

Dale Rigby

THE DEAD SKIN SCROLLS

How many times do the forced movements of our face bear witness to the thoughts that we were holding secret, and betray us to those present. The same cause that animates this member also animates, without our knowledge, the hearts, the lungs, and the pulse.

—Power of the imagination, Montaigne

I am going to try to bear witness to a blurry Polaroid of my naked body taken by my girlfriend—and first romantic love—in the late summer of 1979. Karen was nineteen, and were the camera turned around it would have revealed a smile as brave and devilish as mine. I was twenty and blessedly unable to pull off that stiff upper lip our culture mandates for its young men. About to go under the knife of both surgery and scrutiny, I appear to be mocking the moment, my glinting eyes lit up like a flashing marquee for the latest coming-of-age film, *Chipper Dale*. And I guess I'm sharing this blurry, underexposed old photograph because that's a mask I sit here eighteen years later still trying to remove.

I'm posing mock heroic on a flowery bedspread, with bent knees and a sunburned smile, brandishing a cheap steak knife in my right hand. My physique looks fit from a summer loading trucks for United Parcel Service. A suburbanite, I have a farmer's tan from golfing. Stuck at a right angle, my pinkie finger can't fully clasp the knife handle because of a high fly ball I misjudged when I was nine. The bumpy terrain at my left knee testifies to a boyhood bout with Osgood Slaughter, a growing disease that put me on crutches for a month when I was eleven. My bellybutton is an innie. A blond cowlick sticks up from the crown of my head like the last fir at a distant tree line. The hair on my chest is sparse; that on my legs dense. Faking a wildman scream, my mouth is agape, but my tongue is nowhere in sight. It was stuck to the roof of my mouth at birth, and the muscle which allows us to trill our tongues towards our noses had to be snipped.

Then there is my foreskin.

If our bodies are road maps (as the scholars and the poets claim), there are stories and scars, private roads and social codes to be traced in that Polaroid.

But right now I'm squinting, as though I've misplaced my reading glasses. My eye's compulsion to travel on a bee-line straight to my foreskin is unerring. I was getting circumcised in the morning. Hidden in the Polaroid under both of our clever smiles is the quixotic hope that all the confusion could be fixed with one surgical swoop.

My foreskin tore in 1972 when I was fourteen. It was a languid, midsummer evening, and I was secluded with my girlfriend atop the concession stand overlooking the city pool in a small college town in northwest Ohio. Wearing white hiphugger shorts, facing away from me, she straddled my lap. The heh-battah hum of a softball game floated out over our hideaway and settled down somewhere on the seventh fairway of the golf course. We'd met several months before at the city recreation building; she, a grade older and several wiser, asked me to play ping-pong. We began exploring each other's bodies that summer, but I was still a most anxious virgin.

I was a precocious Jake Barnes. I'd discovered this same anxiousness one nervous night the *previous* summer in a taco stand at the county fair, my body shaking like Fats Domino on a rickety piano stool. "Hey," teased my more experienced ninth grade classmate, as I made a tentative try at unzipping her elephant-bottomed jeans, "that's for me to know, and you to find out."

Here's what I quickly found out: it was fun to touch my eager classmate's body, to both feel and inhale the slickness between her legs, and so to be bolstered by the intoxicating belief that she must like me; however, I also discovered something much less reassuring: when she fainted at touching *me* down there, lingering over my belt buckle, so self-assured, I shivered and locked up like an engine without antifreeze.

Was I *supposed* to be shaking so much?

Back at the city park, a year later, I was now acutely self-conscious of that question. My right hand was removing her halter top, while my left hand traced the thin fabric outlining her labia, when a startling pain spread through my groin like a wet towel whack. I had taken bad baseball hops before, a fall into a retching and creeping blackness, but this was a less incremental and more immediate wash.

"You're all red—you cut yourself," she shrilled, wringing her halter top into a tourniquet. I did? I was too shocked to be embarrassed.

