

BAD OF COUNTRY
a novel by T. Koelb

Koelb/Bad of Country

At last, she lives with me. She travels gently and calmly from room to room and looks from all the windows. When it is cool the straight, rough hair on her bare skin stands from the gooseflesh as if shocked. Then she will drop lazily on the pile of rugs and pillows by the poisonous little gas heater I took from Michael's apartment after it all happened – or rather, after we happened, to him, after he ran into us as if we were a ditch; for no matter how many times I relive it all in my mind, no matter how many variations I attempt on the theme, the basic shape of the thing does not change. I fear that no amount of scrutiny will lift the weight of our liability, and yet it is just for that reason that I investigate it all, again and again: I must continually press the bruise to determine its lasting presence.

Every few days she will boil water in the kitchen, carrying the steaming pots to the tub one by one, slowly and carefully, her face a comic blank of concentration framed by a veil of dirty hair. The bath's electric boiler is weak. She smiles with sudden self-awareness when she sees me following her progress with my gaze.

"It's got to be hot!" she says in the burly gruff of a jazz musician, eyes wide with exaggeration, and hurries off. The floor sounds the short, flat-footed walk of the naked. From the bathroom she will call for me to come wash her back. There is a need we neither of us admit aloud for being in the same room; it can at times be urgent, almost physical. Sometimes while she washes her face she swallows a little water and coughs, mouth open and tongue exposed like a child. She shaves carefully: under her arms, the length of her legs, the tops of her biggest toes, the thin line of dark hair that rises towards her navel. To gain access to the elusive crease inside her thigh she lies low in the water and twists, first one way, then the other, her leg a torn antenna,

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her head partially immersed beneath the grey soapy water, but even this she does swiftly and with the ease of practice.

“Did I get everything?”

I nod. Where it has been submerged her skin is reddened. The bath was scalding hot when she stepped into it, steam drew figures that lingered across the surface, and she lowered herself very gently, letting herself grow accustomed to the heat: first standing, then squatting with her arms around her knees, then lying slowly back, all the time making faces of discomfort. I sit quietly by and watch the otherworldly swaying stillness of a body weightless under water, the creeping spread of the first pale blemish of soap. I scrub her hard, because this is what she likes, dragging my nails into the skin through the slippery film. Red lines appear, comforting and welcome: we are real, after all, if vestigial. She wraps the towel around her and wears it for a time, finally discards it on the floor or over a chair-back; I will pick it up later and return it to its place. Her nipples and smallest hairs bloom stiffly into the chill. She lies on her back on the shapeless heap of pillows and carpets, hands crossed demurely, a mortician’s pose, although the high arch of her hips over the swell of the piled fabric makes her position seem in some way unchaste.

The rugs and cushions I keep for my models, may be manipulated into a soft environment in which to hold still, but I hardly work from life anymore. Instead I have taken to painting entirely from memory (or from the imagination, if you prefer; I don’t know which is more accurate, or even if imagination is really anything other than memory tellingly manipulated), painting portraits that have no express originals outside my mind, and allegories whose meanings even I don’t care to guess.

Now in my sketchbooks I draw only May, her frank features and relaxed poses. In the studio she half naps in a small patch of sun, and I draw her as she slips in and out of sleep, talks with quiet earnestness about the past, or about her day, its temperate blend of sleep and casual, near-aimless walking.

May draws as well, images that are also, I think, mostly of herself. They have her proportions, although they are exaggerated: the angles sharper, the folds deeper. The knuckles bulge, the bones strain at the skin. It was Peter who first commented that in May's drawings there are rarely heads and almost never faces: only the body as surveyed from within the shelter of the skull, just as it is seen in dreams. Floating in an empty space, hovering along the edges of the page, the extremities trail into the distance. The nipples are always hard, tall, the legs are always open and aloft. The back arches dangerously and the knees bend: "A portrait of the physical self as the seat of life," as Lowell Rank said once of May herself. I see in these drawings a kind of landscape, a picture of a prelapsarian world, free of shame or remorse, or even of self-awareness beyond a trancelike communion with the body. It could almost be a portrait of how we lived in Brussels, of the thoughtless and energetic uncertainty we drank so deeply before the events that captured us, fixed us, like a photograph sealed by its chemical bath or an insect caught in amber. She would laugh at that interpretation – at any interpretation, really – and accuse me of art-babble. She has no time for abstractions.

