Visible: A Femmethology, Volume One

Edited by Jennifer Clare Burke
Published in 2009 by Homofactus Press L.L.C.
1271 Shirley
Ypsilanti, Michigan, 48198, U.S.A.
homofactuspress.com

copyright © 2009 by Jennifer Clare Burke and Homofactus Press

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-9785973-4-4


All Rights Reserved.


Cover Design © 2009 Maria Carbone, Director of Marketing, Homofactus Press, zealotry.com
Cover Photo © 2009 iStockphoto.com/ Kamel Adjenef (loriel60)
Book Design © 2009 Jay Sennett and Gwyn Hulswit

Hire them, please.
Not That Girl
by Margaret Price

I never had a sister. I grew up ragtag, dirty, climbing roofs and killing frogs, running after the boys. There were ten of them, and me, and we played Tackletown and Smear the Queer; we farted in each others' faces and danced to AC/DC on the living-room rug. I wore their jeans, their jackets, their stripe-top tube socks. I went weeks without a bath. I walked among them shirtless, tied my T-shirt around my head to catch the sweat.

I know how to whip an apple, how to tag a baserunner, how to say the alphabet while burping. I know how to bike no-handed, how to unhook a fish, how to shoot skeet. I know how to cruise in the car, whistling at girls, how to turn to the boys and say, "I'd eat the corn out of her shit." I can spit ten feet.

You are my best friend. Sweet, small man, hard-won chest and voice, soft hands. We share many loves. Gardens. Bears. Rabble-rousing. Cock. We like to walk in the park and cruise the big tough guys. We giggle.

You're a femme too, and for years, I fail to know this. One day I idly ask what you think of femmes, and you tell me, "Well, I am one."

I am agog. I never knew, how could I not know? I've seen your picture as a baby, just like me, your mother's only girl. But dressed the way I never was, pink ruffly dress with bows, lacy socks, rosettes. You are beautiful, that baby girl, but you are not a girl. Not that girl.

My mother and my aunt, soft voices, hard fingertips, they treasured me, they taught me all they could. I know how to knit a sweater, how to whip an egg white, how to fold a towel with the corners sharp and the monogram on the outside. I know how to pour the wine, clear the dishes, listen while the men speak. When a man drinks eleven beers and falls on the floor, I know how to help him up, comment gently on how tired he must be. I know how to be expendable. To disappear. Shrink to nothing but a pair of hands floating in the air, soothing, lifting, letting.

Nights at my cousins' house. My uncle, six foot four, whom I've lifted off the ground before. Drunk, dark, pipe smoke in his mustache. His hands were heavy and they handled me, my ass, my tiny cunt, my hair. I stopped breathing.

I stopped sleeping. Back home in my room, listening to my brothers' snores, I held my eyelids open and watched the sky. When it turned from darkest purple to blue, when the birds began to keen, I closed my eyes and slept.

I ate dirt. Also pennies. And small screws, and snot, and pages torn from books. I nibbled at my fingers, at my toes. I never ate enough to disappear.
You help me meet my boyfriend. I am thirty-eight, I don’t trust this Internet dating thing, why can’t anybody spell? You soothe me. “Just look,” you say. “Just window-shop. Just try it out.” You’re an old hand, veteran of Manhunt and Bear411, genius of the coffee date. You can pick them up in bars, you can meet a man in a chat room and have his cock in your mouth forty-five minutes later. I don’t know how you do it.

“Dating is a muscle,” you say, “just flex the muscle.”

“Butches don’t like me,” I say. I mean my hair, almost military short, I mean my callused hands, my long determined stride. I wear dresses, but never ones I couldn’t fight in. I stick my hands in dirt, in engine oil.

“The right ones do,” you say.

I remember seventh grade. I knew nothing. I wore the same clothes every day: brown corduroys, blue button-down shirt, white turtleneck dotted with red hearts. Around me girls bloomed in fat curling-iron curls, jeans with names, shining blue mascara. They leaned into the bathroom mirror, their hips swayed to music I couldn’t hear. They never picked their noses.

I took the bus home and a man sat on me. I didn’t understand. An old lady sat up front with her grocery bags, people were behind us, didn’t anyone see? Meaty thigh and square ass cheek, half in my lap, the two of us piled at angles like cordwood. I didn’t move. He ground his ass. His hands lay quiet in his lap, his eyes gazed dully out the window. His left ear flushed and fleshy, swinging lobe trembling when the bus trembled. I weighed ninety pounds, his ass went in a circle, clockwise. I didn’t understand. I didn’t breathe.

