

# THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

---

Mother Tongue

Author(s): Jeanne Schinto

Source: *The Threepenny Review*, No. 30 (Summer, 1987), pp. 14-16

Published by: Threepenny Review

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4383567>

Accessed: 21-01-2018 17:36 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Threepenny Review* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to  
*The Threepenny Review*

# Mother Tongue

Jeanne Schinto

“O KAY, THAT’S IT, you’re outa here,” the manager said. The waitress didn’t protest. She looked disappointed, but no more surprised than an auditioner being asked to leave the stage.

“What are you saying to that girl?” Marion asked from her seat at the counter. She’d been having a conversation with the waitress just the moment before.

“Lady?”

“What are you *saying*?”

“None of *your* business.”

“What?” She stared at the man, not a very bright man, not college-educated, she decided. Or if he did have a degree, it was in hotel & restaurant management, and not from a very good school. He was wearing a rumpled tie and jacket, and straining the belt of his pants with his belly.

“She’s fired for jabbering, that’s what.”

“For having a friendly word with a customer?”

“All right, she’s being let go, because you’re jabbering about her.”

Marion put her coffee down. Her anger made the cup seem more fragile than it was, like an egg with a handle. Anyway, without the cup in hand she could give her full attention to staring. But the manager ignored Marion and instead watched the girl taking off her brown smock. She stood by the safe, waiting for her pocketbook. Now she did look bothered. Her face had gone pale; the blood had drained. One of the older waitresses got on her knees and twirled the combination.

Marion shouted something else at the manager and fumbled in her purse. She put too much money on the counter, saying, “That’s a good way to lose a customer, with an attitude like that.” The manager took a handkerchief from his pants pocket and blew his nose.

When the girl was ready to leave, Marion walked out with her.

“Do you have a car?” Marion asked her. The girl shook her head. Her eyes were brimming.

“I’ll give you a ride home,” Marion fairly snapped. She was still angry at the manager. “Where do you live?”

The girl looked into Marion’s waiting eyes, then burst into tears.

“I don’t live anywhere!” she wailed. “I just moved out on my boyfriend. I just moved in with my girlfriend, but she’ll kill me when she finds out that I got fired!” She talked through her tears; she seemed to be well-practiced. When she finished talking, she cried into her hands.

“You’ll stay at my house, that’s all,” Marion pronounced.

The girl stopped crying, and studied Marion’s face, her lantern earrings, her ample chest, and the huge medallion of Plato she wore on a string around her neck. She’d bought it in Greece ten years ago, the summer after she was widowed.

“You’re not one of those funny women, are you?” the girl asked. “Like the kind you meet at the YWCA? Once one of them was a counselor at the day camp my mother sent me to. When I told her what I’d seen, my mother couldn’t get me out of there fast enough. She called the cops on the counselor. No wonder she picked a man’s name. All the counselors had to pick fake names, and she picked Robin Hood.”

“I’m certainly not any of the kind,” Marion said simply. And without anything more transpiring between them, the two walked to Marion’s car. With a faintly official air Marion unlocked both doors, and they got in.

Marion drove her straight to her house—a small fake Tudor on a street with three speed bumps.

“It’s like Hansel & Gretel’s house,” the girl said when they’d parked the car.

Marion decided she was flattered, but corrected the girl: “It wasn’t Hansel & Gretel’s house. It was the witch’s.”

“Is your husband a doctor?” the girl asked in a low breath as they walked up the slate path.

“My husband is dead,” Marion brought out matter-of-factly; she was proud of that detachment.

“Oh. You live by yourself.”

But Marion didn’t reassure her. Hannah had opened the front door and stood in the doorway glowering. She had her glasses on her head and a book in her hand. A thumb held her place. Her faded hair was pulled back unbecomingly. One gray kneesock was down. She pulled up her skinny shoulders. Her expression said she was none too pleased to see that her mother had brought home a visitor.

Suddenly Marion realized she didn’t even know the girl’s name. Hannah wouldn’t like that, but Marion didn’t try bluffing. “You’ll have to introduce yourselves, I’m afraid.”

“Annette Charlene Weams,” the girl said. “I know it’s a mouthful,” she went on nervously as they entered the house. “And if you can remember it all, I’ll tell you another thing: that we used to be called Williams, but somewhere along the line it got slurred. I come from a family of slurrers, I guess.” She laughed self-consciously, hands by her sides, her pocketbook dangling.

