

## The Work of Art in the Age of Lite Reading

*Nancy Steadman*

INT. A WELL-APPOINTED BOARDROOM AT A DAILY NEWSPAPER. DAY.

CLARA is in her early thirties and has worked as a restaurant reviewer for the past four years at a daily newspaper in Montreal. She is tall and thin, with big hair and cool clothes. She holds a doctorate in Cultural Studies, and is angst-ridden about the 'frivolous' way she makes her living. She's quick-witted, charming, and neurotic. Seven other arts journalists are sitting glumly around the table, waiting for a newly-hired editor to arrive. CLARA rushes into the room, late (as usual) for the meeting.

CLARA

*Thank God! She isn't here yet.  
I hope she's one of these perpetually late people. It'll take the pressure off me.*

ERNST, a balding, pony-tailed art critic in his mid-forties, rolls his eyes...

ERNST

(laconically)

*Listen honey, in your line of work, you need as much pressure as you can get...*

CLARA ignores him, and continues brightly...

CLARA

*Does anyone know anything about the new editor? Apparently she's been stolen away from the competition.*

Classical music critic PENNY, a slim black woman about the same age as Clara responds conspiratorially.

PENNY

*Yeah? Well I heard that the people over there aren't terribly heartbroken about her departure.*

Her colleague MARC, a 26 year-old rock music critic who looks eerily like k.d. lang, lifts his head from its prostrate position on the table....

MARC

*Great.*

(He lays his head wearily back down.)

*She's a ball-breaker.*

The other reporters look at each other apprehensively and nod, conceding that Marc's observation might be at least partially true.

PENNY

(calmly)

*Well no, not exactly. In fact according to my sources she actually...*

Penny's words are drowned out by the sound of the door bursting open. A smallish woman dressed entirely in black enters. She is carrying an inordinate amount of hand luggage and is muttering barely audible disclaimers.

EDITOR

*Sorry I'm late... got into a fight with the parking attendant... wouldn't believe that I work here... had the nerve to call upstairs... should've parked on the street... no one interrogates you there....*

Annoyed, yet somehow not flustered, the editor heaves her huge purse and two over-stuffed leather briefcases on the oval table. She takes a seat at the head of the table and introduces herself. Her head is just visible over the luggage. Although she is in her late twenties, she appears much younger, and the staff is taken aback. She speaks very softly, the reporters bend forward to catch her words.

EDITOR

*Good morning, people. My name is Marjorie Berkshire. I'm your new arts editor.*

A few of the journalists manage a welcoming smile but most maintain an apprehensive silence.

EDITOR

*Hmmm... from your by-lines and pictures I already recognise Ernst Sims, Penn Hutcheon, Marc Laporte, Dylan Watts, Angelina Rossini, Albert Steinman, but...*

*(points to Clara and new film critic Michelle Gates)*

*you... and you... I don't know.*

MICHELLE

*Oh, Michelle, Michelle Gates. I was hired a couple of weeks ago to do supplementary film reviews. My contract is still under negotiation.*

EDITOR

*(gushes)*

*Oh, you're Michelle Gates. I just loved your reviews in The Village Voice. They were terrific! So erudite and informed and yet so entertaining.*

Michelle blushes and shrugs shyly.

The editor turns her gaze inquiringly to Clara....

CLARA

*(lightly)*

*And I'm Clara Bentham, restaurant critic. You probably don't recognise me because I'm always photographed with a big hat over my face. I've always thought that a fake nose and glasses would do the trick, but our former editor wouldn't go for it.*

The editor raises her eyebrows and echoes...

EDITOR

*The restaurant reviewer? Surely you don't need to be at this meeting....*

CLARA

*(bristling)*

*Why not? I always go to Arts meetings.*

EDITOR

*(patiently)*

*Yes, but this meeting is about some major changes I've been hired to implement. When you're only submitting two reviews a week, I'm not sure you need to be involved*



*in any important editorial decisions.*

CLARA

(hotly)

*But I write precisely the same amount of copy as everyone else in this room.*

Some of the journalists attempt to veil self-aggrandizing smirks as the editor smooths over the tension....

