

The Unrhymables

Orange

“Oranges poranges—who said there ain’t no rhyme for oranges?” My sister and I loved this song from H.R. Pufnstuf, a show about—well, who can say? On Saturday mornings, we’d watch it with my father who sang the show’s theme song, “H.R. Pufnstuf, who’s your friend when things get rough?” “Stuff” and “rough,” real words, rhymed perfectly. Some critics now think that the friendly dragon Pufnstuf (along with *Scooby-Doo’s* Shaggy) was a stoner. I have to admit he did say, “Whoa dude!” a lot. Making up words to rhyme with oranges—ploranges, foranges, choranges—gave my sister and me hours of pleasure, and sometimes my dad would join in, asking, “What about broranges?”

Oranges are the state fruit of Florida, the place I live now, though I seldom see them in supermarkets. I read that most of the good oranges grown here are sent north. When I lived in New York, I’d buy oranges at the Korean grocer and then rub the pith onto my teeth to make them whiter, and it worked. Though ghosts are usually depicted as white, *Scooby-Doo’s* 10,000 Volt Ghost was orange. Shaggy and his friends figured out why. The ghost wasn’t a former workman killed by a power surge but a live person in an orange rubber suit hired to scare away townspeople. Casey Kasem, who was the voice of Shaggy, insists his character was a wholesome guy. Sid and Marty Kroft, the creators of *H.R. Pufnstuf*, maintain they used no intentional drug references.

Why do oranges seem less symbolically fraught than apples? There are exceptions, of course. Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* aligns oranges with repression, heterosexuality, the status quo. And some see the death of Jesus in blood oranges, popular in Sicily, which leads me to the movie *The Godfather* and all those oranges rolling across the street as Don Corleone gets shot. *The Godfather’s* set designer Dean Tavoularis said that the oranges were used to contrast against the dark, somber sets. Nothing about Jesus or sacrifice. My father died right before Thanksgiving, and there aren’t any words that rhyme with Normand. “Suze Orman?” I ventured a near rhyme, even though her surname has no “d.” My sister and I tried to brighten up the gray Rhode Island skies above the cemetery with bouquets of orange zinnias and daylilies.

Angst

Let's talk about angst. Let's talk about a word straining at its vest, too bulky to be the single syllable it is: a word in identity crisis. Let's talk about adjectives that cozy up to angst in the library, where understandably angst spends a lot of its time. Mostly a loner, angst has been spotted with *teen*—a girl with gap teeth who takes long pauses in the middle of her sentences, pauses that seem in fact to accentuate those gaps she chose over braces—and *existential*—a bad-boy type who saves his cigarette butts to keep an accurate record of the number of minutes he is shaving off his life. (Eight minutes per cigarette means 160 minutes per pack means 1600 minutes per carton . . .) He is also ideologically committed to stunting his growth.

Let's talk about angst—or *abbbbnst*, as my German friend says. In her version, I hear the sound I make when the doctor depresses my tongue. Angsty people have been known to lose their appetites, as if the tongue were truly depressed and couldn't muster the verve required for lifting or tasting food. But to be in angst isn't the same as being depressed. It isn't even exactly Kafkaesque, though I'd wager Gregor Samsa might claim them both—the angst at finding himself transformed giving way to the depression that drives him from home. His problems are well beyond semantic by the end.

Let's take it a shade lighter, if we can. Let's talk about the color of angst, which to my synesthetic mind is burnt-orange and smoldering like Velma's turtleneck sweater. Let's talk about angst and Velma Dinkley from *Scooby-Doo*, who hid hers well behind a magnifying lens and a hokey catch phrase. (*Jinkies!*) Let's talk about angst and the problem of the wobbly third wheel. Shaggy has Scooby. Fred has Daphne. When they split up, Velma is always somebody's tag-along.

Did you know the name Velma derives from Wilhelmina? Did you know it comes from the Greek for "strong-willed warrior"? Most popular in the United States in 1950, the name is favored by those who also like Penelope and Ophelia—women who waited for men, raveling, and women who stopped waiting for men.