Hannah just stared, especially after her mother told her privately that Annette Charlene had been invited to sleep over.

“Well, do you need to call anybody?” Marion asked. “There’s the phone.”

“To tell them what?” Annette Charlene faltered blankly.

“That you’re here. That you’re going to stay.”

“No! Then I’d have to tell them *why* I’m staying. Maybe I can find another job right away, tomorrow! Then I’ll tell them what happened today.” She put her pocketbook on the dining-room table. She took off her sweater and dropped it on the chair. Then she hugged herself, looking cold, but was probably too embarrassed to put her sweater back on again.

“Have you eaten dinner?” Marion asked her.

“I ate cake all day at the restaurant,” she confessed. “That was another one of the things I did wrong.”

“Well, you’ll have something more substantial with us,” Marion said. She hadn’t eaten dinner, either. She’d only had coffee at the restaurant counter, avoiding going home to Hannah for just awhile longer.

“I’ll help. Smells good. What are you making?” Annette Charlene offered as she followed Marion and Hannah into the kitchen.

“Oven-baked chicken, rice pilaf, spinach salad; no dessert,” Hannah recited. She opened the oven door and reached her skinny arms in to baste. “Because my mother does need to watch her weight, whether or not she admits it.”

Marion fixed herself a drink, and pretended not to hear.

Annette Charlene said, slapping her middle, “I’m a little portly myself. That’s mothers. My sons are seven and twelve, living with *my* mother in Derry, New Hampshire.”

“Don’t you miss them?” Marion asked, surprised by this piece of news, but not wishing Hannah to see how little she knew about their guest. She looked closely at Annette Charlene, who must have been much older than she’d thought.

Annette Charlene said, “Sure, but I’ve got to get myself settled again before I send for them. I’m sure glad she could take them. Who else would? Charity begins at home, I guess.” But Marion didn’t hear her words. She felt mildly deceived by Annette Charlene’s youthful appearance and demeanor. Of course it wasn’t the girl’s fault.

“Don’t you think it’s your responsibility to raise your own kids?” Hannah put in.

“If I’m not able to, what can I do?”

“You could live with your mother, with them.”

“You don’t know me and my mother,” the girl laughed without smiling.

Hannah said nothing, and went back to her basting. She was the cook of this household, and took care of all the other household tasks, too. She even made her mother’s bed. Hannah had grown ashamed of her mother’s sloppy housekeeping.

Marion hadn’t seen Hannah since last night. She’d been sleeping when Hannah left for school. She always slept late; she had no job. Her husband’s death had left her well-off enough to pursue any interests she might wish. Unfortunately it was fear that guided her. She could never think of one constructive thing she had done, except raise Hannah, and that she knew she hadn’t done so well. Evidence enough for her was Hannah’s outfit. “Is that what you wore to school today?” Marion asked her.

“Yes,” Hannah said stiffly. She was wearing a shin-length camel-colored skirt, nurse-like white blouse with a stain on the front of it, and broken loafers. And she must have known she looked dowdy—who else but Hannah would wear such a skirt to the high school?—but she always said, if pressed, that she liked herself that way. Dowdy, she recognized herself. Besides, another thing she always said was that she wanted all her relationships to be “pure,” developing not even initially as a result of superficialities. To this end she fussily avoided grooming herself.

Marion was about to say more about her daughter’s appearance, then stopped herself. Hannah could surprise even her own mother with her nearly convulsive straightforwardness. Marion often found herself half-consciously waiting for the blow, Hannah’s strident delivery. It was a sharpness learned directly from Marion.

“Any good mail?”

“Nope,” said Hannah.

"Dear, don't say 'nope,'" Marion admonished. "Don't you hear how it sounds?"

"It's a colloquialism," Hannah said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"Dear, it's slang. You don't say 'yup,' do you?"

"Yup, sometimes."

Marion didn't laugh, and tried to think of a pleasanter topic, but instead switched compulsively to another criticism. "And did you participate in Problems of Democracy today? What are you afraid of? Just open your mouth and speak. And not just wisecracks, either."

Hannah shot her mother an offended look. "Did *he* tell you?"

