

Studies in Monogamy

Poems by Nicelle Davis

Published by Whale Sound Audio Chapbooks
December 2010

Table of Contents

1. The Middle School Scab Eater
2. A Wife's Last Request
3. A Husband's Last Request
4. Cuba and Coltrane
5. One Shot, Developed
6. Complications in the Art of Monogamy *or* Conjoined Twins
7. Chick Fights and Heartbreaks
8. In the Story of Adultery that Doesn't Happen
9. This World of Chemical Signals
10. Denny's All-Nighters
11. Bought a Pack of Cigarettes Today
12. Flash: Leibovitz's Photo of John and Yoko

*This PDF download is a companion to the original online audio chapbook publication of **Studies in Monogamy**, available at <http://wschap2.wordpress.com>, copyright Nicelle Davis, 2010*

The Middle School Scab Eater

Everything about her was recessive: hair retreating into tight curls, arms holding legs close to chest. She folded into a wooden chair like the yes / no notes we agonized over; tight origami shapes we passed while Coach wrote *heavy petting* on the board. We hated her. Her child's body and thick lips. Her shins bleeding where she ripped off scabs.

Coach going over the concept of *foreplay*, explained how the family dog never really loved us—was only after the *pleasure* of being touched. *You have to butter a lady up* was his best attempt at talking about the bodily secretions most of us were wearing like invisible gloves. She was beautiful and secretly we loved her. Her obliviousness.

In class, she blew on her open sores same as the head cheer-leader blew on wet petal-pink nail polish. It was confusing; this separation of love from pleasure. She looked satisfied. Harvesting dry red chips, taking herself into her mouth like bread. She didn't notice how even Coach gagged a little when he looked at her. His argument

for abstinence, a game of averages: *If two people sleep with two people who have slept with two people*, then we've all slept with your mother and our fathers, we're all carrying something catching within us.

A Wife's Last Request

After the funeral, the room is a scatter of bones on plastic plates. The widow holds a welcoming expression. His touch used to prepare a softness in her for receiving. But grief reminds her that his hands will never leave her. In a bathroom, she pushes her fingers into the empty cavity of her body—clawing herself out of flesh.

A Husband's Last Request

Today the red fiddle was loud. I couldn't remember my way home from the corner store. I watched the traffic. Counted cars. It was hot. The milk I'd bought had turned sour. An officer asked what street I lived on. I didn't want to say I didn't know. I pulled a quarter from the officer's ear. He took my wallet. He wrote down: Wind-Creek Drive. He offered me a ride. I was fighting against the red fiddle that was sawing away at your name. I didn't mean to cry. When the officer asked if I was alright—I just kept singing the hymn of your face until the milk, car, and cop were gone.

Cuba and Coltrane

Cuba. I want to go to Cuba; where we planned to go together. Still the smell of saving change reminds me—we didn't make it beyond the rabid Atlantic border.

You were too busy throwing boxes of Captain Crunch in the yard. *Too White for my kitchen*, you said. To match you, I threw your glossy bell peppers in the street spitting,

I don't know how to cook this shit. In the back ground the tart sound of *A Love Supreme* played between your flesh, my flesh. Two things we could agree on: Coltrane

and Cuba. Everything else was a brood of anger hatching. Bending to collect the scatter of yellow sugar-nuggets, I watched you nurse a bruised pepper. Red heat in the palm

of your hand. The buzz of a horn like a nest of bees singing. Cuba. We wanted to go to Cuba.

One Shot, Developed

He took one shot. Developed in black and white—naked,
I was a boy to him. Arms coiled
against the flesh that moves like silt through currents.
Wanted to pull my teeth—
have him read his name engraved at my roots—spit
blood to prove the ache.
Thought to unhinge the bones in my hand for chimes—
music of collision.
My faith dependent on reconciliation. Serenades of hope
at my fingers—the wind. I was
all fight. Ate dirt to keep the world from unmaking us.
How was he to know
I was testing God by cutting my tongue into apple slices.
Asking him to eat. Without
words. How was he to know I was a woman in a man's
armor—caught on film—
moment of struggle before the continuous breakage.

Complications in the Art of Monogamy *or* Conjoined Twins

Sheets hung from lines block
the sight of a half-man in full
rapture. A wife wraps round her
side of a torso, her legs quiver
at climax. Clutching the edge
of a bed, brother tries to quiet
his blind effort, bending to
the will of brother's movements.
Both undone in, tonight not his
woman. Blue morning clutches
his empty limbs. He falls asleep
to the soft coos of brother's bird-
song singing *beautiful* into
the matted web of bride's hair.
Breath joining three to a rhythm
of one.

Sister died before her. The living woman refuses to be cut from the corpse. She says, *As we came together, so we go together*. Dragging loose legs across the kitchen floor, she puts a kettle on. Sipping hibiscus, she feels her sister's cold lips kiss their neck.

