

## Transit

By BLT

1

In the club, Lan was giving me a bump of ketamine. She said this was the drug of our generation and generations after us. She said no one liked speed anymore. Speed heightened people. Naturally, people liked to relax, but do you know what they liked more than relaxation? I shook my head. She keyed another bump, brought it to her nostril—and in. Dissociation, she said. They want to escape the modern world’s chaos. To be voyeurs of their own lives. The world operates on them, and they don’t want to feel it.

\*

A couple approached me. I was dancing, eyes closed, when a pair of hands found my waist and stayed there. The man held me. The woman stood beside us. She looked at the man, she looked back at me, then she smiled. He smiled. The music changed its rhythm; the beats pinched and spread thin. I smiled back. The hands applied pressure. He came closer until his chest pressed against my back. I felt his face over my hair. I turned and kissed him. Did they do this often? Picking up young men in dark rooms to share? I didn’t mind; I would like to be shared. We went



on like that until the woman pulled the man away. She kissed my cheek and whispered in my ear—something nice. They were out of sight. I closed my eyes and wondered what I could do with all that. I went on dancing. Nothing, I thought, nothing at all.

2

I was returning to Vietnam after six years in

**I had gone to his motel room that night, I had undressed, he had heaved me, up and down, my arms around his neck, like I was nothing. I liked the feeling of being nothing.**

America. I was in transit, from New York to Hanoi, when relief overcame my body in the airport lounge. I began to cry as I watched planes come and go in a vast, empty space. When I was sixteen, I had left my native country to pursue education abroad. Now, I was twenty-two—a full-blown cynical bilingual whore with a degree in Western literature. Despite my hope, I had never found true love in this country. I had been tricked into working hard for my excellence without prospect of money—I accepted sexual promiscuity in the absence of a sustaining romantic connection—I was, obviously, spent. I had lost the sense of home for some time, and I was returning to the place I thought I never wanted to be in. I wasn't hoping to find home, but I was ready for another life.

### 3

I stood in the street; Hanoi's wind blew in my face. I had moved out of my parents' and accepted a job as an English teacher. My apartment was by a lake, a metropolitan area clustered with expatriates.

I imagined myself a beautiful whore living by the lake. Foreign men in the vicinity would come find me, in their loneliest hours. They surrounded

and lengthened around my person. Their eyes shone with want and respect. All they ever wanted was me, and I would pretend it was true. Altogether, all at once, the same.

### 4

Cars, motorbikes, scooters, bicycles, wagons, buses, trucks, and pedestrians travelled on the same roads. The roads were narrow. This city had no room for cars. Vehicles swirled and swerved. The shit they dragged on their scooters: another scooter, a mattress, stacked chicken coops, a slain pig, a cherry blossom, name the burden. Ride by intuition, lack, and the desire to get past this life already. The traffic police stationed here and there. You are pulled over: don't talk back or make a case; call in a favor if you can; if not, a bill, discreetly. I wondered if the heat made us all crazy or the low wages. We rode by the law of avoidance, respecting no lanes, overtaking anything that moved, missing each other by a fucking hair.

\*

I had a memory of an American man. He had driven thousands of miles. He was almost seven

feet tall, in his thirties, and muscle-bound. As if he came from a dream. I had gone to his motel room that night, I had undressed, he had heaved me, up and down, my arms around his neck, like I was nothing. I liked the feeling of being nothing. The only thing we shared was the outline of a human male. I had fallen in love. In the morning, he kissed me goodbye and drove away. I never saw him again. Later, in the aftermath of my feeling, I realized I knew nothing about him, not even his name, not where he was from, his intentions, where he was headed.

\*

I couldn't drive, so I ordered service scooters. Or I would walk. There was no space to walk. The pavement was miniscule or non-existent; and if it existed, it would be appropriated as parking. Its surface was uneven and induced tripping. You could never walk a straight line, you had to swerve, step down onto the road often, and brace for your little life.

