



Trace at 46

Author(s): Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

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TRACE AT 46

EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

1.

In middle age his bodily outline softens and fills in—partly, he supposes, with femaleness. Brooding over himself in his mother's bathroom, this strange month of her illness, gives him pause, and also pleasure. These adipose breasts, these accreting hips! Besides, his new way to spend hours of days—naked on the toilet, his thighs crossed, the penis that now except in full erection always feels vestigial, pressed out of sight between them—lets him write, daydream, or do something that feels like both. Letters to his wife, to different women—"Sweetie," he starts indeterminate, and then just writes. Distant cities (and, nearby, his mother's hospital) seem full of women who may be his, or him. Distant, they sprout (he thinks) *in* this gravid body. All that spacing feels like heaven.

March in Chevy Chase. His curvy abdomen. Several times a walk through the house, or out in the raw garden, ends in the same way with Trace too uneasy, growing tired of the excitement that does not decompose. Nor will it, in nostalgia, disgust, or something more involving, quite engage the rooms around him, the pale and round upholstered pieces, the buoyancy that unmoors and floats them here from the rooms he grew up in. Why can't he work on getting the current chapter written, on Fauré? Dressed or undressed throughout the house, "sweetie, my gut leads me like a pearly side of salmon rolled through a restaurant before the soufflé" to the wet window, to the fridge whose impersonal but responsive brightness opens on his mother's favorite foods and his—yogurt and eggs, rice pudding, cottage cheese, whatever's white, easy to swallow, given to spoilage; or soon to the piano. On the wall behind it a landscape of his mother's. Some passages of melon into an icy lavender remind him of Derain, and the collapse among them of the picture's rhythm, as if a dancer or a typist should over





and over be unable to perform
one single gesture, a porte de bras in mid-turn,
or typed again "invisible" for "invisibly"
wrenches him with impatience, not so much
at the mother neutralized, for the moment, in
a narrow bed, as at the passage through himself
so innocuously of the courses of arousal
leaving, as in the Venice of Fauré, sous l'eau qui vire
le roulis sourd des cailloux, no word, or note.
With mixed feelings he whispers a new phrase,
I am the track of many conveyances.

2.

In the bathroom, he's writing "to" the women
an odd memoir, his own? that, or nobody's.
"Late one night, in my fifth year, my parents
came to an unsurprising decision,
to separate. Then the glass lamp on the night table
was switched off. They touched hands across the space
and turned in their twin beds, and quietly
invited sleep, meaning to hold off
any devastation till each was alone.
Between them they had money—this apartment
was a large-roomed one in the east 60's,
so, as their eyes grew used to the darkness, broad
milky-lighted boudoir space streamed in
over them, washed by the venetians.
They couldn't keep their eyes shut. My mother,
I know her insomnia so well, threw
an arm over her eyes. My father imagined
a thin rope with knots spaced out along it
pulling through his fingers as he counted
knots. That worked. My mother took a pill.
Spaces of potential mourning and
excitement, these two struggling to keep
and to relinquish control, worn out, were asleep
an hour or two later. When the door
opened.

Drag, the drag of feet, of breath taken,
a pull of bedclothes, woke them. In the instant
of lunging separately toward waking, the interval
in which the new, decided-upon separation
came whole to memory, each one imagined this
or something like this: that the little boy, that
I, had somehow within sleep divined
how violence to the small world was going
on somewhere, and had been drawn awake
or sleepwalking, an animal magnet, to
this room, where the magnet's presence and gravity
might with some new imperativeness not
let them part. The breath in the room coarsened
in the instant that my parents leapt in relief
and resentment toward consciousness, toward me.
Everywhere, catching in darkness
the breath coarsened and moved—
a voicelessness that grew, second by
second, so extensive that it emptied

itself (to the waking pair) suddenly
of the meaning, 'little Trace.' More like
a pregnant, abraded west
wind drawn through the unconsciousness
that clung in the boudoir, a wind that urgency
or repleteness roughened. A moment more
prolonged

Just as, in some affairs of the heart,
there are two languages, each made of the waste
or excess matter—the structure—of the other
and the two languages are silence, and speech,
and each language has only one meaning,
as, speech means love—silence means no love;
so that our transactions of each week, my addresses
to you, with the silence that breeds, points, and spends them, which they
gorged with their one, colorable meaning
deny and impoverish—turn abruptly
each week, at some quiet instant
like other quiet instants, in your ears
to intricate corrosive refusal of
love: speech laced with silence turning
to silence pivotally laced with speech:
the small machinery gearing just one more
quantitative plus in-
to the blankly, gaggingly different,

Now in this bedroom the machine was ready.
One circuit of consciousness commanded the room.
Slewed by one last, hoarse, rubbled,
incremental breath, the presence flicked
into intelligibility, and stayed fast. With that intelligence
the scattered pair was awake, because
legible in the drag through milky night
was the despoiled path of resisted pain: was adult pain
of an adult without a voice.