EDITOR

(with fake smile)

*Well, I'll be speaking with each of you individually over the next few weeks, so we'll be able to iron out the kinks then. OK? In the meantime...*

She reaches into her briefcase, pulls out a large stack of papers and begins to pass them around....

INT. THE FOLLOWING DAY. A FANCY CAFE.

Clara and Penny are having lunch at a new hot spot Clara's been due to review. Their menus are open, and Clara is complaining bitterly about yesterday's meeting.

CLARA

*I'm sick and tired of people denigrating my writing, just because it happens to be about food. Gastronomy is as much an art form as music or painting or film. And believe me, it's not a very easy thing to write about. At least you can listen to a piece of music over and over again.... By the time I sit down to work I've already swallowed the subject of my review. Regurgitation just isn't an option.*

PENNY

(ruminatively)

*True.*

CLARA

*Did you see how much everyone loved watching that woman question my "contribution?"*

PENNY

*Come on, they aren't that bad. And you have to admit, your columns can be a bit nutty sometimes. Maybe if you confined your criticism to food you'd be taken a little more seriously. I mean, do you really think a restaurant review is the place to debate whether or not Karl Marx prevented his maid from snacking during the day?*

CLARA

*What are you saying? Everyone else does it. Look at our beloved art critic Ernst — hardly a week goes by in his column without some reference to his cutting-edge status as keen cultural historian.*

PENNY

*That's different.*

CLARA

*Because?*

PENNY

*Because he's balding and has a ponytail.*

CLARA

*Oh.*

Clara's expression darkens, and she looks down sheepishly...

CLARA

*Well what am I supposed to do?*

*You heard Berkshire. She obviously thinks food critics have nothing but fettucine between their ears. What a Philistine!*

PENNY

*(shaking her head)*

*You know the brain does bear a frightening resemblance to certain pastas.*

CLARA

*You see! You don't take me seriously either.*

A waiter hovering around the table interrupts their conversation.

WAITER

*Have you decided what you'd like for lunch, ladies?*

PENNY

*Yes. This lamb dish sounds intriguing, but I'm not familiar with Les Animelles d'Agneau - what is it exactly?*

WAITER

*A very good choice. It's Chef's favourite, a specialty from his home town... he can't understand why people aren't ordering it.*

*They're sautéed lamb testicles, served over a crispy leek and celery root croustade, lightly sauced with a rosemary-infused velouté.*

PENNY

*They sound delicious!*

WAITER

*And for you madam?*

CLARA

*The poached salmon please. And a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.*

PENNY

*Oh yes, the wine.*

*(She looks up at the waiter)*

*What goes well with testicles?*

WAITER

*Perhaps a light Beaujolais...*

Penny nods approvingly and hands her menu to the waiter. He departs, mopping his brow. Clara takes a pad of post-it notes out of her pocket and begins to jot down some of the items on the menu.

PENNY

*Don't you think you're being a little too casual with the notes?*

CLARA

*I know, it's a habit I picked up when I was finishing my dissertation. I was so worried I'd forget to include something that my entire apartment was covered with little squares of paper. I'm still finding them. Yesterday I found a post-it note on a year-old package of tofu in my fridge.*

PENNY

(exasperated)

*No, I'm talking about taking notes, period. Doesn't anyone ever suspect you're reviewing the place?*

CLARA

*Surprisingly no. I try to go at the busiest time of the day when the waiters are running around like crazy. And if, by chance, any of the management notices, I usually stare into space and pretend that I'm revving up for tonight's haiku poetry reading or something. Observe.*

The waiter has arrived with their meal and with a flourish places two gaudy architecturally constructed plates of food in front of them. He picks up a fallen post-it note off the floor and sticks it to the tablecloth. Clara looks over intently at her friend's Anismelles d'Agneau and goes into oratorical mode, intoning dramatically:

CLARA

*The SMOOTH testicles were arranged in FEARful symmetry on the PLATE.*

Penny covers up her guffaws of laughter with her napkin.