My aunt was maddened by my failure. *What kind of Vietnamese are you?* She led me to her garage and pointed to an orange scooter covered in dust.

—*But I don't know how!*

—*You are going to learn.*

In her seriousness, I suspended my dread and initiated a mode of psychopathy. Equanimity arose to serve chaos.

I drove.

*Relax your shoulders,* my aunt yelled. *Never turn*

*around, they know they have to avoid you; never drive directly behind them, so if they suddenly stop or you do, you wouldn't jam straight into their ass; overtake that man, he's riding at a snail's pace; keep going; keep that speed but never below it, don't fool yourself you can do more; if they ever get you, do you know who to call?*

A week passed. My aunt imposed her abusive lessons daily.

It was rush hour. I drove and didn't die.

—*You can borrow the scooter.*

—*But I don't have a license.*

—*Then don't get caught.*

—*Umm . . .*

—*You're welcome.*

—*Auntie!*

—*See. How easy it was. You are still Vietnamese.*

## 5

Lan was a pure-looking young woman, though her actions exposed her inner chaos. She was Vietnamese Australian. She was in Hanoi for a gap year. She liked house music and laughing balloons. We met in an underground club last month, and other than that, I knew nothing about her. All I knew was that I liked her, liked her ease, the way she commanded materials and language to render her presence irresistible, cool. Every weekend, I would see her having little seizures from the balloons. It was scary to watch until it wasn't. She had an episode, laughed it off, and kept on. The equanimity with which she carried her chaos astonished. It shouldn't have. I said

hello.

\*

Leaning over the bar, a stranger also said hello.

—You look lonely. Come, he said, let me fix that.

\*

On his kitchen island, the Stranger was giving me a white line. He promised that it would accelerate my being. After, I felt I loved him more. He was the only one that remained after a night's worth. And he looked delicious and kind in God's fluorescent light. I was familiar with the feeling the lines created; even if it would not last, it was not less real. They made us taut and erased our reservations, and despite knowing better, sometimes all I needed was this. This is my medicine, the Stranger said. He felt the condensation of all things inside. The simmering edges of it all. The hyper focus, the hypersexual, the hyper sense of time. I am *more of myself*.

6

Morning, afternoon, and late into the night I surfed social media. Mindless content offered a mild form of solace against emptiness, or reinforced it, I don't know, but every picture and video I ever surfed through have led me here, to this algorithmic curation of well-formed near-

naked men, sad novels, scenes from indie cinema, pornstars teasing each other by the pool, pit bulls, rave fashion, and sassy memes. Who has created this curation? Me or the machine?

\*

I changed how I looked. The buzzcut I had throughout college had to go. All of my thrifted clothes had to go. The moustache that made me look lewd. The torn belt. All the T-shirts I shredded for style. Nails. I denounced jeans and adopted corduroy. I wore my dad's watch. Everything except my books. Now that I made money, I wanted and could afford things that lasted, ornate things that bedazzled the senses: a bright pink Hydro Flask, magenta corduroy pants, a red phone case, a terracotta multi-purpose backpack. It was not that I deluded myself with the inflated values of these commodities. I could delude myself just fine. Materialism was no longer for me the greedy ownership of objects, but the ease with which I valued and commanded materials to intensify my presence in this world. I wanted to be stunning. I wanted to manipulate people's perception of me. I could; I was doing it now.

7

On any given day, I watched too much porn. In these moving pictures, there existed a feeling which I aspired towards. Like a kind of success at

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living. I recognized all the actors. I knew their adopted positions, the sounds of their grunts, the specific contours of their faces and their carefully crafted bodies. I knew their particular moves in moments of letting go, what their reactions could do to me, the way their mouths opened as their other mouths closed in. They ought to film and choreograph it better, I thought. There was always too much light in the scene, so that the subjects blended into the background. The camera cared more about a close-up of the lock than about feelings generated by the lock, by their faces. It made sex less real and more like something for breakfast.