The third adult in our house was the au pair.

(And now I'm scattered. Part of me, lines back,
addressed to you, is still wrestled
between refusal and love; and some part scuds ahead
plying across the fitful or sustained currents of narration
and gusty, then transparent, with relief as the distance from you
widens and clears.)

Homesick for Manila,
only eighteen or so, this girl must have worn
from the first meeting at the airport some
sullen, contracted blazon of overachievement:
the overseas-edition *Reader's Digest*
in her hand, say, and the one deep fold
pressed vertically into the vellum forehead
of the impassive, very developed face.
Tonight she scrabbled without a voice,
the oriental girl whose voice before had come
accented and veiled out of the rangy body.
Always around her I imagine or remember
was an atmosphere of overplus, like a kind of perfume
that heightens then extinguishes. Maybe
her heavy personal weather never
shifted, or even thinned, never



precipitated, until the night she moved through my parents' bedroom: tearing with pain, with no voice, with a new blazon: a white stain around her mouth.

In the kitchen, two things were discoverable. An almost-empty steel saucepan had been upset, and left an ineradicable dribble. A half-full can of 'Red Devil' lye crystals sat on the table. How firmly she'd put her lips to the heavy rim and with what patience and impatience she'd parted them for long draughts from the up-tilted pan. 'Eat me, and I'll eat you' was the legend the can might have worn."

3.

Everyone in Chevy Chase goes to shop at Friendship Heights, at the Saks Fifth Avenue. From two intersecting flows on the first floor into the almost stirless bays upstairs slip waves on wavelets of consumption and expense past things that anyone with eyes would desire, past some unfortunate, weird lapses, past visible outcroppings of the underlying stuff, the handsome, unindividuable wovens these women cover themselves with every day — this year, often in desaturated beige, a lovely champagne — past these and other things, injecting dreamily into the drift of everything within these walls a substance, money, like a kind of dye that traces and opaques the tide of energy and inattention (tide may be floaty but knows where to go), like the luminous streak of radium or barium the body gulps along some unaccustomed channel, that on the X-ray—

Doctor, how did I get to "X-ray"? Wake up now. All right then, let's see.

Even for habitual shoppers, moving through a big, opulent department store involves a complicated setting-in-motion of charges, anxieties, pleasures, needs. In Trace, who doesn't often shop like this and who's been lately so much cooped up alone, the sheer amount of stimulus, and its tonal monotony, and, outside, the afternoon closing down to early dusk start belated trains, variously freighted, of thought and muffled desire. Walking over, he's slipped into a corner box an envelope addressed to one of the women with the account in it of the suicide of the au pair in 1936. There it sits. Trace at Saks wants to assemble things for women, for different reasons: for Dana, an anniversary present

(twentieth), for Flo, in Paris, turning 47
just ahead of him, maybe for his mother?,
for Cissy, since he can't be in Chicago
to see her conduct "Aquarelle" at its
première—golden embassies
or hostages, he thinks, spent into women's lives
and held in them estranged. At Costume Jewelry
silk cords, thick and thin ones, in blues and greens
for necklaces, have loosely knotted to them
exiguous silver leaves. Rainy strings of silver
that coral branches punctuate; pallid
satin ribbons, three or four crumpled together
through the fingers of a tiny furled silver
fist; folded money-purses in dry pouchy kid
on their own metallic-filing-colored
neck ribbons—all dangling glosses
on a kind of dressing not quite
imagined, but glimpsed as an exigent
rinsing glamor one impossible inch to
the side from real art. From Fauré, say,
whose walky bass lines, with their vagrancy
and thoughtfulness, one note for each beat
even in the most Venetian, silky
writing, are on the point of occasioning
for Trace—himself, as a writer, hesitant and circling—
a group of direct, ambitious sentences for the chapter;
direct in proportion to the distance, and not just
geographical, but also made of mistrust and anger,
between him and the human objects of his desire.
Walking through the decor, and pausing here and there
to focus or buy, buying one thing, a thin envelope
of gold metal, on a gold neck chain, with a flap
intricately hinged to disclose a wafer-thin
gold card that can slip out: "I love you,"
the blank gold envelope less than 1" square—
from his *bouffée* of relief in buying
and pocketing the thing, from how joyously intense
his faith is in its power
to mute and assuage, he judges also the countervailing
magnetism of 90°-north
fury and plain reproach, that pastes
into their distant orbits the huge clouded characters of
his present firmament. And in the high houses
of the astrological sky, as in the remembered
or imagined pale flat beach houses by which
he figures to himself his own life, and those of people
he knows, the animated passages come
from somewhere behind. Behind the opaque
almost unbroken frieze of flat houses, by
which really he denotes marriages, move, he thinks,
their color sucked out by the beachy brightness
of the day, and again eaten up
in the failure of the light at dusk, transfusions
of summer people so magnified in scale
that the cells of their lymph swarm in the dry air
like penscratches: a narrow constellated tide raking
a chalk-faced *plage*.

