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Sharon Wahl

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Sharon Wahl

ZENO AND THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

How wide is the arm of a seat in a dark theater? We are both touching the wooden armrest, leaning into it from either side with our bony elbows and our thin naked arms. Our shoulders are so close that the loose sleeves of our tee shirts almost touch. How different it would be if my arm could pass right through. But it is only this solid piece of wood between us that allows us to get so close. The inanimate accepts touch, but can't return it; so simple things get rubbed smooth. Look how this armrest has been battered with attention, polished and popcorn-oiled by all the hands that have sat here with nothing else to hold.

Emerging past the armrest, side by side on our blue jean thighs, our flickering hands. We are blue in movie light, and the shadows of our fingerjoints, our knuckles, our bony wrists, are both spooky and exquisite. We could be statues. Marble in moonlight.

Have I ever touched him? Once, as I walked behind him at a crowded party. I put my hand on his shoulder, lightly, just barely resting my fingers on the fabric of his shirt. He was talking and didn't notice. I did this only once, though we were there all night. The room was dim, and always people dancing and chatting and bumping each other as they passed with drinks. And I, just passing, could easily have reached out again to steady myself with a light hand on his tee shirt, pressing just enough this time to test how bony his shoulder was or feel the muscles along his spine.

His index finger curls and straightens. Mine does the same, as if to know what he is feeling is to feel him. Even this tiny movement reminds my finger of my knee, the knee of the finger, returns the texture of the cloth between them.

How wide is the arm of a seat in a dark theater? The philosopher Zeno gave this paradox of motion: to reach him, I must cross half the distance between us. Then half the distance remaining; then half of that, and half again, and again, and again: I can only go halfway.

Proving, motion is impossible.

And yet.

That night at the party, for instance. He walked outside onto the porch,

where it was quite dark, and looked up at the sky, maybe at the stars, recognizing a constellation, or maybe just in a vague way admiring the lights in so much dark. No one else was around. I had followed him at a little distance and stood leaning against the doorframe pretending to be part of the room inside, the music, the dancing and drinking. But I was there with the sky and the crickets, watching him. And for minutes he stood with his beer on the porch railing. His back to me. His bony shoulder. Perfectly natural, it would have been perfectly natural for me to walk up, reach a hand to his shoulder, the hand of, Hey don't want to startle you what's up, and leave it there, just friendly, the dark, the drink, the music. A warm night, starting to cool with a little breeze but sweaty for dancing. Just out here for the breeze. Great party, isn't it? Perfectly natural for his arm to go around me, just loosely around my waist. And as we talked, friendly and hardly able to see each other in the dark, so it was hardly real, moving his hand lower to rub my hip.

Tonight we ran into each other checking videos from the library. We talked about an actress we both loved, who had a new movie. We both asked at the same time, Do you want to—? That was easy. Now, for two hours, his hand will be in reach. His leg is in reach. My hand is on my thigh, like his, and my thigh is so close to his that moving the hand from mine to his, fitting my long thin fingers between his longer ones, would take less effort than shaking hands.

But look at him. In the first minutes of this movie, a woman, the beautiful actress, has lost her husband and daughter in a car wreck. Look at his face, the worry in his eyes and brows, the way his lips, drawn together, seem bruised. Look how sad this movie has made him. Since the accident his fingers have tensed and dented his thigh. Now the actress is walking through a walled garden. She looks distracted and hollow. She stops at a rose bush as if to smell it, and with no warning rakes her bare arm over the thorns. His fingers clutch into fists. He stares wide-eyed at the screen as tendrils of blood sprout across her arm.

His hand is still close to mine, really it's only five or six inches away. But covering a hand clenched into a fist would be a gesture of comfort, soothing him of some pain that perhaps I shared. And that isn't true. I'm dismayed. This movie is the wrong thing to be thinking about. When I touch him I want him to be aware of me as skin, to notice how the skin on the back of my hand is so tight it feels almost polished, while the palm is warmer, moister, plumper. If you take someone's hand in sympathy, you can't trace your fingers up and

down his arm and give him goosebumps. You can't tease all his attention into the space between his first and second fingers.