8

The Stranger sent me a message, asking to see me again.

—Your hole was so good, he said.

—How good?

—Like Tiger Woods in the 1997 Masters. Like the moon crater that hosted Neil Armstrong. Like—

—Quiet now.

Holding my phone, I walked out to my balcony. The air was thick as cum. I saw the night sky, and all I could see was beautiful, beautiful

emptiness.

I told him I was free, in fact, tonight.

9

It was not my plan to teach English as a second language, but here, my degree seemed only good for this. During the job interview, the interviewer was calm and polite. It was a private school, but owned by a for-profit, so technically, a business. The information she gave had a veneer of truthfulness. She warned me about the difficulties of the job, about its demanding nature, the excess of administrative tasks, the need for utmost organization, and upon seeing that I was undaunted, the perverseness of students, which she attributed to the pandemic. She asked for my rate, and I gave an uninformed number. She said that since I had exotic qualifications for a Vietnamese, my lack of experience was okay as long as I was willing to learn and be patient.

We hit a silent spot in our conversation. She stood up and refilled our glasses. *You are an artist*, she said as she handed me the glass, *I could tell*. I looked at her and shook my head. My clothes and my mannerisms must be giving that idea. I looked like I was headed to a club. An ornate shirt, baggy jeans with a permanent splash of yellow paint,

glasses with transparent frames, a pair of off-white Converse, and a black fanny pack slung across my side. *The students will love you*, she declared, *they love artists. But in my experience*, she continued, *artists are incapable of dealing with pressure and deadlines*. I assured her the economy had a way of hammering artists into shape.

While the interviewer spoke in professional Vietnamese, my Vietnamese struggled to match. When I left Vietnam, I had left my tongue behind. I was not ashamed to admit that I abandoned it, like abandoning a bad lover. I turned myself over to English, studied it and produced it to the point of native fluency. Now I thought in English and cried in English. My Vietnamese operated only in informal life. I talked shit and talked back in Vietnamese, that was the extent of it. It was stuck there, happy, unwilling to be more. So when I spoke to the interviewer, I gave a sense of casualness, like I was her friend. I was aware of what I was doing and liked it. If this was a business that dealt with serious adults, it could have posed a problem, but it was a business that dealt in teenage dreams.

## 10

When I was a teen, my parents sent me to study English in its dead form. Training in grammar, syntax, lexicons. Trying, in desperation, to absorb a new structure of meaning. There was a teacher who spent his Sundays lecturing modern English grammar to one hundred students in his

basement. I was one of them. He stood in front of the class and ran his mouth over the future. (Tenses.) The rules were set. The rules were everything. All we needed was to remember. He gave us worksheets to master. But practice derailed convention: he yanked my earlobe when I used the wrong tense. Have you no sense of time? he asked.

Every two classes, we would be given a written test. While he taught, his teaching assistants graded the tests. At the end of class, our grades arrived. An assistant seized the red marker in an elaborate gesture and wrote a number on the whiteboard. Half the class's faces went dim upon seeing. The other half packed their things and departed the basement. In the main, I remained. We were then asked to walk towards a long table and lie face down. The teacher drew his rattan rod and struck each underperformed student. He emitted a distinct sound as he performed the act. I could no longer tell if it was the animal part of him. We limped back to our seats and corrected our grammatical deficit; we would be given more to master. Later, in front of the mirror, my posterior would resemble grilled meat. My parents appraised the product and thought the class was necessary, that it would motivate me.

\*

The students I taught first mistook me for an American.

I almost didn't deny it.

—It is the way you speak, they said, and the way you move.

—How do I move?

—Like you own the space.

\*

The students wanted to master English. They asked me to show them how. I found them a passage of Chaucer’s English:

*A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.*

*No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;*

*As smothe it was as it were late shave.*

*I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.*

You want to master this? I asked. They turned hesitant. That’s not English, a student said. The truth is I never master anything, I said. Perhaps only the art of deepthroating, I didn’t say. I could not master something that was alive (a cock is stiff as a corpse). So I asked the students to try to master that. Use language as a tool, I said, you’ll feel *more happy*.