Trace thinks he has in common with other happily-married offspring of broken marriages, a near-heroic pathos about *intactness of the home*, as if the fragility of homes were hereditary; really, he feels that he wasn't himself during his own childhood, that sullen or abandoned moments alike only blinded him to his own efficient function as the cover—addressed without ambiguity, later readdressed, then crossed and then recrossed—for unforgiving things his parents meant each other to know. The abrasions of marriage, and there are some, he and Dana are quiet about at home; vivid thing he tells her about private unhappiness centering on his almost fetishistic ambitions for the Debussy-and-Fauré book, get hidden from the teenagers with an odd zeal: and finally, his relations with other women, substantial though they are in resentment and bondage and imaginative nurturance, seem when he thinks of them at *home* so thin and ejectible, that his complete silence about them to Dana feels, at some such moments, guiltless, and accurate. His father's style of sexual misbehavior in the service of prying that family apart and keeping them, through little Trace, well fixed at a strange distance, he repudiates so intently, with a repudiation and a silence so badly undermined. And speaking of silence.

One of the ways he's trying to recuperate for himself the death of the *au pair* is a second narrative, an unspoken one that imagines an obsessed affair between his father and the girl. The strains of discretion that would have imposed! And how much better at it than his father, any foreign adolescent, who would, like Cissy, *froncer le sourcil* and hold her tongue after whatever obsessive initiation. *This* narrative would juxtapose in a new explanatory way—more stable, but yet-to-be-decided—three givens: affair, decision to end marriage, girl drinking lye. The father wielding his punishing panic would be, maybe not blamed, but firmly central, anyhow; and the *au pair* in this rotated version seems to surrender to him some of the numbing attributes plastered over her in that letter: it's the father, this time, whose averted face, whose unpredictable silence toward her his near-child mistress, impress on her a violence that is in the first place paternal. Is this version better? Hard to tell; a lot (the marriage, this time) isn't there, and a compelling elegance in the composition with the father so foregrounded and every path through the father, though Trace loves it and feels a basilisk emotion thinking of it, till he blushes



and feels stupid under a floorwalker's gaze, also can't be right. What's in his hand? He looks around: here he is in Delicacies, mooning, and a box of French pastilles in his hand, lettered, "Blanc MENTAL." So he folds one "blanc" under his tongue, and then, guiltily paying for the box, feels he's still hungry, must eat soon, should pay attention, buy. It's wearying. Baudelaire says that to digest natural happiness, like the artificial kind, requires the courage to swallow it (and then, not vomiting). This family history that seems to omit him, feels like a nipple through which an opaque flow of narrative supplies that might be endless, pushes itself at him in any surroundings, even these, and opens onto a cool, nourishing, interpolated landscape that might be the remembered past but need not be that.

Shopping, he rounds up some nice things. Besides the pendant envelope, he buys two skeletal-heart earrings in gold, with a thin bar at the heart's cleft that goes through the hole pierced in a woman's ear. At Scarves, he buys a scarf stained with feathery mauve-and-azure waves ("Marbled by Hand"), like end-papers.

He keeps it up, though he's hungry, and shopping after dark feels unnatural. Thursday evening hours. People walk in from their cars looking pale, and almost, for a few minutes, uninhabited, till chafed by noise and light and the nearness of money transactions their dry mouths decompress and facial tone comes tugging back.

A third, less narrative version of the "narrative" would happen in a room of a hospital. The *au pair* girl after four days that no doctor imagined any body could live through, would just moments ago have passed from "this world" (*this* conscious world?), extinguished, and someone comes in with the last X-rays and clips them over the flat frosted lamp. Someone, a doctor, or Trace's father, or her father, for some reason turns to read them. (Everyone in hospitals would always rather be reading: visiting hours, you could run the generator on people moving their lips, over magazines, medicines, the instructions on electric beds.) Behind him, the woman vacated by resistance and pain. The X-ray is hard to get the hang of, irrigated with brightness in all quadrants; wherever any structure has slowly eaten or digested itself away with draughts of lye, there the luminous tracer gives its milky TV-like light, and now that's everywhere; or at least, there's still etched only the lightest drypoint-stroke of organic obstruction to the luster, a childish unlettered scratch, and all the rest is syringed

with light.

