistible:  
her long black hair that falls into my face  
when we make love,  
her red lips the color of blood flower.  
And what's more, she loves me too  
even though she is the wife of my close friend  
and risks her marriage to meet me afternoons  
in my studio in the backstreets of Berlin.  
Her husband is outraged but she claims  
he does not know her as well as I do  
or the other men at the *Café zum schwarzen Ferkel*.  
Yes, she has been with a few of them too  
but she says I am her most passionate lover,  
when I gaze into her eyes I see her soul  
and there is nothing she can hide.  
In truth, she says, I can never belong to any man,  
I am too weak, and then she says,  
we are too weak, Edvard, that is why  
we will never stay together  
and why we need each other so much  
we embrace like this in the afternoon light—  
surely all of Berlin can see.

## The Jewish Bride

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after the painting, *The Jewish Bride*  
(Rembrandt, 1667)

The man's hands resolve into hers  
as though this union started years before they meet  
at the synagogue on the Judenbreestraat.  
She is sixteen, he nineteen and his family  
with the shipbuilding business in Rotterdam.  
The marriage seems destined, the parents amazed  
a Jewish couple can meet and fall in love  
without an arrangement. Once the marriage  
is announced, plans are made that will take years  
to complete—the engagement party, wedding,  
the new house on the Prinsengracht,  
the portrait that can only be done by Rembrandt.  
On the way to his studio they have their first argument—  
his plans to go hunting twice a year with his friends  
from the Gymnasium, boys she doesn't like in the least  
but even if she did she wants to be asked beforehand—  
so when Rembrandt poses them the woman wonders  
if she made a mistake, and the painter  
captures that moment, the woman looking away  
from her fiancé, unsure whether catching his gaze  
she will call off all plans, or become the wife  
who will forever be waiting for her husband's return.

## My Five-Year-Old Poses the Question About God

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The beauty is it comes up as easily  
as the fight she had with Lauren at school  
because Lauren told her she wouldn't be her best friend  
anymore if she did not share her fruit roll-up.  
My daughter wonders if God will think she is bad  
and then, what does He look like anyway. Is He,  
in fact, a He or a She, black or white.  
She asks if God is the echo she hears  
when she makes loud noises in tunnels  
and if He is the wind that makes kites  
climb way up to the sky. What amazes me most  
is the assumption that God exists, and I hesitate  
when I tell her that some people don't believe in God  
and some people believe in many gods.  
*Some people even think monkeys are gods.*  
She is quiet for a moment and then,  
pointing to the fat little monarch on top of  
King's Auto Repair on High Street, *That's Him.*  
*I know for sure. That's Him.*

## Survival

---

Sixth grade: my daughter wants me to test her  
on Darwin's theory, how the only species  
that survive are those that adapt  
and we think about examples—  
the birds that develop longer beaks  
so they can pull their food out of the marsh,  
humans and their ability to walk.

What I want is to tell her  
the other face to survival:

How my grandfather had his bag packed  
ready to go to Dachau on Kristallnacht  
because he believed *das Vaterland*  
would come through for him.

How my father started ignoring my mother  
even as her screaming at him got louder and louder  
until I had to ask him one day, how can he take it  
and he had no idea what I was talking about.

How I stopped eating when I was five  
and became too weak to walk up stairs.

Call it an urge to disappear:  
the sky itself becoming so large it envelops us  
and we let it, we give in, we do not fight.

## Man on the Bus Gazes at his Roses

---

He knows nothing about roses so he wonders  
if he was taken: are they fragrant enough,  
are the buds too opened or too closed,  
are the stems the right length. He wonders  
how hard he tries to please his wife  
and even though it is their anniversary  
he wonders if he tries too hard, shouldn't there be  
more joy in their comings and goings,  
the way the man across from him saved a seat  
for his partner and now his arms are around her  
as they joke and read from the same magazine.  
When the man gets off the bus he holds the roses  
carefully, almost too tightly, to his chest:  
They have turned into crystal and look exquisite.

## Exposed

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after the painting, *L'Homme et la femme*  
(Pierre Bonnard, 1900)

Because they just made love late in the afternoon  
while Marthe was lying on the bed,  
legs slightly apart, posing for him,  
Bonnard dashes out from under the covers eager  
to get back to work, but he is struck by what he sees  
in the mirror: Marthe sitting up now,  
reluctant to get out of bed, easily distracted  
by the cats that just jumped up,  
attracted no doubt by the rumpled bedding,  
the promise of the warm, moist sheets,  
the sour smell of sex. Bonnard looks puzzled  
wondering if he can capture the moment  
or even if he should: the way Marthe's torso receives  
the afternoon light, her hand reaching out  
to the cats that are tentative now, their backs lowered  
as they step across the covers, purring.

## My Father's Autopsy

---

The room is cold and bright,  
so unlike our dark kitchen in Washington Heights  
where he sat silently, oblivious  
to my mother yelling about his inadequacies,  
my sister chatting on her Princess phone.  
When he finished his meal,  
he pushed his plate back across the table  
next to mine, that is as close as we got,  
his baked potato skins curling against my milk glass,  
the fatty rind of his steak nuzzling my string beans.  
The doctors don't notice his silence now.  
For all they know, he was the model father  
who spent quality time with the kids—  
Shea Stadium, fishing trips, the walks  
when he would dispel our fears about  
Harvey, the bully next door, or Mrs. Kipperman,  
the neighbor with the numbers branded on her arm.  
The doctors are most interested in his brain,  
perhaps they will unravel a passion we never knew—  
a woman who walked into his meat market 25 years before,  
an opera he heard when he was a young man in Germany.  
Perhaps they will hold his brain to the light  
and find the truth about his silence,  
that somewhere along the way he got broken

and it hit him while ringing up  
a pound of cold cuts, a pint of coleslaw,  
or when my mother called him an idiot  
in front of my friends.