I pulled my shorts down gingerly. My erection was gone. How I stumbled home, when the torment stopped, why I didn't tell my parents, what happened to the halter top tourniquet, or whether I stopped to pacify my girl-

friend are lost to memory; but what I saw next persists with crimson clarity: my white cotton underwear had turned a rich red color; the dorsal side of my penis, where the shaft meets the head, was bleeding, slowly trickling down my inner thigh like a melting snow cone onto the concession stand concrete. There were splotches on her white shorts. On my T-shirt. My ears were ringing.

Here's what I now know happened. I literally had a "tight foreskin" at fourteen, and it snapped during our dry humping. I must have had a full erection. Medical books tell me that only 4% of newborn males have a fully retractable foreskin. In 54% of cases the foreskin can be rolled back enough to expose the head of the penis. Which leaves the remaining 42% of foreskins at birth too tight to expose even the organ's tip. For most boys, however, the foreskin rolls down like a wrapper on a candy bar by the time they are four or five; though in extremely rare cases, a "pathological constriction of the prepuce," called *phimosis* (tight foreskin), can extend into adulthood.

I truly didn't know that this condition had extended into my own later boyhood until that night above the concession stand. My memory isn't exact, but I don't *recall* any problems rolling my foreskin back for hygienic reasons. And I masturbated. All the time. Like most boys. And yet the bleeding happened again not long afterwards.

We were naked in my bed, alone save for the hovering, life-sized black-on-white poster of Jimi Hendrix hanging above us, positioned so that my peers could see it from the street through my second-floor window. Everything I did was self-conscious at that age. I didn't know Jimi Hendrix from Dale Rigby, which I guess was precisely the point. He was hip and sexual (and dead), everything I, sprawled nervously on my back, was not. I know I was on my back only because of a disillusioning conversation we had that day strolling down the high school corridor, where it seemed like the lockers had ears. My girlfriend wasn't a virgin—and she was trying her best to remove me from the ranks. I suspect we acted with each other as though the earlier episode hadn't really happened.

"My friend says," she began earnestly, my stomach knotting like the shoelaces on my sneakers, "what she does when that happens is get on top." Her *friend*? People *know*? When *that* happens? That being my erection's quivering retreat, weekend after weekend, during her babysitting jobs that summer and fall.

But that night underneath my Jimi Hendrix poster my intractable foreskin bled again as my eager girlfriend tried to mount my retreating penis. The pain was less severe this time; in fact, my foreskin never tore again, though my girlfriend continued to try to mount me, unsuccessfully, until she finally gave me up for a more confident boyfriend. In a move that most make in infancy, my foreskin had finally stretched itself properly loose. I, on the other hand, had not. The shakes continued unabated, just as they had since that night in the taco stand. Oh, I tried to convince myself that the origin of my acute anxiety lay in these two episodes of *phimosis*, but that defied chronology. Besides, what originates a particular anxiety is frequently not at all what *maintains* it.

Silence did a grand job of that. It was six years before I would finally get into therapy for my performance anxiety. I believe now, and I believed all the more by the time I got into counseling, that a tight foreskin is a specious explanation for my anxiety. It's the reddest herring in the story of my penis. But this certitude didn't quell my enthusiasm when my therapist quickly suggested that getting circumcised might be an idea that couldn't hurt. A new penis. A new Dale. Why couldn't it be that easy?

II

This essay has frequently been, to be mindful of Montaigne's own discussion of male sexuality, a most "unruly member." I'm on terra firmer when making jokes about my public penis, a habit I learned in the locker room and can still find in the library stacks. Open a page of Mark Strage's eclectic *The Durable Fig Leaf* (1980), and it's easy to find the jocular mode operating, even when the topic is ostensibly serious: "Though no *firm figures* exist, it is likely that impotence is as common in the male as the common cold." That's the kind of sentence I'm trying to shake.