When I told my father I liked Velma best, he patted my head. "Well, she does solve the mysteries," he said, "but don't you see how Daphne is the happier girl?"

Breadth

“Measure his woe the length and breadth of mine,” says Leonato in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Even though the play is considered one of Shakespeare’s great comedies, I think Leonato had a point. How can you comfort someone whose sadness is beyond what you comprehend? How can you say, “Hang in there!” without seeing that poster of a cartoon kitty, front paws clutching a pull-up bar? How can you hold the true breadth of another’s pain?

Breadth contains both bread and breath. Hatred and heart. Earth and herb. Heat and head. Herd and bather. Breadth contains my grandmother Bertha who died when I was thirteen, during my first period. Breadth contains bra, my new terrifying breasts. Breadth contains brat, my guilt for not visiting Bertha as much as I should have that last year. Breadth contains bard, my adolescent poems locked in a diary.

I didn’t have the breadth of experience to truly comfort my mother who had just lost her mother. My grandmother had lost her own mother when she was just thirteen because my great-grandmother had asthma like I do now. My grandmother’s mother slept in a chair so she wouldn’t choke. The family boiled eucalyptus for her, as there were no inhalers back then. Since her own mother was gone by the time my grandmother’s first period came, there was no one around to explain the bleeding. She ran into a barn and lay with the sheep, sure then that she was dying. She’d lived all these extra years.

My mother curled into me. She was warm and heaving. I was almost as tall as she. My hips almost the breadth of hers.

In the restroom of the funeral parlor was a full-length mirror on the inside door and another full-length mirror on the wall directly behind it. As I checked my lip gloss and smoothed the skirt my grandmother Bertha had sewn for me just a few weeks before, I caught the reflection of my mother behind me and there, in the mirror behind us, we stretched into infinity — my mother, then me. My mother, then me. My mother, then me. “Let’s go,” she said, touching my shoulder. I blinked, unable to articulate what I was seeing — ghosts, babies. Mother and daughter in bodies, in between.

We walked to my grandmother’s coffin. My mother knelt on the red velvet, then I squeezed in beside her.

Depth

My mother lost her mother the week I turned thirteen, the same day in fact that I lost the Miss Pre-Teen America Pageant. I had spent all summer preparing my speech, my sonatina, my runway turn and look. My grandmother had spent all summer preparing for the end. Sometimes I walked with a book on my head beside her hospital bed—what my mother promised would improve my posture: “Stop slouching! There’s nothing wrong with being tall!”

And my grandmother, whose lush gray curls had thinned to wisps of white, pointed at me: “Who does she think she is?”

“That’s *Julie*, Mama. That’s your *granddaughter*, Julie. You have *four* granddaughters . . .”

“I know!” she snapped, her IV lines shaking like so many tangled ghosts. “But Julie’s no beauty queen. *Blythe* is the beauty queen.”

Of course my grandmother was right. My mother blamed her outbursts on the drugs, but she had never been kind in real life—only blunt, which seemed to me now a better way of being honest. Maybe I could learn to love her after all.

Was I out of my depth when I discovered my mother was no longer home to monitor meals? My father ate with the television on. He helped himself to second helpings, assumed I did the same. Was I out of my depth when I learned to favor watermelon over bread, cantaloupe over chocolate, honeydew over every other food? They taught us at Lenten service that it meant nothing to give up something you didn’t love. Surely Jesus had savored his life on earth—all those loaves and fishes, to say nothing of that sweet red wine. If he could lay down his life for us, what could we relinquish from our own?

But it wasn’t Lent; it was August. My parents had paid someone to bulldoze our green-grass yard and carve out a swimming pool shaped like a kidney bean. I was so hungry by then everything resembled food. Was I out of my depth when I couldn’t stop counting the laps anymore? When I lost control of my limbs and felt the water creeping into my lungs? My father stood on the deck and called down, “How ’bout some popcorn and a movie, Smidge?” I saw him glassy above the water before I began to sink. The deep end was only nine feet, but my father dove in and saved me.

