

I'M TRYING
TO TELL
YOU I'M
SORRY

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Black
Lawrence
Press

“To learn to see the frame that blinds us to its interiors is no small matter.”

—Virginia Konchan

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Be My Nephenthe

Let me explain the situation. Last fall I flew to Miami on someone else's miles, some guy's black American Express card. He asked me several times and finally I decided to see what would happen. I mean I knew what would happen. I knew what I would probably have to do.

What I mean is that he had been a friend in childhood, a boy who once showed me how to slide down his parents' carpeted stairs in a sleeping bag, and though we'd lost touch for many years I let him fuck me on his roommate's green satin daybed in the West Village one summer when we were still in college, which was charming because we had so much to reminisce about and because he had lots of money—a useful illusionary tool for a brief encounter. Other people's money was not something I had really thought about before, not to such a degree. But then I was on a plane from New York to Miami with a company-paid ticket folded in my wallet. I bought new underwear and sharpened my eyeliner and stuffed it all into an overnight bag. My ass cheeks were burned pink from a tanning bed. I did these things and I watched myself do them. I considered my performance, just as I always had.

What this all really means though is that I was worried. His friends were models; I'd been eating a lot of chocolate and bread soaked in olive oil with cheese. People kept having these end of summer parties with good cheeses. I had been sick for a year, and now I was feeling better. (You look healthy, one nurse had said, sucking blood from the crook of my arm through a tube and into a vial.)

The kid picked me up from the airport in a silver BMW and the weekend passed as slowly as though we were children again.

Meaning very slow indeed.

I tried to make jokes but he did not think I was funny. He took me to expensive places in South Beach through a side door, which is all he had to offer, and I listened to people who looked like him complain about each other to each other. Someone told me I was lucky to be there. I smiled and accepted a bump of cocaine and drank enough tequila to think that maybe I wanted to fuck one of these people.

What I'm saying is that I tried hard to make it okay, but I couldn't. Not for me, the object, let's say. Not for him, the subject—slippery as that might be. But let's just say.

This was new. What I mean is that feeling. The unease.

In the cabana-themed bathroom I called a friend who lived in Coconut Grove, but she was out of town.

Meaning that night I had to do what I had to do. To be gracious, to at least try. It was among the less easy encounters. I really had to will myself not to think thinky thoughts about objects and subjective investments, about spectacle and the big, black void between us, the melancholy in the reification—thoughts that made me sad because I knew I could probably never unthink them; that there was no going back.

Back at his condo I sat on the kitchen counter in the half darkness and drank more wine while he told me how everyone loved what he'd done with the place. He asked me if I liked his vintage leather sofa: Isn't it good?

Norwegian wood? I said.

On the sofa I made some sounds from my throat so he wouldn't feel too bad. Or so I wouldn't feel too bad about the decisions I'd made, or the failure I was to us both.

In the morning I got dressed and sat outside on the small balcony and asked for coffee. He had none.

I don't drink that, he said. I've just never needed caffeine. Do you want an acai bowl? A green juice?

I was starving. I wanted a pretzel croissant. Wanted to be alone. But not why you might think.

What I mean is I was disappointed in myself. I was surprised.

I'd never failed at pretending before. In general I'd say I had a handle on this kind of emergency intimacy, how to create it in a hurry and hold on in bursts. I'd say that, at one time, it was my best thing.

I used to have such a good imagination. I used to be so tough.

I opened his fridge. It was all beer and hot sauce and tiny containers of salad bar accoutrement.

He had very, very little to say.

Meaning the discomfort was now full blown. It was an unavoidable crisis.

I watched him pick up a tiny roach from his bedside table, spark it with a white lighter, and close his eyes.

At the airport I walked up and down the halls with my overnight bag. I ate a Klonopin and bought a hummus wrap and almost cried because I knew I hadn't taken from him whatever he needed taking. Not the way we both had hoped I would. Not the way we had planned. I had broken the contract, failed to be the promise, the desire, the notion.

Maybe—here's what I mean—I'll start over.

Maybe this was now my newest best thing.

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Like Derrida says: *The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future. Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives. It begins with the printer.*

Nepenthe:

1. /ni`penθi:/ (Ancient Greek: νηπενθέζ) a medicine or potion to soothe sorrow, a “drug of forgetfulness,” or the plant yielding it, mentioned by ancient Greek writers as having the power to banish grief or trouble from the mind, depicted as originating in Egypt. Literally, the “anti-sadness.”
2. Anything inducing a pleasurable sensation of forgetfulness, especially of sorrow or trouble.

If I ever have a daughter will she hate me if I name her that? *Nepenthe*, the anti-sadness. Could she ever forgive me for asking her to take it all away?

The text beside the painting praises the artist's use of subtle symmetry and lyric line. The text says that subtle symmetry is a perfection so beautiful it makes one forget all pain. The way the artist has soaked the paper red so that the pink edges bleed, then stain, then fade to yellow; the way there is that smudge of lichen green.

I suppose it could.

When you get down to it, everything is just some shade of vagina: folds of blistering red or midnight navy or that cotton pink bleeding into yellow. Look next time. That's all the world is made up of.

Once I fell in love with a man because he used the word vagina regularly, sometimes more than once a day. It was really something.

Once I fell in love with a woman who avoided it.

In the museum, two couples. Old friends. The men wear khaki shorts and shirts tucked into belts. The women in their clean, white athletic shoes and cropped hair dyed an impossible color. One of the women looks up at the blue Rothko and backs up slowly, carefully, until she is in the middle of the room, until the concentric blocks bend beyond her eyesight. Until some of the blue can no longer be metabolized. She moves deliberately, as though someone once told her to do this. Pace by pace.

