

HERSTORY OF SEX

性意思史

- * 2019 Openbook Award
- * 2019 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year
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Patriarchal moralities in East Asia have often forced young women to keep a distance from their own sexual physiology and spirit. Chang Yi-Hsum's collection, Herstory of Sex, tells four stories of women finding their way back to themselves – by many different roads.

Sexual conservatism in East Asia, especially concerning young women, is everywhere to be encountered. Patriarchal moralities often force young women to keep a distance from their own sexual physiology and spirit. Yet this book will not abide that distance: these four stories of women returning to their own sexuality are here to defy taboo and bring us all into the conversation – by an imaginative means necessary.

The first two stories dive with us deep into realms of fantasy: “Sluts Aren’t Built in a Day” brings Pan Jinlian, the famous *femme fatale* of the Chinese classic *Plum in a Golden Vase*, into today’s world, and follows her through college and into her young life. The second story begins with the inexplicable appearance of a young man outside the 43rd-floor apartment window of a Taiwanese exchange student. She lets him in, and although he never speaks, they experience a time together in which they communicate in the language of human kindness.

The subsequent two stories, which are connected by their first-person narrator, begin with a series of short vignettes on being a girl in a sexually repressed social environment, such as a mother hitting her daughter for complaining of an “itch down there”, parents who won’t even talk about condoms, but will discuss abortions quite freely, and other bitter interactions. The second story follows the narrator into her own sexual life, through private stories of rediscovery.



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With an essayist's grace and a novelist's invention, Chang Yi-Hsum gives us the book we need that is also the book we want. *Herstory of Sex* reaches out to an emotional world that social repression had divorced from itself. In doing so, it makes us whole again.

Chang Yi-Hsum 張亦絢

Born in Taipei, Chang Yi-Hsum earned her Master's degree in Film and Visual Studies from Paris University No.3. Now a well-known advocate of queer writing, she has also written *Risks Along the Riverbank*, *Ephemeral Love: Notes from Nantes and Paris*, and *A Goodbye Letter: In the Era After I'm Gone*.

HERSTORY OF SEX

By Chang Yi-Hsum

Translated by Roddy Flagg

Chapter 2: The Forty-Third Floor

01

This happened ten years ago. I've never told anyone about it, maybe because I was scared of the consequences. Although, however you look at it, there wouldn't have been any consequences worth mentioning.

It was December's first day of snow. I remember clearly, because earlier I had leaned out of the window to shout at the people above, who I thought were tossing scraps of waste paper into the air. People are so inconsiderate! But I ended up laughing at myself. Those floating grayish wisps weren't paper, but snow. I had seen snow before – I'd been in France for a few years and (like the French) had little time for the stuff beyond practical considerations like slippery sidewalks. But this was the first time I had seen new snow fall from high up. It didn't dazzle with its whiteness like snow heaped up on treetops and rooftops. Seen from the 43rd floor, it seemed thin and insubstantial, solitary flakes of dull gray. And I had thought it was scraps of paper fluttering downwards.

I was living on the 43rd floor of a high-rise – *une tour*, the French would call it, a tower. My local friends all said I was lucky – what views! I don't know if they were genuinely envious, though. Even working-class families tend to live on the ground in France, and with a small garden. Once, watching a French film with Taiwanese friends, they opined that the house and garden on the screen must belong to a middle-class family. They didn't know that in France, it isn't the type of building you live in which determines your class, but its location. I have a friend who lives in a house with a garden even though his entire family works at Carrefour, the supermarket. But that's not in Paris, obviously. My tower was quite old, originally built to house immigrants. My landlords, a husband and wife, had managed to buy up several of the apartments, I'm not sure how. I had the impression they were social climbers, but not particularly good at it, and I sometimes felt they were renting apartments in exchange for friendship. But I had no desire to be the foreign face gilding their social events, so I contrived excuses to miss the charitable concerts and dinner parties. Not that this prevented them from frequently mentioning that they had rented one of their properties to a very arty Taiwanese lady. In Paris, being connected to art was more glamorous than being connected to money.

There was one more floor above me, of ill-repute for some reason I was never sure of. Elevator gossip indicated there were Chinese people or illegal immigrants receiving guests there.

