

## Margaret Christakos / LUCENT

For the sky was red and the subway shuttled from  
its tunnel and out one oblong window he saw it,

a solitary shimmering carmine-edged cloud afloat in an oozing rouge  
pond. Around him, people hunched into their bellies, pulling from

the public gaze all the intensity they had invited over  
the afternoon in their offices. He looked at his hands,

cracked and small-knuckled. He pretended to read the corporate posters  
while snatching glimpses of the upturns and sunken wounds of

people's tired eyelines, the glowing skin of one girl, the  
tragicomical beard of a flesh-cheeked college kid up too late

the night before. Who was his father and how must  
he love this large boy of his now? In his

own skin he felt both beautiful and completely unprepared. He  
hadn't brushed his hair, he hadn't washed. His last shower

was Tuesday — no, Sunday. Five days. But he didn't emit  
an odour, and felt protected by the pall of ordinariness

which kept others from looking at him too closely, scrutinizing  
his features. He'd always been interfered with in public space

and enjoyed slipping incognito whenever possible. Without his children on  
the subway, people couldn't ogle him easily. He became an

anonymous middle-aged male again, no longer a teenager or young  
man whose body was open property. He had a seal

around him like a second skin, and an impertinent gaze  
of his own to cast upon particular female passengers, the

ones who would have intimidated him in his youth. He  
tried to summon works of literature to his mind, political

ideas, mathematical quizzes, but could not distract himself from the  
radiant motion of sex wafting through his mind and body,

the lucidity of his appetite. How stupid he had become,  
reduced to its pressured urges. Here he was among other

adults his general age, adherents to the accepted culture of  
detachment, all clothed in hundreds of dollars of well-chosen coordinates,

flickering their eyes assiduously away from each other's essential physical  
self. A bunch of naked fuckers, all laced and bound

away from desire, as focused as eagles on the next  
task to achieve, groceries to buy, appointments to keep, disdain

to project. It was as if every one of them  
had dedicated her- or himself to the annihilation of the

public at large, that there should simply be no community  
of unfamiliar humans, that if one didn't know the person

sitting next on the seat that one should assume the  
living unit there to be as sentient as a car.

One looked at the shine of the bumper, the onomatopoeia  
of the license plate (all the labels read one by

one, an identity-assemblage), the value-peaking accessories. But wiped out the  
real flesh and blood; wiped them out until their sheen

of absence reflected the sudden sleek red sky like metal.  
In a streaming ray of light, dust filtered up off

the strangers' coats and hairdos. Several lawyer-types talked into the void of their cellphone handsets, which were merely small pads

pressed to their own ears, without any mouthpieces at all. It was the perfect era for an insane talkaholic; even

he could have charaded holding two fingers up to the side of his head and started speaking about bathroom renovations,

or more likely, what time it was and how soon he would arrive at a certain destination, and what obstacles

he anticipated en route, and how the weather had progressed, and now how the train was in a tunnel again

causing the sound to fail and perhaps that he'd talk to his respondent in a couple of minutes because the

train was suctioning air quickly, back to normal compression, and he anticipated that he would arrive as he had projected

a couple of minutes before, and that his respondent should take it easy, that he loved her, and would see

said person in a few short moments aboveground. Several conversations of the sort ended as though a conductor had swooped

them to a skilled decrescendo, and the train pulled into the cavernous yellow space at the city's retail flashpoint. Suddenly

everyone rose to their feet, and looked directly upon the body and face of one person whom they had been

tacitly ignoring during the ride, with a look that was like high-gear seduction, then swung themselves by one snootily extended

forefinger and thumb around the grease-printed silver pole and exited. He watched them go, especially the radiant girl whose hair

at the back was tapered and wisped to look as  
though she'd just gotten out of bed as naturalistically endowed

and fresh to the world as a four-year-old, and the  
boy whose buttocks were visually halved by a thick black

belt charged with holding in place a massive pair of  
orange parachute pants. His hands were fidgeting with both earlobes,

realizing he'd left the house without his earrings, and disappointment  
snowed through him for a moment. What an impression he

might have made just then, with the earrings. One hand  
flitted to his breastbone, ah yes, there at least was

the blue medallion hanging from the slender silver chain. And  
his shoes were contemporary enough, black chunks of assertive yet

youthful shitkickingness, with a counterpointing touch of the gamine. Moments  
of self-centredness shocked him with their predictability. Almost 40 and

the narration did not cease, the measured silken voiceover. Millions  
of non-celebrities wishing they could star in a commercial, and

then the few thousand who'd actually had that opportunity, whose  
grandchildren could be told, yes, Grandpa used to be on

