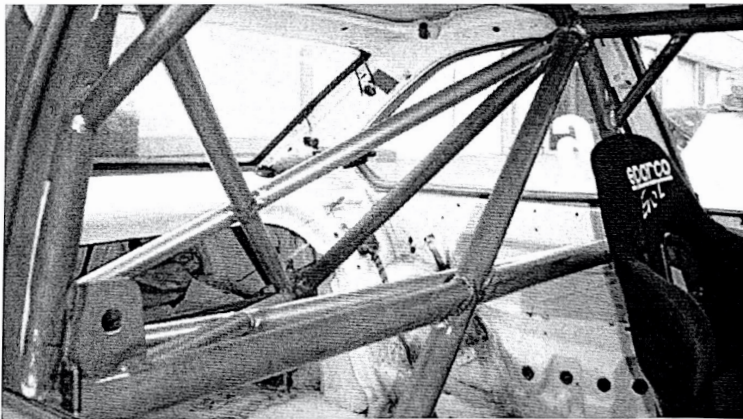


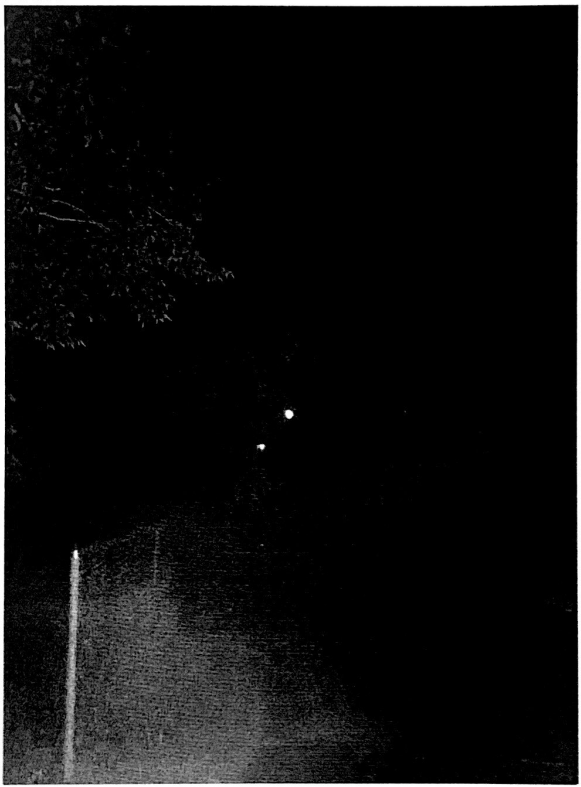
EVERY METHOD OF BEING IN THE
WORLD LOOKS WRONG BUT
FEELS SPECTACULAR



A LIBRETTO BY CHARLOTTE ZHANG

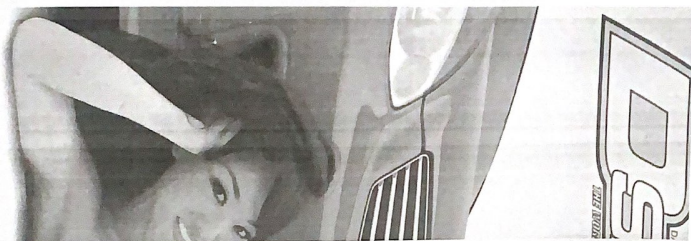
It's doing me no good. Night-time thrumming fluorescent orange. air so taut the smoke expelled from twenty or so beer-slack mouths hangs sluggish and uncertain. Big plumes of it swelling up from the tyres of two stallions on the pavement stretch, restless against the start line. Friction heats the rubber, leaves behind a residue that provides necessary purchase to prevent a skidded start; a stutter is almost a guaranteed loss. The way they shudder like that under the harsh glare of a nearby Arco reminds me of watching someone else about to come with uncomfortable lucidity. Is prayer always performed as though one is bracing upon impact? A quarter of a mile away I am staring at the scum between the tiles of your kitchen floor. listless. untethered. You drink your tea with the embittered manner of someone who never says anything they really want to say, though it is unclear whether this affect has only surfaced in the immediate present or has always gripped you, regardless of circumstance and without my notice - I couldn't really say which. The idea of getting to know someone well enough to know for certain is such a melancholy fiction. The windows briefly shake with the rushing-past of nitrous hellhounds, then nothing.