Purple

My sixth-grade teacher “Flat-As-A-Board” Hoard was the first teacher I had who was a Ms. She was lanky and wore a purple turtleneck under her overalls, the bib of which would flap this way and that. My guess is that Ms. Hoard was naturally thin, as she kept a jar of purple jellybeans right on top of her desk. She explained to us the tenets of feminism and how feminism, like a flag or a sports team, even had colors—purple, white, and gold, which symbolized loyalty, purity, and hope. She convinced us all—boys and girls alike—that we were at the crux of an amazing movement. We were part of the first class to have co-ed recess. The ERA was just being introduced to Congress. Though I didn’t have any purple shirts, I bought purple shoelaces for my sneakers.

When Ms. Hoard found out about her nickname, she didn’t get angry. Instead she told our class that we should love our bodies as they were, accept the miracle of them. My smile contained a wince as I was already quite aware of my pudginess. My grandmother sewed most of my outfits because back then clothing from stores cost too much. But, every once in a while, when I could choose something as a gift, I had to find it in the “chubette” pages of the Sears catalogue. Like Ms. Hoard, my grandmother must have accepted my body—she once let me eat a whole sleeve of her Walkers shortbread cookies.

My grandmother was Scottish and knew some Gaelic words and dialect. If in sixth grade I’d have known who Robert Burns was, I’d have asked her to help me make sense of his poem “Epistle to Mrs. Scott,” the last stanza of which contains these lines:

I’d be mair vauntie o’ my hap,
Douce hingin owre my curple,
Than ony ermine ever lap,
Or proud imperial purple . . .

“Curple” sounds suspiciously like “poranges” to me, but apparently it means the rump of a horse! I guess Burns might be saying he’s as proud of the modest clothes he wears over his bottom as a king wearing royal pants. I’m not sure if that’s it exactly, but I think Ms. Hoard would have applauded Robert Burns’ individualism (he’s probably the only poet to ever use the word “curple”), his appreciation of his attire, his station in life, and his rear.

Gulf

In simplest terms, gulf is a water word—a deep sea inlet surrounded by land with a narrow channel for passing in or out. Like middle school, a gulf is a likely place to drown.

When I skipped sixth grade, I learned about another gulf—wider than a gap, more brutal than a fissure. Let's call it the abyss between theory and practice, the void between ideal and real: to be the youngest student in the class, to be the flattest student in the class, and everyone watching, taking note, hell-bent on my burgeoning. Nancy Twedt approached me with a grin, then pressed her index fingers hard against my new breasts, shouting, "Ding dong!" at the top of her lungs. Sarah Hemme ran her hand up the back of my legs before gym. "Porcupine!" she screeched. "Someone should get this girl a razor for her birthday." Danica Wetzel put out a cigarette on a teacher's car. "Let's cut to the chase, Curlicue—do you even use tampons or what?"

I didn't. I hadn't yet begun to bleed. But I stopped at the 7-Eleven after school and spent two weeks' allowance on a blue box with a dubious diagram inside.

So a woman's body was a gulf, too, I realized. It scared me to think of the places I couldn't see or reach, but I dreaded mirrors more than my own ignorance. An older girl from the high school said: "You've only got two choices: either pop that cherry yourself or wait for the wrong boy to do it for you."

This was years before I saw *Carrie*, Sissy Spacek's stricken face in the shower as a chorus of girls shouted, "Plug it up! Plug it up!", pelting her with tampons and pads. This was years before my boyfriend said, "This won't hurt, I promise, because I love you." Before the gynecologist asked, the furrow deepening between her brows: "Were you ever heterosexual?" Before I learned that some poems have pauses called *caesuras* in the middle of the line—that necessary space for silence, reappraisal. Before I read Suzanne Paola's "Red Girl" and discovered language was a rescue raft sent out into the gulf where I was flailing:

To turn woman is to turn
body:
what you are is who's touched you,
where they've touched—

When she kissed me, my eyes fluttered, then closed. An honest desire engulfed me at last.

