



Rebecca Fifield
Raptor

My still morning is upended by a frantic wing-beat and the shadow-flicker of sunlight broken by pulsating feathers. The bird plunges down past my window. It dives toward the street in pursuit of a single insect, a delicious necessary morsel that had been minding its own business before ending as a momentary crunch within the bird's beak.

This disruption is unwelcome. I put down my pen and look up from my desk, out into the street.

Never seen her before. She is making her way along the sidewalk. I see her at Point A, at the left, moving toward Point B, at the right. The billowing white skirt of her dress snaps upward before she is erased by the window frame.

*

I sit here every morning, scratching my beard and drinking terrible black coffee. Watching people walking along the street is something I avoid. Before I retired I used to watch streets for my former employer, the United States of America, with an M24 jammed into my shoulder pocket. Watching streets means killing people. I killed sixty-three of them.

Mott Street is quiet during the morning. The graffiti-marked security gates are pulled down

tight. There are no high heels, very few cabs honking in displeasure, no yelling and laughter of fancy people. Later will be a different story. It is still morning. All should be quiet.

My mind is not quiet. I've been looking out the window instead of doing my crossword puzzle. I fixate on the street like in the old days, in East Germany, the Soviet Union.

There: he is a man going to work. No briefcase. There: a mother rolls her pram toward the bodega on the corner. *Shit, Chuck. She's holding a coffee, not a hand grenade.* I scowl and look back down at my crossword. My fingertip rests on the next clue: 10 Across. Sandwich shop, four letters. I look up again.

Dammit. It's her again. A large bag hangs over her other shoulder, the one not close to me. Honestly, neither of her shoulders is close to me. I lean my chin into my hand, my body shifting forward toward the window. Her hair swings with the momentum of her walk, and suddenly an earring sparkles from within. It may be silver; I doubt that it is of finer stuff.

She passes and the day resumes being dull. My comfort is made of dullness.

*

Rain dims the morning and umbrellas like mushrooms make their way down the street. This is New York, so most umbrellas are black. I tried some once—mushrooms, not umbrellas—in a country house outside of Dusseldorf. Those umbrellas were more kaleidoscope-colored. Not black.

I doubt I could distinguish her from other people under their umbrellas. But there, I am certain of the roll of her hips, the cadence of her stride.

I have recognized her and now I will recognize her.

*

The varnish on this desk fails, and I pick at it with my nail. Nail-biters lack discipline. They always have their hands in their mouths, chewing away. They do not know how to be still. I do not fidget. I do not pick at varnish. I do not stare out of windows for young women.

The sun promises to broil us all this day. Sweat beads on my water glass soon after I fill it. At my western windows there is a last gasp of early morning cool. *Fucking reading glasses.* I yank them off of my face and place them over the broken varnish.

She wears espadrilles this morning. Somehow she does not totter where the sidewalk is uneven.

*

My windows are surrounded by twelve-inch moldings, fantastic and ridiculously huge and antiquated and caked with creamy lead paint, all crazed with age. Five years have passed since I

have ventured down the stairs. Beyond my windows I do not live.

A freckled, efficient thing stops by with food. She tries to engage me in conversation; frankly, she's not attractive and her simper makes me want to die. My toiletries are delivered by a revolving cycle of deliverymen, all of them smaller than I have become. The couch has emptied of friends. Many of them have moved to New Jersey or they have died. Death and Jersey is about the same. Many of them are buried there.

My hair is thinning. My life is thinning.

*

In the morning, every morning, I sit here and complete crosswords. I do not just do them, I finish them. Quickly. They become complete under my pen. I think briefly. I act. I make no mistakes. I fill in the blocks until the puzzle is made whole. I used to memorize puzzles and do them to maintain my focus while I waited to pull the trigger.

She is not a grid. Her body moves fluidly. If she has any ache, she does not betray it. That looseness of tendon and smoothness in the joint: these are only memories under my fingertips.

Others on the sidewalk are left in her wake. Her body slips past their inconsequentiality. She is a runner who struggles with the limitations of walking.

