

GROUND STATE

By Merrill Gray

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A middle-aged woman struggles to put her life back together after her husband of many years comes out as 'bi' and wants a divorce. Themes of betrayal, guilt, self-recrimination, suffering and resolution are all explored with a sure hand and steady, illuminating prose. But this is familiar territory. What makes Gray's literary equivalent to cinema verite stand out is the innovative use of 'ground' as both a structural device and a resonating symbol. The characters of both husband and wife are convincingly drawn and the voice is by turns sharp, pained, passionate, ironic and skewering. Quote: 'Divorce is like hitting black ice at 115 km/hr in cruise control.' And, 'You shoved the glass slipper onto your foot. You wanted someone to say 'come with me in my pumpkin coach...it will be a smooth ride. You are the other Cinderella. Cinderfuckinella. You are on your hands and knees scraping up your life.'* *High end Creative Nonfiction.* (Spacing is the author's own).

Ground State

Your husband confessed he's bisexual and had been having an affair with a gay friend for seventeen years. 'I'm so glad I finally told you,' he says. That was a year ago; you just signed the divorce papers. You celebrate by getting a bacterial sinus infection; hives cover your body. Every time you cough, the hives quiver. Your grief is contained in the jelly-like fluid. The tiny water sacs of oppressed bubble wrap are ready to burst. You'll need antibiotics. You are at your lowest energy state, yet words ooze up like a fever. 'When do I get to tell my story?' You ask your counselor. 'Any time you like,' he says. You write this.

1. Ground down

Divorce is like hitting black ice at 115 km/hr. in cruise control. At first you don't know what's happening and then you realize that some 'thing' has control of the steering wheel. You do not put on the brakes...you try to hold on... swerve... you must let go ... you cross the center line and hit the ditch ...spin, spin, spin...and stall...you don't die...you just feel like you did. And you hear your counselor say, *'Your marriage is over, you've just missed all the signs.'*

You did see some signs. You were floundering around in the snow without winter boots. Because he asked you to. *'I love you and our relationship is very important to me'* he wrote in an email, *'after 25 years, leopards are not going to change their spots dramatically nor should that be expected.'* You thought he was having an affair with a woman. When you questioned him, he responded *'If I get testy it is because it is work, and things have not been as busy as I would like and this creates pressure.'* You believed him.

Now, you find yourself in a basement suite with only a scattering of items you didn't sell at your garage sale. Kept mainly books. You gave away everything that reminded you of your twenty-nine-year marriage. There's no sunrise for you anymore...not through these small windows. The curtains your sister made from leftover fabric hang hopelessly. You wish someone would peer in. You had a peeping tom in your teens but now you really don't care if anyone sees you naked. You are past the age of wearing backless dresses and your knees have somehow become the largest part of your legs. You can only see the basement parking on the house next door. Grey...it's all grey.

2. *Ground level*

He, at first insisted that he had fallen out of love with you. *'I've ruined your life...I'm wired wrong.'* You still didn't get it. You believed in the fairytale until your prince left with another not so handsome prince. You shoved the glass slipper onto your foot. You wanted someone to say 'come with me in my pumpkin coach ...it will be a smooth ride.' You are the other Cinderella. Cinderfuckinella. You are on your hands and knees scraping up your life.

You eat soup; it's all you can swallow. Your overly sympathetic friends have been a soup kitchen. You go for blood work to get tested for every sexually transmitted infection. And you go again three months later. You can never give blood again because you've slept with a man who slept with a man (unintentionally)...they usher you out the back door and say *don't come back EVER.*

3. *Dumping Ground*

You ponder changing your name back to your maiden name but going backwards doesn't feel right. Your biological father was an alcoholic asshole who wasn't in your life, and he died seven years ago. You realize that you married someone just like him. Your mom and you both married con artists. You didn't know it at the time of course.... fell for them like dogs for treats. You begged for more, believed them, became their pillars, and stood tall like disciples. You listened to them preach their sermons, trusted them. Like bible salesman they dispersed their deceptions and you abided. They were not good treasurers and you forgot to audit them. They were patronizing thieves who pilfered your money, embezzled your hearts and ditched your dreams bankrupt. And at the last

supper you were deceived, by your very own Judas. Your father takes the honor of the greatest bastard you have ever known. Your ex is the second greatest bastard. His gay lover is too. He emailed you to apologize with the title 'from the other asshole in your life.' It's hard to keep them all straight.

