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# PASSENGER

Adam Baltieri

I was lying on the plushly carpeted floor of a quiet bedroom with an amateurishly prepared mint julep in a jam jar balanced on my chest. The well-oiled people who had stayed past midnight were in the living room dancing to pop songs from a bygone era. I sipped my drink and thought that it was time to understand whatever this was – “this” being the best I could do, opening my palms outward and looking around the room as if my glance reached the ends of the earth.

There had been a crowd in the kitchen. I had seen how, as she crossed the linoleum in her socks, a woman had reorganized the room as if disturbing fields of energy. *In an*

*equilibrium of social pressures, people seemed to be held in place by a force equal in strength to life's essential spontaneity.*

A friend appeared in the doorway and asked how I was doing there on the floor. “I’m pretty far out,” I said, and began to wonder why most walls are painted white. I sought an answer as I considered men from previous centuries who had attempted to synthesize basic psychological meanings from the old countries’ mythologies. *All points of departure lead to the sea.*

I thought of purposes that gather, how this party had bloomed from the past, a precipitate of the world. Had the hosts of the party first voiced its possibility in the hallways of this home? *It came to be, carrying its origins in whatever history made it possible to understand what it was in the first place, like me.*

I too wanted to become capable of the imaginable: free to do what I knew could be done; and to give rise to the unimaginable: an art of the experimental and the free; and I wanted to go further: my mind becoming a disruption in that order of things that delineated my freedom. *Thinking should be more than an attempt to lay bare what was supposedly always already the case.*

I remembered that a handful of social scientists have implied that any behavior falling outside the bounds of evolutionary self-interest is genuine insanity. Sipping my drink, I slowly fell back into the world that is located nowhere, that is drawing me through life the way cities lead people down avenues and gather them in squares, the way thought flows through the world in currents. *Doing itself had become undone, like a short-circuiting machine with unlimited functions.*

Could you recover from having felt what keeps millions of human beings synchronized like clockwork within hive-like cities, if that is what you felt? The force of a species channeling through you all the time; nowhere isolable as one body, yet describable in abstractions that sometimes seem to have more reality than the matter you are made of; the automatism of the pulse; the thing that when backed into a corner might fight for its life.



I took the Bay Bridge on my way back into the city. The contents of my mind dissipated as I passed over the silent expanse of water. The skyscrapers loomed, apart from me. Soon the city would gird me in all around. I heard the breeze whipping emptily at my windows. *I remained inside and outside at the same time.*



He opened the door fluently, lifting the handle with a flourish, and closed it smartly behind him. He slumped in the passenger seat and dropped his hat on the floor. I looked at him, surprised. His skin was damp with sweat. As the stoplight turned green, the traffic compelled me to drive.

I had watched him from a phalanx of cars idling in the dark on the outskirts of the city. His was the only human figure in the empty vicinities of the on-ramps, drifting across an intersection at a somnambulant pace I associated with mental illness and traumatically induced amnesia.

He was wearing a makeshift gown. Like a sheet, the fabric fell loosely over his torso. It was luminous in the dusk, like the river of white lights, the traffic winding toward the city.

Slowing before the dark windshields, he had seemed to peer inside the vehicles without fear of being seen. He aimed a gloved hand far off into the city, his entire body beckoning and pointing like a signpost. He was wearing a small brimmed hat. He stopped and seemed to appraise me. He strode to my car. His resolute gait in that brief moment had displayed all the decisiveness of a final *why not?*



I looked ahead and accelerated.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I guess tonight I'm just too good a piece of ass to matter where I am. Nobody cares." His face was smooth, flawless except for a trace of acne along

his lower jaw. He had lank blond hair.

"Are you alright?" I asked. "I mean, I can drive you somewhere. Do you need me to take you home?"

"I'm totally fine," he said, a note of defiance in his voice.

"Well, what are you doing?" I asked.

"I was working."

"What do you mean, working?" I countered.

"For this Chinese couple, they don't understand: you can't *work* every other day."

I was so tired.

"Have you ever spent any time in Chicago?" he asked.

"No," I said, though I had been to Chicago before.

"You should go there sometime."



Perhaps we understood that strangers don't usually just get into other people's cars in the middle of the night, but that it's a perfectly straightforward possibility of which we are more or less capable at any given moment. *The world is not strange.*

He sat in the passenger seat like a sullen shadow, as if speaking to me from within my own solitude. I didn't know what to say, and my thoughts remained inaccessible to me. The car seemed to glide down the avenue on its own. We passed an open space, grass and trees.



One night I had walked by an empty, blindingly lit tennis court at the edge of a deserted park in the Mission. The lurid brightness dissolved into the surrounding darkness, revealing bits of trash littered on a sloping lawn. *I found myself before a stage.*

A homeless woman called to me from behind the chain-link fence enclosing the court. She stood alone next to a shopping cart, her face sunken in the hood of a dirty sweatshirt.



She mentioned that the night was pleasant. There was the touch of a buried need in the way she addressed me: *I know you, I appeal to you*. She approached the fence with the gentle bearing of a hermit and asked how I was doing. I longed to be honest. I had recently read about the suicide of a journalist who had been writing a book about a mass rape. *I have known a mortal fear*.

