

Aquarium

The store had smooth, grainless wood floors. Restrained area rugs were placed throughout. A white rocking chair rested, motionless in one corner. Recessed shelving lined the walls on all sides.

The store was a pleasant place to look around in, and I visited whenever I happened to be in a certain part of Los Angeles. The colors of the wood, the furniture the merchandise made me think about the ocean. The colors of early morning. Sanded down greens and grays and blues. Blached and placid.

The store was owned, curated and run by a boy with taste and careful discernment. He was thin, serious, and snobbish, but not unkind. He wore tailored informal clothing. His hair was thick, glossy and dark. He kept it cut very short. His skin was an ashy sort of beige and his eyes were cloudy, and sad-like, seeming never to be fully open and focused. They were beautiful eyes that seemed both very old and very young at the same time. The boy seemed lonely, but perhaps he wasn't.

Just as the store was designed, the pieces displayed for sale were consistent in qualities of balanced structure, even texture, soothing color. Shirts, pants, shoes, and patterns were gently symmetrical. Fabrics, leathers, woods were all richly woven, finished, refined. Garments were folded with utmost care and precision. Placed and piled straightly. The store was a space of levelness.

The walls were white and the storefront windows faced west, letting in the mellow late-afternoon sun. The boy kept his front door propped open. He felt closer to the ocean this way, closer to the sky.

He was usually on his feet, organizing, tidying, altering and re-imagining his displays, perfecting the appearance of the store. He was, for the most part, in imaginative and physical motion, connecting with the chosen articles, the colors, memories, visions and ideas. He welcomed visitors to the store, but never made small talk with them. His door was open wide but he left the

browsing, the choice and exploration, to the patrons themselves. It mattered little to him what they thought they needed or desired.

The boy was generous. His prices were honest and uninflated, but he refused to bargain with customers. There was surety in this. It made him trustworthy.

The quiet in his store suited some customers. It made others nervous and uncomfortable. The boy's quiet was essential, though. Noise, even the softest and most perfect music would have disrupted the steady beauty of the place, thrown off its balance, spilled within it something toxic and destructive.

The boy loved the items in his store, but he did not feel sad or regretful when they sold. He didn't say goodbye to particular pieces. His heart was steady, unstirred as the sold item was wrapped in paper and boxed and tied beautifully with a sort of cording that makes someone think of sailing. Once chosen and sold, the piece was gone. It was no longer his and might never have been.

When a sale opened space, the boy immediately renewed his vision. He rearranged and reimagined his displays. He felt secure that he would never lack material to collect, new hats and shirts and umbrellas to place within his ever-changing collection of de-animated human effects.

I began visiting the store as a means of killing time before a regular appointment I had in East Los Angeles. Once I found parking for the car, I would wander up and down the certain street where boy's store was. There was a small cafe on this street. I would order orange juice or mineral water before or after the appointment. It was in this cafe that I first saw the boy.

After paying for my drink I stepped aside and waited. The boy--thin and dark and unsmiling, ordered espresso on ice. He spoke softly, sounding almost hostile, paid with a five dollar bill from his pocket, made no small talk and took no change. He left without glancing at the newspaper displayed in the cafe, without adding cream or sugar to his coffee. Without looking over at me, he left.

I took my juice, thanked the man who had prepared it and walked out of the cafe. I saw the boy walking quickly down the sidewalk and I followed him.

I remember the flatness and simplicity of my decision to follow him. I remember how following him didn't feel natural, but felt somehow easy, uncomplicated, motiveless.

I was sure he hadn't notice me in the cafe, so following him into the storefront was anxiousless for me. It was not a small space, and this too, added to my comfort and ease, and the freedom I found in this emotionless direction. There was something timeless in these decisions adopted and paths followed in the space between my appointments. My actions felt simple. Perhaps I trusted myself in these moments, the blank boxes abandoned within the structure of my days. I had nothing to account for.

I entered the store and looked around. The boy had taken his coffee behind the counter. He was talking in a low voice with another thin boy who was unremarkable. I wandered through the store. I looked and touched and drifted from shelf to shelf and rack to rack. I remained noncommittal and unexcited. The boy did not look up when I left noiselessly. I did not look back at him. I hurried to my appointment.

I began following the boy regularly, as if I had never existed otherwise, as if I existed to follow him invisibly, to watch and listen to him silently. I began following him from the store to his house. He lived in a small building. It sat on a hill near a barren park in a neighborhood I'll always remember as having winding streets and temperate weather.

