

## Fingers Pointing At the Moon

In our Politics of Narrative class, we had become obsessed with theory. We read Baudrillard, Lukacs, Barthes, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Watt, Ricoeur. It was a revelation to us that literature had the right to evolve, but no one dared show enthusiasm. We read and we balked. After a while, there began an unspoken though heated competition to coin a phrase that would defeat all hope. However, when E chimed in and said, “Some of us obviously still believe there’s such a thing as a unique event,” I think we were all surprised to feel a glimmer of defiance, to question whether she’d gone too far.

I, for one, wanted to believe but it was getting harder. One morning, toward the end of the semester, I awoke inside a shower fugue, standing under water, with a line moving through my head, horizontally: “There are no exceptions...There are no exceptions.” And I admit, in December, just after *Big Bang* was released and P and I watched the moon disappear, I tried to

become entranced, hoping it meant something. For about an hour. Then I remembered that lunar eclipses happen every couple of years, so I went back to reading *Missed Connections*. I spent the very next night with a different guy.

P was just a stand-in, my second choice—or maybe my third, it always depended on a shifting regard for each of my exes. But he made it clear I was the only one he wanted as his partner in crime, so I asked him to come over to hang out first—maybe take a nap before we headed out from my studio at 4:30 AM to drive around and find a clear vantage point. The night before, to pass time, we watched clips of some ancient animation on YouTube, paired with a soundtrack of Roxy Music. I just clicked on a random song, “Editions of You,” and the rhythm immediately locked in. The squiggly amoebic shapes looked, all of a sudden, more profoundly squiggly.

“How did you know to pick that one,” he asked. “You’re such an artist.”

“That’s just what happens when you put music and film together,” I said. “They synch up.”

I’d discovered it when I was a kid, with the radio and the TV. You just cued up any song with any movie or show. Then everything would magically coalesce. I thought everyone had become aware of this trick by high school, at least. Hadn’t he watched *The Wizard of Oz* with *Dark Side of the Moon* on the turntable? P kept saying, “Oh, I do know. You’re right, of course. Yes, I’ve done that, too,” but continued to look at me in awe. He wanted to believe I was responsible for an algorithmic elegance because I had hit two play buttons at once. This was the first thing that made me sad.

I said, “We should just listen to it with the real music.”

“Oscar Peterson,” P said, “Yeah, it’s really great with the original score, too. Completely different, though.”

Maybe, I thought.

His lips were still soft. P kissed great, but was too little for me; he always noted how small I was, sort of gloating, but was actually one of the smaller men I’d dated. All ribs. Pretty-faced. Like a girl, except that he had a hard time listening. He stroked my waist as I lay across the bed with my face buried in the laptop, laid his palms on either side of me and said, “You’re just this big. That’s all there is. No more.”

We woke several hours later in the pitch black and drove to 7-11 for some crappy food to hold us over. Then we sat in P’s car with the vents blasting hot air, and the very top of the moon going grey like an old hard-boiled egg. Several months before, in the summer, I was sure we had some sort of bond. He had been all germinating projects and Texan optimism. And I believed him now when he told me he liked me because we had similar ideas, but the only thing that worked on me was his voice and the look on his face when he would say, “You’re just so, so pretty. That was all I wanted—the same way I wanted to finish all my term papers and watch the Peanuts Christmas Special, huddled underneath a blanket.

I remembered that, back in October, E had invited me to hear her hot gay friend read gushy poems about his lovers.

“He’s a great guy,” she said, “but I don’t like his writing. You know what I mean? It’s pretty amateurish. He still believes in *beauty*.”

Her chin was strong, like a punch.

I nodded my head. I still wanted to believe.

Everyone outside that morning was staring up at the face of the moon. They made stars fall down with their attention. If I squinted, I could see all these wavy lines on the surface I hadn't noticed before, and there was something charming and familiar about being sucked into the sky's screen that way. Like going to see a secret show, there was both an oddly formal spirit of adventure, and a sense that the outing could become a huge flop.

P insisted we find the best angle of approach. My finals were in two days, and my throat was raw on one side, signaling the start of a shitty weekend. I smiled for his sake, but was not enthused—anticipating the shift from place to place, leaning right through the passenger side window to keep the moon in my scope—as the car made its way over the freeway, across the bridge, along the streets by the piers. He kept taking pictures, saying, “The camera on this phone is not so hot.” He took hundreds of pictures, and the moon was too far away in all of them to even clearly see it was a moon. It was more like the moon condensed into a code representing itself.