*

There was this woman in Cologne. We slept together a few times in a cramped and worn hotel near Kyotostrasse. The affair didn't last long. I probably should have chosen a better hotel on a less grim street. We noticed each other while sitting on opposite ends of a table in an Almarkt café. Her reddened lips wore derision well and I had no self-respect.

We wandered past the Hauptbahnhof and the Dom, through the Neumarkt, and through this platz and that platz. The distance passed quickly. By the Kaiser Wilhelm Ring, sex was inevitable. The adjacent street was not so beautiful, but it reverberated with the seedier side of our intentions. The hotel was certainly convenient, but the sheets were thin and the corners of the room were stagnant and dusty. She sat atop me and I buried my face in what little breasts she had. Her eyes were the color of seawater in which sailors drown.

I look out into the street, waiting for her. *What color are your eyes, I wonder?* My old scope is under my bed.

*

I stopped leaving the house one day. It wasn't intentional. The world was fine, people at the grocery store were fine. The post office was no more a problem than it usually is. One day there was no longer a reason to venture out into the city. Now I stay in.

Letters: this morning she grasps them in her palm. They must be words written, right? Not bills paid or magazines requested? When I was in the Army, I wrote letters in my head while training my rifle on the field of fire. I chastised senators, wrote pornographic fantasies to my ex-girlfriend, sincerely explained my rationale to the Turkish woman whose husband I was about to kill. These letters never made it to print. The words evaporated as I cleaned my rifle.

Your voice, Lady, it must be melodious. Not that I am close enough to hear you. I imagine, instead, the intentions of her hand holding a pen. Her handwriting is surely smooth, like her hair, like her figure, like a spill of script sweeping down her hip and swirling around her thigh before looping up to launch off her hair, words rocketing downward as if on an alpine slope.

This is madness.

*

Sleep is elusive. Twenty-eight years in the Army. If I sleep, the sound of boots stomp relentlessly through my bed. Permanent re-enlistment, every fucking night. There are no barricades between sleep and wakefulness.

Last night I looked for my house keys. It's been two years since I've seen them. My scavenger hunt was for pure novelty. I wanted to see if the keys still existed. But after two hours I stopped looking. They weren't at the bottom of a drawer or on the high shelves in the kitchen behind where I keep the weed.

I wonder if I might have thrown them away.

*

The grocery store next to the restaurant has not been a grocery store for years. No gallon of milk has been sold there in over a decade; maybe that decade has turned into two. The glass behind the gate has yielded under rocks and crowbars that used to come during the day during worse times in New York City and now come only at night. Today I peer down from my window and into the store's interior with my scope. The store appears unchanged except for the plush coats of dust draping the counters where the registers once sat.

Her nose lifts as she passes the urban ruin, and she sniffs at the store's moldering decay.

*

Push-ups. PT. The hang of my old skin bothers me. I can too easily pinch it between my fingers. Might I coax firmness to return to me at this late stage in the game? My skin is no longer pink nor is it tan. Just more of a wan beige. Pudgy does not describe me but neither does wiry. Who would bother with young men and their stupid hands? My hands do not need to work out. They know what to do.

She'll notice my efforts.

*

City workers! *Fuck 'em*. They plant trees across the street in front of the abandoned grocery and the hip restaurant. Precious centimeters of my view of the sidewalk disappear behind these mere twigs topped with a meager sprout of leaves.

I snarl. *Where are those mothers with the dogs?* Relieve yourself here, Fido, please. The canines have killed other recent misguided botanical efforts.

*

A pebble is still stuck to the bottom of one of my shoes, deep in the tread. *Stowaway*. I fish it out. Down into the street I flick that pebble off of my thumb and forefinger.

The clatter causes her to look up.

No. With a screeching sound I slide my chair back. I am rusty at surveillance.

Her eyes lack color. They search across my windows, looking for the source of the clattering pebble.

I do not breathe.

*

She is pure calculus, rate of change. There is no stop. There is no reason to stop.

I do not want her to stop.

