

1975

Documentation

Barbara Grossman

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Introductory note: Now when it is harder than ever for young writers to publish, it is both an irony and a further misfortune that the quality of their work is exceptionally high. Of the fifty fiction students now in the Iowa Writers Workshop, at least a dozen are mining fresh veins with a respect for and a facility in technique that has been missing for a decade.

Barbara Grossman's Documentation, which may well be the ultimate in emancipation stories, is also an example of the imaginativeness, humor and health of Workshop writing in 1975.

—John Leggett

Documentation

There was that time, in August or the beginning of September, when the lake whipped up into moving hills. We bobbed like . . . like what? Like apples I suppose. Fruit in a ten-mile tub. The sun hurt our heads: a white sun that turned the back of your neck pink the first morning on the water. I watched from behind. I paddled and steered prudently around the shallows, executing j-strokes, an occasional bow-sweep, or those effortless featherings in weaker currents. No one, not even you, is conscious of the way muscles move between our shoulder blades. How our backs redden in the light and how under the flesh, beneath wet over-warm skin, our muscles work like snakes digesting field mice.

I loved you from behind. My eyes burned and salt lined my cracked lips, but I thought you more precious than cool water. Such strong calves. Would I kiss those legs, would they hold me like a nutcracker holds a slippery walnut?

One evening welts, then translucent blisters rose on your palms. I wrapped the knife in a handkerchief and let the blade grow white in the banked coals. When you gave them to me, when you held both hands out over the flickering Coleman, your eyes shut and I saw tiny lines shoot out from the corners of your mouth. Your pain made my nose tingle with discomfort. A lovely clear liquid ran down your wrists. It tasted warm and sweet like sugared milk.

When brown clouds appeared over the reforested hills to the west we paddled quickly to an island covered with scrub pine. Heavy, loud rain soaked through the canvas and your hair frizzled from the damp. Such thick

hair you had, hair whitened by the sun in a way that looked powdered. I explored your scalp with my fingers. Your back leaned against my folded knees and I parted thick, white tufts to find flaky skin and the dark pits hair grows from. I pulled you toward me that way and your neck stretched, your throat arched across my shoulder. I put my ear there. When you swallowed I heard glass breaking. How would that feel between my teeth?

On an afternoon so hot the loons refused to feed, we pulled ashore at a sandy beach. The water was cool and clear around our ankles. Under our toes the firm sparkling bottom rippled and ridged in patterns that mimicked the mountainous horizon. Your clothes hung from a spruce limb: a cotton shirt, cotton pants and two canvas shoes dangling by their laces. The reflection hurt my eyes but I watched you enter the lake. Your thighs made rolling furrows in the surface. Twice you wet your upturned face, then dipped so that only your nose remained above water. As you stroked and kicked I saw your dazzling buttocks rise and twist. They were the color of a trout's belly. I thought of the roe that comes from such fish and how the intestines glisten and feel cold.

Nights grew dark too late and we were tired. Often we crawled into our bags before the light died. But I would wait for the sounds of mosquitoes, wait until the moths rapped angrily against the screening and owls began their hunt, to let my eyes close. The candle sputtered from a tin cup we had hung from the centerpole. Long-necked ducks called and echoed each other on the black water. I could see nothing below your chin: only a face asleep. The night you dreamed about an enormous football stadium and climbed bleachers that reached eventually to the moon, you awoke frightened. I buried my fists in your hair and pressed my nose so hard on your skull the cartilage crackled as the candle did above our heads. Almost smothered, I chewed your hair.

Lost swallows sometimes dove about the canoe as we floated and ate our lunch. You threw them small rolled balls of white bread. Bass broke water and snapped at this bait. I had not been sleeping well and mornings you found me stooped for the warmth of the faintly glowing ash in the fire. But the afternoons made me strong and awake with sunshine. We would rest when the sun was highest in the sky, dangling our bare legs in the lake. When you spoke to me I was agonized by the beauty of your voice. Your lips formed words like flowers opening and shutting for light. I wanted those sounds, needed your speech with an intensity that made my jaws ache and clench. Something coiled tightly in my chest as I counted your vertebrae using my hands just like a Chinaman calculating on his abacus. How could I have forgotten their number?