After a few weeks of following him from store to home I began to understand and to internalize his schedule. He left the store at seven o'clock or a little bit later. Rarely earlier. In the early part of the week he cooked simple meals for himself. Rice usually. He chopped vegetables and fried them with tofu, fish or meat. He ate quickly and drank beer out of cold green bottles with his meal. He rarely sat down to eat.

In the later part of the week he would stop in one of the mexican restaurants on his way home. Normally he sat alone at a table and was waited on by an older mexican woman who wore heavy eye make up and her hair slicked back and wound tightly in a bun. She was kind and comfortable with him. She understood his routine. I followed him in once or twice. I drank a margarita out of a glass the size of a small fishbowl and ate the salted chips from a basket on the bar. The boy ate his meal and read from a slim paperback book. I should have felt conspicuous, I remained surely unnoticed.

One Friday I waited for him to leave the store. I followed him to a bar buzzing with young life. From across the street, I watched him join a group on the sidewalk. From a distance, I saw light and glitter, shiny teeth and glossy hair. Everyone seemed beautiful. I saw the boy smile for the first time. I felt bored and drove away.

The nights I liked with him were the quiet Mondays and Tuesdays. I liked the tempered regularity of these evenings. I liked watching him alone in his house. Cooking, working, growing tired. I liked being alone and unseen outside his window and I liked him alone inside his kitchen. To me, during these nights, we were together. we were quiet, strange, intimate.

On weeknights, once the boy finished his meal, he would place the used dishes in the sink. He then draped a worn and splotchy white sheet over his table. He brought a bucket out from under the sink that contained tubes and brushes. He brought out a small, regular square canvas that looked like 10 inches by 10 inches. He set these supplies on his kitchen table and sat down before them. He was a painter.

Sometimes at this point the boy continued to drink beer. Other times he drank tap water from a tall glass with no ice. Occasionally brown whiskey from a coffee mug. It was usually near 9 o'clock when this nightly ritualistic practice began.

The boy sat on a stool at his table, his back to the kitchen sink, his back to the window I stood outside of, watching him. I knew when he set out his supplies on the first night that this was why I was there, why I had come. And this was why I continued to visit to the boy's house night after night.

He worked, his head bowed and his back slightly hunched. He allowed no interruptions, paused only to refill his glass or open another beer. He drank slowly while painting, so this happened only one or two times as the evening passed.

As I watched him paint, he became absorbed in the small, abstract square before him. I in turn, become absorbed in the picture of his tense, broad back, the nape of his neck, his concentrated skull, the slight movements of his shoulders, his arms, his hands. The abstraction before me not only absorbed me, it pulled me both outward beyond and deeper into my own self.

The boy worked and worked. I watched, I waited, tense but not discomforted. During the time of his practice and my watchfulness, we were safe; we were together. I remained hidden, but felt myself necessary and dependable.

Days turned to weeks and in the boy's work, form remained unclear and irrelevant. The canvas continued to appear to me a blur of arbitrary color, sometimes lack of color. The lines made no pictures, they connected in no pattern or coherence. In the boy's work my question remained unanswered, seemed unanswerable.

When he looked up from painting, turned his head and his body to look at the clock on the stove I knew we were over for the night. At this point, I left calmly, immediately. I left in a state of elated suspension. Sometimes I stopped on my way home for a drink. I was usually steady enough to sleep and drove straight home, though.

This routine repeated itself for weeks, months I'm sure. I wasn't keeping track. Dinner, paint, rest, repeat. I found myself at the boys kitchen window nightly. As he worked I watched him,

absorbed and waiting for the piece to take form, for the painting to become something, for my obsession to make a story.

He ate, drank, painted, drank. The season changed almost imperceptibly. I wore a raincoat and gloves. He wore a pullover sweater with a high neck. My appointments continued. I visited the cafe, the store.

Merchandise appeared to be selling, the displays changing. The boy continued with his work quietly. We did not speak and he did not appear to notice me. His colors remained the same. Sand and grey and blue. Sky and sea. Dusty, seasonless colors and textures. I began to feel he belonged to these substances of color, of light. I began to feel I belonged there with him.

I stopped in a bar near the boy's house one afternoon to kill some time before he would begin to paint. I drank vodka with tonic water and lime. I ate peanuts from a dish on the bar. I met a man in this bar. He noticed me. We talked and I interested him.

He asked me about my work, where I came from, why I moved to LA. He complimented my hair, my eyes. We laughed and he touched my arm lightly. He paid for my drinks. He asked me to dinner, and I told him I had to leave. I had somewhere I needed to be. But I did not go to the boy's window that night. I have no way of knowing what he cooked for dinner, if he drank beer or coffee or whiskey that night, and how much of either.

