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Catherine Anne Brereton

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Catherine A. Brereton—Not The Usual Type



I was born in England and after living within a three mile radius of my birthplace for 38 years, in 2008 I made a life-changing decision and moved to Kentucky in order to start a new life with my partner and accomplish a long-held goal of completing a degree in English Literature. We now live happily with our two daughters and an ever-changing number of cats. My decision has been nothing other than positive.

I am currently a Junior, majoring in English and Gender and Women's Studies. I was a Chellgren Fellow in 2010 and a Gaines Fellow during the 2011-2012 academic year. At the University of Kentucky I have had the privilege of working with faculty members who have helped me realize my academic potential. I have been fortunate enough to win several awards and have presented academic papers at a variety of conferences. I continue to look forward to the many more academic challenges that the University of Kentucky can offer me.

My immediate goal is to attend graduate school, either to complete an MFA in creative writing or a PhD in literature. Writing, whether creative (as with this piece) or academic, is critical to my long term plans. I am continually working towards having my nonfiction pieces published for a wider audience, and in the long term future would like to combine a writing career with a teaching career.

This project required a great deal of self-examination, much of which was not pleasant! The most valuable part, though, came from taking an emotional and difficult experience and transforming it into a piece of work that engages and pleases the reader. During the writing of this piece of work my mentor, Lynn Pruett, offered an exceptional level of advice. She critiqued my work in a way that enabled me to make positive changes whilst still retaining my style as a writer. I very much appreciated her ability to identify ways in which I could improve my work without losing the essence of my message.

Faculty Mentor: Lynn Pruett

Not The Usual Type succeeds masterfully as a personal essay because of its intelligent design. It avoids the common pitfall many memoirs fall into: recording chronological events that have no formal relationship. In this outstanding piece, the structure, the choice of the time of the telling, the complication of character, the unreliable narrator who manipulates while managing to gain the reader's sympathy—who hasn't behaved badly in the pursuit of love?—and above all, the beautiful contemplative writing, all cohere to form a sophisticated and riveting true tale.

Not The Usual Type is circular in construction, starting with an image of a sexy woman on a couch and ending with a tired one expressing enduring love. In between there are dramatic power shifts among a triangle of women, the professor, the narrator, and the girl that keeps the outcome in suspense.

The fact that the narrator knows the story ended satisfactorily moves some of the intensity of the lived experience but allows for the contemplation of beauty, control, and perspective in the current telling. This is an authorial choice that showcases Brereton's mighty gifts as a writer. Thus, the sturdy underpinnings and seemingly airy prose fuse in an astonishing work of literary merit.

She told me that I wasn't her usual type. Reclining arrogantly on my couch, she extended her arms upwards, clasped her hands behind her head and crossed one jean-clad thigh nonchalantly above the other. I smiled a half-smile in response, curling up the corners of my freshly-glossed lips and discreetly licking my incisors, then closing my eyes for just a fraction too long before meeting hers as they returned from their wandering gaze. She was locked in my sight. "I don't have a type." It was a lie, although only I knew it then and still chose mostly to deny it. She would come to know it much, much later.

She pulled me to her, across the couch, and I let myself be pulled, unresisting, pliant, consenting, and not her usual type. Behind closed doors, on the chocolate brown leather couch in a room with pale carpets and low lights, a room with roses and carnations, and a fire burning hotly in the iron stove, we made love. I rose to the challenge of not being her usual type and afterwards she smiled, and held me in her arms while she twisted long strands of red hair in her unaccustomed fingers. In another room the phone rang out shrilly, five piercing rings before the surrogate answering machine stepped in and the caller replaced the receiver with a disappointed click. I closed my eyes against her collar bone and slid my hand further beneath the small of her back.

We had met, Guitar Girl and I, in a bar called Eden where Eve eschewed Adam in favour of her more pleasing reflection. There I too had fixed my eyes, pinned with vain desire, a novelty in heels and mascara, nursing a glass of Pinot Grigio. She was like all the others, trademark low-slung jeans, fitted shirt. Predictable. An easy mark. My mood was dangerous; I projected gentle flirtation and easy charm and slid under her radar. By the end of the night, I had her number; I forgot to give her mine. We danced around each other that night. She was briefly awkward then, and I was briefly confident—too confident—nursing a broken ego well hidden under numerous coats of lash-lengthening mascara. She was a distraction, a challenge, if you will, and I was intoxicated at the prospect of being noticed in a place where like attracts like and where I wasn't the usual type.

I left the bar without her, her choice. She was playing hard to get. I didn't disappoint and entered into the chase, determined to let her think she had been the one doing the chasing. Later, barefoot upon the cold terracotta tiles of my tiny kitchen, I glanced across at the unblinking answering machine and the house phone lying mute in its cradle, and contemplated the person who wasn't calling me that night, the person who was lying in another's arms in a Denver hotel an ocean and five thousand miles away. To compensate, I made late-night toast and punched out Guitar Girl's freshly-acquired number on my phone. My careless fingers left smears of butter on the sleek plastic. Within an hour, we had a date. I made vague promises to feed her the next weekend, skirting deliciously around precisely which appetite I intended to satisfy.

