

Words, Images, & More

Meta/ Phor(e) /Play

Heat Index by Paul Rabinowitz

I emerged from the L Train Station as the late morning sun bore down on the sidewalk. My internal compass orientated me south along Bedford Avenue toward Grand Street to the cafe where we'd planned to meet. As I moved quickly to arrive on time, I noticed my new cotton t-shirt was already soaked from sweat.

"Morning."

"Yep, it is," she said, hesitating before looking up from her book.

"You sure sitting outside is a good idea? The heat index says another 100 degree day."

"I'm fine with it. Are you?"

I removed my latest draft from my backpack and laid it on the table.

"Totally fine. Look, I finished early this morning."

She removed a fountain pen from her worn canvas bag and leaned over the pile.

"You want coffee?" I asked.

Her uncombed auburn hair fell unevenly across her burnt red shoulders. I wondered about this, about her inattention to the potential and continued harm she'd sustained from the sun even as she zeroed in like a hawk over the lines I'd written, the sharp point of her fountain pen hovering, ready to descend at any moment it detected the smallest weakness. I remained still as I watched for a change in her expression.

"What does this mean?" she said, dropping her pen to the paper and making a large circle around the paragraph.

I leaned over and settled my eyes within the mark she'd made.

“It’s a description of the character’s desires.”

Her eyes flashed from yellow to gold as sunlight bounced off the white table.

“And your desires?”

I thought before answering, and we sat there in the pause. I’d risen early, the new direction for the story penetrating my waking thoughts. The fading moon hung in the blue hour as the light from the rising sun caressed its lunar surface. New phrases flowed through me like a stream after torrential rains. Letters tumbled out fluidly through the smooth tips of my fingers. I tapped on the keys, transferring images of a ticking clock, chocolates, and the sparkling yellow transparency of Côtes du Rhône through a tulip shaped wine glass. It was true, I didn’t yet know what it all meant, only that it meant something.

The screen door of my summer cottage where I go to be alone and write flew open. Like a mother hugging her child, you clutched a worn canvas bag under your bright yellow summer dress. Your hair dripping wet from a fast moving storm. I watched you.

“I think you’ll like Hemingways’s prose in this one.”

I noticed a small stick and poke tattoo between your biceps. I wondered about the story of this.

“I think it’s kinda where you’re heading.”

I recalled the forecaster predicted unbearable humidity with a heat index rising above one hundred for the next few days. How the forecaster indicated it would feel even hotter than the actual temperature. I wondered, as I always wonder, how they calculate this discrepancy between reality and feeling with numbers.

“Let me know what you think.”

Glancing at your sunburnt shoulders, I drew images of a marble sculpture formed by the loving hands of an artist. I imagined this artist chiseling mass into void with a mallet on a hill somewhere in the woods, upstate, New York. The smooth curves glistened in the sun, triggering reactions from neighbors and passersby, expressing something true and universal about the human form. I inhale the summer fragrance from your body sending me to the tumbling creek that runs through my backyard. My head rests on your stomach. I turn the page. Hemingway’s words churn inside me.

Yes, I did like Hemingway's prose in that one. But "like" wasn't the word. I felt it. I felt his prose to my core.

"Can you stay for breakfast?"

Leaning up against the door jamb, you spread open wide your canvas bag and search through.

"I can't find my glasses."

As I recall, it was at that moment I knew I was at the beginning of something new. Like when I tried on the cotton t-shirt in a local store in the small village near my cottage. It hung over my faded jeans and hugged my body in just the right way. I kept looking at my reflection in the shop windows as I moved through the local farmer's market to buy fresh bread and cheese to have with you as we sat together at my table in the sunroom facing the small creek, working on my new draft. My hope was you'd say something like, this is how Hemingway must have felt when he envisioned seeing Marita, the beautiful one, at Côte d'Azur the first time.

"I tried something new," I said.

Her eyes stared into mine, as if trying to read words I hadn't said.

"Really?"

She removed her glasses and dropped them inside her canvas bag.

"I changed it up a bit."

I felt a bead of sweat drip down my bald head as the solid ground shifted under my feet.

"You mind if I bring my kid the next time we work together?"

"Of course. Uh, sure. I don't mind. Whatever works for you."

"Great. Babysitters are expensive."

As she turned the page, I removed my sunglasses and looked down at my cell phone. A stream of new messages appeared on the screen.

"You read all the books I gave you?"

“Yep. I especially liked The Garden of Eden by Hemingway.”

“I know who it’s by.”

As the sun crept behind a building on Grand Street, it cast a long shadow like a sundial across her face. For the first time, our naked eyes met.

“This about me?”

The shadow penetrated into the creases alongside her eyes. This time I sensed she was reading me. I was shaken at her accuracy.

“I write fiction.”

“You write truth.”

As the shadows inched slowly across her face, I began to make some sense of why I had come. With the bright light temporarily dimmed and feeling a reprieve from the heat, I ordered two coffees with extra petite madeleine cakes in case she felt hungry.

I wasn’t sure what more I could say about the line between truth and fiction that she didn’t already know.

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