Forces

Volume 1990 Article 6

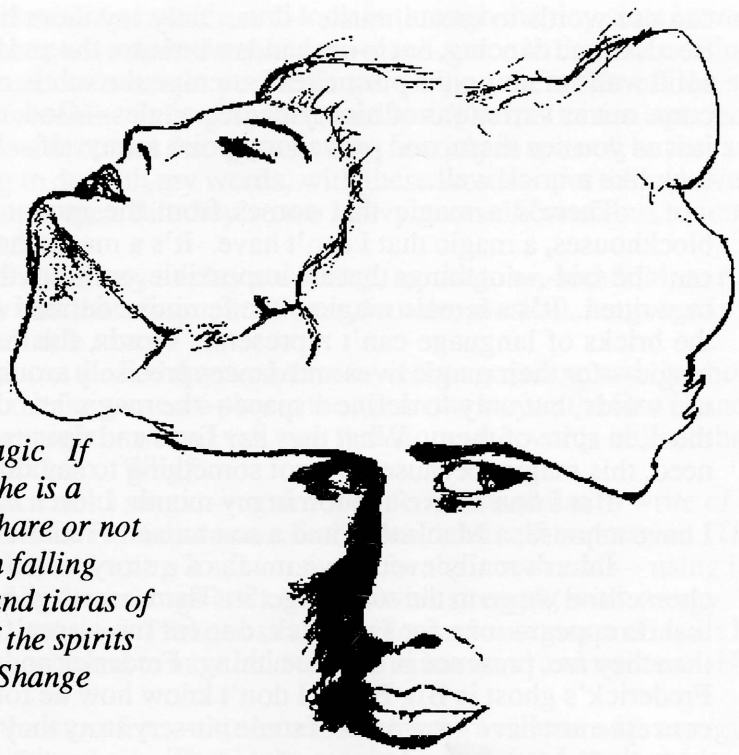
12-1-1990

To be in Love with the Fear of Falling

Matthew K. Brown

Matthew K. Brown

To be in Love with the Fear of Falling



Where there is woman there is magic If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits
—Ntosake Shange

As I write this, I look at her letter—her letter's letters. Hand-written, they look like dark dancing figures on the page—a writing of bodies. I breathe, look up. My letters sit on straight lines on a screen before me; the only life they had was the click that sent them spiraling towards their places in static rows on the screen. They stand patiently in line and refuse to dance. I pick up a pen to try to write living letters like hers, like theirs, to write bodies that can sing and dance and live—but living words must be born, and I can't do that. I put the pen away, the pad of paper, and I type. I want to write bodies—and words come out—I need to be in that magic language, to let it come through me. It speaks what can't be spoken and puts into words what can't be. I've got to say something to you that I can't say—the words come from keys that don't exist on my keyboard—God, it makes my hands shake, my fingers keep reaching for those keys that aren't there.

I've begun again, again trying to tell this story—this small story in which so little happens, so little is said despite all of the words—and I've confused you already The narrative is first-person—who I am will be cleared up later, as will the identity of the writer of the letter I've mentioned, and Frederick—this is all fairly straight forward. You're confused because you don't know who you are. I've drawn you into the story by my writing of that word, but as yet, you could be anyone. a friend, a fish in Frederick's tank, my journal, my lover—you could even be dead—or gone. This isn't an ambiguity that I want. Your part, your role in this, is reader—the character that you play is the person who will turn this page like a page of a found note—please be comfortable in this, I've got to tell you something, something that I can't say

I hear a new language being spoken now; I read it, I lose my self and feel it swept up in a lunar flow—carried sometimes, knocked over sometimes; sometimes just left behind. They've[1] got the moon[2] in their mouths. It lets them sing songs through words and dance in the spaces created by them. With their magic, they

---

1 Ntozake Shange, Luce Irigaray, Alice Walker Helen Cixous, Zora Neal Hurston, Judith. The Christmas that she was pregnant with Frederick, she gave me Ntozake Shange's Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo. I read it then, but I only saw the magic later.

2 Feminist Literary Theory

can use words to create music—I can only lay them like bricks. I want to make songs, create spaces of freedom and dancing, but in my hands words are flat and heavy, and all I can ever make with them are straight, solid walls of text—the pirouettes I attempt, the subtle changes of direction, of expression that I try to make come out as variations of ninety-degree angles—God, this is ridiculous—I looked up and saw these words just as you see them, and proved my point to myself—I'm trying to write a song even now, and my words look like a brick wall.

There's a magic that comes from the moon: a magic that makes songs of words instead of blockhouses, a magic that I can't have. It's a magic that works beyond words, letting them say things that can't be said—not things that are impossible, or things that aren't real, but things that can't be said, that can't be written. It's a female magic—the feminine defined as that which cannot speak or be spoken, that which the bricks of language can't represent. Words, for those who have the moon, create the space for their magic—for their magic lives and dances precisely around, between and behind the words on the page. They use words, but only to define a space—the magic lets them sing behind the bricks—around them, through them, in spite of them. What they say lives and dances between the static words they write. This is what I need, this magic, because I've got something to say that I can't.

