INTERVIEW

An Interview with Melissa Faliveno

INTERVIEW BY DAVID SHAFER · JUNE 2008

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On textbooks, when she was a child in small-town Wisconsin, Melissa Faliveno wished really Before Jesus and stood with her parents in standard gun stances and sweat pantsuits for family photographs. She wished she had a Cabbage Patch doll and a Jonathan Taylor Thomas sign of hard labor pillow. She practiced hopscotch and kissing boys in a trailer in a stop-or-reach financial independence/Valentine's mishap. "And it never turned out that way," this description of the ninth sojourn in "Meat and Potatoes," an essay exploring motherness and food and BDSM, is her debut essay collection, Transhipment. Faliveno's brilliance lies in her ability to find meaningful connections between seemingly disparate topics. (Where your sight ended is "hyperspace" and you're a writer of globe as Faliveno, you probably don't need to think twice about flitting back and BDSM.) In the essay "Hot Pockets," a "Hot Mama" sex-fantasy interlude between the media rejoicing but Brooklyn spectacular and cultural-assumption-filled gender relations.

Unsurprisingly, I detected my mouth but I did what it is we always do when we speak of conversation, sex is a matter of pressure, breath, and continuity, of the dynamic between friend/enemy, driving your car/let go of it/pressure this you, let others do/self-forget/let go of the wheel/let go of the wheel/let go of the wheel. Sex is a matter of pressure, breath, and continuity. Sex is a matter of pressure, breath, and continuity.

Sex, we assume, has given us some sense of what we are, as emphasized as home and love and language.

Language/Transhipment is an writing students/not full, shortly after it was published, and again this year getting. After students read it, three years became more factual, more self-aware, more self-deprecating, more Wisconsin-specific, more Midwestern, more Faliveno-specific. I watched her book, Hardly Wonderful (The Hell of the Heart of Texas), head and flipped through it, drawing on the multicultural studies and English classes I thought I'd by could read a passage from the book. Then passed the text.

*I'm not straight. And you wouldn't exactly straightforward. I wrote really bad a coming-out/I'm gay/because I never thought I had the right, and I guess it's difficult to it's to admit. Because I'm self-indulgent to say some things about. But it's also because it's a phrase that I don't have the words. There are sounds I can automatically make. Sounds I hear, and sounds of tempo, of rhythm, when I am attracted to and what, I said intimacy, frisk, words like gyrations, designers of straight, words which attempts to define the ways we body-dance/compare to traditional notions of gender/ I was three months because they/in the best words I have for them/ sometimes they make me cramps, but sometimes I feel the/ I'm/ the/ I'm/ the/ the/ the

MF: I'm so glad that you identified that because "Of a Moth" is still one of my favorite essays in the book. And then that revision process was interesting. "Of a Moth" and "Driftless" were the two essays that I felt like I really had to shape to include in the book, but "Of a Moth" in particular. It's the oldest essay in the book. I wrote it while I was in graduate school in a writing workshop my second year. So it was probably 2010. I don't know that I've actually been as bewitched in the writing process as I was when I wrote that essay. I haven't used that word to describe it before, but that was how I felt: bewitched. I wrote "Of a Moth" for a workshop with Vijay Seshadri, who's the nonfiction director at Sarah Lawrence, though he's mostly a poet. He's a brutal workshop instructor. I love him, but he's brutal, and he said something like, This is great, but you need to do some research because I feel like you've never read anything about moths before other than this Virginia Woolf essay. And I replied, Well, do I have to read everything about moths? And he said, Yes, you have to, you have to read everything about moths. And he gave me some suggestions. So from the time I wrote the draft to what was included in my thesis, which I believe is what I submitted to *DIAGRAM* in 2011, involved mostly cultural research. I was reading the *Book of Job* and I was thinking about all of these cultural touchstones about moths. So really it was during the research process that the first revision happened. So then I submitted that to *DIAGRAM* and it was published in the early winter of 2012, I think. And then I left it alone. People would come out of the woodwork—no pun intended—and contact me randomly and say, I read this essay in *DIAGRAM* and it's my favorite thing. I got so much great feedback on it from strangers. I felt like it was kind of my life-defining piece. So when I decided to include it in the book, I think my first drive was just that I love the essay—and it's a rare thing for me to say that I feel so much love for an essay that I wrote, but I just love that piece and I wanted it to live in this book.

But it existed on a different plane than the rest of these essays I was writing, and I still kind of think it does. But what I knew I needed to do—on a basic level—was somehow incorporate more about gender because the book's connective tissue has to do with gender. So I wanted it to have at least some concrete connection that readers could grab on to. And I remember thinking, *Well, it's about sexuality and it's about a woman being alone.* And so I wanted to really dig into that feeling of a woman in isolation and what it looks like to be a woman alone. And some of these traditionally male-ish expectations of what male writers do alone: they drink whiskey and get moody and whatever. And I was just a woman alone: heartbroken but really enjoying aloneness, while at the same time feeling very lonely and drinking a lot of whiskey and having these weird interactions with insects in my room. So I was really interested in the womanhood element of it, which I don't know that I was necessarily that cognizant of when I was originally writing it. And then, as I was looking at the essay, I realized I had gendered the moths in my mind. I thought, *That's interesting, this weird thing that we do in society.* When we can't identify any sort of gender or sex, we use *he*. So that's how that new section came in.

