

# SWEET TOWNS

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## I'D REALLY LIKE TO HIT A BITCH

TRACEY DUNCAN

When I tell people that I play roller derby, everyone always wants to know what it feels like to hit a bitch, knock her down, and hear the resounding thud of her knee pads (and maybe her face) as they hit the floor behind me. They want to have an image of me smugly skating past, short skirt whipping in the wind of my own daredevil speed, face twisted in a delighted smirk.

I'd be lying if I said that I don't want to hold on to some part of that image of me, too. But the truth of the matter is that getting knocked down is way more important than knocking other people down. This is not true in terms of points, of course. The less I get knocked down, the more effective I am as a player. But, on a personal level, I've learned a lot more from getting my ass kicked than I have from kicking ass.

Truthfully, I can only remember one hit I've made in all its

sensual detail. I was blocking in an RSRD (Red Stick Roller Derby) intraleague bout at the River Center in March. I had fallen down and fallen behind the pack. As I raced to catch up I saw the opposing jammer, Moxie Balboa, coming up behind me, and I hung back slightly and half-pretended I was still having problems catching up. (I am known for this.) I leaned into Moxie as she passed with the full weight of my body. I watched her knees buckle and her face fall, and as I race back up to the pack, I smiled. I might have even smirked, and my skirt might have whipped a bit around my hips. Moxie is a fast, smart jammer, and while the jam wasn't over, I had definitely impeded her progress.

People always want to hear snippets like that, stories about game-changing booty blocks and bloody noses. But like I said, those stories don't really do it for me, personally. Maybe because getting hurt is a lot more memorable than hurting other people and the bruises that a hard hit leaves don't fade quickly.

The hardest hit I've ever taken was from a skater named Dee Zasta. She's on my team, and it wasn't even during a game, but when that bitch comes after you, it's always for real. I was jamming, which is not that usual for me, as I am not the fastest or most nimble skater. I was about to break through the pack for the

second time, about to start scoring points, when I heard a banshee wail behind me. Dee was maybe ten feet behind and headed towards me with all the velocity of her category five reputation. Going around a curve, I could see her face, mouth opened in a wide oval, eyes blacked out with dark goggles, and I thought, 'Fuck, I just can't skate fast enough to get away from this bitch.'

And I really couldn't. But I couldn't skate out of bounds away from the hit, either. I knew I was just going to have to take it. I tried to make my body loose, like an alcoholic in a car accident and hoped that would save me from breaking something important. I didn't realize how fast Dee was really going until the side of her body slammed into mine violently. I felt every bony protuberance on the side of her body in the space of a second. I actually caught enough air to think about hitting the ground before it happened, and I curled up into a small ball so that just my wrist and knee pads would take the force of my fall. My impact made a small, sharp smacking sound against the floor. I rolled onto my back and tried to breathe. It's the only time in my whole short derby career that I ever really wasn't sure if I wanted to get up and skate anymore. My whole body reverberated from the impact and I couldn't fill my lungs fast enough. Pain makes everything else disappear into a vast expanse of quiet nothing, and I just wanted to stay there. As comfortable as that silent field was in the moment, I knew that it wouldn't stay that way for long. The clarifying quality of physical exhaustion so quickly leads to self pity. I got up and finished the jam. I didn't skate very fast, and I didn't score any points.

Afterwards, the team slapped Dee's palms and congratulated her on landing such a sweet hit. But they congratulated me, too. For taking it, and for not staying down. That's the most important lesson I've learned in roller derby, if not in life, in general: Don't stay down. Not just because it could mean game over for your team. Not just because it's a cowardly move as a player. And not because the relief of taking a break is only temporary. For the simple fact that if you do stay down, you don't get to play anymore. And sometimes just staying in the game is all that matters.

## I LIKE TO DRINK MY FRIENDS

ALEX V. COOK

I used to like to play 'Friends' by the Police, the B-side of 'Da Do Do Do Da Da Da', on the jukebox at the Lion's Share Restaurant at Southland Mall in Houma, LA, circa 1984. The song is funny. I think it is guitarist Andy Summers growling 'I like to eat my friends and make no bones about it' over a lurching half-assed blues riff. It was an ironic thing to hear in a restaurant and maybe my young brain appreciated the frisson of playing a song named 'Friends' that will win me none.