How *does* a man write about his penis without navel-gazing? Not surprisingly, I've found precious little autobiographical sexual writing by American men to help guide my way.

I don't want to make my penis an analogue for Hemingway's Jake Barnes or William Hurt's character in *The Big Chill*. Canonical writers have most often employed the vagaries of the penis as a character trait. William B. Ober points out in *Boswell's Clap*, a book of essays exploring the medical afflictions of literary men, that "the literary representation of psychogenic male impo-

tence is not voluminous,” mentioning that even Jake Barnes and Clifford Chatterley were “impotent as the result of injuries sustained in battle.”

In a short, meditative piece called *Coming*, essayist Michael Ventura resists this tendency to anthropomorphize his sexual confusion. He both documents a hushed history of talk about sex and places the blame for these “constipated silences” squarely on men. Ventura doesn’t mask his own story. He juxtaposes a few sketchy admissions about an “agonizing period of premature ejaculation,” with a wide and barren search for honest depictions in literature of a confusing (and private) physical fact many men know (and hide): to ejaculate is not necessarily to experience orgasm. In a classic case of gender bending, we learn that during his anxious times Ventura became proficient at *faking* orgasms (he says he was never caught). Ventura’s admission is treated a little too seriously—and cursorily—for my taste, but I think I understand the rhetorical restraints: how often when men’s bodies defy conventional scripts is the result treated with anything other than metaphor or humor?

In contemporary academic works, I find clever rhetorical routines about the “valorized penis,” the “postmodern penis,” and “the penis as the ultimate signifier.” The Body is a hot theoretical topic. The penis is now the site for a vast and fascinating spectrum of deconstructed readings. All save one: what’s it like to actually live with the body being written about?

Richard Rhodes’s *Making Love: An Erotic Odyssey* (1992) has been savaged by some reviewers who regard its sexual frankness as less healthy candor than an obsessional pandering to our culture of confession. That’s a charge that worries me. After all, the talking wounded show up on “Springer” and “Sally” to offer us daily confessionals through our television screens; and in the communion process an old feminist battle cry is twisted towards its logical commercial pathos: the *personal* is (now) *public*.

In *Portrait of My Body*, Philip Lopate mused recently that “this part of me, which is synecdochically identified with the male body (as the term ‘male member’ indicates) has given me both too little, and too much, information about what it means to be a man. It has a personality like a cat.” There isn’t a hint of navel gazing in Lopate’s admission that he has “two pee holes” and endured a dozen or so individual bouts with impotence. “Even to say the word ‘impotence’ aloud makes me nervous,” he tells us. “I used to tremble when I saw it in print, and its close relation ‘importance,’ if hastily scanned, had the same effect, as if they were publishing a secret about me.”

Lopate refuses to don, like Montaigne, the cod piece of metaphor. A lesson which teaches me that, however we manage to talk about our penises, we shouldn't forego the world of play for polemics. For when I look at my penis in the Polaroid, I don't see foremost a Jungian Joystick, a Love Muscle, a Phallos, a Wound, a Spear-Ritual, or a Patriarchal Penis. Like darts tossed at its effigy, these symbols leave only the dents of half-truths.

So I've waded through many drafts, each one grudgingly loosening its grip on the joke, the pun, the innuendo, but this remains a difficult story for me to handle. In my least secure moments, I fret to my wife that writing about the shakes might bring them back to the surface like cicadas. I remain acutely aware of every coy limp dick joke on the sitcoms. It's a buried story I've relegated to the safety of the post-coital confessional booth.

Would you *believe* that I didn't use to be able to keep it up?

Nah. No way. *You*.

Yes. Me. Throughout my teenaged years.

Playful confession can itself be a mask, however, if its intent is to deny that it is love we talk about when we talk about sex. And it remains far easier for me to talk about lost erections than lost dreams.

