SHORT STORY WINNER

MARK GERTLER IN 13 SKETCHES

by Shaun Levin

ONE

Gertler loves the mess of putting together a picture. It's like watching his mother make a pot of soup, for what are cabbages and carrots, potatoes and beetroot but greens and oranges, browns and purples? She returns to the house on Spital Square with baskets of vegetables—leaves of kale, mushrooms, spinach, parsnips in bunches—and Gertler insists on laying everything out on the table. And while she rests—having walked in like Justice, weighed down by food in both hands—Gertler sketches her at the table, her hands lumps of clay in her lap. And he paints the fresh fish, the recently-plucked chickens, quickly, before everything gets peeled, sliced, chopped, marinated, skinned, fried, baked, cooked and put on a plate for her Maxe'le to eat before he goes back to his canvas.

Even after Gertler moved to his studio around the corner on Elder Street he went home in the evenings to sit in his mother's kitchen. He went for its warmth and its darkness.

HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS
MARK GERTLER WITH HIS PAINTING "A GYPSY FAMILY ON THE HEATH."

TWO

At Ottoline's house for the summer, Gertler takes tulips—lilac, lemon, white—up to his room on the second floor at Garsington and places them in a crystal vase on the windowsill. I'm a bit like a girl, he thinks; Virginia had said women have a wider range of hues in their lexicon. Ivory white, magnolia white, puss white.

"How many colours do men wear, anyway?" she'd said.

Back in the East End, everyone wore browns, grays and dirty-white cotton. Poverty, like masculinity, limited the diversity of one's fabrics. Bright colours were for the rich and the frivolous.

Looking out the window he sees only treetops and a corner of the barn. The smell is of pine. He'd never learnt the names of trees; when he drew them they were shapes, wholes, rather than the intricate details of branches and leaves. That was his impression—fed by the animism of the East End and an apprenticeship at Clayton and Bell, colouring in designs for the stained glass mosaics for the Catholic Chapel of Westminster.

"Thank God for flowers," Gertler thought.

A vase full of tulips was all he needed. Beauty and order and predictability—the beauty of being itself. That's what he wanted to capture in his pictures, not the patchwork of existence that permeated every aspect of his childhood, the way the buildings sat on top of each other, the way his father dragged them back and forth to the Continent, the food in the markets, the noise—the sounds flying up to his studio from the hawkers on Elder Street.

Stop.

No more.

In the weeks after the daffodils died in the garden, the only colour left was green. Just shades of green—from the lawn to the new leaves—the deep green of the pine trees—and then suddenly in hidden spots around the garden: Purple clusters of grape hyacinths. Gertler thought: I like a wall at my back and an entire garden spread out before me. In the evenings, tired of amusing the goyim, he went to the wooden bench in the corner facing Ottoline's gardens, out of view of the guests in the drawing room, and sat quietly until the East End had disappeared and the only reality was the gratitude and splendour of Garsington. He was being reborn into something better. Gertler immersed himself in the lives of the people who came here, accepted their invitations, and became one of them.

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THREE

The woman writer from America hated her mother and father and blamed them for the death of her three siblings, all suicides.

"My mother should have stopped after me and my brother," she said.

As if the younger three had lived as long as they did only to fight off the passed-down death-wish of their mother. The woman writer had a breakdown when her brother shot himself—five years later her sister jumped from the top floor of an office block in New York. The writer told Gertler—and she only told him this because he told her he was from Whitechapel—she said that on each anniversary of her brother's suicide, she fills her pockets with coins and walks from her husband's office in the City to the East End and hands out coins to street urchins, talks to the poor. Gertler thought that one of those ragged boys could have been him.

"The third one died of tuberculosis," she said.

"I have it, too," Gertler said.

"I can never love my mother and father," the woman writer said.

Gertler was disgusted by the expression of such a sentiment.

FOUR

Gertler liked having his back scrubbed in the bath. He liked to be seen naked, him and Brett paddling about with no clothes on in the pond at Garsington. Katherine had her eyes on Gertler's body, his circumcised penis. And in his flat at Raymond Buildings, just off the Gray's

Inn Road, Eddie Marsh couldn't stop himself from looking. He'd paid for the paintings, so he felt he had the right.

"What is it?" Gertler said.

Eddie had been staring as if shocked into silence.

"It's you," Eddie said.