At my stop I stirred, he moved, I rose, I left. He swung aside to let me out as if I hadn’t sat beneath his khaki ass. What should I have done? I didn’t know.

And the music played. Alicia danced with Ward, arms around his neck, feet shuffling in a slow circle to the sound of Foreigner. I’ve been waiting for a girl like you. On Monday, I teased her: “You love Ward!” Without embarrassment, without denying it, she smiled and glanced down, eyelids smeared with curves of Maybelline purple. Her face was pleased, smug. I had meant to embarrass her, but somehow I’d given her the upper hand.

My currency was worthless now. On the soccer field I hawked and spit, competently, a tidy ball of mucous flying and landing just where I’d aimed past the sideline. Pretty girl ran past me, straight blond hair swinging and legs gleaming, shaven. She stopped long enough to tell me: “That’s disgusting.”

I had no friends. I ran. I ran in the places where I still mattered: across the hockey field, through the woods, I dived after volleyballs, scooped up grounders. At hockey camp, I watched the varsity girls put on their bathing suits, bake on the pavement behind our dorm, stroke the lotion on their skin, wrap towels under their arms. I watched and watched. I needed to learn.
One night I ran alone, melting Michigan July heat, twilight coming down along the quiet two–lane road. He stepped out of the scrub, curly brown hair and mustache, clothing dusty, bottle balanced in his hand. He ran behind me, I ran faster, he reached out and grabbed my crotch, palm up, fingers forward, dilding and twiddling between my legs on the run. I don’t remember what I screamed. I remember I was faster. Long fifteen–year–old legs, panicked kick, down the hill and behind the high school, away into the headlights, pairs of white eyes lighting my way home.

My shorts were thin green nylon, and I threw them in the garbage. They had been my favorite shorts. For a long time I was angry that my favorite shorts were gone.

Dateless, you and I go out for Valentine’s Day. Lush Atlanta winter, warm and wet, we walk down North Highland and gaze at the expensive soaps in the windows. You are laughing, telling a story, you swing your arm and clap me on the back. I decompensate.

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Sense falls away, and sensation, and language. I do not breathe. This is what I know about panic attacks: it’s not that I can’t breathe, it’s that it’s so easy not to. Why breathe, why move, why let time go on, when I could freeze and disappear, collapse to a point like a dying star? Dimly I see your face, huge and white like the moon, I know you must be worried. I form sludgy words: I’m panicking.

You sit me on a wall. You rub my back. The first breath comes in, painful as birth. The second. The third. Air is whistling in my lungs, or are those birds and their early–morning keening? My vision collapsed along with my voice, I’m looking through a toilet–paper tube. You are speaking. After a while we’re walking. We make it to the restaurant, we order wine, we twirl our pasta. The floor rocks gently, like a boat deck. You hold my hand, warm real fingers, broad strong knuckles. I’m afraid I will die from the feel of your gentle skin.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” you say.

Neither of us cries. Both of us have wept enough for the girls we never were.

The first boy who loved me was a poet, six feet tall and skinny as a newt, wide blue eyes behind round gold glasses, journal always in hand. He scribbled entry after entry about my beauty. We slept in single beds, we learned how to do it with me on top. I could make him groan, swoon, fall back. I broke his heart soon after, by leaving his bed and going to a party and fucking another boy. Avidly I read his anguished letters. I kept them, gloated over them, saved them like deeds. I’d never known the power of being loved before, and all I knew was how to swing it like a sword.

The first boy I loved was my best friend. We shot pool, walked up mountains, spat off balconies. We wrestled in bed like puppies, cranking the Sparks as we fucked and fucked in every way we could imagine. We did it in elevators, in fields, in tents, in a chapel, in the balcony during a string–quartet concert, in the ocean. We were playing.
When he and I parted, he knew I wanted to date women, and I asked him, trembling, how to do it. He said, "It won't be too different from dating boys." He said, "You can do it." He said, "You already know."

The ones I liked had broad shoulders, tough faces, assurance in their strides. I couldn't imagine what they might see in me, my heavy boots and rugby shirts, mens jeans, close-cropped hair, my undecorated face. Mostly they didn't see me.

