

THE
SUBLIMATION
OF FREDERICK
ECKERT

TRAVIS
CEBULA



Black
Lawrence
Press

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For Shannon

A great feat of engineering is an object of perpetual interest to people bent on self-destruction. Since its completion, the Empire State Building, a gigantic shard of the Hoosier State torn from the mild limestone bosom of the Midwest and upended, on the site of the old Waldorf-Astoria, in the midst of the heaviest traffic in the world, had been a magnet for dislocated souls hoping to ensure the finality of their impact, or to mock the bold productions of human vanity.

—Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

No one sleeps in the sky. No one.

—Federico García Lorca, *Poet in New York*

PART 2: THE SUBLIMATION OF
FREDERICK ECKERT

Hypothesis

what if

every ledge provided only
an opportunity to choose—

[what if]

whether to approach
quickly, or hesitatingly.
and if.
and if at the end

[now]

the faith nestled in
each line was an edge—
would you
linger or

[we agreed to]

[leap into]

[]

more or less to
note the lack of sound—

in anticipation
silence congeals

on the audience as they
continue

to wait for a human form
to enter the sky.

Catalyst for Ordination #I

it has been said
that in a vacuum—
which is to say,
a space without breath or [without a little]
wind in it—
feathers and rocks
will fall, like humans,
at exactly the same rate.

and those who saw
it happen, they said [a little]
he fell like a spider—
something about the limbs,

they said, and they said [a little]

the word, “carom”—
as if it applied to a human—

and manifest in that word
was the exact historic mixture
of hard sounds
battering soft—

and how beautiful,
his vestment fluttered— [a little]

and what if—

if he survived?
would we—

recognize him

[a little more]

by his limping?

Catechism

where is the wind?

there are 103 floors to climb.

[be patient]

here is a chrome door.
there is sunlight nearer.
here is a narrow flight
of stairs.

there are four steps
between the stairs and the sky

[be assured]

here is the puff of his breath.
there is fog, briefly.
here is a drowsy guard.
there is a wall, knee high,
made of grey stone.

[have faith]

there is the wind,
wind cold enough to cut
granite.

[we have]

[prayer]

and gravity
four steps forward. one up.
and there
he's gone. Our Father
who
art in Heaven.

[and we]

[still]

[breathe]

in the myth

out there.
there is the wind.

Catalyst for Confirmation #I

a subway door hisses open.

memories are a local train—

inside of a dog,

the dreaming that goes on

inside of a dog or

[the smell]

inside of a downtown car,

the old man is sleeping.

the numbers count out Brooklyn

bound and down.

[or the feel of]

getting smaller.

[almost like trees]

it would be a mistake

to assume it was because he was old—

[and given texture]

or only because—

that the man wrapped himself

in the consecrated skin that lines

the gut of the City, or that he

trapped himself unwillingly on

the various tines of fiberglass,

[not wood, but]

bucket chairs, sliding doors, stainless

steel, windows, and vinyl veneer.

[something]

hard and screwed into a wall.

walnut. the color of walnut. the grain.

he chose this raiment, as much as

he chose life in the masses—

a graffiti-strewn coffin—like motion, like

any of us choose our own container of sleep.

[from which to
build]

in fact, he could have immolated himself
in pollen, chosen a rural life and a puff
of yellow smoke [a more resilient pew]
rising from a meadow. and, in fact—
once, he did. but not now.
this *now* of his flowers into injection-
molded plastic and smells like amnesia. [or anesthesia]
it would be a mistake to assume it was
because he was young— [this]
or only because—he tied hemp
twine around his finger. [it fills]
but he was young, then, and not now.
this man is. [a tin plate]
this man was.
this man could have been
this man as easily as any other.

he coughs into a blue
scrap of t-shirt. a door closes. [with]

side tunnels of if and if and if. [smoke]
diminishing. he remembers nothing
below 14th street. he remembers nothing
below 8th, nothing

below Houston, and when the train reaches
the broad gap of Canal, he wakes— [hangs in the air for a
moment]
and remembers. if if. if, if. if.
nothing there, too. the dog goes on dreaming
in the shade of a linden tree. to be a dog in
Central Park at noon in November and [like a grey curtain]
a warm hand on your head. what could be
better? the old man's image of the girl begins [like velvet]

and ends at 4th street, the one he thinks of [curtains]
as she, and only as she, and nameless, [and stony]
and 4th where it defines Washington Square— [rood screen]
its little corner that always connected [waiting with]
dirt and heroin and the unwashed young until—

a door opens. a door hisses closed.
the City drapes herself in the sun's
raiment—miter, autumn and all.
and all falls hissing into the Hudson.

