

**Secret Bodies:
The Murder of Gwen Araujo**

Rolan Gregg

I.

Killers love Diet Coke[®]. They love to drink it while they laugh and mingle during 15-minute recesses at their murder trials. Killers also like priests. Priests with simple, fun names like Bud. Diet Cokes and Pastor Buds are good to have on hand when being convicted of murder with a hate-crime enhancement. Grandpas dressed like cowboys are great, too. Grandpas with shiny belt buckles and boots that click against cold courthouse tiles. Grandpa, Pastor Bud, and a killer were the first people I met from Newark.

In a few minutes, this killer will finish his soda and return to the stand as grandpa and Pastor Bud sit with an empty chair between them. The killer will grow drowsy from retelling the story of how he watched a young woman get kicked, punched, and choked by his two male friends—how she was beaten with an iron skillet and a can of soup, begged for her life, smashed with a shovel, and strangled with a rope. He will yawn as he says he didn't actually see the final breaths strangled out of her. He will say it was okay to beat her because they were deceived. He will refer to the young woman as "it." The jury will find him not guilty.

Newark, California. It's not the Newark where I was at the time. Newark, New Jersey, the place that ruined egg salad sandwiches. But 2,489 miles as crows tend to fly. West. New-

ark, California, is a loop town. Every day people loop out of the city for money, and then they loop back to their bedrooms. A 35-foot piece of rope can make $8\frac{3}{4}$ loops. Everything always comes back to the beginning. As if nothing actually happened. Your day remains a secret, one covered by 1.3 million square feet of retail space, a 20-screen movie theater to stare at before going to bed, a bedroom community. Once inside the bedroom, the community falls asleep. Life ends. We call this a commuter town. Yet in another part of Newark, there is a tract house still awake.

In the tract house three men are playing dominoes, drinking beer, smoking doobies. This is what they do. Then each loops out to his father's drywall business, mails his child-support check from his mother's house. Sometimes they kill women, then eat Egg Muffins® and unwind with a smoke.

"And while Gwen was being murdered inside you didn't hear anything?"

"No."

"While Gwen was being killed you just stood outside and smoked a cigarette?"

"Yes."

"Just enjoying a beautiful Newark evening."¹

Gwen Amber Rose Araujo was 17 years old when she was killed. Walking down the street, getting some fresh air. Sipping a cold beer. She has a fight with her boyfriend. Two men are headed to a pool hall. Women wait for them. They forget about the women at the pool hall. They convince Gwen to get into their car, assuring her they are good guys from Newark. They go to the tract house but this will not be the night she dies. These good guys from Newark will first befriend her. They invite her back often.

These guys from Newark share similar qualities. One killer has a girlfriend. He will call her a stupid bitch and threaten to smack her. The girlfriend's father will testify that his daughter can be difficult and may have deserved it. Another killer will admit to being more concerned about the blood staining the carpet than Gwen dead on the garage floor. The remaining killer will admit to having previous intimate relations with a transgender woman in San Francisco. It will become a joke around the domino table. He will say, under oath, that it did not embarrass him. His hands will be the last around Gwen's throat.

II.

My body is different from the one I was assigned at birth. I won't do some things with it. I won't mention them either. On Tuesdays I always eat dinner with Sweetie O'Leary, a

sex worker and friend. We speak over soy sauce and kitchen soap. She says it's not over; it's just beginning. I think she's talking about pink eye. But she's talking about getting hog-tied. Hog-tied for cash. With the cash she'll take her mother to Maui and tell her she gets hog-tied for money. She sells her eggs, too, one by one. She tries to sell some to me. I tell her I have my own, but I inject weekly hormones. This has made my eggs valueless and me sterile. They're just sitting in my gut, like fruit in a cellar.

Gwen doesn't die in a cellar. She dies on the floor of a garage. She won't do some things. Things she can't mention now. Often Gwen was invited back to Newark's night owl tract house. She liked two of the men. On different occasions, at different times, they kiss, touch, have sex. They like her, but now the men corner her in a bathroom in Newark. It may have smelled of seashells or coconut coolers. The hairiest of the men she had sex with takes her in there. He wants to see what's down her pants.