The next morning I woke up early, cold, uncomfortable. I was in an unfamiliar room. I felt stale and purposeless. Alien and unforgivable.

I showered, dressed myself, ate wheat toast and drank creamy coffee out of white coffee cups with the man in his kitchen. We said goodbye. He kissed me. We smiled and I waved to him from my car before I drove away.

We would eat dinner together the following night. I tucked this awareness inside my heart and went about living through the minutes of my day.

I went by the store before it closed that night. The boy was kneeling in a corner, correcting a fallen pile of folded clothes. I felt strange and displaced and left immediately. It was Friday and the boy would not paint that night. He would eat and drink with people he knew. People that knew him. He would laugh maybe, smoke cigarettes.

I wore a dress that night and earrings. I had dinner with the man. We ate Italian food together. I ordered spaghetti. I did not feel lonely. We clinked glasses and I surprised myself by smiling. I did not think of the boy. A weekend passed, quickly, happily, mindlessly.

Then time turned into a Monday. I waited for night time and drove to the boy's house in my raincoat. I listened to the news on the radio. I was excited and comforted in the return to routine. I felt curiosity. I needed to know, to see if progress had been made, if the colors, the lines, the curves and shading had made a picture yet. If the boy had finally bared something. I needed to see if the canvas had changed, if I had missed something critical in my carelessness and revelry.

I arrived and he was setting his workspace. Dinner was over. I was sorry to have missed it. We both situated ourselves, I allowed myself to become still. He brought the small canvas out from the bucket. I watched him sit and regard his work. I strained my neck, my eyes to see what he saw. I watched him breathe. I was nervous and anticipatory. Finally he shifted, opening the canvas to my sight. I tried to make out the face of the painting, stopped breathing for a moment, waited, and saw only blankness. The square before him, before us, was colorless, bare except for some pencil shadings. The boy sat still and focused, concentrated. He began to work.

After some time, I released the muscles in my face. I stopped squinting. I allowed a burning bewilderment to saturate my body. I allowed myself to feel angry for an instant, and then, I settled into calm. Assuredness washed over me. I refocused my gaze, my energy onto the boy. I watched him work. I remained outside his window for the duration of the session.

It felt like the beginning of something new. I would be more persistent this time, would bring more discipline to my practice. I would commit myself to this painting from opening to completion, conception to birth. Together, the boy and I, would reach a fulfillment of our persistent practice, of our moment.

I continued watching the boy in his home at least three evenings a week. On nights when I was unsure of his plans to paint, I followed him directly from the store. I needed to be sure that I wouldn't repeat my previous mistakes and miss this painting's moment of epiphany. I allowed myself to maintain an obsessive urgency in my practice of following him, in my desire to experience a moment of finality and enlightenment, to experience the lifeless canvas illuminated by color and form.

Nightly, he worked and it began to seem as if the boy could perceive my intensity. We waited together, for the moment when work was to begin. He went to the mexican restaurant less frequently, out with friends less frequently. He cooked, ate, cleaned with efficiency, and then begin to work.

I wondered if the woman who waited on him at the restaurant had begun to worry, if she might show up at the boy's house out of concern and find me there outside his window. I began to wonder if the boy's neighbors would finally begin to notice me, if I would be found out. I started wearing dark clothing and parking 4 blocks away from the boy's house.

Neighbors and strangers made me edgy and scared, but I was confident the boy would never out me. When and if I passed him in the cafe or at the store he looked through me, or into some shadow beyond me. I knew he saved his sight for his painting, for the colors, the substances that pleased him and with which he felt at home. No, he would never expose me. With him I was safe in my secrecy, my clandestine need to watch and be with him, understand his energy, his work, some incarnation of his person.

He continued to paint the tiny square, colors upon colors, the faintest nuance of line, the faintest variation of shade. He was technically proficient, this had become clear. Winter passed and he continued to work in his store, he continued to paint the 10 x 10 canvas at night. Still no finished painting. We were not impatient, though. The winter was mild. We were happy in our concentration.

And eventually we shed our coats, our sweaters. The boy began to drink less whiskey. He began visiting the mexican restaurant again. He began seeing friends again. Our routine loosened. We took nights off, weekends off.

I waited for him to come home one Tuesday night. I sat in a bus stop down the block from his house but he did not come. I waited. I left and drove to a convenience store to buy a chocolate bar. I came back to wait. Still, the boy did not come home. I felt listless and confused, I drove to a bar. I drank a beer. I was wearing jeans and canvas tennis shoes, a loose gray t-shirt. My hair was longer than the last time I had visited this bar.

