



PROJECT MUSE®

Night Vision

Catherine Gammon

The Missouri Review, Volume 5, Number 1, Fall 1981, pp. 44-53 (Article)

Published by University of Missouri

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.1981.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/411591/summary>

Catherine Gammon

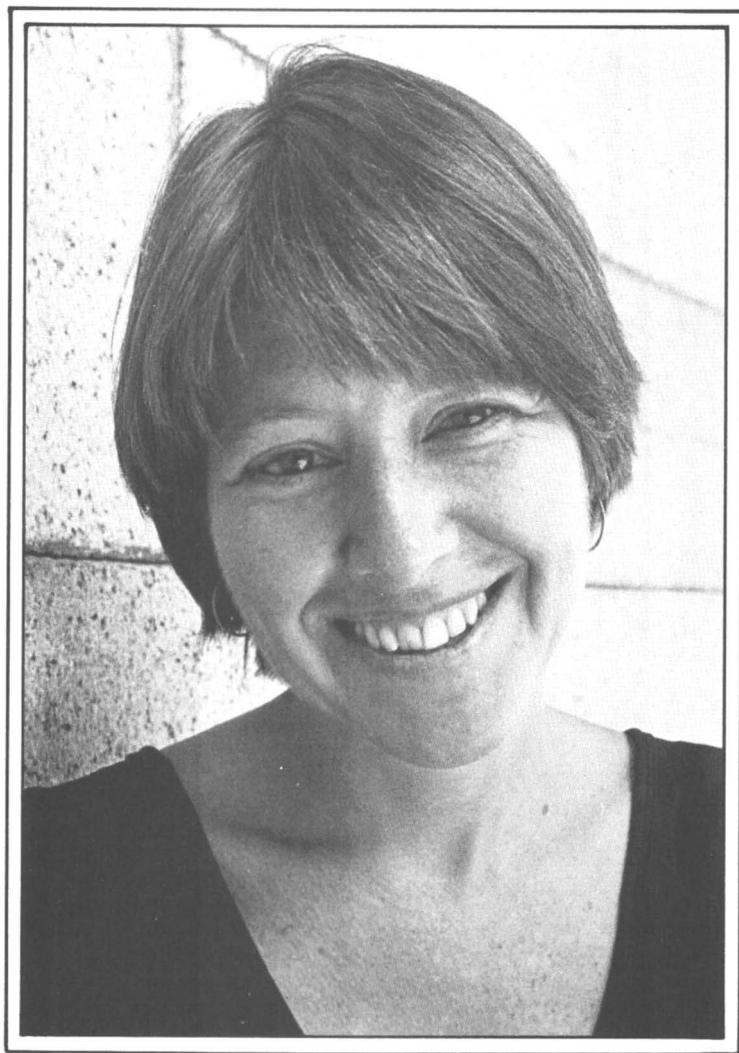


photo by Dennis Mathis

Catherine Gammon is a Fellow of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She has published fiction in The North American Review, The Arkos Review, and Shankpainter. In 1979 she received a creative writing fellowship in fiction from the National Endowment for the Arts. Ms. Gammon has been a guest of Yaddo, and was previously a Fellow of the Fine Arts Work Center in 1977-78.

Night Vision

IT IS EARLY when we go into my room, seven maybe, or eight. In February it's already dark. I have turned the lights off in the kitchen, the front room. China Blue is standing by my bed, dropping his shoes.

IN THE BEGINNING we stood with our clothes on, lay down wearing clothes, felt the other's body through clothes. Now we undress immediately.

Get me to bed quick, he says. Before I change my mind.

I DON'T WANT to spin a lot of fancy images, I'm not a razzler dazzler. I don't want to deviate from the real, don't want to stray into what is not, what might be, or what I fear or wish were true. I want to be accurate. I want to direct a narrow focused beam onto his face, into his eyes, and undress his mind. But it can't be caught that way. He talks reluctantly, easily only in bed, between one fuck and another, our arms and legs entwined. Every night we spend together is the first again, and the last. I have to strip him down obliquely. He vanishes with the day.

ONE SATURDAY in December, very cold, I was walking early in the center of town when a woman crossed Commercial Street in front of me. She was wearing a bright gold robe that hung unevenly from under her sealskin coat. It looked like a bedspread. Her legs were bare and she was wearing rubber thongs. She was beautiful. I wanted to know everything about her: why she would be walking so early on such a cold morning with bare feet. She turned around and asked me if I knew the time. Before nine, I said, I don't know exactly. She nodded. She was very beautiful. She must have been drinking. I wanted to be that free. That beautiful and destroyed. She was an image my mother once had of herself. For years Mama believed she would die in the gutter at twenty-five. When she didn't, she became a survivor. But this barefooted woman just keeps on dying. Her smile was glorious. I don't think she's any younger than my mother is. I see her now, on the streets, in bar windows, I see her everywhere. Three days later, I spent my first night with China Blue.

