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# Pro Rege

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Volume 48  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2019*

Article 12

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December 2019

## Exposure

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### Recommended Citation

Dengler, Mary (2019) "Exposure," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 48: No. 2, 13 - 18.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol48/iss2/12](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss2/12)

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# Exposure

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*Mary Dengler*

My fear of exposure began when I was four, hiding with my mother in a closet in Boston. She'd been planning our escape from my father for weeks, summoning me to the closet under the stairs to pray with her "for deliverance." Dad had been threatening to commit her to an institution. Whenever she'd ask why, he'd say, "You know what you've done." Over the years, I'd understand what he meant and the cause of her tears. She'd ceased to admire him, even dared to express disgust with his ways and disagree with some of his views.

In my earliest memories, our house operated as two camps. Mother, my brother, and I lived downstairs, Grandma and Grandpa Stedman lived upstairs, and Dad moved uneasily between the two camps, shooting verbal bullets at Mother after getting ammunition from upstairs to fight in a war that perpetually wounded both of them. Mother refused, she later confided, to be his "adoring doormat." His parents thought she should. In fact, Grandma Stedman would softly say, "We must submit," and even distract my brother's attention by pointing at the "wee birdies" whenever Mother tried to discipline him, as Dad would not. Nonetheless, I idolized my dad.

"Hi Darling!" he'd say to me as he walked in from his church or the stock market or his parents' apartment upstairs. To Mother, looking up, he'd often fire, "I ate with my folks." He particularly showed me affection when he found me absorbed in a book or conversation with Mother. "How about it?" he'd say, holding out his arms. In rapture, I'd run to him for the expected kiss and toss in the air, unaware of his triumph over Mother.

"Honey-Bee," Mother whispered breathlessly at his departure after the kiss and toss, one afternoon, "you don't have to run to Daddy whenever he says 'How about it?'" Embarrassed and

confused, I started repelling Dad's summons. Mother's approval meant more to me at age four than Dad's expressions of anguish. Still, I was wracked with longing for that kiss and toss.

Years later, Mother tearfully repented in a Florida coffee shop, "I was so afraid of losing you, I turned you against your father when you needed one most." I hadn't thought of the event in years. When my resentment subsided, I realized the extent of her desperation, the cause of his pain, and the roots of my fascination and combat with men.

At the time of this repelled affection, Dad was also fighting a spiritual and political war with his congregation. As pastor of a large Baptist church, he was battling those who questioned the scripture's infallibility and moral injunction against adultery. His father armed him for that battle as well, though Mother would've been as good a mentor. Years later, in their second round of marriage, when church battles ended in court contests over church property, Mother would defend Dad's position unflinchingly.

But loyalty didn't compensate for her lack of affection. In the days of court trials, he kept his last weapon handy—he threatened to use her as a motive for his failure. "I may tell the court my wife is insane."

"How could you?" she whispered. Sitting breathlessly in the backseat of the car, I wasn't sure what she meant. I now realize the irony of his remark. She'd stood by him during a series of trials, supporting his position. If he were to use such a defense, he'd betray his strongest ally and the only person he could intimidate.

Mealtimes heightened the tension, especially whenever Dad invited his parents downstairs for what now seemed like an inquisition. Their forks and knives poised for eating, they'd sit at the kitchen table, silently or verbally critiquing

Mother's movements as she cooked.

"You shouldn't keep your family waiting like this," Grandpa Stedman admonished, one day. "You're always late." And Grandma Stedman, compelled to train her daughter-in-law, added, "We must be submissive, Dearie." At age four, I felt only outrage that someone was scolding my mother. Besides, I loved watching watch her cook while listening to her talk about characters from books or news or the community. I didn't understand my grandparents' hurry to eat or my father's troubled silence.

I remember one particular lunch that same year. Grandpa was volleying scripture at Mother's back while Dad sat silently looking at her. He must have been caught between enjoying her punishment and longing to hold her. Seeing her vulnerable back bent earnestly over the stove, I turned on Grandpa, "Stop bawling Mummy out!" Turning from the stove nonplussed, her ladle suspended over the potato soup, she searched my face with a tender look that caught my throat and cleared my head. I might as well have thrown a hand grenade on the table—everyone sat in deathly silence during the meal.

In response to my reprimand or to some unknown urge, Grandpa intruded himself into the bathroom a few days later. I recall the house, a large, drafty, dark wooden house, the church parsonage, with its bathroom view of the circular stained-glass window of Dad's church. I could see that window as I sat unclothed on the toilet in the high-ceilinged bathroom the afternoon Grandpa looked in. Instinctively folding myself double, I looked up at him from beneath my lowered head and smiled uncertainly.

