Gutted, for Carl Solomon

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Publication Details

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Keywords
gutted, carl, solomon

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This creative work is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/2756
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I WENT TO THE SKATE PARK TODAY to see if I could murder a kid. I did not have any preconceptions about how I wanted to do it, it's just, I had been listening to some old Ginsberg recordings and felt the need to do something for Carl Solomon myself.

Ginsberg trying to keep his cool, Subterranean Homesick Blues Ginsberg: this was me with one foot rested up on the slide rail and the bottle of bourbon swinging lidless in the pocket of my suede jacket. It was about four pm and the sky was overcast and pretty dim. My plan was to use the bourbon to lure one kid away from the others, and then, I don't know, bludgeon him with a rock or something. There were hunks of concrete lying all around the skate park and I had had one thrown at me once while walking home drunk with this girl from my creative writing class. I remember being very disappointed that night. Earlier in the week the girl had written a poem about her pierced clit-hood and had read it aloud to the entire class and everyone had thought Jesus Christ and subsequently I had been expecting Mursi-like capabilities from the thing, rain-hat capabilities. In the end, the cheek-sized slab of concrete was more memorable and the bruise it left behind no less functional.

By half past I had drunk most of the bourbon myself and the majority of the kids had left the skate park and gone to the service station across the street where they skated in front of cars and beneath the fluorescent lights and showed off the tricks and bad language they had spent the day practising with each other. Only the serious ones stayed behind with me, and they were the ones determined to become rich and famous skateboarders. They whizzed up and down the ramps and thought I was some talent scout working for Sony Playstation or Globe shoes. When they knew I was watching they did special air tricks and backwards things to impress me and I nodded my head and pretended to take notes in my Moleskine. If I wasn't writing notes I was flicking the bourbon cap up in the air with my thumb like it was a lucky coin and me a big-shot shaker from the States named Fifty-Fifty or Silver-Up or something. The act went on like this for about another hour.

By quarter to six the remaining group had been whittled down to two. One of them a baby-faced kid wearing a Good Charlotte T-shirt. He had a long blonde fringe which seemed to react half a second slower than the rest of his hair which was dark brown and immediate. He was about fifteen-years-old, I think, and if he kicked down with his back foot and made his skateboard leap up and turn over in the air, then his fringe replayed the entire move a
split second behind. Up, over, and flush against his forehead. Nicely executed. Real sponsorship stuff. There was also a skinny girl whose collarbones were too broad for her shoulders and chest, and whose T-shirt was grey and did not have the names of any bands on it. She was around the same age as the boy, though she was much plainer looking and more damaged too. I wondered if she wasn’t somebody’s victim already, an alcoholic mother’s, or unemployed father’s. She seemed specially prepped for the role of bludgeonee.

‘Hey,’ I said to her when she came onto the platform near where I was standing. It was well and truly dark by now and only the glow of the adjacent streetlights made it possible to see. ‘You read poetry, do you?’

She turned her face toward me and did not say anything. I held up my Moleskine. A sign of honesty, of intent. ‘No,’ she said.

I shrugged and put it back into the breast pocket of my jacket. It was a suede jacket. I think Martin Amis wore one like it once. Maybe his was straight leather. It was the same style anyway, waist-length, floppy-collared and too big in the elbows.

‘What about this stuff?’ I asked, showing her the other pocket.

She stared at it, then shook her head and looked around to see where her friend was. He was jumping his skateboard over one of the bench seats down below. Each time he jumped, his fringe flopped up and caught the glint of the streetlight the way small waves catch the moon before breaking apart on the low tide sandbars. I took the near empty bottle all the way out and held it to my mouth and showed the girl what it was like, just a small sip from the bit that was left, enough to make me remember what it was like myself. I let it go straight past my teeth and tongue and into the throat cavity, and it was difficult, that’s how it was. I did not put the bottle away completely when I was finished, but left it sticking a third of the way out of the jacket pocket, with its smooth bald neck straining and screaming up at me like a hungry baby bird.

‘You spit back into it if you don’t like the taste,’ I explained to the girl. ‘Yes,’ she replied.

I did a fake cough into the closed mallet-end of my fist then. I always liked it when the weather was cold and dim like this, because you could get away with wearing your collar up and dry coughing a lot and did not look like you were trying to be Martin Amis or Holden Caulfield or anyone else too literary. In my head I had very red cheeks from standing out there in the cold all afternoon, and my mouth was shaped like Paul McCartney’s. I have always enjoyed the namedropping. In reality I think my mouth was probably as big and pink and vulgar and whiskery as the pierced-hooded vagina of that stupid girl I had taken home from my creative writing class. A Ringo Starr mouth. And a mouth which had performed one hell of an ugly duet that night too, I am sure.

