

Melita Schaum

Constellations

1.

A woman is asked to give a lecture on the essay as form.

She strolls down to water. Sits on the shore, contemplating wrinkled surfaces, smooth depths.

She thinks of design, pattern, rejects those easy figures. She wants to get at something deeper. Discontinuities. The ley lines of things that cannot exist without inference.

She casts in her line; somewhere the subject waits to be caught. But it's not the beadle who interrupts her thoughts, or a warning to keep off the grass. These days the library welcomes her, the tenure committee (for the moment) has sheathed its claws, let the ears be scratched on its three heads. Instead, it's the surf that breaks her sentences into wet shards—rising, falling in on themselves.

What splits her thoughts now is the space between stars.

2.

The first time we made love, afterwards, I tasted his skin. Sweet and metallic and unique—like milk and grass, and something deeper, chemical, sharp and fleeting. He had extremely soft skin for a man.

Later, when he had gone to work, I went into his closets and stood among his shirts. His smell lingered there, soft, the hangers clinking as if his wardrobe still kept

something of his spirit. His clothes were wrinkled—he never ironed. Muted colors, soft fabrics, the occasional outrageous shirt. He looked good in everything, effortless.

Everything except his one dark suit, which hung in drycleaning plastic and smelled of embalming fluid—a suit for funerals and weddings, stiff and generic. A suit for when he wasn't being himself, but called on to assume the disguise of a relative or best man. He wasn't bad at roles, just indifferent. Donned them when he had to. Shed them as quickly.

I saw him only once in that suit. He looked like he'd been poured into it, molded to its shape. Touching his arm was like touching upholstery. It wasn't him.

We put people together like dots—foreground the connections, ignore the discrepancies. Limn a portrait, something consistent and recognizable, out of what are arbitrary moments, gestures, intimations. Who is he? How is he? What is he like?

He is a man with one dark suit and a copy of Bachelard on his TV set. He is a man who doesn't own a remote control. A piece of Murano glass on his countertop, a pile of dried-out ballpoint pens, matchbooks from bars he's never been to, a pair of Birkenstocks under the bed, a pair of Josef Seibels. The white whale of others—lovers it takes us a lifetime to understand and parse. He is a glimmer of passion and a dark look of anger. Sullen and lovely and soft-skinned, inscrutably deceptive and true.

3.

A friend tries to explain to me the principle of quantum mechanics. We are deep in the rain forest, drinking rum and grilling Ahi over a black brazier, the coals glowing red, rhyming with the big tropical sunset. Sitting on the warm, abraded deck in the moist

night air, he describes electrons moving from one energy band to another without seeming to exist between the bands. The electron simply disappears from one location and reappears in another. Discontinuous events whose only explanation is that they must take place on continuous surfaces in a plane we cannot perceive.

In the field beyond our hut, six white egrets wheel and alight on the rumps of horses nosing the meadow lazily for food. His unshaven face looks shadowed, and I wonder how much of this is physics and how much is rum.

He takes my hands in his, places them palm-down on the tabletop. Watch your hands, he says. If you move them across the surface they are moving in two-dimensional space. If you want to flip your right hand over, you can only do so by taking it off the table. Viewed from the two-dimensional space of the tabletop, an unexplainable, discontinuous event occurs. The hand appears spontaneously to change from a right hand to a left. Viewed from three-dimensional space, the event is easily connected.

Outside the cabin, our view is serrated by green ridges, over which hangs a washed moon, big as a chafing dish. It rains in spurts, waking the dreaming geckos that cling to the walls like household deities. They move slightly, as in a dance, then are still again. Much later, the stars come out, clinging to the sky like the footprints of divine lizards on the black walls in the houses of the gods.

4.

We have conceptions about age—that our twenties will be a certain way, our thirties another. Looking back, we shape the plot of our lives, round off its entrances and exits like numbers. *Those were the years that That was a time in which*

I always expected my forties to be full of wonder. Some hard apprenticeship over, years of trial and error (or, as it turned out, years of trial followed by years of error), smoothed out by the calm hand of experience. Writing would be infinitely easier. So would choice. And love.

Life is amused by our desires. Gives us what we wish for, but in coded, unexpected ways. Leaving clues for us to figure out the ironies. Or is the figuring only more of the same wishful patterning, the rage for narrative that built our expectations and fueled our plans?

5.

Plato called curiosity “illuminating wonder.” The force that interrupts the mundane, lets the message of the universe come through. An expansion of consciousness as we suspend our expectations. A readiness to rupture the smooth circle of law.

I knew a poet at an arts colony who had been working for nine years on a poem about astronomy, imagining a meeting between Milton and Galileo. She showed me a scrap of paper she’d found in her notes, one she could no longer recall writing. On it the phrase “four moons of Jupiter.” A drift of words, shorn of context. She had no idea what they meant.

At that same colony I had been reading a book written in 1939 titled *Pain, Sex and Time* by a man named Gerald Heard. I envied him his title, but not much more.

Deaf as Beethoven, he wrote passages like these:

The thwarted energy within us, which should have gone into our further evolution, will disintegrate in us through increase of sensualism, by an ever more febrile eroticism;

through increase of algesia, by hypersensitiveness to pain; through that overcharge of awareness which, not permitted to transcend the body causes, in a degenerative succession, hypochondria, functional derangement, and finally organic collapse.

But he also wrote beautifully, cleanly, about inspiration (“Coerced, it recoils. Unattended it dies down.”) In my notes I read—his words? mine?—*it is a current that must be watched carefully and taken at the flood.*

6.

A man I loved visited me at a cabin by a lake, where I was spending a month writing. I recall my blushing pleasure at his being there, at the same time feeling awkward and a little intruded on—the subtle anxiety that he might perceive these surroundings I loved so well as crude and rough, uninteresting.

We were sitting on my small porch, where the afternoon broke into fragments through a tangle of live oak trees. Suddenly, from benches near the water, came a woman’s beautiful, bell-like trill of laughter. Just once, once more, then all was still.

I could feel in my skin how her laugh had struck him, like an arrow right up to the hilt. That seductive, anonymous, melodic girl-woman’s laugh that draws a man. I sensed at that instant that this was part of his nature—of all men’s maybe—to chase down that laugh and its girl (the laugh first, the girl second), like a nymph or dryad of the woods. That it would always be a part, the lure of the unseen laugh, no matter how much they contained their desire, no matter how much they loved the seriously real women in their lives.

Like a wave, like a tide worked by its own four moons—we float on the surface of desire and memory.

Later that night, in bed, we named the constellations, those imagined connections between points of light. Shape perceived in what is just an arbitrary scattering of stars.

The essay is a constellation. Love. The mind. The direction of a life. The points between people or moments, lines drawn or imagined. A migration across the dark. This is where we are going. This is where we have been.

7.

As I sit in my study it is late afternoon, the sky sopping up the last of the light. It's nearly winter, and soon night will drop its impossibly blue curtain; already I can see the outline of my reflection against the darkening glass.

I lift one hand from the keyboard, turn it over slowly. I am looking for discontinuities, watching for events that exist as shadows of events, trajectories of a higher dimension. The gleam of firelight in a lover's eyes. Blue dusk on a pillow. Drops of water like jewels hanging from a barren tree reflecting light.

I think memory casts a shadow on four planes, like the movement of a body through time.

I turn my hand back to the keyboard and the light slides across the lawn, the way autumn slips from the skin of summer. Grey-breasted birds wheel and land in the shuddering branches of a pine. Their flashing wings hold the last husk of sunlight. Their voices are full of rain.