III

Call me *irregular*. Since my parents' decision to go against the surgical stampede (my father still has his foreskin, as does my younger brother), that singular flap of skin stretched well beyond epidermal matters. It was a rhetorical site. A cultural construction. An *anomaly*. In an atmosphere of ritual insouciance, some 90 to 98% of male babies born in American hospitals during the 1950s and 1960s were circumcised or "spockmarked," a reference to Dr. Spock's infamous advice in 1946: "I think circumcision is a fine idea, especially if most of the boys in the neighborhood are circumcised—then a boy feels regular."

I winced self-consciously in high school English when the class was told to memorize "a coonskin cap in the congressional cloakroom" as an alliterative mnemonic for *anomalous*. What did I need with coonskin caps? I was already the only boy on Bowling Green High School's basketball team sporting a foreskin.

My penis didn't fit the adjectives in the car commercials—streamlined, sleek, smooth—but looked more vaguely like it was covered by a tea cosy put

through the wash a few too many times. In this skewed estimation, my foreskin made my penis conspicuously droopier and more heavy-lidded than the other penises in the shower. I wanted a Corvette instead of a Rambler. And yet, though I was not immune from (or above) the wet towel sting of adolescent insult, I can't remember a single instance when my foreskin was the focus of bandying, bawdy or otherwise. This seems strange now. Sexual oneupmanships, like rock music, were the agreed upon safe shibboleths, bandying about our genitals akin to strumming the air guitar during study hall. When Whitey told the team after practice one day that he could "*hit the ceiling* with my cum," it was both boast and booster shot against the pleasures and the taboos we stroked nightly from our penises.

Other boys weren't so lucky, immunity-wise. Take our two starting forwards, known to the collective student body as "Slinky" and "Nuts." The etymology is easy: Slinky's penis was long; Nuts's testicles were large. How'd I escape an embarrassingly anatomical nickname? Even now I have to consult a slang dictionary to find some synonyms: Jewish nightcap, lace curtains (from the theatre), sheath, whickerbill, snapper. How come I wasn't called "Snapper" Rigby in the high school yearbook? Whereas "Slinky" and "Nuts" were branded by standard locker room motifs of size and heft, I escaped the hot iron. What earned me such benign, kid gloves treatment?

Maybe we didn't have a frame of reference—jocular or medical—for ribaldry about my conspicuous foreskin. Perhaps I also escaped teasing because my teammates feared something was a little too *wrong* with my penis to joke about. That's not as historically kooky as it sounds now, when the U.S. circumcision rate is down to almost 50%. Dr. Edward Wallerstein documents a late 60s study where 1 in 3 middle-class American wives guessed their husband's circumcision status incorrectly, never having even *heard* of a male body part called the foreskin. This ignorance was not due to prudishness. Intact American foreskins simply became increasingly rare after World War II.

So did adult circumcisions.

After fiddling with endless drafts, all of which have rendered my circumcision vaguely slapstick and theatrical, I've decided to trust that mode's integrity. I *did* treat my circumcision as a lark. However transparent, I tried to walk cocksure into that hospital. All that follows really happened—it was a role I knew how to play. Chipper Dale to the world, on the inside I was mortified by the thought that the entire hospital staff was probably laughing at me.

The anesthesiologist told me to relax and count backwards slowly . . . *twenty-five* . . . why was I doing this? . . . *twenty-four* . . . I'd lied to my roommate that it was because my girlfriend was Jewish . . . *twenty-three* . . . but maybe the pain and the confusion could be excised from the future . . . *twenty-two* . . . with one fell surgical swoop . . . *twenty-one* . . . would be the giddy first year in the rest of a great sex life.

A new penis. A new Dale. My mantra.

A month before, while visiting a urologist in Toledo, I was stashed in a sterile room for an oppressive half-hour in a sleeveless hospital gown to await the examination. My penis felt on trial. About to be "branded" like Chuck Connors on the old TV show. The urologist had the hurried gruffness of the veterinarian who fixed our cats. He'd probably make me cough while handling my testicles like Captain Queeg's steelies.

