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Ekphrasis : Sarah Schoenbrun

10 AM

This is how it happened. I leave my girlfriend's brother's apartment. She and I arrived in Chicago the previous evening, and she left to go to the conference — the reason we're visiting — earlier that morning. I lock the door to the apartment and start walking down North Leavitt, a brownstone- and tree-lined street, toward the train. I walk about three blocks before realizing that I forgot my hat. Should I go back to the apartment to get it? Might as well. I'm not in a rush. This is the Windy City. Wind means cold and the cold need hats.

10:07 AM

As I'm walking back, I notice two cars parked next to a school, and as I cross the street, a teenage kid hops out of one car, jogs right in front of me on the sidewalk, and gets into the backseat of the second one. Why is he in such a rush on such a calm street on such a quiet day? I wonder. Maybe he's cutting class. I used to cut class.



10:11 AM

Back at the apartment, I grab my hat from my suitcase and leave again, for the second time that morning. At about the same spot where I first turned around, the teenage kid who I saw a few minutes earlier jogs past me again on my right side. He slows to a walking pace in front of me and looks behind him at a second teenage kid, who I notice is walking behind me. A woman my age bikes by.



10:12 AM

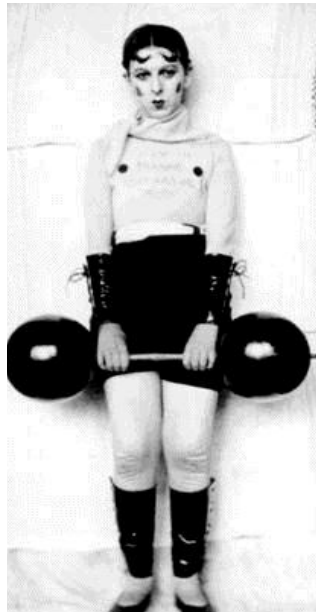
Hmm. These two kids obviously know each other. Why aren't they walking together? Maybe they're afraid of seeming gay. Idiots. I don't care if you're gay, guys. Do you care if I'm gay? It's funny how I can

see that you're a man and you can see that I'm a woman from a million miles away, even though I'm wearing a puffy shapeless coat and you're wearing a loose gray hoodie. That's not funny, that's obvious. You say that everything's obvious, but is anything obvious in reality? Don't exaggerate, it's unattractive. I wonder if I'm headed in the right direction. That looks like North Avenue up ahead, so I probably am. I could check my phone again for directions. My hands are cold. I'd rather keep them in my pockets than take them out to use my phone. I should have worn gloves. I'd rather not spend all day taking gloves on and off. I don't need gloves. I can't operate my phone while wearing gloves anyhow, so having gloves on at this moment would just mean that I would have to take them off and stuff them into my pockets before taking out my phone, and what would be the point of that, because if my hands are in my pockets then they're warm enough already without gloves on. I could go back and get my gloves. Why would you bring gloves to Chicago if you don't intend to wear them? I would have worn them if I were wearing my wool coat, which I also brought and which doesn't have pockets. You can't go back to the apartment a second time to get your gloves. Stop obsessing. Pretend that someone is walking next to you who you want to impress. Pretend that you're on a date. That kid is still in front of me, and that other kid is still behind me. I might get mugged now. That would be bizarre.



10:13 AM

I feel boxed in by the two kids and cross to the other side of the street. I see a woman loading her two children into the backseat of a minivan a block ahead. A car drives by. I see both kids cross to my side of the street. Why did the kids cross the street when I crossed the street? Why did the chicken cross the road? If these kids were white, would you be afraid? If these kids were girls, would you be afraid? I feel the muscles in my chest tighten as my breaths shallow. The average person breathes between twelve and twenty times per minute. As I ask myself these questions, Trayvon Martin would have breathed between three and four times if he hadn't been murdered five days ago and 1,176 miles away in Florida. I might get mugged now. How bizarre would it be to get mugged during my first ten minutes in Chicago in daylight? I might get mugged now. I might be getting mugged now. I am getting mugged now.



10:14 AM

The kid in front of me swirls around and grabs my purse. I am getting mugged now. I am getting mugged now. I am getting mugged now. I am getting mugged now. My purse has a long strap, which is wrapped around my body, so as the kid pulls it, he pulls me toward him. I pull back, and he pulls harder, and I pull harder, as I feel the strap dig into the side of my neck. He wants to decrease the distance between himself and my purse, and increase the distance between himself and me. I want to decrease the distance between myself and my purse, and increase the distance between him and myself. We work. I look at his face, and I think “young,” and I start screaming “help,” and what is this person doing trying to steal my purse, and along with it, my driver’s license, you can’t fly without a government-issued, what if he has a gun, what if he has a knife, photo ID, pull, nightmare, away, help, stranded, cell phone, in Chicago, help, credit card, debit card, help, health insurance card, help, pull, pull, apartment keys, knife, steal, help, home, gun, blood, nightmare, car keys, help, tampons, directions, blood, help, hospital, blood, and how do I get away? Am I trying to pull my purse away from him? Should I try to wriggle the strap off of me? Is he pulling too hard for me to take off the strap? Don’t know. Too fast. Keep screaming. I see the woman who is loading her children into the minivan scream “help” twice, as an echo. I see from the kid’s face that it scares him when I scream. He must’ve thought I would be quieter. He calls me a bitch and then he punches me, once, on the left side of my face. I barely feel it as I fall to the ground. I see him and the second kid jump into a beige sedan. As it speeds away, I look at the license plate and try to memorize it. I say the letters and numbers to myself out loud, but at that moment, I can’t remember . . .