PENNY

(muffled)

*That's not haiku. Sure, you have your 17 syllables, but that's not haiku.*

CLARA

(whispering)

*Who cares. Look at the waiter. You can tell poetry's really hot right now.*



The waiter, repulsed, beats a hasty retreat. Penny looks suitably impressed, and then suddenly remembers something she's been meaning to tell Clara.

PENNY

*Listen, I never got a chance yesterday to share what I found out about our lovely new editor. It's quite tantalising.*

CLARA

*Let me guess...  
she's a cross-dresser?*

PENNY

*No, I mean, yes, but only at the office.*

CLARA

*Well, at the meeting you said that she wasn't, as Marc so eloquently stated, a "ball-breaker." What else could it be?*

Giving Penny no chance to reply, she continues, lips pursed righteously, her voice rising and gushing:

*It's probably the usual bad editor stuff, you know, like our last one — that boring morph of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Conrad Black — power brokering and inserting grammatical errors into everyone's work, introducing misleading punctuation whenever he wanted something to sound meaningful....*

She leans forward, spit descending into her baby vegetables.

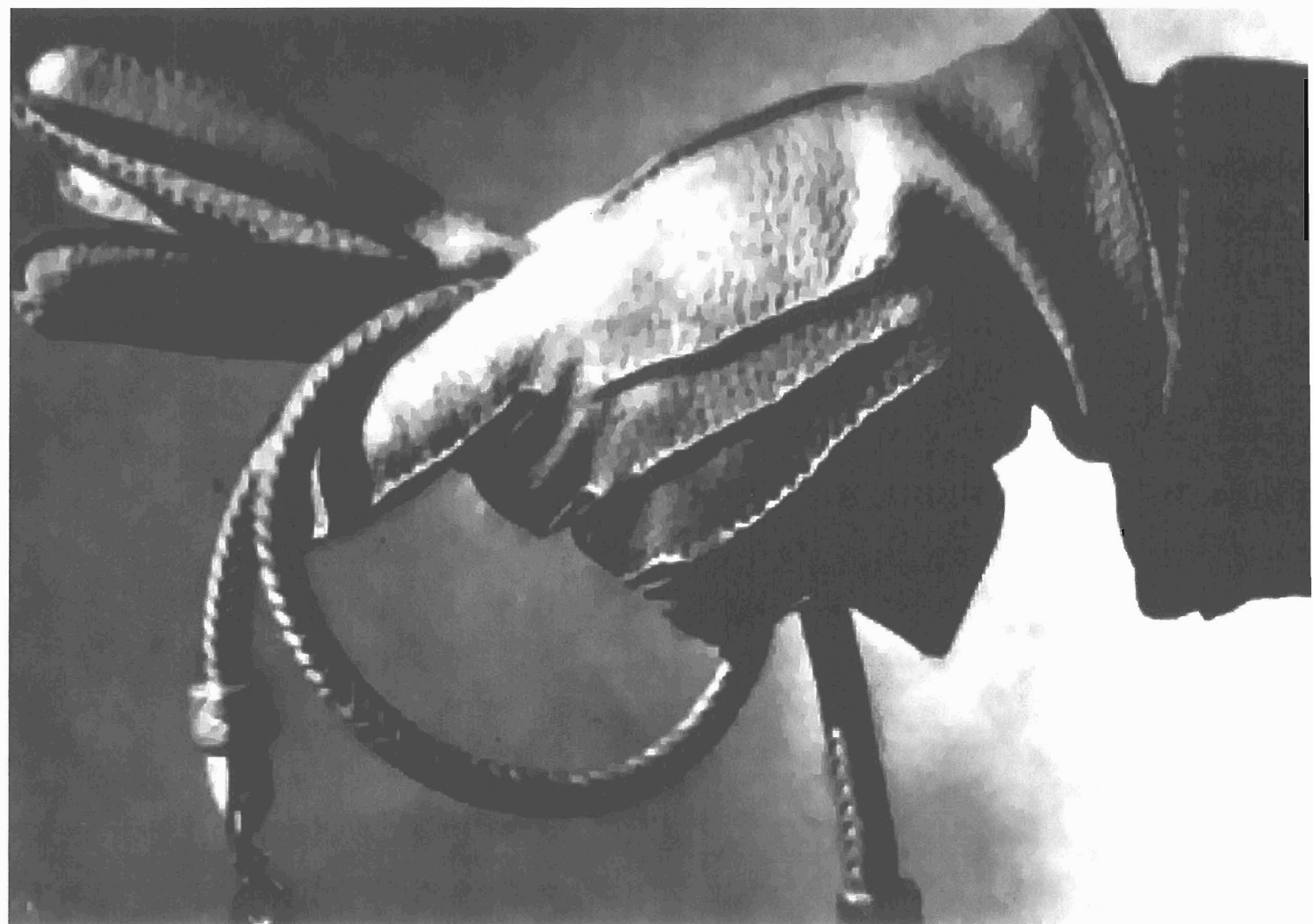
CLARA

*Remember that ridiculous slogan:  
"There's strength in submission!"*

PENNY

(wearily)

*Do you want to hear it or not?*



CLARA

*Yeah OK.*

PENNY

*She's nice. She's talented.*

CLARA

*And?*

PENNY

(whispering)

*And she's also into S&M.*

CLARA

*What's so shocking about that? They all are.*

PENNY

*No I mean for real. She has a dungeon. She moonlights as an S&M nurse. Nurse Marjorie, instrument of doom.*

Disappointed (and jaded perhaps by years of post-graduate feminist theory), Clara shakes her head.

CLARA

*I thought that it was going to be something really juicy.*

The waiter glides by, avoiding eye contact.

WAITER