“What on *earth* are you looking for?”
in Lingerie, the nervy but bemused
salesgirl says, and Trace says, as men will, “Panties,”
meaning something more like drawers, bias silk drawers,
that would go with the fluid chemise that he
can’t quite stop handling, in eau-de-nil,
“to go with this.” Not since his late childhood
has he handled silk—it’s sensational, like
a glinting off-green woven skin, like skin-as-web, like
—he imagines—a shed skin slipped back into, and he buys
the two pieces of it. “Do you have a break for supper?”
he asks next, and gets a startled shake of the head—
“Well, aren’t you hungry?” “Yeah, I am.” “I’m going
over to Howard Johnson’s; if I brought back
a hamburger and fries, could you eat here?”
Another shake of the head, “But thanks.” Stepping
across the threshold into the dark, he has his arms
full of flat, lady-sized boxes, four of them. On the curb,
his eyes still not making headway against
the March evening, his overheated trunk chilling,
watching ladies balance their own middle-aged
bulk across the street, flat parcels to round bosoms,
he uncasually turns back again, and with relief passes
through the glass doors into light, again; and
lets the glow of women, couples, and families lap him toward
the Lingerie woman, again.

“Could you show me a place
where I could mail these boxes off to people?”
She tells him how to get upstairs to the mailing desk.
“And I’ll be able to send them with insurance
and so forth?” “Oh yes.” Pause—some kind
of impasse reached. “Is it complicated? I mean—
you couldn’t come and *show* me where, I guess?”
A smile—OK. She takes him upstairs, leaving him
with four costly boxes, four addresses, and the problem
of what’s for whom? He decides fast, then writes off
cards to the women, and supervises the wrapping, and
dictates addresses, and pays money, and they’re off
his hands. The panic subsides that had
started galloping in him on the curb,
not quite about spending so much money, nor quite about
obligations to so many women,
but because of deformations of the image
of himself, that might take place—had *taken* place—
in that too-broad space called “Buying for Women,”
for which read (things like), “Reparations,” “Making
It—” (what? something lost, someone strayed) “—Up To
Mother,” “Making It—” (her) (them?) “—OK For The Child”
or near-child, and hence, at last, “Buying
For Trace”—love-tokens, end-papers, the silk
sheaths.

And how does he feel now?

He could eat a house.



4.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE TO AN UNWILLING HEART

Cissy reads that over, a couple of times, from the narrow slip of paper that's poised on her plate, still half-folded from being baked in a fortune-cookie—whose undelicious halves, baked gold, the message prised from between them, have nothing better to do than ornament an incidental still-life: beef-liquored rice stipples the tablecloth, the dome lid is inverted into the pedestaled serving-bowl of unreflecting gray metal, and the cookie plate also poses two glassy mint candies, the bill, pistachios. Tired and grim, Cissy's finishing two weeks of rehearsal—and some rewriting—of "Aquarelle," which is a hard piece to play, and not just because three of the instruments are Javanese. Maybe it'll sound more elating tomorrow night. She's cheered to learn that NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE TO AN UNWILLING HEART, because hers is an unwilling one, she thinks. She raises her hand to, not her heart, but the small gold envelope that's hung around her neck, these weeks (weeks during which Trace's mother has come back to her home, and Trace back to Manhattan to his and Dana's) when she's been displaced in Chicago, working hard, like a being half-awakened from a trance. The card, when she fiddles it out of the hinged envelope, still just reads, "I love you"; how soon that gesture has grown almost involuntary in Cissy's pianistic fingers, which brush over the etched lines as if touch were a second sight. "I love you," like gold, is a currency in which these two have habitually traded, and Cissy knows some of the tides of plenitude, and debt, and abscondence, and delay, on which the coinage seems to float inert

Cissy's past 30, and an artist who knows what to do with things, but imagine this. A child "loves" an adult, who grows confused by the child's advances, and loves it back, screwing it, then panicking—repeatedly. The child can't recognize as forms of love either the blind drive toward the genitals, or the panicky silence: but swamped by the adult's wild need—by its own anxiety—by a kind of off-rhyme between the new sensations that hurt and old, climaxless sensations it knows it likes—helpless to turn away the new love, helpless to accept it, helpless to keep the adult from panicky silences or sudden inattention, the child finally invents from its own baffled heart a new, expensive theatrics: a hallucinatory mimicry of the adult, by which within the child a second adult is made; whose function being to put under the child's control what is strangest

in the adult and most at war with itself or the child
— things every adult has, like remorse, harshness,
stupor, intellectual longing, fury—as well as the signs
of genital desire—the child pours all its strength
into the animation of a perfect inner stranger, only swerving
it a little, always, toward an implausible childish
tenderness from which every encounter
with the real unchanged adult saps the pretense
of mimetic force. The child
whose expedient this is, changes, forgetting itself.
From a mortal trance which it wishes
always to deepen, the small anxious automaton throws
different, intermittent voices—different tongues—
even silences that aren't its own—everything that denotes
assent, but whose structure is resistance, to
the love a child can't use.