10:15 AM



10:16 AM

The woman who biked past me earlier, blonde with black glasses and a messenger bag, comes running toward me and asks if I'm okay. Another man, mid-thirties, walks over too. We would call these two people "the witnesses" from that point forward. I say I've never been punched before, and she tells me that she already called 911. The man witness says he heard me screaming, but he didn't come over because he was frozen. I'm so sorry, he says, I should have helped you. It's okay, I say. I hear how loudly I'm sobbing, and I'm aware that I've lost all sense of self-consciousness. I feel so young. I ask the woman witness if I can give her a hug, and she says, of course.

10:18 AM

I hear sirens and the sergeant pulls up in a white SUV. The witnesses and I explain what happened, and as I talk, I feel my jaw stiffening.

I'm cupping the left side of my face, and it's hot to the touch. The sergeant asks if I need an ambulance, and I say no, he only punched me once. I hear the man witness correct me. He punched you more than once, he says. I don't believe him. He kept swinging at you even after you fell down.



10:19 AM

I see myself for a split second as the witnesses and the sergeant see me, and I feel pain. In the hours and days ahead, after the adrenaline wears off, I will not feel pain when I'm alone. Alone, I will simply be hurt and other facts, which will be objective and emotionless. Alone, I will be neutral. But when I am with others, I will describe myself, and in so doing, I will be split in two: the person who has been hurt, and the person responsible for defending her. I will consider the relatively minor crime committed against me as it fits into the broader spectrum of injustices. How must blood feel, if bruises feel like this? How must blindness feel? How must disease feel? Torture? Indigence? Exposure? Confinement? These questions are mirrors, and in them, I see my twin, identical but reversed, and I feel pain. Of course there are biological justifications: blood pools in my cheeks, which triggers receptors in my skin to send signals to my

brain, where I register them as pain. But pain is only half sensation; its other half is reason. This is not a new idea. The reason behind pain — a punch to the face — exists first. But pain then provokes a reason — a reason for me to alter my state, thereby relieving myself from it. A reason to let it go.

10:20 AM

The man witness gives the sergeant a description of the getaway car, which the sergeant repeats into his radio. “Get in the car, everyone,” the sergeant says.


10:22 AM

The voices on the radio become more urgent and dialectical. I have no idea what these voices mean, as I stare out the window at people walking down the street, with their wool coats and shopping bags and briefcases, going about their day in this gray city, the siren just a passing sound which they may or may not greet with a glance in our direction. I close my eyes. Where am I?

10:24 AM

“They got 'em!” the sergeant says. A postal worker heard me screaming and got a partial plate number, he explains, as he floors the gas pedal and we go sailing. Siren's on for a reason, fucking jack-offs! He swerves. The sergeant asks me if I got a good look at the guy

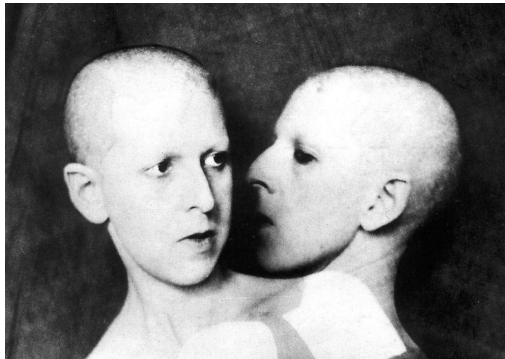
who punched me, and I say, yeah, I did. He was just a kid. “Let me tell you something,” the sergeant says, “He’s no kid, okay? Most of the homicides in this town are committed by 18- to 22-year-olds.”

Local 
2 charged in latest Bucktown mugging
Friday, March 02, 2012



10:28 AM

We pull up to an intersection with seven or eight cop cars swarming around. I see the beige getaway car crashed into a building on the corner.



10:30 AM

We park on the side of the street and two cops pull two teenagers, handcuffed, one by one, out of the back of a cop car about thirty feet away. We identify them from inside the car. Still the woman witness pulls down the sun visor above the windshield to hide her face, which I see in the lighted mirror from the backseat and recognize as pretty in an antique, Instagram sort of way. At the police station an hour later, an old fireman will ask about her ethnicity, and she'll tell him she's half-Italian, half-Irish. He'll say, "That's where you got your good looks. The Irish and the greaseballs make pretty girls," and she and I will look at each other and laugh, and he'll say, "What? You want me to be honest with you?"



Tomorrow, I will be wandering around the Art Institute of Chicago, and I will enter an exhibit called “Entre Nous” filled with the work of Claude Cahun, a French surrealist born Lucy Schwob, who worked in the early twentieth century and is best known for her self-portraiture. In Cahun’s photographs, I will see the kids, clowns, doubled or alone, and the woman witness, with the sun visor over her face, and myself, a clown, or sleeping in the poppies. I will learn later that Cahun spent months in solitary confinement during World War II for leftist political activity. Before leaving the museum, I will go to the restroom and take a tampon out of the same purse that I lost for a few hours the day before, and I will think, what if this was poisoned?

Five weeks later, I will learn that the teenager who was standing behind me was 16 years old and went to juvenile hall after pleading guilty to robbery. I will also learn that the teenager who punched me was 17 years old and has been in jail since that day, March 1st, with a \$75,000 bail, which he has not posted. A lawyer at the District Attorney’s office will explain to me that in the state of Illinois, if you’re charged with a felony at 17 years old, you’re tried as an adult. I will ask the lawyer if he can tell me the 17-year-old’s name, and the lawyer will put me on hold for a few minutes, and then he will tell me. I will be shocked for a second when I hear the name, because it will be the same first name as Trayvon Martin’s first name plus an “i” in the middle.

10:31 AM

The sergeant and I walk over to the crashed car. Inside it I see my purse sitting intact on the passenger seat. I’m not allowed to

touch it, the sergeant says. They have to fingerprint it first.