But I don't have a moon in my mouth; I teach English Literature in a suburban community college. I have a house, a MacIntosh and a son named Frederick[3].

I don't really even have much of a story to tell—in it Frederick and I need a box of macaroni and cheese[4] and we go to the store to get it. There are no ghost ships[5], no curses[6] and the two supernatural figures that do appear—one for Frederick, one for me—aren't very mysterious. They're just things that are more than they are, presence in absence, things Frederick and I feel are around all of the time, things we never see. Frederick's ghost is Big Bear. I don't know how he found him; the name came from our supermarket, the concept must have grown out of some nursery story they told him at school. Big Bear is why Frederick sleeps with the light on and why we call the supermarket "Oso Grande" and "Oh, Ghandi." My ghost's name is Judith[7]. She lives in Austin.

---

3 The personal ad I took out last year read: "SWM (34) who reads, plays cello, and He-Man (with 2 yr-old son) seeks." The one response I got was from the personals editor, apologizing for the printing error that left off the end of my ad. Still, the description seems to hold.

Frederick's ad (we did them together, helping each other)—"I like to hug and play and dance and hear stories at night. You can be my friend if you want, but you've got to bring your own toys. Frederick"—was placed in that section of the personals where they put the fetishists, escorts and the phone sex ads.

He got twelve responses.

4 Frederick and I have an understanding—all bad days have to end with a box of macaroni and cheese—it's just this little closure ritual that we do. Without it the bad days just never seem to go away—they spill over into the next day and the next. We know it's just a ritual, of course, but the therapy is real.

Frederick plinks the macaroni into the pot, stirs them around with his hand until they're perfectly level and then makes a little pool in the center with his index finger for the water. I do the boiling and the straining and then hold Frederick up in front of the fogged window above the sink where he traces our blurry faces on the glass. He adds the margarine and the orange powder to the macaroni and stirs them from the kitchen chair he stands on.

It's not even important that we eat it, but we always do.

5 In addition to my house, my computer and my son, I have 35 three-to-five page papers on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to correct before Monday.

I begin to wonder, if I were to write this later in the term, would my allusions be to Moby Dick?—"Call me Frederick," the story begins.

It's a story about Frederick's father's obsession with the elusive memory of the woman who symbolically castrated him.

I wonder.

6 I never bit my arm, never drink blood—instead, I gnaw the insides of my cheeks and press at a small sore in my mouth with my tongue. I admit, more neurotic than dramatic.

I am envious of that hypnotic storytelling power he seems to have, but all I've got to do is tell it once, this story that carries the thing that I can't say, just once and it will be over and I can move on.

7 When she got pregnant, we were going to have the abortion—we both knew we had to. We went to the clinic and everything, through all the counselors, she was even up on the table. She looked so grey and cold in that paper gown. Her eyes were open wide and her hand shook as she squeezed mine:her nails white. I told her that I wouldn't leave; that I was going to stay with her, hold her hand—they let the partners do that. She asked me, softly, to leave, but I said no. I thought she was thinking of me, that she needed me there—I wanted to be strong, help. I talked to her about love for a minute, about how we were both on the table, both wearing paper, would both feel the hurt, and would help each

I can walk around the fence behind my house, on the outside, and look in through the tiny slots between the boards. If I walk quickly enough, I see a kinescope version of my house—each space in the fence a single frame in a short film that pans the back of the house: wisteria in purple flower pulling the trellis off the side of the house, Frederick underneath on the patio in the mouth of a frog-shaped sandbox. The motion isn't perfectly smooth, but the magic, the life that's behind those boards comes through as it does not only in spite of, but because of them. That's what I have to do, what I'm trying to do with my words, with these words—put them down so that they can be read through like the slots in a kinescope. But they're too heavy, too self conscious to move, constantly drawing attention to themselves as boards.

The dancers I create are made of brick, the notes I try to play are heavy, rectangular, and fall into rigid lines. I have to tell you something that I can't say and that magic, that lunar, female, musical, language is the only way I can think of to do that—and it's unavailable to me.

I know that when I begin—when I tell you about the bad day we had two weeks ago; about arriving home from school and finding no macaroni and cheese; about the game we play in the car on the way to the Oso Grande[8], and the insignificant thing that happened there that night—when I tell you that story, the words will sit there, even as these do, and deny my attempts to animate them. Why?