"Mr. Cappuana and I had a very nice conversation, standing in line at the Food Center," Marion sniffed. "You know, it doesn't matter if you sound silly sometimes. You can't wait for final wisdom to arrive before you say your first word. Wisdom never does come. It just doesn't. So speak. Fumble along with the rest of humanity. You'll see how much fun it is."

"I told him, and I'm telling you, I'll speak if I have something to say."

Marion shrugged, happy to end the discussion anyway, ashamed again at her way with her daughter, but Hannah did have her faults. Why couldn't Marion overlook them? Well, she would when Hannah showed some signs of trying to improve herself.

She glanced over at Annette Charlene, who looked embarrassed at being a

"There's more, but anyway it goes from birth to death."

"I think it's a marvelous poem," Marion said.

Hannah just put on her glasses.

They ate dinner, mostly in silence. Hannah ate and read a scholarly journal. She ate and read as if she were alone, turning each page with a furious snap. Anybody's erudition but her own irked her.

"My girlfriend's where I'm staying?" Annette Charlene said finally by way of introducing a topic of conversation. "Her name's Demone, and she lives with her mother and this bird? She didn't used to live with her mother, but then her mother came to visit, and didn't leave again. It's the bird's mother. Ha! I mean, the mother's bird, and Demone was watching it for her while the mother—she's Dorothy—went up to Massachusetts to have this fling with a professor.

"Those two are so strange. I met Demone through a roommate service. She wanted somebody who didn't smoke. And somebody who was neat. I told her I was neat, because I didn't have anything to mess a place up with! Anyway, that bird? You wouldn't believe it. The first time I walked in the place, Dorothy was already there. And I couldn't take my eyes off the parrot fuzz on her eyebrows and in her hair. I wondered why Demone didn't tell her to brush it off or reach out her hand and brush it off her mother herself. If it had been my mother, I would have. I knew it was parrot fuzz, because I matched it up with the parrot. It was big and green and sitting on the edge of the sink in the kitchen, and walked along the countertop. Then before anybody knew what had happened, it flew and landed right on top of my head! I heard this whooshing noise behind my ears? I swatted! It flew off and perched on top of a chair in the living room.

"Oh, that means he likes you," Dorothy says!"

Annette Charlene took a breath and laughed, and Marion laughed too, and even Hannah turned to look at her half-amusedly.

"They both claim this parrot can tell fortunes. He makes a little noise, and Dorothy says, 'He's agreeing.' That's with something she's said. If I say something and the bird makes a little mumble, Dorothy says, 'He's saying, "So what?"'"

"Well, can he?" Hannah asked. She had put down her journal.

"Can he what?"

"Tell your fortune."

"I asked it a few questions in the beginning, and Dorothy would tell me if he said yes or no, but now I really don't pay any attention to it."

"Good for you," Marion put in; "they would have used that bird to manipulate you, tell you anything they wanted."

"I guess so," Annette Charlene shrugged, but this analysis didn't appear to interest her. "Living with them is like living at a job interview or something. They are always asking me why I don't want to go back to school. To college or something. To better myself. They are both all hoity-toity. But that didn't help Demone get herself a roommate from among one of her friends, did it? She had to go through one of those services!"

"But that's what you did!" Hannah said.

"Yes, but that's because I was new to town," Annette Charlene said; but then it seemed that she had said enough about herself.

After dinner, they went into the living room, and at Marion's urging Annette Charlene began to tell her how she had started writing poems: "When I was small I lived across the street from a pretty famous poet," she said.

"Who?" interrupted Hannah. She was sitting on a straight-back chair off to the side of the couch where Marion and Annette Charlene sat together.

Annette Charlene told her his name.

"Never heard of him," Hannah happily reported.

"Nobody has anymore, but he was famous then, and he used to make up poems about me and my brothers and sisters, mostly to please my father, to make him laugh. My father joshed him all the time about his being a poet. My father was a fireman. My mother tells me it was shortly after he left the neighborhood that I started to recite my own poems about missing him and his old dog. He drank, and one whole week he was on a good big binge, and his dog got out of the house and fell into a drainage ditch and died there. He planted a rosebush at the spot and moved away shortly after that. But he wrote it into the house contract that the rosebush would always be cared for and replaced if it died."

