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SEPT/OCT/NOV 2011

Amazing Disgrace

Following a scandal, an author ponders the connection between humiliation and the desire to write.

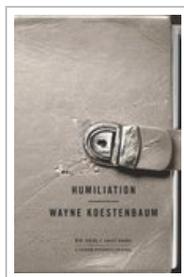
LAURA KIPNIS

SEPT/OCT/NOV 2011
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Among the many sources of humiliation I either learned about or was forced to relive while reading Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation* (Picador, \$14): having a tiny penis or any form of smallness, soiling oneself or virtually any other physical process, writing or being written about, being jealous, being cheated on, being Googled, being mistaken for the wrong gender, being Michael Jackson, electroshock therapy, impotence, hair loss, inadvertent erections in awkward circumstances, smelling like liverwurst, vomiting onstage before a musical

performance, voyeuristic curiosity about death, failing to visit a dying colleague in the hospital, and being photographed after you're dead. The list, as you see, goes on indefinitely, with humiliation pursuing us even into the afterlife.

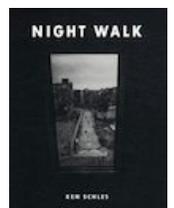
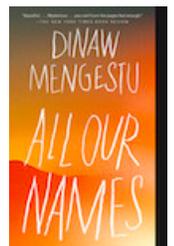
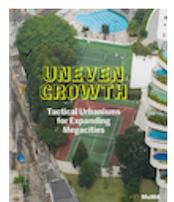
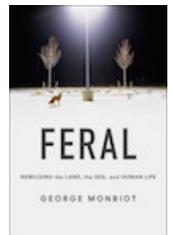
By a happy coincidence, just as I was savoring the humiliations in *Humiliation*, a colossal scene of actual humiliation was playing out on the front pages: A New York congressman named Anthony Weiner had been exposed doing something exceedingly peculiar and, many felt, perverse. He didn't simply have an affair, as per the usual politician scandal. No, this was worse: He *hadn't* had an affair. Instead, he'd sent a lewd photo of himself to a college student he'd never met, then committed the fatal error of lying about it to the press and his colleagues once the photo went public (as inevitably it would). It soon emerged that he'd been exchanging raunchy texts and e-mails and dirty pictures with at least six different women, for over three years, *using his own name*.

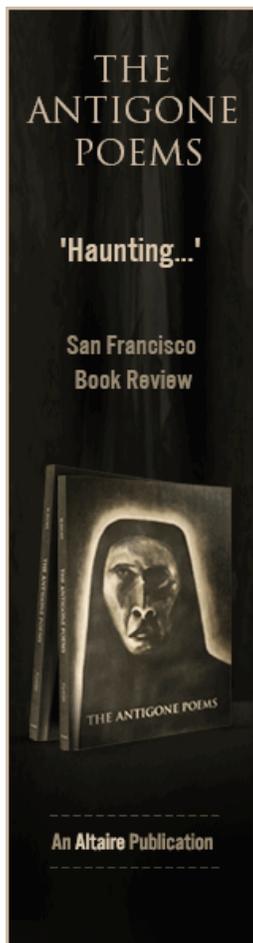


From Achim Lippoth's 2006 photo series "The Class of 1954"

The word "humiliation" became a steady drumbeat in the news reports: He'd humiliated his wife, he'd humiliated himself, he'd even humiliated Nancy Pelosi, who stood in for Sophie Portnoy in this rollicking national saga of lust and shame. "Weinergate" was the wrong appellation for this scandal; it should have been "Weiner's Complaint." This was electoral

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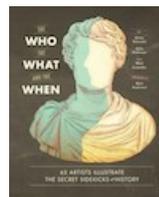
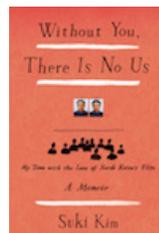


politics reconfigured as an analyst's couch, with tabloid reporters assuming the Dr. Spielvogel role: "Now vee may perhaps to begin, Congressman." Since where else but a satirical novel about a nice Jewish boy and his libido could the crotch-obsessed analysand's name really be Weiner? But as the original Spielvogel explained in his scholarly article "The Puzzled Penis," all this energetic exhibitionism can yield no gratification, only "overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration." To be sure, such dreads really did come to fruition in this case, give or take a castration metaphor or two. There was Pelosi threatening to chop off Weiner's career, and when no less an Oedipal figure than the president stepped in to say that if it were him, *he'd* resign, Weiner finally bowed to the inevitable; taking the proffered dagger, he smote himself dead—politically dead, anyway, which was all that mattered.