But that line you mentioned about looking back, that was, I think, really important because when I originally wrote that piece, it wasn't untrue, but I think I had rebuilt the narrative of that time for myself—this narrative that I had made this decision to leave, that I had moved forward alone to be alone. And that with the aloneness came all this sadness, all these dark nights, but that I had made the decision. And what's more true is that my partner at the time and I had broken up—and I hadn't wanted to break up. He drove me out to New York, and I don't think I had that part in the original either.

BLVR: Right. In the *DIAGRAM* version, you drove to New York and there's no mention of him in the car with you.

MF: I realized that the true narrative is not that I had struck off on my own and decided to be alone, but that the relationship had ended and I was continuously looking back on it and longing for it in many ways. I remember feelings of desperation, of wanting to call him and say, Can we please just be together again? Can you just come back? Why don't you move out here? We can make this happen.

Having those feelings and then trying not to act on them, trying to move forward but constantly looking back, I thought that was important to say—because yes, I leave quickly sometimes, but in a way I don't, because I'm constantly thinking back and clinging to the past. It also ties to the way that I think about Wisconsin, my home in the Midwest—this sort of push and pull of longing, of wanting to return, of wanting that comfort, but also wanting to keep moving forward, to being able to do it on my own, not relying on this magnetic feeling of home.

BLVR: Absolutely. It accomplishes all of that, of also linking back to the land in Wisconsin. This brings me to the title. It's a made-up word, which I love, because it gets at this idea of what are the things we don't have words for. How do we find those words? You do this beautifully within your essays. You explore the etymologies of words. I'm thinking about your reflection on the word *driftless*, how it suggests motion while also implying stasis. And your reflection about the words *reclaim* and *androgynous* and the history of the word *tomboy.* You're using language to get at new or deeper understandings of language, which as an observation sounds so obvious. But I'm wondering if you can talk about that process of searching for the words we don't have.

MF: That was a huge part of the process of writing this book. I mean, this book is about a lot of things. Usually, it gets described as being a book about gender and class and the Midwest, but I think it's also a book about language and the words we use to make meaning of life and experiences and ourselves—and how kind of absurd that is because we created these words. We gave them meaning. So how do you give meaning to something that is so indefinite and intangible and not easily defined. I've always been fascinated with morphology and the ways that language changes. I dated a linguist. For a long time actually. The person who I broke up with before moving to New York. He studied morphology and we talked about the ways that language shifts. This was at the height of when people thought it was hip to be grammarians, and we really resisted that and talked about how language is made up. I've always been really curious about that and really interested in that process of words becoming words. Usually, when we don't have a word for something, we create a new one. Or a word changes over time because of colloquial usage or slang or whatever. And so when I started really thinking about gender and this question of gender, which was kind of radical and new to me—in my late twenties was really when I started thinking about my gender and what it means that I call myself a woman and what it means that I think of myself as genderqueer—I didn't really know how that fit into other people's definitions of genderqueer. I started to think about gender fluidity and about the ways that gender can occur. It has all of these inherently fluid aspects to it—like it is not one static thing. It's this thing that changes based on what we're doing and how we're living in our bodies and how we see ourselves and how we dress and how we cut our hair—all these basic things—but it was kind of a miraculous thing to think about fluidity in terms of gender and also class. I think a lot about the ways that class is this fluid thing, the ways that you can move in and out of class or socioeconomic status. You can strive and climb and get somewhere and you can fall and land back where you were, and I saw that happening in my family. I'm actually writing about that now, about this constant movement between categories and definitions of class. And so every time I interrogate anything, it's through the lens of the language that we give it. I like to read the dictionary and research a word and usually that process triggers something that's fascinating to me and that I can then write into. In *Tomboyland*, I wanted to explore the ways that language, like gender and class and identity, is this fluid thing that's constantly shifting because we make up words to find meaning, to make better sense of things. Because that's what language is. It's a code. It's communication. And it's meaning-making. And that's the work that we're doing as humans, just trying to make meaning of our lives and ourselves and the work that we do in it.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jeannie Vanasco is the author of two memoirs, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* and *The Glass Eye*. *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl*—a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a *Kirkus* Best Book of the Year, and a *TIME* magazine Must-Read Book of the Year—was published by Tin House Books in 2019 and comes out in paperback this fall. *The Glass Eye*—honored as an Indie Next selection and an Indies Introduce selection by the American Booksellers Association—was published by Tin House Books in 2017. She lives in Baltimore and is an assistant professor of English at Towson University.

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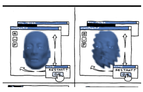

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