The creative writing class is full of stupidity. I think a good creative writing class needs a certain level of stupidity in order to be productive.
By stupidity I do not mean playfulness or silliness, but base dumbness: prose writers with no sensibility toward dialogue, poets lacking all natural cadence, screenwriters interested in vampire lore and the philosophy of American comic books. The smart writers need these stupid writers to learn their mistakes from. Carver did not get good by reading Faulkner and drinking with Cheever, or even by sharing his bed with Gallagher, but by latching onto his first wife for twenty-one years and seeing how he could really shit over a person. Maryann Burk: passive co-writer. Hadley Richardson: scrupulous editor. Girl with pierced-hooded vagina: workshop supercritic.

A writer must be blooded first, and educated second. Like a dog. You bring him a dead rabbit, and you say, here, chew on this for a while. The taste of the dead animal will make the dog feel proud of himself and he will not let the carcass out of his mouth. I did not kill this thing, he will seem to say, but look how I carry it around with me nonetheless—look how I might have killed it. After a week or so you bring him a rabbit that is still alive, but has had both its back legs broken so that it cannot run away. When the dog has got the hang of this second game, you deliver a live, jumping, running Chekhov and you say, graduation day, boy—now, catch! If he has been blooded properly he will chase after the thing and believe himself capable of getting a hold and the taste of the first dead rabbit will be in his mouth still, making him too proud and mad to stop running or even to look over his shoulder for encouragement.

‘What do you do, then?’ I said to the skinny, sad girl who did not drink and who did not read poetry. She was not really sad, but for the sake of Carl Solomon I thought she was sad on the inside. Be brave for Carl and all the other best minds of your generation, Charlotte, hide your worries from the world. In my head I was calling her Charlotte and myself Allen now and the names seemed perfectly suited and so did the meter and the assonance was wonderful.

‘I write poetry,’ Charlotte said, a kind of amendment to her statement about not reading poetry. As in, I do not read poetry, I write the stuff. That is, it reads me. It reads me and we write each other, right?

‘So you are a poet?’

‘No,’ she said.

Thank God, I thought. Then, ‘Why do you write it and not read it, Charlotte?’

‘I don’t just write it, Allen,’ she said. All very informal stuff. Allen this, Charlotte that. It is how we played.

I smiled and nodded and the crude cold hard hunk of concrete suddenly did not seem to be the right thing to do by this girl. She deserves subtlety, I told myself. I could see how her parents and teachers agreed with me, and how they were clandestinely grinding up tiny amounts of poison and slipping it into her food night after night. Rohypnol. Paracetamol. Ratsak. Shame. Anything they could get their stubby little hands on. This kind of attack
risked her building an immunity though. Immunity to death almighty and poetry ever after. Were her parents and teachers aware of the immunity risk? ‘How come you talk to people without looking at them?’ I said to her.

She thought for a moment. Then turned her damaged face right at me. ‘I don’t do that to everyone.’ She had thin, dry lips. I wanted to rub chalk on them.

‘Is that how you talk to your parents and teachers?’ They closed together. Nothing. She did not want to talk about her parents and teachers. I did not want to talk about mine either. We wanted to and did not want to talk about all of the same things. We were kindred.

‘What sort of poems do you write?’ I asked her. ‘Ones about people,’ she answered.

Yes, I thought so, I thought. ‘But you are not a poet,’ I said.

‘No.’

‘Are all of your poems about people?’ ‘No. Some of them are about old ships that have been retired and stripped of their guns.’

‘Do you know who Carl Solomon is?’ ‘No.’

‘And what else?’ I asked. ‘Former schoolgirls,’ she said. ‘Yes?’ I said.

‘Cornered and beaten by nuns,’ she went on. ‘Do they all rhyme like that, then? Guns and nuns?’ ‘Not always,’ she said. ‘But most of the time.’ ‘Would you sing one of them aloud to me?’ ‘No.’ ‘No. Good.’ ‘I hate music.’ ‘Everyone hates music.’

I could not help thinking of the poem about the pierced clit-hood then. Of course, it was the kind of poem that did not rhyme at all and which relied on dissonance and terseness for effect. I think this was symptomatic of the creative writing class and not necessarily the author. None of the people in the class who wrote poems liked to use rhyme, and those who did were shamed into pretending they did not. All of them feigned to detest alliteration too. I think the majority had been made to study Wilfred Owen at high school and were now afraid of stylisation like they were afraid of mustard gas. Often they would hyphenate a word like clitoris to make the syllables sound less processed, and hardly any of them could write a full line without hitting the Enter key six times between the first and last words. Moreover, they hated giving titles to their poems and a resigned fashion for naming poems after their first word had caught on quite early in the class, so that too many of the poems were manufactured with adjectives and prepositions for titles, Hundredth, for example:
hundredth

hundredth clit-hood he's done
he says,
tats on
his face too,
none
bigger than mine
but
he says,
a parrot
a skull
and set of blackened tits ...