*How is your meal ladies? C'est à votre goût?*

PENNY

*I find the testicles a little rubbery.*

WAITER

*You mean "Les animelles?"*

PENNY  
(firmly)

*Yes, "Les animelles."*

CLARA  
*My salmon is delicious, it's perfectly cooked!*

WAITER  
Let me ask Chef about your dish madame....

PENNY  
*Thank you, I'd appreciate that.*  
(To Clara)  
*Do you think I'm imagining it?*

CLARA  
*You're suggesting you fabricated the Nurse Marjorie story?*

PENNY  
(annoyed)  
*I'm talking about the food. Aren't you supposed to be working here? What do you think of these testicles?*

She offers Clara a slice of the sautéed yet undeniably gray matter, it glistens on the end of her fork.

CLARA  
(chastising)  
*We really don't refer to them as testicles.*

Clara tries them, chewing ruminatively.

CLARA  
*These are fine. Delicious in fact. The rosemary highlights rather than masks their delicate flavour. This is a difficult dish to get right.*

She quickly jots down her observations.

CLARA

*What a relief. Do you see how hard this job is? Imagine if they were bad. I mean talk about hermeneutics! How could I explain to our readership that the badness of animal balls is directly related to a particular chef's talent and ability and not to some inherently revolting property located deep within the organs themselves. But are people ready to understand that?*

She makes extra notes, underlining them several times.

PENNY

*Aren't you curious about Nurse Marjorie? Don't you want to know how I found this out?*

CLARA

*Of course.*

PENNY (whispering)

*Apparently, when things are going a little rough at the office, say around big deadlines, there's a bit of a spillage.*

CLARA

*Is spillage a word?*

PENNY

*It's an event. One of the reporters at the other paper told me about it. The last person to leave the office gets it.*

Clara takes a sip of her Sauvignon Blanc.