In adulthood I maintain a push me/pull you attitude about friends. I have a number of very good friends who are treasures in my life, but I see our interactions the way I see a lot of things: as teeth in gears that occasionally interlock and help each other spin. I don't think everyone else feels this way. Many people I know weave their friends into a thick mesh used alternately as a safety net, a snare, or a fence. Their friends are the boundaries within which life is experienced, just like high school.

I wondered if the same thing was up when I received an



Tracey Duncan

When you skate with Baton Rouge's RSDS (Red Stick Roller Derby), the hits just keep on coming.

invitation for ‘Openings’ a performance by my friend and Sweet Tooth contributor William G. Osborne III, affectionately known among us friends as Chip. In the interest of full disclosure, my attendance was requested by the artist, asking that I record my observations in exchange for his writing a piece in a previous issue of this publication. The invitations were handed in a tightly controlled manner, carefully numbered and annotated down to 1699 being named the salon that did Chip’s hair in the invitation photo in which the artist posed in front of a painting that the salon had commissioned from him. See how tangled friendly relations can get? It was also asked that I submit a review of the performance to Artforum, which I did.

The performance consisted of Chip making drinks for this precisely selected group of friends. When the appointed hour arrived, an elaborate temporary bar was set up in the Ephemeral Gallery and the video cameras were turned on, but no Chip. The performance time on the flyer was set for one hour to be followed by a reception, and a large part of me was hoping that Chip would remain absent, his bar a temptation for the thirsty gathered, a Six Characters in Search of a Cocktail kind of situation. That would be performance art, whose main component is taking an audience off its guard. To some mild personal disappointment, Chip eventually emerged and got to mixing drinks. A soundtrack involving what resembled a heartbeat throbbed quietly in the background. I also detected a bit of glass harmonica, where angelic tones are summoned by rubbing the rim of glasses. Rubbing glasses, rubbing elbows . . . I can see where this is going.

It must be said there was no disappointment whatsoever in the drinks provided; Chip is a studied and skilled mixologist as he is in most things he does, and similarly the things he does inspire thought on those around him. I have in my notes ‘#2 – super lemony martini; I like the blank tag.’ There was a tag attached to glass and philosophical treatises laid out on plinths throughout the gallery. The texts were too long to read and dense to read in such a setting, but I’m thinking that was the point, or at least was the point I was going with. That’s how it goes in performance art; we make our own points. Next in my notes I have ‘#3 – syrupy thing. Road leading to profundity.’

The drinks were strong and sublime. I don’t know if I think of mixology as a proper art or a rarefied craft. I suppose one can get along fine in life without ever debating the difference between the two. With enough drinks, one can debate anything.

Despite the careful lubrication and congenial nature of this performance, buttons were still getting pushed. One attendee sidled up irritated, whispering ‘Is this it? Making drinks? I gave up tickets to something I really wanted to do for this!’ Ahhhh... art was happening, just like MTV’s *The Real World*—it stopped being polite and started being real.

Just then, the fabric of the performance was tested by the sudden appearance of uninvited friends. The Ephemeral Gallery events are a hoot, the kind of thing that lets you forget about the supposed lack of culture in our fair burg. They had seen cars in the parking lot and had assumed they missed the invite. Puzzled that Chip was not responding to their salutations in his usual warm manner, they were quickly pulled aside, explained the restrictions imposed on the evening and respectfully shown the door. Bravo! The friend barrier had been subverted and we were in the dangerous open waters of art.

The music turned to abstract percussion and whiskey drink appeared that I can’t remember whether the artist or I dubbed a ‘post-Guliani Manhattan’ and maybe it was the top shelf liquor talking, but I felt the presence of Art. Some people were still grumbling about the arguable eventlessness of the event—always a hallmark of successful performance art is decided whether the something really went down—while the rest were basking in the excesses. At the end we applauded, and true to reception form, some inexpensive bottles of wine were being poured at the back of the gallery, just like any time I’d been to a friend’s opening, an invitation to which I would have replied ‘Maybe Attending’ on Facebook the day before. I wasn’t sure what I’d been to or even if I had a good time, but that in itself is a triumph, because it is when you don’t fully grasp the circumstances is when things get interesting. Salut! I wondered if he’s got the Police on that laptop.

