



Robert G. Sherrin / STILL LIFE

Nature morte: a hand, just so. The fingers curl lightly, as though about to receive a touch. The palm is still damp, and its life lines glint with a dark moisture. In the background, a blur of movement, mainly reds and greys and blacks and blues. Noise echoes into silence.

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He withdrew, so we're told, into his apartment where he watched war movies and read war comics.

He must have practised often: pulled it out of his closet, swung it from a sack, aimed it at the faces on his TV. He must also have contemplated how to travel from his apartment, how to carry his weapon from the building to the car to the Polytechnique, how to remind himself of the exact location of his gun and to feel always assured that others couldn't see it. He must have imagined pretty thoroughly every step he'd have to take to the second floor, where to park legally, how many doors to get through, when to pull the semiautomatic from the garbage bag, how close and intimate the crowds might be. He must have dreamed every night of those tight corridors, lined with lockers the colour of iodine.

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Why do you have to be so powerful anyway?

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The head. I know a little about the head: de-capped it resembles an eggcup with breakfast cooling in it. The dura mater coats the brain like albumen. But it can be peeled back, like the membrane of a Christmas orange, to lay bare the corrugations of what I am: imagination, motor skills, the ability to reason myself to the logical extremes of that cavity.

I am quiet most of the time. I look out the window but I stay away from it, behind the curtains, and peer through a slit in the fabric. Things dart past the thin gap. I learn to slow down my gaze, until the traffic and pedestrians move past my sight at a pace that makes it easy to track down a feature, a moving colour, or put sound of protest to the car lurching sideways.

I don't eat much — except things that taste sweet, that counter the greyness of the room.



He had to pick a wardrobe. This is something he knew a little about, having gone with his mother as a young boy to be outfitted for a new term of school. He understood that certain colours went well with others, but he was no longer sure how to make decisions about things like clothes. It was irksome to have to devote time to appearing to be any thing in particular. He understood the symbols as well as you or I — that ties denote a degree of success or a desire for it. *Material desire*, I suspect we are likely to be told when the so-called authorities are allowed, or are willing, to tell us all they know. Certainly by that time, we'll have speculated so greatly about his character that we'll find him a bore and turn our attention to the latest large scale political murder somewhere else in the world.

He believed, I suspect, that the only time we point is when we raise our remote controls: that much we understand.

To be different, so he thought, he chose mottled colours, such as those found on the bark of winter dormant trees: medallions of flesh-colour slipping over patches of withered brown sliding into pools of coagulated rust. Like a wilderness he could wear.



I have learned things lately. For instance, I have learned the difference between television and the world outside my window. Television is an electronic pulse. The world outside possesses a wider spectrum. This is a property quite common in science, an activity that causes me to think a lot about pulses, energy, and spectral displays. I've learned that when I watch TV I don't watch TV. I watch other people take their places in the activity on the screen — fleetingly, like the pedestrians that slip past the widening gap in my curtains. At night I now turn the television off and stand by the window. I let the darkness come around me, from behind, like a gesture I sense is about to land — and does. That's what I like about the darkness — its touch, its thorough embrace. I lean toward the window and wait for the shapes to shift through the streetlight, weak now at this time of year. The cold makes the air so clear that light is absorbed by it, and I have to wait a long time to see, but then the patterns on the snow become

discernible. I can pick out depressions, and I imagine the foot that made them, probably narrow enough to fit in my palm. It is a pale foot, particularly under this blue yule light. But a soft foot. I run my thumb along its instep and the warm skin wrinkles. There is moisture under the curl of the toes. A little lint too. I can smell a mixture of sweat and felt and freshness because the sock's humidity has already dissipated in the cool darkness.

It tastes of salt and soil — right there, at the heel, where it's a little rough.

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Why are you so afraid of us?

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The round, he thought, was well named. When set beside the video monitor, its shadows were multiple and mobile in the wobbling electronic light. He found himself watching, humming a tune over and over again. This was also something he'd done as a young boy — sung his chorus repeatedly while his classmates sang their assigned verses over and over.

The round was also well named, he understood, because it was endlessly repeatable, constantly pumped out 24 hours a day at sites all around the world. There was probably one for every living human being, a name for every round.

The round was long and tapered. It had what he came to call *hips*. And narrow, delicate shoulders that carried the head — of copper.

A redhead, he thought. And gave it a name.

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I learn new things every day. Today I learned that if I stand for long periods at the window, I seem to disappear. No one takes notice of me in the same way that I take notice of them. I pull the curtains wider, so my gap frames more and more things: that one's leg slipping past the doorframe of a store; this one waving in anger at the passing cab; another one, just over there, bending by a tree, reaching down for something. Her hand is outstretched, and I can see the splayed fingers so I know she is not about to grasp anything. It's as if she were testing the temperature of the snow-covered earth. Her fingers curl, but very slowly, I notice, so the yellowy sunlight glints, but just barely, off her

burnished fingernails.

They are not so hard, you know. They can mark the flesh if drawn over it in various ways — a brief furrow, the fast whiteness of a scratch, the burgundy welt. But nails can be cut themselves or bitten off.

I look down at my fingers. I feel the coolness that arrives — as though from the lined glove she draws her hand, slipping it through mine, finger between finger laced tight. If I were to have the chance to be with a woman again, it's that coolness I would want, something distant but momentarily touching, foreign and somehow dangerous. Quickly absorbed and excreted.

The woman is gone now, and I am relieved. The glass is icy as new bedsheets against my forehead. I lean hard into the damp cold cutting edge.