“Receiving guests” implied a certain degree of social standing. Unless, of course, your guests had nowhere else to sleep. Anyway, it was just what I heard. I never visited any of the other floors and was only on nodding terms with my neighbors. Occasionally people moving out would knock at the door to see if I wanted some expensive, unwanted piece of furniture. That was the only time I would know who lived in which apartment – and, by then, only in their final hours.

It happened at night, and so quickly that it’s hard to explain. I was at my laptop, doing a final check of my oral report for my graduate seminar the next day. Looking up, I discovered a figure pressed against the left pane of my window. My heart almost left my chest – this was the 43rd floor! I pulled the right side of the window open and the figure bent to come in.

“The laptop! Mind the laptop!” was the first thing I said to the man now standing on my desk. He stood on the only part of it not piled with books – I had to keep some space free for the window, which opened inwards. He froze, immobile and erect like the Statue of Liberty, although obviously he lacked a torch and had neither arm raised. I offered him a hand and he stepped down. He was very graceful.

I closed the window, somewhat flustered. How had he climbed to the 43rd floor? Would he have fallen if I hadn’t opened the window? Or jumped? I’d had a good look at the windows once before leaving on a trip; any part of the exterior which might have offered a foothold was steeply curved to ward off burglars.

“Sit down,” I said. He was a full head and shoulders taller than I, and I felt threatened. Yet as he looked at me awkwardly, I realized that finding somewhere to sit would be easier said than done. A week ago, I hosted a friend visiting Paris, and the folding mattress I was too lazy to put away still occupied the only part of the room worthy of calling “space”. I’d been stepping over it all week. It wasn’t hard to fold up, but I wasn’t in a hurry to put it away on top of the bookcase. I’m so short that even if I climb onto a chair I have to throw it up there like a discus. And now this man was standing here as if he belonged, doing his best to avoid stepping on the mattress. It lay directly on the floor like a gym mat, so was no good to sit on. Except for sit-ups, maybe. What to do? And he wasn’t even wearing shoes! Which at least meant he wouldn’t get anything dirty if he stood on it, but it seemed to make the whole situation much worse. The most obvious seat was the chair in front of my desk, but why should he sit there? Had he brought homework to do? Then there was my bed. If I had a friend over, we might sit there, one at each end, facing each other. But this man was no friend.

The heat was on, but I couldn’t leave him barefoot. “I’ll get you some slippers,” I said, fetching a pair for him as I started to form a plan. “Would you like to make a phone call?” I asked. He shook his head. I glanced at my watch: just past midnight, and I had a class at eight. Time for bed. I wasn’t sure if I could simply tell him he couldn’t stay, but I surely couldn’t cope with the fright if he appeared outside my window again. He didn’t look like a bad person – as if I could tell. I had some kids make trouble outside my apartment door once and phoned the concierge to come and chase them off. But he was in my apartment and not causing any trouble. What could the concierge do? I could phone my French friends and ask their advice – it was late, but I was close

enough to some of them to make the call. But I couldn't discuss how to get rid of him while he was right there. I had to get away.

As I was working this out, my phone rang from the shoe rack by the door. Perfect timing. "I'll just get that," I told him. Hardly impolite, given I was in my own home. And he wouldn't be able to hear while I was out in the hallway, so I could come up with a plan. It was DD! He'd been in Italy for a year, and I was always glad to hear from him. But I didn't ask him about the man, perhaps because it was him who called. When I got back to my room, I found the man sleeping on the foldable mattress. Just like the girl in the fairytale who walked in to the three bears' home and slept on their bed. So, now he was asleep. I laid a blanket over him, sighing. This is what I get for being too lazy to put things away. I tidied up a little then slept myself.

02

The high-rises made my neighborhood a favorite with parkour enthusiasts. I'd filmed a documentary on four whom I knew well, but they wouldn't let me show it because they felt they weren't good enough. Which was disappointing. I explained I was more interested in how they redefined the urban environment: traveling through spaces intended to be viewed; using untrodden spots as springboards. And even if they weren't the most graceful, I said, there was a vitality to how the scenery changed as they moved. But only one of them understood me. They liked my description, though, of their vitality. At first, I thought December (I named him for the month in which he arrived) was most likely a parkour runner. It would explain his appearance on the 43rd floor, at least. I ran into a young parkour runner I knew while buying croissants at the bakery and asked him if there were new rules about not wearing shoes. He hadn't heard so.

