

Brenda Ueland Prose Prize Winner

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VOICES

Each year just before Halloween, the Christmas season thudded into our house with the arrival of the Sears Roebuck *Wish Book*. The catalog wasn't about things but about a world unlike our neighborhood. None of the girls I knew sparkled like the towheaded models in the catalog. We had their straight haircuts and scrubbed fingernails, but our skin was dry and freckled, not peppermint pink and candy smooth. Our eyes lacked their wonder.

Wish Book children awoke to unsalted snow outside their wreathed doors. They wore starched plaid dresses and unscarred tights. If they wore knee socks, their knees weren't gray from pulling themselves across hardwood floors. They probably lived in homes with thick carpets. They walked upright and sat on couches that swallowed them like laps as they ate warm cookies and drank hot chocolate made with steamed milk, baking cocoa, and sugar.

"I want that," I told my mother, pointing to the robe on a little girl watching the train circle through Searsland Village. It was quilted pink satin with enormous pearl wafer buttons.

"You have a robe," my mother said. It was true. I had a quilted flannel robe, just

like the ones she'd sewn for my three sisters. Every year there was at least one identical handmade gift in four colors, four sizes, archived in annual photos of the four of us arranged by height on the couch.

"I want a pretty robe," I sassed.

"You look pretty in your robe. You look pretty in anything."

"I don't look like her," I said, pointing to the catalog.

"You don't look like her, that's why. You have to pick something with a letter on it, like this."

I began to understand that we're not really meant to choose. The catalog chooses for us, and we engage in a process of elimination until the buyer and the catalog compromise on what is available. There was no point in arguing with my mother and the catalog, and no point in putting the robe on my list. It wasn't for sale.

We lived in a turn-of-the-century Victorian house in a neighborhood of young families and widows. Many of the older women, whose husbands had been immigrant granite workers, still spoke French or Italian. We had our own Strega Nona, an Italian widow who carried hard candy in the pockets of her flowered apron and whose kitchen smelled as if it were papered with cabbage and oregano. Her feet, at least a size 10, turned a 30-degree angle at her ankles, but the way she wore her bones made her all the more commanding. She sucked hard on butterscotch as she thumped us to her waist with hands stiff as garden claws and shouted, "Such good kids." That's all it was to us, a butterscotch accent.

To this day I don't understand what my parents were thinking that Christmas they gave me Lester, a black ventriloquist dummy. The package was the size of our footstool. I ripped away the paper to find a black suitcase covered with colorful travel stickers in triangles, circles, even hexagons. I love suitcases for their emptiness, my faith that I'll fill them with something worth keeping or taking somewhere. My first thought was to fill it with used wrapping paper and travel to the storage hall at the top of the back stairs, where I might smooth away the day's crinkles beneath the snow-lit window. But when I lifted it, I felt something slide from one side to the other. I don't recall my parents watching me as I worked the clasps. It was as if this were truly a gift from Santa, as all the tags claimed.

The suitcase fell open to Lester's dark skin, his black Howdy Doody freckles, his mechanical jaw gaping an inanimate jeer. I picked him up and bounced my palms on his acrylic Afro. It was tight and springy, unlike the loose blonde curls on my sister's Barbie Beauty Fashion Head. Lester belonged to someone the way Charlie McCarthy belonged to Edgar Bergen, but I didn't know who; I'd never seen *him* on television. He would have been unreal if he were not propped there on my lap, silent and blinking as I blinked back.

The shock wasn't in getting a present I hadn't asked for. The year before, I'd received a mosaic tile kit even though my *Wish Book* list avoided craft kits. My parents might have hoped that mosaic work would train me to start with little pieces and build the big picture rather than doing it my way, starting with a whole and trying to identify the hundreds of jagged pieces needed to construct it. I animated every doll I owned with my

personality, imposing the whole like a new outfit, a snug, one-size-fits-all dress with buttons and lace and matching hat. My shock in suddenly owning Lester was in holding, for the first time, something *not* an extension of myself. Even my stuffed animals had a certain feminine Aryan quality with their white or blonde fur, their boneless cheeks, their lipless, embroidered smiles. Lester was at once the big picture and the smallest fragment I would frame and reframe at arm's length.