I was staring at him half the time, wishing he would stop looking down into his lap, stop obsessively manipulating the photos. It's not in your hands, it's above you, I wanted to say. Then when we got to Twin Peaks, there was a news crew and we perked up, thinking we must be on to something. We finally got out of the car and stood against it in the cold. But the sky was still vague.

A boy I'd worked with at a record store five years earlier passed by in a Scion with some stranger, stared at me, and was gone again. He was a good friend of N, the ex to whom I still texted quips and insights, all day, every day. I left that job with a permanent cringe, but I'd come

in with a doll's face, hauling my winsome effort around, unloading it onto lanky boys whose bands I'd barely heard of. My tattoos were fresh as drying paint.

N had also worked in that den of disenchantment. He answered questions at the info desk. Once, an old lady had approached the counter, stopped in her tracks and breathed, "Rudy Valentino!" Flattered, he'd replied, "Madame, I'd marry you, but I'm already taken."

"You flirt with every woman you meet," I said to him a few weeks before we broke up. "It's that soft voice. You level them with intimacy."

I do not," he said, nostrils flaring. He wouldn't talk to me after that.

But the next evening he was contrite. Our transgender coworker, J, who made N more nervous than he liked to admit, had blocked the door as he left for the day.

"I'm mad at you, N."

"Why's that?" He'd asked. "We're friends J, aren't we?"

Then J had crossed her arms in front of her perky, hard bosoms.

"You haven't flirted with me all day," she'd pouted.

"That's when I realized you're probably right," he told me, laughing. "I should find a new approach with the opposite sex."

We'd been laying atop his lavender bedspread as he told me this story, under a poster from *L'Avventura*, a portion of Monica Vitti's full mouth invisible, outside the frame. My life resembles something, I thought. What exactly?

On the hillside, P was holding my waist, and I stared back at N's friend, thinking N would surely hear about everything in a few hours when the sun was up. Then P drove us back across the bridge, and I tried not to fall asleep, to be polite, even though I wanted to be alone. He slept over and stayed too late. He left his backpack at my house for a week.

Later that day, I cried on the phone to K, my most recent ex, the one I went out with after the Texan—the one I just wanted to be happy. K was the kindest, most remote man I'd dated, a painter who talked with no affect and constantly lamented his bad luck with women. He was broad-shouldered and moved through the apartment like a well-intentioned ape, spilling coffee grounds and knocking over lamps. On our third date, he'd read me a poem about performance anxiety. It was dedicated to me.

Post-break-up, we were more like an old married couple. The vibe had become very flannel pajamas. He turned up with spaghetti and textbooks, and told me he felt bisexual. That he wanted a large and unattractive older man to dominate him in bed. I said I thought it was a good idea, that maybe he'd let go and finally experience his emotions. The last little light of my desire went out and I felt both grateful and desolate. He left for two hours to go to a party for a couple of friend who were moving to Norway, and I stayed in bed to indulge in a flurry of texts with N. In summation, N sent me a YouTube video of an old Blues song and a clip from a Bruce Lee movie. We only knew how to talk this way anymore, accepting feelings as ineffable, acknowledging how little we could do with language. When this happened, we just showed each other sad songs and scenes from movies, going, "Yes, that's right, like that, exactly," over and over, stuck in a mimetic groove.

Bruce Lee played a mentor, instructing his student to stop thinking so much and just feel; that he should make himself into a “finger pointing at the moon.” The Blues song was about a woman doing the singer wrong because that’s what Blues songs are all about. N had written that the two clips were related; then I remembered his friend who had driven by during the eclipse and read in a reprimand, by proxy. I cried for myself, pulled it together quickly, and apologized for my weakness with men. But he didn’t know what I was talking about, or what I was apologizing for, and let it go. He had just been giving me Bruce Lee advice. And later, while writing my paper after K returned, K asked me, about his own final paper, “Tell me, how does this sound?” Then he cleared his throat and began, “Like a finger pointing at the moon...” I didn’t hear the rest. When he was finished, I related the coincidence. He was both understanding and annoyed.

