

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Jessy Brodsky Vega
The Abyss

He turned on the bed so his back was against her belly. He faced where the bed dropped down and emptied into darkness. "I skated to this place today after class, this little chunk of beach you hop a fence overlooking the Hudson to get to. There was trash on the sand but I took my shoes and socks off anyway. Sand was rough. There were larger jagged rocks at the end of the shore wet from the waves coming in too fast. But it was quiet there and the sound of the waves on the rocks took you out of the city for a minute...I want to take Rye there one day." He felt the expelled words leave a hole in him. An acidic emptiness eating away, poking, and pulling at his insides. Behind him there was a stirring and the arm across his chest tightened so his air was constricted. "I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I shouldn't have said that."

Whispers of reassurance, content, absolute need filled by absolute comfort; the disk yielding to the conical sphere; all is right in the world.

"Yes, one day, we will," he whispered.



Waiting for time to pass with the lights off. Watching the door from the couch, lying back, head balanced on folded arms. Staring at the ceiling criss-crossed by the shadows of the fan circling. Staring at the door again. Feeling the air weighing on her chest. Staring at the door again. The clock. Getting up, into the dark bedroom, leaving the fan on behind her. Lifting the bed covers and once inside curling up to make a chrysalis.



The door opened when the night was deep and dark and near completion. He threw all his clothes off in a heap on the couch. He trudged to the bathroom and took a long moment to relieve himself, letting all the whiskey flow out of him. He did not brush his teeth. When he came into the bedroom, she was sleeping curled up under the covers. It was late enough that the street lamp outside the window had shut off and the only light coming in was the last of the moon's opaque rays. She sniffled and stirred and he knew she was awake. He slid inside the bed and circled her stomach with his arms and the soft skin stiffened. "Hey, you awake?" The thin shoulders lifted and fell under the covers, the head sunk down. He rested his cheek against her head of dark hair. "Go back to sleep. Shh. Shh."



He went over to the bed and languorously climbed on to it, his feet not even making it over the edge. Wafting in from the well-lit kitchen was the mingling smell of olive oil roasting onions and veal and the oven pumping hot air.

The hot air was what was putting him to sleep. It meandered over his eyes, blurring them, so the eyelids needed to cover and rejuvenate before the world would clear.

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A padding of feet, a compressing in the mattress beside him, that faithful arm looping over him. Shaking him. Trying to turn him over. Behind his eyelids, he stared deep into the darkness but the shaking would not cease.

"I want to be alone," he said.

The shaking stopped but the arm weighed heavily upon him.

"Time passes so slowly," he sighed.

The onions popping, the meat spitting answers. Gorge, digest, make waste, make love, sleep, wake, gorge, digest...

The trailing smell sneaking up his nostrils and tickling his brain. Wake up, we will be ready to eat soon. The arm in the wake of his silence reattempted conversation. His senses flooded over him as a tidal wave crashing down. He wanted to put them to sleep. Put them to sleep. His closed eyes fluttered.



He woke to the arm shaking him. He grumbled and turned over to bury his head in the comforter.

He felt the air shift and then settle. He was alone in the room again. He lifted up and saw from the window orange light cast by the streetlamp coming through the curtains. The windows were barred as was custom for first floor apartments in New York City. At the foot of the window was a line of her books, aged things she had found on the street and brought home and he noticed more of them but couldn't tell what was old or new. A beeping diverted his attention. A delivery truck backed into a warehouse across the street, blocking traffic so a cab speeding by honked.

He lifted up, his shoulders hunching. The lack of sleep weighed on him, the want of sleep, though not sleep itself. When he closed his eyes, he could see sleep and it was a starless night and the sky was huge and very high up was the full moon laying the earth to bed in silver sheets. The moon he couldn't see here. The streetlamp was so tall but so close that the artificial light barred the moon from the window's sight.

He walked under the fan spinning in the living room of the railroad apartment to the kitchen where she was tending to the lasagna.

The air was dense and sickly pungent and hovering around her.

"It's so stuffy," he said, going to open the kitchen window.

She lifted gray eyes up and they were wet with tears already. Her mouth opened, she sighed. Her dark hair she rubbed in front of her eyes and she told him he couldn't come in yet. He shouldn't see what she has done yet!

"I just want to open the window. It's so hot." He pushed the window up and breathed in fresh air. Then he looked behind him and saw her head hung low. He wiped his brow. "Who cares? It's just dinner." She kept the head down, the eyes lidded. He didn't stand to wait for movement and shoved by her into the bathroom. Behind the shower curtain draped over

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the tub was a long window looking out onto the gray brick of the adjacent building. The moon trickled light down this corridor between the buildings and it lay quietly against the brick wall and meekly shaped the darkness of the bathroom.

