

**THE
TEXAS REVIEW**

VOLUME 37—NUMBERS 1&2—Spring/Summer 2016

Texas Review Press
Huntsville, Texas

THE TEXAS REVIEW

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From *Wild Girls***Begin in Gladness**

“Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little.”—Gore Vidal

Depending on where you stood on the great wheel, June 1962 was a month of celebrations. *Everything you Wanted* sneaked onto the best seller list. Julia Vosburgh and Bodie Curtiz threw a book party for Audrey—now Audrey Marsh—in Bodie’s art-filled loft on Greene Street. The last of the sun lay lashings of red gold over the dropped living-room, a smell of wet plaster wafted in from the street. Bodie was on the horn in a back bedroom, sweet-talking a player on the city’s zoning board. His mission to shake up New York had found a new arena: the conversion of Soho’s warehouses into lofts for “aspirational” buyers.

Julia was full of her beauty this evening, her eyebrows striving to meet, breasts shifting like sleepy puppies beneath a muslin camisole plucked from the attic in Marion. After a brief waltz with slenderness and fashion, Julia was yielding to her natural heft. Not for Julia, a neat body punished by girdles and cinched waists, boobs like ready-to-launch missiles in circle-stitched satin. If there was one thing Julia wasn’t it was neat. Fleshiness became her, rhymed with her pre-Raphaelite allure. It all looked good to Bodie, who thought Julia’s largeness, indifference to makeup, and hints of silvered hair betokened class.

Julia waved everyone over to the spread on a raised dining section: her famous rumaki, deviled eggs, steak tartare. Mateus Rose d’Anjou.

“*Chéri,*” she crooned. She stooped to crush her little godsson Miles DeGroff to her décolletage. He was a beautiful child, pale and withdrawn, with a malevolent look. He’d

been the first baby in Julia's circle, she loved him madly, down to the grime on his knees; even when he barfed in the lobby of *Babes in Toyland*, kneeling to tip his head delicately forward like a fountain sprite. "Julia has a magic way with Miles," sighed Lyndy, whom Miles generally ignored.

"That child could be Tadzio in *Death in Venice*, all he needs is the sailor suit," said Brett (privately convinced he'd grow up to be an arsonist).

"Oh, don't even think that." Julia nuzzled Miles's hair. "A homosexual was in love with Tadzio."

A fuss by the door, and Rinko Park, their old Foxleigh classmate, made her entrance. Something suggestive and accusatory about that pyramid of black hair; it spoke of pubic swatches and internment camps.

"I hope you'll come to my show next week at the RG Gallery on Madison Avenue," Rinko said. "John Cage is coming and everything, and maybe Marcel and Teeny Duchamp."

Julia's gracious smile curdled. She had regularly to battle the envy that lay dormant in her system like herpes, triggered by any woman who'd stayed the course, and this evening was proving a rough patch. Audrey, who'd taken *Marriage and the Family* in college and kept a dollhouse in her living room, had produced a bestseller. Now Rinko Park, who'd composed operas in Foxleigh's apple tree—and surely been the most ludicrous of them all—would have a show in a bonafide art gallery. Not a vanity space you had to pay for, like her. With *Teeny Duchamp* coming! Julia mumbled something and headed for the john to deal with the wreckage of herself.

The heat—they had to be kidding. The manholes could double as skilletts. Brett ducked into the Parthenon at Broadway and 107th which, like every self-respecting Greek diner, sported a crystal chandelier fit for Versailles. The glacial air conditioning quickly sealed the layer of sweat like a second skin.

"I'm separated from my second husband and good friends with my first," Rinko said straight out over iced coffee, as if she and Brett had kept up since college. "He's in Seoul."

It sounded complicated, Brett thought, quasi-hypnotized by Rinko's little singsong. Despite the heat Rinko was draped in black *schmattes*.

She'd been living in a loft on Broome Street, Rinko went on, where she'd been paying \$50.50 a month. "It's also a studio where I show my friends' art and all that kind of thing. La Monte Young just gave a concert there—he's a composer—and Charlotte Moorman, a cellist. The D.A. is always after her and everything because she performs topless." A little smile bracketed by double dimples. "But now I'm being forced out of my loft."

Apparently, the clutter generated by the artistic ferment in the space had metastasized and literally shoved Rinko out onto the street. Brett pictured getting ejected from her own apartment on West 90th Street by a glacier of dreck. She was sweet, though, old Rinko, with her shallow head, like a moon or theatrical mask; the amusing way she peppered her singsong with American argot, "that kind of thing" and "you know?" Also, since getting "laid off" from Arden, Brett was behind on her rent and Dr. Raul Connor, her landlord and owner of the brownstone, was eager to find a pretext for eviction. She constantly badgered him to fix the leak in the living room ceiling. And he suspected she was on to the nature of his practice. He billed himself as a chiropractor, but to judge by the Puerto Rican women who came weaving up, green around the gills, from his basement quarters, he had a side gig in abortion. Rinko homeless, Brett jobless—the match was made.