“I won’t talk about N if it bothers you,” I said.

“I want to be the most special,” he said, not entirely joking, “Because you’re the most special to me.”

I thought: You want men; that makes me the least special of all.

A few days later, K and I went to see *Big Bang*. The film was described as a sad, slow apocalypse, wherein a planet-sized, unidentifiable object verged upon the Earth. I had been looking forward to seeing it. I thought it might keep my attention.

There were two cute boys ahead of us, silently texting each other on their phones, then showing one another and snickering. It seemed possible they were implicating me as K’s accessory. I could see their tiny screens over the rows. When K and I talked, they continued to

giggle into each other's ears. Played out in public, our quotidian conversation seemed loaded down with irony. It felt torturously stupid to speak.

The whole first half of the film was full of the thoughts in my own head and what we'd recently talked about alone where we felt safe. I squeezed K's arm a few times when I heard him sigh. At one point, as I see-sawed on the verge of tears, he turned to me and stage whispered, "Does anything happen in this story?"

I was stunned.

"It's an allegory," I said.

Throughout the movie, K talked too loudly at me on purpose—to be funny, or to break the tension. "What's the allegory," he kept asking, and I started to think maybe I'd just said that to be smart or to make him shut up. Suddenly every detail was a clue and they all became tangled and confused. I no longer felt like crying, just couldn't breathe, and reached in my purse for an Ativan. After the movie, I recovered and talked in the car about advertising, narrative, and the theme of the godless universe. I tried to convince him that the movie had value. He said, "Yes, I got all of that. I just don't really like his style."

When I asked if he wanted to get dinner, he said, "Actually, I'm going to the city to hang out with S. We'll probably grab some dinner over there." Another ex. K and I had never gone to a movie before that night, had rarely been to dinner. I was silent for a while. Outside the car, people walked around in their huge mistakes; some of them even smiled—so simple, like they were allowed. I thought of what we'd talked about in my class, how the zeitgeist shifts a principal form of narrative, how, in the novel, characters explore an "urge to be at home anywhere." What could possibly come next? I wanted to believe in it.



When we were almost to my house, he said, “Do you have anything else to say.” His voice was flatter than usual. Like a defendant on the witness stand, I realized this might be my last chance to plead for clemency. But I’d already talked too much.

“You barely talked at all,” he said.

“Thank you for being such a good friend to me,” he said, and I said, “You’re welcome. Thank you for being my friend.”

Then it felt more like an exit interview.

I got out of the car and he drove to the city to find his other ex. Then I texted N and told him I was sorry for writing the night before, once again, that he didn’t care about me. He said I’d hurt his feelings but he understood and that we were cool. His sigh was practically embedded in the characters. Back to normal.

At home, I tried to finish my paper on the distinction between heroes in the Novel and the Epic—talk about the disappearance of the transcendental locus. Instead, I played a sitcom on Netflix about rich teenagers who spend their lives scheming and buying clothes, and I fell asleep this way, pacified, with the lights on. I woke up early the next day and felt alone. Got coffee. Read all the status updates on Facebook about a local musician I knew only peripherally who had just committed suicide. A stream of loving elegy interrupted by chatter about the holidays, links to news stories about presidential candidates, and naked photos of a starlet becoming a flash in the pan. Then I got a call at 1PM from K.

“I’m driving,” he said, “Or I would have texted.”

I nodded into the phone.

“I just wanted to tell you I changed my mind about the movie. I did like it.”

“Ok,” I said.

He said, “Yeah, I realized it had something to say and that, while I’m not a fan of his aesthetic, it was on target with the message.”

I wondered if S were responsible for his change of heart, if she’d said something eloquent that made him see what I had seen. A silence opened up because I had no rejoinder. This made his voice edgy.

“What are you up to?” He asked.

“I’m not up to anything. What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Okay then,” I said.

He said, “I guess I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yes,” I said. “Have a good day.”

I got off the phone and he kept driving wherever he was, probably on the bridge back from the city—definitely from and to somewhere—and I opened my laptop again to read through the Missed Connections.

“Searching for you.”

“Want to hook up.”

“I truly do miss you.”

“You opened it. Good luck!”

An inscrutable galaxy of you, me, I, me, you.