Gwen may have panicked amongst the seashells. I often panic. Different bodies often carry anxiety through the cracks in gender expectations. Bathrooms, sexual acts, and government forms require a certain degree of quick thinking, explaining, even escape plans. Neither she nor I transpanic. The man in the bathroom will transpanic. They all will claim transpanic: It was what she was wearing. It was what she called herself. It was how she lived. It was a deception. "This crime didn't occur because (*insert killer number 1*) had a bias. It happened because of the discovery of what (*remove Gwen's birth name and insert Gwen Amber Rose Araujo*) had done," said the killer's attorney. "This is a case that tells a story about... the tragic results when that deception and betrayal were discovered."² The killers were deceived. Brought to a place that makes them cry for their lost sexuality. Cry for the blood that is so difficult to get out of carpets. But not before a blowjob.

"Did it feel good?"

"Yes."

"Did you say, 'That feels good, but I still need to know?'"

"Did you say, 'Thank you, but I still need an answer?'"³

I read a book that states panic defenses are fueled by a sweeping social fear.

A woman at the party helps in the seashell bathroom. She helps get down Gwen's pants. Later she will comfort killer number 2: "I put my hands on his shoulder and said, 'This is not your fault. You were a football player.'"⁴

What's down Gwen's pants? What's down her pants is

what girls are made of. The girl she has been since she was 14 years old. I won't mention her birth name, as do the newspapers repeatedly. I will mention her grandma's buttery yellow slacks and lilac blouses. Her mother rubbing counterclockwise on pregnant bellies. Purple sparkle pens writing Gwen Amber Rose Araujo over and over. The last thing she says is in a tract house in Newark: "Please don't kill me. I have a family." This family attends the trial every day, and when the jury hangs itself, they also attend every day of the retrial. More than three years of living in those moments in autumn 2002. A punch through her face cracks the plaster behind her head. Her transgender face splits. A 35-foot piece of rope is looped.

III.

Gwen told them what she was. A woman. They feel a sharp threat bearing down. It's a party. A public space. Witnesses to watch them witness. Their immediate narrative formulates their own identity. Queer crimes against normal bodies. The worst of the worst. First it was just sex. Then it was reverse rape.

"You're not a homo, now you are."

"That's terrible."

"People will see that's wrong."⁵

These men and their lawyers talk about rape. The men believed they were raped. Raped by a gay man. The trial, the media, and the people from the party where Gwen was killed will never identify her as a woman. We must continue to go back to their gaze. Even when giant photos of Gwen are hung in the courtroom to get the jury to visualize a woman, we must still return to a heterosexual idea of normalcy. It is a normalcy of genitals, bodies, sexual acts, and self-identification. We are asked, unapologetically, to look at Gwen's life from a place as far removed from the transgender identity as possible. This is a view that displaces a queer body into the margins of her murder trial and comforts the public identities of three heterosexual men.

IV.

I am transgender. I go out at night. I often stab a single orange with a tiny knife. Impaled and left next to a picture of an avatar from 1975. It is an act I started when I was 16. It's rooted in a poem about Kwan Yin. I hope this will take me safely through the night.

"Dude, did she have a weapon?"

"Dude, I'd feel the same as you, man."

"You know, those (transgender) prostitutes—they're always packing—did she have a knife, anything? Was it self-defense? You can tell me."⁶

Institutions click like compasses. Offering us direction if we fear we have lost our social structure. Detective Lavano of the Newark Police Department is there for us: "Anybody would understand the anger and rage one would feel if they discovered the person they were physically intimate with had lied about their true gender."⁷ I want to be physically intimate with Detective Lavano. I want to know if his public body is the same as his private identity. I will have to be physically intimate with Detective Lavano. According to Newark, true identities emerge only when naked and under good lighting. What you say and how you feel about your privates and your publics is irrelevant.

My phone works only when my head is out the window. Open the window and stick my head out onto 16th Street. It's the *New York Times* reporter. She's home in bed. Writing a story about the in-betweens. Those living. She asks what it's all about. I tell her everything. I wave to Mackey passing underneath my head. The reporter is fascinated. She tells me she could never be transgender, that her bladder is too small. The next day Mabel will see the article. She will mail it to the president of my school. He will not respond.

A medical examiner describes a transgender murder in Boston. The words "throttling for eight minutes" are used. Ten years ago. Chanelle Pickett was a 23-year-old woman. She went home from a nightclub with William Palmer. They had sex. Chanelle was then severely beaten and choked to death. Palmer claimed that he panicked when he discovered that Chanelle was transgender. The jury agreed about this panic. It was valid and so was the strangulation. William Palmer was found not guilty of murder. He received a two-and-a-half-year sentence. The crime was called assault.⁸

August 2004, Joel Robles, a transwoman, is stabbed 20 times. Her killer jumps out the window. He is naked and walking away when the cops find him. He claims he had transpanic when he discovered Robles was transgender. The Fresno district attorney accepts this plea. The act of killing this transwoman is worth three years in prison and the scissors he used for stabbing her to death will get him another year. Her life is worth four scissors.⁹

Transpanic derives from gay panic. While they are not legal defenses, they can get a killer off the sharpest hook. They are triggers that water down the value of a person's life. Death isn't so severe because the victim was so abnormal. A reasonable person can't be held solely responsible for encountering such a bizarre identity. It is partially the fault of the transgender person for being transgender in the first place.

