

Eye of the Beholder

by David Raney

Call me male-ish. According to cultural assumptions, men are supposed to like guns, but I'm not really a gun guy. As a boy I wheedled a BB gun for Christmas with the solemn vow not to shoot birds, which I did at the first opportunity. "You'll shoot your eye out" runs the refrain from the movie *Christmas Story*, and at least I didn't do that. But I shot out a bird's. Stalking the wild sparrow in our back yard, I missed innumerable times before chance brought down a luckless thing from our birch tree, a bead of blood vividly welling where its eye had been. I stood over it dumbfounded until a rap at the picture window startled me and I saw my brother pointing in the dramatic full-body pose we now refer to as *J'Accuse!* before running off to find my mother and bring down justice. It didn't surprise me when I later read that the last wild passenger pigeon, out of billions darkening pre-1900 American skies, was killed in Ohio by a boy with a BB gun.

Men are fascinated by cars, too, I'm told, and football and fixing things, and we're competitive sexbots, comparing conquests and notching headboards. I don't really qualify as "manly" on those counts either, though I can be adolescently competitive in the sports I care about. But testosterone levels aside, here's my question: Is it possible to connect with people first as humans, and only afterward as men and women? Unless we've taken monastic vows, we interact with each other all day, at work and play and school, shopping, dating. But sometimes it seems less interacting than circling: shy, cocky, avid, wary, desperate for attention, wishing we were invisible.

I've been interested in this *terra incognita* for the better part of my life, as we all have, but lately I've been thinking about a certain backwater of the territory that used to be called wolf whistling or catcalling, and now in our less poetic times is referred to as "street harassment." Consigned by cliché to certain neighborhoods, particularly to

wharves and construction sites, it's been treated for generations as a behavioral imperative issued with the sailor suit and hardhat.

Is it a behavioral imperative though? Whether sexual attitudes and behavior owe more to biology or culture, a debate that's far from over, this isn't 1965 after all. Surely gross misogyny is on the wane, like smoking, if only from the pressure of broad social disapproval. Even the word "catcalling" sounds like a *Mad Men* plot point. But it hasn't gone away, of course, as half-open eyes and ears will tell you.

I react to women, and if I were homosexual, I'd react to men. That's a biological imperative, not a behavioral one. No one, I think, wants us to stop noticing each other. I just don't react like the wolf in *Red Hot Riding Hood*. I've never offered a public assessment of a woman's body or suggested to a stranger what a fool she'd be not to avail herself of my outsized charms. This makes me a paragon of nothing, as I don't imagine my friends do it either. I know my father didn't. In any case, who does it is less interesting to me than why, and what it feels like. So I started asking women.

The problem was how to approach someone at a bus stop or coffee shop without sounding like the saddest pickup artist ever. ("Scuse me, just wondering, do guys hit on you all the time?") But I wanted to hear from more than friends or the internet — where, as you'd expect, treatments range from intellectual to comic to incendiary — so at the risk of being slapped or simply ignored, I ask.

What works best, after establishing that I'm a writer, is to ask women if they've lived somewhere else and noticed any differences in catcalling. I realize this begs the question, but no one has ever corrected me. Precisely zero women said they'd never been whistled at or otherwise harassed in public. My unscientific survey suggests it happens nearly everywhere, to pretty much all women, regardless of age, attire or weather.

Researchers have done some work in this field, though I was surprised to find how little of that research occurred until recently. The CDC reported in 2010 that worldwide seventy to ninety-nine percent of women experienced “non-contact unwanted sexual experiences.” In a 2008 study by StopStreetHarassment.com, nearly ninety percent of women said they’d experienced harassment by age nineteen, almost a quarter by age twelve. *Twelve*. Americans, incidentally, have no special claim on this ugly street theater: in one study more than eighty percent of women in both Egypt and Canada reported harassment, and in Yemen, where women typically go about modestly dressed or veiled, the figure is over ninety percent.

