

shapes of you
e.d.numb

I'm not the only one adrift in the ocean. Huh?

Having ingested dried, weakened mushrooms, then edibles, alcohol, and a single scoop of peach ice cream tasting like water, the very flavor of my life, I stumble chasing after the meaning of these Rolling Stones lyrics. They buzz through my nerves. Alas, I'm neither some driftwood plank nor a ghost ship. I want to sing along. A-LEXA, LOUDER!

The melody hijacks the caboose of my runaway thoughts. I whirl, or maybe it's my eyes chasing Cat vaulting over that moon-blue yoga ball. Fatigue seeps in. Emotions bubble up. Where the lyrics remain impenetrable, life starts cracking up at the edges, trying to escape. I crane my neck to look if she jumped out through the large, industrial windows. I edge closer and closer. My brow nearly touches the cold pane. Then, my thoughts falter. I forget why I stare. It's that time when the day shies away and the evening steps in. Somewhere, the sun has set, but its light continues to linger. I catch a glimpse of the grim windows across. Like mine, they are forgotten and unwashed hiding perhaps a soulmate gawk under the same urban shades of dirt.

Distracted, I light a cigarette. Cuban. Must have bought the pack the last time I traveled to Europe. From Ravello? Or the duty-free shop at Heathrow? A squashed dream of me wriggles down my legs. Trapped, it laments. I am not alone. Nor adrift. Or am I? I can't decide. I watch it wiggling away, its gliding invisible. Yet, I see its exit. I put out the cigarette, feeling like an emptied-out suitcase. I need to get higher. Ecstatic. Love, oh love. Wherefore art though? An opiate as potent as virtue, poetry or wine. I declare remembering Baudelaire: *Enivrez-vous à votre guise, de vin, de poésie ou de vertu*, inspired by his Parisian spleen.

« Il faut être toujours ivre. [...]
Mais de quoi ?
De vin, de poésie ou de vertu[...] »

Love didn't make that triumvirate. Nor being fucked. I find a discarded pen and start vaping with determination. It takes me a moment, but it dawns on me. I suffer of Baudelairianism: Unloved and unfucked. Gunless, too. I become unsettled thinking about how guns made it into my caboose, when I hit a dead-end. I crave better mushrooms. Or a heart attack. Fucked with affection by a heart attack. While choking on a dried mushroom.

A rift between undoing and undoable. The song keeps playing on a loop. A-LEXA, STOP!

I reach the bedroom, and collapse onto the over-pillowed bed. I close my eyes making a wish for a lover to devour and be devoured. All this interlude to avoid thinking of you. Especially since I came across this self-styled gallery manager, Rod, who bears your way of talking, your gait, even your smirk. Your doppelgänger. A miracle. A curse. Or both.

You know how I love exploring time when encaged. Walking to the Lexington Street market, I came across a space more Mardi Gras funeral home than storefront—its façade half parlor, half carnival, all intrigue. I pushed open the cracked door, tentatively. The sign was unreadable—open? Probably open?

Or fuck it, I'm open, come in? I guess the latter. I slipped in quietly, ready to flee at the slightest summons: "Don't touch!" or "I'm unavailable," just like your last informal, "ruff" text—that performative otherness you sent me on May Day, followed by silence until September 4, 2024, the day after my job interview. I had known that you watched me on zoom, from your home, perhaps from our once-shared bed. I hadn't expected a text from you. You'd ghosted me for months ignoring my contact implorations. So, when your first text praised me with two negatives bracketing a slammed-down verb I took it as it was meant. A defense against a potential white woman's rage. I felt insulted. And hurt. Like that night when ignoring my plea for gentleness, you pressed until your red-hot iron marked my hide: another cow, cowboy, permanently branded. Submissive, I replied with yet another plea: "Can we talk, as friends?" Surprisingly, you acquiesced within seconds. "Of course, and know I am your biggest fan here." Unsaid: fat chance to your coming "here." I had already ignored the fat and took my chance interviewing. I had nothin' left to lose. You, on the other hand...I couldn't say anything about you. Then, or two months later when the job belonged to someone else. I vowed to leave your city. I did, with you in tow, in my heart. Despite your curt dismissals. I have collected them all, like dead butterflies in a glass box I keep on shining. "I'm busy with a pay-per-view boxing match" you said at the very beginning of our, what was it for you, an entr'acte? For me, a tsunami. You had sidelined me for pay-per-view. You did not want to waste \$79. I wish I had left you blocked then. I did it first, but then I flipped-flopped.