Month

I used my knuckles to figure out which months had thirty-one days and was glad when I went from one hand to the other for July and August, those two long months of summer. I felt ripped off on days when I sunned myself, pretending that I was uninterested in the pool, the bulky wet Kotex between my legs. I feared tampons as a teenager and never truly got the hang of them. I wore a pad on the day I was married because my period had been late so I was still dribbling as I said, "I do." I had tried hard to plan for a menses-free honeymoon, but periods weren't always as predictable as the moon, which doesn't really fall that neatly into calendar months even though "moon" and "month" are cognates, from the Latin for *cognatus* (blood relative.) I made my first communion in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, at Precious Blood Church—also known by its French name, *L'Eglise du Precieux Sang*. In French, moon and month—*lune* and *mois*—don't seem quite as close.

The Catholic Church devotes the month of July to Precious Blood, the sacrament brought through Jesus' pierced side at Calvary. But by the time I was old enough to question the logic, I was devoting the month of July to tanning. Rather than make my confirmation, I did my astrology chart, my sun sign and moon sign both in Gemini. At least four of me wrestled inside my brain. No wonder I was moody and quixotic, regardless of what time of the month it was.

When my friends and I found the stack of *Playboys* in the woods behind our street, we gawked at each Playmate of the Month. Transfixed, we were speechless before Miss April's skin that looked as though it had been shellacked. She stood nude, totally unembarrassed, in some kind of tiki hut. (Turn-ons: Tall guys. Men with senses of humor. Turn-offs: Bad hygiene. Rain.) Miss November leaned against a pinball machine, wearing only snakeskin boots. Miss February posed naked except for a scarf and bent toward the curling handles of a white ten-speed bike. None of the scenarios made any sense. None of these women wore a pad or had the telltale sign of a tampon string.

In a few months, construction started. Bulldozers took down the trees, ripped through all those magazines, and a new housing development sprouted.

Mulct

There are some words we never say aloud. *Mulct* is one of them. It sticks in the throat like glue. It tastes worse than oatmeal without the raisins and brown sugar. But we know about mulcts, don't we? I'd wager every mother's daughter does.

In high school, we had to pay for pads and tampons if we forgot our own, if we were caught off guard in the lunch line or on our way to mass. Sister Dorothy, the school nurse, would dispense Tylenol for a headache, Band-Aids for a cut, but feminine hygiene required a quarter, a pause before the glossy white box in the bathroom with *KOTEX* scripted in silver.

"It isn't fair," I whined. "I wanted to buy chocolate milk with that money."

"I'm surprised you're surprised," my mother said, as if it were a tacit understanding. "Women always earn less but pay more."

In a few years, I would work for a university that promised not to profit from women's bodies. Bathrooms were stocked with the same folded packets, the same paper sheaths, but all the doors to the glossy white boxes were open. *Take what you need, ladies. They're free.* I was young, I was broke, I was indignant. I didn't like the world I'd grown into, where men still made crude remarks about women "on the rag," women "riding the cotton pony." All the mulcts weren't fiscal, you see. Some taxes were attached to my sex that I could never file or pay.

And so I filled a bag with a dozen pads, thirty or forty tampons. I was going to take them all back, reclaim my power through pseudo-thievery. I would never shell out money again for the ignominy of a "sanitary napkin." As I trudged toward Forbes Avenue, I noticed people peering at me from under their hats. A few less subtle folks were laughing. Then, a student rolled past on a wobbly bike: "I think you have a hole in your purse," she murmured.

I did what they say you should never do, stopping then to look back. The pads formed a trail like fallen leaves, the tampons like twigs marking my boot-prints against the packed snow. Was I Gretel after all—a girl majoring in consequence, primed for retracing her steps? I let the bag fall from my shoulder. I summoned my breath. I strode on to the bus stop, numb.

