

LIA PURPURA

Street Scene

At least I can't *identify* a particular state of mind—nostalgia, say, thieving from elsewhere, or even a stricter, plain yearning at work on the scene. Rather, just sort of blankly did I enter the car, start the engine (those three Hondaic chuffs before catching), and drive it into the sky.

Or (and this direction is also possible) I submerged it. Or hit a misty wall of rain from some emigre jungle. Steered into a cloud on the lam.

I was on a familiar street. But I had to *assume* this. And, boy, was that move epistemologically unsound: "this street should be familiar to you—because it is familiar." (*Miss Purpura, I have here your essay. Define for us, if you will, "tautology."*) My watch showed I'd been on the road just five minutes—a fact that helped not at all to re-pin the street which had blown, which was currently falling and shushing, even as I drove, like a sheet of paper, unreachably far under dark furniture.

The street slipped a groove, the street behaved like a pencil-sketch track laid lightly down and easily smudged, or a wooden lift-upable set for a wooden-wheeled train. Puddles settled in dips and depressions. At a distance they blackened and then, as I neared, silvered over. They behaved as expected, dependably tilting some sky one way, then another—that is, exchanging the rote pleasures of sipping and staring at nothing-

much.

This puddle series was arranged with some logic—no actual point of departure, certain and sterling, fimbriate, timetabled—but perfectly, primitively cause-and-effectish. If splashed by tires (or the foot of a distracted college student), the puddles recommitted to new, nearby watery communities, mercury-style. The solid, central yellow line did nothing but divide the street neatly; it was not one of those newfangled, rubbery strips set down with a waggle where the road crew faltered, got ahead of themselves, or behind in their gluing. How I've wanted to pry and reroll those strips, stash them in my sewing box, along with coils of binding and red measuring tape! And here I comforted myself: at least I recognized the yellow thought, saw the sewing-box notions, and home.

But the street itself slipped free. There was no alembic click of light and shadow. A lyrical moment, well known, highly quotable and good for rainy occasions like this—"petals on a wet black bough"—did not appear as an apparition, to affix the scene to a recognizable mood. No ensemble of clues plotted the meeting of a St. & a Dr., a Rd. & an Ave. to orient by. The street just would not, would not mean *route-to-store*, or *close-to-home*. It offered no eau d'library-nearing (white roof the

top note, then the crowns of green maple), no whiff of *farmers' market upcoming with subacute parking-anxiety flicker*. No overture, prelude, or preface rounding toward anywhere stepped forth. I was driving—first principle, sure—but it could have been Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky. Spearfish, Sonoma, Syosset, Seattle. No last-year-at-this-time specimen (big yellow moon slung low over IHOP) (now Enterprise Rent-a-Car) turned into a wist- or a joy- or a hurtful past moment.

As I said, I might as easily have been flying, all movement unfelt, the speed of the moment so wholly contained. The street's singular elements were perfectly nameable—that echt yellow stripe, those newly-dribbled tar snakes filling in cracks, curbs darkened with rain, fickle puddles, passing cars sending stars out of low spots to firmaments elsewhere—yes, the *things* of the place were nameable, as when, from a plane, looking out, looking down, certain of an actual street below, the internal eye can conjure up joggers pushing triangle prams, bike bells aflame in low sun—while the whole remains patchwork and chessboard, unquitting.

I knew the street to be “residential”—it leafed over with well-tended trees, curbs thickened and rose, yes, I could read that. Those clues registered. And so did the need to go slow—but only as reflex: a simple, synaptic response. I had not the sense of a specific school ahead directing the downshift, or that, say, a tumbly, yellow-haired kid in favor of darting lived near. In fact, I could recall no one at all with that habit.

So where was I now?

And also, *who*, is the question.

