

Against Romanticism

by Bobbi Lurie

In *Under the Sand*, Charlotte Rampling, stiff and elegant
in her aging body, imagines
her husband still alive after drowning in the sea.
And because the film is French, the camera pauses
long moments at the curve of her neck, it watches
her finger vermilion tulips in a vase. Her new lover,
a wisp of a man, looks good in leather.
The camera pans quickly across beige suede,
rests long on papers piled high on the dead
husband's desk. A harsh diagonal of light intersects
French sentences I cannot read.

You've got to let me rent a video to make up for this,
my son says emerging from the dark theater,
the light in the lobby haloing his rumpled hair
as he drags his denim jacket across the floor, across the debris
of popcorn and abandoned straws. *This movie sucks. I*
hate watching old people have sex.

I look back at him as I walk to the line
for the bathroom, following a woman with a cane
through the door. *I love this film*, she turns and says,
It's so romantic. I watch her look long into the mirror,
apply her fuchsia lipstick with a brush, watch her
pucker, smack her lips, leave
crumpled paper towels lying along the edge of the sink.

sb.gif

*That film was just a woman's perception
of men. Her boyfriend was just a body
to have
sex with. She was so boring.
Who gave a crap about her? Even her denial was boring,*
my son says as I pull out
of the lot. *Roger Ebert*, I start to say
when a car screeches, I crash into it,
the window glare blocks my view,
I gasp. My heart pumps hard as I remember the way
Charlotte Rampling ran to her car from the beach,
screeching to a stop in front of the French police
station, frantic at first then strangely calm,
the mask of her face filling the screen
believing her husband is dead, not believing
he is dead. I step out into the chill air, survey damage,
thankful it's just my headlight knocked out,
that the red-haired woman in the gray T-shirt is smiling,
walking towards me, her massive, white SUV undamaged.
My name is Ginger, she says, thrusting her hand towards me,
her diamond bracelet shimmering in the cold light, her fat fingers
choked with rings. I think of Charlotte Rampling's ringless
fingers,
how her hands floated briefly over the surface of her dead
husband's desk. Ginger asks me questions I answer
without thinking. I turn back to my car, to my son, feeling numb
and weak. I sink into the seat, clutch the wheel,
force myself to focus on the road.

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At home my son watches *Fight Club* for the sixteenth time.

He tells me *how cool it is to watch the mind split in pieces.*
98% of the world wants to see *violence, Mom.*

I cook him pasta with red sauce the way Charlotte Rampling did,
ask him if he noticed how she always
made pasta when she cooked.

Yes, he says. And pasta makes me sick. I take out cold
leftover chicken from the fridge, place it in the cracked
yellow dish, watch him devour it in front
of the green glow of the television set.

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I stand behind the sofa where my son
lies cracking ice between his teeth.
On the screen we see Edward Norton, an insomniac,
living as a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct,
at first searching through catalogues until sunrise
wondering what kind of dining set defines him as a person,
then joining support groups for people with testicular cancer,
brain aneurysms, melanoma and parasites.
We see how the crying helps him sleep. He meets Helena
Bonham Carter who also cannot sleep. Then he invents
Brad Pitt who leads him with his *tough gaze,*
jaw shrugged forward. Together they create *Fight Club*
which escalates into *Project Mayhem.*

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Phone rings. I leave the screen. Ginger calls
to say she has whiplash after all and do I have a lawyer?

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I remember Charlotte Rampling staring out at the sea from the window of her kitchen, the overcast blue of the sky almost identical to the blue of the sea, her white blouse, unimaginable thoughts as she lifts her hand to her face.

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In the other room, Norton says he and Pitt are *always sizing things up*. They are *building an army, trying to hit bottom*. Norton spits loose teeth out into a filthy sink in an abandoned building. Norton's apartment has been blown up, his prized Ikea collection demolished. He says *self-improvement is masturbation*. He's through with catalogues. He's searing his own flesh with lye for amusement, living the anti-anti where *nothing is solved but everything matters*, sunk in a feast of self-mutilation, the saturated *Techno* blasts, magnifications of synapses to the brain, mitosis of cells and the microscopic details of hair on his head, ending with a gun barrel between his teeth, *speaking only in vowels*. But the gun is in his own hand, so he shoots himself through the chin, realizing this is the only way to get rid of Brad Pitt who is part of him. Pitt dies before his eyes. Norton is finally cured through this self-inflicted violence. We are asked to believe that his schizophrenic split comes together from a gun for he holds Bonham Carter's hand

by the window as they stand very close and calm,
in the midst of *Project Mayhem* coming true,
skyscraper after skyscraper
crashing down in front of them.

This scene draws me back to the twin towers
crumbling over and over, the searching for dead after.
I cannot watch the credits though I notice
how the green glare rests on my son's face when he asks,
wasn't that fantastic?

I don't answer.

Instead I remember flying back to Manhattan
after the whole thing happened. I took a cab
from LaGuardia, felt the usual blast of the city,
only this time it was different. The echoes of the horns
and sirens reached deeper as we drove past the
wounded western stretch of lower Manhattan. I told the cab
driver
how sad it made me feel seeing the towers' absence.
He started to cry. He said he almost died that day.
He was on his way to Chase Manhattan Bank
when the crash happened. His best friend died.
He cried and cried, tossing a coin at the toll booth slot,
driving through the deep grime of Queens,
drenched in a gathering drizzle and American flags
strewn from the balconies and windows of the tenements.
By the time we got to Canal Street the driver had to stop
the cab. He lowered his head in his hands. I stared through
his convulsing shoulders hunched over the wheel. I felt trapped
in the cab with the black night outside me,
with the moldy smell of old leather from my seat filling my
nostrils.

Drops of rain dripped onto my face through the crack
in the window. The smell of deep grime and gasoline leaked
through

like a message of safety as the whoosh of traffic seeped into
the sounds of his weeping. The shops of lower Manhattan,
the bantering teenagers reeling on the corner drunk,
while the driver, Ibrahim, ranted on and on about his brother
and sister and mother in Egypt, all the words
insistent as the increasingly persistent rain
outside us, his tape player wailing songs in Arabic.
I think of Charlotte Rampling weeping and shrieking
when she sees her dead husband's corpse, his bloated face
eaten away, so long under water, wearing the same watch,
the same hands. Crying and screaming she starts to laugh,
then shout, *It isn't him! It isn't him!* Was the translation
from the French. And the next shot
is of her working out at the gym.

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Wake up, Mom. Wake up, Mom, says my son. *Why can't you
answer?*

I try to bring myself back to where we are,
to say something to him about the film.

But I get up instead, carry the dishes
back to the kitchen.

Saturday Night Live begins to blare
on the screen.

I lean against the cold of the sink, then feel moved

to turn and see
the chicken thighs and wings
stripped of meat, planted beneath the hissing
light, sinews glowing, gizzards decomposing,
two bulbs missing.