TV, he was so gorgeous that a bigwig producer picked  
him right out of a crowd one day, as he

left the subway. A real stand-out. The ad was for  
kitchen floor cleaner, groundbreakingly masculinist at that, about the multi-tasking

a man of the new age (well, here we mean  
the "zeroes," that's what we used to call them) could

achieve by cleaning his floor while doing calisthenics, with washing  
scours that attached to the bottom of his Contoured Men's



Nikes! He didn't want to leave the train. The children  
would be in school until 3:30, and it was barely

lunchtime. He'd imagined all the passengers to be ending their  
day, but it wasn't so; like him, they were working

at surviving the noon frenzy. From seven a.m., when the  
children woke him with shrieks of embattlement, the day's hours

had seemed to infinitely reproduce and expand themselves. And the  
red sky? It had been only coloured toxins in the

air penetrated by the bold eye-of-God sun. The unshaven boy  
probably had just gotten himself out of bed, and his

dishevelment was the product of oversleep, not the kind of  
exhaustion he might have endured as a university student bent

on originality. Up all night making paintings for an alcoholic has-been teacher  
whose idea of great composition was the dissection and redistribution

of every element of the male form, coloured in great  
swaths of pigment, textured, worked up, as though the surface

of a painting were a thought screen for a paranoid  
schizophrenic, projecting that, as a young post-virginal man, he might

relate to the skewered body of this art, the hyper-porousness  
of self one felt being fucked over and over from

every angle possible by an experienced fucker's imagination. Really, these  
were the sorts of conversations one could pay the university

in which to engage, and then in fatigued befuddlement at  
four in the morning he would wander to the freight

elevator at the rear of the all-night garage of a  
studio and see if the object of his obsessive interest

of the moment were there. There exactly she'd be, monkey-squatting  
in one corner of the elevator, arms straight and swaying

from between her knees, completely looped on acid, glazingly staring  
past him and drooling slightly, fulfilling his exalted idea of

a sexual Messiah. It was months later he actually slept  
with her, rolling on a mattress that had dropped like

an oxygen mask from the far wall in her little  
dorm room. She'd said with earnest and generous praise, now

you are the sort of boy who really should be  
on birth control, lamenting the condom she'd been smart enough

to stick on him. He wouldn't have known how to  
layer it on the moment, moving with the velocity of

a plunging plane to the sudden airbag, woozy with beer,  
wine and cheap ouzo, in addition to her homemade spaghetti

and garlic bread; the measures she'd taken rather presciently thoughtful  
the same way a kind uncle might plan a birthday

celebration. He'd left uninjured and rather head-floaty, as if the  
pieces of desire-narration to anyone else in the future would

never completely make sense, yet he would never care for  
that gap anywhere near so much as for the fact

of having been finally initiated, and decently. There, the obvious  
untranslatability of all desire. Whosoever should be picked out as

anyone's love object must be distinctive from the norm, for  
if the norm actually were stuffed with amorous charisma, we'd

all be in love with the same sap. Each of  
us lands on the illuminated bulb of difference, and try

explaining it to your best friend. It's no easier than making a convincing account for the senior relatives. There's no

real point in loving anyone beyond the claim to human kinship, but love is what is done, with frequency, and

many times even with plausibly novel flourishes. No one on the train had caused him to fall in love, however,

and he became sad at the thought that this new crew aboard proved the average toss of the public dice

produced a plateful of single-digit disappointments. There were really not that many attractive people, those for whom the norm was

warped to the specific angle he liked. One in a few hundred, if that. And each of the truly attractive

ones was only so due to her or his charming reminiscence of others he'd already admitted to loving in some

way in his past. They echoed something that had been defined earlier on. They were not new. They were walking

memories the way dog-owners air their dogs, looking sidelong in the opposite direction when the pet begins to shit in

the middle of someone's garden. Daydreaming like sailors, a cool wind tossing their hair playfully over their eyes, and then

a tug to bring the darling animal, really exactly like a winsome toddler, back into the fold of the sidewalk.

