

The Invisible Part of the Spectrum

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"I'M OXYGEN POOR," he says to the girl beside him.

I can see them reflected in the glass as I stare out the window into the agitated night. I had been studying them or at least their image in the window, but my mind had wandered trying to describe to itself how the world outside the skytrain looked as buildings, cars, everything retreated faster than daylight. His words had caught me doing long division of my numerical self—part of me wallowing in the calm of being the passive passenger, the other swishing in the black water outside the train, a piece of laundry bobbing to the surface with car lights and neon signs. I was playing with metaphors, similes, a little onomatopoeia. Nothing new for me. My mind runs regularly to phrases like phosphate soup, glub, glub, or wash & wear secrets. So, he managed to bring me back from my contemplation of dirty laundry with a worthy statement.

The girl takes her time, nonplussed, maybe bored. She just says, "Yeah." If she had been chewing gum, she would have cracked it.

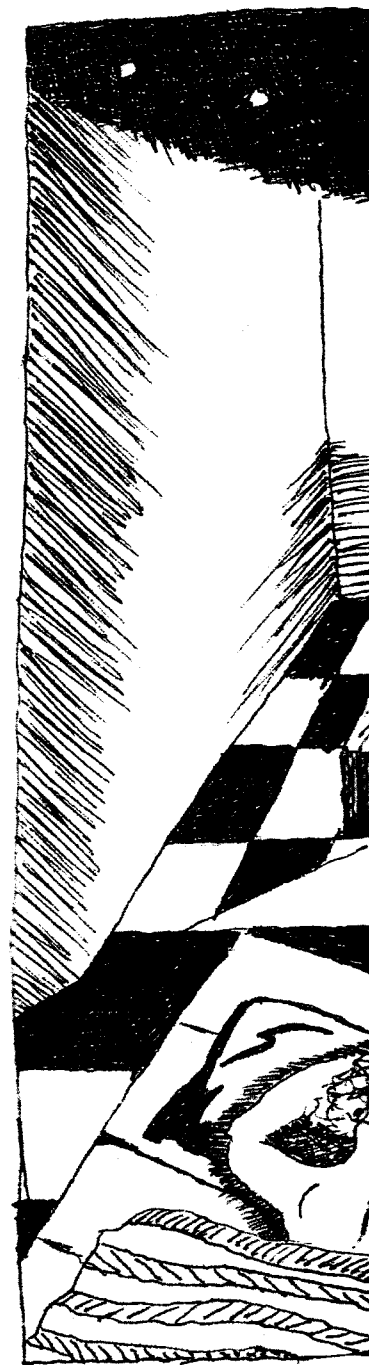
"Yeah," he replies. "I get feeling real heavy like my head's this big wrecker's ball and it's going to fall forward and back slamming into things."

"You look okay," the girl says, trying not to look too close in case he's right. She just got her braces off. Her new teeth figure in her future.

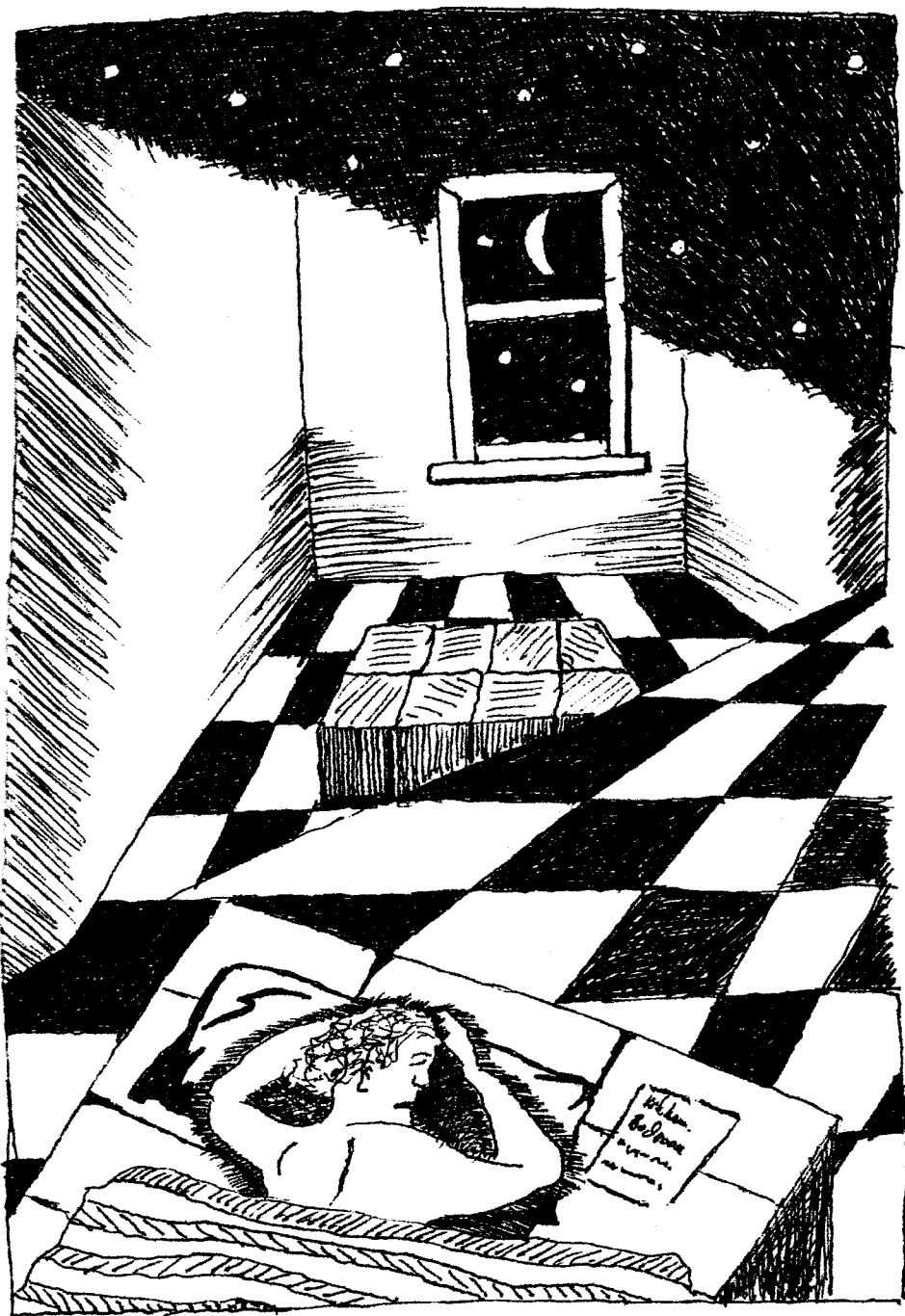
"Yeah, really?" he says this in no particular way as if he knows how to flirt. Is 'flirt' the right word for these kids, these youths? What would they call this? Rappin' Flappin' Chawin' Gnawin' Gettin' it on? Hell, maybe it's just talk.