Behind him, he heard her slow feet shuffling.

He sat up on the sink. He kicked the shower curtain to the side, put his feet up on the tub and dropped his chin to his hands.



Closing the door to the outside world behind him, he found himself again in the dark, warm apartment. The fan spun slowly and in the corner the heater whined. He slipped off his shoes and his jacket. The sun had begun to rise already and the white curtains in the bedroom were tinged by light. Looking to the light source, he spied the lump on the bed stir. He felt the eyes opening, spying him, as he bent down to yank his pants off, boring into him as prey feels the eyes of the leopard.

"Hey, I'm late, I know," he said, padding into the room, drooping head caught by the palm of his hand. He started rubbing his eyes and paused at the foot of the bed. Fingertips reaching from under the covers touched his limp hand and then curled around his fingers. Applying pressure, pulling. He stumbled forward into her embrace. He closed his eyes to the Furies' gray eyes glowing in the dark.

Kisses all over, the routine build of arousal. Sweat created from the act rolling down the center of his back from the nape of his neck. He rolled over and threw the comforter off their warmed bodies. He faced away from the window, the light behind him brightening the darkness before him. Through the abyss, the door frame could be seen and the faint outline of the heater in the living room, spitting water and breaking the silence of the night, the suggestion of a library book on the floor poking out from under the couch—hers—and in the center the darkness still radiating, holding the abyss together. He concentrated on that formless absent space.

"I want to be alone," he said. "There's too much pressure." The arm came off of him like a snake engorged slithering away.

He turned over then to watch her reaction but spied the covers folding over her skin, leaving open the center of her back, the visible, bony spine held under the shadow of the encroaching sheet.

She reached out from the covers, her skin exposed to the sun coming in stronger now and grappled for a book from the library on the windowsill. It was the diary of Anaïs Nin. She spread the book out before her. Sunlight inched over her shoulder toward her back. She bent her head and read:



"It hurts me to remember, in the middle of a day, that warm afternoon in my room when Henry lay on the couch while I dressed and perfumed myself for dinner. The texture of that day, the colors, the temperature, I have them all in the journal. But very often I have asked myself with a pang, Have I got it? Will it vanish? Will it fall into shreds, grow dim? Will

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I look for it in the journal and find only pale words—meaningless words? And it is all an acute pain. The essence, the human essence, always evaporating. I cannot bear the passing of hours.”



She carefully closed the book and returned it to its spot on the sill, then lay back to the bed and folded the sheet tightly under her neck. A quiver took hold of her shoulders. She turned her head so one eye caught his and the corners of her mouth were dipping very low. His eyes glaring. She broke the eye contact, dropping again to the pillow. Her shoulders were shaking now. She hid her tears from him. He leaned into her back, cupping her, shushing her. But she escaped him, plunked down into the passenger seat of a 1994 Volvo with a smashed side mirror and a plastic dash splitting from wear. She had her feet up on the dash and she rolled down the window so the wind from the highway came in. They were driving north along the east coast and it was summer. The sun was so bright, she grabbed hold of the visor above her head and then decided against it, letting the sun hit her straight on instead. His voice interrupted her thoughts. They were passing a town called Rye. It was a town they'd never been, though they could imagine it was like other northeastern towns. He turned toward her away from the wheel. He asked her what she thought of the name Rye.

She closed her eyes. In a white sundress, she was strolling through the long wheat and rye fields of the southern Pennsylvania countryside, feeling the long grasses under her fingers and scratching at her ankles. In mimetic attention, she'd taken her shoes off following behind him. She watched her feet to avoid stubbing her toes and scratching her soft underfeet too badly on the broken weeds. She saw the sky stretching large and heavy and white over their heads, moving as a great mass moves. And the black naked arms of the distant woods still against the running sky. The trees with no means for moving or wanting, only ever receiving. And then, there was simply the lasting on.

She contemplated eternity. The field would not end, not even before towering woods, not even in the darkness. They could continue walking. And anytime she wanted to walk again, she could recall it and touch her feet down. She was padding through the earth, her head down, but smiling, silent. His shadow stretched out in front of her.



He stayed awake after her breath had steadied and glancing at her eyelids, he saw the twitching behind them and knew she was asleep. The heater had stopped its whining. With a breath, he welcomed the silence that radiates only to a sole consciousness. Closing his eyes to sleep, the silence flooded over him, ringing his ears with its urgency, walking him into a dream. To dream of wondrous things that have not yet come to pass.