Here, into the picture (I'm slowing it way down), came an old woman shuffling, assiduously not looking both ways as she crossed the street. The crossing, I could see, was a big, concentrated-upon project—an endeavor which must have, earlier, as she dressed for the day, required planning and determination, the gathering of *moxie*, as someone's grandmother would've said. Or she herself would've said. And here (she'd laugh to herself) how newly applied the word “moxie” to crossing a street! How silly the things age reduces one to—a trip to the drugstore, across the street, *planned*. And still, or again, or always, that question returns: *Who am I now?* *Who*, to those college kids in the apartments across the street, *part of a tribe?* (tries on “The Olds.”) Daft? (*yes, a little-seeming, I'm sure.*) Harmless (*ah, the harm done, and now done with, and time-softened, sort of*). Oh, she thinks, now I'm the person who cannot believe she was once one of them, that eye-of-the-storm, centrally pumping heart one makes of oneself, one's confusion and terror and beauty, at that age.

This congeries of moments wasn't lasting. Was startling, though. Microdramatic. Many-bodied and pinked with the buzz of a colony of coral. I was trying to find my way back, or dig into the moment, there on the street. It was the sensation of pushing the sash of a window that won't, won't, won't budge, knowing the stubbornness to be weather, the resistance to be moisture, and that, with the right blow applied, the window *would* budge, *would have to* budge. I felt the thought's

construction shift from certainty to a shade of doubt—an insistent, keen, little stab: it *would have* to move, right? The moment's flat, solid resistance would give?

For the duration of the moment, trying to locate myself on that street, trying to tack along it, I was a foreigner. I was en route in a strange station, bars of the ticket window striping the clerk's lips (straining to read them), the informative clerk reciting time/track/tariff, the echoey loudspeaker announcing maybe my train (its delay? its departure?) maybe not (dining car's down?). I felt, amid all the commotion, only blankness. In such a chaos, listening for that sound-combination meaning *my train* and *my destination* (friends, in a foreign land always memorize the "from-to" construction and numbers at least to one hundred) suddenly, a fingernail shone promisingly out—as it did one real and wintry afternoon past in Warszawa Centralna Station. I was booking a couchette to Prague (do *what* with my visa—stamp? save? submit?) when the scroll of that very same nail, mine own, seemed to offer answers about my journey—if only I could read its whorls and shy ridges, its dents, and the crescent of Polish dirt there collected!

So what happened?

I rolled down the window for a breath of air. At least I still knew to regard with pleasure the way my crank window, my no-power-steering-activated muscles in my shoulders and back sharpened and fixed my attention. The exertion felt good. The wind lifted my hair and found a way to my neck. Pressing the gas caused a line of cold rain to slip

from the roof through the window and onto my thigh. It darkened into a tiny Brazil. I eased into second. Things shifted.

What happened?

But I've already told what happened.

All along, this has been the story of a moment.

The cross-sectioning of a moment is the news. That a moment anywhere—here, on a street—does this, is news.

Later, I studied up on the construction of streets. I liked one particularly clear diagram I found, labeled "city street." Different materials are layered up for flexibility and skid resistance. Internal steel beams or meshing help a street withstand cycles of expansion and contraction. Seasonal flux is planned for. Subterranean drainage systems with rocks and sand are laid in to control saturation. A whole formula called the California Bearing Ratio calculates for appropriate loads. One cut-away showed the world of buried telephone cables, gas mains, sewer pipes and other bundled electrical stuff—systems collecting-from or delivering-to each nearby house voices and heat and waste and light. On top of the street was planted the outline of a house. Then behind the flat house, a blue wash was meant to stand in for the sky.

When I looked up, beyond the book was the expanse of my desk. Then, in the frame of the window was grass-sky-trees, in no order. In no order at all, it went black phone-line horizon to kicked silver trash can. It went coil of hose to far-off pink cloud.

I found, given a cross-section to study, the eye

hovers and slides, lingers on the most satisfying shapes, takes in, zooms out, sharpens some things, dissolves other things. The eye disarrays the neatest sequence.

Thus in the frame of my window is a white truck. If I drop my sight down, pitch it over the

truck's bed, there's a porch swing, two people, gray shingles, blue shutters. Blue shutters, gray shingles, a baby held close. The baby in a red hat with a tassel (last week she was born) (the red's easy to see). There's her mother and father swinging into and out of the scene.

