PLEASURE

Heidi Jon Schmidt

I HAVE BEEN absolutely alone here for weeks now, or months. I think only of pleasure. I lean back against the pillows and let the air blow in over me, or I stand watching the afternoon light fall along the length of the hallway. This morning, I would like to drink tea from a gold-rimmed china cup. I would like to sit in the cemetery, bent over a book, and eat blue plums until my stomach aches.

I've had a letter from Alicea, to say she is coming down soon, she will pass near here and we should have dinner. She writes, in her proprietary way, that I am alone too much, that I must go out, extend my reach somehow. Even when I think of her, I do not reach out to touch her, to take her wrist for emphasis as I often used to do. Nevertheless, when I know she is coming here, as I try to think of the best restaurant, I remember how much there always is to say, and what pleasure there is to be taken in saying it, in pouring wine out with the bottle high over the glass, in coming just to a point and going no further.

Alicea would tell me that pleasure lies only in memory or anticipation, that it is too dangerous in the present tense. Suppose you are rowing alone in a stream, she has said, and you can REACH OUT and pick raspberries from the bank? It is still possible that an unexpected thorn will scratch deep and straight along the arm whose beauty among the branches you had just admired so strongly. So I savour my solitude, with its particular illusion of spaciousness. I recollect, alone here with my picture of Louise watering her plants, and my thoughts of Alicea zooming down to me in her bright car. I weave my wishes together and follow their threads and I can seem to find luxury without debt.

I readjust to Louise's absence each morning, pressing up through the layers of sleep to find her gone. I dream that the garbage men mash the cans right up with the garbage, speaking in streams of unrelieved obscenity so that they seem to have a language of their own. I hear the trucks coming in my sleep, the men shouting to each other across the machinery as it grabs and presses and grinds. I turn away. Louise is in France, studying irrigation. I try to dream of her kneeling in the soil beside the arbors, but I see her most

clearly here in the city, breaking an Aloe leaf off for my sunburn or pouring out the water for tea. She had no hard or glittering edge; she struggled up from her own depths to comfort me. She spoke so little that I was confused by silence alone. Louise would answer my questions about leaf spores, but she will not tell me what there is in her life that holds her still for fear of its loss.

I am accustomed to volubility, high promises, effervescence. Alicea can speak faster than anyone, flattery or criticism, enumerating the points of her argument with incontrovertable emphasis, and I contradict her. I remember her very strongly: the great smoothness of her hair, the terrible whiteness of her skin. She seemed a vessel of the purest energy, as attractive and terrifying as a flame. She speaks and interrogates, looking at me as she ends each sentence, turning her head suddenly, like a bird.

My mother used to tell me that I was strong, that nobody could ever hurt me. She thought I was possessed of a verbal shield that no one could penetrate, and she sent me off in my armor to parry with Alicea. They met each other at dinner with me on a summer night. We sat drinking together on the porch, looking down over the fields. Ma wore a red dress with a high slit, her hair pinned up quickly in the back. Alicea watched me and questioned my mother. She watched my hand as I used it to split open my dinner roll, as if it was the most singular hand that had ever posed over a red checkered tablecloth. Ma used to tell me I had beautiful hands. She told me a woman pointed to me through a crowd, saying, "What beautiful hands she has!" My fingers are quick and slender, much more delicate than my mother's hands, but she opens jars with them, she can hold four peaches in each. Alicea asked her about all of her children, and her job, and my mother replied with wit and suggestion and we wove all of the talk from memory, from hope, from imagination. Louise would have thought we lied.

No one ever taught Louise to construct a scene. Pleasure, she tells me, is the promise of safety and calm. Pleasure would be to pick my own apples, to buy the orchard, to have fresh pie for breakfast every day. Louise's hair was filled with a soft heat scent at night, while I fell asleep beside her, and I carefully did not torment her with my inquisitiveness, but lay very still, thankful for her presence, and for the cooler air.

Only the imagination satisfies, Alicea writes to me. I imagine her. She teaches vigorously, turns her head, our eyes meet, my thoughts have been pierced. She stands beside me on an asphalt pathway while the sun shrivels the grass around us. Her voice narrows, never softens. Her wrist rests against the table as she questions my mother. I reel in the memory of talk, each hammered sentence meeting the next in exclamation of agreement or discord. Inflection, choice of words, speech! "Tell me!" I say to Alicea, and I close my eyes so that the words will press around me.

I spend all of these days in the silence Louise has bequeathed me, unsure that my voice will rise to answer the phone, walking into the city, up into

the graveyard with my books, dusting the shelves or finding larger pots for the plants. My thoughts burrow down in solitude, seem to pierce a narrowing tunnel, to concentrate in force so that I might be sucked through after them and discover the exact space in which I stand. Alicea does not enter my mind as often. Sometimes something I am reading reminds me of her, something scientific, electrical, or geologic. I would like to reply to her, to inscribe the flyleaves of all of her books. I labor under my wish for her, wait for it to subside, go on.

I will have to walk into town later, to get some money from the bank. I have no choice but to take Ashford Street. It is the shortest route, the widest street, the street with the fewest burned out houses, and the street where a woman was raped last year on a quiet July afternoon. I steel myself with little plans, guerilla survival strategies. I know all the tricks, and as I walk down Ashford Street, with my face set in one forbidding line, carrying a pear for lunch and watching between the houses for a shadow, I itemize them. I could vomit, I could poke out his eyes, I could tell him that I'm diseased. But if a man were to call to me from his steps, as they so often do, if a beery doorstep sitter were to move toward me this afternoon after making his guttural calls, I would take the stem of my pear between my teeth and wrench it out. I would throw the pear so that it hit his face HARD before he ever had a chance to ascertain whether it really was a grenade that was hitting him.

On the street a young girl screams mercilessly, held by a group of passersby until a fire engine comes to save her. I cross to the opposite sidewalk. There is no blood, no evidence, no assailant. No one accosts me. Five men stand, challenging, at the corner and I have no grenade. I set my expression. I strengthen my stride. They know exactly what to do, they watch. They narrow their eyes, and as I pass between them, they scrutinize silently. I dismiss them and walk on.

And here, at home, the calm is broken by a storm that sweeps down over the cemetery, by an old man shouting under the window in the dark, by the telephone. My mother calls to tell me she's lost her job. She's furious, she will not stand for it. She begins to cry. On the television, soundless footage of an air disaster passes. At four o'clock in the morning, it is the overseas operator with Louise behind her, giving me dates and times and flight numbers. "I miss you," Louise says, and in the silence I believe I can hear the ocean surge over the cable.

When I see Alicea, I'll open my arms for her as I would to any old friend, and she'll step back. She'll watch me, as I walk toward her and while I sip my drink beside her, sharply enough that I can feel her searching through the depths of me. If I cut myself slicing up fruit for her dinner, she will recognize the blood that wells up there, and offering me a bandage, will not touch my arm.

So I sleep, waiting. The breeze returns from the dark and I pull up the cover, stretch over the whole bed. When I have trouble, when I fear the sound of a step on the stairway or the stab of a siren passing, I invite them in to comfort me: my mother, Alicea, Louise. I picture their kind faces, Alicea's perpetual surprise, the mask of Louise's slender features, and their quiet movement. They weave a net beneath me, so that I can never fall too far.