Midweek, The Professor returned from her Denver soiree. She called me from the airport, having untangled herself from the arms of the Other. I told her, strategically, of my plans for Guitar Girl. She sent sounds of encouragement down slender ocean-spanning optic fibres. I bit my lip and refused to ask her about Denver. We were back on familiar territory and quickly resumed the routine of our denial. She called me, I called her; we conversed about everything and nothing for hours of our days. We had learned to straddle time-zones, I grew accustomed to saying goodnight at 3am, and she grew accustomed to a 2am good morning. The easy pattern of our non-relationship decorated our lives.

Date night with Guitar Girl inched closer. I considered what to feed her, wondering if it would be gauche to offer her the same quiche that The Professor had seduced me with just three months previously. She was due to arrive at 7pm. I taunted The Professor with her imminent arrival; in return she feigned nonchalance and wished us a pleasant evening. I hung up the phone as Guitar Girl knocked on the door.

The overnight bag held in her hand took me by surprise; I hadn't expected her expectations. The neat bunch of sugar-pink carnations nestled in a swathe of baby's breath that she clutched in her other hand was naively predictable. Her glance swept across the room where we would later make love and rested upon the large, elegant bouquet of cream lilies and roses sitting discreetly in the corner, observing the newcomer with a territorial eye. I inhaled the sour scent of her anxiety rising from beneath the subtle fragrance of her garage-bought flowers and discreet cologne. Only a slight pressing of her lips gave her away. I took the innocent carnations with lowered lashes and an all-encompassing smile and led her into the kitchen where she slipped her arms around my waist and lowered her chin to rest upon my shoulder whilst I stirred cream and brandy together in a bright copper pan. Her familiarity was as disconcerting as the bag that lay hopefully at the foot of the stairs. I pushed away my reservations and left her arms where they were.

On paper, we were perfect, the ideal couple, and for a while I convinced myself that given enough time we could be perfect in the flesh. And indeed, she had a very particular loveliness of her own, a certain charm. She lived two hours away from me in a bleak, northern town accessed only by a perilous, summit-climbing road that frequently succumbed to fog and ice even when the surrounding valleys were bathed in springtime. In her workday world she took photographs and designed something—I never quite understood what but, truth be told, I never really asked and if she ever told me I wasn't really listening. She had an eye for beauty and an ear for music; on the many nights we weren't together she wrote songs that she brought eagerly to me and would play on an old acoustic guitar, perched on a low pine chair while I cooked her pasta and poured her wine. We shared a love of art and a taste in music but I failed to understand her passion for old buildings; she, in turn, was left cold and confused by the poetry books piled high in the room with the low lights and the roses. I hoped the music and the paintings would be enough but when she was absent I made phone calls across the Atlantic, sating myself with The Professor's recitations of Donne, Marvell, and Milton.

I allowed her fully into my bed but gave her only limited access to my life and skirted around making plans for the future, always deliberately vague about when I would see her again. In the lonely late afternoon I would call her and invite her over the same evening and she, no

matter what her plans, would drop everything even though she was allergic to my cats and I refused to let her stay overnight; she had always gone by the time my phone rang at midnight. She fell in love anyway; I pretended not to notice. The Professor pretended not to care but still wrote poems that she emailed to me when I eventually slept.

In April, I broke my unwritten rule; she could stay. The Professor was making tenuous plans with the Denver Other and I was scorned and vengeful. I told her not to call me and took Guitar Girl to bed early, showering her with affection that she lapped up hungrily. At 2am, shattering the silence, the phone at the side of my bed rang. Without a thought for the woman sleeping innocently at my side and with an instinctive knowledge of exactly where the phone lay, I picked up. Hushed tones.

“She’s still there with you, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

Guitar Girl, dragged rudely from her dreams, tightened her arm around my waist and curled in beside me.

“I hate that. I hate that she’s there beside you, that she gets to hear you breathing when you sleep, that she gets to see you when you wake. It should be me.”

“Yes.”

I had moved the goalposts and The Professor wanted to be back in the game. Guitar Girl, suspicious, lifted her head and I saw the weak light from the street lamp outside reflect from her eyes and illuminate her pale skin.

“I should go. Sleep well.”

With that, she was gone, her voice replaced by the dial tone. I lay down and turned to Guitar Girl with lies dripping from my lips.

“Wrong number.”

I pulled her to me and made her forget.

Monday morning, 5:21 a.m., my email registered a solitary new message.

“I’ve been up thinking a lot of the night/morning. I hate the way I felt last evening and the way I vaguely continue to feel this morning. I can only assume that the psychological process of transformation I’m undergoing--which, I must say, is about as subtle and convenient as a sledgehammer twixt the eyes--is having a deleterious effect on my usual ability to compartmentalize just about everything. (Verbosity is a sign of nervousness, wouldn’t you say?)”