MAMA NEEDS a fix. She's addicted to his body, to his long fingered hands, to his skin. She's addicted to his precise, quiet voice saying, *Turn around, I was hoping you would do that, Do you want me to get on top?* She's addicted to his semen, which she swallows, to the pulse that ripples up his cock against her tongue before he comes.

Am I hurting you? he wants to know.

Are you in the habit of hurting people?

No, he says.

Because I was moving your fingers away?

Yes.

I didn't want you to do that now.

What do you want?

I want you.

You want me how?

Inside me.

Just my cock inside you.

Yes, she tells him. Yes.

IN THE MIRROR of her window at night she studies her face. She holds her hair back from her forehead with her hands. She wishes she could still see the image clearly when she takes her glasses off. Without her glasses what she sees is a wash of pale skin, a purple robe, black night, an impressionist sketch, the asparagus fern in the window blurring green and bright out of the darkness. She pulls her glasses down again. In the lenses the lamplight is reflected. The frames are dark, amber plastic, and they break up her face. Her hair hangs around her temples, too long to be bangs, too short to stay off her eyes. Her eyes look dark tonight. Her earring catches a glint from the lamp. She has a high forehead when she pulls her hair back. Her mouth is full. Her neck is bare. Her robe hangs open. She is waiting for him, but we both know tonight he will not come. She watches herself in the window. She knows she is not beautiful. But sometimes, if she looks at herself long enough, she thinks she has never seen another woman as beautiful as that image there in the glass.

WHEN SITUATIONS are undefined anything that happens becomes the definition. Sometimes the cat smells like sour milk. Mama remembers baby diapers. China Blue is so inaccessible he drives us to invent. They grow inarticulate together. She has known men who change with the moon, but this one turns at midnight. Catch him before or after, she says, and pay attention to the time.

WHEN THEY FIRST step into her room, they're blind in the darkness. Only the sound tells her he's taking off his shoes. After a while, separately, they realize they've begun to see. In the quiet between sex they are able to talk. He asks what her father is like. She tells him. She tells how he died. China Blue counts his children, who've never been born. I am thirteen. I embroider peace signs, yin/yang signs, Scorpio signs, *I Love the Beatles*, *Disco Sucks*, and shooting stars and rainbows all over my jean jacket. I wear my yellow hair loose and long, and collect unicorns. In the summers, I visit my father. My mother's hair used to be as long as mine is. Now it's shorter than China Blue's. She walked out after him one night in January, with bare feet on frozen snow, then came back in and began to cut. She can't stop cutting. Every day I find new trimmings in the wastebasket, hair ends clinging to the wet porcelain sink.

ASK CHINA BLUE if that's really his name.

My father was a sailor, he says. There was a family fortune somewhere. Then he took up aviation, and began to scatter the wealth. He laughs.

We lie in my bed like spoons.

SINCE MAMA STARTED cutting her hair, pictures fall from the walls, objects suddenly break, fuses blow. She was going to dinner one night across the street, and when she got there, Mason was changing a lightbulb. He screwed it into its socket, and the house went black. One afternoon the radio fell off the refrigerator when neither of us was near it. Something broke inside. Now Mama can only hear the news by sitting close to the speaker, when there's no sound anywhere else in the room. In our kitchen, a purple and blue and silver pinwheel attached to the corner of a high cupboard keeps us from bumping our heads. The pinwheel comes down now, every day. We hear it sometimes, falling into a silence with a clack and whish across the floor, in the morning before we get up, or late at night, when we're all quiet, or after China Blue's gone home. Mama says it's her poltergeist. At a party she felt she could spontaneously combust.

You have a poltergeist? he asks her in a bar when she's describing her new radius of chaos to their friends.

Yes, she tells him. But it's mine. Mine, Mama says, knowing what he is thinking. Mine, not hers.

CHINA BLUE has fantasies he never tells my mother. He hides with me in the night.

