

# BAD WORDS

How she envied him! this new found friend of hers. The way he cursed. Walking before the big mirror in her parents' room, bony chest — almost as flat as his — puffed up with the trying, trying hard to imitate him. If she could only look like him... Miranda thought, maybe she would acquire his knowledge, his way of cursing.

Starting with words like damn and blast, Miranda was slowly working her way up her list of bad words — from the least to the most bad. They all shared a common quality — they were all too heavy for her tongue to lift up — so her mother pronounced regularly. "Prick! Shit!" Miranda looked at herself in the mirror; the smile that was reflected there was one of deep satisfaction. Her mother was wrong — she could, would, and did lift the weight of these words, these forbidden words with her child tongue, the secret pleasure all the stronger for being visible in the mirror as she sharpened her mouth around them all. "Practice makes perfect," her father had always told her — practise to be perfect, in control as he was — and her friend — of words.

When she got to "fuck" she paused, took a deep breath and mouthed the word silently then out loud. Her heart beat loudly now as she replaced the "u" with an "o" — "fock." She felt the sharpness and power of the word — suddenly and involuntarily she shivered. Was it fear or excitement? She didn't know — probably both — but didn't care.

Now came the best — the baddest of them all. Whenever Miranda got to fuck she knew she had crossed a line — as palpable to her as it was invisible. A different world awaited her with the next word. A threatening word in many ways. For a long time she could never say it out loud. As with all the other words she had begun by mouthing it. The times when she was lucky enough to practise before the mirror as she was now, she thought she looked pretty stupid opening and closing her mouth on the word — like a fish gasping for air. But mouthing this word suggested nothing of its power, and for a long time she remained at this stage, not even being able to whisper it as she had with the others. The taboo against it was absolute — almost.

Hurrying to school one day, late and therefore alone, just so — it came out as she was crossing the bridge over the thin and brown trickle that was the Wapsey River in dry season. "Cunt!" A great wave of relief

washed over her as she said the word for the first time. Her surprise at hearing it come from her own mouth brought Miranda to a standstill, and although she knew it was unlikely, she couldn't stop herself from looking behind her both fearing and expecting to see her mother standing there, a silent and stern witness to this new level of her daughter's shameful behaviour. Miranda gave a nervous laugh at seeing no one there, and hurried on saying the word over and over again to herself under her breath.

She had taken a long time to say "the word"— that was how she referred to it — but she had come to like rolling it round and round her mouth, except that you couldn't really roll these words around. They all had edges — hard edges that hurt somehow as she intentionally and deliberately strained her mouth around their shapes, her tongue paying strict attention to their individual shapes. Afterwards she would carefully examine her mouth and tongue for the staining she expected. She was surprised that her mouth did not show the outrage she had just committed.

Why was it that men had words that could excite her? Miranda would often think of this as she travelled the time between the inner and outer boundaries of her life — home and school, school and home. Chaucer, for instance, with all his plumbing the depths of women. Late at night and lying awake in bed, she would ask her older cousin what this meant and the older girl would tell the younger one about men entering women. Miranda would wonder how you could enter another person. *Fanny Hill* and Henry Miller — men's words that she read secretly, her mother not dreaming of the feelings she had, or the wetness between her thin twelve-year-old thighs. Excitement would quickly turn to O.K.-so-what boredom and after the third or fourth time a woman's depth was plumbed, her twelve-year-old mind was bored and wanted something else. So she would go back to her practice make perfect and that most secret of words and most profane when coupled with another. Mother and cunt. In their opposition the two words — one resonant with safety and comfort, the other harsh, defiant and threatening — were locked together irrevocably. The power of this combination, made greater by the secret nature of it made her feel light-headed even faint at times.

*fiction*

*by*

**MARLENE**

**NOURBESE**

**PHILIP**

*paintings*

*by*

*Buseje*

*Bailey*



Before moving to the city Miranda had never heard "the word" before. No one told her what it meant. No one had to. From the first day she heard it, felt it sear her ears, spindly-legged and innocent as she was coming fresh from the country, she knew it was bad. Bad bad.

Until then totee was the worst word she had known, but it was child bad. Its badness existed only in the world of children when you could laugh at a boy — only boys had totees — and say, "look, look, I see he totee," and the girls would giggle and scream and laugh and run away leaving the boy shame for having a totee. Except Clarence. He just took his for granted. Clarence was her cousin who played marbles in the hot sun with her and her brothers and sisters for hours on end under the guinep tree and let her play with his balls while they stood waiting their turn.