During sex, a conjoined twin will slip behind
the consciousness of the other
to provide privacy. While searching his wife's
living dust for the light kneaded there,
he grieves for the loss of his brother.
The wall of flesh rises with cell
division. Wife longs for the hirsute feel
of her Wolfman ex-lover.
Every kiss begs to break bread—
to have multitudes dwell together
in the pleasure of light upon light upon light.

Conjoined sister at thirty masturbates for the first time. The weight of her dead sister draped next to her, she forgets the corridors of their limbs. Body overrun by light. Desire shucked off, she moans the song of settling earth. Dusk covers her. Alone and complete.

Chick Fights and Heartbreaks

Think of it as the flu. Go to bed. Stay in bed. Try not to think of what used to happen in that bed. Just think how sick you are. Indulge yourself with illness. Eat things like popsicles, well maybe not popsicles, try instead chicken noodle— nothing sexy about soup.

Chunks of meat drowning in their own juices— a meal made from chicks with their beaks cut off to prevent cannibalism. Their faces, black holes of noise, opened to be fattened before the bones are broken and throats slit. Think of all that red. Don't associate it with death, just

think how much you like the color. Consider painting a small room with it, like the half bath. Remember how you broke up that fight between two female students in front of the school, because you didn't want to see them suspended over a boy—how they lay together

in the grass, grasping each other's hoop earrings, blood running from small rips, their chests bruised as though tenderized with cleavers. You screamed for them to let go. But they didn't. Couldn't. I mean, it was love that they were fighting for. Think of their

faces, startled, as though they didn't understand where the pain was coming from.

In the Story of Adultery that Doesn't Happen

There is a painting in the hotel lobby of trees by a river. In the river, a reflection of something red—shape disturbed by currents—hot color smeared across an unwalkable pathway. This might suggest that the sky is burning while cool tones drown the seeable world. I keep my eyes on the painting. There is a sense of movement in its stillness. Call it art—this distraction from the possibility of your lips against my saying no. Contrast of tones. I want to rub green spring beneath your skin (dry shore) with my tongue (damp rag)—would like to hang you on a wall (crucifix)—pretend this is my home of five thousand rooms. Perhaps those are not branches, but a tangle of limbs. Perhaps those are not leaves, but silk scarves tethering hips to the vanishing point. It's all (over)lap. Perspective. Inside. A world. A frame. A hotel. Outside. A block framed by four streets. An exit unto an entrance. Repeating. Yes. This is a mistake, I say. Logic. Red merely marks the presence of a bird and you are not a choice I can make—though I would love to cup fire from this stream of brush strokes—drink feathers—become flight—rise from the street to be possibility. Beyond a hotel canvas—red mark. Might be hell. But then. Might be song in midair.

This World of Chemical Signals

Voles do the big *it* for 24 hours. Continuously. Same pairs licking their round-bodied lover until dirty coats shine with want. Romantic love is said to resemble OCD. I throw three pennies on the floor. Heads: *love*. Tails: *not*. The little portion of the brain that loves is also the spot that sparks with cocaine. So really mom left us for love, not powder.

Love as recipe: part contraction, part retention. Directions: whip pain until the constancy of pleasure and simmer to a piss. When desire's chemical compounds are injected into test subjects, the serum has no effect. Our bodies made to take so little of the potion. Prairie voles are seen as rats with human attributes. But in truth. They're better at *it*.

Even as this poem is written, two voles are molding themselves into a unity of fuzz. Our brain's three-party system is made to hold spouse, adulterer, and unrelated other. Simultaneously. Often, while having sex, I envision Neanderthals pounding at each other's heads with rocks—enacting their need to know how it works.

What is that rattle in the chest? What is that light in the eyes? *We were not built to be happy but to reproduce*, says the vole expert at the Monogamy Institute. Even a vole will chop through an artery and scratch out the beady spark before losing vole. What is vole? That vole? Sound of a carrot eaten—the leaching of gardens—my teeth at my own wrists.

Denny's All Nighters

The server brings more coffee. I drink to keep going past the three a.m. blackouts. I cut the arm off my mother and feed it to my father, spoon my brother's eyes out to boil them in a pot, until I wake up in a table-top lake of drool, my face imprinted with the creases of used napkins.

I quick-jump back to a sitting position. The server brings more coffee. I take out a picture of my nine-month-old son. He grows faster than I have time for. I asked my husband to give me the *Cliff Notes* version of how we are doing. We're not divorcing. We're not separating. We're not far from the possibility of either. The server brings more coffee.

I have a fight with myself about the use of definite articles. A life. The life. All I ever wanted was to love well. I rip all the things I love to pieces and rearrange them with words. What I can't get right, I try to make right on the page.

I nail poems like lost/reward signs to telephone poles. I distribute them like evangelical flyers. I tuck them under windshield wipers in parking lots. I beg others to hold what I love within them and keep it safe from how I love to love. I hardly sleep anymore. I drink more coffee.