A light-blue pickup truck
with Georgia plates has backed up to the sidewalk
outside the window of the cavernous restaurant
where she's sitting. It's dusk. The cab is lit
and the backs of two curly, tobacco-colored,
sunbleached heads—one bleached arm circled
around the other seatback—have the flatness,
the exotic scale, and the swift color of projections
glimpsed by travellers, on the screen of a drive-in.

A story like this one

of the reluctant child is compelling to Cissy, not
about her past, but because it makes temporally opaque
and in that way visible, fragments of her present,
with Trace, for instance: her hallucinatory complaisance;
how uncharacteristically off-balance she's
felt at every node of this friendship; her implacable
anger, and the muteness about that. But more:
how much, and after what fixed study, Trace's language
has become hers, the peculiar paths of Trace's
taste. (Though, *vis-à-vis*,
the medium of her and Trace's relation has more
often been aphasia, as though against him her heart folded
its tongue in the night, and stole away.)

And more.

Cissy's a composer. Even in New York
on the subway, with music in her lap or on her mind
her outer ear grows mute; against the subway
rhythm of congestion—convulsion—then expulsion—
she studies, prolongs, and alters new
divergent strains of whatever
errancy of line will most richly, or
most barely, forestall an early interruption.
She's all attention, like a dreamer, or Scheherazade, lest surprise,
lest termination, or a dissonance she can't get that silky
inner web of herself around in time, break in; like
a dreamer, but also like a man of the world, the reader
of a novel called *Nil Admirari*, or *Never Wake*, or *Structures*.
In Cissy, the continuous plait of different voices
might be named Trace—the music of Trace—after the real Trace

whose breaks with her, whose differences from himself,
whose quick foreclosing shudder in her arms
the voices mean at once to figure within her and to
fill in, repair. And if not that, then veil.

(Besides, how clearly her recent productiveness
has a filial bond to Trace: his attraction,
through Debussy, to gamelan music; a lot of vocabulary—
for instance “walkiness,” a term they’ve both kept using
in the midst of so much imagery in both their work of
water—“Aquarelle,” “Reflets dans l’eau,” lots of Fauré;
and then the tides, back and forth, between them, of ambition.)

It’s dark out, and frontlets of lightning
are all over the one end of the sky
she can see. The baby-blue pickup has pulled out.
By the time she gets outside the sky’s brick red.

Her hand at the collar of her winter coat
holds “I love you” as she walks. Somehow the huge middle-aged
Chinese restaurant’s infected her with
a look and walk of the 40’s, for an instant—the wind
tugs the hem at her calf, her shoulders are protective—
like the year her mother had her. Sketchily now, it’s raining
and, sketchily, the florid store-lights prolong
their paths a little way onto the air
or spill and flare on the slicked-down street. Intermittently
it’s very hushed. A car window behind her
must be open, because a top-40 song
is drifting in phrases toward her. “Walking music”
she *thinks* she hears. You’re not man enough to—something.
Your ex-wife called up: a country song; children and.
What overtakes her, with Walking music spitting out
its windows, is the baby-blue pickup—the cab-light buttery
on the two tobacco-heads, who may be lost: they drive
so slow and vagrantly, with the light on.
They’re both boys, she sees as they drive past,
but the arm of one still lies behind the other.
They stop with other lower, darker traffic
at a light, but when the traffic goes,
the truck sits, and their heads are bent together.
A quarter block behind, on the sidewalk,
Cissy’s stopped too. Don’t move yet, she thinks.
She feels like a traveller who’s turned off the road.
She’s back at the fugitive drive-in:
—the flat bright oblong, the lit heads,
the thriftless leakage of image, of sound.
I go for baby eyes, I go for hair that’s soft and curled.
The boy’s arm is making floaty gestures. A man that’s like a little
boy, or maybe like a little girl.
The arm reaches back, way back, and sweeps down,
till it’s reaching off the screen. It does reach out
past the back window of the cab, toward
the watcher, then withdraw—as if the boy has forgotten
he has a hand. There must be no back window
of the cab, Cissy realizes, or it rolls down,
but the hand, blindly, loftily expressive in



the dreamy in-and-out gesture, still looks to Cissy endangered, as though the 3-D technique that reproduced it must be obsolete or trashy. Radio: I could wear my heart to rags, making you your pretty treats; giving you (unintelligible) walking music for your feet.

5.

