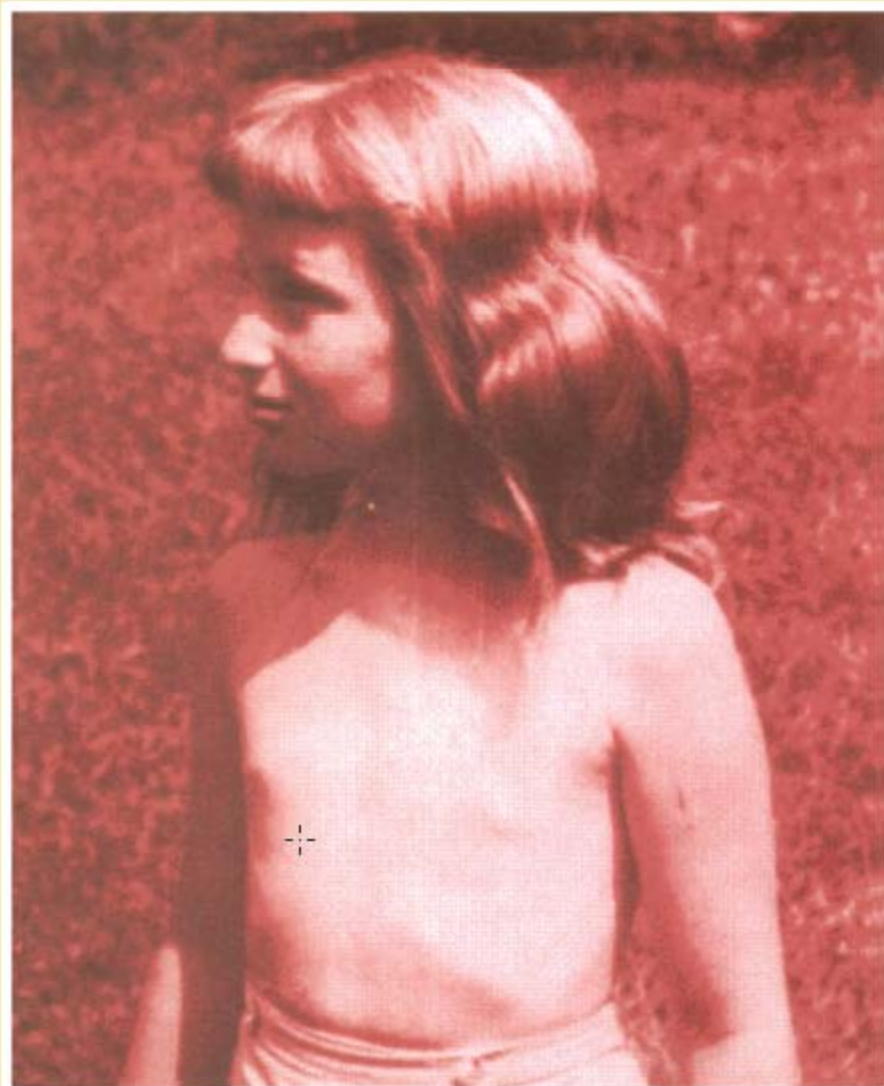


FAT ART • THIN ART



EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

FAT ART, THIN ART

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T H I N A R T

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

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■
Who fed this muse?

Colicky, premature,

not easy to supply, nor fun to love:

who powdered her behind and gave her food

the years when ("still a child herself almost")

her mother was too blue?

"Almost"—I *was* a child.

Blue, I was blue; even more I was green.

They mystified me too,

the red protuberant

organs hypertrophied with self-abuse

from which we thought back then

a muse like this emerged.

Her grandmother was willing, so I kept her,

lucky I could so choose.

My family fed this muse.

And it was in a suburb she was schooled,

like me, among assimilated Jews

in the American creed

that nothing could be very different from this

or much better. It could be much worse.

On TV she would watch the Museketeers.

At a parent-teacher conference, Mrs. Tarrant,

her fourth grade teacher, told me I didn't

"know what a treasure I had there" in her

which wounded me; who'd say such things for *me*?

And I minded that she went

so ardently to Mrs. Grove and Mrs. Wittman

and her friends Julie, Nancy, Don, Meganne, and Susy

and *their* moms, who she thought were wonder-moms.

For two years, I swear, she wouldn't let me

cook for her. I'd beg. She would refuse.

She acted like she thought I'd poison her—
that was the start of her terrifying revulsions.
(It's true, cooking was hard for me.)
And I, I always had to thank
the teachers and the friends who fed my muse.

I have to still; I want to.
Is there another story, a better story,
than the young muse in search of nurture, and finding it?

Today they'd call it an eating disorder
but I never heard of such another.
Greedier than a dog,
big-boned, rangy she grew up; was sometimes gaunt,
then fat—and those fat times
it was like somebody who hated her had tied
clumps of upholstery stuffing all around her frame.
The flesh fell off her just that easily, too. As if
she never quite digested
the things she ate—
not in the sense of storing them as muscle or as fat,
in some shape that would be her own shape;
say, she had no reserve.
It frightened me (I had my own "weight problem").
Her belly like a wineskin:
round, sometimes, as a kittenful of milk,
then the same day
slack like in a dustbowl photograph.
It meant that every person, all her life, who ever
stinted this muse one crumb
threatened (they didn't know it) her survival.