Then off they'd go. Sidewalks were spaces he always felt safe. He liked the way they were built of squares,

some stamped with the date of their pouring, their smoothness. The odd times when the children began chanting, as if

infected by faeries' slime, about stepping on the cracks and breaking his back, he winced and reassured himself that children

must hate their fathers a little, or be careful not to hate them too much, and that like every other secret this

hate would be immediately confessed to the only person they loved as much, their father! He had said it over

and over about his own father, wondering what the words meant, really, what did they mean? It was a riddle

against sex, evidently, that trespassing the asshole would lead to that back-breaker, murderous incubation, then delivery. They railed against their

own presence on the sidewalk as children born from their father's pain. Who cared; it was a skipping song, one

that got them off at a good clip, marched them flightily to school in a private competition that released him

from supervisory precision. As long as he could hear them singing they were fine, like in the tub when he'd

gone to fold the laundry and instructed the littler ones to keep their voices up. It was wrong not to

see them, but it was also wrong to sit lazily observing them splash bathwater on the tiled wall and get

nothing done. He couldn't stand, most of all, getting nothing done. There was one woman on the train now who

had forgotten to look away. Perhaps she was thinking of something or someone, and not aware her gaze gave the

appearance of activity. He blinked downward, shy of reciprocal encounters. Embarrassed to be seen without his children, for here he



seemed moorless, jobless, thought-free, indolent. Who was he to be riding about on the train? Where was he going? An

itinerary of destinations occurred to him, as if an urgent email had popped onto his screen, or a note was

passed to him by an underling at a tense moment during a pivotal meeting with a client. The gym, a

movie, Metro Hall, a doctor's appointment, a focus group where he would provide his opinion on a new mouthwash, a

date with a photographer. That was it, he was off to meet his photographer. He was going to have his

picture taken naked. This was not planned as a present for his wife, not at all. Instead, an image bound

to be compared with his own Polaroid-blue record of the body he'd had as a twenty-year old. He was supposed to

arrive by two, and, in order to suppress natural bloating, not to have eaten for 18 hours. The chocolate biscuits

he'd snuck making the older girl's lunch couldn't count, surely. And the bulge below his chestline never left now anyway,

not even when he starved for an important occasion, or at the change of seasons. If he caught a bus

immediately from the platform, he might make it to the glorified storage locker where Lucent worked, marked by a giant

lilac-coloured door, the kind that ripples upward like a magic withdrawal of insecurities, a bold reconciliation of desire and self-denial.

If he missed the bus and took a cab, he'd still get there but it would set him back an

extra twenty-odd bucks. Once you've committed to a thing, missing it altogether, and for such a flimsy excuse as poor

timing, seems the greater sin. He would peel one of the three twenties he tried to always keep in his

wallet; kiss it good-bye. You only live once. His clothes would fall away. Lucent would place a glass of wine

and wink when it was permissible for him to let it delve down his throat, stinging a little as he

swallowed, and then he'd resettle his lips into the slightly parted semi-smile he wanted to see himself make. Not one

of those boyish grins — secretary grins, he called them. Ladder climber grins. Mid-range family restaurant waiter grins. As if a

man is born to show his diffidence as a mere aspect of cosgrain masculinity. This portrait would be art-directed from

the inside out, and the evolution of his agency and beauty would be self-explanatory when he held the proof alongside

the cloying photo of his first engagement party, 1984. He deeply wanted there to be definable differences. At the age

of 21, he had planned to marry. He had asked, in fact, and been accepted, though not without drama. He and his

girlfriend had been in Mexico, at a roadside tortilla stand, and he'd choked on some cheese going down sideways. He'd

choked chiefly because he was about to confess how he didn't know if they were right together, but translated this