The vape pen is a mean-spirited companion. I'm burning through the sky only to read your May Day texts: "I'm unavailable," "no talk," and the final "move on." I'm still unclear about what made you so abrupt. Or maybe that's you. Always expecting to be disrespected, insulted, so you preempt. "Move on." That evening, in your kitchen, in one of our heated embraces, I did rhetorically wonder why you were available, meaning why were you letting *me* worship your body? I didn't know how fragile you felt and how easily prone to distort innocent questions. I would have clarified, had I imagined, you could feel objectified as an available item on a shopping list. You mumbled and I left it unexplored, too busy adoring your body falling into mine, while humming, "Maybe this time." No one ever felt bewitched by your body the way I did. It was your mind. You said they said. I held my tongue, and my guttural laugh remained inchoate. It could have toppled your face from your own private Mount Rushmore.

And now this Charm City gift, half real and half imaginary, your doppelgänger. Hard to forget you, huh? Rod was keeping the smoldering sun at bay making small talk with a shorter and slightly bulkier guy, Jimmy, a sweet hustler charged with fucking me, if that was what I was looking for there. You're in the black artists' quarter, Rod elucidated. I heard "ghetto" instead. Rod pedantically enlightened me that I was in the black artists' part of the city. He was enunciating his words so I could understand that I h a d w a l k e d outside the white-folk's comfort zone's territory. A Cheshire smile became my lips. I understood him so well. Like I did you. To avoid any misunderstanding, I grabbed his wrist. Of course, after I had asked for permission. My touch made him sense that I could not be bothered to give a shit about the scenarios in his mind. I was game with whatever was supposed to happen right then right there. I got Rod's attention. Like I got yours when I went along with your gently push didactically making the point it was time to graduate from a mere hand job in your red truck to the main course. I complied like Barrie's Tinker Bell flapping my wings of fairy dust into your Shelley eyes dead with delegated power. Trickled down power. You must know that's the only power there is: trickled down. Why not step outside that game and do something really powerful? Being unafraid.

Respect. You are in pain. Probably have been forever. Gathered so lifelessly and meticulously for five decades. Maybe it's time to end that shit. Next to your Aztec ancestors' looks your personal Niagara-

fall of accumulated suffering looks shallow. You are the breathing Diego Rivera painting hanging in one of the Kaufmann's Fallingwater bedrooms. Your body's hypnotic. Stop being so insecure. This is me, you said. Redundantly more than irritatingly. Standing with your rock-hard rod in the badly lit basement which smelled of canned fear that you were not enough. Fuck, I was hoping for couchie dip city, and I ended up in your prudish yet naked ballet, so tacky, Bob Fosse would have blinked fast to make it go away. I thought if I joined in, my mind would stop making it more unpleasant than it was. I mimicked you, and this is me. I pirouetted and caught a glimpse of that framed picture of your turbaned-bearded dude spreading fake smiles of satisfaction while his eyes winked hopefully to see us do it. Orgasm killer. Fuck me. It all started to smell of shit. And I wanted to feel like I was the shit that night. You asked me to do it slowly. Another pirouette. A good sport, I did another pirouette and embraced the leading Cunt role. Perhaps my attitude derailed your personal compass. How could you navigate life as a hurt minority anymore if *you* looked bourgeois and *I* the benevolent outsider?

Lying awake on my back, the bed doesn't feel right: either too big or just empty. I will myself out of it and start pacing back and forth. Too hot. I turn on the AC. I continue pacing. I feel too lucid for this hour of the night when small and lost is all I can become. I decide I am thirsty. I fix myself a large spritzer. You are departing my mind. The void you leave is not peaceful. I dwell in imaginary dialogues. I open the drawer where I stash joints. With indica. I pick up my iPad from the same drawer. If I can't have you, then I will make you. Not in some divine way, quietly, with my hands from the dark. I'll conjure you in a sea of noise, from your laughter, the shouting of evenings lost, and aches of tenderness that never were. Your blood, my digital ink. I erase the shape of you as my own Playboy centerfold. I embrace my scream. Your gift.

And now this Charm City Rod. So much of you and yet so little. He's a hustler. He advertises as one. He does not try out on people as if they were gloves only to discard them. Unceremoniously. That's my beef. Right there. I am a performing artist. Each day I wake up for All My Jazz. All of it. I handed you the lead. You took it, showed up, hardly, but you did, including to the dress rehearsal, only to leave without an explanation. Dropped out. Unceremoniously. Move on. No talk. How can I move on, my Aztec god with an iron rod and a soul of clay?