## THERE ARE NO CIGARETTES IN BALLET

ERIN ROLFS

‘God! She’s mean,’ Holly whispered to me as we stood en barre facing the wall.

We had a substitute instructor that evening and Holly’s form was not making this prima ballerina, of days gone by, very happy. We had signed up for the basic adult ballet class, hadn’t we?

‘Did we wander into Swan Lake auditions?’ We considered it might be a mix up, but all the same faces were there. The anorexic older woman whose leg warmers actually seemed necessary; the team of college students who had found a practical reason to



Strong and sublime: a drink by William G. Osborne III.

wear an American Apparel leotard and some menopausal ladies in shear, pink skirts that wrapped around their hips like drooping flower petals.

And us, in the New Orleans School of Ballet on Adams Street in Pampo’s flesh-colored tights and split-sole slippers. Soon our far-from-lithe bodies shed the strict vertical and I remembered why I quit this ridiculous thing called ballet.

I never knew what my instructors were saying, not literally. I just knew different strings of foreign sounds were signals for various movements. And depending on how the voice executed the command I knew to move slow or fast or up or down. ‘FRAH-pay,’ was always issued forcefully. My 10 year-old brain gestured to by leg to stab my foot in a controlled, swift motion against the floor on its way to a nice turned-out point.

‘Roownn dee jhommmm’ had a couple intonations, but when stretched out as such, I knew to carefully trace my leg out and around from my body with only my toe touching the ground. At some point this exercise would encounter a ‘anh deh-Danh’ and I surmised to do the same thing in the opposite direction.

Ballet class was truly like learning a foreign language, not because French terms were being lobbed about, but because it required me to retire the conveniences of my body in its contemporary state. The slumped shoulders and unsophisticated gate that would equate to my daily English was not allowed in the studio. My thighs, back, stomach, neck, brow and fingertips became syllables in a formal conversation devised of a kinetic alphabet.

Over time, just as language requires nuances and accents to express more complex thoughts, so too ballet requested a technical devotion I couldn’t give it. I stopped dancing when I was 14 years-old because the precision that was required to ‘make pointe’ (or to graduate up to toe-shoes) had created asshole out of our instructors. I couldn’t quite handle the empty threats of sticking lit cigarettes under our legs so we wouldn’t release them from en l’air. The girls who had squealed over tutus and stage makeup became pinched, taut snobs. The competitiveness that had sadly crept into our affairs with boys found a place in dance. In class, I was always praying for the minutes to pass faster, I was always in the back of the group. I was truly ostracized because I wouldn’t compete and I did not respond well to negative reinforcement. I was miserable.

‘Ms. Rolfs,’ that puckered-face witch of a teacher would say to my mother. ‘She’s just the right height and she has small breasts, her legs are naturally hyper-extended, the arch in her foot is perfect, she’s built for this. But her eyes glaze over half way through class.’

The self-consciousness and failure that rotted my stomach in those last years of dance had obviously never dissolved and our substitute’s displeasure with Holly’s pas de chat resurrected it all. Of course, we never went back to that class and Holly never went to ballet again, ever. But I missed the relief my hips felt during barre stretches and the comfort of knowing just how to hold my arms during a port de bras. So I took a summer class at LSU with Susan Perlis, who teaches the junior ballet with the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre. My first day in class I struggled to walk through the door, Susan looked just like one of the mean ones.

‘I can’t be humiliated in front of these Phys. Ed. majors who are just taking this course to fill an elective. I can’t be subjected to this in a form-fitting lycra-cotton blend.’ I thought to myself. ‘And God what the hell happened to my butt?’ The physical vocabulary I needed to speak the language of dance was already producing a slur.

She handed out the syllabus and *The Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet* by Gail Grant was the only book we were required to buy. I was surprised to see any reading required at all and I bought it as soon as I could.