"You're a pretty little girl," he said, quietly gazing, his head in the door. I looked from him to the pink, hot-water bag folded over the shower rod, to the stained-glass window. He stood there only a moment as I stared at the stained-glass evasively. I never told anyone about his visit. But I started locking the bathroom door and hating hot-water bottles.

A few days later, I writhed from an infection, caused, I now assume, by an inexpressible sense of violation. Few things are worse, at age four, than being violated by a pair of eyes, let alone medical fingers and instruments.

My only memory of that medical intrusion

is seeing Dad biting his lower lip, his face among the faces of Mother, the doctor, and the nurse. Or did I just imagine he was there? Whether real or imagined, his face wore a look of love, guilt, and curiosity. He must have told himself he had a right to be there—if he really was there. What he didn't know was the cause of my dis-ease: Grandpa's intrusive gaze and my shame in being its target. Would he have believed me, I later wonder, if I'd said, "Grandpa looked at me." He probably would have described Grandpa's difficult youth, the brutal stepfather who locked Grandpa out of the sod-floor house one wintry night, forcing him to leave home for good. He would have recounted Grandpa's epic journey from Northern Ireland to Canada, his earning his way through a Presbyterian college and seminary with hard labor before becoming a circuit preacher in the Baptist denomination. And he, like Grandpa, would've explained the gaze as love. And maybe it was.

Seeing the forces mounting against her, Mother fled from Dad the same year as that bathroom incident, taking brother James and me with her while Dad conducted his Wednesday night service. In preparation for escape, she'd made several hushed phone calls to her brother, my Uncle Cecil, while Dad was out. "Cecil, can you come? He's threatening to have me committed....He claims he can, by convincing a court I'm insane.... He says he can get his parents to agree." Standing near her, I felt her trembling with fear and rage.

Apparently, Uncle Cecil was her only sibling romantic and daring enough to believe her or rescue us. Her younger brother Perry read her letters with a grain of salt, seeing them as examples of a Gothic imagination or overdue punishment for marrying a Baptist. A talk with my uncle Perry thirty years later confirmed my suspicion. Smilingly he commented, "Your dad wasn't such a bad guy. Somehow your mother thought he was an ogre. She really believed he planned to commit her to an institution on trumped-up charges of insanity."

"You didn't know my dad, Uncle Perry. He always paid back an injury."

During the weeks preceding our escape, I noticed the effect of Dad's threat on Mother's poetry. Her writing of "White Clouds Billowing on a Sun-washed Sea" was suspended. Instead, I'd hear her chanting, "No weapon formed against thee

shall prosper.” Reciting scripture became her wartime substitute for composing poetry.

When Uncle Cecil arrived from Delaware that Wednesday night after Dad crossed the yard to church, Mother pulled our packed suitcases from the closet. Flinging them to her brother, she hurried us silently to the car. “Quickly, Jamie,” she snapped in a whisper, mastering my head-strong brother. At age four, I sensed that Mother’s life depended on our escape. Thirty years later, she’d have been called either a “kidnapper” or “victim” of abuse.

For Mother, running had become a reflex action. Her marriage to Dad began with the same kind of flight after her parents forbade the wedding. At Dad’s first meeting with his future in-laws, he offended their aristocratic British code by calling my grandfather “Doc” and putting his arm around my embarrassed but adoring mother. Seeing their obvious disgust, he had the cruel sense to break off the engagement, leaving Mother sobbing in her room, surrounded by newly purchased satin and suitcases. To make matters worse, his own father undermined his decision by forcing him to go through with the marriage, for honor’s sake.

Rather than face his future father-in-law, Dad proposed an elopement when they met secretly at Memphis’ famed Overton Park. And Mother, fearing a lifetime of parental tyranny, immediately yielded to his. After secretly packing a few essentials and leaving her satin on the bed, she fled her parents’ house while her own father conducted a Sunday night service. Church services provided temporary salvation for Mother. But they didn’t save her from either her guilt of fleeing her parents or her husband’s grudge in marrying against his will.

Within weeks of their elopement to Maine, Mary and Haddon had emerged from the romantic personas of their letters to look more like the Morels in D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. His defiantly uncultured ways shocked her, and her refinement shamed him. As the years passed, their difficulty was complicated, first by a boy child born nine months later, then by a girl child—Mother’s consolation for her parents’ reproach and her husband’s distance.