Flo is driving in Brittany that day in a little *deux-chevaux*, stopping everywhere, but headed for St. Malo by five. Unfortunately she's not alone; a colleague who talks more, and much more fatuously, than a shrink ought, is sharing the car from Paris to this seaside conference organized by the editors of *Thalassa: A Journal of Genitality*. And Flo's attention is stretched too many ways—barely pleasurable, though she most often prefers a variously-aroused poise of consciousness. One analyst describes two varieties of free-floating attention to be played over the patient's stream of language: one's like simultaneous translation, continuous, and with regard to bits of the discourse, egalitarian: everything means something else; the other, lacunary and rhabdomantic, gravitates around lapses of meaning and wellings-up of excess meaning, the defects of consciousness and its aggressive floodings with remediation—a periodic attention that seems to say, those other moments do mean what they say. Moving back and forth between the two is stranger, Flo thinks, than moving between different objects of attention: the man beside her, say, and road ahead of her, each evoking shifts of incredulity that grind between chronic and acute. She has to think about a last paragraph for her conference paper, "Sustained Homosexual Panic and Literary Productiveness" (which includes close readings from *Our Mutual Friend*); and to think (which she wants to do) about the friend she's meeting at the conference, whose Sust. Hom. Pan. may be—ought to be—lightened for both of them by the nuanceless air, huge tides, the narrow tented beach, the sense of excavation and Earth's End about St. Malo—walking on deep walls, and the regular thalassic irrigation, then deletion, of rocks, causeways, fortifications, outline; to think about forgetting to give the gas-pump woman a tip, and more generally about tipping; to think about lubrication; to think out her anger at her teenage son; and all or part of the time be semi-conscious of something barely there between her and the Citroen, sketched-in sensations of weedy underclothing in silk.

6.

In the middle of that night, Trace—or whatever the torso is beside Dana, damp, undecidable, with one of those stubby, silver, wee-hours erections—seems to panic or be stirred, trying to speak, trying to roll over, slugging out, finally waking himself to lie quiet with his heart thudding. What was it? Cissy, he thinks. His mind shapes a conscious, almost superstitious, gratitude: that it was a dream, that he's awakened, that there's a woman with him, that it's Dana—but he's motionless, not wanting to wake or speak with her. Two sentences are emerging. The rest, whatever it was, is going belly-up—he feels it—like a dead ocean liner, full of people and surface mail—letting drift to the surface only these two bubbles of syntax, which, he thinks as they clear in his mind, probably weren't in the dream, but are some artifact of surfacing too suddenly from the dream's pressure of narrative. By the bed is a small notebook and pencil which Trace retrieves carefully; but how dark it is! But he doesn't want the light. His shape, Dana's, the notebook's are there, but not the lines; his hand in front of the page is repeatedly swallowed up, and the pencil is swallowed in both hand and page but he prints anyway, striking broadly at an oblique angle to the felt page and the imagined lines:
Have I mentioned, too, that she was still
naked to the waist?
But remember my position too, my own
sense of damage and humiliation.
Even written, it's still part of the velvety dark. He imagines two different stories that could re-embed those distinctly *louche* quotations; but he tells himself, to calm himself, that he's interested in the repeated "too," an over-emphatic pointer to ranges of continuity in the ur-dream, now lost if they ever existed; and in the speciously, pruriently conversational direct-address. It will appeal to Cissy . . . when he calls her in the morning . . .

Lying beside

Dana, thinking of Cissy, he gratefully forgets that he's been frightened, and, cheek on cool notebook, patrols awhile between waking and sleeping.

In the middle of that night Cissy, Trace's reflected self in the puddle of Chicago, is bolt awake in the bathtub of the borrowed apartment, sweaty with unhappiness. Partly she's lonely, because none of the people she'd like to have with her for the performance or the night before, can be with her. But she's not aggrieved—they have real reasons—and she usually likes nights alone: no: the brunt of this night-long seizure is something else, more purely formal, inseparable—as the night the day—from the nearness of tomorrow's culmination. (Which isn't the real culmination. For the composer, the public première, even if she conducts it, rightly has no



more special a link to her real labor of composition than every subsequent performance. Each should be a specially, differently, illuminated reading; Cissy feels that her real composing of "Aquarelle" either climaxed at the unperceived instant when she decided against the one change in the score after which it later happened she made no more— then, or it will never climax, whether in forgetfulness or in repeated new performance. Yet she's rigid! with affectless terror, or with something else.) Call this stagefright. When there's performance in the offing, with the imperious machinery of climax after grim rehearsal, what ambition, what neurosis, what pleasure-taking, ever detaches itself from the hungry occasion? What work however steadfast or love or deep resistance fails sooner or later to lend corrosive force to the *réjouissance* of a climax in the vicinity? an anecdotal tide whose shallows of hesitation, in the preparatory reflux, are close to the desultory moment in dreams, when the burglar, having nothing better to do than terrorize, tries to reassure by pressing the handle of his knife into your hand and tugging his own wrist across its blade.

7.

