

Ellen Sullins

The Visible Spectrum

I.

She used to wonder a lot
about what went through the mind
of her old cat Sybil
and once she said to her old friend Jay
wouldn't it be cool to spend a day inside her head
you know to really experience cat
reality and he said hmm maybe not
might make you crazy and even though
that conversation was years ago she still
thinks of it often and wonders if it might be true
that only cats can handle cat consciousness
and if so would it also be true that a cat couldn't
handle human consciousness because maybe
what happened was her dad
was really a cat who somehow landed in a human
body with a human brain and that's why eventually
he had to take that shotgun to obliterate
the consciousness so alien to his essence
but maybe she's reaching a little there.

II.

Or maybe not
because she also daydreams a lot
about waking up with new and improved vision
that would let her see beyond the currently visible
spectrum of light not to make bifocals
unnecessary but allow her to apprehend
the colors hiding in the really really
short and the really really long
undulations because wouldn't it be cool
to experience something as incomprehensible as that
and then she thinks hmm might make her crazy
but then if she did
discover something like maybe
infrared smells like death or birth or maybe ultraviolet
has the texture of Aphrodite's inner labia wouldn't insanity
be a small price to pay and she's reminded
of the people she knows who stopped doing acid
or peyote back in the day
because they knew... the next time
they wouldn't have the will to come back
and all the ones who didn't know
they wouldn't have the will or didn't care
but she's been very fortunate and didn't actually know
any of those.

III.

Although her brother
did sort of loosely fit that category
after Vietnam except it wasn't drug-drugs that got
him though he certainly did plenty of them saying why
should an emotional cripple any more than a physical
cripple have to give up his crutches let alone
his wheelchair and she remembers thinking that he did
have a point but then it turned out to be all the beer
in his bloodstream that day that either fucked
up his judgment or just persuaded him
to go on and blast through the stop sign
where the road dead-ends at the highway
with that big tree on the other side
either way they said he died instantly
and yes she says she's wondered all the clichés
about that last instant of his
and her dad's
like did they see the real and true face of god
in all its holy splendor and all but when she lets
herself imagine the full spectrum of feelings
they might have had then her own
reality begins to shimmer and sway
in a bendy-stretchy kind of way and she has to pull
herself back from even looking
at that land of melting clocks and buzzards
because what distinguishes her from them
might be nothing more than a gene here a peptide there
and even if she's been saved so far by something like the fullness
of two entire X chromosomes you never know
when some little acid-base pair might just wink off or on
and she could very well join the ranks
of the unwilling or unable to come back
from such a place where the entire spectrum of all that is
is visible.

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Homage To A Red Honda Civic

You haven't
really plumbed the potential of your psyche until
you've driven across country alone at the end
of another affair, especially if you're driving the little
red Honda you bought in '77 with the drab
of divorce money sticky with guilt and bright promise,

this car like a red metal womb that six years later has proven more steadfast than any of the cast of characters hitchhiking across your heart—a few months here a year or two there—before one of you says “This is as far as I go” and it's you and the Honda again.

Like now

heading west out of New Orleans with the sun slipping toward the horizon and the road behind you stretched out like a fat rubber band attached to your bumper and stubbornly anchored to the man who most likely is still sitting in that bar in The Quarter, the one where the house drink is called a Climax so you ordered a double and he said *mmm-hmm*, even now the Honda pushes ahead, the little-engine-that-could, doing its best to soothe and distract you with music that conjures imaginary lovers riding in the passenger's seat.

Like the one

that appears just now as you cross into Texas, the rubber band's pull overwhelming and the Honda choosing Dire Straits to remind you (*everybody's got a knife, it can be just what they want it to be*) and there he is, pushing back his seat the better to unfurl those lanky legs he knows you're a sucker for, and he cocks his head to look you over with half-veiled eyes and a little Rorschach smile that says oh honey, a double climax wouldn't even begin to describe it.

And hours later

when that one has been exhausted and your right leg no longer seems attached to your body and the night is the bottom of an ocean where your headlights reveal ghostly blind creatures swimming across the road and one is clearly the cat that was put to sleep when you were ten, the Honda comes to your rescue again with Miles and Coltrane blowing *So What*, and beside you appears the one who wants nothing more in life than to hear your thoughts on Miles and Basquiat and Clapton and Ginsberg and Hegel and god and whether or not Hegel is god, and even your treatise on the tragedy of Steely Dan disbanding, and although he asks you many probing questions, in the end he usually concedes the point and always admires your tenacity.

And just
when it seems like months you've been driving through Texas,
and the passenger seat holds only your purse and beef jerky
wrappers and a few thousand crumpled cigarette packs, fresh
caffeine starts percolating across your synapses and the rear
view mirror fills with the lemony light of morning, and at last
the Honda reaches escape velocity, the rubber band snapping
out of its mooring, launching you free of the pull of the earth,
and you float like a capsule in space on a graceful trajectory toward
some new promise, not merely away from your old familiar songs.

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Degrees of Freedom

after Bruce Snider's 'The Certainty of Numbers'

It isn't the numbers you love
—the roots and sines and logs—
it's the way the answers are always
so definite
there's no real need for a You.
It's how 2 plus 3 is always 5, never
8 or 9 or your family. That anything
divided by N minus 1 does not
require an opinion on global affairs,
and negative times negative is positive,
not like your brother times brother or father.
How the sum of X-squared is clearly
so different from the sum of X, squared
and neither is ever
your own critique of Existentialism
swaying in the breeze, a possibly empty
piñata dodging the big theory stick They
swing. And formulas! Benevolent maps
that guide you away from your father's despair
and your own. The autistic escape of 5 and 6 and
leave the sticks and stones and certainly the words
alone—7 times 7 the stairway to heaven, which
happens to equal the inverse of home.