The girl's not talkin'. She just smiles, opening her mouth wide enough to suck his words in on her breath.

He is quiet. She has his words, offered none of her own, so he has to shift around upstairs in his room, going through his various collections looking for something to show her. In the silence, I can see this on the silver glass in front of me, I decided against silver screen, too obvious, I can see him in his bedroom. At first I see it as a disaster area with the requisite pop star posters, then I think better of this, too predictable. This guy's not that ordinary. Instead, the room has no furniture. He keeps all his stuff in cardboard boxes clearly marked—the heavy kind movers use, with a special space on



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the lid to itemize the contents. At night, he pushes the boxes together, throws a foamy, himself and a blanket on top. The room is white, the floor covered with black & white squares, carpet samples glued down with checkerboard precision.

He breathes deeply a couple of times, his nostrils spread. "It's like I've got inflated balloons up my nose. Can't get any real air in there."

"You're kidding?" the girl says. I can tell that she's noticed his nostrils too, but she thinks that they are flaring, maybe like a horse, a stallion.

"No, really, the pressure in my sinuses makes me crosseyed sometimes." You'd expect him to do this, cross his eyes. The girl does, she's watching. But he doesn't. He just stares at her. And I know she's wondering why guys have long, curving eyelashes when they don't even care about stuff like that. It's not fair, the goop she's got to put on hers so they don't look like caterpillar hair.

He says, "If someone took one of those infra-red pictures of me, you know, the kind they take to show where the hot spots are on your body. God, my face would be one big red zone." Zona Rosa, I get this image of a deep rose blush creeping, they always say creeping, better than flushing, I guess, suffusing his soft, clear skin to the temple. He has pretty skin. He looks innocent in it.

The girl says, "Geez, I didn't know they could do that." She looks like she's wondering if he has other hot spots. She's considering if hers show.

One more thing to worry about, I think. Some guy out there on the street, dressed like a tourist, shooting points of interest, taking thermography shots of me, of you. Captured. He'd know where I'm hot, where I'm not. Wallpapering his room with his secret knowledge like Bellocq, the little cripple, photographing the whores of Storyville when New Orleans had a gaudy, jazzed-up heart of sex and music, never one without the other. Always carnival. On the mouth of the Mississippi, as wide as the black momma's, who had most of her teeth pulled so she could give the best head in town. Think of always having to eat baby food.

That's another time, far away from the rain on the window. Vancouver is trying on carnival, carny, carnal, fornication under carnal knowledge. No, none of this is Van's Expo, world exposition of fast-track glass and serene metal, the only things pulsing are computer chips. But I forget myself. Taking the pulse of cities. I would much rather put cool fingers on the hot spot that is this boy's pulse. The other hand on the radiant forehead. There is none of the nurse in me, none in the girl either.

She speaks to the scar near his ear, "You got a cold?"

"Nah, hayfever."

"Fever," I almost say it aloud. 'Feed a cold, starve a fever.' A witch's incantation to insure the spell that allows me to watch unnoticed this man-child. What is it that attracts? A kind of innocent arrogance? No, his look isn't that confident, it's more self-possessed yet tentative, unsure. It's the hesitation that's attractive, it suggests sensitivity, nothing crass in the high colour of his cheeks, nothing gross in his sideward glances. I can imagine seducing this boy because I wouldn't want it to really happen. Clothed, his vulnerability is enough to send a person into the night to walk away a stitch in the heart. Physical exposure—his, mine—would in the real world of rain be too close to cold humiliation. People have been known to die from common humiliation.

"Did she say something?" the girl asks him. She seems to be referring to me. I must have spoken out loud.

"I don't know. Ask her." His head is turned away slightly so his gaze falls on my hand lying on the seat, it is my left hand but he would make nothing of that.

The girl looks me over. I am deciding what I will say. 'Starve a cold, feed a fever,' it's an old saying, good advice from wise old women who had no trouble describing to themselves the night outside their windows. Their minds ran to home cures, to natural remedies, passed down by mouth. The girl has decided. She turns to him, her back to me and places a wan hand on his forehead. "You feel okay to me," she says. ☞