December had a young face. I can't say much about his body. He had the kind of androgynous beauty I like, making it all more necessary to get rid of him. All questions received only a nod or shake of the head. In fact, I was a little scared he might talk; if he spoke, I would be responsible. And I might not be able to handle that.

I was an entirely legal international student, so I'm not sure why I felt like a criminal so often. A Chinese girl once struck up a conversation with me on the street. "You seem kind," she told me, "so I don't mind telling you I'm here illegally. I know you won't report me." I think she was lonely. She told me everything – things one could say, as well as things one shouldn't. She was a fashion graduate, working in a clothing factory. Wasn't she scared of the checks on the subway? I asked. She said she'd been told which stops they usually did the checks at. She worked six days a week, so had no time to learn French. This worried me; what if she got into trouble and couldn't communicate with anyone? I met up with her a few times and gave her French textbooks I wasn't using. Her factory was shut down, and she went unemployed for a while. But there were plenty of other illegal factories, she said; she'd find another one. Sometimes I would find her wandering back and forth at the bottom of my tower when I got home at night. There wasn't much I could do

for her, but we chatted. It seemed cruel not to. But I never accepted invitations to visit her. I had so much schoolwork – and who knows what I might get mixed up in.

I'd spent some time socializing in Taiwanese international student circles, and didn't plan to keep doing so. They formed small, fraught groups, forced to gossip about others to avoid gossiping about themselves, and you never knew who was doing what with whom. Enough material for a hundred social realist novels. And while I was no longer part of those circles, I still heard the horror stories. One male Taiwanese student took in an odd Frenchman for some reason. The French guy died in bizarre fashion, and since then the student kept trying to kill himself. But DD had taken in an Italian man, Mich, and it turned out well – DD was now doing business in Italy, with Mich tagging along and helping out. I'd met Mich in Paris and worried he wasn't trustworthy. Not at all, DD explained, Italians just have untrustworthy faces. Anyway, on Mich's first day in Paris he hadn't been able to find anywhere to stay, and he thought DD looked helpful, so he asked if he could help. And DD let Mich stay with him. I asked DD if he should let a stranger stay like that, and he said it would be dangerous for Mich to be alone, as nobody could understand his French. Which was true. Mich went back to Italy to teach French at university – not at all what I would have expected. Whenever I saw them together at DD's office, they spent half their conversations gesturing. I envied DD's trust in others. I think befriending parkour runners and letting December stay were all a form of expressing my love for DD. My kindness to them is somehow his kindness to me.

03

And so, December lived where I lived. It should have been terrifying, now that I think about it. Every day I wondered how I could politely make him leave. He wasn't like Mich. DD had explained that although Mich spoke terrible French, he was resourceful. But December had just appeared at my window on the 43rd floor, and I don't think resourceful people do that kind of thing. The nightmarish vision of him clinging to the window like a frog on an aquarium wall remained with me. What about your family? Your friends? Your lovers? Was there any point asking such questions of someone who just appeared outside a 43rd-floor window? December had no coat or shoes. I asked if he would like me to go and buy him some, but he always shook his head, quick and decisive. I suspected he knew owning a coat and shoes would leave him no excuse to stay.

December did nothing all day, except read books from my bookcase. I told him to make himself at home, and he'd brew himself a cup of coffee or cook. If we were both in, he'd cook for two; if I was out, just enough for himself. A gay friend who stayed with me once had left behind some pajamas, which I gave to December. Those bastards were always leaving things with me, things I had no need of, so it was good to put some of it to use. Shame none of them ever forgot a coat. Buying those things for him would have felt like buying back my freedom. I wanted to do it, but felt ashamed of the urge. I left some cash where he could see it, and would not have objected

if he had taken it and left. But he touched nothing of mine beyond the fridge and bookcase. Money didn't seem to be what he needed. He never spoke, but I used to chatter away to him, to be friendly.