On Sunday nights we ate Campbell's soup or Bisquick pizza and took baths two at a time before *The Wonderful World of Disney*. When the story faded into "The End" and darkness closed around the castle, we marched single file past our father's recliner for kisses and followed our mother upstairs. My sisters shared one bedroom, and I slept down the hall in my brother's room, watching with fascination as he created Disney bubbles with his compass. I longed for math homework, believing it was the art of truth composed with shiny silver tools.

As I lay contemplating bubbles and numbers, waiting for Disney's magic to settle like silt in my blood, I heard my father laughing. Few things triggered my father's semi-automatic laugh the way Archie Bunker's bigotry did. Sometimes my brother went downstairs and joined my father for *All in the Family*. Even then, I heard only my father's laugh. I strained toward the ambiguous tones of their murmuring. When my father and I watched *Animal Kingdom*, he filled gaps in the dramatic narratives of predators and prey by further explaining why certain animals inevitably dominated. I still wonder what he told my brother about Archie's stereotypes of blacks and Jews when, in fact, we knew none to disprove them.

Years later, when Carroll O'Connor died, the media rolled away the stone and walked Archie Bunker from the tomb. I was in a motel in Steamboat, Colorado, mesmerized by repeated clips of Archie bellowing his philosophy of what God had intended with "thems there colored people." O'Connor's contemporaries praised his character for voicing the seemingly innocent racism of the average working-class American. They claimed Archie's uncensored bigotry hung in balance with Meathead's Civil Rights sympathies so that the sitcom did not support or condemn either character's attitudes. Theoretically, the show was a mirror of American political extremes shattered in thirty minutes into apolitical fragments. But seeing then what my father had watched for years, I couldn't believe it had meant nothing to him. If Archie's target had been diesel mechanics, Catholics, or any group my father knew well or belonged to, he would have challenged the stereotypes as bluntly as he defended his union and the Church. Seeing the old clips, I felt haunted by the laugh track, hearing my father laugh on cue.

Lester and I found our stage on the fifth tread of the attic stairs, facing a three-foot oval mirror. He came with an instruction manual, *How to Become a Ventriloquist*. First, I had to get comfortable with my dummy. I positioned him on my right thigh, working his jaw with my right hand. The first movement I gave him was to look in the mirror at our audience of two, then jerk his head toward me and drop his jaw in mock amazement, as if I'd just insulted him. I'd seen that on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and though Lester was not yet speaking to me, I practiced nonverbal gestures to lay the foundation for our symbiosis. I learned to nod and shake his head, to slump his shoulders, and to drop his head into his lap to express absolute exasperation. Most of his expression would come

through head movement. I over-exaggerated side-to-side glances, loving the aura of bigness created by his hair. It was better than all the home Toni's my mother and her friends gave each other on summer afternoons. No matter how I flopped and swung him, his hair didn't move.

During these bonding days, I began to feel attached to Lester in ways I had not experienced with my dolls. Unlike the blonde infants in the turquoise toy chest, he came with his own case that afforded him a place of his own. But he was unlike them in other ways as well. He offered me the silent strength of his maleness, making me ambivalent about my responsibility to give him a voice. I enjoyed his company, the mute story of his becoming. I even considered keeping our routine nonverbal, waving and twitching our dialogue like silent film characters cast in black and white.

By February, my family began to ask. "Does he talk yet?" How could I explain that I had yet to discover what he had to say? Secretly, we had been plodding through the ventriloquism manual. We were honeymooning in lesson one, "Getting to Know Your Dummy," but I knew the relationship had to move forward if Lester were to become anything more than the object of my affection. I entered lesson two, "Controlling Your Face." According to the manual, I was to maintain a relaxed countenance while my dummy spoke. My mouth should be set in a slight, open-lipped smile that would enable sound to escape without calling attention to its production. My jaw was to be loosely set, not clenched. I should avoid inadvertently flared nostrils and raised eyebrows that sometimes result from working too hard to relax the mouth and jaw. I practiced a fake, loose-lipped smile until I perfected the very look into which my mother's face settled when my father's relatives dropped in unexpectedly for banana

bread and Sanka on a Sunday afternoon.