Silver

I'd once hoped to make it to a silver anniversary, twenty-five years with the same person, our silver hair finally devoid of its childhood colors, our forks and knives in a drawer just so. My husband convinced me that our sterling tea set, an assortment of heavy platters, ladles, and serving spoons, would be enough to get us through retirement. His parents gave us the heirlooms when they moved to a smaller apartment, and we shipped them to our place in Florida and even hid them in a locked closet when we went on vacation. During the divorce, I forgot all about the silver. When my ex came to pick up his stuff, he forgot, too. It wasn't until a few months later, when I was totally broke from our settlement, that I remembered I might be rich! I unlocked the closet and hugged each bowl.

I drove to an antiques dealer, ready to cash in. *Maybe I'd give my husband half*, I told myself, *maybe I wouldn't*. My trunk was brimming. I was brimming. I took in just the teapot ready to bargain, ready to say there was more where this silver came from.

I put my sunglasses atop my head and walked into the dark world of cuckoo clocks, maroon Oriental rugs, and Victorian settees.

It was hot and dusty. I sneezed and adjusted my eyes before spotting a silver-haired man behind a glass case full of gold rings and watches. He was shuffling receipts.

"May I help you?" he asked.

I held out the teapot, ready to be a wealthy divorcée. I wondered if I'd have to report this windfall on my taxes, if my ex would somehow find out and sue me. Maybe I should give him his share even though he was mean.

"This is silver-plated," the man said.

I smiled as though that was a good thing.

"Not interested." The man went back to his paperwork.

When I pressed him, he explained the process of getting the thin layer of silver off the pot was more expensive than what the silver was worth.

"I have more in my trunk," I said, trying to be optimistic. "Maybe that stuff's sterling?"

The silver-haired man reluctantly followed me to my Honda to tell me things were once again not what I'd hoped. When I cried he gave me a business card for a pawnshop on State Road.

Ninth

On my ninth birthday, I waltzed into the kitchen and announced, "Today I'm almost a woman!"

There I stood, halfway between footie pajamas and button-fly jeans, while my parents appraised me like a panel of judges. "Emphasis on the *almost*," my mother said, returned to stirring her tea.

Ninth the Not-Quite, I came to see. Not quite a decade or a double digit. Ninth the Nearly, the Honorable Mention, the silver-plated numerical mark trying to pass for something of higher value.

My friend Joy went to a feel-good school where every student always won a prize. She started aiming for ninth place because she loved the lavender ribbon. "Aren't you supposed to always do your best?" I said.

"I don't like blue as well as purple," she replied.

In Bible school, we memorized the Ten Commandments, which were arranged in order from greater to lesser crimes. *But how was cursing or sassing your parents worse than murdering someone?* I asked, aghast. And what about this Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house"? Such a simpler rule than the next one: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife [. . .] or anything that belongs to thy neighbor." *It was worse somehow to covet his dwelling place than all the contents therein?*

The teacher gave me a lollipop and patted my head, suggested I take an early recess.

The ninth element on the periodic table is fluorine, easily forgotten and easily misspelled (the o and u reversed), though it is the most electronegative and reactive of all.

The ninth state admitted to the union was New Hampshire, whose motto is a charged imperative: *Live free or die*.

For a ninth anniversary, married couples should consider gifts of pottery or willow. Leather is a modern-day addition to the list, a twist on the old tradition.

Right now the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals is considering the constitutionality of state-level bans on same-sex marriage. For many years, I have not coveted my neighbor's wife, but my neighbor's right to marry the woman he loves. Isn't *till death us do part* the spousal equivalent of *live free or die*? I have worn the lavender ribbon of domestic partnership, some pale version of better than nothing when nothing but equal will do.

“But you have to admit—it’s almost as good as being married,” the naysayer said.

