

The First Two Pages: “Rendering” by Sophia Lynch
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An Essay by Sophia Lynch

“Rendering” tells the story of Em, a nude figure model who is fed up with her usual clientele and jumps at the opportunity to sit for a somewhat eccentric artist in his home studio. It was my first attempt at writing crime fiction, the result of the first assignment given by my professor, Scott Loring Sanders, during a genre fiction seminar at Lesley University one socially distanced semester.

I came into the class as an adult student with a number of creative writing classes under my belt and some confidence in my ability to create character-and-language-driven fiction, but with little to no sense of what goes into constructing a mystery or thriller. Like many literary fiction enthusiasts, I assumed that in order to be worthy of the name, a mystery story was required to adhere to a strict formula. Scott was quick to assure us all on that first day in the virtual classroom that his goal was not to see us mimic the structure of the mysteries of Agatha Christie or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle but simply to learn the art of building tension, of using a reader’s anxiety to propel their curiosity. We were encouraged to seize every opportunity to make our readers—and ourselves—uncomfortable.

I chose to write a story about a woman who is paid to stand naked in the center of a room without moving while people stare at her because, having worked

as a figure model myself (and explained the exact process to friends, acquaintances, and family members countless times), I can attest to the fact that it is a prospect that makes a large percentage of the population nervous.

When you are a female-bodied person who works as an artist's model and you tell people about it—casually, at a cocktail party, or in the course of introducing yourself in the mail room—questions ensue. These questions most commonly concern the concept of embarrassment or, more intriguingly, vulnerability. Nakedness (or nudity, as we are taught to refer to it professionally) is seen as the ultimate state of defenselessness. In the case of nude young women, a lack of clothing doesn't just reveal the body, it makes it desirable, and where there is desire there is always the potential for misconduct, for crime.

Isn't it dangerous? I've been asked. Aren't you scared?

Fair questions. It's one thing to be on display, but quite another to risk being seen as plunder, conquest, prey.

Why, they would ask, would you want to take that risk?

The answer I have routinely given in response became the foundation of Em's character: Because I loved it. Because it never felt dangerous. Because I was never scared. Because there is a strange sense of empowerment that comes from being the only naked person in a room. Because, not more than two minutes into my first session, I realized that the groups of clothed artists I was modeling for

were far more subject to feeling vulnerable and anxious than I was. I only had to stand there, representing reality—*they* were the ones who had to try to make art out of it.

This is an element of the model-artist relationship that I knew the majority of my readers wouldn't anticipate, one that would turn their expectations on their heads. I knew that in order for Em and her chosen profession to capture their interest, I needed to steer clear of portraying her as the defenseless, desirable woman wandering ignorantly into danger (in essence, to avoid turning her into the sexualized shark bait deployed during the first scene of *Jaws*). Instead, I highlighted the vulnerability of the artists she works for:

The thing was, word-of-mouth only got you so far. The art world around Boston was insular and a little skittish, and models tended to form long-term associations with the artists they worked for. It was difficult to branch out. Cold-calling the art departments at the colleges would usually at least get you on a list, but Em was getting sick of that atmosphere. The swelter of the portable lights causing sweat to leech from the places where her skin met up with itself, the scared rabbit looks on the students' faces when she took off her robe at the beginning of a session, the aggressive tone of the professors as they bellowed across the studio, telling those poor kids to REACH IN and PULL OUT the angles and FIND the areas of LIGHT and DARK.

Em views the art scene in this particular city as shy and self-protecting. She sees the students as poor little helpless bunnies, as victims of their professors' aggression. She is sympathetic toward them, but ultimately irritated by their embarrassment, which she can't help but interpret as being on her behalf.

During breaks, when she would wrap herself up in her kimono and walk barefoot around the charcoal-scented room, taking sips from her water bottle while peering at the students' attempts, they wouldn't meet her eyes. They wouldn't even accept compliments. What on Earth was there to be so nervous about? It was a body, something everyone has, and this was an art studio, not a strip club. Why couldn't they just get over themselves?

The students' resistance to seeing her as a person causes her to feel invisible, “the kind of invisible that can only come of standing stark naked on a pedestal under a spotlight in front of twenty strangers, to which only cuts of raw meat under the glass counter at a butcher can relate.” Em only finds nakedness uncomfortable when during the course of it she becomes isolated, separate, inhuman. What she wants is discourse, connection.

Looking back, I find it interesting that I wrote this story during the pandemic, when many of us were feeling at once on display (thanks, Zoom) and isolated to an extreme degree, reduced to faces behind glass. That kind of isolation can be devastating, as we know, and it can serve as the basis for some pretty risky decisions, such as offering private modeling sessions to inquiring strangers.

Something more personal, that was what she was after, a long, one-on-one session at a devoted artists' eccentric-yet-cozy home studio. And as she couldn't afford a website, a flyer in the window of an art supply store seemed to her the cheapest and most direct way of requesting it.

Now, this is my cue to contradict myself (or maybe *provide contrast*—sure, let's go with that). While I said before that I very purposefully did not intend to

portray Em as a tender maiden swimming unknowingly into the maw of the beast, I'm now going to double-back and suggest that, to a certain degree, she is just that. After all, who—in the context of a mystery story, that is—but an obvious object of predation would come to the conclusion that this is a good idea?

I will just say, though, that it isn't Em's being young and female and unclothed that contributes to what probably comes across as a lapse in judgement. It's her love of the process of modeling and her desire to connect with the artists that motivates her to seek out a more "intimate" experience. To her, preserving that enjoyment is worth the risk of, as her mature model friend Vic puts it, "fielding calls from random creeps all day long." Nevertheless, the risk had to be spoken aloud, and from the far more cynical perspective of a seasoned professional such as Vic:

"Artists can be creeps. In fact, they are especially prone to being creeps, they just play the 'eccentric' card to catch you off guard. When I was your age I got suckered into posing for a photographic series that involved me and another chick repeatedly pouring heavy cream over each other's bare breasts. Then the raw hot dogs came out, and it was downhill from there. Luckily, this was before the Internet was a thing. And even if it's not overtly disgusting, do you really want to spend all day trapped in a studio one-on-one with some washed-up Egon Shiele wannabe?"

Someone had to say it. I could practically hear the red flags whipping in the wind inside my readers' heads, and inside my own head, for that matter. Because while my personal experiences as a figure model have been overwhelmingly

positive (I don't want to discourage any of you from taking it up as a side hustle, really I don't), as a writer I'm not permitted to ignore the potential for anxiety in Em's plan. I have to acknowledge the deceptively large gap that inevitably exists between how a person perceives herself and how someone else might, particularly someone who happens to see himself as her possessor, if only for a day.

So at this point there appear to be two possible outcomes to this story: one, in which Em's vision of a session spent in cozy, artistic exchange is preserved and she emerges empowered and with a renewed appreciation for her job; another, in which Vic is proven right and outright creepiness turns out to be the order of the day.

And it is at this point that I leave you, uncertain and (hopefully) anxious.

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Sophia Lynch is a perpetual student of creative writing and previously unpublished author. She has studied at Hampshire College, Lesley University, Emerson College and just about anywhere else she can find that is willing to instruct her. She is, as of January 2024, able to proudly say that her short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. "Rendering" is her first published short story. She is also an experienced life model and studio assistant who has had the great privilege of working for and with professional artists for the majority of her life. She currently lives in Watertown, Massachusetts, with her partner (and photographer) Augie and their cats, Hamish and Sally.

Sophia's career as a writer—much like her online presence—is currently a work in progress, but keep an eye out. She'll be around.