As soon as his hand relaxes, I tell myself, I'll move my hand, and cover it. As soon as it comes back onto his thigh. I rub my palm on my cheek to test it: not damp and not dry, very soft. It smells just slightly of cucumber soap.

It seems so simple now. Once we were standing at the porch railing arm in arm, I could have said, so easily, Come on, let's look at the garden, let's see what the flowers do at night. And led him by the hand down the stairs, and stayed hand in hand as we told each other how good the roses and the lavender smelled, and wow, what was that? Along the fence, a vine that smells fantastic, oh, it's honeysuckle! isn't it? isn't that what honeysuckle looks like? And we would finally drop hands, so that he could break off a tendril of honeysuckle and loop it behind my ear. And I would pick a couple sprigs of lavender for him, and pretend that it was difficult to attach them, as he had no buttonholes, though I would pretend there were and try to poke through the tee shirt, or through his collarbone where there should be a collar button, or through his nose which wasn't pierced after all, my what a surprise, finally stuffing them into the front pocket of his shirt, crushing the little flowers to release more scent.

And here he is, just as close as in the garden. Instead of relaxing, one by one his hands have left his thighs to grip each other's arm at the elbow, to clench and comfort each other. His legs are pressed together at the knees. His shoulders are hunched from slumping lower and lower in the seat. But his eyes are still wide open, peering up at the screen in fascinated anticipation of the further pain he expects it to inflict.

I shift my elbow onto the armrest, so he won't be quite so far away. I edge the elbow slowly, deliberately across and over the armrest, for the first time violating his unpatrolled chairspace. He is so skinny and so tightly huddled that it's still inches from the closest part of him. I watch him breathe, all locked up.

Watching him instead of the movie feels like stealing something. It is a little like watching someone sleep. We are in another world, and the expressions left behind on our faces are vulnerable. But why would I want to watch a movie, when he is here? It's such a luxury to look over and see him next to me. In my imagination his face always lacks detail. Here it is, all filled in. Here is his cheek shaved very smooth with an eyelash fallen onto it, and his nose without any bumps in it. Profiles take getting used to; they don't always

look like the same face. Especially this close. The nose is larger, and the mouth is smaller, and there's a different chin.

He is so still. Only his eyes move; he blinks. I could put my hand on his leg. His leg is right here. It's just a leg. I look at it and feel fond of the way his knee has rubbed the jeans into thready patches. His thigh would feel hard and solid, like mine. Harder, maybe. There's the familiar lump of keys in his right pocket, maybe tissues, stuff wadded up. Loose folds at the hip, such skinny hips.

All the time I've been watching him he hasn't once looked at me. It's a little insulting. At first I watched sideways, sneakily, but he didn't notice and now I'm just outright staring. I can't believe he doesn't see me. I imagine putting my hand on his thigh, wrapping my fingers into the inside of the thigh a little. What would he do? I imagine him pulling me onto the floor in a passion oblivious to sticky spills and dead popcorn kernels. I imagine my hand sitting on his thigh, squeezing it, my poor excited finally happy hand, and him staying still and staring up at the screen and just blinking.

The movie is already half over.

The scent of honeysuckle was so strong, he said he could find me just by smelling. So I ran into the shadow of a tree and told him to close his eyes and try. No, I couldn't smell him in the dark under the tree, lavender is delicate. But that wasn't the point. There we were, giggling, in the dark. With my eyes closed I couldn't help but walk with arms stretched out, to take slow steps and grope the air. I heard him stepping on leaves, and he heard me, stepping and giggling, so of course we found each other, our stretched arms hit and withdrew from the species' monster-instinct, help, Something in the dark! Then reached again, is that a hand, yes, and what is this? Finding arms and pulling on them, finding a head and hair, textures and bumps, touching it all as though it was a thing to be identified, a new thing we hadn't expected to find. Really it was a strange thing in the dark, all the parts of us seeming to be unconnected and needing to be put together—the scoops and hollows, thicks and thins—until finally they all fit, my hands on his back pulling his chest to my breasts, and even our belt buckles cooperatively clicking.

I look over to see if he is wearing a belt. He isn't. Neither am I.