Stakes, intimacy, pageantry, and witness - these are the four margins that constitute a slow dance.

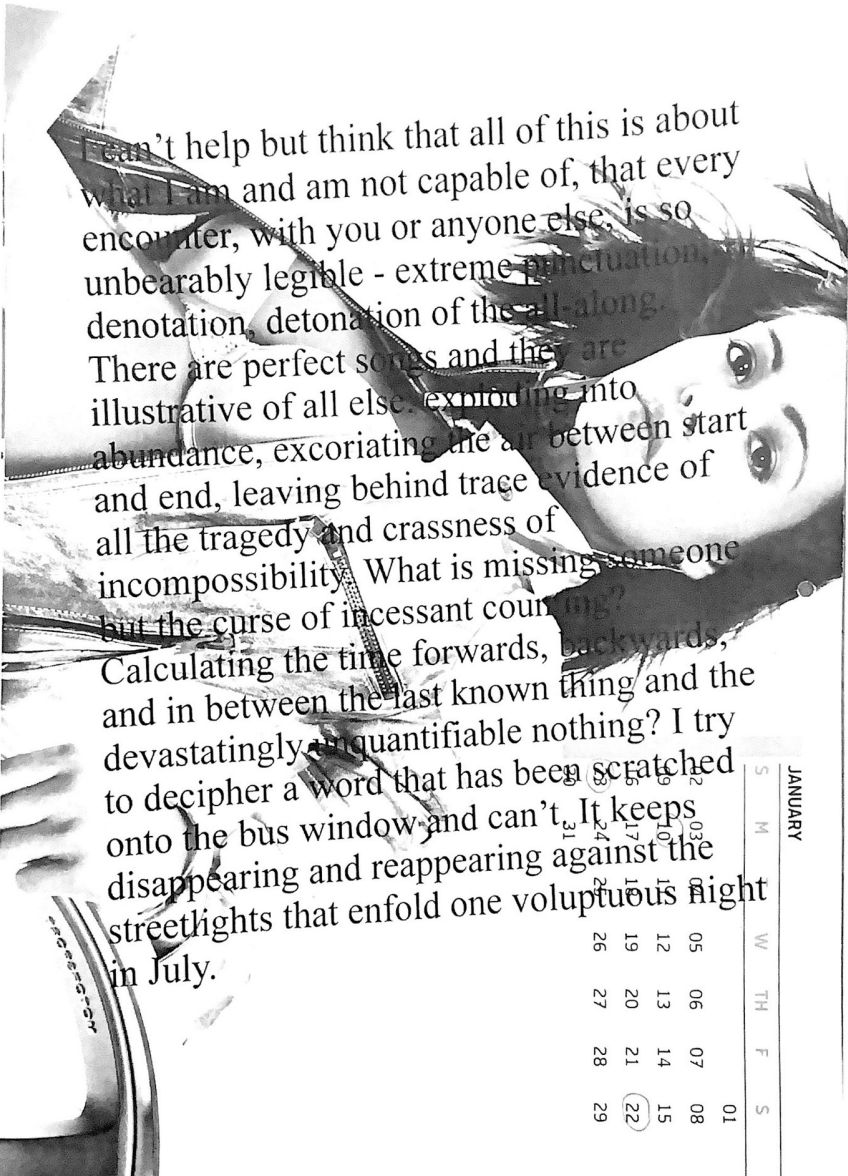




For years after, spectators will refer to particularly impressive maneuvers as *slow dancing*; eventually the expression will turn blurry at the edges, and within a decade, new legends will spin new terminology, and no longer will anyone think first of him; in fact few will think of him at all. It is all too unfortunate how much must be seen and done in order to distill just a hiccup of ubiquity, a single crease in a hierarchy of meaning. This is the heart of all things - language will never hold you. And what's left for the morning is little more than an aggregation of rapturous skid-marks offered up like evidence of ritual summoning.