In the year that followed our escape from Dad, I often thought of his face among the faces of the

doctor and nurse, wanting him yet afraid he’d follow us to Memphis to take me from Mother. Yet whenever Grandmother and Grandfather Cross told Mother, “You must divorce Haddon,” I’d curl up tightly in bed and pray, “Oh God, please help Mummy disobey her parents.” I grieved that I’d never see that face looking down at me again. His alienation made him my obsession. And being under the Crosses’ rule frightened me as much as living with the Stedmans.

At the Cross house, where prohibitions reigned, Mother was treated as much like a child as we were. Taking a cookie from the cupboard, sitting with our elbows on the table, or using their blue bathroom amounted to mortal sins.

Dad waited a year to pursue us to Memphis, probably counting the costs and advantages of his options. I was enjoying “show and tell” in kindergarten and walking at dusk past the neon-lighted liquor store to greet Mother getting off the bus from her editing job. In her well-fitted, forest-green suit, carried on long slim legs in brown high heels, she seemed confident and forceful. Still, always looming in the back of my mind was Dad’s face looking down in love, guilt, and curiosity from among the other faces as I winced in shame.

But this afternoon, when we turned the corner for the final block home from the bus stop, I saw a handsome stranger standing on the porch waiting for us. “Who is that?” I whispered excitedly, feeling attracted and repelled. Mother reacted breathlessly “Oh Honey-Bee, it’s Dad!” and grasped my hand more tightly.

To get his family back, Dad spent several afternoons negotiating in the study with Grandfather Cross. Standing on one foot near the door and chewing on several strands of hair, I listened, wondering why Mother wasn’t included. Years of studying literature and cultural history would remove my confusion: she was the prize in a power struggle. Her escape from Dad, like her retreat to the closet to pray, had provided only temporary freedom. In fleeing from Dad, she had landed back under her father’s rule. At this point, anything must have seemed better than living as the third child in her parents’ house.

“You’ve never been a real Christian....You must start to act like one....You must stop investing money in the stock market....You must start treating your wife better”—I could hear

Grandfather Cross's litany of injunctions stretching endlessly on, Dad must've mastered his contempt with convicted-looking nods. He'd probably gotten so tired of traveling around with his parents in penury after losing his church he was ready to submit to British rule. He must've figured he'd never get another church, another chance to defend the faith, if he couldn't keep his own house in order, if he didn't have a wife and family, if he was divorced.

Mother remained tense, breathless during these afternoons, praying that God and her father would work miracles—that Haddon would love her anyway, that a marital paradise could exist.

During an outing with Dad during this negotiation process, he broke out in song to me on the city bus. "Little red caboose, chug, chug, chug, little red caboose, chug, chug, chug, little red caboose behind the train..." he sang unabashedly. Lowering my face, I forced a smile, looking evasively out the window at a Presbyterian Church as the bus sped along. The women on the bus must have thought he was a dream, I realized years later, since they all smiled at him, sitting up a little straighter, their shoulders back. His hair was Celtic blue-black, his suit and shirt dark, his eyes a moody dark brown, his voice deep and beautiful—from training at the Boston Conservatory of Music after college and seminary—and his smile mischievous. He loved an appreciative audience and rendered even the most respectable women powerless in spite of their propriety. He must've felt especially joyful in manipulating Grandfather Cross and winning back his lovely but defiant wife.

I countered my five-year-old unease with remembered words of my mother: "Your father was spanked unmercifully as a child and lost his church when we left him." At five, I was learning to make excuses for both parents, to give them the benefit of my doubts.

But I had to work hard to accept conditions in a small North Carolina town, where his next pastorate took us after he won back his family. After learning the Southern dialect and practicing in the mirror ("Hi y'all, my nyme is May-ree") in first grade, I watched with interest during my 5<sup>th</sup>-grade year as the concerned Southern ladies of his congregation flocked to the parsonage to rub his back, bring him soup, and pray over him when he

was sick with the pneumonia that eventually sent us to a South Florida coastal town. Mother always received those sisters-of-good-deeds graciously: "Mrs. Parker, Mrs. Clark, Mrs. King. He's right in here. You are kind to visit." Instead of staying with him, she would retreat with me to the pantry, close the door to a crack, pour our coffee, and conspiratorially smile with me over cooed expressions of sympathy from the sick room. Mother had learned to replace resentment with mocking wit and to see these proceedings as entertainment. I drank this ironic wit with my coffee for years until it became part of my defense chemistry.