4. *Hunting Ground*

People don't know what to say to you. It's like when you had your first miscarriage and the nurse said, '*It was God's will...*' and you wanted to slap her. What do you say to a friend whose husband tells her that he is gay or bisexual or whatever? You should say, *that's some weird fucking shit* or *that might take some good counseling*. Do not stand in a room at a Christmas party and in front of fifty people shout 'HE WAS FUCKING GAY'...over and over. Do not say, *you must be so shocked! How could you not know? I'm sad for you...At least you know now. What were you thinking?etc. etc.* Don't try to cover it up with sentimental phrases.

You want to go to Europe; preferably where they do not speak English. You don't want to talk or explain your situation. You are close to sixty and you are wondering if anyone, ANYONE is going to date a woman whose husband was sucking dick for 20 yrs. and interspersed a few affairs with women. *How did you not know? Why didn't you leave?* You can honestly say *you never knew.... you had no idea...you thought you were the love of his life.*

What were you thinking?? Well, you were thinking that marriage is a union of love. That people can commit to each other and be faithful and plan a life together. You put your head down and you ploughed through; raised three children, drove to sports, school activities, music lessons, had various pets; dog, rabbit, guinea pig, hamsters...fed,

watered, loved. You bought gifts for his family and arranged family get-togethers...because look at us WE ARE SO FUCKING HAPPY. You demonstrated it over and over...each season you placed decorations outside your front door, wreathes you made from a willow branch hedge, Easter Bunny prints, pussy willows in a pot in the spring, pumpkins carved with a variety of faces...some even smiling. Let's celebrate...celebrate the FAMILY that lives here. You were in a couple's world and that's where you wanted to stay. You are scrubbed off the social calendar in that circle. Now they talk about you at dinner parties '*Well I never saw that coming....can you believe it?*' '*I guess she didn't suck hard enough!*' HA HA HA. That's so funny.

5. *Go to Ground*

You are a stigma. There's a splotch on your character. '*A place that bleeds during mental states, as in hysteria.*' You go underground in your basement bunker. You pass time watching late night television. Your children buy you an Apple TV and sign you up for Netflix. They show you which remotes to use. When you finally find something you want to watch, it's not on your cable plan. Did Bill Maher just proclaim on his show that he would like to challenge the Guinness book of records for the longest orgasm? Is he that good? Is he single? On *Girls*, Hannah's dad comes out of the closet. OMG, you could have written that episode. And now on Netflix there's a new series, *Grace and*

Frankie. Their husbands ‘come out’ and profess their love for each other. They want you to feel sorry for them. It’s been soooo hard cheating on their wives for twenty years. All you really need is some peyote and organic yam lube and you’re all good. Obviously, the writers have never experienced ‘it’ and ‘it’ appears to be everywhere. You get well-meaning emails from friends commenting on the series, ‘*See you’re not alone.*’

6. *Stand one’s ground*

You go to yoga five times a week. Meditation, Yin, Restorative...do it all. Any position that helps you surrender and absorb grief. You lay on your Madara mat, hug in your personal space... tears on your bolster...you want to levitate ...rise above this. Who is on this journey with you? Who? You are shuddering solo on the surface of this shaky dumping ground.

And so, you continue with counseling. Twenty times in the past year. And your counselor tells you that maybe you are one of the 3% of women who get through things like ‘this’ without having a breakdown. And this is good news? You start to believe that you might be strong. Or in denial. Or have PTSD. And why is your bi-ex-husband now dating a 44-yr. old woman? ‘*He’s just found someone more naïve than you,*’ your counselor says. ‘*Gee thanks,*’ you say.

7. *Shift one’s ground*

You think about writing your own questionnaire for *The Rosey Project*. Have you ever lied? Tough to answer that one without being a liar. If he says NO ...that makes him a liar. Do you like women? Are you heterosexual? Are you the cheater or the one who was cheated on?