Messaging to you, an iPhone user, is available on my iPad. Hi, I type in the app. I finally doze off. I wake up. It's 2 AM, and ready to witness my becoming. Aware of my experiences. Or rather failures. Success measured in awareness of failure. Failure to receive love. Failure to give love in such a way that you could not live without it. Becoming in a vacuum of love. Performing the part of the nomad. The one I know best.

Delivered, it says below Hi. From afar, Charmed City, the best city to see Sidney Lumet's *The Witness*. I seem to really want to be your friend. Especially if I hurt something of yours. Pride? Timeline? I refused to spend a second night in your basement. Its manufactured otherness put me off. It was a cage screaming I am the Other. Magnanimously, you opened the door to your cage and invited me in. Probably for some type of forever. It scared the shit out of me. More articulate? I could not breathe. Afterwards. We did do **IT** twice. Again. For two hours. I was getting hopeful. Its brutality was waning down. I could imagine pleasure coming towards me. If I persisted. God knows I could persist.

You blocked me, didn't you? Delivered in iLanguage means disposed of, doesn't it? Tomorrow the system will add the day of the week, and then, the following week, it will add a cold date, July 12. I wish it also added what we do in response to a message. Like what I did after your "Move on. No talk." I sought therapy. Thinking I must have hurt your pride somehow, telling you I loved your body. Leaving your mind outside of any conversation. I did not even attempt to say, of course, I love your mind, too. But I don't lie when it matters. You mattered. The therapist I chose from a list of names

and blurred pictures was a nun turned social worker. Her age was a higher number than mine, and her hair looked whiter and thinner than my own locks. Her hair was white. Mine is colored. She looked like my grandmother. I looked like myself. I don't know why I told her that your cock had a piercing once. Maybe I needed to say cock and piercing and think of your cock making me scream for dear life. I did not enjoy our copulations. They hurt and I screamed as I did when I delivered my first-born without any medication. I thought you a rapist. And yet, I enticed you for a second time. And a third time, and a fourth time. Until you stopped me. Was I a masochist, you might have wondered. No, a cockeyed optimist.

Do you remember our only morning after? You had offered to give me a ride to work: if I had come with you to your doctor's appointment. Why not? You were talking about money. Something about a check you were waiting for. I kept wishing you had offered me a cup of coffee. I noticed your neighbor checking me up and down from behind her curtains. You had parked your red truck in front of her bland house. Stephen Frears' *The Grifters* started playing fast in my own movie-theater mind. I nodded, so you were content with my audience and would not stop your monologue. Frears' raw brutality was so palpable in its possibility. I felt overwhelmed thinking that I might shadow John Cusack's Roy Dillon, Angelica Huston's Lilly Dillon, or Annette Bening's Myra Langtry. Their small-time, small-town darkness fit splendidly that menacing morning and again, me. Three decades earlier, Lilly Dillon taught a MasterClass on how to react when violently facing ripe oranges cozily bundled in a white towel. Eager to learn I used for oranges, my fucks – and I mean the best ones – the date-rape-installments, administered as small-dose poison ingested to survive the real one. I have, haven't I?

I catch a movement in my still dark apartment. Cat is probably stretching. Distracted, I stop writing and pick up the open book sitting on a pillow next to me. The glow of the iPad bestows my wonder onto these words: "I did not want to be a secretary & I did not particularly want to get into publishing, but I did not want to go back to the States." As a constructivist of don'ts and nots and won'ts, I ponder what opposite of *this* could keep me enmeshed in you?