That you turn away and immediately begin to wash your empty mug makes me love you less. It surprises me, the velocity of this displeasure, but I remember that actually a lot of things are just that easy. I suppose it's that I suddenly feel dubious about my being in your kitchen tonight, or going anywhere with you at all if a gesture like that could make me conjure up the very worst of you, and so I tell you I don't know to answer the question you have finally mustered the will to ask in the most irritatingly wounded way ever, finish my tea and leave, though upon closing the door I immediately realize I've left my almost-full pack of cigarettes on the table. I'm punished with a pang of guilt for allowing it to matter. As I'm exiting your apartment building, down the street Slow Dance lets someone tilt their flask into his open and waiting mouth as he stumbles out of his car, splattering his screwed-shut eyes and dribbling into his nostrils, face still stinging from imaginary wind. The hot thump of blood, the chorus that arrives and keeps arriving like the greatest personal disco remix. He wipes his mouth.




I can't help but think that all of this is about
what I am and am not capable of, that every
encounter, with you or anyone else, is so
unbearably legible - extreme punctuation,
denotation, detonation of the all-along.

There are perfect songs and they are
illustrative of all else, exploding into
abundance, excoriating the air between start
and end, leaving behind trace evidence of
all the tragedy and crassness of
impossibility. What is missing someone
but the curse of incessant counting?

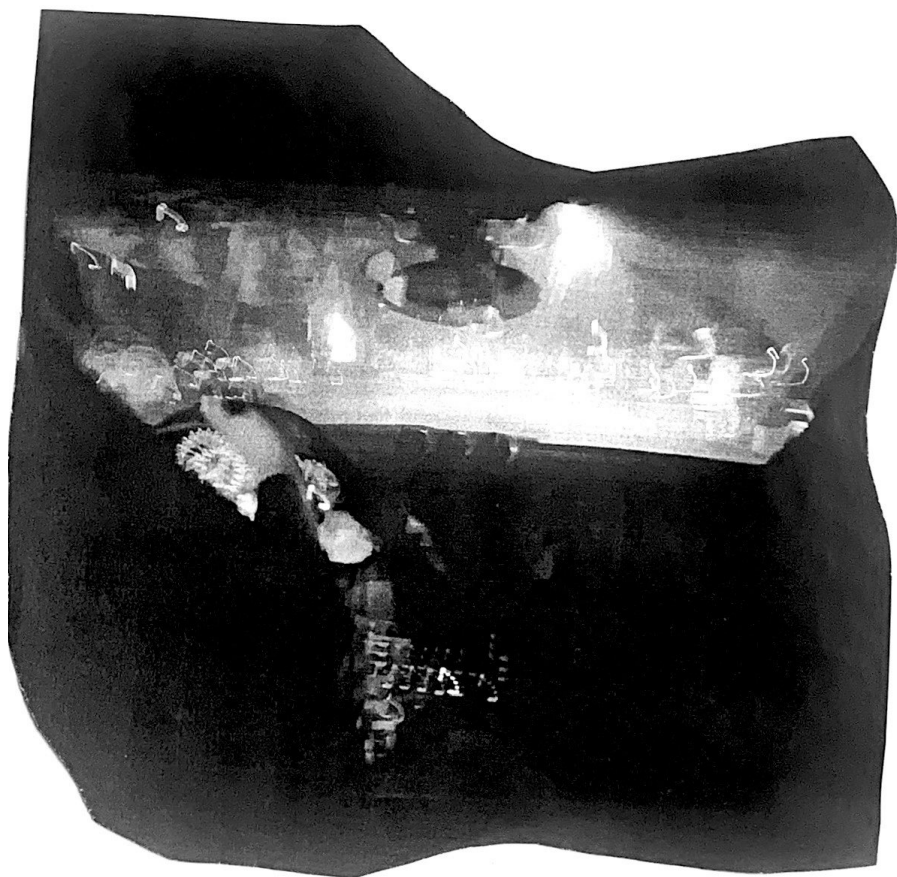
Calculating the time forwards, backwards,
and in between the last known thing and the
devastatingly unquantifiable nothing? I try
to decipher a word that has been scratched
onto the bus window and can't. It keeps
disappearing and reappearing against the
streetlights that enfold one voluptuous night
in July.