Instantly they found their groove. Rinko set up in the back bedroom. Brett remained in the sunny, if leaky, front room giving onto 90th Street. Olive green walls, a sofa of foam rubber on a plywood frame, the bed snuggled into an alcove. A narrow hall made a dog's leg turn to a misshapen kitchen and the bathroom, the whole back end reminding Brett of her deviated septum. With Manhattan's dearth of rent-controlled apartments in safe neighborhoods, the place was a find. Brett lugged a teak strappy chair from Goodwill

up four flights of stairs, envisioning salon-type evenings with her new roommate and avant garde friends.

Brett's cooking skills barely extended beyond frying a Minute Steak. Smother with Adolf's Instant Meat Tenderizer, drape in wax paper, pound with hammer. Rinko, to Brett's delight, cooked Korean savories like "Bibimbap"—rice topped with spinach, mushrooms, bean sprouts, and spiked with red pepper paste. They carried their plates to the living room and ate sitting cross-legged on the floor before the leaky bay window and gabbed like old-style girlfriends late into the night. Rinko's father was a prominent businessman, distantly related to Ferdinand Marcos of the Phillipines. Junior year she'd quit Foxleigh for lower Manhattan's cold water canyons, acquiring two husbands along the way. Her family was not amused.

"La Monte Young and I once lived for two weeks on nothing but Beluga caviar. Someone sent it as a Christmas present to his manager. We walked around the city feeling big and important, as if we owned the place." Rinko's mouth curved in its little lunar smile, framed by the dimples.

To cobble together cash Rinko had worked as a translator of Korean for Campbell's Soup. "Now I'd never touch it 'cause I know what goes into it and everything. The worst is Pepper Pot soup, the tripe." She was also a musician. At Foxleigh she'd been working on an opera about the end of the world.

"You play an instrument?" Brett's chopsticks closed on a 'shroom.

"My voice is my instrument. I use the screams of women in childbirth in my music. I'm attracted to how it can express human suffering. There's a lot in life to scream against."

In the light of the gooseneck lamp the hillocks of Rinko's cheekbones and, yes, inscrutable smile anchored by the double dimples gave her a delicate beauty. Other times she looked flat-faced and sallow, tented behind the fierce black hair like Wumei the warrior queen. She was low-slung in the seat, bandy-legged, droopy up top. This scarcely deterred the American male, apparently unable to look at an Oriental female without sex secrets of the East dancing in his head. Suitors quickly smoked her out at the new address. Pablo

Sobotka, ever bobbing in Brett's wake, might have been the one man in the Tri-State area immune to Rinko's siren call. She returned the compliment by pronouncing Pablo "crass."

Rinko kept the suitors in line, to Brett's amusement, rather like the recreation director of a cruise ship. Harvey the lawyer hadn't made the cut as a lover, but was recruited to protect her from Manhattan's District Attorney, who was on a crusade to keep the world safe from the pubic hair on display in avant-garde theater. One evening two dozen yellow roses arrived on 90th Street from a famous Brazilian architect. "I hate you," Rinko told him over the hall phone and hung up. How he'd offended was unclear; perhaps he was the wrong color or simply old.

They ate lunch in a wedge of sunlight at the foot of Brett's Indian bedspread, and Rinko shared her love secrets.

"I never eat scallions for several days before a date," she said in her little singsong.

Often a bridesmaid, never a bride went the Listerine ad to combat hal. There was also Clorets gum.

"And"—the little half-smile—"I have this secret muscle way up *inside*," Rinko said.

"Like, what does it do?"

"You know, clenches and unclenches."

The secrets of the Orient. Brett assayed an inner clench or two.

Rinko's hypnotic singsong, their cozy dinners, and late-night bull sessions laced with laughter soothed Brett, still jangling from the pasting at Arden. She'd made light of it, and could have seen it coming, but everyone knew that "laid off" was simply fancy for "fired." Brett sometimes feared she might be programmed to fail on every front, like someone with a reverse Midas touch who turned everything to shit. In Rinko she'd found an ally. They were each in her fashion dissenters from the straight world outside their door, the army of permed wives putting hubby through Dental School, or Gal Friday's waiting for him to "pop the question." Rinko created a "work on paper," a lock of Brett's copper hair pasted across her own black, which she intended to include in her book *Baobab*.