to its opposite, almost as if the words emerged, one after the next, to the fluttering butterfly identity of all

good emotion, out of the nasty, dank, boring chrysalis of  
rumination. Colours surrounded them, and after tracing out various ribbonary

shades with her green eyes, she smiled broadly. On the  
next bite he choked, and she hoisted herself on the

weight of one forearm and jerked upward under his ribs.  
The wad of cheese flew out like a piece of

gum. He was unstuck; he was stuck in love and  
the idea of a wedding he couldn't even imagine, not

being the kind of man who'd made his Ken dolls  
marry, or throw baby showers, or any of it. On

the plane home, the cabin jolted and dropped, and a  
steward fell into his now-fiancée's lap, one flapping hand flat

on her jeaned crotch, followed by the remainder of his  
slender waist and hips and perfumed hair. How about *you*

marry her, he thought, you've got a career already, you've  
seen the world. Me, I've seen the prairies, the burping

clam burrows of Cape Cod, my dorm. I've fucked two  
women, what am I thinking? The steward scrambled upright and

opened and clenched his hand a few times, unsure of  
how to politely thank her for her help while erasing

the embarrassment of inappropriate implication. As if mere contact was  
a sign of will, choice, desire, destiny, aim, intent, consciousness.

All of the surrounding passengers caught it, and right there  
and then he was able to hold the event against

her, to glaze it with other such indiscretions, to build  
a case for the unsuitability of their plans, now that —.

But really, it was the male student he slept with  
who undid his marriage prospects. Call it a college fling,  
  
a gender excursion, a re-orientation, the image of his naked  
body under and against another man's shimmered as though dipped  
  
in love heroin. His senses came alive, he laughed instead  
of sobbed after sex, he felt lifted and reformed. Not  
  
that he stopped caring for the girlfriend. It was just  
a verdict about the true and eventual package deal; he  
  
wouldn't marry. She was surreally understanding, as if the idea  
of the engagement, like a cake in the oven for  
  
half its baking time, hadn't really set, had congealed only  
about the edges. The moment of inflationary magic had not  
  
occurred, where the trapped air puffs up inside globules of  
batter and the whole concept lifts to its highest potential,  
  
then seals itself into that classically impressive form, until it  
cools and is eaten. So no one was really hurt,  
  
he remembered, no one was defiled by his own flailing  
attempts to know himself. Even he was never bitter about  
  
the change of heart. What was the rush for everyone  
to decide and measure and set down regulations for their  
  
wants and whims and why did he not feel the  
same implicit obligation like a noose around his waist? The  
  
rope tying him to the rest of poetry was a  
ribbon wound in concentric hulas, and he'd learned to swing  
  
it loose and breeze-like. It kept winding its way around  
him as he aged, up through the teenaged years, through



the twenties, through the thirties, but he was not tethered.  
He was held, yes, but not stymied or leashed or

preregistered for a certain pattern of china or stemware or  
silver cutlery. He was in the whirl of it. His

eventual wife did not expect much from their wedding day  
beyond a manifesto of enduring mutual self-revelation; and he returned

this promise, and they kissed in front of everyone who  
meant anything to them (except for Elevator-girl) and went nowhere

for anything like a honeymoon, but settled down to have  
their first child, a daughter who taught him to stay

up most of the night while still staying up all  
of the day. He could tell his wife was troubled

by her deep identification with the girl, and he cajoled  
her into viewing it as a natural confusion, more to

pacify his own shortage of such feelings. There she was,  
a small squirming, sometimes-purple-faced human who could suck milk right

out of his wife's body and settle. He wished he  
had the capacity to render another person subliminally, subcutaneously, full.