"Should I leave?" Gertler said, sitting there in Eddie's living room in a dressing gown and slippers.

"I was watching you in the bath," Eddie said. "I shouldn't have."

"What did you see?" Gertler said.

"I saw myself as a boy, maybe eight or nine years old, getting ready to swim in the lake."

"Go on," said Gertler.

"I don't want to shock you," Eddie said.

"Tell me."

"There was this older boy standing next to me, my head level with his chest, and as if it was the most casual thing in the world he removed his trunks and there it was, like an epiphany, a gift, a thick mound of black pubic hair. It wasn't his cock that stunned me. It was the lusciousness of that dark patch in the centre of his body."

"Carrington has lush pubic hair," Gertler said.

"Oh, please," said Eddie, getting up and walking over to the mantle piece. "Must you."

"I think she'd rather have a cock," Gertler said. "Anything to please Strachey."

And Eddie said: "I remember thinking that there couldn't be anything more beautiful than that...that...that knoll of plumage and the fish-bone of dark hair between it and the boy's belly-button."

"And then?"

"And then there you were stepping out of the bath," said Eddie. "And you just carried on talking to me, chatting away as if you were oblivious to..."

"I like it when you look at me."

Eddie walked over to Gertler, who was slouched in the armchair, his legs stretched out in front of him, and he reached down and undid the cord of Gertler's dressing gown, opened it and stood over him, watching his smooth chest and stomach rise and fall, and he followed the skeleton of the fish that ran down from his belly-button.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

"Sh," said Gertler. "Just keep your eyes on me. Think of the young boy, of what you couldn't do, how quickly you turned away, and

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The Moment Magazine-Karma Foundation Short Fiction Contest is in its seventh year. We are grateful to Sharon Karmazin and Dina Elkin of the Karma Foundation, for without whose generous support and guidance, this contest would not exist. And a special thanks to this year's judge, Jonathan Safran Foer. To learn more about our 2007 contest visit momentmag.com.

The winners of the 2006 Moment Magazine-Karma Foundation Short Fiction Contest are:

First Place: "Mark Gertler in 13 Sketches" by Shaun Levin
Second Place: "Trade Show" by Lisa K. Buchanan
Third Place: "The Sweetness" by Sande Boritz Berger

Finalists

"Desperate" by Jane M. Broido
"Himmelshine" by Bernard Cohen
"Capricorn Rising" by Yana McDonough
"Lotzi" by Dalia Rosenfeld
"The Harlow Gown" by Marc Simon
"On Becoming a Mother" by Myra Sherman

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in those seconds branded his image on your memory. You don't need to avert your gaze."

But Eddie turned and walked out of the room, and in the morning left for his office in the House of Commons before Gertler rose for breakfast.

FIVE

Gertler loved Carrington's solidity and her bigness. He loved watching her. Just being with her invigorated and inspired him, much more so because she withheld her body from him. Pursuit inspires. Gertler wanted to own her, possess her—he'd managed to conquer her *knish* only once—and that once had increased his desire and hunger for her. She was resolute never to be fucked again, not even by the men she married and landed up spending the rest of her life with.

Gertler thought Carrington's second husband was gorgeous and that if he, Gertler, were a woman, Partridge would be the man he'd fall for—so good looking and such a fine figure!

But Gertler was not a woman.

Despite what happened at the theatre: During the interval at *La Traviata* a man came running down to where Gertler, Carrington and Brett were sitting, just to see whether Gertler was a boy or a girl, and then he rushed back to his seat.

Brett leaned in closer and looked into Gertler's eyes.

"It's a girl," she said, stroking Gertler's hair, his chin.

"No, it's not," said Carrington, leaning in from the other side. "It's... It's..."

And they each kissed a cheek: three boys in a row all with very short hair.

Gertler smiled, his black curls framing his face, his sombrero in his lap. This being adored was always a great thrill, he thought. And when they left the theatre and went over to Ottoline's on Gower Street, Gertler and the two women recreated the best parts of the opera for everyone, including the little interval drama.

SIX

Carrington was on her way to visit Gertler while he worked on his self portrait. He was most beautiful when he was painting, and even more so when he was painting himself, absorbed in the pleasure of his own beauty. She walked across the Heath with a bag of strawberries in her hand, heading for the studio on Kempley

Street. She liked to think she was still in the country, walking from the cottage to visit Vanessa, one painter crossing fields to visit another. She needed geography and uninspired musings to prepare her for seeing Gertler after—what was it?—three years? She knew how unwell he'd been, written to him at Banchory, then the sanatorium at Mundesley. Would he be gaunt and pale, a skeleton in her arms?