This opus was wandering the byways of publishing like a jilted bride. Brett couldn't bring herself to reveal that she'd encountered *Baobab*—mostly blank pages with freaky “instructions” (“stare at the moon till it becomes square”)—in Arden's slush pile. She tapped her sole connection from her publishing career, and arranged for Rinko to hand deliver the thing to Oralee at Arden Press, who would place it on the desk of the Managing Editor. What better home for Rinko's book than with publishing's enfant terrible? *Baobab* arrived back at 90th Street in record speed with a terse note: “Arden is in the business of *publishing literature, and whatever this artifact might be, it does not qualify as such.*”

Brett donned her best consolatory face. “Forget Arden, it's basically a loony bin run by the craziest inmate. On to the next.”

Rinko looked at her, impassive. “I've added you to my list of inspirations for the book,” she said. Then she padded past to run a bath, leaving Brett with her sympathy like shirt-tails hanging out.

It kind of blew Brett's mind, how Rinko simply shook off rejection like a wet Retriever. Rinko couldn't muster the attention for such a thing as rejection, she was moving too fast and in too many directions. Rejection was simply the lag time of a slow-witted world lumbering along behind the curve.

Fall 1962

Labor Day jolted New York back into gear. Brett continued the unemployment line shuffle in design-challenged spaces that informed people precisely where they stood on the food chain. Paris sheltered its dreamers, the idled could aerate their imaginations over pastis at the Select; in New York you were either on the bus or a bum. And a worm had entered the cocoon of 90th Street. If you didn't serve Rinko's art, Brett was learning, you inspired as much interest as the strappy chair she'd hauled up from Goodwill. She began to harbor irreverent thoughts about Rinko's art.

She huffed up five flights of a loft to view Rinko's latest work, *Hump Me*, a hillock-y stretch of canvas on the floor that invited the viewer to do just that—and galumphed back down. A record downpour in October inspired *Rain Piece*. Rinko invited her cohorts to 90th Street for her “concert” of drips, as water traversed the window frame of Brett's bed/living room, to go splick in a bucket. A second pail was produced for a collateral leak, setting up a counterpoint.

Nam June Paik cozied up to Brett on the sofa. “Rinko, she take art off wall and pedestal and make art accessible for every man.” Paik (pronounced “Pike) was a “video artist” who worked with old TV sets, and played Boswell to Rinko's Samuel Johnson. He spoke a strange gumbo of Asian-English, hiked his pants high with both belt and suspenders, and wore a perennial smile of a lewd Buddha.

The next week another of Rinko's people, La Monte Young of the greasy pony tail, played a seven-hour concert—the repetition of a single note—in a derelict warehouse, as the audience clanked up and down in a freight elevator.

Audrey, whom Brett had dragooned into checking out the scene, lasted fifteen minutes.

“This ‘art’ is about the sanctification of boredom,” Audrey said in her chirpy, good-humored style.

“But if you want to be hip, you can't admit you're bored.”

Brett suspected she was hopelessly tethered to logic and form and other Old World artifacts, milk-fed as she'd been on 19th century novels by Flaubert and Stendhal. Square, Rinko had intimated more than once.

Rinko padded into the apartment one night with a groin injury from a piece that instructed viewers to pelt her with jelly beans. She stretched out with an ice-pack on the foam rubber sofa. “Why you working temp jobs and all that kind of thing when you could be, I dunno, making dances, like you used to?” Rinko asked.

“Well, to pay the rent, for one thing.” And the phone bill, which she awaited with dread after Rinko's midnight calls to Seoul. “So I can work on my memoir about the Beats in Paris.”

“Memoir? That’s like first this happened, then that. It’s in the old mold, you know?”

“Yeah, life is one damn thing after another, as someone said. I don’t think we’ll get away from that any time soon.”

“Oh, I want to mix up all the boundaries. My art asks for viewers to complete it, like a call to action and everything.” Rinko sat up and swung her feet to the floor. “Maybe some day you’ll write about me.” The little smile.

Brett smiled back. *Maybe some day I will.*

Brett pounded a minute steak in her crooked kitchen and pondered an irony she might have enjoyed had it concerned someone else. The world was catching up to the pocket rebellion her crowd had launched, no permission asked—while she herself was spinning wheels in sand.

The home life wasn’t helping. Rinko’s pieces were turning hazardous. Brett lay on the sofa circling want ads for Glamor Jobs, when she smelled smoke. She found Rinko cross-legged on her bedroom floor, lighting matches and watching them burn out.