\*

Once, I met a German who was training to be a linguist.

He came the moment he was inside.

After, he apologized.

—It has been three months, he said (embarrassed), I shouldn’t have come.

\*

Conjugate for the following phrase: If he .... (know) the outcome, he ... (come) anyway.

A. If he had knew the outcome, he would have cum anyway.

B. If he had known the cum, he would have out the cum anyway.

C. If he knows the outcum, he is come come anyway.

D. If he had cum on the outcome, the outcome would have still come anyway.

\*

Whenever spring comes, Rosie, my cousin’s dog, would eat a bumblebee she found on flowers. Her cheek swelled; she never learned her lesson. The doctor said there were no immediate remedy; she just had to wait it out. We pet her more. We avoid saying the word “bumble” in her earshot. The word triggered Rosie. If you said it continuously, she would go crazy. She was mad at my cousin for a day, refusing his pets. I told them it might be the alliteration, the sound of her trauma, reverberating.

\*

I have no trauma, I told the Stranger. What I meant was that violence did not always define me, but he took it to believe I was filled with pretension. I told him it was now the age of resilience, of moving on. I remembered what happened and have negotiated with my past; why

**Language was never just language. It carried who people were. But my mother tongue had felt like an entrapment. It was too real. There were dimensions of myself I could not access through it.**

would I want to make that the center of my life? Perhaps I had the luxury. I was more, I thought. I was glib, too.

\*

Language was never just language. It carried who people were. But my mother tongue had felt like an entrapment. It was too real. There were dimensions of myself I could not access through it. I needed to be outside nativity. Now, wielding English like chopsticks, I could only speak something that was not mine.

11

I was growing tired of lyrics. Of music that was animated by language. Too much language ruined living. I realized this, weeks after residing inside electronic sounds with Lan. Words carried ideas. In the dark room, I simply wanted to be rid of ideas. To accept instant feelings that sustained and swayed me for hours. Perhaps this was a phase I was going through, a change of form after time has made old forms obsolete.

\*

—Don't we look stunning, Lan said, though the hour is ungodly.

\*

Lan and I were friends who go to clubs together. We don't have access to other dimensions of each other's lives. I don't like my friends, she said, and their ostentatious "I LOVE YOU" devoid of meaning. They can't do what we do. It requires a certain mentality, rigor, and quiet collective indulgence. They can't stay out past 12. The party really starts at 7. They talk too much. They can't listen to anything that is not pop. When they dance, there is syncopation between them and the music. You are nothing like that. In fact, she looked at me, *you are perfect*.

I smiled, but not taken aback, not knowing what Lan meant. I mean it, she said, slurping on a pomegranate frozen margarita. You are lean, strong, and lasting. Your posture. Your fashion. Your mysticism. Your English is perfect. You don't use music as a crutch. You read books no one reads. (Thanks.) You want to create, even though you haven't figured out the way, but you will. You know the world operates on you. You are dangerous, too, because you are too perfect.



You are the perfect combination of a scholar and a whore, not one or either varying through times, but always both at once.

I told her it was hard to assimilate everything she was saying, and that she's throwing that word around like a ragdoll. But it made me feel deceptively special, I said, thank you anyhow.

\*

At the end of the night, I felt like a medium. An instrument. It was the purity of sound that passed through me and moved my body. I had no will. It was strange but familiar. I didn't mind; I felt free.

12

The Stranger wanted foreplay in the shower, but it was cold today, and I had forgotten to heat the water

So he pinched my nipples  
Bent me in half  
And entered—  
—Are you leaving? I asked at the end when he started to put his clothes on  
He laughed in a way that meant *Yes, now that the business is done*  
I shook his hand  
And cleared my throat, forced a rasp in my voice:  
—Pleasure doing business with you  
After he left, I sat down to contemplate my new life

After he left, I had an urge to watch a horror film

\*

It is advised that one does not include the number that comes after 12 and before 14 in one's building's elevator—or anywhere for that matter—due to the number's inherent unlucky nature. Don't fret. The residents' initial confusion will be overcome.