Every time Clarence stooped to pitch he was facing Miranda — looking back on it that's the way it seemed to her. Her eyes would drop to the crotch of his pants where the stretching, straining cotton threads struggled to hold the seams together, her gaze riveted by what she feared and expected to happen. Suddenly there it was — she let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding — his little worm, his totee hanging out. Totee a soft word with none of the edges of these new words. He let her touch it sometimes, his totee, and the soft warm snuggly sacs behind it.

She had had no words for them — he just had them. Balls would come later. In the hot hot sun, waiting their turn to pitch their marbles, he would stand patiently while she crept her hand up his short khaki pants to his totee and then to the cool yet warm squishy things, her fingers moving and squishing them around — doing the same things that her tongue now did with these new words she was learning — exploring the limits of her world and, therefore, of difference.

Miranda and Clarence had never done anything more than that. He, in fact, did nothing, a willing subject to her inquiry and always in public. Her brothers and sisters must have known what she was doing, but in that sometimes inexplicable and implacable silence of childhood, no one said anything to her or to her mother. There had been no secrecy to her exploration, and they felt no need to swear

themselves to secrecy about something that was no secret. There was consequently nothing to tell.

The words she now explored were, however, adult-bad, big-people bad and secrecy was the screen behind which she now travelled into their newness. Secrecy was what she needed to explore them; and secrecy was the key to why these words were so bad. She had only to look at her mother's face to know they were bad — the way she shut down her eyes and her whole face at the sound of these words, particularly the one that referred to her — to all mothers.

This word had to do with women, all women. That much Miranda was sure of. And weren't all women mothers? Maybe only mothers had cunts because that was the only way she had ever heard it used. Never your sister's cunt, or your grandmother's cunt. Only your mother's cunt. And she had wanted both to cover her ears and stretch them wide to take in the sound of these words. Would she have a cunt when she grew up? She didn't dare ask her mother. Did she have one now? Was it something that came with having children? Once left on her own she got a mirror to explore exactly where she knew the word referred to — except she wasn't a mother — not yet anyway. As she explored she said the word soft soft to herself, mouthing it, mashing it between her teeth, tasting it, whispering it — looking to see if she changed as she said it.

In her house there was no word for what Miranda explored with her fingers. Baby girls had pat-a-cakes, or muckunzes or pums pums. As you grew older, the safety of those soft domestic words disappeared leaving behind a thing unnamed, referred to only by the neutral pronoun: "Have you washed IT yet?" Or, sometimes, "Have you washed yourself yet?" She knew full well that the self referred to was not the whole self, but only that tiny part of the self that somehow became your entire self. If you were a woman. Until it became a mother's cunt — harsh, jagged, the words intended to cut to the quick the man to whom it was aimed.

Lips would curl savagely around the words, "Your" shape the words with a blunt and rough-hewn style replacing the "t" and "h" with a double "d," "mudder," only to let fly the deadly missiles that home in and explode — "Yuh mudder cunt," in the man's face, dripping the

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bitter sweet sticky mess all over him. Miranda had seen grown men grow murderous at this insult. She had seen her brother come home in tears because of this.

It was only men she had heard saying these words. Did women curse it too, or was it only a male curse? And what did women say — "You father's prick?" Somehow it didn't sound as bad as mother's cunt. She knew all the words now and cock or father's cock just didn't count if you really wanted to curse. Put together a word like sucker to make cock-sucker the word became really bad, but it didn't, at least in her books, come close in badness to "the word."

The exploration of forbidden words was always always in the practice makes perfect of secret places — at night in bed with the sheets pulled up tight tight over her head; in the bathroom under cover of the shower's noise, or if she was home alone, in front of the big, round mirror in her mother's bedroom. Her mother and father shared the room but Miranda always thought of it as her mother's room — it smelt like her, carried the imprint of her order. The big obzoky bed took up most of the smallness of the shabby room; in the daytime, with its dark wood shiny with the high gleam of regular Saturday polishings it seemed not to belong — did not quite fit — but at nighttime when hurricane season came round, or during earthquake time, it was the safest place to curl the body round sister or brother or mother, its wide expanse like some ballasted haven among the shaking and the lightning and the thunder and her mother's voice no longer forbidding but soothing and comforting at each tremor or flash or roll. Miranda now pranced up and down the hard mattress feeling boldface and nervous. She watched herself in the mirror as she formed the words — excitement balancing risk, like playing with matches under the house, knowing it was worth the flogging she might get if she were caught there. To practice make perfect forbidden words in forbidden spaces...