until when? maybe he should have asked for her name, or
listened, then. to have more than *she*—one name more
than the one he suffers.
a new one. she seemed afraid,
held her happy dog on its short leash,
its feathered tail waving back and forth.
rhythmic. like a ride out on Coney, [hope]
like a lightbulb screwed into every surface, [and a prayer]
you could make out
silhouettes coloring midnight.

he never saw her again.
or rather, he saw her everywhere, but
she wasn't her—
and there was no grass, only granite [with]
the hot glare of the sun on
a triumphal arch. and thus irony. and noontide.
he had only asked her to dance, innocent,
once with him in the open air. she declined, refined [penitence]
to the end, that one, and beautiful
in a scarf and a pounded felt hat, that purple
he thought, always looked pounded.
and a boy always looked—

his head pounding, against the window,
the clacking of wheels intrudes on sleep. asleep

under the financial district and nearing the end— [to
proclaim faithfulness]

he swore to her as he rounded the black
stone pew, in his hardest voice he swore to her
and that damned hat and City and dog and any [eternal]
addicts sitting still long enough to listen
in Washington Square on a Sunday,
he swore that he would come back. [and everlasting]
mark him, mark the calendar, mark
the clock's face with tattoos
and the tolling of bells. [to the faithless]
the world would end when
he stopped coming back.

a door hisses open. the masses stand.

he would be back, and back, and back,
every day until she married him and if not [he believed]
he'd marry the City, by god, the City herself, [in]
that terrible and huge and frightening bucket
that could hold him and her and her scarf and that
stupid pounded hat and dogs and garbage and everything.
[beauty]

and everything. he never saw
her again. he was old then, and suddenly, and true
to his word, he married the City anyway [she was so
beautiful]

and he figured it wasn't her fault, it was less than [that]
her fault and the girl was probably
a terrible dancer anyway, what with that scarf [he]

and everything and anyway the City—
fuck, the City was a nightmare
but [unwittingly]
he chose her, he had every chance to leave but [committed]

he married her and worshipped her
and found himself on his knees more [himself]
than once, heaven knows. and so, they clung [to a life]
together, he and his City, all clung and cozy
in a walk-up on the Lower East Side, at least
at night. and *anyway* was there as the third wheel. [of concrete
and glass towers]
at least until they got divorced

or she left, or anyway the City seemed to, [to forget flowers]
she seemed to recede, to be bereft, and he was alone [to forget]
and old, then, too. and elsewhere, [reinforced]
the dog kept on dreaming
of an old man on a train and didn't ask why, [to forget why]
he just watched him sleep, felt his breath escape [and happily]
in visible puffs of cheap gin. and the old

door hisses back open, just like the lid
of the world rolled sideways, yawns, and the old

man pounds his dreams of the girl in the purple
hat into himself. his fists curl and the City tucks [the width of]
her dreams of them all under her arm.
and the City slept below herself. and in spite of.
almost as if she believed in them, too. [the sky]
and, in her way, the City confirmed
that they lived—the born, sleeping, risen dead, the [cloudless
sky]
dog, girl, man, subway.

confirmed their limbs and minds were firm [and starry]
for a while before the end. the end of the downtown
line approaches, and under the East River [black like]
the old man breathes.
the dog thinks belief is like that.
like breathing under a river. [a river plummets]

the masses sit. the door hisses—
open. just one more time.

she relaxes one warm hand onto
his forehead, and with the other
adjusts her hat just so
she can lean lower and linger [into the sun]
there—*love you, you know. I've always*
loved you. [and happily]

Catalyst for Baptism #1

easier than a face,
he decides to imagine the girl [like]
a name,
thin as it is, to wear [the secret]
as her own sacred raiment—
a ribbon, say— [name]
say, for her hair, for her,
so he can distinguish her
from the masses in his head.

so he can say her, [for god]

he goes to the shrinking closet
in his head where he stores
the names of everything he's
ever named. he doesn't remember
who wore most of the names, or what,

like he doesn't recall who wore [or]
the books or hats or glasses—

calmly, he forgets, [the deep incantations]
especially the ones at the back
of the closet or the front, and so— [required]

when he pulls a name from the hook
next to where he keeps his own,
he only almost recognizes it.

he squeezes his eyes
shut, so the answer will
be a surprise. opens them—
opens his chest, his chest opens,
exhales, and his mouth speaks—

[for flight]

and when it speaks it says, *Carole*.