14

—Teacher, why do you wear sunglasses?

Pause. Silence. Stare.

—Because I am a vampire.

Lesson begins.

\*

How can a person do this every day? Standing in a room filled with little imps, trying to grab the attention of half-formed minds, trying to lead and shape chaos. The students didn't care about knowledge per se. They only cared when the delivery of knowledge was *fun*; the lessons should be thrilling, and they shouldn't have to work so hard. *They are our customers*, a colleague told me; *if anything happens, we are to blame.*

\*

At school, an English class was taught by two teachers: one Vietnamese, the other an expatriate. The system dictated that the expat teacher helped students speak and write, because these skills could only be instructed by their nativeness. The Vietnamese teacher, who was (un)naturally good at grammar, because they studied it, were not born into it, worked to deconstruct the language into manageable bits and building blocks. The expats were paid quadruple the salary of the Vietnamese, regardless of experience. *But you speak like one of them*, my mother barked, *it's unjust—all that money on your education! I understand*, I told her, *but there is not much I can do*.

We believe the language belongs to them. Moreover, *the expats were from developed nations*, my colleague explained, *if we pay them Vietnamese wages, they won't stay. I am just a rarity on special offer*, I told my mother, *and I'm fucking angry*.

So I acted out in other ways. I didn't wear uniforms; I wore sunglasses. I changed the lessons. I paused class, so I could take long gulps of my boba tea and chewed the boba deliciously. The students loved me for these acts. When the customers loved you, the politics went your way.

\*

Today I scraped the lesson plan from the curriculum and led my students to the computer lab. Thirty minutes prior, I had created an impromptu worksheet for them. I told them that they could choose any material they wished to

engage with for the lesson, as long as it was substantially in English, and then fill out the worksheet. I did this because I wasn't in the mood to teach and because I thought the students could benefit from their own minds.

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1. What material did you choose?  
—*Love song*
2. What is your material about? (50 words minimum)  
—*Love*
3. Why did you choose this material? (50 words minimum)  
—*Because fun*
4. Is it substantially in English? (25 words minimum)  
—*I think so*
5. What is the form of your material? Is it a poem, an interview, a movie? Does the form matter? (100 words minimum)  
—*Hub?*

15

In New York, an estranged cousin was gesturing to the playground before us, which she and some friends monopolized when they were children and snuck out to when they were suddenly teenage girls. She was telling me how she missed those days when, she swore, all children did was try to die. No, not like that. Trying to die under the ambush of genuine stupidity, where she

hurled a tetherball into a muscular orbit and it kissed her playmate deeply in his teeth. All that parents ever tried to do, she swore, was stop children from dying. Now, Hoa was twenty-seven and spent, living with her mother and looking to move out. I am wistful, she said, for how undemanding and unblemished those days were, and laughed. But I said I didn't think it was true. *There was no such thing as an unblemished childhood*, I remembered. Things, innocent now, were exactly as they were.

\*

My mother and I went to the movies. She was walking behind me, then she shouted *Stop*, not aggressively, but not nicely either. She told me to walk right. *You move like nobody*, she said—it almost sounded like a compliment. *Why do you walk like that?* she asked, *you never walked like that*. How did I walk? *Like a cooked noodle* was the answer.

\*

It had never occurred to me to ask, so I sat down and asked my father:

—*Why did you let me leave?*

—*Leave what?*

—*Leave Vietnam when I was so young. Alone.*

He looked at me seriously. Then he smiled, a little.