"Fascinating," said Marion, who had settled into a glass of brandy. "I feel someone should be writing all this down for you. You need an amanuensis."

"Well, I don't even know what that is, but if you say so," Annette Charlene laughed.

"Have you written a lot of poems?" Marion asked.

"Oh, about a hundred, maybe more. Maybe two hundred. I don't know. I never counted. My mother's got them all up at her place."

"None published," Hannah stated.

"Well, the doctor I had for awhile sent them around—"

"A doctor—" said Marion.

"Psychiatrist," Annette Charlene sighed the word, like someone who'd finally been found out.

"See, I got married at fourteen, and then I was eighteen and I said to myself, what am I doing? I already had a three-year-old by then. This was in Florida, and I took the first bus out on my eighteenth birthday. It was going to Indianapolis, but I didn't care. I would have gone to Alaska at that point. And I got a job at a VA hospital washing men, and I tell you I worked! I washed men from morning till night until I dropped. That's when I ended up in the asylum for the wayward and the insane. I was always hoping that I was more wayward than crazy, and I guess it turns out that I am."

"Well, I think you've done just fine for someone who's had such a hard



Harry Fritzius, *Study for a Painting (After Goya)*, 1986

witness to their squabble. Marion couldn't let this be their only exhibited communication in front of a visitor. She asked Hannah about her poetry, and the poem she soon would have published in the high school literary magazine. For the first time since their arrival home, Hannah actually smiled. "Mr. Graham rejected another one of mine today because he said it wasn't for the general high school readership. He said it would be over most kids' heads."

"And that makes you happy?"

"Yes! He said I should send it to a real magazine."

"It would be nice if you could write a pleasant poem one of these days," Marion said.

"I write poetry," Annette Charlene stated to the hanging pots and pans.

"Do you?" Marion asked.

"My favorite one's called 'The Race.'" She began to recite it:

Get born  
Forlorn  
Popcorn  
At the movies.

That's a date.  
There's your mate.  
Then you wait  
For babies.

life," Marion said. "You made a mistake, you admitted it—" She looked at Hannah. It was her turn to acquiesce, to give their guest some polite praise. But all Hannah could say was that it was late, she was tired, and she still had to do the dishes. Annette Charlene offered to help, but Hannah said no harshly. So Marion showed Annette Charlene which bedroom to sleep in and found an old robe and nightgown for her to wear.

Marion was on her way into her own bedroom when Hannah called to her from the downstairs hallway.

"Mother, can I talk to you about something, please? Down here."

Marion came down the stairs swiftly, making sure she moved confidently. She knew there was a reprimand coming. Hannah looked very upset.

"Mother, I'm really not happy about the fuss you made over that person tonight."

"What fuss?" Marion said angrily.

"I found it deeply disturbing."

"She's a charming girl. I thought you two liked each other. You could, you know. You have things in common. Anyway, she's a friend of mine."

"Well, I'm not going to stand for it."

"Darling, there isn't anything in this house that you are at liberty to 'stand' or not to 'stand.' Children are guests in their parents' home."

"Guests can leave anytime they want. I'm a prisoner. Children are prisoners in their parents' house."

"The girl is in trouble. She needs a helping hand. Love your neighbor," Marion said, and turned and went back upstairs.

She sat at her dressing table to take off her earrings, great tree ornaments that swung dangerously, and the Plato medallion. But then she heard a terrible noise—the slamming of a kitchen cabinet. She heard it again. And then again. Hannah was slamming the cabinets over and over in a childish display, which Marion would ignore. She looked at herself in the mirror. She had rouged her cheeks and reddened her lips before she'd gone out that afternoon. Everything was smudged now. She leaned closer to the mirror to pluck stray hairs from her eyebrows, and the earring dangles hit the glass.

Suddenly downstairs it was quiet. Then Marion heard Hannah's footsteps, and the front door open and close. So she would walk around the block, Marion guessed, and she would let off some more steam. Good. She was glad her daughter could express her anger so succinctly. Just as well for the sake of ulcers and other kinds of ill-health, she thought. Then she was startled. Annette Charlene stood in the doorway.

"I couldn't help but hear," she said. She was wearing the old nightgown and robe, pulling them tightly around her. It was odd for Marion to see familiar clothing on an unfamiliar person—she was still a stranger, after all.