V.

Lately I've been sleeping with earplugs. Bright pink ear plugs that slide like slugs into my canals. It almost hurts. Like it has to hurt to be quiet. It will hurt to be quiet. Secrets are quiet. The dirt in the Sierra foothills is quiet. Looped up, Gwen is dead in the garage. It is a party. Everyone is watching. They will dump her in that quiet dirt.

"After what she had done to me, I wanted her to shut the fuck up."¹⁰ He grabs her by the throat and pins her against the wall. It becomes important to silence her. Keeping Gwen quiet will begin the process of repairing the cracks between their public and private lives. Propped on the couch and gagged, she is still conscious and most likely aware that she will die in Newark tonight.

A series of beatings begins. Gwen is tiny. Beautiful, thin, feminine. The killers are particularly large. Football players. They swing their giant meat hooks. Cracking and snapping. There is a frying pan. That pounds on Gwen's head. A shovel. That breaks through Gwen's head. A can of soup that bounces off Gwen's head. Kicks. Gags. Chokes. Strangled with looped rope.

Deception is a trick. Gwen wasn't a trick. Gwen didn't trick for cash or companions. Gwen was a disruption. She disrupted their public identity. Their identity hinged on a collective belief. Everyone at the public party needed to believe in his or her normal body. Their impenetrable heterosexuality. The implied perception that was falsely attributed to Gwen must not clash with the monoculture of their environment. Admitting intimacy with a queer body would force them to publicly witness a shift in their social narrative. It was a party; the story would spread.

VI.

Cargill Salt, manufacturers of a highly processed salt seasoning, operates a refinery in Newark. If you circle the town enough times to get lost on the streets that relentlessly blend into one another, you can spot the white mounds. The salt is mined from its home in the San Francisco Bay and undergoes a lengthy process to detach it from any remnants of its actual self. The crystals are washed in a salty brine mixture, then dissolved and reconstructed. This process is believed to rid the salt of any traces of the sea, the place where it formed. The result is a 99.9-percent sodium chloride creation. This is as pure as natural salt can be. The salt is kept in large mounds that can reach over 60 feet high. After this complete cleansing-until-purity process, the salt is shipped out of Newark.

One of the killers is under the assumption that Gwen will be brought back. To the place in Newark where they often picked her up. Drop her body on the corner. The simple act of dropping her off back at the beginning. A backward loop to a more manageable place. A safe place of drywall and Diet Cokes. The brotherly bond of the dominoes table. A place where jokes about sleeping with transgender women circulate with a distance that does not enter Newark. These shared private events occur in a space that delays their admittance into public knowledge.

The other killer finishes tying the rope and announces that they must take her outside of Newark. It wouldn't be enough to go back to the beginning. This whole situation must be taken out of Newark.

They drive. Dig a dirt grave. Dump Gwen in the dirt. The killers drive home. They go to a McDonald's drive-up window. They return the shovels to their fathers' sheds. They take a nap. They are not gay. There is no tranny. They will go to another house party that night. They don't want to appear any different than before they met Gwen. It's Friday night in Newark, Newark, California, "The Best Kept Secret in the Bay Area."¹¹

1. From personal records during murder trial of Gwen Araujo, summer 2005.
2. Vicki Haddock, SF Gate, May 16, 2004
3. Community United Against Violence (CUAV), Gwen Araujo trial updates, www.cuav.org
4. Vicki Haddock, SF Gate
5. From personal records during murder trial of Gwen Araujo
6. Taped conversation of the Newark Police Department during defendant's interrogation
7. *ibid*
8. Gwendolyn Anne Smith, PlanetOut.com News and Politics, September 14, 2005
9. Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg, Washington Blade, Washington Blade.com, September 2, 2005, "Man Gets Four Years for Killing Trans Woman"
10. *Bay Area Reporter*, Vol. 35, No. 34, August 25, 2005
11. Newark town motto, Newark Chamber of Commerce, <http://www.newark-chamber.com/>