CLARA

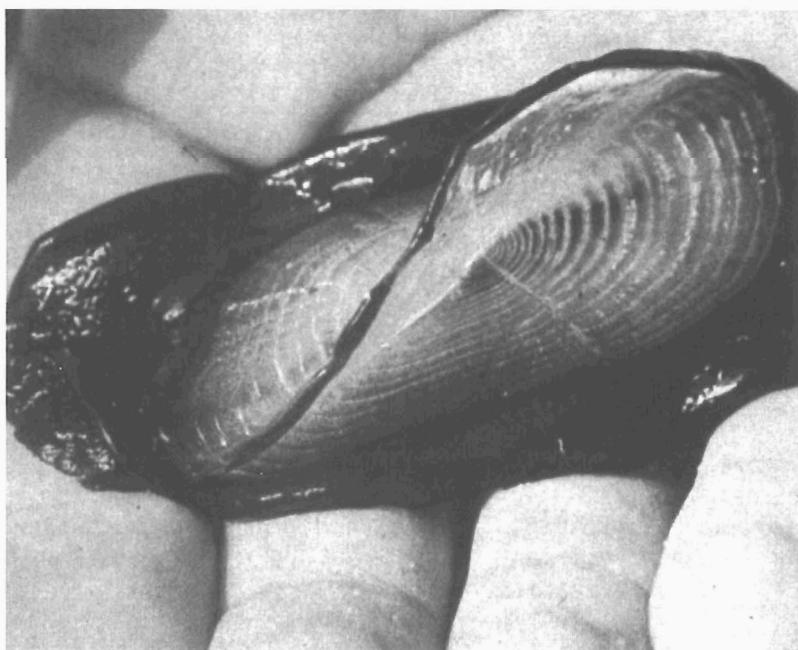
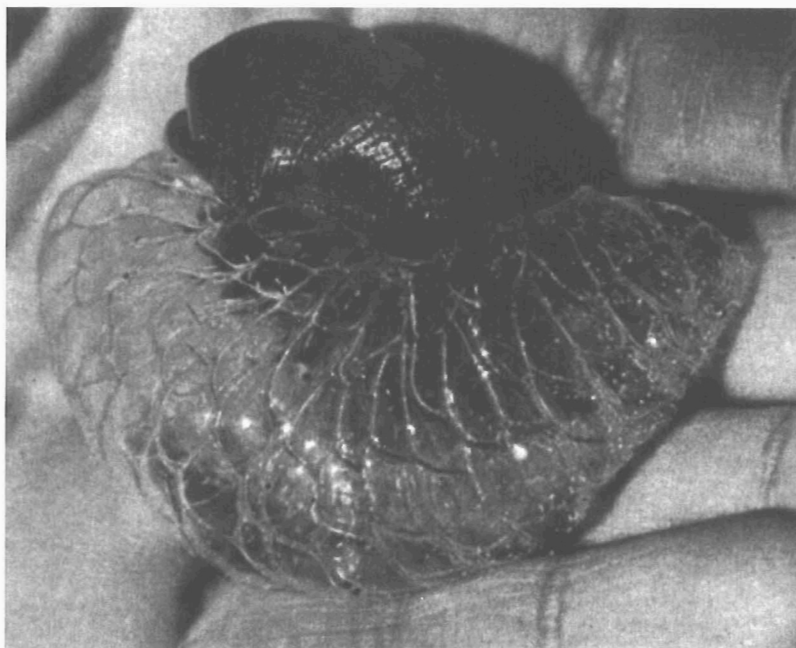
*Gets it?*

PENNY

*You saw all those bags she carries. Guess what's in them?*

CLARA (laconically)

*Uh — leather gear — masks...whips...harnesses?*



PENNY

*Exactly. And one more thing. Slugs.*

*Or escargot if you prefer. Seems she puts on all this gear and then revs up and tortures the poor creatures right in front of the person. Apparently at the end she lets out this bloodcurdling scream and cuts the bug in half with her stiletto.*

CLARA

*And what's the journalist's role in all this? I mean, why would she need someone there?*

PENNY

*Honestly Clara, for a writer you're not very intuitive. Without the reporter there'd be no gratification. She needs to force someone to eat the slugs.*

CLARA

*(enlightened)*

*So that's why she doesn't want me around — Bekshire's obviously followed my work enough to know I wouldn't be impressed with her little show. Finally, an editor who's serious about food.*