That the wife's body was slowly trickling down to become  
the pillowy flesh of their baby . . . it was almost unbearable

to think of. He awoke shuddering some days, despairing for  
the old days in the studio. Almost like a commercial

break where the TV volume suddenly rises, the train squealed  
into the next station. He'd missed his stop for Lucent,

and now that the choice was upon him, he felt  
uninclined to spend even ten bucks on a cab anywhere,

and instead transferred out of the burgundy-upholstered car onto the platform. His knees ached a little against the shift

of activity. The kilt had been a poor choice, for the wind still bit at the back of his thighs,

pushing quills of cold up his spine and out along the backs of his arms. His elbows were pulsing and

he squeezed them against his sides. He would walk out of the station and slip off down along the ravine,

stumbling a little on the thick rubber heels that seemed to swell the proper size of his feet, almost like

snow shoes for the tar sands. Got his balance by calling up the physical memory of navigating a balance beam,

when a youngster in junior gymnastics, of imagining a thread dropping from the middle of his brain through the gall

bladder and due south through the perineum's span, then dangling auspiciously between the stockinged moving calves. Give this thread a

pull and up his arms and legs would pike like a startled cartoon character! He laughed to himself, smelling fresh

new leaf growth, the fiddleheads unfurling to their feathery tips. A mulch of fallen leaves and cedar twigs held early

morning rain and a squelch burped up with each step. He watched his thighs move underneath him, like a metronome

carrying his torso into music. Ahead the river unspindled. A few joggers gusted past, their sweaty smell hanging behind them

in the air, attaching to his hair and cheeks. He instinctively stopped inhaling. He didn't admire the smell of strangers,

and felt himself to be unduly porous in a crowd,  
as if the pall of people extended past their skins

and clothes and could adhere untidily to his own psyche,  
tainting him somehow. He liked to remain separate. Soon the

woods felt quiet, and he stopped expecting another runner to  
burst in on his solitude. From a young age he'd

craved this kind of moment, the sense of absolute privacy  
in a natural setting, where he could simply breathe, amuse

himself with the beginnings of games and songs, where he  
could speak out loud to imagined friends, conduct relationships of

import and magnitude, discuss why things must be as they  
were, where he could use his pidgin French as if

a high-ranking diplomat sorting through the most privileged of receiving  
lines. He hated the actual presence of others, but loved

to imagine himself surrounded, hosting them all. He would think  
of himself as a ball-gowned princess, even. Or a thug,

running drugs and hoisting women onto beds in dank motels.  
One image would move and float into another. Alone in

the woods he felt perhaps more comfortable and accompanied than  
at any other time, regardless of the lover or friend

or relative he might have been with. Perhaps now closest  
was his sense of peace when reading to his children,

or watching them play their own games of magical intervention.  
His wife had admitted being jealous a few days before:

Why can't you relax with me? Why must you leap  
up from the couch like that, when I've only been

leaning against you watching a silly cop show? You spend  
an hour with the children putting them off to sleep!

What is it you're trying to get away from? He  
had blanched and lied, and she'd said, I can see

right through you, don't you realize? You're the worst liar!  
He'd shaken his shoulders as if his hands were tied

and he needed to rid himself of a coat, or  
perhaps it was as if he were trying to shimmy

like Houdini out of a straitjacket, the emergent thought like  
a new raw shape of himself into the room, until

there it was, the thought that he preferred being alone,  
or with the kids, and what was so wrong or

unnatural about that? You don't see anything lacking? His wife  
had turned to him with reddened cheeks and a half-open

mouth, and exhaled as if simply frustrated past the point  
of speech. He countered, Would you rather I didn't love

the kids as much? She began to nod her head  
and press her lips into a grimace, There's just nowhere

to go with this conversation, I'm going to the basement.  
What for, at this hour? To do some of my

own work, and see how you like being abandoned at  
the best part of the evening, when we could actually

talk or — Or what? Is it that you want to  
make love — Oh sure, make it all so serious, I

was talking about TV and you turn it into sex,  
every time. With that line, they'd burst apart, into opposite orbits,



and pretty soon, each would breathe more easily, sensing the  
plenitude of oxygen in each annex room. His chest would

puff up as though he were a duck about to  
fling itself up into the sky, away from the shrill

surface of the river, its triangular feet inelegantly tucking back  
and up into underfeathers, the wings stretching to either side

and lifting, lifting him like a football toward the clouds.  
So what if the argument had been required to lift

off; each felt freer in their own space, he felt  
sure the wife was happier there with some time to

herself after her long day at the office, a few  
moments to putter about and put things in their place