“It’s called *Flame Piece*,” Rinko said. “It makes people think about, you know, our mortality and everything. George Maciunas invited me to perform it next week at his gallery.”

Brett was in no hurry to encounter Maciunas, the ring-leader of something called “Fluxus.” Reportedly, he took literally the dictionary meaning of the term as “bodily release, a flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part.”

A rapping on the door. The sulfurous smell of *Flame Piece* had set aquiver the nostrils of Dr. Connor, who’d been changing a light bulb in the hall.

“You got problem with electrical?” He sniffed the air, mustache twitching, like a grey fox scenting prey.

Brett thought *Flame Piece* rather haunting, but how to explain it to old Connor? He was a virtuoso of ethnic slurs and called Rinko “the *Chinita*.” When Brett explained Rinko was of mixed heritage, he varied it with “*Boonga*.” (After they’d asked him to unclog the bathtub drain, Rinko became “*La Puta*.”)

“I was ironing and the blouse got singed,” Brett said, signaling with her hand for Rinko to stay back.

Waking to the season’s first frost, Brett smelled schism in the air.

She couldn’t have said when the apartment fell to the downtown avant garde, whether it was gradual or a sudden coup, but it was now officially Occupied, the Upper West Side’s very own Sudetenland. Every second evening artists stomped up the stairs to present—what? performance art? or—or—“Happenings,” yeah, that was it, the new “theatre” by Allen Kaprow, the latest thing! Brett was too busy searching for a nook in her pad free of artistic activity to care. She retreated with her notebook to a nest of towels in the bathtub. A thumping on the door, someone urgently needed the sink! To dye a jock strap purple for a performance piece.

Video guy Nam June Paik arrived the next day with his cellist-muse Charlotte Moorman, bearing a live chicken under his parka for a work whose nature eluded Brett. Within minutes Connor’s knuckles met the door; he must have heard the goddamn chicken squawking in Paik’s coat during its journey up the stairs. Connor didn’t look happy. Perhaps he harbored festering memories of discrimination, the flunkies of imperialists barring him from carrying livestock on planes from his native land.

“We make ‘Happenings!’” Paik said excitedly. “You watch? No performance ever the same twice. No more wall between art and audience. We break down fourth wall!”

Connor’s eyes narrowed. “Not here you don’t, no construction.” Turning to Brett, he indicated Paik: “Tell General Tso here no construction.”

The phone. Paik, who happened to be standing next to it, picked up. It turned out to be Brett’s father.

“Who is that strange-sounding man and why is he answering the phone in your apartment? It’s not *correct*, think of the impression it gives. I thought you were sharing the apartment with a nice girl from college.”

The artistic Occupation of 90th Street marched in

tandem with an uptick in traffic to the back bedroom. La Monte Young, not the tastiest item on the menu, hadn't made the cut. Nor had Nam June Paik, smiling, devoted, and horny. "I want to get in Rinko's pants," Paik confided to Brett, "but she like white guys." The whiter, the better. Brett woke one morning to find the resident lover was Warren Finnerly, star of *The Connection*, the Living Theater's notorious new musical about junkies hanging around waiting for a fix while a live jazz combo played onstage. En route to the bath Brett sighted Warren standing like a ghost in the back bedroom, a fair match for the sheet doing duty as a toga. White trash junkie sexy. Brett couldn't delete from her mind the giant boil plaguing his character in "The Connection." She put paper down on the toilet seat.

The following week Brett collided in the hall with—here was a new one—her own date from the night before! She knew she ought to get pissed; instead, she was tickled by crazy laughter. Like, how did Rinko bring it off? Last night she'd brought back Laird someone for a glass of vino . . . Rinko blows in, sashays around, a second bottle is produced . . . and then, Brett's lost the transition . . . whoosh! the guy got vacuumed like a dust bunny into the back bedroom.

Brett escaped to the Public Library on 42nd Street and Fifth, its cavernous reading room. She looked up from her notebook across the rows of tables with green lamps at the scholarly and the homeless, and wondered how she'd become a squatter in her own apartment. She struggled to work up a head of anger at Rinko. Her normal responses had slipped their sprocket; she was only dismayed by *herself*. She knew what she *didn't* want—what she did, not so much. She was like a clay figurine with only rudimentary features pinched in. Rinko Park might have sprung fully formed from Minerva's head. Even from 42nd Street Brett could sense the thrum of Rinko somewhere in the city, her droll bossiness, her religion of her own importance, as unshakable as Joan of Arc's. Rinko was impervious to the snickering at her art, converted the snickering, too, into art, a win-win gambit. So where did that leave *her*? She was an extra, a spear-carrier standing by to serve Rinko Park's vision, her rendezvous with greatness.