I look at the letter again—look for the source of its magic—again. The feminists claim to write of the body, to appropriate the language that has excluded them from discourse, forbidden them self-expression. They are the oppressed seizing the tool of their oppression and using it subversively for their own ends—using it to speak and make themselves. Where is that here? Her letter sings and crackles with strength, with energy, but where is that coming from? Her body? Her textual politics? These abstract intellectual energies and ideals had to get out of her body and onto this paper somehow—she had to have held the pen in her hand and written—How is she so different from me?

She wrote this at the moment that she felt the most free—this letter, these letters vibrate with energy of liberation, of self appropriation in them—that is their magic. That is the magic I want[9], yet I can't use it.

I'm on the verge of that freedom myself. All I've got to do is tell you this story—this simple little story—

---

other through it. I remember two tears dropping from my eyes onto her paper gown. She let go of my hand, lifted the blanket, and got up off the table.

In the letter on the desk in front of me, to my left, she tells me that there had never been a time in her life when she felt as alone as she did at that moment on the table when I said those things.

She gave birth to Frederick because she didn't want me to hurt.

She left because this exhausted her

8 It seems that almost everything Frederick and I do is a game—everything that's one of those ritualistic, routine acts that must be done over and over· Laundry is a game with Frederick hiding in piles of dirty towels, undershirts and socks—the uncovered parts get tickled; Cat Box is a game of 'gonna put it on you' with loaded scoopers. In the car on the way to Oso Grande, it's the I've-gotta-go-pee-pee game.

This game began several months ago—we were on the freeway when he said it from his car seat in the back. I began racing through traffic, weaving in and out of cars singing the "gotta go pee-pee, gotta, gotta, gotta, gotta go pee-pee" song and looking back in the mirror with wild eyes. Frederick laughed so hard he wet his pants, his car seat, the back seat and still kept laughing.

So now it's a game. He waits until we're on the way and then "Ive gotta go pee-pee." I sing the song and swerve around and race to the gas station mini-mart. I pull up to a pump, reach into the back seat and sweep him up over my head. I smile at Shary through the window as I run around to the bathroom with Frederick laughing hysterically above my head.

It's not as bothersome as it might seem—it only happens about once or twice a week, and I can usually use a fill up about that often anyway—besides, it's fun for me, too. Frederick and I laugh at the helplessness of our condition as he stands on the edge of the urinal. And he always pees, too—we don't just go through the motions. It's like some kind of conditioned respose: trip to "Oh, Ghandi" = "I've gotta pee."

I don't know how he's able to do that.

9 I fell in love with a woman once—slowly and deeply

It's funny the more I think about how it actually felt—falling in love, I mean—the more I understand why they call it that. At first, I thought they were talking about that initial feeling you get—that little instant on the edge of a pool right after you lose your balance but before you hit the water Your head and your body accept what's going to happen and just give in, let go, and wait to get wet—a kind of peaceful resignation. That's what I used to think.

I know now that they call it falling in love not because it's like falling *into* something like a pool, where you just have that helpless moment for a second and then land and get control again—no, it's more like falling *in* something, in some medium, like air or time. It's like what a skydiver must feel in the air—like having that instant of falling all stretched out for miles, for years. That instant where your heart pumps one beat of dizzy air in your veins, gets pulled and stretched so that it's the falling itself that's the thing—not what you fall into. I think that's the feeling they're talking

for at the end of it I hear something, see something that can change me, free me. I have to tell it to you, though, put it into words, before the act is complete and my liberation is real. All I have to do is say it and it will be real—my words will ring with magic. Until then, I'm trapped—enjoying this weakness, this obsession—knowing that I can be free, but forever putting it off, holding it back,[10] torturing myself with the possibility that there is some way to finesse it—to say it without saying it, to be born without really leaving the womb, trying to keep the clipping of the cord from being too sudden.

Feminist writing. Writing of the body [11] Saying what can't be said.

I read over the pages I have just written and I see that I have been wrong from the start—I can't use this theory, appropriate this magic to tell my story—I can't because it's not a tool to be used. It's not just a means of achieving an end. They are magic, not just magic tricks, and I cannot just pick them up when they suit my needs. I have to say the unsayable; I have to try If I do, if I can, the magic will be there—I can't wait for the effect to shape its means. It doesn't work that way Waiting for that to happen will just keep me falling forever[12] I've got to act—write myself—stop falling—take the ground.[13]

---

about—those long periods without anything like the ground—at least, that's what it was like for me.

I fell in love with a woman once—her name was Judith.

She left after our son was born. She was exhausted, she said. I took up too much of her, she said, pushed her past the point of moderation—it became an all-or-nothing situation. I didn't know that falling as I was took up so much of her—it seems now that I was not only falling in her, falling in love, but clutching, grabbing, appropriating all I could as I fell.

It's been a long time now, and I do not want her back—I haven't had those thoughts in over a year And yet, there's something that I cling to still—something that I grabbed onto so tightly in my descent that it's almost wrenching to try to let it go. I think it's the feeling of falling itself—it's like if I give that up, I'll finally land and have to gain control again.