The first one who saw me was Sami, and she taught me manners. Not mine: hers. She kept me on the inside of the sidewalk, opened doors, bought my drinks. She said I was a femme. I said I wasn't.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Femmes are weak," I explained. How did I know this? I just knew, the way I knew how to separate an egg, the way I knew the taste of a swallowed screw. I knew.

She let it go. I undressed her and discovered she wore blue-flowered cotton panties. "I thought you were a butch," I said.

She grinned. "I don't like doing what people expect."

Then she turned me over, unzipped my skirt, and showed me how to take a fist. She told me that I did it like a femme. She asked me where I'd learned that.

I thought about launching a sled down a ski slope at midnight, laughter muffled to keep the security guards away, my body prone and stacked between two boys, leaning together, side to side, avoiding the trees by hair's breadths, screaming. Unkilled, uncaught, and the pure laughter on the other side. I told her it felt natural.

It was Michigan, it was 1995, and no one was a femme. Some of us were on the femme side, maybe even were femme, were adjectival. Mostly we just wore skorts. I wondered if I'd have to give up softball.

I began to research. Anthologies, anthropologies. I drew the map again and again.

Femmes date butches. Except when they don't.

Femmes wear dresses. Except when they don't.

Femmes bottom. Except when they don't.

Femmes are catty, smart, small, large, tough, butchy, macho, femmey, high, low, slutty, slow. Femmes receive. Femmes give.
The only thing that stayed on the map was this: *someone touched you when you didn’t want them to.*

Or was that simply everyone?

Now I am apparitional; I play with ways of showing up. My hair grows long, it curls and puffs, I cut it off. Skirts brush the floor, they barely clear my ass, they swing and cling. Eyelids sparkle purple, brown, waist pinches in and out, laces string me up and hold me in. Heels rise off the floor, four inches, five, one, none. I grow and shrink. I hook my garters, touch my butch, change my oil. The only thing that never changes is my stride.

I went to a class, and they showed me how to walk. I was thirty. Echoing Saturday high-school gym, fourteen women wearing sneakers, all of us survivors. Marian, the teacher, showed me how to square my shoulders, uncurve my frightened spine. Head up. Eyes direct. "Try it again," she said, "again." She said, "You need to take up space." I paced the floor, masquerading unassailability. "Don't rush," she said. "And don't look back."

We fought men in padded helmets, fought with knees and hips and fingertips. Kicked the air and punched their faces. We practiced shouting *No.* That was hardest. We were not allowed to fight in silence.

My first femme friend was Jen. Long blond hair, wide blue eyes, dirty mouth. We taught at the same school; we wondered what our students made of us. "They think you're straight," I said, "and they think I'm a big butch dyke."

"What they really think," Jen said, "is that we're old." It's true; we were thirty-two. Some days we felt quite old.

"Do you identify as a femme?" I asked. The language of the new millennium: we *identified as,* we *presented as.* Good perverts, we subverted and inverted. We were subjectivities.

"I think so," Jen said. "Do you?"

"Yes," I said. It was the first time I said it without qualifying.

I taught her how to drive a twelve-foot truck. She taught me how to line my lips. We told each other we were beautiful.

Frosty early morning, barely light, I am walking up to work. Streets deserted, except for the man in the long duffle coat who shouts at me. *Hey, Hey, boy.* I don’t change my stride. He is coming from behind me. *Hey, white boy. I'm talking to you, boy.* Close now, one sidewalk square behind.

I spin and snap, *What?*

He takes in my face, my treble voice, and his eyes bug out. Hands out of pockets, raised palm-forward as he steps away. *Sorry,* he says.
Did it save me that I was a girl?

Did he only mean to ask for money?

For a while, after I learned to fight, I walked in the world thinking, Don't you fuck with me. As time went on, I began to wonder—of every face I saw—Who hurt you?

A party at Jen's house and along came Ryan, old-school butch, bleach-blond hair and seven studs in each ear. Jen asked to take her coat. Ryan swung it over, then turned and said to someone over her shoulder, "That's one thing femmes are good for."

And I was grateful, all at once, to the men in my family, for all the times I saw them push women, ridicule them, squeeze their asses when they weren't looking. Even for the heaviest hands, even for the cruelty. For I knew this: Ryan's nasty comment—it was not a butch thing. Just an asshole thing.