No, not greatness. Rinko was too subversive and sly and slant-wise for anything so grandiose, so uncool as greatness. Which wouldn't keep her, Brett sensed with a little shiver, from latching onto something, or someone, that would catapult her from the fringe to make the world her stage.

A sudden vision of the apartment in flames. Brett collected her things and hurried down 42nd Street toward the Seventh Avenue subway. To the west loomed New York's monoliths, windows glittering and laser-sharp against a cold orange dusk—Allen Ginsberg's Moloch! She felt captive to a runaway car hurtling down hairpin curves and narrowly losing it.

With Paik's *Opera Sexualis* a new corner was turned. The pipes had burst in his loft and Paik arrived with Charlotte Moorman at Uptown Avant-Garde to run through a section of the work. Charlotte sat in Brett's front room furiously bowing a piece by Alban Berg that sounded like cats in heat. She was naked but for a bikini fitted out with Christmas lights.

A rapping at the door. The artistic activity here must be putting a dent in Connor's practice, Brett pictured the hapless patient below, abandoned in the stirrups. Before Brett could stop him, Paik emerged to greet the doctor with his toothsome smile.

"Ho ho, you don't like Alban Berg and twelve-tone masters?" he said—or something of the sort.

"Como? Me estas volviendo loco."

It was the friggin' UN up here.

"I warn you many times about the racket," Connor said to Brett, pulling at his little dictator's mustache. He craned his neck to get a view of the living room action.

"Racket!" Paik said, smiling ear to ear. "'Racket' is music, too, if you know how to hear. I make sex part of musical performance. You a doctor, you appreciate. Sex a part of art and literature—why not music? The highlight of my piece—"

Brett shouldered Paik aside. Connor had no need to know about the highlight of Paik's "Young Penis Chorus,"

which consisted of ten men sticking their dicks through a paper curtain in time to the music.

“We’ll be sure to keep the volume down,” Brett said.

Connor’s eyes betrayed a glint of amusement at what must appear to him the frivolities of people unhampered by the need to perform basement abortions. Then he glowered, pulling at his mustache: “I want the Chinita out.”

Brett wanted La Monte Young out. One evening she arrived home from the 42nd Street Library with fever chills, to find La Monte stroked out on her bed, greasy pony tail fanned across the pillow. He crashed there, Rinko said, because . . . Brett was too feverish to retain her explanation; she remembered only that Rinko seemed puzzled she needed one.

Fortunately, George Maciunas, CEO of Fluxus, never ventured north of 14th Street, as if the air uptown was composed of methane ice crystals like Uranus. One of his artworks was a series of little boxes called *Excreta Fluxorum*, inspired by an Italian artist’s collection of ninety cans titled *Merda d’Artista*. Maciunas’s boxes housed a carefully curated assortment of animal poop, Brett learned from Rinko—from a tiny mouse turd nested in a pill capsule to a dried cow pie—all classified in Latin. There was reportedly a container for a Cro-Magnon specimen, plus the doody of *Unicornis fantasticus*. One evening Brett sniffed suspiciously at an envelope on the little hall table next to the phone. Labeled in Rinko’s hand, “Tortoise shit for G.M.”

Swell—so long as Maciunas’s oeuvre resided south of 14th Street. Later that month his building fell to a developer—Bodie Curtiz, as it happened, who was scarfing up great chunks of downtown. *Excreta Fluxorum* was in need of a new home. Rinko stepped up to the plate—possibly, Brett suspected, because Maciunas would also be welcome in the back bedroom.

Rage pressed up through her ribcage and throat. *Calm down*, Brett told herself. She didn’t listen. “Waitaminute, d’you mean to say he’s gonna bring boxes of shit in here?” she spluttered. “No way.”

She and Rinko stood facing off in the hall. Brett

suspected she looked scary. She'd been smoking too much, sleeping little, and couldn't throw off a bronchial cough. Her periods were lasting so long they shook hands with each other mid-month. A doctor had recently confirmed that she was suffering the after-effects of her visit to a section of Paris overlooked by tourists.

"It's only till George finds a new place," Rinko said. "You know, *Merda d'Artista* sold for its weight in gold to a major collector and everything." For a moment, the hacking, haggard presence confronting her in the hall seemed to register on Rinko. "Something John Cage taught me," she said, in a conciliatory tone. "It's alright to be wacky."

They stood so close Brett could feel Rinko's breath on her face yet they might have been standing on separate planets. *I've gotta get out.* And she saw, suddenly, that she could change course.