I vaporized to fluorine right before her eyes.

Twelfth

The Twelfth Amendment to the United States Constitution changed the way we vote. Before 1804, the person with the most votes was president, while the person who came in second was vice president. I’m saying person—but, let’s face it, I mean white man. All the voters were white men as well. In 1796, John Adams had the most votes, while Thomas Pinckney, the man he wanted for vice president, came in third. So Thomas Jefferson, Adams’ rival with many opposing views on policy, became second in command.

Jefferson said of Adams that he “sometimes decided things against his counsel by dashing and trampling his wig on the floor.” When Adams ran against Jefferson the second time he smeared him—because Jefferson supported the French Revolution, we could expect guillotines in America if he were elected.

Now presidential hopefuls, backed by corporations, run in likeminded pairs, their destiny decided by the Electoral College. Each sound bite is calculated, “talking points” ad nauseam.

It’s hard to be nostalgic for a time of bondage for most people, and yet, what I wouldn’t give to see a frustrated president stomp on his or her wig! Or political opponents suddenly president and vice-president, bickering like *The Odd Couple*.

What I wouldn’t give to go back to the Christmas my father and all the uncles argued about Tricky Dick as they smoked cigars in the garage. One cousin was proud he threw an egg at Nixon’s car. Another cousin was in Vietnam. If I could do it again, I would have left the world of my mother and the aunts who sang the round, “On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love sent to me: twelve Drummers Drumming . . .” I would have sided with my father and said, “Thou shalt not kill!” to shame my religious pro-war uncle. I would have practiced my budding debate skills. When encountering Sharon Olds’s “On Reading a Newspaper for the First Time as an Adult,” I remember how watching the 11 o’clock news gave me nightmares. So I withdrew, the folly of politics making me feel powerless and exhausted. I was not truly “a reader of the earth’s gossip.”

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams reconciled after their political careers were done, and these signers of the Declaration of Independence became avid correspondents. On July 4, 1826, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died within five hours of each other.

Wolf

If I could do it again, I would choose the Wolf instead of the hand-wringing mother. I would revel in the role of anti-hero at last, pushing the limits of fang and fur.

Mandie Salazar, the girl I loved, had been cast as Little Red Riding Hood. Mrs. Miller, the teacher I loved, said I needed to learn how to be good. "Sometimes being good means sharing the stage, even when you think you'd make a better star."

If I could do it again, I would seduce Red in the painted wood rather than send her out the door with an empty picnic basket. I would say, "Stray with me!" and take her smooth hand in my costumed paw. As her mother, I could only shout from the threshold: "Stay on the path! Stick to the straight and narrow!"

Then, I would sail ahead to graduate school, to the Cinema and Desire class, to Neil Jordan's *Company of Wolves*. In this story, victim and villain are brilliantly merged. Rosaleen, as proxy for Riding Hood, transforms into a wolf herself. She flees to the wilderness with her huntsman-wolf, members of a growing pack.

Who said her cape should be red anyway? Why not orange or purple or silver even, as Dorothy's original shoes? Some scholars suggest red represents the first menses, our young pilgrim's month of initiation into the angst of womanhood. Some scholars suggest our pilgrim was in her ninth year; others insist it was her twelfth. Regardless: who said Red was ready to strike out on her own? There was the breadth of the forest to consider, the depth of the river, the great gulf between imagination and experience on the lonely road to Grandmother's house.

If I could do it again, I would read Allen Tate's "The Wolves" before I read the tale of Riding Hood and long before I appeared in the play:

I have brooded on angels and archfiends
But no man has ever sat where the next room's
Crowded with wolves [...]

I think every girl has. I think every girl has been Red with wonder and fury and terror at the Wolf beyond her, and the Wolf within. Every girl has been charged a mulct for passing through those woods. But not every girl has had the map of a poem to guide her. Not every girl has read a poem that doesn't rhyme.



Amanda Gannon, "Lonely Stars Cry," ink on paper