One night about ten days after his arrival, as I lay half-asleep, I felt a warmth across my shoulders. December lay behind me at the edge of my bed, one arm around me. He was crying. Was he allowed to do this? I'd seen plenty of people cry, but never while snuggled up in bed.

I wriggled towards the wall a little, but left his arm where it was. I patted it, as if comforting a child, while I woke myself up. "It's okay, everything will be okay," I told him, searching for French words of consolation. And then I found his hand inside my pajama top, nimble and playing. I made a sound that even I could not interpret. Arousal? Warning? My mind was a mess. But it didn't escape me that this was the proffering of a service, a demonstration of skills. I stopped him. "No, you can't do this. I have a boyfriend and we shouldn't." But every word I spoke itself raised unimaginable surges of arousal in me. He was so practiced. This was not his first time.

Was this an offer of payment in exchange for bed and board? Could I accept it? Was I like those corrupt aid workers in Africa, swopping food for sex with children? "Stop," I told him, but the way his mouth moved on my chest was entrancing. It seemed familiar, perhaps similar to how a woman might clench her vagina around a man's penis. It was something I'd only done twice, with men I truly loved, but they both nearly fainted in response. Only a certain degree of love allows me to control the clenching of those soft, coral-pink depths. And he was sucking at my nipple like it was a penis. Did I want to stick to my morals? Or enjoy the experience? I was the rope in a tug-of-war. His hair was long and so soft to the touch. I wrapped my hands in it and wanted to pull him away, but it sent waves of excitement through my fingers to touch his hair. It swayed down, an engorged erogenous zone itself, and we petted each other like that, pleasure draining the strength from my body.

"I don't want you to do this," I told him. "You're not a whore." I managed to get the words out, biting my lip. He heard and understood, still crying like ejaculating. My face was wet too. While he was distracted, I wedged my pillow between us, finally drawing a line between our as-yet unentangled lower limbs. Then he started grinding himself against the pillow and I thought, well, if you want. I stayed motionless at first, then started using the pillow in the same way, as if we were two seals playing with one ball. Moving rhythmically in the dark, moaning. After I came he whistled, like an arrow in flight – I wasn't sure if that meant he also came. Because maybe he didn't even have a penis, I thought. And I have no idea why I thought such a thing, but it's what came to mind in the moment. He looked like a man, but he could have been anyone. Any sex.

04

December left. When he went, he took the pillowcase with him. Which didn't matter, I just put a new one on.

But he came back. About four years later I arrived home one evening and found an envelope, hand-delivered, wedged into my door. Opening it, I found my pillowcase, folded up like a handkerchief. He'd finally been able to return it.

I shook it open and placed one hand inside, making a hidden fist for a long, long time.

Chapter 3: Herstory of Sex

01 Louie thinks about down there

Louie always thought the Chinese word for sex, *xìng*, sounded muted. Like a loose piano key, muddy no matter how many times you played it. Or a dried felt-tip pen you need to brush back and forth several times to get any color out of. She worried she wouldn't be heard clearly when she had to use it. What if it was understood as *xìn*, meaning trust? You couldn't always use a compound word (*xìngyù*, libido, for example) to clear up the ambiguity. And if your interlocutor was determined not to hear *xìngyù wèntí* (libido issues), it wouldn't matter how clearly you enunciated. They would still hear *xìnyù wèntí* (reputational issues).

Louie, 13, asked Pei, 14: "What does 'I want your heart life' mean? I don't remember hearing that one."

"Look at the English," Pei told her.

Louie had just started listening to English-language music and hadn't thought to inspect the cassette tape. She lowered her head to read, then looked up in shock.

"Get it?" Pei asked. "Heart and life together?"

Combine the Chinese characters for heart and life and you get the character for sex. Maybe the heart dies without sex? And heart sounds similar too – *xīn*, just a tone away from *xìn*. How did the saying go? "There is no greater sadness than to lose heart." Perhaps they meant to lose sex?

Pei explained: the publishers, scared of censorship, must have avoided printing the Chinese character for sex by breaking it into its component parts.