—*You wanted to leave. You were so adamant that we*

*had to give you a chance. And you could do it. That was clear.*

—*What about money? It was a lot of money.*

—*It was a lot, but we had it. Well, your mother had it. From her business. Barely.*

—*Okay, I said, but no parents in our town would have ever allowed that, even the ones with money.*

—*We did.*

—*Why?*

—*Why all these questions?*

—*Well, it was a decision that changed everything.*

—*It is done, isn't it? Why bother?*

—*I found it contradictory, too. You two wanted to control everything I did when I lived with you. You wouldn't even let me attend school in another city, in our own country, but you sent me solo to another hemisphere?*

—*Why're you putting us on trial?*

—*I'm not.*

—*Then quit it.*

Silence.

—*Would you rather not have gone?* he asked.

I was silent.

—*Would you?* he pressed.

—*No, I said, I would have left, still.*

—*There.*

He stood up and started to leave.

—*You have changed*, he said at the threshold.

—*How?*

—*I don't understand you anymore.*

\*

I visited my family once a month. The commute

from Hanoi to home took about an hour by train. My grandma gave me pork ribs, egg noodles, minced beef, green vegetables, Danish cookies, and red wine to take. *Eat. Eat. Eat.* She kept asking when I was getting married. I never kept in touch with friends from home. My parents were the most ordinary people to form in the aftermath of the war. Except for an episode where my father cheated, and all went to hell for two months. They were boring and loving people, which, I have realized now, was all I ever needed from family. *Are you still with that job?* my mother asked, *You should be making at least twice what you're making; what a waste; here, take some money for the bus.*

16

I used to work on a mono strawberry farm, Lan said. I loved strawberries, so it was a dream come true. We ate strawberries every day. It was pure pleasure. To ensure their quality, we tasted them every two minutes. Five days a week, twelve hours a day, thirty strawberries an hour. Excess did something to me. I never ate another one after that.

My point is, she continued, slurping on a frozen mango margarita, you can't love drugs and drugs alone. There have to be things you can direct your energy towards when the chemical feelings wear off. You can't love only one thing, not because it doesn't last, but because it will last longer than you can love it. You must move on

to other things, and leave this one thing alone, and then come back. You will forget how it feels, you wonder why you have left in the first place, but leaving, she continued, leaving makes it real again.

Okay.

But then there were those people that didn't get sick of the strawberries. Ever. They are rare, really rare, but they exist. I envy them. I envy their biology or the secret of their capability. Perhaps I fear them. I never asked how they did it. Not because it's trivial, this strawberry matter! But because I fear they do not know, or worst of all, it is pure luck.

17

A wise woman once told me: you are what you pay attention to.

Cocks.

When I meet strange men for sex, I find it hard to break through the initial strangeness of being strangers together wanting something so intimate and intense. I considered sex a mode of socialization. Time talking to my subject, training him in my presence and vice versa, alleviated the pressure of fucking an idea. Then suddenly: contact. Everything came naturally. I would understand the rhythm we have created at once. Though, it was not always this easy.

But fucking an idea was fine. Perhaps better. Ideas translated by bodies into sex. An idea thrilled.

Scene of a gangbang.

18

I was horny and thought of the Stranger. We had been seeing each other for months. On and off in his bedroom. We never talked. He requested we keep our relationship that way. He was tired of forming new relationships just to let them go, to find out that he didn't like the person after all and didn't know how to extricate himself except by abruptly leaving and ghosting that person. He said he tremendously enjoyed sleeping with me and that he was sure I was a great man, but there was no need for a new psychology to unravel at the moment.

I understood the thrill of continuing to fuck someone you didn't know; however, over time, didn't it build up a kind of existential suspense?

But yesterday, something changed. When I stood to leave after coitus, the Stranger told me to stay.

I obeyed.

—Can I get you a drink? he asked.

—What kind?

—No, let's go out for dinner.

—Where?

—You choose.

—Now?

—It's my birthday.

—Oh.

—Sorry to spring this on you.

I caressed his abs and told him it's alright.

—I just feel lonely today.