And every single hand that ever fed her, saved her life.

(Iciest of questions for a muse:
Is there any more where that came from?)

Of course, I was *in love* with her, a lot,
we were so close in age; but in the way of love
maybe it wasn't something she could use:
my eyes that dwelt then in her face;
the rhythm of my day
molded to her furies, her despondencies,
the gaiety of her, her way of switching
always ahead of me in her ragged right margin —
so I could never pay attention to *my* work.
Even today I've got nothing you'd call
"work habits," though I've worked so hard.
By the time she was 12
I was cemented to my muse's moods.
Maybe you'd say she didn't have a self?

But she would court me too!
There was this gruff, butch thing she'd do
like she was taking care of me in a scary world
that I ate up—who wouldn't?

Did I know

how all this grim sublimity
in the tight-budded, clumsy ingenue
could have been called as easily
depression as (what she would call it) speaking true?
Enough to worry: *that*, yes, I did know.
Worry, the only gift we always gave each other freely.

After that suburb, everything was news:
there we'd been used to always being used
to everything we saw. Not pleasure, okay,
but pleasantness, and plenty, a cautious plenty
we thought we could assume
—lucky we: almost imagined the world could—
and heterosexuals out the wazoo.
(Except at scout camp; what that place had been

for generations of baby lesbians
it was for her. And I, as well, was happy there.)

Later, after she'd run away from me
all those times I would wonder
sometimes how much her grueling aptitude
for silence and aversion
owed, maybe, to the domestic politics
of postwar—when the thing you asked your courage
would be, How to refuse?
How to go limp when you're hailed by the Law
in the shape of a state trooper with a dog;
to leave, like the Unfriendly Ten,
the names unnamed, to test your eloquence
in untestifying to the Committee.
A song my muse would like to sing
was, We shall not, we shall not be moved.
Except—another thing—she couldn't sing.

And with her bad feet, never learned to dance
through years and years of the lessons she liked
for the sociability, for all the pain. . . .
She thought—and later our friend Hal would say it to her—
it was in her nature as she was born
to be elastic, even graceful; she somewhere had
a voice to sing that was mobile
and affecting, and she wouldn't (of herself) have knocked
things over all the time or jerked so much
from the strange deadness to the strange
propulsions; somewhere *could* carry a tune.
Which she both liked, and found it painful, to believe.
Because, then, what had happened?
What was the spell that bound her throat and feet?
Tampered was a word she often used,
with (implied) a point of interrogation trailing after.

Questions I couldn't answer,
story I can't tell. Even probably I don't know it,
like the story of her leaving me;
of all the times she left, and stayed away; let *her*
tell, she's the muse. (If she will.) The plainest fact:

for years, while she was homeless, I was housed.

Was nourished, and gave nurture. Had my own
queer enough aesthetic, it turned out.
Had even my own loves, which weren't all hers.
Fat amazon, found courage, such as it was,
including if I had to
the courage to survive her. Learned more about the shape
my own refusals took:
never to claim. Never to disavow.

And did she, those years, toil, and did she spin?
Whose was the sanctuary that took her in?
Supply that kept her synapses synapping,
maybe it was the care she always had with her
from friends we'd shared, or hadn't,
the old loves—old attention—dear praises from of old—
dearest of all, severity, sobrieties—
the chaste, and sometimes the delirious, things.

Some friends to me unknown.

Many I know so well that even now
they are "our" dear ones.
Some dead; some are estranged.
Many, even, I now fear that I've forgotten.

This morning somehow she was at my side again—
it seemed so natural,
an "I" I guess I am when she is there.
(But maybe not the old one; maybe an "I" that fed
as much on the longing for her,

on the body of her long refusal
to be with me.) She beckoned, she
enfolded me; enfolded me with her.
She took the coffee cup out of my hands.
I fell into it all,
the vat of her unmakings, her returns,
bottomless eyes, her halting narrow tongue,
all the old saturnine
ways whose only hint
of the utopian is how she reckons
that somewhere in the making there are souls
she'll teach the skills of hearing her
silent No to the last
loamy and bitter reverberation.
Her presence seemed a promise to me, and I was happy.

* * *

So (Proust says), telling the truth
in our book
we lie in the dedication; but this one is no lie.

Only she and not I
(but here she is) as best she can,
gracelessly even, if graceless be her way
can proffer both our gratitude to those
beloved, who fed this muse.

■ —

Joy. He's himself today! He knows me!

No good outcomes with this disease
but good days, yes—that's the unit
for now, the day: good day, bad day.
From under the shadow
you wield this power to
be (or some days not to be) yourself,
to recognize and treat me as
(or some days not to), as *myself*.

Thus, to make me myself
by being recognizable to me;
not to unmake us both,
turning away,
joining your sullen new friends.

■
Grave, never offering back the face of my dear,
abey: let me take some more pictures
from this dramatic low angle by the footstool,
pictures I won't be in,
his face homing toward mine.
Catch him mugging with his pretty sisters
(one cuts her eyes drolly away,
clearing a place to be sad)

—and wait, please,
for the 1-Hr. Prints, then let me assemble
a big pseudo-David Hockney photo collage;
also hold on till I'm old enough to go instead,
even just tag along.