In this new country — for that was how she saw her move to the city, even the air felt and smelt different. Where before there were no spaces or places she could not enter, where before everything was allowed and permitted, now the forbidden was the usual: forbidden places, especially for girls, forbidden books, forbidden people, forbidden words, forbidden thoughts and yet what was forbidden was all the more clear to her because it was forbidden. The forbidden had come to life in new and unusual ways in this new place.

For a while Miranda envied her new friend — nothing was forbidden him. Miranda's eyes would follow his sure and insolent swagger, trail each movement of his walk — it was all the more brutal to her for its casualness and confirmed his indifference to all that Miranda could not ignore. His ignorance of the forbidden was absolute. And she could feel her thin body vibrate with the energy of want — so keen was her desire for this state at times. Then something happened that made her switch her loyalties once formed and in making this switch she felt that she had, somehow, betrayed her friend. But it was a war, wasn't it, she told herself as she hurried to school one day arguing with herself, and you had to take sides.

Pomona Adams was a large and beautiful brown-skinned woman. Miranda was impressed. Very impressed with Pomona — with all things about Pomona — her size: she was close to six feet with full shapely breasts — the kind Miranda wanted — wore high heels all the time and had the largest behind Miranda had ever seen. But more than anything else what Miranda was impressed with was Pomona's ability to curse. Miranda was intrigued by how Pomona, her plump arms resting on her window sill, could casually carry on a conversation with her neighbour, pause mid-sentence, calmly tell her son to stop kicking the arse out of his shoes, turn back to her neighbour and continue her conversation as if nothing had happened. Miranda was entranced by the way Pomona could combine words when she cursed — words that she, Miranda, would never have dreamt of putting together, like arse and shoe. Under the pretext of doing homework she would often try to parse the use of certain words she had heard Pomona using — trying hard to understand the context. She was not very successful, for while arse was a noun, shoes did not have arses, yet she knew what Pomona had meant... she shrugged her bony shoulders and gave up in frustration after a while. She was young, but she recognised artistry when she heard it and she knew that if ever there was a cursing contest,

Pomona would win hands down and she, Miranda, would be there cheering her on.

Pomona, Miranda saw, had powerful words too and she used them as if none were forbidden, as if she had the right to use them all — the good *and* the bad. And something about the way Pomona walked made Miranda suspect that Pomona's words, especially the bad ones, and the way she used them were connected with her body. She used her words like she walked, with a prideful determination that matched her size. You couldn't even call what Pomona did walking, Miranda thought as she watched Pomona mashing the ground as if she owned it and knew that she owned it — each step was merely intended to confirm that ownership. The proof of this connection between Pomona's body and her words came early one morning several weeks after Miranda had moved to the city and while she was struggling to understand this new badness that was all around her.

Pomona and one of her neighbours hadn't talked for several months, they just threw words at each other — this Miranda only found out by listening to her parents' conversations. When Pomona and Sybil stopped speaking to each other their children did too. The men, like men, pretended to be above it all, and would nod to each other. To go out Pomona had to pass Sybil's house, so almost every day as Pomona passed by, Pomona and Sybil would be throwing words at each other under their breath so that the other one wouldn't hear, but know something was said, or just over their breath so that the other one did hear. Miranda never found out what Sybil said to Pomona on this particular morning but Pomona's response was the reason why she switched allegiances. She saw Pomona lift one of her solid arms, grab the flesh on the underside of her upper arm and say, "Look, see here, this is flesh!" She flung her challenge at Sybil who was by no means a small woman, but certainly smaller than Pomona. As if this was not enough Pomona turned her back to her opponent and with two hands flung her skirt up and up over her behind; down, down and still further down came Pomona's panties, her hands swift and sure with the choreography of pride. "Look, you want to see flesh, this, this is flesh!" And there for all the world who cared to look and Miranda was Pomona's fat backside exposed to the sweet morning air as she grabbed a handful of her brown flesh to demonstrate the proof of its existence. Proud and in the brown amplitude of her flesh, unashamed of her size or her words, any of her words, particularly the bad ones that now, after the unmatched challenge of her flesh, issued forth from her round pretty mouth, Pomona threw her words in her neighbour's face and made a stand for truth — the truth of flesh and bad words. "Come in here now!" Miranda's mother's voice banished her from the forbidden and the desired — to be bad — to use bad words — to make them good perhaps, though she liked the power that badness gave them.