I BURN THE kitchen trashcan when Mama's across the street, talking and drinking with Mason. When she leaves am lying in bed drawing the head of a unicorn in black charcoal. The unicorn is facing me. The longer I work on it the darker it gets, and after a while I know I have to burn it. It's torn in four pieces. I hold them into the flame of a black candle I light at the stove, and when almost nothing's left, I drop the corners into the trash. I thought they were done burning, but from my room I smell garbage and rubber, and I am back in the kitchen, looking at fire, when the smoke alarm above the table goes off. The air is floating with ash. The sound scares me. It's loud and insisting, and tattoos like a high-speed amplified drum. It goes off sometimes when we're cooking, and Mama talks to it while she opens the door and a window to shut it up. Not *now*, she says. Or, Stupid, it's only fried fish, can't you tell fried fish yet? It stops and starts as fresh air gusts in. She keeps talking to it, pausing to listen, as if they are having a conversation. I put the fire out quickly with an old pair of pants that don't fit and water, and no damage is done except to the trashcan. Then I open the door and windows to get the alarm to stop. The kitchen is tiny. Ashes are everywhere, the rubber trashcan a gnarled mess. In a few places it's burned to the yellow floor. I pry the hard, melted rubber up with a knife and take the trashcan outside to the garbage bins. I don't want Mama to see. I have to leave her a note. First I clean the kitchen, wondering how much I can say. I don't want her to lecture me about playing with fire, because I wasn't playing. I don't like to think about it, because the fire was scary and stupid, and because I had to burn that drawing. I don't want to have to explain to her. But I have to and I leave her a note. I try to tell her how Jane and Rainy and me were talking about black and white, because Rainy has a friend she thinks is turning black. What I drew was dealing with this but I didn't realize it till after drawing it, so I tore it up because I don't want to be involved. But after talking to Jane on the phone I decided to burn it, since throwing it away wasn't really destroying it. Then I ask Mama please not to bring it up, I don't really want to talk about it because I'm not involved with all that black and white stuff, I burned the drawing because I don't want to be involved, and I can't talk about what I don't know. It's a silly note, full of *pleeze* and *cuz* and *kinda*, and I know she'll come in and wake me anyway. While I'm waiting, I think about China Blue. I think about how he'd understand this: the black and the white, the unicorn, the fire. I think he already knows, as if he's been here, watching, even though the reason Mama's at Mason's, talking and talking, is that China Blue's not coming tonight. I sleep a little until I hear her. I've left the ceiling light on, the note on the table. I listen while she reads it. She comes into my room in the dark. She doesn't lecture me about the fire. I don't know why I thought she would. She never lectures me that way. She wants to know about the drawing, she wants to know about the black and the white. She's on every

left list in the country and since the last election she always talks about the Klan, neo-Nazis, fascism spreading suddenly, rapidly, all through the world. She knows what this town can be like, how too many people here are narrowly bred and full of hate. She thinks I'm going to tell her this *black and white stuff* is some kind of racist talk, moving through the school, through the streets. At the end of summer at a churchyard flea market she found a table where a man was selling brass KKK belt buckles. There was a crateload of them, along with crates of glove hands, shoe feet, and other odd things in multiple quantity. The Klan buckles made her angry and she wanted to go into the church to complain. But she didn't. There's no law against it, she said. But she was furious and left the flea market right away. Now she thinks I'm going to tell her the Klan is here, in town recruiting kids. I know it isn't funny, but I have to laugh at her.

How could Rainy have a friend *turning black*? I say.

Lots of ways, she says. If it's not that, what is it?

I tell her it's about good and evil. The more white you are, the more the black comes after you. I don't really understand it, which is why I don't want to talk about it. But Rainy's worried about her friend. They think the black is getting him. And my drawing was getting blacker and blacker. It was a drawing of him. I'm white. Except I'm not really involved in any of it. But the whiter you are, then the faster the black comes looking for you.

Oh, it's magic, Mama says. She sounds relieved. You can talk to me about magic, she says. I know about magic.

You do?

Sure, she says. In the sixties. It came in with drugs and the Beatles. Just like for you. I can smell her whiskey breath. I wonder if she talked to Mason about China Blue. Magic is powerful, she says. It can ruin things. But it's never more powerful than you.

I don't want to be involved in it, I say. It scared me. I didn't even know what I was doing.

Its only power is the power you give it, Mama says. If you don't give it power, it doesn't have any. It can't get you. You don't have to stay away from it and you don't have to submit to it. You don't have to be afraid of it, either way. It's not outside you. Leave it alone if you want to. Just remember, it gets its power from you. Her voice is getting sleepy, impatient. She's preaching. She has answers. She wants to save me. She's like her father, she's told China Blue. Trust me, she's saying, tell me about magic, I know a thing or two. She begins to repeat herself, sitting on the floor, her head down on the sheet beside my pillow.