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Miyako is five-foot-two, 32 years old. She's an elementary school art teacher in Osaka. She has an affinity for Sade and Celine Dion. She likes to read Victorian literature. She doesn't want to play games, she wants something long-term, someone real. She doesn't like confrontation and she craves protection. She likes to tease, though her gentle barbs are blunted by the occasional absence of "the", "a", "am". He's endeared, sometimes even aroused by the sudden unravelling of her sentences, something that registers to him not as errors of translation but accidental slips of digital flesh, a proxy-body briefly undressing in front of him. Irreconcilable language accumulates, becomes a dense wreckage that then performs as a provisional space of desire when little else is able to escape into the tangible. Don't you know? I saw her name on the side of a building in Little Tokyo one night last November, its every window a continuation of the breath of pink that arrives before collapsing into dusk. I looked it up when I got home, after I'd been sitting in the plaza nearly 45 minutes waiting for you to come pick me up so that I could ride shotgun in your car, buzzing with the electric agony of not touching, never getting close enough. It means "beautiful night". Apparently there are Miyakos who are actresses, athletes, artists, anthropologists, and so on. The purpose of this list seems to be a means of predetermining success, that a name is always a name of consequence.



Slow Dance drives a burnt-orange Mazda RX7 with a black hood and spoiler, almost unbearable to look at in the daylight. Lowered suspension, hovering impossibly close to the ground. Paintstakingly stripped then refitted with aftermarket performance parts. Muffler and catalytic converters removed, radar detector wedged haphazardly onto the dash. Doors replaced with fiberglass, windows with tinted plexi. The interior stripped to nothing but a roll cage and a racing seat mottled with cigarette burns. It is as once-streamlined, featherweight, and opulent, a Baroque entity, as neat as a fugue. If Slow Dance is synonymous with his car, as one usually is in his world, then he too is a body raw with change, changed with potential.



The stench of 4 days: the phantom dampness of un laundered socks and underwear ripe with the tang of old discharge. Every exhale mucid with plaque. The sudden aroma of overripe bananas on the kitchen counter that overwhelms me upon re-entering my apartment. I lock the door and lie on my carpet in the dark, pinned by an arc of streetgleam marred by the shadowy striations of blinds. I wait and keep on waiting. Time is so tenuous right now, carried only by my neighbour's snores rattling through the wall. I think about what it looks like to snore - how the face becomes a soft aperture, stunned open by sleep. I think about how most faces are really difficult to look right at, your face unbearably so sometimes. I think about all the stupidest things I could possibly allow myself to, just this once.

Unbeknownst to you and your mother, your father drove to the airport and waited with a sign bearing Miyako's name. He watched streams of people, mused and vacant, dribble down the length of the escalator in waves. Thrice he rushed to the bathroom and back, heartbeat stuck in his neck. He says, Excuse me, is there an inbound plane from Osaka arriving soon? Has it already arrived? Do you know if it is delayed? All the other loved ones, they shake their head no. I don't know.

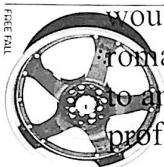


After waiting more than four hours he went to Subway, which was the closest restaurant to the site of his mounting desperation. Italian bread. Monterey Jack. Toasted, please. Tomatoes and spinach and banana peppers. Mustard and mayo. He began to consider the way something could be made real through an assemblage of decisions made in quick succession; even his reassuringly mediocre 6-inch roast turkey sandwich was little more than a combination of attributes that he just now demanded be conveniently placed in a single bun, their harmony completely illusory. You have to understand that this is still the early days and the corporeal consequences of such encounters were thought to be resolute and agreed upon, by virtue if by nothing else. When we revisit this event in the future, we cannot help but place it in our tumultuous history of technological trust as a decidedly pithy signification of the times, emblematic of a now-extinct breed of naivety. The moral, apparently, is that victimization is what happens prior to learning. That's narrative.