There was no part of you I did not know. Your brain was grey and wrinkled like an unburst chestnut pod. Your heart was red meat. Lungs, faintly green and mottled, moved as the tissue gills of perch still in gentle currents. I kissed your fingers, wiped my tongue along the cuticles and enjoyed the resistance of hardened skin. Was that pleasant for you? Would it be something you might remember?

Most of all I enjoyed the sight of your sunbrowned arms pulling at the paddle. They glowed as if you had candles for bones and your skin were amber glass. When the wind blew from the bow to make the lake foam, I smelled the heat rising off you and saliva bubbled around my teeth. If the shapeless remains of a rotting raccoon lay on a nearby shore, or if poisoned carp floated belly up only feet away, I never sensed them; for only the acid scent of your sweat drying in your shirt and the crisp smell of your bleaching hair reached me in the stern. I had whole days to memorize these things. I say honestly, that after the first week on the water it was difficult to distinguish your breathing from my own.

Small, hungry animals rattled our tin pans and dishes after sundown. I rushed after them with a flashlight, sent them hurrying back into the safety of the woods. Everything was wet and cool at that hour. The trunk of a birch glowed with dew and stones marking the periphery of the fire steamed and hissed. You slept so soundly. If I had shouted to bring you out with me, would you have chewed the gritty birch bark too? Would the sharp, green stink of crushed pine needles under my bare feet be a part of your night as well as mine? When I sat on the stones the dulled heat dried my pants bottoms. I stirred the logs to make a flame shoot up. Drippings from our dinner sizzled briefly. How long does the progression from black, to red, to whitened ash take in burning fish bones? Surely not all night.

I cannot understand how these things happen so quickly. There was no time on the lake, weeks passed silently. Your skin, its color and its texture, was my only clue to duration. It began the hue of unripe pears, so delicately yellow and smooth, and then turned the exact tint of that inner skin peanuts hide beneath their shells. This rich color became progressively darker. Then, one morning, I saw you washing, naked to the waist, at the chilly lakeside. The sun was eclipsed by your shivering body and as it rose turned you into a black silhouette, a construction paper cutout against the light pink sky. I expected you to flare and char, to become a torch, that morning. When I ran to your side, almost panicked by your beauty, I touched your wet arm and my hand looked slack, pale upon your crisp tan. Nothing in these scenes prepared me for weakness, for you were thick with health; it enclosed you.

Beans, rice and dried fruit. Fish of all varieties, coffee and herbal teas, condensed puddings, sugar, salt and pepper. Blackberries floating in tins of evaporated milk. Soy flour and boiled groats with honey. Slab bacon. Molding, warm oranges and soft apples. Tasteless water, well boiled, in plastic canteens—I took all precautions. We prepared wholesome meals and ate them slowly like intelligent animals. You drank the syrup from the prunes I stewed and my teeth twinged in reaction to their imagined sweetness. We picked carefully, so carefully, at the pin-sharp bones in filleted pike. You never gulped at your food. How could I have misjudged that hollow rattling in your mouth for hunger?

Once before I'd seen that queer, unhappy look; but it was in an animal's eyes, an exhausted doe that I came upon in the woods last spring. Her new fawn lay on bent, tangled legs at her side while, panting softly, she licked the hairless infant dry. I had never seen such awful terror, such complete resignation, as I did in that deer's startled recognition of my intrusion. Now I've seen it twice and am wealthy with comparison.

First your liver. Then your heart. The greasy bowels voided of their content. A brain, two eyes and thirty teeth. Your stomach, your pancreas, long leg and arm bones and, scattered throughout, tiny fat-encrusted glands. A sweet gall bladder peeked up from under the liver. Two lungs, a tongue, a hundred, maybe more, foot and hand parts. Huge cartilaginous joints from your knees and a white worm of an appendix. Firm kidneys encased in shivering jelly. All your ribs and the fine hard knobs of the spinal cord. A pale colon: ghostly. I found hair in your stomach but very little else.