The other woman stands beside a man who is sitting on a bench, folding and unfolding his baseball cap.

She says, They really do have some incredible work here.

I can't hear the man but already I can see the woman looking like she is trying not to need him. Looking like, I will be ok.

Women, with all their expectations! Just like our mothers. Fathers might be a little disappointed deep down, but mothers! They won't stop doing that thing with their voice until you know how bad you've hurt them. They're all, Why don't you love the museum? The mausoleum of the looker, the gawker, the gaze.

But the man is done. It's Friday for god's sake. The game starts in two hours and we're tenth in the nation. He wants to walk the clipped lawns of his alma mater and remember. Who could blame him.

The woman is trying so hard with her jaw and her eyes.

Look at the art. Look at me looking at the art. Look at it with me, why don't you. Everybody went to Paris to copy everybody else. Even us. But you sat a lot then, too. You were so easily tired. I wore stripes. I got a little fat.

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Renoir's preferred subjects were adolescent girls, whom he idealized as perfectly epitomizing female beauty. He wrote: *In literature as in painting, talent is shown only through treatment of the female figurine.*

Here. *The Sculptor in His Studio.* Behind his head a woman wiggles in front of a window above a city, her hands covering up or playing at the place between her legs. Maybe both. The sculptor looks out from the canvas with black hole eyes, holding a tiny replica of the woman in his hands. His tiny, tiny woman. He made this tiny tiny, this subtle symmetry.

She wasn't much, but she gave him that.

Our mothers tell us, Be my nepenthe. Lovers ask us, Are you my nepenthe? Strangers, the most, need us too.

Meaning on the street and in the coffee shop or at the bookstore or in the park, they expect it.

You should smile more. You'll get ugly if you don't smile more. Smile, sweetheart. Smile for me. Make me forget.

I'm saying the forgetting is something big. Something more than a bad day, a lonely evening. I'm saying the forgetting is about sickness and death, the abject; mortality. The stuffing away of something spilling out at the seams. A tidying up.

Yesterday in front of the co-op a man rolled a cigarette and scolded me: Didn't you hear me? I said I like your bike.

I could see how angry he was.

Later, I admit, I was a little sorry that I could not help him. But I was tired—he smelled like soggy cereal.

Another day, another man who looks at me and sees, perhaps, a bit of nature, a pastoral scene.

You must be on your way to yoga, he says.

What? (This is an accident. It just comes out.)

Aren't you on your way to yoga?

Um, I tell him, juggling a bag of damp vegetables, a yoga mat, water bottle.

Well excuse me Miss Rude, he says.

I mean, he is offended. And really it is my fault because today I do not have the energy to explain it. To say that even if his intentions are merely inquisitive, if he just really needs to know for his own peace of mind whether I am going *to yoga* or not, my skills of flash differentiation are sometimes too weak to separate one uninitiated observation from another. To explain how difficult and time consuming it can be to tell when an exchange will turn. And yes there is a part of me that wants to ask him for forgiveness, for not having the patience to see when this specific turn will come.

Just now a man passing in the street tells me I am doing okay but that I could use a little more ass.

A man outside of a bar tells me to keep it up.

Keep it up, baby, he says, and then he claps. He claps!

I move through a life that I am only pretending to lead, filling time in an attempt to cover up my true identity as that which chases away sorrow. Go to work and to the store and other little places like that in disguise. They all know what I'm up to, the power I can wield, the potion I am keeping from them.

Give me your potion!

(This is the background noise. It's very loud.)

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Some days, though, no one needs me to smile or to relinquish their grief, and it's those days I feel the weight of it the most. What am I to do then?

Was I ever not afraid of men? Of other peoples' fathers: good-looking, clean-shaven, socked-feet up on an ottoman, fishing olives out of martinis and yelling at the television. Of dentists, not the drills but the eyes. Of doctors and their gloved fingers.

Meaning did I ever not fear that they would and would not? Even before my hips got wider than my waist and suddenly boys twice my age were asking did I know how to suck a dick without getting hairs caught in my braces. Boys, men, always asking me to keep secrets. Meaning I spent a lot of time sneaking around. A lot of time playing Juliet, playing Maria, in someone else's personal tragedy.

But that's what I liked most. The rush, I mean. I liked hiding. Liked lying. Liked organizing my secret worlds.

Meaning I still do.

What I really mean is I wanted them.

And I thought about it even then, how betrayal isn't always betrayal. That no one else deserves every part of you. Even then, when I was fifteen, when I'd make my boyfriend tie me up and lick ice cubes off my stomach on his mom's silk sheets, I would sometimes let this other boy, this older boy, buy me a poppy seed bagel at the deli and pin me down in the back of his Jeep until sixth period was over.

Or later how I'd tell another boy—the one whose parents hated me because I was still in high school and he was twenty-two, still living at home, stinking up their certain kind of organized garage—to drop me off at the top of my street, nights when we'd been out doing stuff in empty corporate complex parking lots and in the wet grass. I'd wait for him to drive away and I'd walk to my neighbor's house in the dark (this really beautiful guy) and scratch at his bedroom window. We'd smoke a little joint and my eyes would close and I'd let him do his thing.

This is how I did everything. A few in my pocket. My secret entourage.

And I've never told the whole truth. Not to anyone who's seen me take my clothes off.