I didn't need that brusque urologist to tell me it wasn't a plumbing problem. There were locker room scare stories about catheters and so I searched the examination room for any object that looked remotely like what plumbers put down plugged kitchen sinks. Instead I found the doctor's clipboard. With Dr. Markman's clinical consultation: **Dale is in therapy with me for severe sexual dysfunction, and I would like him to be examined for any physiological problems.**

Severe sexual dysfunction?

In our two sessions together Dr. Markman and I had only talked about my *nervousness*.

A month later I awoke heady and licentious and asked two dreamy nurses whether they knew that cliterodectomies were far from rare in the United States as late as the 1930s. Even doped, it was second nature for me to focus on their bodies instead of mine.

"Can you *imagine* not having a clitoris?" I commiserated. The nurses delicately checked my dressing and let me flirt. I felt like Whitman before a field of wheat watching what laughter did to their undulating uniforms. Never before had I felt such abandon while my penis was being touched. "Dale," said the nurse with the curly hair who reminded me of my girlfriend, "be careful—it'll hurt to be hard, you know." I laughed and peeped under my hospital gown. My penis was purple, cradled in cotton gauze, like a stage in a butterfly's metamorphosis. Some propriety, nevertheless, remained in order. You see, I wasn't drugged enough to offer the nurse my gut reaction: believe me, it hurts more *not* to be hard.

IV

If foreskin is the mnemonic for a cartoon-captioned version of my Polaroid, then **impotence** is the bold-faced clinical caption. Like *severe sexual dysfunction*, I feel myself resisting these disembodied verdicts now with the same recoil I felt that day in the urologist's office. Today's preferred term is, I believe, "erectile insufficiency." However you cut it, I had trouble keeping lead in my pencil.

Impotence. The sweaty palm of that word captures bewildering memories of my failed teenage couplings. One night, while lying mostly naked with the girl I would soon take to the senior prom, discussing openly how one of her breasts was a different size than the other, I blurted out that I was still a virgin.

"But I am too," she reassured me. "There's nothing wrong with that at all."

Oh yes there was, I wanted to tell her. *I get the shakes*. I *really* get the shakes. But to admit as much, I probably thought, was to see my mask slip away. How would a confession of sexual inadequacy square with my outward demeanor, so self-confident in school, in sports, or with the standard progression of our own romantic plot, where I, the male, had made most of the overtures, in a cautious creep from first kiss to being naked together on her living room carpet? Couldn't she tell that I often started to shake when she moved to touch my penis, and that what she touched wasn't exactly robust? That she couldn't, that she was as inexperienced as I was nervous, probably explains how we were on that living room carpet in the first place. "But, I . . . didn't want to be. I mean I couldn't . . ." and the words trailed incomprehensibly off, as did our romance soon after.

My sexual recall of my high school years is more one of *loss* than of excruciating embarrassment or episodes of literal failure. Instead of full-blown nightmarish episodes of the "shakes," my wistful memories are mindful of how far the script I feared fell from that of the teen movies. The question in the movies was always, given the consequences, *should we*, not, given the shaky circumstances, *could he*.

Throughout high school I had an unremarkable number of back seat fondlings, go-in-the-bedroom-during-parties clutches, and so on, but I wasn't anxious to put myself in the position to fail like I'd done so often that summer when I was fourteen. Then, my senior year, I dated the aforementioned girl,

but I was never relaxed enough to slip my penis inside her vagina, even under the intoxication of the huge old back seat in my '67 Ford Galaxy and the raunchy campiness of the *Revenge of the Cheerleaders* at the drive-in, or the provocation of the prom ritual's liminal license. We never fucked, did it, went all the way, lost our cherries, slid home, screwed, made love, or even so much as broached the topic of birth control. Sadly, it's not the trips to the quarry, Cedar Point, the library, the drive-in, baseball games, or Senior Skip Day that I remember of our attachment. It's that I got the shakes. The same goes for my earlier romance at fourteen: I got the shakes.