That there are no texts from you only proves two things. It could be that I am blocked. But it could also be that you don't exist. Only you do, even when you avoid me. It was a mistake for me to show up at your city property to seek clarity to your silence. You repeated yourself a few times: it was a mistake. Like a court stenographer you stated that I was there on your property. I corrected your misdescription of the facts. I was standing on the sidewalk. I had not trespassed. I didn't want to make it legal for you to shoot me. Or use the machetes you showed me when I spent the night over in the basement of your other house. It was a mistake to come, you continued having noticed that I was not going to be scared by the American dream of being shot for some real or imagined trespassing. Why, I asked and then you looked into my eyes covered by prescription glasses which one of my Trump-supporter neighbors described as cartoonish. Round and blue on their mirror side. You saw yourself lecturing me in the mysteries of mistake and reason. I, reason. You, mistake. And satisfied with your image reflected in my glasses you briefly defined my mistake: that of pursuing reason. You were not ready. Oh. I could have said. I did not. I looked to my right. To your second-born son. A rising high-school junior, holding the hosing you were using to water the grass. He was so petit and distressed at whatever he thought might happen next. Then I looked at you. You appeared to be uncomfortable. Not with the moment. Generally. You had lost weight since you directed me to move on and keep quiet. Circles grew around your eyes. I was sorry for your sleepless nights. I longed to hold you. Not to be shot for trespassing while hugging. I turned around, left, and let it all be.

I sigh. Fuck friendship. Remember your red-truck insolence when you opened your legs widely so it could not be any confusion? You were so emotionless. So rehearsed. There was no intimacy in your

gesture. We were so well-matched. I cannot deal with intimacy either. You must recall how we went to bed that night. I fully clothed in my burgundy silk pajamas. You in your jogging suit.

Damn it all. I am debating whether I should take a cold shower. I wish I had something or someone to hold me tight. Like when you seized my hand signaling it was time to stop our bar suffering. You paid for the three beers and the shot of mezcal and made a comment. Your inflection was one of relief. \$37.90. Outside you marched me towards some imaginary destination. I asked why you chose that direction. You caught yourself and replied with a shrug and laughed. I liked your laugh. Vulnerable. You offered to give me a ride. We both knew what you just offered.

You parked your red truck on my street. A few houses away from where I lived. Were you mad that I did not invite you inside? If you were, then perhaps you need to consider catching some sense of irony. Or humor. And don't take yourself so seriously. But then, you put me in the sky of diamonds. With a kiss of a lifetime.

Our kiss.

I don't know which one came first. I am pedantic. Of course, I remember. The blow job. You advertised your cock to me when it was a nonentity. An ice cream flavor I did not care about. You turned your knees outward forming a v directing my gaze to your cock though you were looking straight ahead as if ready to deny you knew me, need be. Immediately it dawned upon me that I just got cast in a new rendition of *American Graffiti: The Middle Age Years*. Your red truck sealed the deal. No idea of its making. I do not drive. My gift to Mother Earth.

You were happily still. No one was calling "cut". So, I improvised. I asked you whether you were going to make me come, too. Without warning, you said you were a feminist. I could have laughed, instead, I sighed. Of fuck it, I said. I am not here to be lectured. I had just given you head and fast debated whether I should call it a day. But then, that scene most likely would have been edited out of this sequel to *American Graffiti*. I so badly wanted to see my name while scrolling down the credits. I took your middle finger and licked it slowly before inserting it inside my vagina – yes, I can be less vulgar to avoid unnecessary repetition.

And then, the kiss that revealed me a breeze, a gesture, a fractured melody without a beginning and you, a reaction to words you misheard as mockery. Your delirious rubbing knocked down a door I had thought bricked over long ago. Our embrace freed my past cursed with amnesia. Erotism made redemption possible. Your uncontainable rage injected me with pleasure I had only known when I too sought approval as a good person. In my moment of jouissance, a whisper "Dani" unaccountably intimate, uninvited, settled on my shoulder. Your desire to prove yourself something you weren't by pleasing me freed up Dani from a bruising cage of shame. Your intense, frenzied determination matched Dani's when, blindly, she sought to please her mother and control that adored adult's unbearable desperation. For all her early youth, before going to bed at night, Dani climbed up onto her mother's flabby, naked body, pressed her small lips onto the woman's, and touched her large breasts. In her frenzy, Dani would climax but fail making a broken woman feel. In your red truck, that cloudless spring evening, after five decades of nonbeing, Dani found her pixie wings and broke free. The weight of the freak child lifted, you gave me myself. Stripped down of the pain of those who didn't know any better and the disdain of those who didn't care, I kissed your cheek in tears. And thanked you.

You gave me that too—the unexpected grace of crying.

Another day cracks through the eggshell of the night. Finally, a yawn is trying to be heard. The light struggles to make it through the city dirt accumulated on my Tribeca style windows. “A-LEXA, WHAT TIME IS IT!” “GOOD MORNING MOMDANI, IT’S...” I smile as I hear my name and identity smashed into one defining, loving, word. I wiggle down under the covers. Will you still be with me when tomorrow becomes today?