Louie and Pei laughed about this for quite some time. But it didn't really count as sexual experience. Louie hadn't acquired or lost any new knowledge. Even thinking of the English song title – "I want your sex" – didn't arouse or tantalize. But there are no rules to which words or phrases turn us on. Playing the secrets-swapping game "Promise Not to Laugh" in high school, Louie's friend Li-Ju told her that for some reason she found a particular Chinese idiom – "clear as ice, clean as jade," describing incorruptibility – hugely arousing.

Maybe "guard honor like jade" would work too, Li-Ju said.

This reminded Louie of a time in elementary school when she'd become infatuated with a line from a Chinese classic: "An embrace of soft jade and fragrance." That had somehow seemed hugely exciting, although she had no idea why. Deep down, Louie knew sex was meant to be cool.

Extra cool. The coolest. But hugging, kissing...even the words themselves were off-putting. If she'd known what the line was referring to, she wouldn't have found it interesting at all.

During her final year of elementary school, she took to performing suggestive song lyrics – she liked to be the boldest of the girls. On one school trip she put on her most cloying voice and sang for the boys: “This world, this life, I will be your wife.” You would have thought she was undressing, given the way they all covered their eyes with their hands and howled. Just the effect she wanted. Causing that odd reaction made her happy. She knew how to appear bold, so she did bold things. And to be seen that way was all she wanted. But she still screwed her face up at lyrics like “Holding you feels so good.” How, she thought, could anyone want to hold anyone else? How vulgar!

Young Louie's most passionate exchanges with the boys were foot-stamping contests, stomped back and forth in classroom and corridor. The cutest of the boys were those who could think of something to make you laugh while they stamped on her foot. In summary: pre-senior high Louie dreamed wholeheartedly of a rich sexual life to come – limitless experiences, as vast and teeming as the ocean. But actually holding hands with a boy was, as far as she was concerned, akin to caressing a caterpillar – her hand would simply not obey. Louie herself never noticed this great contradiction she played host to. And why would she?

It is surprising nobody reminds us to take note of our sexuality, to bear in mind why we have it and to observe its many states as it withers or flourishes. I spent time recording the growth of mung beans and soybeans; at one point I was required to keep daily notes on whether a silkworm had eaten any mulberry leaves or not. I stayed up all night making the necessary instruments to find a certain star, injuring my thumb in the processes. But as for sex... if you told me my sex is less important than a star, I might agree. But surely it is more worthy of study than a mung bean, or a soybean, or the mulberry leaf consumption of a silkworm? Why did no one ever say “Hey, something you should know...”?

Sex never stays the same, it is always unique. Your feelings about it today are only for today. They'll be replaced tomorrow, like a mayfly.

Louie read a short article in the inside pages of the newspaper about a mother who beat her daughter to death. She had caught her daughter playing sex games with an elementary school classmate, and killed her. The newspaper did not report what game the boy and girl had been playing. Had they been looking at each other? Touching? Regardless, nothing the girl could possibly have done warranted being beaten to death by her own mother.

Around the same time, Louie witnessed the following:

Her young cousin, walking home from kindergarten with her mother, complained: “Mommy, I itch down there.” Before she had even finished, Louie's aunt started hitting her daughter – really hitting her! “Don't say things like that!” But what's wrong with saying you itch down there if you itch down there?

Louie knew that the adult's anger had something to do with sex. She thought her cousin probably meant that her panties were uncomfortable. Our heads itch, our noses itch, our backs itch now and then, so why can't we itch down there too? Louie was still young herself and knew

how adults could sometimes misunderstand a child's utterances as somehow being related to sex, when they really weren't. What was it that made adults so quick to anger? If she hadn't seen it herself, she wouldn't have believed people could be so uptight about sex. She would have been wrong. And if even something innocent can be so dangerous, anyone who said the wrong thing might end up beaten to death. And that fear seemed so close to hopelessness. Louie didn't know where it came from.

Her cousin limped off wearing the trendy black boots her mother had bought for her – her way of showing affection.. But she hadn't yet mastered the body language needed to walk in them. Those shiny black boots might as well have been horseshoes.

A girl, lame. Not because of her leg, but because of her boots. Or maybe not the boots, but the language she'd been allocated. She couldn't talk about down there. What about to the right of down there, or to the left? Above down there, below down there? Inside, behind, in front? Was any aspect of down there not guarded by an electric fence of taboos?