Until college, only these two girls were privy to my intimate difficulties. Their knowledge was first-hand and unimpeachable, but otherwise I confided in nobody. And for years now, I have wanted to find an unassailable answer to *why* I got so preternaturally nervous. Why couldn't the body which took over on the basketball court find the same repose in a bed or a back seat? It stayed that way for the first year of college, through beer blasts and drunken boasts, the occasional young woman fumbling after a party with me either admiring or bemoaning my restraint about intercourse.

Looking at the Polaroid, I would have sworn the photographer, Karen, was my first adult confidante. And yet evidence suggests I wasn't able to maintain this quarantine very convincingly. Exhibit "B" is a short story I wrote for a college creative writing class which predates my Polaroid (and my counseling). It yields a different, perhaps a more blushing, glimpse behind my mask than the Polaroid. For the first time, I feel myself cringing while writing this essay, worried about the fallout from disclosure. Conspicuous foreskins, phallic deflowerings, adult circumcisions are safe glimpses next to this essay.

Its title: "I am Potent."

The story doesn't jibe with the mask I see in the Polaroid or with my sense that I relegated my bewilderment to an isolation chamber. After all, the story must have been *workshopped*. Its four double-spaced pages are sprinkled with attempted smatterings of Marx, Freud, Shakespeare, Tom Robbins, and whom-ever else I was being exposed to at the time. It's *way* overdetermined. It's Freudian fireworks, if you so choose. An habitual reader aflame with college English courses, this was the only outlet I knew for my anguish.

My story opened with a young janitor named Eunester A. Corn (Unicorn) waxing the floor of a downtown Toledo, Ohio drugstore:

Unicorn had been absentmindedly guiding his buffer to and fro across the drugstore tile until he decided to move a protruding lipstick display to one side. The display had been covering one of the meanest looking scuff marks this side of Godzilla's racquetball court. Raging black with charcoal breath, the scuff mark cindered Unicorn with derision. "You dirty filthy son of a shit eater. You miniscule piece of dust . . . you . . . you . . . JANITOR!" screamed the scruffy scuff mark.

My professor's only marginalia on that paragraph is a question mark besides my "scruffy scuff mark." I think I would have been a hands-off reader, too, especially considering what follows.

Unicorn took this attack on his livelihood very calmly. He reached over amongst the children's coloring books and picked up his can of spray wax. Gingerly uncorking the top, Unicorn shook it gently as though checking for the salt-shaker. Only now did his right thumb unlimber into a slow stalking dance. His body coiled into a submachine gun and . . . URRggggggghh!!! The guttural sounds were then drowned by Pssstt! PSSTTTTT! and finally FZZZZZZZZZZZZzzzzz! The weapon lay spent in his hands, and the scuff mark lay choking under a museum load of wax.

There follows a short dissertation on the technique of buffing a floor with a machine that has "been known to careen across four aisles at the mere suggestion of wetness." Finally, though, Unicorn does manage to take the buffer to the scuff mark:

Unicorn wasn't sure why the scuff mark had bothered him so much. Maybe he was becoming more conscientious about his work. He felt relaxed and slightly embarrassed by the erection in his pants. Buffers had a tendency towards producing that elusive effect in him—they are probably the world's biggest vibrators. He dragged the buffer over towards the magazine racks . . . "You goddamned imbecilic excuse for a sanitary napkin!" piqued up the prickly scuff mark. The erection went away.

At this point the scene careens from Freud to Marx, as Unicorn, despondent over his custodial contretemps, takes off his clothes, sits down on the buffer in the Thinker's classical pose, and turns his vim towards Capitalism and his own demeaning occupation, concluding with this resigned maxim: "You can SCUFF up the BUFF; But you cannot BUFF up the SCUFF."