"Would you like an apple?" she asked. A round gray object sailed through the air, making a tall, sharp arc over the fence. I caught it as she screamed, "Your mother had semen in her vagina!" I quickly turned and walked away, the apple in my hand.

After a few blocks, I slowed beside a trash can. "What the fuck," I whispered. I let the apple roll off my palm and into the trash. *There is an alienation that only wants to get closer*.



"You could keep going this way," he said, "but I would really suggest going that way." He indicated a turn, I missed it, and we were trapped inside a mess of traffic inextricably routed toward a center of frenzied nocturnal activity. I had forgotten about San Francisco Pride weekend.

Taxis honked in the din. The street was suddenly crowded, pedestrians overflowing the sidewalks. Some of them seemed to have lost their minds and were now roaming about wildly. The window of the car next to mine jerked open. A bald man leered at me from behind the wheel. In the back seat, a gang of bare-breasted men grinned at me as the car rolled by.

"This is what we get for a Saturday," my passenger muttered without amusement. I braked as a group of naked men cut across the street in front of us.

"So, what do you do in the city?" I asked him.

"That is the question for us both to answer during this time," he said. He continued to observe the riotous procession, as if he were sitting at a windowsill above.

The traffic moved along slowly, and I lapsed into a silence, a tide washing away the course of the evening. Groups of humans walked with libidinal focus, ignorant of

the dark waters crashing on the shores of the peninsula. The earth had rolled away from the sun; an atmosphere of electric light pushed toward the night sky. We watched from behind the glass of my car.

I saw the slogan "Stop the Violence, Stop the Hate" in the crowd and remembered newspaper headlines about queer couples murdered in parks while making love. There was a hill sloping gradually downward beyond the intersection we were approaching.

"You could cut my throat and eat me. I wouldn't be one to protest," he said.

"But are you okay? I mean, really? Do you need me to drop you off somewhere?"

"I'm totally fine," he said in a different voice, brushing aside my concern. "There will be order over there." He nodded toward the far side of the intersection, like an oracle free-falling through his element.

The gowned man had entered my life. Here was another of my kind, an actor playing a role in the upkeep of significance within the course of history. Warm air passed through muscle pulled taut in his throat, making sounds, and I understood these words.

Reading the license plate of a car in front of us, he trailed off into an incoherent succession of numbers and digits. He looked at me with mild brown eyes, and the crowd surged, a mess of life illuminated by the emergency lights flashing on the periphery.

"Wouldn't it be terrible without me here?" he asked. "I mean like, no, like now, when we're just waiting behind these cars, unable to go anywhere, just waiting for something to happen. Wouldn't it be terrible if I weren't here with you?"



In my apartment, alone in the evenings, sometimes I would lose the thread. I began to believe there was none, yet pursued this conclusion just as doggedly. *I wandered within an interminable whiteness that filled space the way a room devoid of light surfeits the eye with nothing*.

Eventually I gathered the force of my wearied indignation; I threw on warmer clothes and turned myself into the street. I headed somewhere where the bars were still full and people were out. I walked. I got a maniac's urge to ask people, out of the blue,

forthrightly and penetratingly, what they were doing. I trailed behind small groups strolling on the sidewalk. I crossed the street unthinkingly to be closer to a woman whose appearance aroused desire, though I knew it was wrong, to approach somebody in such circumstances, at night, outside the sanctioned and comforting enclosures that permitted, even encouraged, such approaches. I was quickly overcome by a fear of being condemned in the eyes of the stranger, yet I craved a recognition of something so stubbornly unsayable, it seemed only a miraculous and fractured trust spontaneously originating in the blackness of the night could help me.



We came through the traffic. I drove the car away, down the hill. He brushed his fingers over the dashboard, the controls of the broken radio.

"Nothing?" he asked ambivalently.

I confirmed, "Nothing."

From the drink holder he took a glass Coke bottle. Earlier that day, I'd thrown out the roses I'd kept in there. They had dried out and begun to rot. Littered around the car like potpourri, the petals were limp and delicate, the color of purple chalk. He sniffed at the mouth of the bottle.

"It's just old water. I had some flowers, roses."

He held it in front of his face.

"It's just rose water," I said.

He began to sip cautiously. It wasn't rose water; it was stagnant water that a decaying plant had been festering in.

"You're drinking rose water," I said again. He pressed the bottle to his lips and drank.

"It's just old rose water," I said again, to the incorrigibility of the world incarnate.

A few blocks away from the demonstrations, the city was quiet. I turned onto a side street.

"It's alright if I drop you off here, then?" I said, and pulled over at the corner. He

picked up his hat from the floor and checked the seat.

"Did I leave anything?"

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Roger."

As he stepped out of my car, I caught sight of his ankle. The hairs were thick and matted at the edge of his sock. He was wearing leather boots, scuffed like bowling shoes. I lost him as he disappeared around the corner, carrying my bottle, walking into the morning like an immortal. *Like you, I will learn to let go of what has nothing to do with me, as soon as I understand what that is.*

December 2014