and sense the calm of the house now that the  
children were safe and away and wouldn't be up again

for seven or eight hours. Ah, that time whole like  
a horizon, and even the ducks flapping far left above

the subway station and far right above the bulldozer pulling  
up loads of garbage to expand the ravine did not

intercept any of the whooshing liberty of this moment for  
him. The quiet and rapid ascent. As he crested a

breeze he thought about how the subway ride was frightfully  
similar, how the solitude possible among other riders was perhaps

the next best thing to climbing to the centre-point of  
a bridge and staring beyond the trestle at the ground

below, the way trees looked like cabbages, how houses dotting  
the landscape shone like baseball plates for an athletic hawk.

What did flying require, really, except the expectation of a conscious touchdown? He turned his eyes from the distant ravine,

covered his ears against the gulls calling him to join them in their frenzied anxious pack-behaviour; he made his way

to the crosswalk at the east end of the bridge and buttoned his collar as he walked scrupulously between white

lines leading to the far side, to the shops, to a drug store. He would buy a box of condoms

now and slip them into his knapsack, then head south to the rolling hills of the park. Surely there'd be

someone to fuck today. His scrotum ached for the right press of an unknown human receptacle, craved the complicated sensory

mesh of entering and being entered, of flying and not landing, of seeing from a high point what a ceiling

accurately looked like close-up. No doubt someone would open to him. He would instruct his own prudery to take itself

for a walk down the path while he unmasked and decorated his best features. The latex smell had a way

of jamming itself in his nose and he winced, oh, to have just the powdery flesh again in the mouth

without all the fear, all the tremulous and preparatory proxy. But forget it! A thin envelope keeping him from the

world was consonant with all his habitual preferences, he wouldn't fight it, especially if it meant keeping his family safe

from the aspects of privacy that were not private but shared privately. His wife had her own world, he was

sure, the realm of the office where colleagues invited her  
to lunch and delivered birthday greetings, with more exuberance than

he and the children had mustered in their parallel stirrings  
toward the school day, while foraging under the couches for

missing library books, in locating the hair brush and matching  
rainboot and slipping the nutritious lunch into each backpack. Their

cards were heartfelt and graphically splendid, yes, and his pancakes  
were flawlessly studded with organic berries, their juice running navy

with heated sugar, and each had kissed her specifically on  
her birthday forehead as if she were the daughter among

a quartet of adoring caregivers, and she had smiled forcefully  
and looked satisfied. Then left for the office, and he

with the children across the several blocks to school, with  
the eldest sparkling powerfully at her ability to give pleasure

in the world and the younger ones humming and skipping.  
Hardest about this preference for solitude was his unsurpassed desire

to give to others, without the usual conversation about decent  
reciprocity. He'd rather, on virtually every occasion, simply give and

give and give. He became annoyed at how he was  
expected to slide to the spectrum's opposite end and receive

and be grateful and charming, instead of frantically but invisibly  
exhausted at the strategic triumph of his provisions. He liked

best the guest who knew to say thank you, and  
thank you again, who skipped the "What can I do

to pitch in?" with full recognition that this one, odd,  
parenthetical occasion required only surrender and sensuous presence. That on

almost every other occasion it would be exactly the reverse,  
that they would be the planner and executor of every

detail of service and innovation. His wife had pulled him  
aside, though, the previous year, to suggest he at least

feign interest in help from the other husbands, for they  
were becoming offended and a little hurt, and this too

was part of a good host's responsibility, to allow the  
most minor of assistance to be cast as gold-circle kindness.

Perhaps I should pin up names on a donor wall!,  
he'd snapped, and she'd hushed, No, everything's lovely, we all

appreciate you so much, do you think it's time to  
bring in the cake? The sulphur of doused candles stung

his eyes; there was no place to look except the  
crotch of the man approaching from calm's green foyer. He

opened his mouth and torqued his neck as though hanging  
from a bungee cord. Clouds gathered like photographers, crackling and

nudging themselves into position. There was a slippage of the  
man's thumb against the head of his cock, the fleet

bagging of the member, then the hot tube of the  
foreign mouth suckling him in and out, drinking him to

the surface of himself.