When will I break out
or up
or down
or in?
Any day now. Any day.

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What is it in us that frightens you so? Maybe that's not the right question. Maybe you are frightened by the fact that we even ask such questions of you, but nevertheless, let us ask you this one: what is it in you that is so frightening?

And this one as well: why are you so determined to control everything but your own desires?

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He began at an early age to look at his body in mirrors, in any reflective surface in fact. When his father and mother and sister were out, he would take the looking glass from its brackets on his closet door. He would lie on his bed and hoist the mirror so he could scan his naked body: across his thighs the snake-like bruises from the belt, the dark lift under the eye where the fist had struck, the scratches on the chest where the nails had dug in to spin him around for another fatherly tap on his face. It was odd, but he understood that the pain had leaked into him from outside and sunk deeply, settling perhaps to the bowl of the abdomen, for it's there his hand would begin to smooth things over as he stared upward into himself and witnessed the

transformation.

He realized that size is a matter of perspective. He realized that in his culture power is also a matter of perspective. Sometimes he lay on the mirror, pressing himself into it, feeling his cool hard reflective surface. He loved that pressure — and the ritual of his father's hand, his mother's useless threats, his sister's quick yet futile invisibility when the beatings began and the old man made his rounds. No one protested. The neighbours turned up the sound to the Plouffe Family and that was that. He would pound himself into his own reflection and wait for the weakness to overwhelm him.

Years later, he would still sigh in his looking glass cell: oh yes, oh yes. Fuel, he would think as he rolled off and stared into the winter of his cracked ceiling. Energy. Size. Power. These are the things he would build with, he decided. With these things he would engineer his world: tall buildings, mirrored sheetwalls 54 stories high on Rue Dorchester and long jets of arced steel over the St. Lawrence. He recalled that carbonated sensation just at the moment of release. That soft explosion.

The shot, he said to himself, finally finding the name for the thing and the action both. The shot.



Do you think we're taking your world away from you? Why do you believe our future denies you a place? Don't you know that a fetus is, at one point, both female and male? Do you really think the one disappears when the other declares itself?



The classroom he chose carefully. He had thought about it while watching the videos he'd bought. He would squint at the monitor and soon the howling shapes would recede into the schematic he devised for himself: up the long escalators on the slope from Cote Ste Catherine, past the tall tower, up the ramp, and there just to the left, the entrance way. He knew the dimness of the escalator shafts, the nearness of concrete, dull bulbs glowing. He could already sense the students sliding smoothly up and down, their smatters of conversation deadened by the materials of the building. The classroom would be large: this he knew all along. There would be a little wooden desk on the podium, and women and men in the seats in front of it. The men he had no use

for, but the women would remain with him. Then his work could begin.

Certainly he knew already they would look at him with slackening faces and then they would grow animated. They might want to argue with him, even handle him roughly, but our world had already trained him in the language of denunciation. Oh, he'd have no trouble keeping their voices and hands at a distance. That's what he would design in that large room: space. He would engineer emptiness.

The weight of his weapon was that of a phantom limb. Even when he wasn't hoisting and aiming it, he could feel it nestle into his shoulder, the embrace of its length in his arms, its perfume of light oil and tempered metal. He would sometimes lie on his back with the weapon on his chest and loins, feeling it rise and fall as he breathed. He slept that way towards the end. His dreams became more and more hollow until their images dimmed to quick ragged movements, and the voices he heard were those of women calling out.

Their names, that's what they were giving him. This he finally understood, and in his sleep he began writing them letters of outrage and suicide.



Fear we understand: we learn it from childhood. We are warned about strangers. But now we must ask you more questions. Since you also are afraid, why must you make a joke of it? Why is your humour so black, so vicious? What is there inside you that makes you piss your pants when we insist we will live our own lives? Who put it there?

Why is it that when we say, No Means No, you reply with glee:

No Means More Beer

No Means Tie Me Up

No Means Kick Her In The Teeth?



I know a little about this head. It is full of things from books and television. I recall Lortie blasting his way into the National Assembly, the still electronic frame as he points his machine gun at the camera. Camouflage gear, boots, and clips of ammunition. I know also that in this head is a recipe, a complex one centuries in the making, subtle but volatile at certain moments. My head, should you peel it open and settle into the rift between my hemispheres, is like an open air cinema

where you will see our history played out: the fist, the foot, the crushed face, the geysers of blood bursting from bulldozed trenches in Silesia, the assassin in the window, the man in the shadows, the wolf outside the hut, the .223 raised yet again to frame the world in crosshairs, the sirens like a wind cutting through Boulevard Edouard Montpetit.

In this cinema, there is an endless loop: male power — we are, I say, all pricks. And some of us are all prick.



We have now for you instead of a question, only a few facts, too well known, too much already romanticized:

In his three page letter, he wrote, “I will die Dec 6.”

In his chosen classroom, he yelled, “You’re all a bunch of feminists.”

He wore a baseball cap with the words *Montreal Tracteur*.

His weapon cost \$600.00

The men who run the store where he bought it said, “He seemed like a happy guy. I guess he felt good here . . . It isn’t a place where you see a lot of women. It’s like a boys’ club — toys for boys.”

We know his name will live forever. We fear these ones will not: Genevieve, Annie, Helene, Nathalie, Barbara, Anne-Marie, Michelle, Maryse, Maud, Sonia, Annie, Barbara Maria, Anne-Marie, et Maryse.