We went to a street restaurant where I usually had my fix. We sat and ordered. The Stranger pointed out that the ceiling was caving in. I told him it would be an exquisite death. The waiter arrived with a pitcher of iced green tea. No, it fucking wouldn't.

He apologized again, this time for breaking the terms of our situationship, but he needed someone to talk to.

I am turning fifty, he said, paused, corrected himself: I *am* fifty. Upon hearing, I felt strangely spirited and nosy.

He was—originally—having an identity crisis. He had been an actor for twenty years, but he had rarely played meaningful roles. Except for his last movie, which was snubbed, and in which he played a character he wasn't sure he succeeded in depicting. He played a fifty-year-old artist who had blazed right through life. The artist was at the highest point of his career, though he had unsuccessful marriages. A technology came and revolutionized the artist's industry. The technology made him obsolete. The artist realized that was it. That was his time. The only gift he had to live for: gone. Most people would move on and try to find meaning in other things. The artist killed himself. The Stranger wanted to know how the artist knew precisely the measure of his time. After this movie, he had the unshakable fear that he could become the artist; though, he also felt that he has been becoming the artist for a long time now. That fear had propelled him into

a hiatus in a country he did not know.

I drank my tea and told him I didn't know how to respond to that. The waiter brought us two steaming bowls of pho. The ceiling fan circulated humid air. I squeezed a whole kumquat into my bowl. A child began to cry behind the Stranger, but the mother told the child to shut up.

—I'm moving back to America, he said.

I looked at him.

—I hope you don't mind.

—When?

—In a week.

I looked down and studied my bowl.

—I can't stand it.

—Stand what?

—Being an expat. It's...

—What?

—Sad. Really. At my age.

—My ass'll keep you company.

—This is not a joke.

—Sorry.

He looked away and said:

—All these months here, I keep having this strange feeling, like I am—

The child screamed. My eye darted to her. The mother was fuming now. The child was dragged out of her seat and received two smacks to the butt.

—Sorry, what did you say?

—A fragment, he said, like a fragment.

—What do you mean?

—I'm here but always detached from context. (Pause). That's perhaps how the artist must have

felt.

I grabbed a pair of chopsticks and plucked the rice noodles into my spoon, brought the spoon to my mouth, and slurped vigorously.

—I feel unreal, he said, all my feelings and desires have always been generated within existing social structures. In a way, it's good to have frameworks to live by, but it is another thing to know that you have been given those frameworks at birth and you have to negotiate with them in order to live. That this negotiation has created who you are. That beyond this, you are nothing.

I plucked more rice noodles into my spoon.

—People have assumed agency to create new ways of living, he continued, but most of us are incapable of that. Identity is unappealing and appealing for that matter; sometimes we feel trapped and sometimes it's your only shield against emptiness. Multicultural humans like you understand this. In a way, it is like living a prophecy. You know how you feel, how the people around you feel, what is going to happen, but you can't change it.

—Why are you telling me this?

—Because I can only say this to a stranger.

I looked at his bowl: untouched.

—We won't see each other again, he said.

I looked at him.

—I'll go back to my life. It's still a life. It's too late to start over now.

—You're not going to kill yourself?

—No.

**These men never became more than strangers who only wanted him for limited time in this space. He wondered whether it was the condition the night created, the thrill of transitory moments of being, or if it was in fact him.**

—Okay.

—I mean, no, I am not.

I lost my appetite. I put down my utensils. The child and her mother had disappeared. The Stranger was right: the ceiling was caving in. Why had I never noticed that? Now, he picked up his utensils and began to make his way through the bowl. I felt the humidity in the air slowly seep through my skin and resurface. I started to wonder about my role in the Stranger's story and his in mine. It is relentlessly human to try to connect and narrate others into relevance. Then I became conscious of that impulse and wondered no more.

—Let's party tonight, I said.