The women who have been kind enough to talk to me about their own experiences confirm these findings, as well as the appalling range of misbehavior that can accompany the hooting, whistling, and verbal vivisection. One woman was biking along a country road between grocery store and home when a man pulled up next to her, masturbating, then turned around and drove past again, clearly enjoying her fear. The women with whom I’ve spoken say this sort of thing started when they were eleven, twelve, fourteen, describing plenty of “Hey babys” and all manner of unwanted advances. One woman wrote, “It’s hard to explain how invasive it feels. I’ve had my entire house robbed twice, and it doesn’t even approach that hit-and-run feeling. It makes you wary; you shut down.”

Men, none of this will be news to your friend, girlfriend, daughter, sister, wife. But it was to me, and the more I listened, the more troubling it got. “Strangely enough,” one woman told me, “the college towns I grew up in were the worst, whereas during five years in Philadelphia, I can only recall one stray comment yelled from a car.” Others spoke differently of Philly, Atlanta, Chicago and every other city I heard about, with two women saying the opposite about college towns.

I’ve spent a good part of my life in university settings, and I think the reason I haven’t seen much of the cat or wolf isn’t that everyone’s so proper; I just haven’t seen it. I’m not the recipient, for one thing, but apparently, I’m also oblivious. As I spoke with

women, I was shocked at how ubiquitous such harassment is on campuses where I've worked. One woman told me she was repeatedly harassed by a university security guard; another filed a report on campus workers for leering at undergraduates. And it isn't only nineteen-year-olds in shorts; a middle-aged woman told me she'd been catcalled near the school while walking in the rain in a bulky raincoat, oversized hat, and umbrella: "I might as well have been wearing a tent." And then there's frat-boy behavior, an example being the section of Brown's campus that a woman told me she avoided because it was known for rows of guys holding score cards, like Olympic judges, as women walked by.

I'm not alone in my density. The discussion "How common is catcalling?" on the site Democratic Underground begins with a woman's six-month diary of strangers leering, making passes, and offering offensive comments regardless of weather or dress. A sympathetic reader commented, "Being male, this is not in the realm of my experience—neither as a receiver or a perp. Though I have witnessed catcalling of women on the street, it's not all that common in my neighborhood." Possibly, but I'm willing to bet it's more common than his experience would suggest.

What we dismiss in our density is the recognition that such behavior fosters fear in women. Not only are catcalls demeaning, reducing the individual and complete woman to a fraction of herself as a sexual object, when men leer and make suggestive comments, they see women only through male eyes. Few men have experienced how frequently unwanted advances escalate. Women are rightfully afraid of being pawed, stalked, or attacked, however innocuous men might find the leer or whistle. "Almost all women have a defensive strategy for walking alone," writes Jamie Golden in "Why Just Telling Men No Doesn't Necessarily Work," but "almost no men do." This seems to be true across cultures. "A young woman likes to feel attractive," one woman told me, "but I think women of all ages feel that implicit threat of physical peril, always."

Many men, I'm sure, would regard the fear induced by unwanted advances as ludicrous. Most women, I'm equally sure, would find it commonplace. Two women in a single week

of October 2015 were murdered after refusing to talk or give their phone number to a man. One was in Detroit, at a funeral of all things, the other on a street in Queens. Margaret Atwood writes that she once asked a male friend why men feel threatened by women. He told her, "They're afraid women will laugh at them." She asked a group of women the same question and they said, "We're afraid of being killed."

The wolf's defense is typically to claim that a whistle or call is a compliment. Deep down women like it; why the fuss? Innumerable articles and blog posts argue against this, their titles sufficient: "No, Dudes, It's Not Flattering"; "Your Catcalls Are Not a Compliment. *Ever.*" Even *Playboy* weighed in with a flowchart called "Dudes, It's Not Flattering", which concludes that precisely two circumstances make catcalling acceptable: "1) You've consensually agreed to shout sexually suggestive comments to each other in public; 2) She is literally a cat."