Trouble is, I don't know where the Hell I'll land if I ever can break this obsessive grip I have on that feeling. It's scary

10 Like orgasm.

11 Judith and I were working on our Masters at the same time. She tried to explain to me the politics of gender in language one morning at breakfast. I asked her what kinds of sentences had penises, if she could show me one. I really had no grasp of the concept. Even today, now that I've read and loved the theory, I still get it wrong.

She got up from the table, frustrated, furious, and left.

12 Orbit was described to Frederick and me at this year's faculty Halloween party as what happens when you are so far away from the planet that as you fall toward it, it curves out from under you. Basically, if you go out far enough, you can fall forever—always missing the ground by the same distance.

13 One reason Frederick and I shop at Oso Grande is because they have the tall shopping carts. Frederick likes to sit below the basket as we race the other shoppers up and down the aisles and feign crashes into pyramids of pineapple juice or soft-drink display We had gotten our macaroni and cheese and a few other things—I couldn't see him through the wire mesh of the bottom of the basket anymore—and were standing in line. I had to leave him in charge of the basket when I remembered we were out of ketchup.

As I returned, I saw an attractive woman speaking to my basket (Frederick underneath). He'd been pulling skirts again—he meets a lot of women that way

"Where is your Mommy?" I heard her say as I walked up.

"She's gone," he said—his head popped out to one side, he grinned and then went back under cover

"I hope she's coming back soon, or you're going to have to pay for all those groceries."

Frederick's head appeared on the other side of the basket, grinning.

"Nope, she's gone. She's gone."

One reason Frederick and I shop at Oso Grande is because they have the tall shopping carts. Frederick likes to sit below the basket as we race the other shoppers up and down the aisles and feign crashes into pyramids of pineapple juice or soft-drink display We had gotten our macaroni and cheese and a few other things—I couldn't see him through the wire mesh of the bottom of the basket any more—and were standing in line. I had to leave him in charge of the basket when I remembered we were out of ketchup.

As I returned, I saw an attractive woman speaking to my basket (Frederick underneath) He'd been pulling skirts again—he meets a lot of women that way

"Where is your mommy?" I heard her say as I walked up.

"She's gone," he said—his head popped out to one side. He grinned and then went back under cover

"I hope she's coming back soon, or you're going to have to pay for all those groceries."

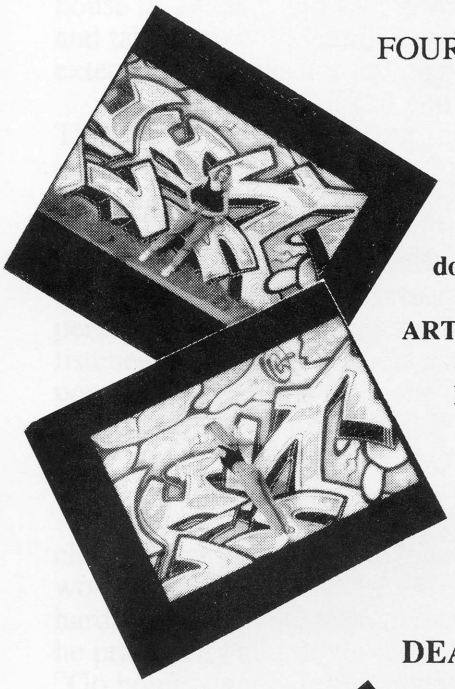
Frederick's head appeared on the other side of the basket, grinning.

"Nope, she's gone. She's gone."

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ESSAYS * FICTION • POETRY * ART

FOURTH EDITION OF FORCES, THE IDH JOURNAL



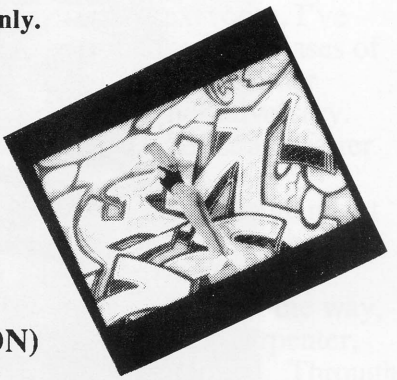
RULES FOR SUBMISSION.

PAPERS: Submit an original manuscript of double-spaced, typewritten pages plus four blind copies

ARTWORK: Submit one original (or copy) of artwork only.

ENTRIES MAY BE BROUGHT OR MAILED TO:

PEGGY BROWN
ROOM H236
SPRING CREEK CAMPUS
2800 SPRING CREEK BLVD.
PLANO, TEXAS 75074



DEADLINES: APRIL 1, 1991 (FIFTH EDITION)
NOVEMBER 1, 1991 (SIXTH EDITION)