By the end of the course an entirely new world had opened up to me. A ballet that wouldn’t shun you if you forgot to tuck in your abdomen, but quietly walked up to you and petted it into place. A ballet that explained a pas de chat was the step of the cat, a rondes de jambe was ‘circling the legs,’ frappe meant ‘to strike.’ The meaning was so important to the nuance and the instructor’s patience was imperative to any student’s endurance. I think Susan understood that no one in class had delusions of Zelda Fitzgerald proportions. And the wicked girls of adolescence had morphed into a gaggle of misfits battling beer guts and hang-overs, none of them ever snickered when I couldn’t do a split. I really have Ms. Perlis to thank for not bringing a cigarette to class and letting me speak in broken sentences if I had to.

I guess it was a combination of my own longing and nostalgia, someone’s kindness, a simple book and finally being mature enough to redeem lingering 14 year-old’s fear.

Now when I can, I go to the Dancer’s Workshop on Bluebonnet on Wednesday or Thursday nights at 7:00 or 7:30 respectively to take their adult ballet class. I’m certainly no more fluent and my butt is still a disappointment but the class i never long enough and I never hide in the back of the group. I enjoy myself and that’s all I really wanted out of ballet.

Now I just have to convince Holly to come back.

Anyone can indulge their inner ballerina or danseur (the male versions) at a couple different classes the Dancer’s Workshop offers, check out [www.dancersworkshop.com](http://www.dancersworkshop.com) for seasonal schedules or look at auditing a university elective course.

## SPILL

DAVID BROWN

On April 20, 2010, it happened. A BP oil rig in 5,000 feet of water off the MS-LA coast exploded, killed 11 people and has leaked at least 5,000 barrels of crude into the ocean every day since. The sort of spill that Gulf Senators and industry execs repeatedly promised could never happen actually did. Technology had apparently become so advanced that accidents couldn’t happen anymore. This particular rig was at the technological frontier. But, the truth is, accidents do happen and we forgive them, don’t we? We certainly forgive our friends and our children and ourselves. We’re only human right? No use crying over spilt crude.

When major accidents like this happen and billions of dollars of property or lost revenues and priceless ecosystems are trashed, scientists, lawyers, environmental groups, survivalist politicians and sometimes the general public dig deeper. What someone virtually always discovers in the inquiry is that profit motives trumped decency and public safety. Less than three weeks after the spill, the hyperspace/hyperspeedy muckrakers have revealed both that the Minerals Management Service (MMS) bestowed BP’s lease at Deepwater Horizon through a nifty ‘categorical exclusion’ from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (the grandfather of federal environmental laws) and that BP’s lobbying efforts just 11 days before the explosion to expand those exemptions paid off.<sup>1</sup> Or did it?

Unless we’re truly suffering from addiction or codependency, it’s much harder to forgive someone who displays only brief and transparent remorse. The oil industry is drowning in historic profits. BP has over \$6 billion neatly tucked into their back pocket after the first quarter of 2010.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, Exxon-Mobil scored a dizzying \$45.2 billion in profits and paid not a cent in federal income taxes. (Exxon Mobil paid no federal income tax in 2009, 2010.<sup>3</sup>) So much for consequences, huh? It appears that the American people forgot or forgave Exxon’s Alaskan transgressions of 1989. They forgot the failed fishermen, the oiled otters, the dead crude-fed birds and Exxon’s refusal to pay. If BP promises they’re going to try harder now and that they’ll never ever hit us again, will we be willing to forego our shrimp and oysters and vacations to white sandy beaches? Will we simply forgive and forget and smile as we pull into that shiny station with the sanitized starburst logo and a promise to bring us all ‘beyond petroleum?’ Or will we insist on consequences, alternatives and stricter regulations this time around?

Works Cited:

<sup>1</sup>Epstein, J. (2010, May 5). *U.S. exempted BP’s Gulf of Mexico drilling from environmental impact study*. Retrieved from The Washington Post.com: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/04/AR2010050404118.html>

<sup>2</sup>White, R. D. (2010, April 30). *Occidental’s profit nearly triples; BP’s more than doubles*. Retrieved from Los Angeles Times: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/30/business/la-fi-ox-20100430>

<sup>3</sup>*Exxon Mobil paid no federal income tax in 2009*. (2010, April 6). Retrieved from Climate Progress: <http://climateprogress.org/2010/04/06/exxon-mobil-paid-no-federal-income-tax-in-2009>