

“Appeal”

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A stranger approached me at the bar one night and invited me downstairs. The only furniture in the room was a chair and a table, which I sat on at his indication. “Take off your shirt,” he said, and I did, but it wasn’t enough. There was another room and another chair and table. I spied a wall of books, thick volumes of fiction and myth. Somewhere between *Cyrano* and *Decameron* there was an empty space the width of a novel. I slipped my hands between them and peered into another chamber, this one with no floor or ceiling, circular in shape, shelves carved into the walls. They looked to be filled with books, but like oil-slick rainbows the volumes vanished with a tilt of the head.

I was at the bar and a stranger invited me upstairs. There was a rope and a ladder and a periscope. I saw animals in the air and plants unmoored by crumbling sediment. I closed my eyes and fell into a corner, and when I woke up I was at the feet of the customer whose dime had fixed my fate. His face was bruised and he wore catcher’s mitts on both hands. The sound of his fingernails scratching away inside the leather made me dizzy and that’s how I wound up here.

* * *

The pills they give me get stuck in my throat. They only go down with ginger ale, but when they dissolve, the nausea subsides. They decorated my room with curtains and kaftan rugs the same shade of green as the dress I wore that night. At first I didn’t notice because they

replaced all my old clothes. I haven’t seen the dress since they took me. One day I told the nurse I liked deep shades of green. “We know you do,” she said.

When I wake up in the morning, I’m almost hit in the face by the fan, which thankfully moves at a snail’s pace. I never remember how low the ceilings are in here until I’m almost decapitated. Every day I remind them to shut it off before evening, but they don’t do it.

After I’ve recovered from the shock of the fan, I swaddle myself in a sheet before picking out my clothes. It doesn’t make a difference; I assume they’ve all seen me naked; but they never gave me pajamas and I don’t like to walk around bare. The closet is ten paces from the bed and I can feel their eyes on me. Food comes between the slats of an opening in the doorway designed specifically for the purpose. I eat all my meals that way, unless I forget my medicine or if I’m still too queasy anyway.

There’s not much to do. There’s a chandelier above my mirror that distorts daylight into knots and the moon makes diamonds on the walls. I was never much of an artist, but they didn’t give me anything for amusement besides a pen and two sheets of loose-leaf paper. One day I started sketching the shapes the light made. After I used up all the paper, I asked for more. That was my first mistake.

“They wanted you to write a confession,” the nurse explained. “That’s what the paper was for.” My punishment didn’t bother me too much, though: no laundry service. I’d already told them I liked doing it myself (“are you sure about that?” the nurse asked). But the day my basket got full enough for me to haul it down to the basement, they told me my case was going to trial.

I remember everything. They annexed our neighborhood, tried to sell us on the promise of a name for ourselves. They said if we came willingly our arts and crafts would outlive us. Half of us went; my friends put up a fight; I moved in with the ambivalents, the ones who refused to opt in. We agreed to be alienated by power regardless of who wields it. I shouldn't have been arrested.

I couldn't think of a crime to confess to. I'd been watching the world harden into an object my whole life. I'd seen friendships sour over differences in techniques of defiance, and at the same time, my grandparents died of cancers that had nothing to do with war. And since I'm not an artist, I had no fame to secure. I was a seamstress, a pattern-follower, more like our official opponents than my new neighbors. My rent was paid on a constitutional commitment to order. But it was good to caucus with the bohemians. Most of them liked me, and since they claimed me I returned their affection.

The time came for my old friends to make up and die respectable deaths. Death scares me, I'll say it. I've never brought it into this world, or life. The artists' attraction to me was misplaced.

Then the officers set up bars. Not the ones we were used to, which by mandate served food and offered childcare — these twenty-four hour ventures had no kitchen, and at their approbation, we passed entire evenings at orgasm point. I would drink the cheapest beer on tap and wait until it kicked in to say anything. Although we understood their placative function, we still enjoyed the up-drugs and improv theater exercises they pushed alongside the drinks.

Upon orders to gather data about us, they started with say-the-next-word exercises. These were designed to see if our associative capacities were “less trained” and “more schizophrenic” (as one scientist put it). Lucy said you can’t know that based on a typology, and an officer gave her an empty smile. My neighbors were more schizophrenic than I, but they were still made up of patterns — obscure, sure, but predictable with machinic scrutiny. That I knew for sure. I’d always seen the props changing hands behind the scenes. In that sense I belonged exactly where I was: x-ray vision was the magic ring that circled us as a tribe. Some thought it defined their worldly purpose, at least under more felicitous political circumstances.

The stranger had been charmed by my depthlessness — not that he said so, but I have a hunch. A few drinks in and I told him my life story. I have nothing to gain from being coy.

He wrote a poem on a napkin:

In modern thought, (if not in fact)
Nothing is that doesn’t act,
So that is reckoned wisdom which
Describes the scratch, but not the itch.

Now I’m enlisted and my ticket is up. Shall we find out which side I’m on?