Perhaps we should talk about knees, Louie thought. We've all got knees.

02 Louie hears that birds go *tweet*, and crosses to the other side

Oh, but not every story of a girl and her down there is a tragic tale of scoldings, beatings, and death.

Louie heard a fantastic story once – coincidentally, about someone's young cousin. Younger than Louie's cousin though, and not yet at kindergarten. One day she clung to her mother and told her with great delight: "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, touch yourself down there, it goes *tweet-tweet*, like a birdie. Try it, did you know you could go *tweet-tweet* down there?"

But this mother – composed, wise, and possessing a brain equipped with a high-speed sexual implication interpreter – burst out laughing. The little girl continued to encourage her: "Touch it, make it *tweet-tweet*." She finally gave in to her daughter's repeated requests: "I will, soon, I promise I'll make it tweet tweet."

The story induced a state of embarrassed delight in all who heard it. "Good lord, I've heard it all now!"

Nobody thought this young prodigy had a squeaky toy or a tinkling bell down there. This was a sound without sound. Anyone older than she would struggle for something between "I don't know what that's called" and "arousal" But we know the established meanings of words too well and struggle to understand the language the little girl pieced together for herself.

It was a happy feeling like birdsong: intermittent, rhythmic, not heard by the ear but unavoidably audible to the body. After hearing the story Louie kept confusing the lyrics to that old song: "Calling me, calling me, the old village dusk is calling me," became "Tweeting me, tweeting me..." As if it really were the same thing. Someone commented the little girl must love her mother very much, to want to make sure her mother knew. Does a mother know? Do others?

Mother – other. A subtle distinction in roles. One year, Louie’s mother couldn’t go on the company holiday, so Louie went alone, with the older ladies keeping an eye on her. One day, clutching the change of clothes she’d been told to bring and waiting her turn outside the showers, she got so bored she screwed her panties up into a ball to play with. Throw, catch, throw, catch.

She had always done this: when there were no toys to hand, she’d pick something up and play catch with herself. But that day her game was interrupted: one of the older ladies walked past and Louie stopped in embarrassment. The woman didn’t say anything – Louie was the boss’s daughter, after all. But even if the woman’s sudden look of panic contained only a sliver of disgust, it was enough. Louie had been sitting all by herself at the door to the showers, how was she to know someone would walk past?

That was the first time Louie crossed that golden line, and in crossing it became aware it existed.

On one side of the line, everything belonged to her and if she didn’t want to think about it too much, that was fine. But on the other side: a kingdom of taboos, a land overcast by shame. On one side, feel free to play catch with your panties – why not, after all? But be spotted doing so from the other side of the line and your panties are no longer a mere piece of cloth. They represent your down there, flying brazenly through the air rather than being properly tucked away.

The threat of adult punishment was clear to Louie. The reaction of an adult woman taught her to be ashamed – even though, a minute earlier, her actions had been of no significance at all, just a simple pleasure too ordinary to mention. And then she bent to the adult world and tamed herself, without requiring an explanation or asking if it were right or wrong. This is what adults are to children: authority, exemplars of “how the world is.” Louie understood she had to rely on adults to learn things – she knew so little then. And so she accepted – if only temporarily – the grown-up view on panties, and pretended it was her view too. Even though her brain had not yet developed to the point where she could connect her panties to her down there, and her down there to so many other things. Shame and good manners were, for a long time in Louie’s life, a concession made to others, rather than something she might have thought up herself.

As an adult, she obeyed the suggestions of the feminist movement of the times and used a mirror to have a look at her “little sister”. But she found the looking itself strange, like she were inspecting the roof on your house. Unless something’s gone wrong – a leak, perhaps damage from falling debris – women had plenty of other methods to know what was happening. Like her young cousin had said, they could hear it tweeting. We trust our roofs are sound without climbing ladders to check.