There were those that skipped on for world without end, and then there were those that sat like red wheelbarrows with flattened tyres and could not be pushed any further than three or four lines. *Hundredth* was made up of seventeen twelve-line columns and plumped somewhere in the middle of that array.

The girl with the pierced clithood did not like her columns being referred to as stanzas. She was against titles and against stanzas. She had a tattoo of Athena on her calf and said the strongest columns were the ones that fattened out at the bottom to give the effect of a straight line. I was on my knees at that stage and thought there was very little truth in such perverse mathematics. Only when the foreplay was over and the disappointment did not seem to matter so much anymore did I tell her that *Hundredth* was the Hundred-and-first I had performed and that Ginsberg himself was a direct descendant of Pythagoras and me a direct descendents of Ginsberg, which made us all first cousins. Aww, it's bleeding again, she responded.

The kid with the Good Charlotte T-shirt came skating up to where Charlotte and me were standing and talking. His T-shirt said Good Charlotte in lime green and had a picture of some raggedy old Michael Corleone lookalike mixing drinks or chemicals on its front.

'Who are you?' Corleone said.
I looked at him seriously.
Charlotte looked at him seriously.
'This is Allen,' she said, answering for me. 'The famous poet. He does not have a beard. Only me.' She laughed.
'I shaved it off,' I added. The kid glared at me. 'You got an agent?' I said, in reference to his skateboard.

Corleone pushed his fringe away from his eyes and straightened it back down with his fingertips and looked at Charlotte for confirmation. She looked back at him like he was very stupid. He was very stupid. What are you looking at her for? I thought. She does not have any use for a dead rabbit like you.
‘No,’ he answered timidly.
‘Chew on this, Corleone,’ I said. I handed him the bottle and he swigged from its glassy beak. He was keen.
‘You spit back into it if you do not like the taste,’ Charlotte explained.
‘Eat pussy, Alex,’ he said between sips.
I used my pencil to make an important mark in my Moleskine. ALEX, I printed.

‘Do not be so crass,’ I said to him when I had finished. He glowered.
My own poems were always criticised for being too polite. Even the creative writing teacher thought my poems were not aggressive enough and she had suffered through a miscarriage. Aggression is not necessarily violent or tragic, she assured me. See, aggression can be something as subtle as a breadcrumb refusing to give over to an ant. To me that sounds like a polite way of talking about rape, I argued back. Good, she said, write a poem about rape, then. She was determined to show that she had not been affected by her miscarriage. I wrote a poem called *The Frailty of the Human Condition, for Gertrude Stein*. It was a very short and polite poem about a rapist called Ford. In it I rhymed the word *fingernail* with the word *derailed*. This decision received much criticism on account of its lyricism and its politeness and eventually I was pressured into replacing the word *derailed* with *scum-fucked*. The teacher who had suffered through a miscarriage called me Ezra-fucking-Pound for the rest of the semester. She was clearly very affected.

When the boy had drunk it all, he handed me the empty bottle. I thanked him. ‘Whatever,’ he said. Then I took it by the neck and lunged forward and used it to strike at him across the face.

‘Howl!’ I yelled. And I howled. The glass bottle felt like a piece of concrete in my hand and did not break apart when it struck him on the cheekbone but jarred both of us instantaneously like an electric fence current. Rather than going over dead like I had anticipated, the boy recovered from the jolt almost immediately and picked up his skateboard and ran away.

‘Go!’ he yelled as he ran. ‘Quick, go!’ He was talking to Charlotte. But she did not go. She just laughed and howled as well. We both howled. Howled like first cousins caught in the act.

‘Scum-fucker!’ she yelled after him.
‘Scum-fucker!’ I repeated. I repeated it as aggressively as possible and even threw the bottle too. ‘Scum-fucker! Play that on your hydrogen jukebox, you fucking scum-fucker!’

When that stupid boy was out of sight I sat down on the slide rail and reopened my Moleskine to the ALEX page. I calmed myself and started writing. I tried to remember what it was like just at the moment when the bottle had connected without breaking, the moment when the pierced-hooded girl had dropped her head back and lifted her erratic knees, the moment when I had first pressed play on the VCR and seen Ginsberg with his stroke-mangled face and big pink lips reading the opening word from that Parthenon of a poem of his. By contrast the first thing I came up with was an adjective
that started with the letter G and rhymed with head-butted. Gutted. I wrote it down and underlined it for a title.

'You chickened out, Allen,' Charlotte said.

'For Carl,' I said.