Just don't bring it up again, I ask her. Please? Okay?

HIS SKIN IS smooth and hairless. Nothing's between me and his body. He's almost as old as Mama but his flesh feels as young as

mine. Mama seems young, too, but she isn't, she's wise. China Blue is just a boy, beside her. He's tall, though, and she likes that. She likes his pale skin, his dark hair, soft under her fingers. She lies against his back and runs her hand down his head, his neck, she pets him like a cat. Then she stops suddenly, afraid to claim him. She scared him the first night they spent together: she wants him too much and all the time.

Don't stop, he says. Keep doing that.

Don't look, he says in my room, I'm invisible. If you see me in here, shut those eyes.

WANDERING FLOES, washed in from the Atlantic, trapped in the spiralling Cape tip, mass in the harbor for weeks. The bay freezes. Boats can't move. The sun comes out. At low tide the floes rise up from the sand. From Mama's window they look white and green. We walk in canyons of ice. They stand taller than our heads. When the tide comes in, they bob and drift, carried so fast finally they seem to skim the surface of the water. Within a week we're in February summer, the sun is warm, temperatures climb to the sixties. Mama takes her jacket off and walks barearmed in the morning to the restaurant where she works. For a few days, almost everyone is happy. Mama sees Rainy in the window of the Governor Bradford, a bar where people *collecting* hang out, drink, play pinball, video games, backgammon, chess, and pool. Jane lives with her father now. He's a carpenter and boatbuilder and his hair falls curling to his ass. He hangs out at the Surf Club, where winter people working go. Mama's working hard again for a while because the sunny weather and school vacations bring tourists back to town. In the nights, she waits for China Blue. In bed with him, she laughs. He makes her happy. They are quiet together, except when they're making love.

What? he asks when she laughs.

I just remembered something, she tells him. Her right hand's first two fingers are resting in his left hand's palm. She tells him how when I was little, just beginning to walk and for a long time after, I had to hold just those two fingers—never one, never three, not two other fingers, not a whole hand.

She ritualized it, Mama says, then she's quiet again, then she laughs. What a funny thing to remember.

It's nice, he says. It's nice to have things like that to remember.

It's dark, he whispers. Where are you?

Here, I say, and he stands me up against the wall and touches the hard new breasts through my clothes. My mouth tastes like toothpaste.

Yours tastes like tobacco, I say. He's pressing against me, holding my shoulders, my hips. I feel the strange shapes of him through our clothes. It frightens me, how big he is. His hands are gentle. He holds my head,

my hair. He moves his fingers. I can't stand up anymore. *I plop* when I hit the sheets. The night is so quiet I can only hear my breathing. China Blue is gone.

JANE AND RAINY and I are talking. We're down on the wharf. All the ice has melted, or gone back to the sea. Two nights ago the moon was full. The high tide today is very high. The water's green, and waves as if it were the ocean. A storm is coming. I tell them about China Blue. I tell how he comes to my room in the night. I tell how he touches me. I tell them and tell them. I don't know why. Seagulls are screaming. Jane is fourteen and Rainy is fifteen. I want them to put him in order for me. I want them to help me to see.

ON SUNDAYS Mama and China Blue sit around drinking coffee together, reading the *Times*. They laugh at words and phrases coined by Alexander Haig: campaign of disinformation, augmentees, the U.S.G. They worry that El Salvador will be the new Vietnam. Historical reality, Mama says, is not on our side. But the world of war and politics is not their true province. Between them on the table oranges are piled in a white, gleaming bowl. Their skins glow, so intense in the bright sun they hurt my eyes. The days grow longer. Mama plays poker on Tuesday nights. China Blue comes to her more often. They walk. They talk. They drive. They are seen together in the light. I like it here, he says in her bed, you can hear the foghorns, and when he says, *You feel good, resting while they're fucking*, his cock still hard and deep inside her, she answers, *I know* it, and they laugh, and they go on making love. Only I stay blind to him and take him in the dark. In my room, our eyes do not become accustomed to the night. Still, it's me he comes to, me he seeks, and in the mornings, when he's gone again, and alone, when he lies wherever he lies, on the beach sand, in the dunes, on his own bed, staring at his ceiling, smoking, listening to birds, resisting the day, I'm the one he imagines, I'm the one he dreams.