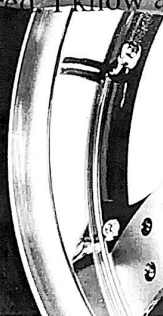
MEET
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KÖNIG

FREE RAIL



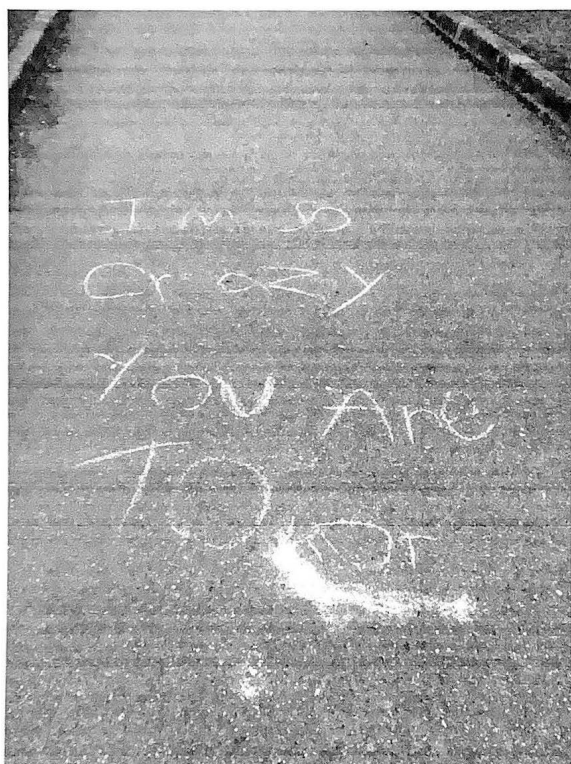
If there is any reassurance to your father, Miyako would leave many other men waiting too. She would later gain healthy notoriety on romancescam.com, effectively putting her career to an end. Over the span of about dozen different profiles she claimed an interest in paragliding to one man, was an avid karaoke singer to another, she was a nationally renowned cellist, a marathon runner, a widower, a confused international student, an expat's lonely wife. By now, she could be a completely different woman with any given characteristics and interests, or perhaps she was no longer a woman at all—maybe she's transformed herself into something someone could bear to be far less involved with in order to entertain the thought of generosity. I'd assume she's tired. I know all too well how tiring it is.



Is it really so morally reprehensible to be an ever-changing set of variables? Is that not what it takes to be here and worth any kind of affection or protection? The body that is infinitely modifiable, always adding-on, removing-from, supplementary, surplus, narrativizable, detachable, rebuildable, reducible, transportable; Miyako, the Mazda, me when I am with you; I can no longer distinguish the contours of our variance.

Slow Dance drives backwards down the freeway. He can't stop laughing because a deathwish is a joke is an embellishment that attempts to salvage the refuse of heartsick and far too dependable living.





I kept thinking you would drunk call. I don't know why because you'd never done that to me before, ever. I got warm and unsteady imagining the unlikely event that I might hear the slow wet of your voice fogging the line between us. But it never came, and a month later, I realized that it was never coming. I remember the exact, irrational moment: I was picking away crusty bits of fallen rice stuck to the patch of carpet between the sofa and the coffee table. Outside, a car blasting music so loud I could barely comprehend that it was music at all rushed by, its reverberation setting off the alarm of another car parked across the street, and then another, and then another, and the air was suddenly swarming with panicked, overlapping honks. Someone started yelling out of their window or from their stoop, but no one came to the rescue. It went on for what felt like many days; I gave up on the rice and stared at the wall in a stupor and when it stopped I became terribly aware of the gap between me and the thing for whom you would with great effort, pull into strangled words what you could not bear to succumb to in daylight. You were not going to chase after me. Not only that, you were capable of dignity, and in that case I might as well call it quits.