Yet in 2014 *New York Post* writer Doree Lewak caused a stir with an article titled "Hey ladies! Catcalls are flattering! Deal with it" in which she maintains that she loves all the attention from construction crews: "I'll never forget my first time... I was over the moon.... The mystique and machismo of manly construction workers have always made my heart beat a little faster—and made my sashay a little saucier. It's as primal as it gets."

Never mind that, as Lauren Bans noted in *GQ*, Lewak's editorial "reads like a drunk Carrie Bradshaw after a partial lobotomy." The point Lewak chooses to ignore is that she's decided to be pleased by a situation that might turn to violence, and frequently does. It's not everyone's option to disregard that fact, nor her place to instruct them how to feel.

This is why when male celebrities complain of being objectified (Robert Redford: "People have been so busy relating to how I look, it's a miracle I didn't become a self-conscious blob of protoplasm"), it's possible to think they're sincere without accepting that they really know what they're talking about. Any fear they associate with the

experience involves being professionally trivialized, not made to hate half of humanity for the rest of your life.

It's why I'll never really know what I'm talking about, either. In my only example of trading perspectives, I was biking one day and stopped for a water break. A van of teenagers rolled by, and one girl leaned out the window and whooped something about my butt in bike shorts, pretending to be enthused for the benefit of the guy driving and, I'm sure, for her own amusement. It wasn't about me—any male fifteen to fifty would have served—and there was no physical threat. But it didn't feel great, because that's what objectification is: being rendered interchangeable, a category.

The other reflexive defense of this behavior is that it's timeless, ineradicable, it's in our DNA. You hear this from men interviewed in the street, including one who let this drop (along with my jaw) in a video: "I understand, you know—I have five sisters. But it's just, like, a societal thing. It's the way things roll." To appeal to someone's mother or sister might seem a foolproof way to humanize the encounter. (Would you want someone to talk to your *daughter* that way?) But isn't that also objectifying, to say a woman is worthy of respect because she's somebody's something?

The behavior is certainly old, so I guess the excuses have to be. References to whistling at women date to at least 200 B.C., when the Roman playwright Plautus mentions a young woman who, "when she passes through the streets, all the men would look at her, leer, nod and wink and whistle." He has a father say this to his son, creepily enough, about a slave girl they both covet. But old isn't the same as natural—and what does that matter anyway? We tamp down or prohibit all kinds of things that are arguably natural. Evolutionarily speaking, indiscriminate rape is an efficient way to spread one's genes. Civilized people don't practice it. And there's the slippery slope problem: assaults and rape are worse than whistling, but are they categorically different or just on a continuum? If whistling is hard-wired, as some would have it, and thus a cousin of "real" violence, wouldn't rape be just as hard to eradicate, just as exempt from the attempt?

I hope not, because I enjoy connecting with people, not objects or opposites. Maybe I'm fooling myself and a sexual agenda lurks under all our veneers. But maybe not. I like giving directions to strangers, though I'm awful at it, and I even like seeing other people do it—both looking the same direction, arms outstretched like an invitation to dance. And I like eyes. While I can't look at the world through someone else's, I can look into them, and what I see there often saddens me.

Girls are taught early not to talk to strange men, not to make eye contact. That's what I see in women's eyes when they're alone. Asked what she does to protect herself from street harassment, a woman in Jessica Williams's *Late Show* segment on catcalling replies, "My normal response is to put on my bitch face." The other women nod. I pass them on the sidewalk, morning and evening, walking and running, in suits and dresses and gym clothes. Their eyes say *I've heard it before, asshole, or Go ahead and look—I'm not even here.*

Those expressions aren't haughty, just defensive or middle-distance vacant, born of long practice deflecting all the muttered invitations and "Damn, girls." Instead of thinking about the spring air or a project at work or a drink with friends, she's spending mental energy sorting men into a box (guys, jerks) like the one she's been in since middle school (tits, ass). Wouldn't it be nice to imagine a brighter world to breathe in, one where our fleeting chance of connection didn't come so freighted with fear?

I'll never know exactly what another person thinks or feels. I'm not even sure how well I understand myself. But half a life later, I know what that sparrow saw.



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