Still, Mother was the person they'd seek when overwhelmed with marital or spiritual problems. For six years she listened to them without irony by the hour. Coaxing them to unravel their troubled tales with reassuring words, coffee, and oatcakes, she'd pray with them and send them away refreshed, braced for the next assault from their husband or the devil.

Returning to the high-ceilinged rooms of Grandmother Cross's house after the bus ride that afternoon during the negotiation process, I broke away from my father's hand to run up the front steps and explore the new magazines waiting in the mailbox—my new obsession and competition for my father's attention. In our summer visits to the Crosses' house during my parents' second attempt at marriage, fiction became my first love.

It allured me as much as my father, whose affection I still guiltily and painfully resisted. Making a virtual closet in the living room by turning the overstuffed chair around to face the wall, I lost myself in fictional worlds. Stories in *The Ladies' Home Journal* depicted love that led to sex that led to more love. Between stories, as I considered the ways glamorous women used their powers to win and tame dangerous men, I saw the future as an alluringly difficult prospect. That particular afternoon, I lost myself in the story of people that successfully played the game of love.

I felt no grief when Dad, Mother, James, and I left the Crosses in Tennessee to start over in a small mill town in North Carolina. Our train ride south—Dad's car had belonged to the church he'd lost—gave me a chance to sleep in a Pullman. Mother and I occupied one tiny bedroom, Dad and James the other. I recall interrupting our night of sleep to try an experiment. I had watched

my brother using the toilet and thought I'd master his technique. On a Pullman, the fold-down bed fills the room. So when I announced to Mother that I had to "go-go," she got up and pushed the bed back into the wall so I could use the toilet. As I stood facing the bowl, Mother watched silently, showing neither humor nor disgust. She said nothing, as we wiped the floor, the seat, and my legs. Not scolded for that attempt, I felt no shame, just the comparative freedom my brother and father must have felt in the next compartment.

My exposure continued three years later at age eight, when I ran in urgently from school, on a warm autumn afternoon. Mother usually made my homecomings eventful, wearing her jade-green shirtwaist, burnished red lipstick, and Wood-Hue perfume, and calling out, "How's Miss Honey-Bee?" Today, though, I heard the shower running and yelled my greeting.

"Mummy, what's a 'Queer'?"

"What, Honey-Bee?"

"What's a 'Queer'?" I repeated, sticking my head into the steamy bathroom.

"Why are you asking, Bee?" she said from behind the curtain, suspending her scrubbing.

"I heard somebody call somebody else a Queer at recess."

"Just a minute, Bee. I'll be right out."

I expected a quick answer but not the kind of censure I got when I asked my Dad what "abortion" meant. Instead of saying, "Don't utter that word in this house," Mother brewed coffee and served it in delicate yellow china cups with Scotch shortbread for the occasion. Then she unraveled two very different narratives—one about sex, one about gay sex. Her knowledge stunned me. In her love of narrative, she told me more than I expected. She didn't use technical terms, since they offended her poetic sense. But she made me understand the concepts in a straightforward, neutral way.

"Oh, ugh," I responded to every step of the narrative. "That's what people do?"

"Yes, Bee," she said without hesitation, pouring another cup for each of us. This time she filled my cup with coffee, not milk.

My eight-year-old mind, untroubled by the sexual images beyond the coffee hour, simply stored the information till my next exposure. I realized, in years to come, I didn't think any better or worse of gays after her explanation—it just seemed to me they played the game with different

rules and, at that time, tried not to get caught.

That night, when I jumped into the tub with my brother, I recognized our differences in a new way. Self-consciousness took the nerve out of my water-fighting strategies. Our epic water fights ended that night anyway—Dad came home unexpectedly for the evening. Finding us engaged in a heroic struggle, he interrogated Mother. "How could you let them bathe together? Don't you have any sense of decency? Don't you ever let them do that again!" His shock suggested the enormity of our transgression. It also proved his estrangement from us. Devoted to his church and his adoring friends, he'd found a way to fill his own vacuum. Besides, his friends gave him access to television, which Mother had denied for the sake of education and family life.

At Dad's prohibition, I pondered the wickedness of what we'd been doing. I later realized that Mother wouldn't have issued such an edict. She would've simply encouraged us to do serious separate bathing. But I soon learned that sex was a forbidden topic in my father's world. His upbringing had made him as silent as he was curious on the subject.

In the days following the bathing edict, James and I avoided each other's eyes. Still, we demonstrated good will by throwing buckets of cold water over the shower rod and greeting each assault with an outraged "Hey!"