Some months have passed in the movie, and the grieving woman has decided to take a lover. Finally. Of course I'm hoping that watching a love scene with a woman he finds attractive might remind this man in the seat next to me of other, less distant, possibilities. But as soon as they are alone the actress undresses and commands her admirer to strip. This is a man who has

loved her secretly for many years. She gives him thirty seconds. “No,” the man next to me says. The word is forced out of him, in pain for the man this time.

“He should just leave,” I say.

“Shhh,” he says gently, as the woman onscreen is saying something else, something equally cruel, and he wouldn’t want to miss it.

This is so annoying that I withdraw my elbow, in punishment. But all I think about, after that, is how far apart we are, and how much I notice it, and how he doesn’t notice it at all.

Under the tree, under his shirt, under my hands, his skinny back, wingtips, spine, his skinny ribs, ticklish if touched too lightly. Then we are kissing. A nuzzle of beardstubble, then his lips. The rest is easy. This is how it starts this time, the party and the porch, the flowers, the tree. I have a copy of the *Kama Sutra* illustrated with Indian miniatures. My favorite of them shows a man being driven by horsecart between his lovers: a plump woman with a parrot who sits astride his lap; a slender pale woman who lies underneath him in a garden; a dark playful one who squats on top of him under a tree full of squirrels and white herons. They’ve spread a golden carpet under the tree, and the woman, while raising and lowering herself on the naked man, pets a small deer. That is me in the horsecart, on my way to try again, and all the women are him, each time in a different colored tee shirt, each setting a different missed seduction: the walk home after we met in a bookstore; in his car, the night he drove me home from a party and I asked him to drop the others off first; the theater: another dark, close, logical, suggestive place.

We always meet accidentally, and I’m always unprepared. Even when I’m hoping desperately to see him, hanging around the bookstore or a cafe because those are places he might appear—even then, I try to make the meeting look accidental. The lovers in the *Kama Sutra* would never let this happen. They would have spent the day being oiled and perfumed and painted, laying golden carpets under the trees, choosing incense and ragas for their powers of aphrodesia, instructing the servants as to when they might appear with wine or trays of perfect fruit. Their intentions couldn’t possibly be mistaken, or the women themselves, resisted. I, however, have not painted the palms of my hands with henna, nor taken a bath perfumed with sandalwood. I’m wearing a tee shirt and jeans. Nothing that suggests it wants to be touched, the way silk or lace would give out instructions on their own.

I roll up the sleeves of my tee shirt. That isn’t much, but there is so little I

can do here. I wish I had a tattoo, something that could be revealed. I take off my shoes, and my socks, and put my bare feet up on the seat in front of us. Look, something naked. Look at the toes, the high arches. The delicate ankle-bone.

His eyes never leave the screen. The movie is in French, which I don't understand, and I haven't been reading the subtitles, so by now I have no idea what is happening. The expressions that cross his face are completely incomprehensible.

I finally edge my elbow far enough across the armrest that it nudges his. All my attention is in this elbow, and it is feeling quite coquettish. It bumps him again, rubbing against him suggestively, hey there, Mr. Elbow. "Oh, sorry," he whispers, as though he is crowding me, as though he has accidentally jostled a complete stranger. He leans against the armrest on his other side.

I leave quietly, thinking he won't notice. He is quiet too, so quiet I don't realize he's followed me until he catches me right outside the theater, on the sidewalk under the bright marquee.

"I was not in the mood for that," I say.

"Yeah, that was pretty intense," he says.

"Yup," I say. I sit down on the sidewalk to put on my socks and shoes, right down on the flat cement, deliberately ungraceful. This confuses him: did I carry my shoes into the theater? Wasn't I wearing them? Where did they come from? Maybe he is seeing me for the first time.

He says it's hard to talk after something like that: Yeah, Yup. He says he will walk me home. We leave the Loop for streets with the lights further apart, with large trees shadowing the sidewalks, leaf-shaped shadows mixing with our leggy shadows which grow taller in one direction then shorter in the other between the streetlights, Look at that, and treefrogs, which hush when you get too close, he tells me, Listen, and crickets, which don't; the night still warm though it is late, and both of us are sleepy, and shy.