"I futz," she had yelled over the noise of the party – the music and dancing, bottles and glasses, the crash of shouted talk – when I asked her what she did. That was the first time we had met. Lowell Rank would have been annoyed, of course: he disapproved of asking people their occupation as rude, potentially insulting, and, "at bottom", as he liked to say with a moist smirk,

self-aggrandizing. “You might as well inquire of someone if he has ever been to jail. Anyway, you after all wouldn’t ask the question if you hadn’t already formulated your own answer, one naturally designed to suit your self-image,” he over-enunciated to me in his strange, rolling accent. “It is a bad Anglo-Saxon habit, particularly offensive from the English, who after all understand class and so on. Americans I suppose may have the benefit of the doubt, as they mistakenly believe themselves to be without class. That is why they fail to understand that there is a moral value to status – which is to say, that it provides codes. No, no: it is very bad this business. One should never in a social setting force a man to measure his own substance.”

Vandermal laughed at that. “Attention boys,” he whispered to me. “Lowell thinks size does matter. Hands in your pockets, now. It gives the illusion of depth.”

“You what?” I leaned closer to May to hear. Alcohol was already wearing down the edges of my restraint and I found it hard not to watch her little breasts nudging at her shirt. I only noticed it when she moved. I thought she moved rather a lot.

“Futz.” She made a little tinkering gesture and mouthed the word again, silently: futz.

“Oh. All right. That must be fascinating.”

“Hey, it’s a living.”

“It’s not that inaccurate,” Lowell shrugged when later that night I tried with all the subtlety of a drunk to milk him for information. He was sweaty from dancing, his half-bald, half-shaved head a glistening ball. With a fingertip he collected the salty drops from the hooded folds of his eyes, flicked a small shower amid the colored lights. “It is just as I told Michael,” he said. “She cares for her mother, under the fiction that her mother is caring for her. May is here for love of her mother, you see, and the mother is here for the love of John Vandermal. She goes to some

classes in the meanwhile. I think all this can safely be called futzing.” Later I learned that she was in fact talking about something very different – but she would never call it art.

She keeps another sort of sketchbook these days, in which she pastes images carefully cut from magazines, weird mixtures of bodies with foreign heads, subjects with foreign backgrounds, characters weighed down with a dozen arms or alert with a dozen eyeless faces. The magazines people have thrown away, or left behind in parks and cafés where she seeks them out. It is especially pleasing to her to find pornography, and it will take days of careful consideration to decide which figures are to be sacrificed so that those on the other sides of pages may be outlined with the scissors and made part of the strange story she is shaping in her large black book. Women’s bodies anesthetically posed are available in any fashion magazine, of course, but contortion, unambiguous disclosure, and blunt masculinity are much more stirring, part of the vast genus of charged material she calls “the good stuff”. Things found but not ready for use are kept carefully in a large, flat cardboard box, all loose and confused, like a diary written in any order, like memory. The box lid is an oppressive embossed gold, in which I imagine some expensive gift was once delivered: a silk scarf, perhaps, or truffles – something, whatever it was, that I could not afford to give her: a reproach can be found anywhere if you are willing to look. May doesn’t see that, of course: she simply keeps these things and ponders them, sifts the contents regularly, familiarly.

Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn’t do better to work as she does, borrowing whatever I can, having it on hand to consider exhaustively before use. Lowell Rank told me that to rely too much on oneself for creativity is “an injudicious over-exploitation of a limited natural resource, you see: the usual Romantic miscalculation”, or as Peter Achurch puts it, “Sometimes the crap is

important. You have to learn to recycle.” I say the word over to myself and observe how my accent emphasizes the first syllable. In Achurch’s gentle Blackpuddlian the stress is on “cycle”. I think about it as May sorts her plunder in quiet, contented admiration of its bounty.

This detailed attention is not for the scrap box alone. When we talk about her day she always describes for me exactly what she has worn when she goes out, and often remembers to the centime what was paid for each item, or if it was found, or a gift. She is proud of her bargains, no matter how long ago she achieved them, and prefers familiarity to the sense of discovery. These days she hardly ever shops except for food from the market, and barring her devoted attention to the creation of her montages, she doesn’t work. I wouldn’t ask her to.

There’s a sound at the door, and she names it: “Peter.”