Over the last few years, Trace's mother has been waking earlier and earlier. This morning she wakes at 4:30, fills her bloodstream with coffee, cleans house until there's enough light outside to garden by and then, wrapped up but not very warmly, crouches in the grass, as the long shadows take shape, and trenchantly, impetuously digs and prunes, often with a gardener's astuteness, sometimes too fiercely. Since the operation she's been weak and her side hurts: now and then, drained but galvanic with impatience, she sits back till the least trickle of strength returns; she's doing that when the sound of her phone drifts out back to her just before 8. Trace, she thinks—he's an early riser too and calls early when he does call. Breathless and a little faint, "Hello?"

Trace's strangled voice says, "Pussy—"

He doesn't mean

me.

"are you still in bed?"

It is Trace's voice, but whoever he's addressing is a stranger to his mother, so, like a stranger, his mother can only say, "Excuse me?"

"Cissy," Trace says.

"Who?"

"Is this Cissy?"

She has to stop being this stranger who pointlessly, imitatively comes between an unknown man and his desire. She wants to marshal the claims she has

on the estranged address of the estranged
voice—but, in the face of an impulse blind
enough of arousal and communicativeness
to send it astray so wildly that it comes
to her, home to her, unrecognizing and
unusable, like a dead son from the war,
what hasn't already *been marshalled*?
"No," she says to the voice, "it's me."

"I'm sorry.

I must have the wrong number," the voice says, and hangs
up. But says it so numbly that she knows,
motionless over the phone, he'll have to call again
in a few seconds, needing *her* voice, needing lots
of whatever the language is that best extenuates
the flooded transfer between the two of them
of alienated excitements, of farce, of sudden power.

8.

For Cissy's half of the concert, the stage of the Goodman Theater
at the Art Institute looks a little exotic:
in their normal positions are violinist, cellist,
flautist, but in front of them, cross-legged on
bamboo mats, are players for the three
gamelan instruments. Those are three large arrays:
of bronze slabs, of bronze pots, of wooden bars:
and their part of the sound, when Cissy
comes onto the stage and starts "Aquarelle,"
is so delicate, infusing, and sustained, one note
for each beat, no beat withheld
or lengthened, a scale of five notes—so close to
seeming transparent that the ear for a while fails
in its work of discernment, fails to
pick out the fixed melody from the elaborating
lines, fails to understand how slight a token of the full gamelan
these are, fails to catch the periodic
structure since among the 38 omitted
instruments from this particular
gamelan is the range of gongs for subdividing
the periods of repetition equally, then fails
to hear any silence, any room
for the three western instruments to take shape
in, until they begin to do so—one of the more tutelary
functions here of the western
instruments being to underline by
their own differently-posed invitation, the Javanese
lure into texture, a texture not of contingency
or the lapse of other structure, far from that,
but of the ubiquity on every surface
of every structure, waiting for the graze
of any tangent of attention, to grow
at once traceable, salient, thirsty. If the western
instruments in any stable way oppose them
here, it might be in that strange uncaloric
absorbency of attention, like rooty winter fields to be
irrigated by what always changes from
attention to lapses of attention.

Cissy and an ethnomusicologist have made careful

program notes about gamelan music, about the night-long shadow plays— indigenous hero cycles or syncretized epics—, touching on the intimacy between a deeply stratified hive of melodic lines and the projection on a screen of the silhouette of a flat puppet doing something irreversible by bloody generations, tearing the dress of a woman, killing a half-brother, or turning back into a cloud: the narrative skimming away from the present, and music withdrawing everything into a deep unstable present. It would be hard to excerpt here their account of the narrative accretions embedding the melodic lines of which she makes allusive use; but— what’s not irrelevant to your residual impression from listening to “Aquarelle”— imagine this: (Imagine this: a phrase that’s turned up before, and in the same way: a kind of chalky rag pulled over the grammar that leads up to it, desubordinating the new message, clouding and fragmenting the base on which it’s to be superposed) in the shadow-theater mythology among the distinct strata of warriors, magi, traders, giants, gods, eagles, duennas, one more anomalous class, of clownish servants all *aubergine*-shaped, all graceless or incontinent in their personal functions, called *punakawan*; a few of whom, dwarfish, unlovely, affected, happen at the same time to be immortal. In fact, they’re gods; more precisely, they are the wisest and, in moments of tragedy, the most powerful of the gods. One of these is distinguished in Javanese by being always addressed or referred to in the plural number. Squat and pudgy with a woman’s distended breasts, an expectant gibbous belly and wildly salient ass, jewelry, a made up face, but in male clothing if any, his voice tone-deaf and high and irresolute and, as no one would have predicted, transfixing, he wields in high matters an omnipotence as final as it is narrowly bounded and rarely used, while for his life’s work of stewarding for generation after short-lived generation the domestic retinue of one of two feuding warrior-administrator dynasties, he secretes a second and less couth brood of attributes, snobbishness, a network of petty kickbacks, and an omnivorous convulsive incompetence being the most presentable of these. Whatever’s the Javanese version of Over 22 Billion McDonald’s hamburgers, that’s what turns up at the front door, in place of the desired single she-elephant that’s legendary for swerving into battle as exposed and giddy as into the shifting center of a ballroom. And though *these* lapses are the lapses of