The warmth—sun and open fields—and a bench just ahead of her. If it hadn't been close to three o'clock she'd have stopped and sat, fed her mind on ponds and boys flying kites, a couple on the grass on a blanket. She thought how the real dramas always happened indoors. The more time I spend out in the open, she thought, the less I want drama. Nature is drama enough. That's why she'd insisted on moving to the countryside—she wanted to spend time in the garden, walking through fields with Lytton, painting him on the lawn.

Carrington wanted to be on time. Gertler had told her once that it doesn't take much to make a Jew worry. She tried to respond to all his letters, especially the recent ones in which he'd been pushing her away, telling her how much he hated her because he loved her and because she couldn't love passionately. He'd called Lytton a half-dead thing. And she'd written to calm Gertler, to remind him how she'd always wanted to care for him, how she suffocated every time she got close to him. She'd written and told Gertler how jealous she was of Monty and Brett for being invited to wash his hair and scrub his back. She'd do anything to spare him from dread and loneliness.

Carrington knocked and Gertler opened the door and the smell of him was vile. Stagnant, stale, neglected. An assault.

SEVEN

"Stop," Gertler said. "Let me."

Carrington was rubbing her eye, pulling the top lid over the bottom like her mother had shown her—this is the way to remove grit from your eye, Dora. Gertler thought about oysters, thought about the things the *goyim* ate – thought of Carrington and what it felt like—like *treif*—to touch her.

"Hold still," he said, and put the tip of his finger against her eye.

And the grit stuck to his skin.

EIGHT

Gertler didn't like to wash when he was on holiday, especially in the summer, especially by the sea. He packed his trousers and his shirts—all white, all cotton, all missing more than a button or two. Last year the heat had been unbearable and he'd painted without any clothes on. Now he couldn't find his sketch-pad and he had to be at the train station in an hour to get to Dover. He blamed Marjorie for leaving early and buggering off to Spain with Greville and the Texidor clan.

The Lawrences would be there and that was reason enough to go. The village had become so crowded last summer and there'd been a constant queue of visitors. Even though Marjorie tried to stop them from walking straight into his studio, there were some who ignored her, this new wife of his. Gertler hadn't seen Lawrence since his letter about the "Merry Go Round." He was looking forward to thanking him—he liked to hug Lawrence, to feel his beard against his face—even if Lawrence did make Gertler feel more of a Jew than a painter, telling him that only someone with two thousand years of suffering could create such a work, that the Jews would sound the final death-cry of the epoch, that Gertler was flying like a moth towards a flame that would destroy him. "You must have periods of proper rest," Lawrence wrote. "Try to save yourself."

Gertler had lost the sketches. Marjorie would know where they are. With Mar-

jorie away he thought of death, of putting an end to this slow wasting away. His lungs were failing, he was coughing up blood, wads of squashed cochineal beetles. He'd spoken to Virginia about death when he'd met her at Carrington and Lytton's cottage. She'd spoken about it with

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an exuberance that was both cerebral and inquisitive. She wanted to find out about death before she died. Gertler expected to see her and Leonard in France.

Now he wanted sleep, to melt into the heat that had been constant for the last week, and would, they told him, become increasingly intense the closer he got to Chateaubriand.

NINE

They sat in the kitchen drinking tea. Gertler felt a recrimination from Marjorie—and pity—as if he was a person to feel sorry for.

"There are things we haven't spoke about," she said.

Gertler felt himself withdrawing, folding in on himself. Again. He was being blamed. His mind had gone blank and he was finding it difficult to go back, to remember. Is that what fear did, he thought—destroyed memory?

He said: "I really wish I could give you a child."

She said: "There's something about the kind of relationship you want with me that excludes children."

"All my relationships are like that," he said. "I like that sense of exclusivity. I want to feel I have the power to give *you* what you want. I want to give all my friends what they want."

"Why does it have to be about power?" she said.

"The ability, then," he said. "To be able to give everyone I love what they want."

"What you crave is for everyone to give you what you want," she said. "You're selfish and childish and naïve."