I am thirty-four, I meet you at a party. Mostly FTMs, a few butches and femmes, everyone uncomfortable. I introduce myself, and you are cold. Later you tell me, "No, not cold, just socially awkward." I'm not sure I believe you. I know how femmes sometimes hit on you, how they won't take no for an answer, the ways they touch you—neck, arm, even your ass—when you don't want them to. I think you may have been telling me, Be careful. I think you may have been telling me, Don't touch.

I think about the word pursuit. Sometimes it's alluring, touch and go, faster, slower, hot. Sometimes not.

You and I, we want to change the world. We live in the deep South, search for decent bagels, fear the hatred. We march, we organize. Our skins are pasty white, our accents northern. We try to find the boys, the butches or the bears, the handsome kind ones who will pick us up and throw us just enough.

One night you call me. Someone mugged you on the street. They pointed a gun, took your wallet. You are shaking, I am shaking; I'm not there, I can't hold you, I can't offer you my practiced small femme hands.

But they did not see all of you. We both know how much worse it could have been.

Ungracefully, I date. I call you to report; we dish and giggle. I feel absurd, I feel delighted. I am thirty-seven. I don't act my age.

I go on a date with a woman and tell her I'm a femme. She purses her lips at my jeans and boots, she shakes her head. "You're not a femme," she says.

I know enough by now that I can laugh. Just enough.

"What bullshit," you say when I tell you.
Maybe it was only you, sweet brother femme, who could unlock my heart, who could make it ready for whomever might float in. You and I, we're opposites, we're complements, we're strange animals with different faces and a similar smell. I think you taught me how to love.

I find a butch online. Jake. We meet, we kiss, we tell the litany of exes. I explain about the hands, the heavy hands and why I never sleep. Jake strides in leather jacket, low-slung jeans, boots. "I've been told I'm too gentle," he admits one night.

I tell him what I know by now: you cannot be too gentle.

He: this is new to me. Jake is not transgender, nor a boy, though he is my boyfriend. Nor is he a man, except when he is my man. He is a mark of validation, of respect. It's a secret code, a shared vocabulary among butches and femmes and those who know. Not so secret when we're at my straight friends' house eating meatloaf. Our private lives turn public, stumble out our mouths. I say he. My straight friends follow suit. Then they slip up and apologize profusely. They are nervous.

These are not the people whom he wants to see him. Still he is gracious and easy. He goes back for seconds; he reassures.

I step out in a silver glittering dress, four-inch heels, a long brown wig. Blue eyeshadow is back, it takes me back, back to the unholy girls' bathrooms of my junior high. Now I brush it easily. I blend.

You see a picture of me from a butch-femme formal ball. "My God," you say, "is that you?" The eyelashes, the hair. "It's your smile," you say, "Your smile is different." Different how, I ask. You take a minute. Finally: "I don't mean that you usually look scared. But here, you look...you look fearless."

No, not fearless. You know this. You know the diagnoses: post-traumatic stress disorder. Chronic anxiety. Borderline personality disorder. I've been given so many names, told so many times what I am or am not. Sometimes borderline becomes a garden-variety insult for femme. She's such a borderline. I walk plenty of lines, but not the ones they think.

When we walk in crowds, you keep me on the inside of the sidewalk. You hold my elbow. How you doing, you ask, and Do you need to take a break? You say, I'll get the drinks. You are chivalrous and careful, mindful of my unseen bruises. Yours are not the manners of a butch.

Jake is his parents' daughter. In their house, I say she. At first this makes me angry. Cowardice, I think, denial. I don't say these words, but he reads them on my face. He explains in his gentle Georgia drawl.

"It's courtesy," he says. "It's manners. Baby," he says, "my parents are doing the best they can. Try to understand."
I am mannered in their house. I don't swear, I don't take the name of the Lord in vain. Jake is Katherine, and we are merely friends. I wipe my lips and ask for seconds. I watch. I walk the hard-won borders of their truce.

We join hands and say grace, we thank our Heavenly Father, and silently I think of all the names there are for love.

For Thanksgiving you go home, home to the northern state where you were born, where your parents call you by your girl name, and your brilliance is not seen. You send me messages by phone. Four more days, you write, and They're driving me crazy and My niece is beautiful. You send a picture, and she is: gremlin face, pink dress, ruffles, bows. New girl, dauntless and unthinking as the sun, not yet collapsed, maybe never.

I have nephews; I am still the only girl. The only girl, and yet I’m not alone. I know that she’ll be safe with you. Sweet femme brother, I know that she will never fear your hands.