Once again in front of the mirror in her mother's bedroom, the house empty, Miranda throws up her skirt exposing her bony bottom to the mirror. "Yes, yes, this is flesh," gripping her arm, tightly muscled with youth. "Oh, hell!" Disappointed she flops on the bed. "To have a behind — no an arse like that," she says out loud — "something you could grab on to." She longed for flesh on her arms or breasts like Pomona. The person she now most wanted to be like was Pomona. In the dark she told herself that she didn't so much want to be like Pomona Adams as to curse like her. She wasn't sure if there was a difference. Practice makes perfect Miranda reminds herself once again and stands on to the bed now, hoping that the mattress would give her the sort of rocking majestic walk of Pomona; she starts to work at her words again, trying hard to get the right inflection, the right sneer. Women curse too — she knew that now. Pomona had taught her that. She had even heard one say "the word," the one that made men cry, the mother's curse. It wasn't only men that used it, but only men cried or got really angry at it. The women didn't carry on like the men did at the mother's curse. Why that was she hadn't figured out. Not yet anyway.

As long as she continued to practise in secret Miranda felt uninitiated into the world of the forbidden. And her initiation she felt, had to be a public one — a speaking of at least one of these words in the presence of others. She picked one — shit — knowing she was a cow-

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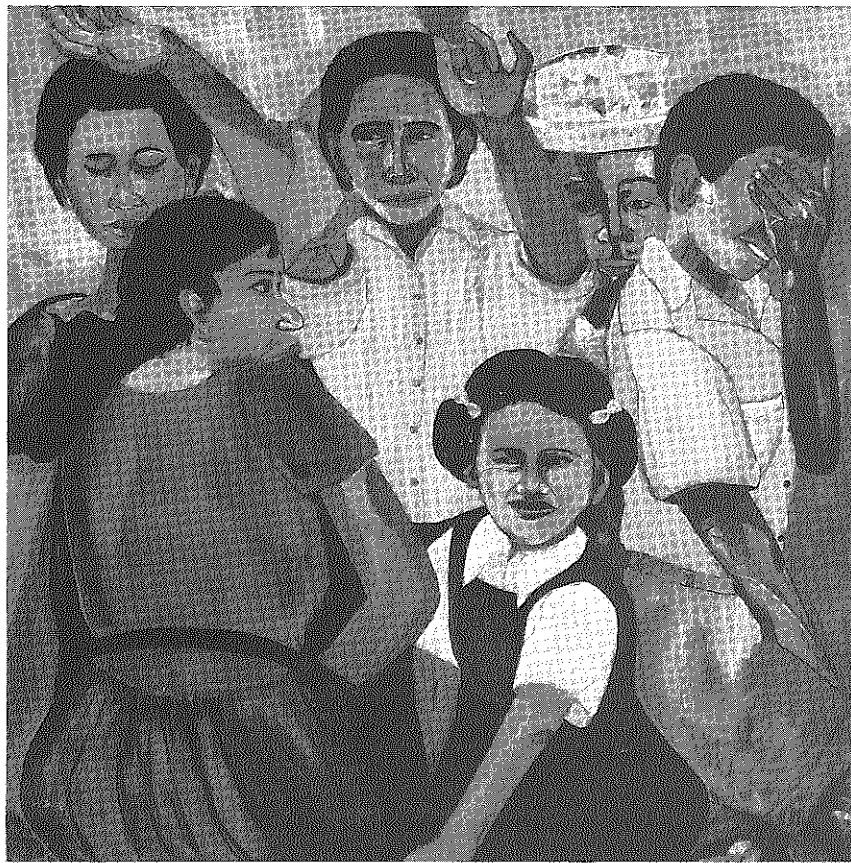
ard for choosing one of the least bad. Plotting and practising to make perfect in public, she rehearsed all her words tasting them secretly as you can only words. In the secret spaces of her mouth she spun, unspun and respun with a loving tongue a new language, the language of badness. And her testing and retesting of these words became a fuguig against and with the words of her mother and father.

"But he say massa day done, and that all the children going to have a free education." Miranda didn't so much listen — these conversations went on almost every night — as she was aware of the rising and falling voices drifting in from the front porch to where she sat preparing for the examination that would give her a chance to enter yet another forbidden world. Her parents called it a better education. She heard the voices rise and fall with the rhythm of passion and excitement which strengthened the already rhythmic language. "Yes, but he not going far enough, England and America still going control the economy." The cadenced voices reflect the trajectory, the rise

and fall of empire. The deep bass of her father's voice, her mother's higher softer tones throw back and forth between them words like politics and freedom, pulling a thread here, a strand there, trying hard to twist and braid these hard words into dreams for their children — a good job in the civil service perhaps — they explore the furthest limits of their world — maybe, even a doctor! As they talked, Miranda felt rather than heard the urgency behind her parents' words, words which they had stoked and fired into life and now would not let die, words which under the lash and caress of their tongues now transformed themselves — slavery into freedom, nigger into human. Miranda heard and felt all this, she knew that like her they were entering forbidden spaces, naming now what they had only dared to dream of before. In secret. But Miranda also knew they would never see how her exploration of bad words was anything else but an expression of vice — proof of her badness. So she smiled a knowing smile to herself and continued working.