Someone noticed me. We drank beer from brown bottles, we talked about the neighborhood, the news. He said I looked familiar to him.

My weekly appointments continued. The temperateness of Los Angeles made it difficult to feel change, to feel growth or wisdom.

I purchased a white, cotton kimono from the boy's store and began wearing it to sleep. Each night after leaving the boy's house, I would bathe, slowly with deliberateness. I applied milk cream to my skin. I pulled a wide tooth comb gently through my hair, wrapped myself in the kimono and stood still before a mirror. I regarded my face, the lines around my eyes, the beginnings of wrinkles. I tried to ease the persistent crease between my eyebrows, the skepticism from my forehead. The kimono became my ritual, drawing me close to the boy. I used it to feel that our lives became livable together in a reality of dreaming, silent and separate.

I slept through the nights, still and light in the white kimono. My blankets remained smooth and untangled. My dreams were deep and vivid and silent in these nights, irretrievable.

Some mornings in Los Angeles, the rooftops of the place can be indistinguishable from the sky. One fades into the other. This can make you feel lonely and weightless. You drive for hours and never feel like you understand the city. Progress can seem impossible, borders irrelevant.

Time passed and I became desperate. I dug through the boy's dumpster one night thinking I might find a history, a clue, something revealing why the small painting remained unfinished as he continued to work and work.

That night I found melon rinds. I found empty glass bottles of different colors, shredded bills and bank statements. Nothing indicated the boy's work. Nothing brought me to wisdom. My questions hung rotting in the air, now smelling of garbage.

I returned home to bathe. The night passed.

I met the man from the bar soon after. I let him take me out to a small restaurant. A return to time, to something physical I could sink my teeth in, my fingernails. Dinner was nice with this man. We shared chocolate cake for dessert. I sat next to him on the banquette. He paid the bill discreetly and kissed my earlobe. His eyes were dark. He smelled like smoke and herbs and his hands were rough and textured.

I looked at him slowly and deeply that night. He had a dark beard and gray streaks in the waves of his hair combed back from his face. Youth seemed woven into the speckled color of his eyes, into his teeth, his muscles. He was kind to me and drove me home in an old blue jeep.

I drew energy from this man. We drove to the beach one night after dinner. We slipped our shoes off and ran towards the ocean. The moon was high and pale over the water. We waded in the surf and his jeans got soaked, my dress, too. He smiled to me and I considered for the first time, our togetherness. By the time he took me home I was hungry again.

I slept in a gray sweatshirt that night. My hair was tangled and salty.

In the weeks that followed, I began to schedule my appointments in East Los Angeles less frequently. I spent Christmas with the man in Minnesota, where his family lived. I bought a wooly plaid coat with a hood and mittens for the trip.

This man came from a medium sized family. His mother had short gray hair and soft skin. We said grace before dinner and ate meatloaf with ketchup and green beans. We played board games, baked cookies and I never felt cold.

After Christmas I returned to Los Angeles. The man stayed to spend two weeks with his family. He drove me to the airport with his dad and kissed me before I left.

Los Angeles was dull and mesmerizing in winter. I liked being on my own again.

Before long I started wearing my white kimono to sleep. It was just as it had been, weightless and impersonal. The cool color of the moon.

I found myself on the east side of the city, the boy's side of the city. I went with the intent of visiting a bookstore just opened. I bought a book for the man to give him when he returned from Minnesota.

Knowing I shouldn't, knowing I would, I followed the sidewalk to the cafe where I had first seen the boy, the painter, the store-owner. I was alert and excited, the suspense of entering irresistible. I sat in a corner for hours, drinking cinnamon tea and mineral water. I stared at the pages of the book I had bought, turning them mechanically.

Finally, he came. Quiet and unchanged, inward vision, tightened body. I watched him order, pay and leave. I gathered my things and left after him.

He walked, quick as ever, towards the store. He wore slim, dark jeans, a leather jacket. I held back as I watched him open the door and walk inside the storefront.

I continued walking towards the store at a medium pace. I felt bright and suspended, both knowing and not knowing what lay ahead of me.

It had been some time since I had visited the store. I had missed the soothing landscape of the space. I had missed the lines, the colors of a pale horizon over water. The picture painted and framed by the boy with his chosen textile, wood. I had missed the rocking chair. I had missed my quiet intimacy and anonymity in the place.

As I approached, I saw that the glass storefront had been papered over from the inside, and the same for the glass entrance door. I tried pulling the handle to the door but it wouldn't open. It was strange to me to find the store closed and locked. There was no sign, no information. I speculated that the boy was remodeling something, to keep my anxiety at bay.