Peter Achurch’s skin is the temperature of the outdoors, his narrow eyes watery, a damp, cloudy smell of stale tobacco mingling with the cold stab of the weather in his clothes. I accept his thick, chapped fingers at the door. He says my name, “Alex,” and then shows himself shyly over the threshold; I say his, and in my ear it is as much a song as it is a greeting.

“All right with you?” he says.

I admit with my shoulders, the movement of my neck, that it is. “And with you?”

He nods and walks through. In the short hallway I am suddenly aware of how much dust there is in the corners, how dirty the doors are around the handles. It’s not that Achurch will mind – he’s famously untidy himself; but I want to be neater than he is, to impress him with our gentility, however shabby, to prove that I am, after all, taking good care of things. May gives a wave, a quick smile, and runs her funny run, right foot always forward, one arm across her little breasts to stop them showing. She will go and cover up for Achurch, protect his cheek from the

swell of rosy embarrassment; she senses what is proper within him, and knows it would be unfair to risk alarming him with her sheet-etched thighs and floor-blackened feet. It is something I lack, this ability to rouse a sense of bourgeois propriety from her. She returns wearing my clothes, trousers rolled at both the ankle and waist, shirtsleeves swallowing her arms. It's a compromise, a costume: this isn't really clothing. She has a relationship with her every belonging with which mine cannot compete. If I were to lean close to her at this very moment, as I am tempted to do, and by a few words relinquish ownership, make what she is wearing hers, whether because the trousers suit her simple shape or even for no reason at all, only because I choose to, their significance would be immediately altered; suddenly she would be dressed, really dressed, not with the fakery of my things, but in real clothes of her own. She would always recall the moment they became hers and at some point they would hold, if only for a short time, the ceaselessly rotating honor of being her favorite this and favorite that, a long, detailed roster that I sometimes imagine includes in its elaborate and infinitely flexible sub-categories the entire narrow span of her worldly possessions. She would note just as solemnly the moment she gave the clothes away to someone else, or left them clean and neatly folded in an open paper bag on the street for a passing student or other needy soul to take home.

“Now they can think they've been lucky and found something good, or even that they are stealing it,” she will whisper excitedly. “They'll never have to thank me.” This is the blessing she wishes most earnestly on strangers. She herself thanks people unreservedly and with ease but I can't help thinking it isn't without some hidden reluctance, or else why would she try so hard to spare others? It seems to me that with the first words I ever heard her speak, that night in Brussels, at the party with the stagieres, she thanked me.

She was dancing and twice fell against me, first gently and then again, more deeply, her shoulder in my stomach as she tried to find her balance in the hammering crowd. I grabbed her roughly, blindly, and, while the pain passed from my gut, held her suspended briefly above the floor, my left hand against the moist bare skin of her underarm, the other around the corrugated tube of her rib cage, slipping slowly over the easy swell of her breast. Cloth bunching in my fingers exposed her belly. She tipped and swung, put a hand to the ground. For an instant her chest was bared; I didn't witness it so much as sense it, a passing awareness of having done something I shouldn't.

"Thank you," she curtsied. "That must have looked very graceful on both of us."

"Don't mention it. In fact when you elbowed me in the gut, I wasn't really left with much choice." To overcome the music we bowed closer when we spoke, each addressing the side of the other's head, then straightened again, an automatic return to the normal pose of conversation. All around the edge of the room people bobbed as we did: a bend of the waist, a turn of the neck, then back, heads nodding. Shoulders met and lips brushed cheeks, seeking the ear. She moved close again and I leaned forward to listen.

"Are you all right?" I became aware that I had avoided looking her straight in the face, because she craned her neck around to confront me. She smiled with her mouth open and hoisted her heavy eyebrows. I noticed the faint scar, a pair of fragile furrows traced across her cheek and up under her eyebrow. Even then, in the first moments, I found it part of her beauty.

"Of course," I said. She nodded and bit gently at her lower lip. I felt something more was expected of me. "Sorry, by the way, that I.": this illustrated by a helpless gesture.

"Groped?"

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“Oh. I guess so, yes.”

“Well, for helping a stranger you deserve a shot at the good stuff.” She gave her body a showgirl shake.

“Then we’re all square, I hope.”

“A boob in hand is worth two on the floor.” The slick odor of her perspiration clung to my fingers. I nodded a few times, and looked around, at the other people, at the walls, at nothing, and finally I asked, against prohibition: “So. What do you do?”