a peasant-servant, even in Olympian matters where all this god's other constellations, those of delicacy and sway, configure and preside—in which laws of succession, the transmission of codes for the classes of men, the plaiting-together of lines female and male and divine, must by his strength and wisdom be altered or sustained—the outcome is not very different. The god, his waddling thoughtful step still engorged (for the moment) with a deep purpose just accomplished, the soft torso heavy and magnetic with intentness, with joy, in story after story moves away through a forest from a clearing where only his handiwork remains steaming as the evening cools and shadows tilt: it might look like this: two sibling mouse-deer, small hornless ruminants, each nailed by its hind paws halfway up one tree, the short, characteristic fur ruffled but not broken, blood tugging against its own viscosity to mark a trail from nostril or lips to a stream that runs nearby from which these two tongues have supped; and scored in the bark of one tree, words like these: GO NOW AND, AS I HAVE SHOWN YOU, SHOW YOUR KIN WHAT THE FATE IS OF A WARRIOR WHO BREAKS FAITH IN SINGLE COMBAT WITH A BLOW TO THE THIGH: ROOTED LIKE YOU IN SPEECHLESS WOOD, A TREE SANS LEAF SANS FORCE ROUND WHICH THE FOE WITHDRAWS HIMSELF LIKE WIND.

And the mouse-deer,

what overflow of totemism in the culture leaves them high and dying here, as the symbols maybe of some treacherous clan the god wants chastened but not destroyed?

The truth is less syntactic than that.

An early story about the infancy of the *punakawan* god tells how he was cozened by a goddess already envious of what were to be his wisdom and power into taking, instead of his mother's breast, a polished gourd with a nipple carved in it as long and prehensile as your pinky. From butting this and guzzling it the creamy baby grew round with its insidious milk, and when its milk passed through him, there passed with it alluvially something of his own, leached out in the activist pulse of thirst and supply and elimination. No one knew then that in the thin puddle spreading from the little loins of a little god, floated away his memory, hot as his insides, in physical solution: not just what he already remembered but the reticule of any memory;

since which, *il s'éloigne de son sujet*
 de plus en plus, the flunky immortal, and collages
 like that one, particular language superposed
 on an atrocity on a particular
 landscape from which the god is just withdrawing
 touched with state, have grown more frequent. His life
 is like music—always in the present tense.
 Wisdom or love sets him on his path
 and nothing slows his telegraphic defile
 between Chinese-high horizons, except
 whatever crosses it (you might imagine a kind
 of “pure” narration, all flow, every obstruction washed
 away or worn through, with no author, or at least
 no tendentious drift toward any hovering
 obsessive image, an image magnetically loaded and reverted to
 with or without relevance); no, whatever crosses
 the path of the god becomes the object of
 his imageless motive passion. Like
 “Aquarelle,” though, no flooding but is also
 pastiche. At first light a warrior enemy
 wakes cold and stiff from a stunned sleep
 in the nest of a hillside. Inside him
 his bowels are loose and hot; his numb head tells
 him nonsensically, or has dreamed, that he’s been raped—
 and a silver trail where he can’t see it, says
 yes; the rolling grass
 as far as he can see in one
 direction oblique to the canted sun, has been
 furrowed—trenched, really—throwing up walls
 of rooty fabric that, now deeply shadowed, would spell
 out hugely, to a high and distant viewer, WHAT
 I FELT IN YOUR ARMS: CHILD THE SCOURING CHASE
 OF HALF A DECADE HALF A CONTINENT
 MY HEART ALMOST TOO TIRED
 THE DELICACY OF YOUR REPROACHES, IN
 THOSE SILENT MINUTES BE MY ARMORY
 WOMAN YOUR WINDING AND RECOILING BREATH
 BITTER UNDER ME AT LAST YOUR SILENCE
 SINCE WE FIRST MET, BROKEN ONLY
 BY THOSE TOKENS YOU LEFT IN MY PATH
 THE FOX THAT DAY I THINK THE SHEEP IN THE
 TREE THE LOAMY STUMP SOMEWHERE RED AND
 BUSY A GREEN IN THE SKY I THINK PERTAINS
 TO YOU AND SPEND MYSELF ON TOP OF
 THEN FORGET WHAT CHILD I THINK I
 FELT IN YOUR ARMS:

on, like that, for acres
 of rubbled dewy turf, stretching away from
 the warrior—damaged, beached; also away
 steps the breasted god, transfigured again.