Bought a Pack of Cigarettes Today

At this distance, street lamps are reduced to strands of Christmas lights strung between windows where televisions are erupting like fireworks from the eyeholes of track homes. A lit cigarette reflects as a birthday candle off the surface of my windshield. Fighter jets pass as the slowest moving stars—their engines low moans—loud as breath in my ear. A semi-truck passes as a streak of light chasing flight. Beneath me, red ants are carrying the body of a black ant to their underground city. If I didn't know hunger, I would think they were leading a funeral procession—if I didn't know limitation—I would think the world was in celebration of loss. It is

cold. Tonight. Please. Let me clarify.

I'm in an empty lot—next to a suburban neighborhood—alone leaving you—that is— three vacancies placed next to a thousand homes. When

I say

“a” cigarette, I mean “mine.” When I say “my”
windshield, I mean “the car’s.”

There is distinction in ownership.

Guilt belongs to me. You gave me HPV, but I took it willingly— wanting to believe in the religious alchemy of becoming one flesh— put on cancer like relief. Impossible. Love. For me. There are

places in the sky untouched by shine. And this is what I focus on. But must search for these rare absences between structures made for together. Looking for dark

I catch sight of a couple making love in an upstairs window. The wind is a torrent; I am wet from its intangible hands on my thighs. We are

done with each other. I recognize. I drove this far out of town to hide that sometimes I choose cigarettes over tofu and sit-ups.

I understand my mother better at moments like these—know how she could drag the body of a deer under her car for miles, because she had to get away and needed all her concentration to obey the traffic signals.

Stop. Go. Slow.

I imagine the naked man in the window is being given direction. I have nowhere to go. Tonight is your turn with our family. Ours is a separate matter. You tell me I'm leaving too fast. I say,
I can't think right with the pain of my own teeth at my hands. I need to

stop eating cancer—
need to read books about spiders saving pigs to my son—
need to stop dragging a corpse every time I search for
a place to be. Quiet night. Birds

are sleeping in their twig cages built from the down of other birds. Harvested from bones. Their chicks blanketed in another's insulation. I long for

the friendship of morning, to see its red currents seeping through my closed eyes. To see myself divide. To have my shadow self—
proportioned as a little girl with giant arms reaching for warmth. Again. I wish

to make comrades of variance. Light and shadow never stop touching. Again. I flip a lucky. Spit the yoke of mucus. Wonder if this leaving will ever end.

Flash: Leibovitz's Photo of John and Yoko

Polaroid: Yoko Ono, in jeans and a black sweater lies on her back, a straight line. Her hair surges, above her head, a rooted chaos. She's a rib sucked dry of flesh. He kisses her cheek. She's unaffected. His touch adds only another layer to her. He looks like he knows the bullet's coming. Five times coming.

He's lost her once already. She's still cold from being in ear-shot of the sound of him with another woman. Together they have survived each other. John curls naked and fetus-style at her side. His arms frame her face. His legs, bent into inverted V's, encase her torso. Captured: the sight of a man becoming a shrine.

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the journals in which the following poems appeared, sometimes in earlier form:

- *Blood Lotus*: "Cuba and Coltrane"
- *Blue Mesa Review*: "A Husband's Last Request"
- *Breadcrumb Scabs*: "In this World of Chemical Signals"
- *Centrifugal Eye*: "Chick Fights and Heartbreak"
- *Connotation Press*: "One Shot, Developed"
- *The Fertile Source*: "Bought a Pack of Cigarettes Today"
- *Illya's Honey*: "Denny's All Nighters"
- *Mosaic Art & Literary Journal*: "Complications in the Art of Monogamy or Conjoined Twins"
- *PANK*: "In the Story of Adultery that Doesn't Happen"
- *SLAB Magazine*: "The Middle School Scab Eater"
- *Two Review*: "Flash," "A Wife's Last Request"

About the author

Nicelle Davis lives in Southern California with her son J.J. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Broadsided*, *Front Range*, *FuseLit*, *Moulin Review*, *ML Press*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Offending Adam*, *PANK*, *Picture Postcard Press*, *SLAB Magazine*, *Superficial Flesh*, *Two Review*, and others. She'd like to acknowledge her poetry family at the University of California, Riverside and Antelope Valley Community College. She runs a free online poetry workshop at *The Bees' Knees Blog* and is an assistant poetry editor of *Connotation Press*.

About the editor/publisher

Nic Sebastian is the founder-editor of *Whale Sound* (<http://whalesound.wordpress.com>), an online audio poetry journal that features readings by Nic Sebastian of the work of web-active contemporary poets. *Whale Sound* began editing and publishing audio chapbooks in November 2010 and its first publication was *Handmade Boats* by H.K. Hummel (<http://wschap1.wordpress.com>).

About the artist

Artist Cheryl Gross has an MFA in New Forms from Pratt. She writes: "When asked about my work, I always equate it with creating an environment transforming my inner thoughts into reality. Much like an architect or urban planner, that reality and humor becomes the foundation of the work. Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, a totally vertical and intense environment, I now live in Frenchtown, NJ. The rural countryside by contrast to the city is horizontal and peaceful."