Sunday. That was the day Miranda chose for her initiation. She had woken up at cock-crow and knew that that was the day, but when it was to be she couldn't tell. It would just happen when it was time she thought. After church and the heavy Sunday lunch, and still dressed in their Sunday best, her mother had taken them all to a neighbour's for a visit. There the two women and the children had all sat stiffly drinking sweet drinks on the front porch before the adults released them to play in the front yard while they talked.

Like her favourite cowboy shoot-out scenes from Saturday matinees where the good guy, usually Roy Rogers or Gene Autry — dressed in white — meets the bad guy dressed all in black and shoots it out, Miranda replayed the scene in her mind for many months, even years after. She was standing close to the top step about to jump all the way down to the bottom — some six or so steps — when someone, she couldn't tell who it was since the push came from behind, pushed her off. She never found out who it was, she never cared enough. Like the morning "the word" had just popped out over the Wapsey River, she didn't will them, the words just came, "Oh shit!" The release was almost too much to bear, and before she knew what she was doing, before she could savour the delight and pride she felt, she heard herself, "Oh fucking, fucking shit!" She saw the shock on everyone's face and felt a rush of excitement. One or two of the other children even had their



hands over their mouths as if they themselves had said the words, and that made her want to laugh out loud. Her mother's face was serious — like a bull she remembered thinking. Maybe she added that thought later — as time went on Miranda did have a tendency to embellish the memory. Her mother's full eyes that could, in public, cow them into quiet, now gazed at Miranda commanding her to silence. As if she were rushing toward a cliff in preparation for leaping off and flying, Miranda saw it all, and knew she couldn't stop or she would fall and not fly. She saw the licking that her father would give her with the thick leather strap that lay coiled in the bottom of the bureau like some lifeless but still threatening snake — there was a rumour that it had been soaked in pee to make it sting more; she saw the washing out of her mouth that her mother would carry out. But she also saw Pomona Adams with her shapely breasts and large backside mashing the ground — proudly — and thought of her using her words and her body just the way she wanted to, and Miranda smiled

and rushed to embrace the unembraceable, the forbidden: "And your mother's cunt!" She slung her mouth around the words and repeated them all again to no one in particular, but with a bravado and a gauche sureness which was sureness all the same, and an understanding way beyond her years. She had practised to make perfect and she had come close to perfection that Sunday afternoon. She understood badness now and that was what mattered.

The words had not stained her mouth — even in this public uttering. The moist, wet, inner pink space of her mouth had become a tender womb to bad words, any words — mother's cunts, pricks, dicks — the words were embedded deep inside Miranda filling up all the secret places and spaces created by the forbidden. Like Chaucer's male characters the words had plumbed her depths — mother's cunts and all. No one, not even the guardian of space and words, her mother, could take them or any of her words from her. They're all mine now, Miranda thought as she lay in bed, remembering how she had parted and her forehead had broken out in sweat after she was done swearing. "But see here," her mother's friend had said, "she not even done grow yet and she want to be woman." Miranda's eyes had locked with her mother's — behind the hardness of the glare she could faintly recognise the hurt — she had shamed her in public, and for that she was sorry, but not for saying the words. Her fingers now gently touched the raised weals on her arms and legs from the flogging her father had given her. They were the painful proof of her allegiance with Pomona Adams. And the truth. There was a certain truth in those words, she knew that now; it was that truth that made some people dislike them so — like men crying at the mother's curse. Having uttered them Miranda now felt that she had made the words good, especially the mother's curse, but she now wanted very much to keep the power of their badness. And how was she to do that — make them good yet keep them bad?

On that thought Miranda fell asleep. ■

*Marlene Nourbese Philip, a writer who lives in Toronto, was awarded the 1988 Casa de las Americas Prize for Poetry in English for her collection, She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, which has been published recently by Ragweed. Her novel, Harriet's Daughter, published by The Women's Press in 1988 was shortlisted for the 1989 Toronto Book Awards.*

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