You ponder joining an online dating site. How would you introduce yourself? Fairly intelligent, although recently duped for 29 yrs., heterosexual woman with plenty of experience, seeks heterosexual man who is not a liar. Your single friends have been online for five years and the pickings are not promising. Some men criticize their body, the way they speak, their children. Some have anger issues towards women; others want to borrow money. Some promise extravagant trips but have no money. Some are dating three or more women at the same time, skyping young girls, send photos of their penis. Some are looking for a Sugar Mama. All are needy and sexually confused.

8. *Proving Ground*

You tell your children to be honest with their partner. If you are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Intergender, Asexual, Ally or anything else...you can still love someone and not be a cheater. You choose to be monogamous, faithful and trustworthy. Just because he wasn't, doesn't mean all bisexual people are. You want your children to love with all of their being. To own their sexuality and be true to themselves and others.

You bi-ex said that it was his 'right' because you couldn't give him what he needed. To justify his actions. On the grounds that he deserved it. He told you he couldn't give you more than 60% or himself. A little over half was all you were worth. The other 40% went to his gay partner. Is it just about sex? You suggest they add a new letter to the gender list... O. LGBTQQIIAA+O.O for other, O for 'out of it', ordinary, outcast, objectified, outsider, odd, off beat, off-centre ... choose one....or zero. You now want to be zero gender. You just want people to leave you alone.

You are sleeping better now. And your counselor says *'You know that anxious person you were? Well, you're not anxious anymore because now you know the truth.'* *'Good to know,'* you say.

9. Ground Rules

Your hair dresser notices that you have a bald spot. There have been handfuls of hair coming out in the shower. She tells you to try a product for thinning hair. Biotin for men. *'You should also take vitamin B and a multi-vitamin,'* she suggests. It's great that people are so helpful. *'I'm so excited, I'm getting married this summer,'* she states. You want to say, *'Don't do it.'* Your fake smile could crack the mirror.

At home, while doing a scalp treatment, you realize that the shower in your basement suite can steam up like a 'sweat' and you let your skin get as red as a bruised peach. You stay focused and soak away your sins. You feel like you could go through the 'fourth door', the round that burns out the last impurity in the body. ...you are ready to forgive.

Instead of crying at every counselling appointment, you are laughing at your naïve self. You are laughing at the person you once were. You know that you trusted too much; held on too long. You know that you were emotionally present and loved your children unconditionally. You know that you were living your truth. In the future, you know you need to have necessary conversations. You know that you need to set boundaries. You know that you want someone to value you for who you are. You know you will not be deceived again.

10. High Ground

You are grateful. You send emails to thank your friends for supporting you. You even send one to your bi-ex to thank him. *Thank you for telling me the truth about your life and thank you for letting me go. I hope that you can find inner peace and live your truth now.*

You get your divorce certificate, sell your wedding band for \$45.00 ‘*Don’t spend it all in one place,*’ the jeweler says. You laugh, ‘*I’m buying an expensive bottle of wine.*’ You change your last name, get a new passport, quit your job, jump in your new car, and move to your new province. You get off the ground.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wrote Ground State the year after my divorce. It’s a story that no one wants to talk about or publish (until now). It’s a story that I didn’t want to be in. I was happily living in a heterosexist world, tightly grasping at coupledness. I was even smug about it. On discovering my then husband had been in a relationship with a gay friend of ours for over 17 years, the shaming comments from homophobic former friends led me to re-examine my beliefs. Ground State was written to pick myself up off the ground. By sharing this experience, it is my hope that people recognize this societal problem and the discrimination that we all feel when we do not accept different sexual orientation.*

BIO: *Merrill Elizabeth Gray’s writing has appeared in Grain The Journal of Eclectic Writing, Temenos Press, Silver Birch Press, Birds we pile loosely, S/Tick, Blue Skies Poetry, Worth Architectural Magazine, Crazy Pineapple Press, Fieldstone Review, Four Ties Lit Review, Spring vol viii, Misfitmagazine, Sugar Mule Literary Magazine, CBC Canada writes Stranger than Fiction and Joy, Interrupted an anthology on motherhood and loss.*