

Surveillance/Reconnaissance

I. Surveillance

Binoculars grope from a slit in the window, tentative as a snail's antenna. With a gloved finger I rub the grooves, focus. My breath frosts the glass. Thousands of tiny insects applaud, wing against wing, in the falling hail.

The building is the sky, dense and murky, endless. My eyes are an aim of tiny red light; they slip on the smoothness, the evening's plastic gloss.

Three oblong lights are scattered above, dull rooms hanging beneath dull lamps, constellations in the void. In the crack of a blind a woman's shoe dangles from a rounded heel. Blown by dusty vents, her eyes peel wide. A computer screen makes her cheeks blue, ghoulish. She is Neptune.

Bertrand reclines at his desk, head lolling; he barks into the phone—he thinks he's dreaming—flab rattles beneath his chin. Army figurines, chipped and broken, backed against the wall, await the firing squad.

Emptiness...a cosmos wide. Then a crystal paperweight, a paper clip bent from frustration. A bookcase of mugs that lips have never touched. The hooks of a crawling cockroach, obscene amid the splendor. I promise not to tell.

The lobby is a marble cage. It rattles like ice in a cup. The double doors open and a thin man emerges, narrowed by the squint of light. Don't let me down. He drops it (a pen? a business card?) and performs a double take at his watch. I retract. He tries not to see me. Awkwardly done. Dare I raise a pinky to toast our success? He salutes with the grind of tires on asphalt.

To tiptoe is childish. Masked, my progress is swift; propped doors give way as a pricked balloon deflates. The elevator doors shudder shut with the ring of a bell and like a fatal disease I ascend to the core. Outside Neptune's orbit, even a gold key is turned with respect for the touch of metal to metal.

At last I've punctured the wall that separates me from them. Their facts are vaster than supposed, but the particles refuse to converge into waves and I am a being I hardly recognize, a stick figure made of dots. As I topple this house of cards I leave only the severed head of the joker.

II. Reconnaissance

I awake to the sound of my own breathing. Today is the day – I've worn my watch overnight in preparation. Its only lies are during ticks that rush to catch up.

I adjust my black sunglasses before the mirror. They screen my face into shadows; I am a black and white sketch, hastily scratched into being.

Heat rises with the smell of morning, outlines are smudged, lights haloed, thought averted with magnetic repulsion. It's been like this for some time; I will drag down these stairs no more

At the corner of Vreeland and Vine, I insert one quarter, remove three copies. I thought I was above such things? Old lessons die hard. I crunch the stale leftovers of days gone by, cracking the newspaper before my face, looking down. A constellation of petrified Bazooka. Grey stars, darker than the darkness. I speak to no one so I can answer my own questions.

The attaché is in his left hand, clutched in hamfisted fury. He has a slight hunch and cupped, grasping ears. His hair is prematurely grey (how do I know that?). *Trust him*, they said. I have my doubts.

We walk side by side, a silent marching band, proud without purpose. Buses squeal and snort. Streams of bicyclists quiver by. Within five blocks wariness becomes barely cloaked antagonism. We are forced to stop at the corner. A blue hand flashes in unknowing triumph. Do we keep our chins up? He watches the traffic in the reflection of my glasses. His eyes glower under heavy brows, beneath each eyelash a Kubrick stare. My lips twitch. What he sees is closer than it appears. There must be a better way.

The entrance is sunken in the wall. Who will open the door for whom? There's irony in his deference. I don't like him at my back. I seek refuge in the steady shuffle of khaki, the jangle of keys, the woman who flattens along the railing to let us pass, my faster and faster steps.

Bertrand is embedded in a cavernous armchair, blowing an aquarium of smoke between the fronds of potted plants. His back faces us. Beethoven is playing from invisible speakers. Surely he heard our knock. He swivels on cue to the scherzo. His fat cheeks flush as he raises his hands to bring the world into harmony. *Pathos!* he cries with the grimace of having lost something crucial. Yet we are here. I avoid my craggy companion while trumpets blast.

Having gathered the pieces to form an incoherent whole I have come to collect. Doesn't mean he shouldn't believe me. Or he should.