"It's not selfishness," he said, noticing how much he wanted her to understand. "It's vision, direction. I don't want to be some spineless jelly, to create things—paintings, a life, relationships—that have no inner vertebrae of purpose."

Stop.

No more.

As Gertler drifted into sleep, his head on the kitchen table, Marjorie stroked his hair and talked to him. "I am so terribly happy," she said. "Be happy, my love. Think how happy I am to have you." And he longed for her to lift him up and carry him to the bath, the way she'd always done, pressing him to her chest, offering herself for him to feed from.

TEN

Gertler tried to kill himself today. He cut his throat and then sliced his wrists. Marjorie raced back from Spain, where only days later civil war broke out and Luke was stranded in Tossa with his nanny and another friend of Marjorie's (Not the little homo. But then, Carrington had gone off with one fag, so why shouldn't Marjorie leave him for this one, with his thick purple oily veined penis?)

Now he lay with the blanket up to his neck and shivered. He held the cup with both hands, as if one hand could steady the other, and the cup a crutch in the

middle. The cake was a Victoria sponge. Just one slice. Thursdays was Victoria sponge; yesterday was the last of the fruitcake. He held the cup close to his nose, inhaling the steam. He knew that once he let go of the cup, he would smell his wounds, his own blood. The smell was of rotting flesh, of fried pork.

"Hello, Mark," she said. It was Marjorie. "How are you?"

"Damned awful," he said.

He hated it when people snuck in like that, crept around corners.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said.

"You could have waited till I looked up," he said. "I was just enjoying a spot of peace and quiet."

"Should I go?" Marjorie said.

Gertler said nothing, though he knew he should be saying: I apologise. I apologise all over again. Please, don't go.

Marjorie sat by his bed and he took her hand and held it against his lips. It was still warm from her gloves. He had nothing to say. He wondered if it was possible to stay silent from now on, to keep everything to himself now that there was so little left. She had that look of pity in her eyes.

"I don't think you know how to be happy," she said.

"Is that the aim of it all?" Gertler frowned. "Is that what we're working towards?"

He felt the undertone of misery in everything he said. He wondered how it would all end. In his room in Mundesley looking out the window, the scabs forming on his skin, being wiped and cared for by Marjorie, and later, by the night nurse who will page through his book about Picasso and ask him to explain the meaning of it all.

ELEVEN

Back in London and hungry for cool daylight air, Gertler left the house and headed for Highgate Woods. The autumn sky was clear, the woods full of older men treading the paths, two young girls in floral dresses on a bench making party arrangements. His hunger for beauty grew. He wanted to get back to the South of France. When the hunger for beauty faded, everything would fade; nothing would rescue him where once even the smallest thing could keep him from falling. Company was needed. To have Carrington with him at all times, to give him a reason to go back to the blank canvas. He hugged his chest. The trees were like giraffe legs, giraffes on their backs with their legs in the air. He kept walking. Every thought—a potential for anxiety. He kept the landscape moving to make sure the stimulus constantly changed.

He thought of the window in his room at Mundesley. Hours in one place.

TWELVE

Gertler's mother met the woman painter. She didn't trust women painters. Gertler's mother—she would never admit this—had always loved to paint. The dream that had frustrated her had materialised in her son. Gertler was a painter because his mother wasn't.

She was in Brighton and her dress was getting wet in the ripples on the shore. She disliked the pebbles and she disliked the heat and she remembered how much she disliked the smell of her own body. The sea air was good for her. Like the smells in her kitchen, they hid the smell of her body from her. She wondered if she would lose her sight one day soon, and whether this heightened sense of smell was compensation for a blindness about to happen. Her father went blind at seventy. She was 73.

The woman painter smelt of lavender. Gertler's mother thought she was beautiful in a *heimishe* kind of way.

THIRTEEN

Almost twenty summers of pavements and puddles behind him as he walks along the water's edge. Gertler imagines endless miles of beach. He imagines walking naked. Towards what? He just wants that sense of—that pull of a destination—to be driven by expectation and faith and wishful-thinking. So he walks—he follows the path, as if it was sea sand, only inches away from the waves, and he takes off his shoes. And the man at the gate asks: "Where are you heading?"

And Gertler says: "There," pointing at the distance.

It's an horizon, and since he now knows that the earth isn't flat, and that you can't fall off, ever, he knows there must be more beach after the horizon, more room to walk and wander and explore. He knows the horizon is only the illusion of an ending. Ⓜ