But the report tells me nothing:

*Necrosis of cerebral cortex.*

*Loss of neurons in thalamus.*

It says he became comatose during surgery  
when his heart stopped for several minutes,  
his words fluttering inside his chest:  
the wings of a dying crow.

## The Diagnosis

---

We do everything but name the disease.

My mother wants to know if it is curable  
and the words begin to bounce off the walls:

*nerves, muscles, breath, stop*

*muscles, nerves, stop, breath.*

She knows this silence

so she just looks at me and will not let go.

Back on the street, a sudden gale so strong

I can barely push my mother's wheelchair up the hill.

A tug-of-war, perhaps, in reverse

as I imagine trying to deliver my mother

but her wheelchair knocks me down and this time

there is nothing I can do to save her.

## The Hairdresser

---

When my mother becomes ill the hairdresser  
she has known for the past 30 years—  
*the only one who can fix my hair the way I like*—  
comes to her apartment. He is always drunk  
and calls her by a different name—  
their own inside joke. She would laugh  
but by the end she didn't respond,  
assuming that she may well be Mrs. Kaufman  
or one of the other names he called out.  
When he washed her hair I could see  
she was all forehead, the few strands he teased  
over the front giving her a face.  
Just before she died, my mother's eyes  
could only reach the bottom of the mirror  
but she would still try to hand him the rollers  
and stare while he placed the thin strands around each one  
as though he alone could tether her to this earth.

## Thirst

---

My mother and I are given careful instructions  
on how to hasten her death.

*Once you stop drinking, it's only a matter of days.*

When I was a boy, I was so frail

I could barely walk up a flight of stairs.

Dr. Turnauer told my mother to force me to eat:

*Try anything. Raw egg yolks in chocolate milk.*

I can still see my mother separating the yolk  
from the egg white until she only had the yellow center  
back in its cracked shell,

the albumen dripping reluctantly into the porcelain sink.

She would drop the yolk into the dark brown liquid  
and beat it as hard as she could,

then hold up the container to see if the yolk had disappeared  
but it was elusive, the light always detecting  
the yellowish wisps that would help me survive.

## The Unseen

---

As the plane begins its descent into San Francisco  
in thick cloud cover, the pilot says  
*And on your left is Yosemite, El Capitán.*

My mother always hoped that what she had  
was Lyme disease so she could give it a name,  
imagine that it might be treatable.

The subject in Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter*  
opens her lover's note quickly, then reads each line over and over  
hoping that she might detect a change of heart.

We are compelled by what we can't see  
so that we might be surprised  
by the things we already know—

The one thought we prey upon,  
not unlike the way a bat stalks a grasshopper,  
swoops down, then misses.

## Forsaken

---

The former Miss Belgium tells her people  
that if they elect her into Parliament  
she will pose for them in the nude.  
The polls say she is favored by a wide margin  
and already I can see her first press conference,  
TV cameras trained on her breasts  
as she condemns NATO's missions into Serbia.  
Her breasts become small globes that dissolve into  
a map of the Balkans and then we are in Kosovo,  
hundreds of refugees crossing the border.  
On the wall where the press conference is being held  
hangs Breughel's *Parable of the Blind*.  
The sightless men appear to be laughing  
as each of them, one by one, stumbles into the river.

## Unspoken

---

Growing up we rub our open wounds together.  
Your words would still be coursing through my veins.

The lady on six with the numbers branded on her arm,  
her apartment always filled with parakeets.

When I am inside you, I can feel your heart beat.  
The eyes should be off limits while making love.

Marthe exposes Bonnard as he paints her,  
the towel waiting to receive her as she steps out of the tub.

My mother waits until I get home.  
The undertaker, handing me her wedding band, has no clue.

## End Matter

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*The Girl Eating Oysters* originally appeared at 2River. Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry, art, and theory, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

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### *About the Author*

Stewart Florsheim has poetry in *DoubleTake*, *Seattle Review*, and *Slipstream*. His poetry is also included in the anthologies *Unsettling America: Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary American Poetry*, *Bittersweet Legacy*, and *And What Rough Beast*. He is the editor of *Ghosts of the Holocaust*, an anthology of poetry by children of Holocaust survivors.

### *About the Artist*

Mark Flowers is currently mounting his fifth one-person show with Hodges Taylor Gallery in Charlotte, North Carolina. He has taught art at the secondary and post-secondary levels for more than 24 years.

### *Acknowledgments*

Many of these poems originally appeared elsewhere: “The Girl Eating Oysters” in *Round Table* (1986), “My Father’s Autopsy” in *DoubleTake* (Fall 1996), “Exposed” in *Rattle 14* (2000), “Thirst” in *88: A Journal of Contemporary American Poetry* (December 2001), “Survival” in *The Seattle Review* (2002), “Initiation” and “The Unseen” in *Full Circle* (2003), and “The Hairdresser” in *The Great American Poetry Show* (2004).

Richard Long  
2River  
April 2004



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number 16 in the  
2River Chapbook Series

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