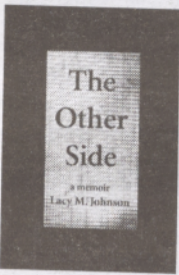


# From pole dancer to Ph.D.: one woman's empowering memoir

BY JOE MARTIN  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



The Other Side:  
A Memoir by Lacy  
M. Johnson

Early in her life, author Lacy M. Johnson was made aware of her good looks. When she was only 7 years old, her mother entered her lovely blonde daughter into a beauty pageant: "In the pictures, I don't look like a child of 7. I walk in that sashaying pageantry way I've learned from watching Miss America on television — I've practiced in the hallway of our house for hours, for days — back and forth across the stage, back and forth in front of the audience, the judges, all of them veiled in shadow, only their smiles visible." She blossoms into a young woman with abundant physical charms. Compliments and admiring glances came her way easily. Of such routine attention Johnson admits, "I would give anything to keep getting it."

This captivating memoir is as troubling as it is compelling. In "The Other Side," Johnson relates the wrenching story of her victimization by an older man with whom she willingly became involved. Although she is intelligent and capable of reaching out to friends and family for help, Johnson instead endured spiraling verbal and physical abuse in isolation. Later asked by a therapist if she ever told anybody about the twisted travail as it was unfolding, Johnson admits: "No, not ever... I still don't understand it myself."

The only real name in the book is Johnson's. Every other person in this collage of fragmentary recollections and vignettes is designated "My Older Sister," "My Good Friend," "The Detective," "The Man I Live With" and so on. This device tends to enhance the focus on Johnson herself while conveying the sense of disconnection she experiences in the confused course of her uncertain journey. A rebellious small-town youth, Johnson leaves home as she enters her young womanhood. Residing in a larger university town she attends classes and works "one crappy job or another." She also engages in unprotected sex and excessive drug and alcohol use.

Her attractive appearance allows Johnson an effortless entrée into all kinds of situations. For a time, she works as a stripper to pay her tuition: "In many ways, it's the kind of job a girl like me has spent her whole life training for: there's the makeup and the costume and the hair, there's the stage and the way of coiling and uncoiling my body until at least one man wants to fuck me enough that he gives me all his money." She will leave that job, but the experience follows the risky pattern of Johnson's young life. That pattern would eventually lead to her gruesome brush with death at the hands of a lover, an urbane, multilingual man who turns out to be a cruel bastard.

Growing up, Johnson's family was composed of her mother, father, herself and two sisters — one older, one younger. Her parents had a loveless marriage and bickered frequently. While she was still in high school, her father discovered a notebook in the basement. It was a journal replete with Johnson's jottings of sexual escapades, real or imagined. As recounted in this memoir, he gives the notebook to his wife who then grills her daughter about its graphic contents. Johnson tells her mother, "It's fiction, Mom. My way of dealing." Though shaken by the journal's contents her mother accepts Johnson's explanation. She wants to believe that her teen is still a virgin. Johnson did not reveal to her mother — or to anyone else, apparently — that sometime during the previous year she had been "raped by a drunk boy in my friend's basement."

Johnson is 19 when she enrolls in a Spanish class. The instructor is a handsome fellow who chats with her at various opportunities. He makes it evident that his interest goes beyond academics. He is exactly twice her age. This does not deter Johnson who in time leaves her boyfriend, a hard-drinking biker, and moves in with her teacher. She writes: "It's sudden and it's not exactly about sex, though I give him whatever he wants, whenever he wants it... I want him to love me." Her new lover's

domineering side appears quickly. Any noncompliance on her part is met with violence: "He holds me down while I scream and beg him to stop. I cry out in real pain. This is how he sees me: a mirror that reflects his power always."

Johnson should fly out the door at the first opportunity. But she doesn't. It is some time before she finally leaves the abusive relationship. And in the most horrific way, Johnson will find that her tribulation does not end there.

In a recent interview, Johnson states: "When I was younger, before the kidnapping even, I didn't realize how much my appearance participated in a much larger economy of image and desire. I wanted people to think I was beautiful and crafted my appearance accordingly. Now I realize the extent to which women are trained to value themselves on how much we are desired by men and how this training is part of a larger culture that demeans women as a general rule. Over time I've stopped offering to the world an image of myself that I think it wants to see and instead offer the only one I want to show, which is not an image of beauty but of strength."

Johnson now holds a Ph.D. in literature. She is married to a decent man. She is a mother of two children. She is an able and successful writer. Given the turmoil of her younger days, she is most fortunate. Indeed, she is lucky to be alive. And her memoir is an enticing and worthwhile read.

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In a recent interview, Lacey Johnson (above) states: "When I was younger, before the kidnapping even, I didn't realize how much my appearance participated in a much larger economy of image and desire."

## Broken Angels

By Athena Street

When children are born they're still full of the light  
We'd do anything for them, starve, steal or fright  
Somewhere inside we recognize God  
They make us feel perfect although we are flawed.

So what happens next? Do we teach them to grow?  
Not at all, we demand that they never let go  
Don't feel your feelings or try anything new  
Don't do anything that the Joneses won't do

We shatter their faith & we steal their belief  
We murder their heroes & we insult their grief  
There's really no mage with a reindeer & sleigh  
The unicorns are dead & the elves gone away

Don't use your left hand. Don't dye your hair pink  
If you can't just be normal then try not to think  
Don't love anybody who lacks the right part  
Be creative, but make sure we preview your art

Coming of age means losing your wings  
It means putting away all the magical things  
But somehow we wonder why we're all depressed  
It's cuz the divine deep inside's been suppressed

But I'm not so broken I'm drawn to the light  
I look for the others who glow in the night  
There aren't very many, it's something to grieve  
But I share of my fare & I still believe.

# I AM NOT A POET

15 YEARS OF Street Roots Poetry & Art

## Shipwrecked

by Morgan W. Brown

no longer adrift  
creeping white  
capped waves  
above a heavenly  
flowing ocean  
current of blue  
upon a state  
landlocked

beyond despair  
swimming sorrow  
faith long vanquished  
comes the morrow  
empty further tears  
amidst the mist  
hope rises still

welcoming spring  
late in arriving  
mother earth sighs  
deeply breathing  
dawn's birth of dew



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