Lesson three, “Exchanging Greetings with Your Dummy.” I had observed how Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy exchanged small talk at the beginning of their routine. So one afternoon, settled on the fifth tread, I asked Lester, “Hi, how are you today?” He could respond, “Okay. How are you?” without upsetting my countenance. But Charlie McCarthy was never just okay. We needed conflict, something to argue about. We needed bilabial banter. The difficulty, however, was that all of Lester’s sounds were to be produced without my lips and teeth so that I appeared silent as he spoke. *M* must become *n*, and *b*, *p*, *f*, and *v* must be pushed back into *th*. *W* must lose its lips to *l*.

For the time being, to save face with my family, I worked on strings of sound produced without the teeth and lips. “Are you hungry?” Lester asked me. “I’m starved,” I’d say, letting the *s* collide with the *t* as I raised my lip and wrinkled my face. I exhaled my *r* with all the freedom of one whose face moves while speaking. Then I would carry the show, rambling on about what my mother was making for supper, how he could have some, too. Lester’s response would be to look around, asking with his eyes how he was supposed to eat beef stew with dumplings. He was decisive, saying “yes,” “okay,” or “no” to everything I said. Our relationship operated perfectly according to the obvious binaries: human/dummy, positive/negative. Our communication was unfettered as long as he felt no need for words like “maybe” or “probably.”

Margaret arrived one day in June. She rode up the hill in the back seat of Mr. and Mrs. Rossi’s silver Saab and stepped into the neighborhood as if she’d only just returned

from swimming lessons or the grocery store. She was the first black person to enter our lives, part of the Fresh Air Program that matched inner-city children with host families for two weeks of “country living.” She called her hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Rossi, “Art” and “Anita,” as if they were old friends. “A-ni-ta,” she’d say, delivering three distinct syllables while all the neighborhood women just called her “Niter.” Margaret brought a certain grace to the neighborhood that I didn’t know if I should associate with her being black, fourteen, or from New York City.

I envied Margaret’s hair. She wore seven or eight tight braids that didn’t absorb water when she swam. They were secured with elastic and bright baubles bigger than marbles. I loved the way the sun shone through the colored beads lying against her scalp. She sparkled. And she talked loud, opening her vowels as if they might just drift through the fresh Vermont air back toward New York. She talked about the boys she liked back home, the kind of bike she would ride if she lived in a neighborhood like ours, how Art and Anita let her eat cream cheese with olives on Ritz crackers before bed.

Margaret slipped so comfortably into the neighborhood that I felt confused. It wasn’t that we ignored color. Each time she met another one of the neighborhood children, she underwent the curious inspection of her palms, the soles of her feet, the texture of her braids. But she didn’t talk about being black, the way sitcom blacks did. She didn’t shout when we sang along with the radio, despite my father’s observation that all blacks screamed when they sang. In fact, Margaret seemed more like me than did the girls whose families owned granite sheds and occupied new houses in the country, beyond neighborhoods. Yes, she was different. But then so was our beloved Strega Nona with her swollen diphthongs and cabbage soup. During Margaret’s brief presence in the

neighborhood, our stereotypes began to fade like cheap fabric in the sun. Then, as easily as she had arrived, she left. For the rest of the summer I missed her colors, the ghosts of her feet moving across the solid blue bottom of our pool.

Our neighborhood had not consciously resisted integration. We were a remote, white, working class community. Civil Rights had no reason to enter our neighborhood ringing its bell like the ice cream truck. If it had, most of our parents would have risen from their recliners and at least pulled back the curtain to see what the fuss was about. The children, bored with summer reruns, might have rushed to the streets to see what it had to offer. But most likely, like anti-war efforts and the women's movement, Civil Rights wouldn't find us. Our neighborhood was off the political map. We occupied the unnamed interstices between Searsland and *Good Times*. It was as if we lived in a time and place existing between opposing magnet poles. Other worlds came close, we felt the draw toward some, but at a precise and unpredictable moment the approaching forces met and sent one another twisting off in different directions. Except for Margaret, we remained unmoved.

Lester and I sat stiffly on the footstool, self-conscious in the glare of the living room lamps. I was accustomed to leaning my elbow against the sixth tread when I held Lester. I felt exposed. My brother and sisters formed a semi-circle at our feet. My father sat in his recliner, my mother in her swivel rocker. We had performed for no one other than the mirror, and here we were preempting Disney. My family expected things to come to something, lumber to boats, fabric to clothing, books to book reports. After months of practice, Lester and I had mastered consonant substitutions, lessons five and

six, well enough to debut our act.