19

Lan looks at her watch. The hour hand reads 7. She watches herself in the mirror. Behind her reflected figure, a small bathroom appears. The walls are covered in graffiti. A quarter of a toilet roll sits on the sink. She is alone. The mirror glass vibrates. She is dressed in a white linen jumpsuit, sleeveless. She wears a pair of designer, round-edged, black-rimmed sunglasses, to complement her angular jaws. No sign of make-up. She

reaches into her pocket and pulls out a plastic pouch. She takes a polyester bill, rolls it into a straw, dips into the pouch, and carves the white dust out. She brings the tip to her nostril—and in. Her head jerks back. *Knock knock knock*. She puts it away and wipes her nose. She opens the door and walks past a line of scantily clad young women. The beats grow heavy. She reaches the dancefloor. It is filled with figures. Beams of magenta neon light sweeps back and forth. The figures hold and inhale giant balloons. She purchases a balloon and makes her way to the front. She faces the DJ now. She inhales, closes her eyes, and absorbs the rhythm.

20

Every weekend, he went to the club and danced until someone came to place their hand on his waist. Almost every time someone did, but he would not leave with that person. Not because he had so high a moral compass; in fact, he was so loose. These men never became more than strangers who only wanted him for limited time in this space. He wondered whether it was the condition the night created, the thrill of transitory moments of being, or if it was in fact him.

\*

At a pride parade in a city that now only lives in his memory, he was walking to a party with a group of friends. He lost the group when he stopped and looked up. A man had his upper body out the window ledge; he had an exercising look; his sweat gleamed in the sun. There was something inside that pushed and pulled at him. It was another man. From the adjacent window, a third man poked his head out to cheer his neighbor. He looked down and saw him. People started to gather. He waved. Both of the men waved back. They stared at each other. People howled and filmed. He pointed at himself and back at the window. He took off his shirt. They studied him. They deliberated. They waved him up.

\*

He once met a man with a benevolent face. It was instantly kind, but not without hints of mischief. He had the face of someone who was not traditionally handsome, but was attractive still, for its particularities. His gapped teeth correlated with a slight lisp, though they formed perhaps independently. The words he spoke mysteriously clung together. It made his flirting rhythmic and dangerous. The man said he had to ask his wife's permission to kiss him. He smiled and said nothing, and later he would think back and wished he would have obliged him to kiss him

anyway. They moved away and ran into each other throughout the night; they had their hands on each other's waists, smiling, clinging to the rhythm, doing nothing.

\*

Sometimes what he had was futile. Desires and events experienced alone against the largeness of time. Energy exerted while having no one to direct it to.

Having a life, a body is funny, he thought. The constant push and pull between structure, discipline, and impulse. Obsession is the only way people live. And if not obsession, then it's non-life. He had felt that before, the feeling of being non-life. After an eight-hour bus back to New York, he had walked block after block to a man in a Manhattan hotel, he had cum before the man did, but the man continued to bend him down and take him, and when the man came, Luc felt *nothing*. He had a strange sensation of being an object. He couldn't locate the origin of the feeling, but it didn't matter. It didn't bother him. Maybe he misnamed the experience, but later, thinking back, he felt he was touching something great: the black hole most people try to ignore or escape, but can't.

21

After our final bender, I returned to my apartment. I closed the door and pressed my back



against it. Let out a sigh. Standing there, I felt at once sad and delirious. At once more and less human. I wandered in this compact space. The marble floor glinted as I walked. My clothes came off one by one. I came out onto the balcony, looked into the night and at the trees in front of it. It was dark enough to see only the outlines of things. I was wide awake. I went back inside and rolled a spliff. Sprawled on the bed, I was calm again. I opened a cruising app on my phone, deliberating, and then posted:

*I am alone in my apartment. Naked. Blindfolded. Facedown. This my address: [enter address]. The gate is open. I am on the fourth floor. The door is unlocked. I will stay like this. Come.*

I put down my phone and did exactly what I said. I waited. Minutes, hours, days, decades. I thought I heard a sound in the hallway, but no one ever came. I lay there and felt the weight of my body slowly giving. Until it was no longer mine.

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