I HAVE LEARNED, Mama tells me. Mind lives in what it touches, but it devours what it sees.

CHINA BLUE drives a cab, or tends bar, or waits expensive tables in the summer. Sometimes he's on unemployment. He hangs out in winter, like everyone else in this town, and works when he has to. He has dedicated his life to some purpose. What it is, he'll never say. If you ask him, he'll laugh and tell you all he wants is to live in a cabin somewhere, with a dog, or any other silly thing that comes to the top of his head.

Mama's jealous. From small evidence she constructs whole worlds. She is jealous of every woman he talks to. She is jealous of his fantasies. She is jealous of him with everyone but me. She wants to know his secrets. She wants him every night. She sits at her window, studying her image. From my bedroom, tapes are playing, and sitting in her chair she dances with herself in the glass. She unbuttons her blouse, pushes her lips to a pout. She thinks he's coming, even though she's left some party or dinner or restaurant or bar before him. Why? she hopes he'll ask her. Why did you leave? And she has her answer ready: to say no to you, to avoid asking you, to avoid hearing you say no to me. *If I didn't love her I would laugh. If I didn't know that what she is today I'll someday—twenty years from now—have to be.*

SOMEONE'S HUNG the pinwheel right side up instead of upside down, and it's stopped falling. We don't know who turned it, Mason maybe, but nothing's breaking anymore, no fuses blow. Everything gets calm. Mail comes in from liberal organizations all over the country, and Mama says she bets the same computer that sells her name and address to ERAmerica, the Poverty Law Center, and Greenpeace is also selling Right-to-Lifers to the Moral Majority and the Klan. She glances through the letters and saves the return envelopes. She pushpins them with their pledge cards to her bedroom door, and sometimes, when her tips are good, she takes one down and gives \$10. Some she throws away. When a Stop-the-Slaughter letter comes, she gives it and the pledge envelope and protest postcards to me. I want Jane and Rainy to help me donate. I show them the pictures of the harp seals, and read to them how the hunters will sweep across Newfoundland ice floes, clubbing and skinning 100,000 white-furred babies while the mothers bellow and bark.

IT'S A WARM misty evening and I see that December woman, skating spaced on the street. Her eyes more ruined than ever, the lids hang heavy, make slits. Her shirt is pink, her pants and jacket black. Even her skates are black. She glides toward me slowly, like rowing. I think she knows who I am. She doesn't look at me when we pass. I think she knows what I see.

MAMA'S OUT WITH China Blue somewhere and he drops her off. She comes in and drinks half a bottle of wine in fifteen minutes and cries the rest of the night, talking to herself, to him, in the mirror where she cuts her hair. If he had a phone, she'd call him. But he doesn't, and her anger's bigger than wires.

I CLOSE MY eyes and see lavender, and when I say the word to myself in my mind, I feel *lavender* move up my body—*lavender*, I don't know if it's cool or it's hot—*lavender*, I don't know if it's on the surface or under the skin—*lavender*, I don't know whether it's real, or just dreamed up out of some song.

You'd better look at him, Rainy tells me. You better look, is all. It could be anyone. Anything. Why should it be China Blue?

Doesn't he love your mother? Jane asks.

No, I say. I don't think so. I don't think he loves me either.

SOMEDAY, MAMA SAYS, I'm going to get mad at him. But not yet. He throws me into a certain kind of stillness. He's very good for me. The cat is on her lap, letting her stroke him. His hair is long and striped and orange. He has a broad, intelligent face, and big feet. He's a Maine coon. They used to be seagoing cats. At midnight he prowls the beach. His eyes are gold. He likes rain, and understands whatever he sees. Mama makes fists at her image. Through the thin skin of the backs of her hands the veins show blue, the color of her blouse, her eyes. This failure of knowledge is necessary, she says. What it can penetrate, what it gets into, mind consumes. She's playing poker tonight and tonight she's going to win. She'll take the table out for a drink and they'll stay in the bar until closing, when December Woman, wearing red, will be standing behind the counter, backed up against the bottles, her eyes wide open like nobody's ever seen them, their little gray centers surrounded by whites, a radius sweeping out from her as red as her sweater and big enough to hold twenty people at bay. The bartender's telling the crowd to leave and calling the police, and Mama, standing closer than anyone, watches that woman's eyes.

The police? Mama says. We can't let him call the police.

Look at those eyes, says Mason. You don't interfere with eyes like that.

But *look* at her, Mama's saying, *Look at her!* and China Blue is standing in the darkness by my bed, dropping his shoes.