“Good evening ladies and gentleman. We have a really great show for you tonight. I’d like you to meet Lester. Lester, say good evening.” He turned to me in mock shyness, then slowly panned the crowd. They laughed. By now, our crudest nonverbals equalled my parents’ best. With a single side tilt of my head and an eyebrow raised into the tilt, I could have been my mother letting my father know that his fish sticks were still in the oven where she’d put them three hours ago when he called to say he was on his way. Lester, rolling his head for lack of moveable eyeballs, could have been my father expressing resignation.

“Good ethening. Who are these thethle and lat are they doing in ny lithing room?”

“Lester, this my family. They’re the ones who brought you here.”

Lester bowed in mock humility. “Thank you soooo nuch.”

Lester was the innocent outsider, able to ask anything and speak without censure through the mangled language of ventriloquism. To his innocence, I was the voice of knowing, the one with lips, teeth, and answers. Our routine consisted of slightly bawdy family humor, how we survived with only one bathroom, how we sometimes snuck a good look at the neighbors’ underwear that hung in their yards like gossip. My father didn’t laugh the way he laughed at Archie Bunker, but I could tell he was amused by my vaudeville efforts.

I was folding Lester into the rocking chair when my brother said matter-of-factly, “He sounds too much like you. He needs to sound,” he paused, “different.”

“Different how?”

“You know, like J. J. on *Good Times*.” I looked at Lester, face down in his lap,

his hair shining as if he'd been caught in the crossfire of my mother's Lemon Pledge. Suddenly I was the gutless one. Was Lester really nothing more than an extension of my ego? How could I have missed the me/him tension that should exist between the ventriloquist and her dummy? I thought about my lessons, my painstaking study of each step. Could I have missed the most important lesson, "How to Make Your Dummy Less Like You"? There was no small print, no warning on the suitcase: *Black English Vernacular Not Included*. But even if I had known, who else would he be? I knew little of myself at that age. To demonstrate alter ego the way Edgar Bergen did would take years of self study. More importantly, I lacked a real, black, male role model to imitate. My choices were limited to J.J., whose ghettoization stereotyped artists as well as blacks, and Mr. Jefferson, Archie Bunker's neighbor for whom "moving on up" meant becoming a token middle class "honkie." Lester was nothing without me. So far, he was nothing more than me. If he were to assume a persona of his own, I would have to become, in some way, a black male.

Lester and I were sitting on tread five when my father opened the stairway door to put his lunchbox on the bottom step.

"Hi Dad. Lester, say hi to Dad."

Lester swayed his shoulders, snapped his head forward like a turkey, and shouted, "Hey nan! La's uth? Dy-no-nite!"

Although my father and I knew that he wasn't allowed to sit anywhere in the house in his greasy uniform, Lester's new identity proved riveting beyond house rules.

As he sat down on the third tread, my father's face was dimly cast with disappointment. It was the look of painful regret that came over him when my sister tried to open a box with a screwdriver pointed towards her and almost lost her nostril when the tool slipped. Disappointment that he'd failed to tell us something because he had faith that we were smart enough to figure it out. When he said that my new act "made fun" of black people, I argued that Lester wasn't like us. He needed to sound like one of his *people*, another word I'd learned from television. The contradiction between my father's response and his day-to-day behavior confused me. He said I shouldn't mock black people, but week after week he watched this happen on television. Perhaps he thought that seeing blacks participating as actors gave him permission to laugh. I understood only that I needed Lester's permission to make him sound like J.J., but without a voice he couldn't give me permission. Throughout the conversation, Lester sat mute and appropriately slumped, his finest performance ever.

For a long time after my failings with Lester, I clung to a longing for *people*. All I had was my family, my brother and sisters whose old shoes and worn foot patterns I would slide into as they outgrew them, my parents' relatives who lived even further from Searsland than we did, and my parents, the ones who bought into the neighborhood and conceived me behind the shades of the southern bedroom as if I were an idea, that abstraction that doesn't make sense until it's there between your legs screaming for air. No *people*. Only my family.