I returned the next day and the next. The windows remained papered, the door locked.

I drove to the boy's house that night. The lights were off.

I spent the night in my white kimono.

The man would be returning from Minnesota soon.

I panicked one night. I left my bed. I tied my hair back and put on a pair of sandals. I rolled my windows down, turned the heat on low in my car and drove to a bodega. I bought a bottle of chilled white wine and drove on to the boy's house. The lights were off. I continued towards the street his store was on. I parked and walked down the block with my car keys and the cold bottle of wine. Everything was as it had been earlier in the day, door locked, paper up.

There was about a quarter of an inch gap between the paper on the glass and the wooden door frame. Here, light from inside escaped out, the edges of brown paper illuminated, indicating life. I tried to peer through the opening, but it was too narrow.

I stepped back from the door and stood on the curb. Shards of glass glittered on the sidewalk and the night air hung soft and weightless over me. Activity reverberated from inside the store. A living warmth, like that of a bedtime story, kept me outside, waiting and not wanting to leave.

I returned to my car and took a corkscrew from the glove compartment along with a white paper cup. I sat on the curb just in front of the boy's store and opened the cold wine. I poured myself a cup and drank slowly. I felt lonely and placeless, childlike. I missed my father. I missed the feeling of a home in evening. I sipped the wine. It was cool and tasted of lemon rind and beach sand. I looked at my toes, pale and unpainted in my sandals.

I sipped the wine slowly with deference and enjoyment, so as to slow time. I sipped the wine slowly in a way that created some space in the moment, that seemed to spread the seconds out thin and level. I sipped it, seeking passive resolution.

For a moment, I imagined myself jumping up, striking loud out of the dead torpor with outrage and love. I imagined myself taking the cold wine bottle and throwing it deliberately and marvelously across the sidewalk. I imagined it shattering the wide glass storefront, rendering the paper, the tape irrelevant and vulnerable, torn and crumpling, powerless on the floor. I imagined an outpouring of nakedness and truth to come from this. A revelation.

I lost myself for a moment in imagination of this wild and chaotic debut. I lost myself in the image of the image of the light, the shine of the familiar gleaming wood floors, the boy within standing alone, immaculate and uncurtained.

A car drove by at a moderate speed. I poured three tablespoons more of wine into my cup. I drank this. The wine had lost some of its shocking and exquisite cold. It had mellowed into something softer, gentler, less perfect. I finished what I had poured and stood to go. My kimono stuck to the back of my thighs with sweat and gravel.

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I married the man from Minnesota later on. The days becoming impacted with small milestones of terror and necessity. Children came to us, popsicle sticks and cooked spaghetti. Construction paper and colored pencils adorned my home. I became used to laughing. I came to

learn that there is a right and perfect minute, an urgent beauty that presents itself in the time to teach a human being to swim, to ride a bicycle.

Time was passing and I had no choice but to wash dishes, return books to the library, cut hair and grass. I was silently and secretly overjoyed that the dishes returned dirty to me, that the hair I cut, the grass, grew back so soon, so generously.

The man remained always young and buoyant, forgiving. He asked me questions, listened to me speak, think, cry. His mother sent me recipes and tea towels. She prayed for me. Life become a time of memories and distinctions. I felt I had little to hide.

There was a moment, there were moments, though, that I lost my sense of perfect and safe placedness. A reversion to the cool stillness of what I had left, of what I once was. I chose to drive to the boy's storefront one day. I parked my car and walked along the sidewalk. I had eaten waffles for breakfast with my children, that morning. Our plates, sticky with syrup and crumbs sat in my kitchen sink. I walked along slowly, glancing periodically at my reflection in the storefronts I passed. My hair was light and wispy that day. I wore bluejeans and carried a leather bag on my shoulder. I tucked my hair tight behind my ears. I searched for angles, for recognition in the reflected face, the reflected figure.

I kept moving, but slowly. I felt ready to encounter something, but at the same time, ready to stop.



Years later, I dreamt a sort of mural, a mosaic of blended lines and swirls that combined to make a magnificent portrait. The woman had the face of a Japanese schoolgirl softened into motherhood. She had quiet, laughing eyes; creamy, even, moonlike skin; matte black hair. In my dream, the mural covered the space of an entire wall. When I approached the painting, looking closely at it, I saw that it wasn't a mural. It was a collage. One hundred small square canvases built

together like a puzzle, each one blending perfectly into the other, writing the landscape of the woman's face. A hundred individual canvases, painted, matched and pieced together in a work, a labor of filial love and concentration.