*

This morning the sun is hot and syrupy. Her passing is part of my routine. I sit, I wait. She passes, I live. I continue with my day, which is not living. I should stop. I should upturn my desk chair onto my desk and no longer sit. Not sit there in the morning.

*

This morning I sit out on the fire escape. No small feat, ducking through the window frame with arthritic ankles and knees. I eat an orange, I smoke a cigarillo. Acid, acrid, acid. My tongue sorts through the threads of the fruit, followed by a blast of hot, bitter air.

Sitting on the fire escape, I am closer to her. I see more of the street. I will see more of her. This is the furthest I have ventured into the world for years. This day's bruises and scrapes will surely be rewarded.

She passes by the bakery's ancient, enameled sign. Not that she stops in the bakery. I

wonder at what she eats. Nothing so leaden as bread.

*

Surely she will notice my want spilling from my apartment windows. It's unforgiving and relentless, the power with which she pushes off the pavement, forward and leaving me behind.

Any resolve to sit upright in my ladderback chair dissolves, and soon I splay across the battered linoleum. The ancient fan wheezes and blusters, a metal death-blade straining under the letters WESTINGHOUSE. The hot sun shifts from one set of windows to another, then empties from the sky.

My buzzer is ringing. Could it be? The clock in the kitchen reads 8 p.m. It must be Henry, bearing booze and old war stories. I push myself up from the floor. Terrible way to pass the day.

*

Her dress is like a lipstick smear across a collar, a fluttering red-flag-like thing. It's that painting by someone like Hooker, Cooker, Tooker. You know, the suspicious eyes of gray men peering at the lady in the subway, but remember, they all wear respectable hats. About the same time each day, my lady passerby glides past an elderly woman in a plastic-coated floral smock. The smock-wearer travels in the opposite direction, purposefully dragging an empty market cart. Both go in search of those things that will fill them.

*

Henry brought Johnnie Walker last night. He always settles on the left side of my old plaid couch. I grab mismatched jam jars from the kitchen.

We always end our old-man crabbing and tall tales with Henry suggesting we go to Yankee Stadium, Governor's Island, some Vets cruise, some gallery opening for a friend of his lady friend. He ignores my self-imposed quarantine. Never makes a point of calling me on it, never even acknowledges that I do not go anywhere. He just suggests we make plans. I always respond, "Yeah, sounds like a good idea."

He never purchases tickets. I never follow up.

*

I don't believe in deities. For all intents and purposes, I used to be one. It isn't all it's cracked up to be. I've determined who lives and who dies, dispatching men and women from small windows above streets.

Now my tongue mutters strange words of supplication. Is this what it is to pray? This is not

the patter of silent words I used to maintain focus as I crouched above cities, playing god.

This morning she's dressed in heartbreaking, verdant sweetness. My whistle is thick and full and appreciative. Her head cranes, looking for the source. She knows it is for her.

My lips freeze mid-whistle. Then I hiss, "*Jesus!*"

*

She grows like a vine across my day, insidious, the ivy that chews at the bricks. Wrenching down that vine could never obliterate her history. Once knitted to the surface, her suckers will leave pockmarks in the mortar until it, too, crumbles.

Her breath hangs in the chilly air this morning, the hem of her coat sending the street-fallen leaves aloft. It sweeps around the grandmother and her shopping cart, the mothers on phones with coffee and dogs and strollers.

In the evening Henry brings me the day's paper along with the scotch. I let the newspaper steep until the next morning. The scotch, that we drink.

This morning I pay the paper no mind, and I sit in the window, waiting. Then, through my old scope: the sweep of coat, the furry vine, the leaves tinged with red, the loll of her head.

Poison, surely. I begin to itch.

*

Cold. Within it is nothingness. No heave. No pang. Summer's green surge is now brittle and crisp and skittering down the pavement. In the cold we can breathe again.

Her stride does not have the same flow. She wraps herself against that chastening breeze. *Could I stop her?* I imagine it: she leans into my chest, I hold her. I don't wish to be a roadblock—only a pause, a perch.

