
Pro Rege

Volume 48
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2019*

Article 3

December 2019

Miss Perception

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Recommended Citation

Dengler, Mary (2019) "Miss Perception," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 48: No. 2, 4.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss2/3

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Miss Perception

Mary Dengler

The first few years I knew you
didn't really let me know you well
at all. I saw a seemingly pretentious person
try to summon confidence and friendship
by a false bravado at the podium, presentation
memorized but speaking to yourself instead of us,
just skimming eyes across the crowd and resting
on the wall or window glass, your face aglow, your smile
a mask. Your answers given in class seemed made for show
in always being right, the gifts you gave, hand-crafted
I now know, seemed celebrations of your skill and charm. And yet,
your mental range could catch our breath, disarm
and hold us, pull us to a greater depth, on many topics
educating us. But still, I didn't know
the inner you until our meetings one on one.

Now your smile comes fitfully, like sunlight glancing
on a wave. What started as an interview of me becomes a revelation
more of you. Yourself forgotten in this exchange, a grave
and modest person comes to light, a depth and scope
of mental range behind the serious glance and fall of hair, a keen
perception of the world, a love of what is right and fair. I've learned
much more about that smile—and I was right to some extent
but also wrong. For you developed in an isolated prairie town,
attended classes K-12 in two rooms of a Bible school, where several
live-in teachers guided you, your siblings, and assorted kids from Asia
and Midwestern states, kids of Christian farmers mostly, lacking faith
in public education—safe to say. That tiny world amid a vast
unyielding landscape gave assurance and a solid place to stand
but disallowed a swagger or a studied pose. I found a person
quietly assured in faith, self-critically at home in academic books
and discourse, confident to head down unknown roads, to leave
the childhood world but not its friends behind, to follow
customary paths but not rush blind into a college love affair.

I didn't see the hugeness, the complexity behind
the simple smile and crafted gifts. I now know you
can run a school or business, lead a group of any size, bring
hope to people on the street, or merely change
the world as you've been changing
me—each time we meet.