Mother flashed her anger at Dad, though, when he yelled, "Mary! Don't you ever do that again!" as I darted naked into the living room a year later. She saw my shock and pain before I fled the room. "Oh, Haddon," was all I heard in my mortified retreat. The upshot was my standing in front of a mirror, door locked, staring at myself to see what was so offensive about a nine-year-old body. His words didn't match the face—real or imagined—among the circle of doctor and nurse of three years before. And Grandpa Stedman, poking his face into the bathroom four years before had said I was "pretty," sitting within view of the stained-glass window. I was confused on how to determine when I was pretty and when I wasn't—the private signals contradicted the public ones. Who held the greater power—the girl in private or the man in public, the girl sitting down or the boy standing up, the person being scrutinized or the person scrutinizing?

My one source of guiltless hilarity was Cousin

Alison. Each summer, after our two families moved south, we met at a North Carolina beach for a week of play. There our dads rented a wind-and-salt-water-eroded beach house. The first day, after we all ran to the surf, Mother, armed with broom, sponge, and Ajax cleanser, made the place antiseptic. She even dragged a cement block into the shower for us to stand on, fearful of the germs lurking on the shower floor. She and Dad had learned to live in painful co-existence for the good of their children and the church, and it helped that his parents lived in a small rented house of their own. As before, Dad devoted his time to preparing sermons, fighting liberal theology and immorality, and responding to the attacks of his Southern congregation. As before, Mother devoted herself to counseling troubled women, cleaning and cooking rituals, writing poetry, reading her Bible and English novels, arranging twigs in china bowls, and guarding her children.

At the beach, she established herself on the porch with a book and writing pad, always keeping us in sight and abandoning her post only to prepare delicate lunches and perform housekeeping chores. Aunt Barbara would be forced to leave the kitchen with her coffee cup if she wanted to talk with Mother after we'd headed to the beach.

Meanwhile, Alison and I, astride our fathers' shoulders in the surf, engaged in our annual chicken fight. One particular summer, we checked each other for any physical changes, as we had just turned twelve.

"Do you have anything yet?"

"A little. Do you?"

"Yes. Let me see you." I repulsed her with screams of laughter as she tugged at my swimsuit top in the waves.

Running back to the cabin for lunch, our thin brown arms and legs dripping with salt water, we found our way blocked by a strange slender man, smiling at us, forcing us to stop awkwardly, run around him, and continue our run on the other side. We looked at each other and grimaced, saving our reactions for naptime in the attic.

Mother, watching us from the porch, said only, "Miss Bee? Miss Alison?" when we walked up the steps. It comforted me later to think that her eyes, like God's, were watching.

Lying on our mattress later, giggling at the erotic-looking wood designs, Alison and I recalled the strange man on the beach. "Isabel, did you think he was handsome?"

"No-ho. He looked weird. He might be planning to kidnap us. He might be in the closet!"

"Shut! Up!"

"Maybe he's still standing out there, waiting for us to come out," I said ominously, really thinking aloud. We laughed again, forcedly, turning away from each other with our troubled thoughts. After trying dutifully to nap, we hit the beach again, as if the event hadn't happened.

But late that night, in the attic, lights off, as we looked out the window from our mattress, elbows on the windowsill, to watch the moon sparkle on the water and see if our aging prince was gazing hopefully toward our cabin like the heroes in magazine fiction, our peace ended. For there, at the window in the house next to ours, stood the stranger, stark naked, looking across at our window, his bedroom lights blazing.

Inhaling together, we both ducked our heads, rolled over on the mattress, lay in silence for an endless moment, then burst into guilty laughter. But the laughter quickly ended, like the relief it had given. We said nothing, breathing in silence, each of us cascading through our own dark memories. Over the years, that event would redefine Grandpa's gaze, Dad's bathtub edict, and the shouted order to "never do that again."

Next morning, Alison and I exchanged conspiratorial glances but said nothing to each other or to anyone else. Feeling guilty and fearful, we walked slowly to the beach later in the day when our brothers had taken charge of the boiling surf. Instead of running toward the water and hailing our dads to take us out to the swells, we sat in the sand, heads bowed, digging our fingers into the sand. Suddenly Mother joined us from the porch. Giving us a searching look as she sat down between us, she circled each of us with one of her thin, strong arms, causing us to lift our heads toward the sea. As the three of us sat staring at the boundary line of ocean and sky, my peace came in with the tide.