Enter another nice Jewish boy, also preoccupied with public shame, to help us understand such primal scenes. Indeed, Koestenbaum has been toying with the exposure of his own private parts—his obsessions with opera, divas, and Jackie O—throughout his career. Humiliation has the structure of a fold, he notes here—the inner and outer realms change place, as in folding a napkin, though other examples are less congenial than a well-set table: "Think of a defendant, in a trial, seeing his or her underwear presented as evidence by the prosecutor. An object that should be private and unseen is suddenly visible." Recall that the first photo that surfaced of Weiner *was* of his underwear, an erection clearly visible beneath gray boxer briefs. So being "caught with your pants down" isn't just an idiom, it really happens, and not just in those awful dreams of showing up at a dinner party in your underwear. You have those, too, right? Why can't we scrape these images out of our psyches? Koestenbaum recalls the indelible sight of a third-grade schoolmate, his pants around his ankles, being paddled across his naked buttocks by the teacher as punishment for some infraction. The buttocks were pimply; girls could see the boy's penis. For Koestenbaum, the queasy mixture of fascination, horror, and shame condensed in this childhood spectacle provides the model for every humiliation to come.

Does the mercilessly shamed third-grader evolve into the defendant whose underwear incriminates him in court, or into the congressman flashing his crotch in public until the hammer of social ignominy crashes down? What I want to know is how the disciplinary horrors of childhood relate to these self-inflicted injuries of adulthood. Koestenbaum, however, is less interested in origin stories than in allegiances: with sexually disgraced politicians or anyone with "a complicated erotic agenda." No one should be humiliated for sexual conduct—even former senator Larry Craig, the long-standing gay-rights foe caught making solicitations in an airport bathroom, gets a reluctant sympathy vote. Public bathrooms provide the settings for some of Koestenbaum's most memorable humiliations, too. Not merely a theorizer of his subject, he also performs it on the page, offering readers "some details about my own penis and its proclivities" to amplify humiliation's universality. Take the time he was snubbed in a train-station men's room by a catheterized wheelchair-bound man who, though positioned hopefully in front of the urinals, was clearly waiting for someone sexier than the author to arrive. Then Koestenbaum ups the ante by informing us that he snubbed the wheelchair guy, too—they were *both* waiting for someone sexier to arrive. He's not just a reject—he's an *ableist*. He's our alchemist of shame, spinning every episode or memory into the maximum possible yield of embarrassment, as a show of solidarity with outcasts everywhere.

Perhaps this is the place to mention that I know Koestenbaum casually (in the way that a gay male writer and a straight female writer who have drinks together once a year know each other), so it's possible that reading of these humiliations had more voyeuristic zing for me than it might for a stranger. But it wasn't so much the sexual revelations that zinged me—it was the professional ones. That writing is deeply connected with humiliation is one of the book's motifs. Why is writing humiliating? Because it solicits a response that may not be forthcoming, and unreciprocated desire is always humiliating. For Koestenbaum, *any* reader's dislike of your work is an injury. You've offered yourself to them, as if offering your



body to be caressed; being refused is shaming. When he writes of editors rejecting commissioned essays and reviews (“a botch,” one of them declares nastily), or a publishing-house acquaintance taking unseemly glee in having shot down a submitted manuscript, or books he’d warmly inscribed to a revered poet turning up at a used bookstore, I find myself doing a quick mental inventory: Has this happened to me? It’s like checking your limbs after witnessing a car accident to reassure yourself that you’re still intact.

Humiliation concludes with an enumerated compendium of Koestenbaum’s lifetime humiliations, from a disgustingly messy sneeze in fourth grade, up through more recent mortifications, like being told he has a flat ass. He’s excited by the creative dimensions of humiliation. Constructing such a list would be impossible for me, let alone publishing it. Confessionalism makes me nervous—I wrote an entire book about love without once employing the first-person pronoun. Would I be a better writer if I cherished my humiliations more? I don’t cherish them, though I do suspect that every accumulated wound and misery seeps out onto the page in some version or another, however circumspect you think you’re being. Writers, too, are compelled by forces they don’t understand to flash their underwear around in public (camouflaged to varying degrees by form or craft); critics play the sadistic teachers (camouflaged to varying degrees by discussions of form or craft). Obviously writing has its moments of sublimity: grasping after the ineffable, realizing something just out of reach—modulated by that chronic substratum of shame about having taken a dump in public. The literary landscape transports us frequently enough back to the childhood classroom and the teacher’s humiliating paddle. It has such a familiar feel—it feels like going home.

But I tend to think about writing in relation to unconsciousness; I suspect Koestenbaum thinks about it in relation to the body writ larger, more of a continent than a precinct. An earlier essay titled “Darling’s Prick” recounts how Darling, a character in Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*, traces the contours of his penis on a piece of paper and mails it to his lover, a gesture that, for Koestenbaum, serves as an emblem for writing itself, or what he wants writing to be. The dotted line is shorthand for something that needs to be conveyed (it could just as well be the tracings of a nipple or a nose, he reassures us, not wanting to be prick-centric) but that words can’t capture. “The writer draws a dotted line around the inappropriately thrust forward presence.”

If only Anthony Weiner had been a character from Genet instead of a politician from Queens! He may have used a cell phone in lieu of a pencil, but he, too, was tracing the contours of something—a desire, a presence—for which language was insufficient. “Assume there is a state of mind called ‘wanting to say,’” Koestenbaum suggests. From here, the humiliated congressman and the writer struggling for words don’t look like such different animals.

Laura Kipnis's book How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior (Picador) was just released in paperback.

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