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The Street Performer

Rebecca Grace Cyr

Oregon State University, cyr@oregonstate.edu

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

Award for Best Creative Work

2018 Northwest Undergraduate Conference in the Humanities

Loosely based off a group of female abstract artists from the late 1800s, this fictional piece is centered around the protagonist's obsession with one particular subject in her art—the medium being filmmaking—and exploring the rather idolized projection she has created for this individual. This story attempts to examine the life of an artist who is swept up in an unconscious state of fiction, continuously re-creating and shifting her perception of people (the street performer, specifically)—often as a reflection of her own self and frustrations. This is done through the use of film, and highlighting specific images as we might see them in movies. There is a sense of self-awareness in both filming, and being watched or recorded.

Keywords

creative writing, fiction, short story, the gaze

In the evenings we came to Room 310, a large studio that held photography and film equipment, a broken floorboard that led to some vacant darkness, and a television above a sunken red couch. There were no windows. The four-story building that contained this studio, also employed—as far as anyone was concerned—only one woman. She was always the same, sitting behind a grey, oak desk, swallowed in its hugeness with a strained facial expression.

We arrived individually. If I was the first of the group, (and I often was), I would approach the woman, who smiled—a large gap between her front teeth—and ask for the key. It wasn't mine to receive (the studio space was Heather's), but the woman, oblivious and kind, handed it out to whoever asked.

It was Thursday. We were lying on the wood in front of the TV, sprawled like addicts—the needles on the floor being camera lenses and rolls of film. A woman I'd never seen before entered the studio.

"This is Colette," Heather said.

"Are you in the project?" Mira asked, staring at Colette.

"Yes. There has to be five," Heather said.

We turned our heads back to the television. On the screen we watched a room full of figures watching their own TV screen, passing a joint between sets of forefingers and thumbs. The scene cut between close-up shots of the men in the room—men, all men—though half were dressed as women, and each face was shown. The camera pulled back to a full view of the room. The figures were walking now, on a line taped to the ground, and they were spreading their arms

for balance, moving with intoxicated meticulousness. If a foot stepped off the line, they'd fall to the ground, amongst the others—the bodies all lying together as the camera spun in a dizzying grey.

After the movie, when the sun had set, we walked, film equipment in our bags, to the old apartment complex on the other side of the street. On the left side of the structure, a sequence of fire-escape ladders crossed upwards to the roof. We climbed in a robotic pattern, single limbs moving up one by one in the cold air. The roof was a flat landscape scattered with boxy ventilation systems on a black, rubber surface.

Colette stared to the ground below, "Tall building."

"It's not tall," Heather said.

"It feels tall."

"Nothing will happen," she said, and then, to prove her point, walked to the edge of the building—which came up about half a foot—and sat down on the ledge, legs dripping loosely off the side.

We stood for a while, watching Colette watch Heather, knowing she felt terrified—too old for this strange form of recklessness.

"Do you think people look up?" she asked.

"No," Heather said.

We began setting up the camera equipment, placing the tripod legs on the tape marks Heather had left, angling the camera down to the view of the street corner. Always the same one, right off of the park, across from the drugstore.

"The card trick performer is back," I said, motioning to the others.

"He's there every night."

I stared through the lens. Figures were moving around one another, some trailing behind in an unintentional formation. Like cattle, they were a numbing stream of bovine creatures. On the outskirts of the park, an old woman sat on a wooden bench, staring into a vacant space above the drugstore. When she looked away, there would be flickers of neon in her vision from the fluorescent sign. Beside the bench was the street performer. He was aware of the movements in people; he watched for lulls in the pattern, approaching only those that turned their heads. The motions he made with his arms had fluidity—a charismatic flair. I watched him fan out a set of cards to a middle-aged couple with a small child. Their facial expressions, though not perfectly distinct through the lens, had a definitive sense of excitement. They were genuine, impressed.

“He’s good,” I said.