That people want the thing that has no words and slow dances as a means of survival; the thing has the wet sheen of a surface not yet able to see in return; a fretful newborn animal pink blind and uncertain of what exactly it is searching for only that it must find whatever it is in order to live; this thing is slowly bleeding out in the third act of the film and it's so harrowing and tragically sexy; it's always that which must be painstakingly revealed and then this process of revealing becomes a practice becomes a procedure becomes an organizing of libidinal principles in an economy of desire. In your kitchen, I felt it: your disappointment at having pried it apart just to come upon the sensation of hitting zero. Because there's nothing to say and nothing to hide; I am only ever an assortment of methods; a series of public encounters nauseating and liberating alike; some misunderstood gestures in the dark; for the stakes have been set and it's all skin off my back.

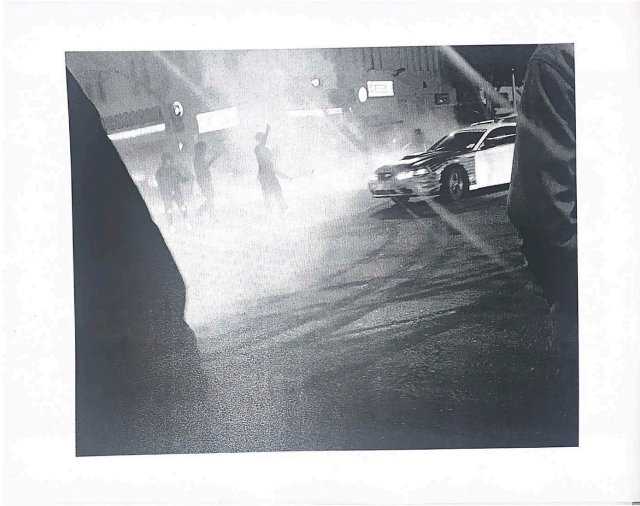


Even now I don't have the right words for it. Even now I feel torn when I say 'slow dancing', by a loyalty I forgot I held.









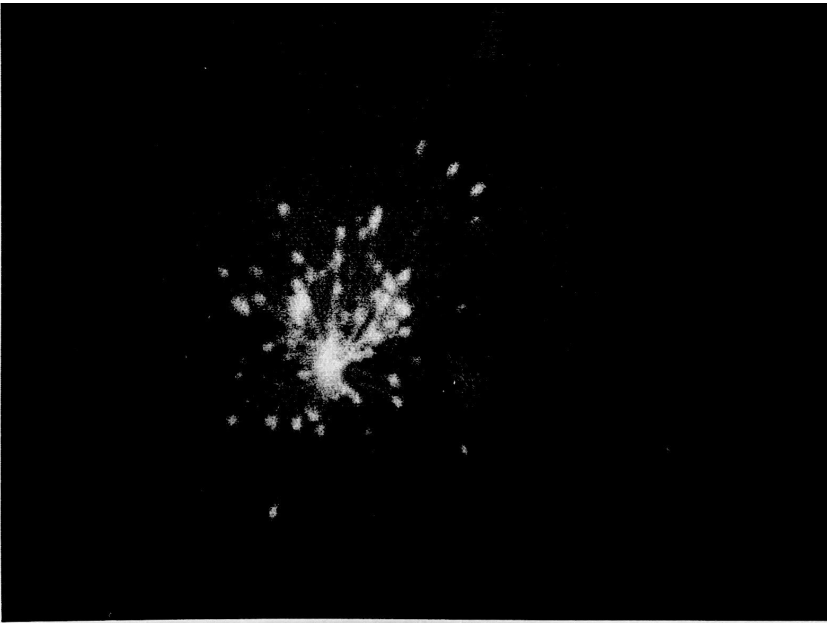
Slow Dance pulls up to the takeover Thursday night in Anaheim. Someone recalls him saying that he had just quit his job at the sunglass kiosk in the mall earlier that day, and he's taken it upon himself to celebrate tonight. He arrives still wearing his work uniform. This ends up being particularly memorable, because in his cheap polyester polo and church-boy shoes he finally appears as he is: fidgety, teeth yellow in the crevices from smoking, forgettably slight with terrible posture. He's always smiling. It's gotten him in trouble before. He's a lot younger than anybody remembers.

