

Disturbances

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HIM:

Darkness, broken by light from a waxing moon, filters through the plastic blinds above a bed; ambient air gently sways the grey slants onto his face, onto the pillow, onto his face. Hush like the wings of a moth beat against the sleeping man's consciousness, unwillingly aware as the silence that isn't really silent splits with another noise. He sits up at a 45-degree angle, hands propping him, elbows rigid and neck tense with anticipation, hoping he only heard the wind. Time is a protean elastic when held by the night, stretching out in any direction with the possibility of a snap, and the inevitable rebound, its blisteringly firm bite. He waits, motionless so as not to disturb the old mattress, until he imagines his tissue ossified, a body made of bone and gravitas.

The sound again, a thwump probably against his mother's antique mirror, the one he remembers her smiling into, back at his younger self. Two breaths later, a creak on the floor which he knows by heart to be the tell-tale boards in front of the bathroom. He releases the air he has focused all his energy on retaining until this moment, relief that she is only going to the bathroom and now, under a compounding league of pressure, must wait till she leaves to go back to bed. Or not. The weight of the night bears on his hyper vigilance, for if she is on a mission then he knows exactly how the next hours will play out; preparation against anxiety made obsolete by the disillusion of pacific sleep.

She moves. Although the house has only wooden floors, her bare feet are faint as petals falling on dirt and when he closes his eyes to just listen, her tediously cautious scuffles draw an image of a little mouse crawling for a way out, directionless determination to survive some unidentifiable terror. The creak of the house as she feels her way down the dark hallway towards his bedroom confirms his suspicion, so he rises, placing his tall-man feet on the cool unforgiving wood and meets his wife at the doorway. Her eyes dilate, the whites are overwhelmingly stark against the moonlight that casts his drawn face in shadows; *chiaroscuro*, flickers across his thought, something she said years ago about a style of painting, once so incongruous to their relationship. He finally allows himself to read her face, the etching of her emotions a blatant and sometimes feral hint at

the severity of her confusion. She does not seem to give him as much thought and moves on, inching past his chest, to which she only comes eye level. Her artist hands reach for the other side of the doorframe, desperation feeding her strength.

Having prolonged the inevitable, he finally breathes out the words in a voice gruff with disturbed sleep, “Where are you going, honey?”

She stops, slowly turns with both vise grips on the door jam, and her face creases into one of ambiguous thought. He imagines her thoughts: her conviction that she has to be somewhere important, as though there is a photograph in a dark room, soaking in formula that never fully develops into the irrefutable evidence she needs to be certain. Both of them think the other does not understand, both certain of their own indignation at the absurdity of disbelief that buckles the other’s face.

Eventually, stubbornness and frustration win out as he asks and she belligerently snaps back, his voice elevates to hurt distress as her familiar features contort into that of a stranger lashing out with intimate knowledge tenderized by illness. He moans and restrains his wife’s frantic arms, not knowing why she turns on him in the home where they raised their daughters, she not understanding why he can’t take her home, away from this unsafe place with shaking walls and snake-eye hours.

Once again, time has become something not measurable by numbers or lines or scientific data. Rather, the transcendence of possibility within an infinitesimal action that manages to occupy not only a moment, but the sustained duration of that moment until time passed is unrecognizable as history.

He sees his sleep much in the same way, especially once he manages to get her back to bed, reconciled for the time being that there is no second floor, her mother does not need the sewing kit and she isn’t late for school. Voice hoarse and brittle as his yard in this Texas drought, he climbs into his separate bed, perfunctory whole-body soreness takes over, and he sinks into the mattress as if to equalize the rising sun outside the window that did not wait for him to summon it on his own time.

HER:

Fluttering sounds of a leather lung, in out pause in, in out pause in out, hover for a moment, maybe ten minutes, waiting for the ground to reach up. Sit up first, small rustle of skin against cotton, a cocoon she remembers making so He, no, maybe so It cannot find her. The It to which she owes her current state, the heavy skin that has taken her place and forces her to act it out, impotent. It follows her even down into the past, what might have happened could actually be present future. She loses track.

At a 45-degree angle she feels upright. Something bumps into her hip and she vaguely registers the pain, not because it doesn't hurt but because it doesn't seem to originate from reality, her reality, the one she uses to explain this alteration of physics. Carry on, step into the dark amber tunnel, there has to be a bathroom; in the back of her mind, this recollection that takes the shape of familiar awareness, and like everything in her world, it has a sound. An echo-location. This pathway from the bed to the floor to the doorway to the hall to the bathroom door to the tight perimeter walls that buttress her and finally to the toilet, is accompanied by the sound of a seashell clutched close to the similarly conical ear of her little girl self. If asked, she would agree to the memory of painting this bathroom in Porcelain White and Sky Blue from Sherwin-Williams sometime in the mid-nineties because their two daughters were still young enough to find hidden pictures in the swirls, giggling with their mother and marveling at their father. She is that mother. Isn't she?

It is not that she forgets, but more as if her life has been projected onto a wall, tapering at the bottom and wide towards the top so that when she tries to touch it, all becomes a distorted two-dimensional shadow. Her frustration at this also has a personification, her voice that is cloudy and weak and inflamed until it is no longer her own.

Stepping out of the bathroom, time seems to have crawled inside with her, everything the same as it was before, her fingers like little rabbits poking out of the hole to see if any predators are near. She follows their lead down the hallway, her soft pit-pat shuffle is a steady rhythm against the dry security of the wood floor. As if remembering a long established appointment to which she is late, her inclination solidifies into resolve regardless of the hour or darkness; it is more like a thick velvet curtain hiding the

destination she can only recognize upon arrival. Her mother is around here somewhere, waiting for her to turn the final corner.

Suddenly, out of stage right, he appears, this occasional stranger who lives with her, who makes her laugh and yet inhabits, through no fault of his own, the uncertainty that this house, he claims, is her home. Then she knows him as her husband, the one she loves, lover of her even now, though neither can articulate the no-man's land in which they stand.

Thoughts, her mind a gentle buzzing like a summer rain over the garden they tended together once; eventually, she realizes he was saying something in that drowsy coarse voice he has when exhausted. She doesn't know.

And he doesn't know. Their skins could not be further apart, as if one face were painted on glass, the other looking through it.

She just wants to go home, the one she used to have beyond timelessness and wintery sleep that draws days together as a stitch, one where she could know herself and not be afraid, and know that he was not afraid either. The days before surgery when they had daughters and games and familial mutinies about serving fish, verisimilitude of normalcy and exceptional only in their way together.

Subsumed under this pressure, watery, dense and without any law of orientation, he is sketched into her world, merely an observer as she shifts gradually away in the dusty light that is her quixotic luminescence. She lets the warmth of his presence guide her back to bed, her reason for getting up in the first place already fading.