We sat on the roof for two hours. I continued to return to the lens, listening to the women raising their voices over the film we had seen as I watched below.

“It’s more complex than that. To say it’s the story of Oedipus Rex is to diminish the artistry. It’s an exploration of the counterculture in Japan, above all else.”

I went home, becoming a part of the collective in the street, trying to differ my walk, moving quickly, experimenting with space. I imagined how it appeared from above.

Jacob was sitting on the couch when I entered, chewing the eraser of a pencil and bouncing his knee, eyes fixated on the television.

“There’s someone new,” I said.

“Are you still filming the street corner?”

“We are only filming the street corner.”

“Why do you need more people?” Jacob asked.

“There has to be five.”

In bed, I stared at the ceiling, picturing the street performer. I imagined him as someone well-traveled. He had acquired his skills in Europe—in Paris. He spoke French. He lived in an apartment with red walls, a king-sized bed surrounded by golden curtains. Bohemian, eclectic, every style tastefully intertwined. When he lived in Paris, he made appearances at a well-known cafe. It had a bar in the basement where jazz musicians would play. He wrote a book. He’s rich. He’s here now only for the passion. Unaltered, purified. It’s his only love.

Jacob came to bed much later and began kissing my neck.

I turned over and stared at the wall.

A week passed. I went into the studio early. The woman—the poor, strained woman—handed me the key and I went upstairs to get the film equipment before anyone arrived. From a bench across the street I watched the performer. His mouth curved oddly when he spoke. The French accent, I thought. He wore a white shirt, slightly unbuttoned. His hair was dark, almost black. Beside his feet was an expensive-looking briefcase.

There was something simplistic about his practice, humbling. He performed new tricks, but only with the cards. An artist of one medium. An hour passed, then I felt my phone buzzing in my bag amongst the film

equipment. I couldn't return to the studio. I had to see where the performer went.

Close to nine, the performer began to pack his things. He came toward my direction from across the street and entered into the drugstore. I went around the corner and waited on the other side. He exited the store in a change of clothes, more professional now, in a white shirt buttoned, a blazer jacket, and the expensive-looking briefcase swinging by his side. I began after him while picturing the five women above, watching me follow the man, trailing him down the street, keeping a loose distance.

For twenty minutes I continued behind him. We approached the outskirts of the city, its buildings spread out and shrunk. Barbed-wire fences hung around miserable plots of yard and broken windows. The air was thickened by the smell of cigarettes and old food. He turned into a circle—not quite a cul-de-sac—of trailers and small, frayed homes. He moved towards a dark blue house on the left. I waited from a distance and watched him enter. A warm yellow light spreading out and dissipating into the dark as he opened the door. I moved closer and squatted next to a shrub, taking out the camera and pointing it toward the kitchen window.

He had a wife. She was standing, elbows supporting her frail figure bent over a cheap, tile counter. She was fixated on an invisible point. The wife didn't turn her head when the street performer entered. He came behind her and kissed her temple gently, lightly placing his hands on her shoulders. The street performer walked off to another part of the house.

I slowly maneuvered to the backyard, positioning myself deep within the foliage. He entered into one of the rooms and turned on the dim ceiling light. Through the lens I watched him undress. The tips of his hair drooped over eyebrows after he removed his shirt. He reached up to press the hair off his forehead. I saw a small section toward the back that was balding, and I was able to see his eyes now: dark brown, sunken into the face, surrounded by deep circles. I watched him lay naked on the bed, limbs stretched out.

The room was nearly empty, nothing on the beige walls. I zoomed out the lens on the camera, until the house was fully in view. It seemed to shrink and crumble as the image was recorded. The grass, though it was dark, was visibly flaky. My feet were amongst its dry, yellow strings; my figure was amongst it, crouched behind the tripod. The sound of a car driving on gravel echoed in the distance. I stepped in front of the camera, recording the dark silhouette of my body standing before the house and the man inside the window—together contained in the same moving image.