What a day we had. You used the binoculars constantly and discovered an eagle's nest atop an enormous pine. A terrifically nervous bird, she screamed in the tree, furious and majestic—a mother. We paddled to land and covered the overturned canoe with the green tarp. You struck out ahead of me, crashing without purpose or goal through a maze of fallen trunks and rhododendron vine. I followed you up a small rise and sat down where you did on a gypsum outcropping at the crest. From there the eagle, her nest, the lake and a million pine trees were visible. You stripped. Wiping your forehead with a piece of clothing you then bunched it into a pillow and spread out under the high sun. You feared nothing: not the intensity of the light, not angry birds, not even sharp rock. As you lay there I covered your unprotected belly with my arm and once, in your nap, the skin there contracted with a jerk that sent me bolt upright with surprise.

Within seconds. I wish to destroy the myth that those who suffocate claw and tear at their own flesh, rip their throats to bleeding shreds. It is untrue,

without fact and certainly unfounded in experience. Yes, eyes do roll and horrible noises are emitted—but self-inflicted violence does not occur.

A chickpea: the ludicrous garbanzo bean. No larger than the colored pebbles you collected in a leather pouch. That starchy yellow vegetable consumed faithfully because of our lowered protein intakes. A dietary obligation of the dullest flavor. I found the uncooked villain lodged roughly in your trachea. Did it bob for a while on the last outrush of your breath, balanced tenuously on a column of air like a ping-pong ball on a geyser? Did it move at all once there? Perhaps not; perhaps it stuck fast and was sucked in with all the force of your surprised anger. It was, after all, a poor joke; the pun that set you gagging. I no longer retain a sense of humor but have buried it, along with my appetite for vegetables, first in the memory of the colors you turned, second in the sounds you made, third in the odor of your violently emptied bowels, forth in the coppery taste that lingered in your mouth and on your white lips, and fifth in the scars left by your bitten nails when they raked my face. For you I have become the complete carnivore. Flesh is all I can swallow.

I was incapable of finishing you and still agonize over the waste. So much was left over each evening and set to smoulder until morning, when at last I was forced to bury whole, charred portions in my smoky campfire. How happy you made the sharp mouthed turtles that chewed holes into the canvas sack as it trailed, bloodily at first, behind the canoe. I repaired the canvas each night before the sun set, finally ran out of thread and had to rip the cuffs and linings out of our clothing for additional sewing supplies. The weather grew steadily colder and even the afternoons seemed cool, for the rains had started. It was necessary to seek higher ground for camps. But I was thankful for the chill. The cold water, the thunderstorms and even the brutal wind that drove in from the northwest: all these things kept you for me and I prayed each morning that they might continue.

For I am both consumer and consumed. The lake is rarely calm these days. Geese fly overhead in endless formation, in giant V's that splinter clouds, loud birds disturbing the churchly silence of the woods. I cannot hate their honking idiocy—I no longer hate.

Our canoe is often lost for hours in the insipid fog. I do not worry. Gigantic mires of brown leaves float everywhere on the water that is milky now. You scan the horizon, scour the coasts for safe harbor and I place extraordinary trust in your navigational skill. Our choices are limited by flooding, for whole islands have disappeared under the lake. You swing all night above me in your hammock, warm and dry, and that comfort is my only

concern of late. Days are short. A full moon illuminates our suppers, casting a cold, hard light on your forehead, giving your face the appearance of dried bark, warming us through the night. So large and bright a moon the mornings are grey by contrast. My hunger grows. I feast you: love me.

POETRY / DEN BOER, HANSON, DOW, OPPEN,
MARKS, ORLEN, ST. JOHN, WITT, STEWART,
SHAPIRO, SWIFT

Storm / James Den Boer

It is just after the New Year;
we are in the third day of a storm
from the west, from the Pacific,
and the eucalyptus roar louder
than the surf. The slough fills,
the herons standing deeper
and deeper, to their locked knees.

Hollow jointed reeds rattle.

I haven't seen a bird flying today.
They are all huddling, fluffed feathers
under the eaves, against cold brick.

Even the telephone whines
and crackles; voices in the wind.

Sometimes the air is so full
of voices, so loud with power
and the sound of the great throat
of the world, its huge rushing
pitched exactly to the clash
in my mind, the tremendous whisper
that continues in my head,
that I feel I am only well
in a storm, only a part
of the world when together
we roar and batter toward
some reluctance, some peace.

We are released. Storms end
against the mountains and the sea
settles to sparkle in the sun.