

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 18 *CutBank 18*

Article 41

Spring 1982

Contortions

Joan Colby

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Colby, Joan (1982) "Contortions," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 18 , Article 41.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss18/41>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

CONTORTIONS

Jonathan watches the naked lady hook a tassel over her nipple. It takes a moment to secure it so she can begin the contortion that causes it to twirl like a pinwheel. The wide screen magnifies the action. Her breasts look as if they had been let down by ropes like a boat's sails, and then suddenly caught by wind, they billow out, the nipples brown as the secret wounds of bananas. Jonathan's mother always says, "It's just ripeness," holding out the bruised fruit, but Jonathan recognizing that sick boozy odor, refuses to eat.

The lady turns her back and steps out of her g-string. Her fleshy haunches are those of a well-fed animal. Her face, turning to wink at Jonathan is garish. Jonathan feels the cutting edge of his mother's glance. He shuts his eyes. He can smell his mother's perfume — heavy and full-blown. It reminds him of great drooping heads of dark red roses. Jonathan opens his eyes. On the screen a man slides a sword down his throat. There is a trick to that probably like the one in which a magician saws a girl in half, but really she just pulls her legs up to her chest. The feet sticking out of the box are fakes. The girl is a contortionist.

Jonathan gets to see a lot of R-rated movies, because his father doesn't like to pay a babysitter and his mother says all forms of censorship are iniquitous. Jonathan's mother and father decide to do everything on the spur of the moment. When they get in the car, Jonathan asks, "Where are we going?" over and over, knowing there will never be an answer. Sometimes his father just drives until they come to a place, a park maybe, or a fast-food drive-in, and next thing, Jonathan is playing on the swings or eating a hamburger, catsup only.

Other times, his mother will say "Beach" and that's where they go, but on arriving it becomes apparent that none of them have a bathing suit, and Jonathan's father looks at picnickers gulping lemonade and forking potato salad, and says to Jonathan's mother, "Why don't you

ever think to pack a lunch?"

Then his mother snaps, "I didn't know we were going on a picnic," after which a volley of complaints goes back and forth like tired tennis balls over the invisible net that hangs between them. Once in a while, his mother makes a speech about planning ahead, but most of the time, she defends spontaneity, even though as far as Jonathan can see, generally her attitude means the good time they set out to have will be sabotaged.

After the carnival movie, Jonathan and his mother and father go to a pizza restaurant. Jonathan's father orders a beer. Jonathan orders a coke. He drinks half of it quickly and sucks an ice cube. "Don't drink that so fast," his father says. Jonathan planned to ask for a second coke when the pizza comes, but he realizes his father has already vetoed it. He shuttles the ice cube to the opposite side of his jaw. Jonathan's mother reads the menu. "I can never decide what to order," she declares, considering the possibilities of antipasto, Italian beef, or maybe lasagna. What they will have is pizza. A large half-cheese half-sausage.

Jonathan wriggles on the hard booth anxious to go home. He has eight mice. Two are pregnant. This morning, lifting the black one by the tail, he could detect squirms in her bulging sides. The mouse hung from his fingers fat and glossy. Her belly blown up as if by a bicycle pump.

Jonathan chomps another square of ice into diamonds. The glitter dazzles his teeth, the bones of his skull. He feels the red wave of a headache beginning. It crests forward beaching at the edge of his eyesocket.

"I have a headache. I don't feel good," Jonathan says.

"You ate that ice too fast," his mother tells him.

Jonathan lies on the rear car-seat watching the power poles blur past the window. This makes him feel sicker. Once home, he peers into the fishtank where his mice live. The black mouse is spreadeagled over a clutch of tiny pink commas. Each has a round greenish spot where an eye will be. They heave up and over each other trying to nurse. A last gelatinous glob is emerging from the black mouse's

vagina. All the mother mice huddle around, licking the pink sausages.

Jonathan wakes up. Something is squeaking. He turns on his bedroom light. A lean white father mouse has one of the pink babies in his mouth. He crouches behind the play-wheel tearing at it. His red eyes glare like stoplights.

The black mouse squats over a pile of wriggling. Jonathan counts seven babies. Nine originally. He lifts the mouse-castle built of Legos. Inside lies a dismembered pink thing, shredded in places. The mice flee from the secret heart of their castle.

Jonathan scoops out the remaining babies and their mother. He puts them in an empty fishbowl. In the morning he will make a better home for them. A temporary home, until the babies get bigger. Until they get hair and their eyes open.

He stares at the father mice. Two are ripping a piece of stale bread. Another is rocketing in the wheel. It runs perpetually forward, interstices flashing beneath its tiny pink gripping feet.

Jonathan wonders if the father-mice waited until dark to steal the babies. If they deliberately waited, or if the dark inspired them to dreadful acts, getting into their heads the way headaches slide into his.

In the morning the headache is still there, its crimson drumbeat creasing his skull. Clenching his lids, he sees a lineup of savage red mouse-eyes.

His mother says it's natural for father mice to eat their young. Jonathan wants to ask why, but he doesn't. His mother won't know and the question will only irritate her. He looks at the pinkies, little nude breasts and penises. Contorted. he wants to shut his eyes, but when he does sickness ripens and blooms in dozens of malformed pearls upon his forehead.