



The Couple

BY MARK RUDMAN

1

The woman stands on tiptoe to kiss the man and for a moment,
with their twin-teal backpacks, parkas, and other gear—
they look like one new creature. A mutation.

2

Seated in *La Rosita* their gear guards the table
where they sip *café con leche* and lean forward,
sitting tall, pelvises tilted forward,
to talk—whisper?—their physical closeness
almost embarrassing (but to whom?) at this early hour—
light rivering in her chestnut hair,
their foreheads almost touching as they sit
further forward straddling their chairs
toes pressed down, heels up, wrists crossed;

a posture almost too intimate for a public space
at breakfast but somehow right in the Spanish café.

She says that while it is absurd to sell forsythia
it is a small miracle to buy cactus
on 107th Street and Broadway.

(If they're strangers in Manhattan
they seem more at home than I've ever been.)

They listen to the brisk chatter and clatter of plates
and music from the Spanish station
which now plays "Yellow Submarine"—
universal language?—"our friends are all aboard."

They study the menu and note
the beautiful sounds
words like *huevos* and *arroz*
make for eggs and rice. The generous
syllabic count and vowel length
seem like an echo for their love. And their desire
to linger. (Other eyes
are on them, not only mine.)

They have drawn
the morning from a sea
of newsprint—in at least three
languages—toward their window seat.

3

The light changes along with the brisk pace of the walkers.
Someone in a tan Mackintosh reaches out to hail
a yellow cab, while the sun gilds
the fire escapes and people rise
energetically from their beds.

4

Don't their eyes tire of each other?
Or is it not the eyes that tire?
They're not looking, they're drinking,
communicating through their skin
several inches apart.

Love can't be trusted.
But that doesn't mean it isn't real.

They linger over coffee; he strokes
the back of her neck; she doesn't feel
impelled to look up or stop but, later,
she kisses him behind the ear.

5

And in the mountains there is
snow melting to get down from the heights
to pour through the clefts in the twisted
rocks: natural arches, obstacles—horseshoe shapes.

And in the plains there is
a dropping of the shoulder-armor,
a tingling in the hip sockets, so that even a chance touch
at the hipbone startles the center and starts
a slow convulsion—

release of two creatures
(peculiarly, perilously at odds),
used to training their gaze
on the peripheries, like this
bicycle tethered to a parking meter,
orange handlebars, silver trunk like a treasure chest
perched—not locked—on a wrought iron ledge
fixed over the chrome wheel-casings—
blue shadow-dappled twig-littered canopies,
or the small tantalizing cursive *c*
in the blue neon soft as silk, announcing

café Equense

where the couple might return in the voluptuous dark.

The dark, quietly vibrating like a Mouth Harp,
or her—noiseless—breathing...or,
when they are lost in Olmsted's
misty, labyrinthine rambles
and, framed by traffic, they pause
beside the lake in the dank air
where the water is still,

another
world from the blood-running pavement,
the meat-packing plants

gray and dour below the rotting piers—
warped—(and will they be replaced

with fresh wood or fazed out with poured
concrete that knows no give or take—no—swelling—...?)

What can love repair?
By what force of love
can they imagine themselves beyond
the squalor that surrounds them
onto another plane
blessed and blessing!

6

Who invented ecstasy?
What man or woman
first walked around
with its burden?

Cold shelter from the street,
among the bronze
mailboxes, inside the bright red—
freshly painted—door jambs.

He picks her up under the buttocks,
she arches her thighs around his hips,
plants her feet on the tiles:
tongues firm, yet tentative,
learning their own momentum;
(the rubbery wall of her mouth
takes him further in and in.)

Tongue and tongue, freckle and freckle,
tears, shuddering, swelling
in the places where they used to ache,
“ain’t no cure,”
knowing this touch,

this grave flicking
of tongues could never
be repeated, or knowing
it *could*—

knowing it in another consciousness.

7

He strokes her neck at the junction
where the occipital bone and cervical spine
cross, engage, spark;
coccyx tingles, cock rises toward
her, not into her, through her, to her;
rises as he plies
the inside of her ass and thighs,
or rubs the crevice where her right
forefinger and thumb divide,
stroking her cheek, or the hollow below her earlobe,
ankle bone, clavicle,

tonguing every millimeter,

until sea dissolves into sky

(their raft turns over
in warm water and they are that water,
and bob, afloat, buoyant;
at rest in secret knowledge of each other's darknesses...
and now he could weep.)

But there is no ice in the water where they would roil and tumble,
and where avenues welcome those who walk hand in hand,
gait easy, backpacks half-full,
half empty—
the sun coming out now, as if synchronized to their desires—
and as the runners circle the reservoir
they lower their eyes to adjust to the light
bouncing off the water to ignite
the cinders; the green through the dead-
ice capped leaves;
a small curve, an indent on the track
gleams like a bracelet,
before an azure haze takes over.

Necessary to hold some one thing back.
Whom could she trust to let it out?
It might scare her. (Scare him.)

and no one will see them.

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