"Why did you choose this title?" asked my professor, the director of the Creative Writing Program, delicately, in her office during our scheduled story conference. I remember her question, the angle at which we were sitting, even that I was wearing my motheaten, brown, Robert Bruce sweater, but I don't remember my *response* to the question. What could *I*, at age nineteen or twenty, have possibly replied to that unmasking question?

"I am Potent" was, of course, blatantly autobiographical. My out-of-school job involved pushing a buffer for a janitorial service, which provided too much free mental time for fretting about my sexual shakes. This frustration transformed into a loathing for my midnight shifts of stripping and waxing the floors of a large drugstore chain in Toledo, Ohio. A buffer *would*, in fact, go scooting into display cases if it encountered the wetness from a "museum load of wax"; but floor waxing, I think we can admit, was hardly on the young writer's mind.

What *was* on my mind? Did I have, as "I am Potent" could beg, some kind of castration anxiety, a deep-rooted fear of women? "I am Potent" is packed with pun, allusion, sophomoric metaphor, sexual innuendo. Unicorn's Marxist maxims, his naked classical pose, the relentlessly insecure yonic imagery, the thinly-veiled autobiographical obsession with the ebb and flow of his erection are indicators of the *hors de combat* of my sexual bewilderment rather than a call to arms. Unicorn is gasping for breath, suffocating under his prophecies of failure.

Contrary to my occasionally worst fears (probably received from my fiction reading where such confusion was often treated as a trope for just such character traits) my shakes weren't the symptom of deep-rooted trauma, guilt, or maladjustment. What I had was a self-fulfilling fear of failure at sex. I feared not being able to perform. One of the first rules I was given in counseling was *no more trying to have sex*. I was always trying so damn hard, staring down at myself the whole time like a cheerleader urging the team on. That's called "spectatoring" in the sex field.

One night, after only a few standard background sessions in therapy, I experienced a fantastic wet dream, the first that I remembered having since my early teens. Simply talking seemed to release the sexual confidence stymied by the hobgoblins of my anxiety. Those dreams were pedestrian enough—chance encounters underneath waterfalls with the winsome brunette in my English class, a windfall where every girl from my high school was lined up naked in the school gymnasium—and predictable: I imagined losing my erections even in my dreams. But this wet dream was fantastic as both symbolic release and deliciously tangible proof that change wasn't impossible. I could indeed be a *regular* boy.

V

How do I begin to end this essay? I am strongly tempted to find a “quest narrative,” which scholar David Jackson calls the “primary male autobiographical mode.” Like Humpty Dumpty, I could show you how I put the pieces of my penis back together again. The narrative would move inexorably from challenge towards success, accomplishment, tumescence, a tidy and not-unheroic version of the self. A 12-Step Program for erectile sufficiency.

But quest narratives or journeys to the deep masculine comprise somebody else's fictions. I have my own generic conventions to exorcise. Previous drafts of this essay have resembled “I am Potent” in tone, red herrings, and manic denial. Here's a representative stab I made earlier at a conclusion:

Unlike my tonsils, I didn't cart my foreskin home from the hospital like a trophy in a Mason jar. It never graced the Rigby family room as a mantelpiece. The sacred penile hood of Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, dispatched on New Year's Day, is rumored to be preserved in formaldehyde somewhere in the Middle East, floating in aqueous suspension for two millennia, waiting to be cured and read by some opportune Sanskrit scholar. Balzac wrote a group of stories lampooning this veneration, but I find affinity in that story, however farfetched. I can't match Jesus for vintage, but I do regard my own foreskin as a bit of a palimpsest.

Vintage, vantage. My Polaroid doesn't require formaldehyde, a Sanskrit scholar, Balzac's lampooning, or Jesus' imprimatur to be seen as a palimpsest.