Then her eyes are wild, her mouth distended into a great "O":

"Get the fuck off of me!"

I shift uncomfortably in my chair, that ladderback oak thing from my mother's house, darkened by oils, oxygen, time.

*

The old rag factory is burning, the one on Broadway. Twenty years ago I used to bum tools off the foreman. Distracted was his middle name. Really. He never remembered that I borrowed something from him. My whole tool bench is thanks to him.

I lean out the window and toward the nighttime burn. I peer sideways to catch my neighbors also peering out of their window; their faces are red from the firelight. Sirens are raging over on Broadway. Here on Mott, crispy ashes are falling softly around us like a deep, black snowfall. This fire might consume us all, and yet we stare at its romance as if it were

rendered on a Hallmark card.

By seven in the morning, our exhausted neighborhood lies quiet in a tired, gray heap. Either due to the lessening of the fire or the coming of the sunrise, the night's brilliance is now gone, and my neighbors and I retreat from our posts. My head is throbbing from lack of sleep, from the odors of burned everything wafting through the damp morning air. I twirl my scope through my fingers, listening to the city's hum, no less diminished by the night's fire.

Would I have run from the fire?

I might have let it take me. The fire is already burning.

But the fire cannot stop her. This morning she picks her way carefully down the sidewalk through the ash and debris. *Enough of this.*

My hand pushes up the window sash, and I climb out onto the fire escape. There I spread my arms wide for her to see. I send no bullets. I send myself.

"*Hey!* You down there. Yes, that's right. You. You walk here each day. You're beautiful. I notice you every day. Now I'm yelling down at you. Fucking stupid, right? Enjoy your walk—must be a mess out there today. I wouldn't know. I haven't left my apartment for five years, but that's the kind of crazy shit you expect in this town. This is just one of those ridiculous moments, but you will forget about it soon enough. Tell your friends about it over wine tonight. Have a great day. See you tomorrow. Or I probably won't see you tomorrow. If some asshole yelled at me from his fire escape, I'd probably choose another street, right? Good-bye, lovely lady."

I look at her for a long, last second and think, *Odd; why doesn't she run?* Her mouth gapes with the horror of being called out but she does not move. I wave at her and then turn to climb back inside my window. A guy in the next building rolls up his window and shouts, "*Shut the fuck up, geezer! Geez.*"

*

Snow is just seconds away from falling from the crystalline air. I lean out my window to escape the overzealous steam radiator, into the winter cleanness that delivers the city from its summer squalor. It is 7:42 in the morning.

Of course; that's where they are. On my bookshelf I take down a stack of small flowerpots and fish out my house keys. Shoes next; my feet object to being slammed into the stiff leather. I stick my coat out the window to shake the dust off the shoulders.

The doorknob. Curious thing. Wondrous, my hand grasping the tarnished brass and then turning the knob. I did not tell my hand to stop this time. My door opens. The marble sill is not nearly so wide and impassable as last time. I step over it and stand in my shoes on the small, hexagonal tiles in the hall. Now the stairs: my right hip moans from the unfamiliar movement of moving down the flight.

Snowflakes drift along the pavement. It's abnormal, this much snow, this time of year. In the snow my coat does not appear dusty. I step down onto the sidewalk. We are on equal footing this day.

I don't wait for her. The store gates are rolling up—the stock boys take deliveries, bodega owners take down packs of cigarettes for the regulars. Her shape does not approach. And why would she?

My feet now move and they move me toward Spring Street, after all these years. There is so much new out here, signs, and young people, and irrelevance, like rice pudding stores and handbags.

Women walk past me on the sidewalk. But I can't say I remember what she looks like.

Rebecca Fifield has written multiple scholarly articles and book chapters published by institutions like the Smithsonian Institution, the American Institute for Conservation, the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, and the George Washington University. Her work is forthcoming in Blue Lake Review. She earned a master's degree in museum studies from the George Washington University, and she now works as a museum and library preservation administrator. You can learn more about Rebecca Fifield at www.rlfifield.net.