Annette Charlene walked over to her. Marion looked up and saw them both in the mirror together. Neither spoke, and the silence made Marion uncomfortable.

"How do you like your room?" Marion asked.

"It's a wonderful room. Are you kidding? You are so generous to do this. It's a Christian thing to do, is what it is. But I don't want you getting into an argument over me with your daughter. . . . Shouldn't we go look for her?"

"No, no, she'll be back. She went around the block, that's all," Marion said, though she did start to worry, imagining what Hannah might meet up with on the dark street. It was such a quiet, suburban street, but things were known to happen.

"Well, I'll tell you again, you're kind. I'd like my boys to meet you and Hannah sometime. We fight like you and her sometimes, too. It helps to talk. You should really talk—"

Marion shook her head violently. Hannah was demanding something of her she just couldn't give. She stood to protest Annette Charlene's suggestion. But Annette Charlene misunderstood. She hugged her tightly, wrapping her arms around Marion; she hugged her tightly, and Marion hugged her back. It wasn't something Marion and Hannah ever did.

Then the two women stepped away from each other, and their eyes locked. Marion was embarrassed. But Annette Charlene wasn't. She gave Marion a little wave as she walked out of the room.

Marion wished Annette Charlene would leave—tonight, go now. She didn't want to see her tomorrow, or ever again. She would ask Hannah to get rid of her. She closed her door, got undressed, and lay down on her bed, and put out the light. But she didn't sleep. Should she go out and look for Hannah? But she didn't want to leave a stranger alone in her house. She lay awake, thinking, until she again heard the front door open and close. Hannah had returned. Marion slept then.

All the house slept.

When Marion awoke the next morning, she felt a terrible, unaccustomed stillness in the house. She flung off her bedcovers, and ran to Hannah's room. The girl was sleeping in her clothes on top of the covers. She hadn't even bothered to take off her dirty shoes.

Then like a dreamer remembering, Marion remembered Annette Charlene, and her warm, full chest that her own chest had pressed up against. Women didn't seem to be made to hug each other. Was she, Marion, a middle-aged mother of a teen-ager, afraid of a little affection? She went downstairs and started making morning coffee. Then she saw a note on the table, signed by Annette Charlene:

Must leave.  
Don't grieve. . . .

Though there were several more lines, Marion stopped reading. She went

upstairs and looked into the guest room. The bed was made, and the old nightgown and robe had been folded and placed on the pillow.

Marion felt a coldness here, as if she were looking into a room where someone had died. This room had been her husband's study. He used to lock himself in when Hannah was a toddler. He so hated to be disturbed, he wore wax earplugs behind the locked door. Marion half-praised, half-scolded herself in her usual way, thinking: my husband is dead, and I haven't loved another individual since. Then she heard Hannah's voice coming down the hallway.

"She's gone?" Hannah asked, rubbing her eyes. Her school clothes were so rumpled, and one piece of her hair was folded up and standing on end, like a cockscomb.

"She is."

"Did you check your purse?"

"Of course not!"

Then, trying to be surreptitious about it, she did check. But Hannah saw anyway. Everything was there. The full wallet was still very full. Hannah seemed faintly disappointed. "Promise me you'll never bring home another stranger!" she said. "Promise!"

Marion said nothing, but Hannah seemed satisfied by this. She went downstairs and started making breakfast.

Marion sat longer, confused by her own disappointment. It would have been so certain a thing to call the police, to give a description, to get angry. But there was nothing to get angry about. □

## Connecting Flight

The flight is late, I'm told.  
Planes cutting through fog  
into O'Hare, all stacked up.  
I complete the connection  
in my head: *like poker chips*,  
the gambler inside me  
pushing a bluff  
behind his one small pair.  
The gamble, I think, is always  
the same: the miles they have  
brought with them,  
the distances I carry with me.  
They're almost the last ones  
off. The embrace we make  
is the stiff ballet of intimate  
strangers. We say the words  
we knew we would say,  
the voices behind the words  
trying to work  
their inexplicable magic.  
I sling my mother's bag  
over a shoulder. Father insists  
on carrying what's his.  
But he stops to move  
his watch ahead,  
on my time now.

—Jeff Worley