I've never known anyone since whose memory lives in the fissures of testimony in the way that his does: with an utter lack of breath: a movie so hurried and ecstatic that there is never enough time to point the lens directly at him.

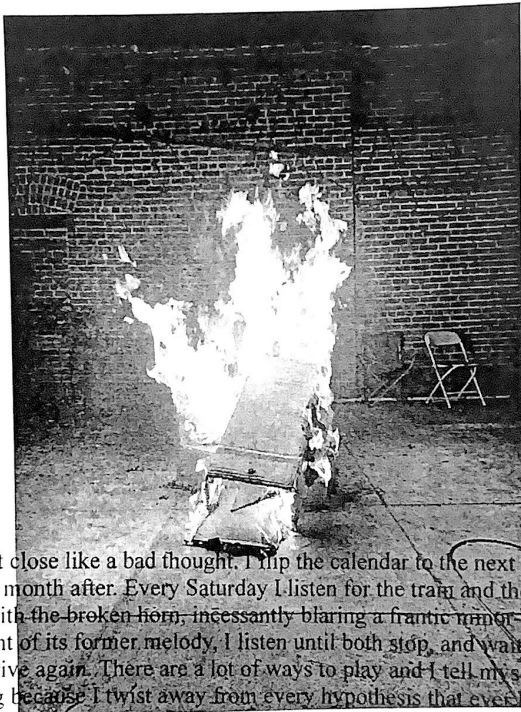
Since he couldn't possibly go back home, your father booked a room at a Super 8 in Culver City and would end up staying there for two months eating Subway for nearly every meal until either he ran out of money or your mother finally let him come home (this was always unclear to me in your recounting of the event, though it seems to be an important detail). You want to protest the decision, but decide against it for her sake because you're too afraid of what she will do to herself if there is no tidy ending. Soon enough, so much will be gone anyway - the sunglass kiosk, both of our old apartment buildings; even Slow Dance's car was burnt so thoroughly that there was nothing of him to find but teeth, and just the other week the marks of his demise were paved over too. There is no good time to do much of anything, only time that is favorable for the currency you hold and time that isn't. How can anyone possibly protect themselves, when the only way of doing so seems to be the abasement of every experience into a win or a loss? And that I can win or lose simply by virtue of telling myself so?

Because narrative performs an explanation without any actual obligation to explain, Slow Dance suddenly swerves and hits what is later dubiously claimed to be something "like an invisible wall in the street" by several unreliable eyewitnesses at such a velocity that he flips sideways. There is a grotesque, squealing clash of metal on metal on pavement, the glossy exterior of his car catches a stripe of streetlight glare on its way up, a flash of heat sucks the air out of everything on the way back down. And just like that, the mangled Mazda goes up in flames. His opponent screeches to a halt. He doesn't know what to do. The sound of collective horror is all slowed-down and viscous and unreal; the smell is indescribable. Sirens getting closer this time. Fuck this, his opponent says out loud to himself, and he flees. closer this time. Fuck this, his opponent says out loud to himself, and he flees.





And it rains like crazy in the days that come after, it rains so much it ends the summer prematurely. It causes accidents on the 5 and a few minor mudslides. Out of caution, everything and everyone moves slower, but I squint real hard at the city so that out-of-focus it might resemble a funeral procession.



I hold it close like a bad thought. I flip the calendar to the next month, and the month after. Every Saturday I listen for the train and the produce truck with the broken horn, incessantly blaring a frantic minor-key fragment of its former melody, I listen until both stop, and wait until they arrive again. There are a lot of ways to play and I tell myself I'm winning because I twist away from every hypothesis that ever laid itself at the nape of my neck.

If not an explanation, this is a love letter.



EVERY METHOD OF BEING IN
THE WORLD FEELS WRONG
BUT LOOKS SPECTACULAR