Once I stopped worrying my hard-ons to death, sex became an easier topic for me than most. I had to learn an alternative to hushed silence—I *had* to learn that not talking about it *won't* make it go away. My younger brother, Barry, though he has tried, can't begin to understand the need behind this essay. Not only does his foreskin offer, in his estimation, a "lovely lubrication," but he was also spared the burden of hypertropic self-consciousness. I assume most men's sexual history is more like my brother's than mine. For some reason my anxiety was acute. At about age twelve I became overwhelmingly curious about sex; I remember reading books like "J's" *The Sensuous Woman*, and, remarkably, Masters and Johnson's little green book, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*. I even gave a book report in the seventh grade on *The Sensuous Woman*, delicately trying to explain oral sex esoterica like the butterfly flick to my classmates. My previous class presentation had been a stultifying, half-hour, year-by-year history of the Dodgers, complete with a sheaf of statistical hand-outs that didn't go over very well. No doubt my choice of *The Sensuous Woman* was an overreaction to my previous gaffe, but this wasn't an auspicious start: I was obviously trying way, way too hard.

Perhaps I took books like *Human Sexual Inadequacy* as prophecies. Maybe I scared myself into the shakes. That's the best hypothesis I have, but I am no longer fascinated by the first cause. Because I can finally bear witness to the Polaroid. Its center of gravity is not my naked body, my hairless chest, the knife, the cheap bedspread, the blond cowlick, or my bumpy knee; it's not my impending circumcision or the lead in my pencil. It's not even my foreskin.

After ten years in a shoe box, that smile fooled even me at first glance. I see a twenty-year-old man who was as desperate to maintain his erections as his sense of humor. My foreskincentric reading of my Polaroid was a conceit, like my smile, I could hide behind. I've decided I no longer need reading glasses for a squinting understanding of the Polaroid. There is a small, turquoise, totemic Phillies baseball cap placed on the far right bedpost. The hat was Karen's, and wearing it gave her a mischievous look, a devil-may-care confidence. That hat was her mask, projecting to the world a young woman untrammelled by family ghosts, a young woman seemingly confident, as all the books reassured, that my anxious problems weren't really her fault.

We moved to Berkeley shortly after my counseling. The hat came west with us, and Karen wore it the weekend we were stuck in Deadwood, South Dakota, because our fuel pump gave out halfway up the steep grade to Ca-

lamity Jane's grave. Gravity rolled us trunk first to a Sinclair gas station where a man old and crusty enough to have known Martha Jane herself tested the fuel pump by trying to suck gas out of it with his mouth. The closest Toyota parts were fifty miles away in Rapid City and this was 5 P.M. on a Friday. We walked a silent mile down to the Greyhound station and ordered a fuel pump with traveler's checks earmarked for our security deposit. Making love that night on a four-poster in Deadwood's renovated Franklin Hotel, we decided not to turn around.

In Berkeley, the Phillies hat sat on one of the bedposts in our ratty, Telegraph Avenue apartment. I could now keep it up, but we finally couldn't. On and off, seven years scrolled past, and we tried to keep it together. We tried hard. Love didn't desert us, nor did lovemaking fail us. We were finally exhausted by all the *trying*. Maybe that broken fuel pump in Deadwood was a harbinger for us, two lovers slowly slipping backwards, doomed by the gravity of all we overcame.

That's all too regular a story, isn't it?

Maybe I no longer need to explain away my shakes. I won't ever shake them because I am tattooed with their memory. They are as indelibly a part of my body as my bumpy, Osgood Slaughtered knee, and the spliced muscle in my tongue. Maybe I wanted an answer for talismanic purposes, the way Chinese believe the color red will fend off ghosts, or as garlic against the vampire's return, an anodyne I could stow under my pillow were the shakes ever to fight their way back from hibernation to the surface. But if my foreskin remains in aqueous suspension anywhere, it's a lot closer than the Middle East. It floats somewhere in the insoluble recesses of my body's memory cells, part of what still animates my heart, my lungs, and the pulse of my member. I welcome its tingle.

And why not. It will anyway.