Later, a sentence in a Kobo Abe novel brought a revelation. Men want a woman’s genitals constrained within a certain area, so they think of them as boxes, the lid of which can be sprung open by attention paid to ankles and knees. It’s not a penis, hanging there to be drawn. If you want to draw the female genitals, you need an opening motion. As you shift from grasping a penis towards down there, a man needs a point around which to orient himself, something you can hold. And sometimes that’s a knee. “You must not seize the vagina or clitoris, nor are the labia there to be touched. Approaching these three jeweled keys to the gate like a penis will only leave you

confused as to how to proceed.” Louie had not once imagined she had an opening mechanism in her knees. She’d never even thought of it as opening. There’s no lid or door – she knew it well enough to just go there.

Louie had never before put herself in the position of the opposite sex and thought about how bewildering down there might seem. For a while she would read euphemisms such as “the secret delta” and wonder what was meant, not realizing this was very much her territory. It sounded more appropriate for strippers. It’s hardly a triangle, anyway. A reductionist description, relying merely on the visual. It made her think of a three-cornered set square, set between her two legs. How do they think we live like that? As if. It’s only a triangle if you go and stand in front of it. But as the owners, that’s the last thing we would do. We have more immediate entrances to that neither two-dimensional nor three-dimensional venue. The trick to safe navigation there is to not look.

It was like learning to translate into another language, and Louie came to think of this amusing realization as “looking from the other side.” Doing so made one see wrongly, think wrongly, speak wrongly. Perhaps inadvertently, perhaps inevitably, perhaps poetically. Because it’s the other side.

Louie thought this distinction better enabled her to speak her own language. And previously, she hadn’t even realized she had one.

“Next time we’ll try and find the G-spot,” Louie thought.

03 Louie ponders being “good in bed” and considers the G-spot

And through romances big and small, Louie and Pei remained in touch, in their twenties now and the ignorance of high school far behind. Talking on the phone one day, Pei (a spirited ball of chaos back then) said to Louie (a woman not given to making trouble): “Hey, guess what. Someone said she could tell I’d be good in bed as soon as she saw me.”

You can tell Pei’s good in bed just by looking at her was the original sentence. Louie forgot her actual response, but recalled it as an artful evasion. Perhaps she said something like “it sounds like she’s flirting with you,” playing the knowing but neutral observer. She knew she had ignored the question Pei was really asking: “So tell me, do you think I look like I’m good in bed?” But she still found the assertion worthy of consideration in its own right.

She had once heard a film critic describe Marlon Brandon in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as “a huge phallus walking back and forth.” She found it a vivid description. Louie knew the film critic was very heterosexual, but also quite talented: he expressed annoyance, but not maliciously. He merely reported the fact that certain physical appearances cause certain associations. To have used the word “cock” might have sounded admiring, but “phallus” maintained an objective distance.

And she remembered once accompanying a friend, a gay Frenchman named Alain, to an LGBT film festival. They went with another woman, whom Louie found to be homophobic, but

Alain felt duty-bound to bring. She found it interesting: the two shared an experience of marginalization. As a gay man in a heterosexual society, Alain was often lonely and isolated, while Felicia's homophobia left her ostracized at social events. The homosexual and the homophobe, perhaps not a natural pairing. But Alain often quietly asked Louie to bring Felicia along: *Don't ditch her, she'll be so sad*. Louie bit back her own commentary that Alain's humanity was stronger than his homosexuality.

As expected, Felicia complained: "The film was good, but they really didn't need so many close-ups of penises. I felt so uncomfortable." Alain defended the film and the close-ups, and the two argued endlessly, both unusually stubborn. Louie knew Alain wouldn't give up his own views just to support LGBT films – if he said it didn't bother him, it didn't bother him.

Louie tried to placate the pair, explaining that the scenes weren't filmed to excite a female audience. Both Alain's enjoyment and Felicia's objections perhaps proved the director had captured the unique relationship between gay men and the penis. Felicia was not convinced by Louie's aesthetic analysis: "But why so many, and so ugly?" Alain argued back, although without much structure: "I don't think there were too many, or that they were ugly." One penis (and there had been many) could elicit a range of responses.

Felicia tried to win Louie to her side, but Louie declined, explaining: "I knew I was never going to feel the same way about penises a gay man does, so I wasn't expecting to enjoy them. You're going to feel differently about watching something close to your own experience, compared to something that isn't. So I wasn't engaged by all the close-ups, but I didn't find them unpleasant either. It's a look at a whole different world."

Felicia remained angry, but stopped complaining.