Oh, what to say? Call the spade a spade, then. I’m in love with you. I feel closer to you 4,000 miles away than anyone else I can think of. And, alas, that doesn’t make the miles disappear, doesn’t change the fact that a relationship with you would be painful and difficult, if not finally impossible. No, all that remains painfully true. Also painfully true that I must Catherine love, to adulterate Sir Philip Sidney. I still check flights to England, still harbor fantasies that I can figure out a way.... But something changed for me last night, when I called and I realized she was still there; and probably making love to you. In short, I can’t deal with it--not at least in the way I have been. I can’t stop talking to you; I know that. I need you too much. But it all changed for me last night....”

I walked for a long time that afternoon. Spring was fervent and my restless feet carried me down country tracks bustling with activity. The hawthorn bushes were just beginning to crowd onto the lanes, sporting tightly furled leaves, verdant and neon-bright, and an abundance of tiny baby-pink buds waiting to erupt into delicate blooms. The air was fresh and damp, the new grass springy beneath my feet and I soaked up the hopefulness of it all. And, like Keats, I too felt that for many a time I had been half in love with an easeful Death of my own making, a suspension of life, a drowsy numbness. But now what? Would I fly to her? Or she to me? Like the daffodils fluttering bravely at my feet, perhaps I really liked the tossing.

I thought of her, The Professor, as the fields wrapped me in their safe familiarity. I imagined a time when I might walk with her through the same fields, imagined showing her the hills I had grown up in, the pathways I had wandered since being a child. I sent out a silent plea that she would never hear. Come, madam, come.

And there was still Guitar Girl, talking of introducing me to her friends, hinting now of plans beyond the weekend and calling me hers.

She came that night, Guitar Girl, and like a coward I took her once again into my bed. On my back she traced her love with a single finger

and with a low voice she whispered it into my ear. I closed my eyes and pretended not to hear. She sighed and laughed a gentle laugh and defensively reminded me that I wasn't her usual type as she silently denied the fact that she knew now she wasn't mine.

It ended far later than it should have done in a way that it shouldn't have done. Confused by my sudden withdrawal Guitar Girl began to press for more, for definition to our relationship and a future. I met her in a tea shop not far from her bleak northern town on a day when spring was at its height and the sunlight painted the moss-ridden walls of old smoke-stained buildings with riches. For the first time I was stepping into her territory, not to meet her but to leave her. We sipped hot tea, poured from a tourist-pleasing teapot adorned with chintzy roses and she reached across the table for my hand, twisting the engraved silver ring I always wore.

"This is such a pretty ring. What does it mean?"

"It's Hebrew." That was the first real truth I'd spoken to her. I hid the cruelty of the second truth. "I don't know what it means, I just like the way it looks."

How could I tell her, sitting across from me with hope etched on her face, that it was given to me by another woman, how could I tell her what the inscription said or how it meant that I was never to have been hers? *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*. The Professor had sent it to me, hidden in a purple silk bag, with a note thanking me for the most beautiful weekend of her life. A week after that, she cancelled her flight to England and told me it was over before it had even begun. She asked me to wear the ring regardless, but I had needed no prompting. It had remained on my finger ever since.

We left the dimly lit tea shop and emerged, blinking like newborns, into the sun. Guitar Girl held my hand as we walked along the banks of a still canal where new ducklings wobbled in the murky water. She pulled a camera out of her bag to snap pictures of the bluebells crowding the slopes alongside our path, finally releasing me to crouch low, twist her head, change the angle of her lens, seek out the shadows that would make her images work, anything to delay what she knew was inevitably coming.

"I'm sorry."

"Why? I don't understand why?"

The bitchy urge to tell her that I wasn't her usual type anyway rose in my mind. I resisted it and instead relied on old lies, used by many before me.

"It isn't you, you're lovely. It's me. I'm just not ready for this right now."

"Can't we carry on as we were then? No pressure, I promise, just some dates now and then?"

I shook my head and leant over the wooden railings of a battered footbridge, watching our reflections shimmer in the water only to be shattered when the ducklings bobbed across. She moved next to me and put her hand on my shoulder, trying to convince me that given enough time we could work things out. What she hoped but didn't say was that given enough time I would forget the shadowy figure that she saw standing at the side of our bed, that I'd take off the engraved silver ring that she knew I had lied about and give her the chance she had always deserved, the chance to be truly lovely, the chance to be my type. Her pain and confusion was tangible, it hung in the air, captured in the heady scent of bluebells and framed in gilt sunshine. I held her for a short while when we said goodbye. She didn't try to pull away.

On a bright morning five weeks later I waited in an airport arrivals lounge. The flight had been on time, and uneventful. Anxiety and anticipation filled the fluorescent air; ahead of me the pneumatically controlled doors swung back and forth releasing weary travelers who dragged heavy cases across the expanse of inoffensive coffee-stained carpeting. Finally, she was there, much smaller than I recalled, more slender, and tired-looking. She glanced at me through heavy-rimmed glasses, momentarily self-conscious then unexpectedly stopping amidst the throng of impatient loved ones as if cold feet or second thoughts had overtaken her. She dropped the handle of her beaten red suitcase, smiled and reached up; tipping the brim of the cowboy hat perched on top of her head. As she did so, the light caught on a silver ring resting innocuously on her finger, reflecting in irregular angles from the engraved symbols. *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*.

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