

What We See

by Brett Garcia Rose

The square red light winks at me from the scratched mica of the desk. I slouch down further into the leather chair to bring it to eye-level, hunching my shoulders and squinting at the light as it blurs into the carpeted wall of my cubicle. It flashes once a second, conniving and condescending, marking empty time as it drains its own life. I lift the device sideways on the desk and press random buttons until the screen lights, tilting it towards my face and looking for new icons. After a few more winks I wipe the fingerprints from the screen with my tie and check the ringer and set it back on the desk, repositioning it as it was.

I want to smash it against the far cement wall and watch the bits and guts tinkle down to the floor, but that's the old me.

The move to the motel was circular and short, a slow, drab exodus of numbness and automation. This is how people live when they get tired of living. They watched me with small and unsteady eyes as I left, their faces full of fear and pity and low-grade guilt, unlike the giddy relief of the prior week when I came home early from work to tangled bed sheets and extra limbs. I stood and watched for some minutes before they saw me, finally, the giggles draining from them too slowly, untangling themselves and covering up, sighing with regret and relief. It is a scene of decay, of despair, replaying in my head in disorderly fragments.

She needed a reason. I needed a push. She says again that I don't understand what I see. The old me would be at the hardware store gathering supplies, already three alibis deep.

The carpet on the floor is worn through from the wheels of the chair, forcing me along the same, tired grooves. My legs ache from fidgeting. Fridays are my worst day. The weekends are blank spots to me, bare, ugly patches in the middle of time to step over and get back to the stupor of work. Claire's fingerprints still shine on every

dirty surface of my life, and I cannot clear them, but sometimes I gather enough momentum to jump over.

This is my life, recycled, a gross and growing core of post-parting waste.

When I get outside the sky is dark, thick with rain and cold. Everyone hurries somewhere. I call my latest doctor on speed dial, confirm with the receptionist yet again. I imagine the old Italian with razor stubble and vodka breath and rusty instruments as I climb into the cab. A dark place with generators and bare buzzing light bulbs, dirty water and scalpels and hag nurses who pump poison, toothlessly giggling as they strap me in. This is my future. One day they will take what remains of my eyes so someone else can use them to see beauty, someone who will value them more than I have, someone who will be strong enough to keep them pointed away from ugly things. I will be free, floating in the ghetto streets, eyeless and blind and waiting to be harvested.

At an office on the far East side of Spanish Harlem a pretty Asian nurse offers me Valium and I take two on top of the halves of Xanax already coursing my bloodstream like sleepy piranhas. The drugs make me tired so I close my eyes and wait and try to meditate, but the treacherous scenes keep coming back. His hair greasy and long, her back arched and shiny with sweat. I try to splice in good memories, but no matter how I rearrange the pieces in my head it still plays like snuff.

I don't see well, true, but I see enough.

A friend tells me that love is the perfect prison. Nourishing enough to sustain hope and limiting enough so we don't spin out. When I talked about Claire's activities, he said there's no advantage in allowing this new bit of knowledge to upset an otherwise functional pairing. His advice; keep the electrical signals separate. Your brain is every bit as dumb as your heart, and every failure of love is another multiple bypass. He's divorced, also.

But if ignorance is bliss, what is knowledge?

I remain awake for the procedure. It's cheaper this way, and I've long since passed the place where my debts will outlive me. The old

Italian spreads my eyelids with cold metal stretchers, cranking them impossibly wide, the scalpel shaking in his liver-spotted hands. He cuts slowly, leaning so close I can see the specks of dirt on his glasses, his eyes beyond murky and veined. The clear part of my eye yields with a soft pop, then I feel the circular slide of the knife. It is not unpleasant. The nurse watches, looking for twitches, holding her needles. I can see the hair in her nose, the vertical smokers-wrinkles around her lips filled with cheap make-up. I think of jerking my head now, messing with the doctor a little, but better to wait for the laser.

He jerks the clear flap down and then puts it back up and cuts some more, correcting little mistakes. I am not nearly numb enough but the pain feels good. Finally he takes hold of the surface half of my eye, peels it back and tacks it to the metal frame of the eye stretcher. I settle into a half-blurry valium haze, feeling cold air touch the inside of my eyes as the fake plastic lens pops out.

When the laser buzzes is when I will make my move. It is close enough that I can lift my head and bang into it, sink it in a few inches and let the rays go right into my brain. See how far down they are able to correct me. What I want is 20/20 vision where my eyes meet my soul, and these tools can do anything if you know how to use them. What I want to see are the honest shapes minus the dirty details. If I merge with the laser I can fix loneliness, despair, disillusionment. Maybe it is magic and maybe people are just too afraid. Go ahead, doctor. Let me be first.

Make me your pig.

Claire hovers inside my thoughts and stares at the pulsating walls. The angers and fears circle her like little henchmen. The room tilts and sways, everything shifting and clanking and clashing. Too much, the drugs, the sorrow, the uncertainty of life. The henchmen pull up chairs, a fledgling, provincial leadership waiting for Claire to fade and my eyes to stop lying. She swirls and blurs to a cacophony of shrill threats and rusty weapons. My head swells and bubbles with the heat, waiting for the laser to come and wipe everything clean. I smile and take deep breaths, inhaling the fumes of my melted eyes.

Knowledge is a virus that devours itself.

As quickly, it ends. The henchmen wail and flail, hip deep in blood and gray matter. Claire watches from her corner, waiting. The doctor reattaches the clear flaps on my eyes, taps them with his rubber-coated finger and grunts as they slide into place. The hag nurse smiles at him and gathers his tools, breathing stale cigarettes on my wounds as he bandages and wraps.

She asks me if I have someone to take me home. I can't see but the voice is sweet in my head.

Yes, my wife is waiting downstairs with the car, I lie.

Are you sure?

Of course.

You know, insurance.

Of course...I'm fine.

You don't look fine.

You have no idea just how fine I am.

I can make out shapes, walls and walkways, but I sit in the elevator until someone else comes along to press the proper button. Another patient. We look at each other without seeing. As the doors begin to close the doctor enters and rides down with us. He holds my arm and guides me to the sidewalk, waiting for the others to walk on.

His face is tired, sad.

This is the last time, Mr. Hanson, he says. I do hope you understand.

I raise my head towards him, the quick movement unsettling my fragile balance.

Six months, he says. I don't know, maybe longer. You never can tell.

I thank him and nod away. Time is a river of short, sweet pains. My next doctor will not speak English, in a faraway foreign land where they laugh at lawsuits.

I ask around and someone leads me to the subway. It is a long walk, and I keep my eyes closed for much of the way. I imagine Claire with me, guiding me, laughing, joking, kissing my shaking

head, telling me how good everything is, and will be. I imagine her yelling at me for not taking a cab and it is as good an excuse to hear her voice as any other.

Every few minutes I see a little better, but as I go down the subway stairs I still cannot read. The henchmen are quiet again, watching and waiting, and it is the first time I can remember not feeling lonely in public. There is so much we can do, the world, so much we can cure and conquer and correct, and yet so much that we cannot.

The first train is an express but I get on anyway, going past my stop and walking back. I walk the park, cross the street with everyone honking, and slowly amble up the stairs. My doorman looks at me strangely. I feel it more than see it. Clear globes pasted to my eyes, covered with giant sunglasses. I feel like a movie star.

Upstairs I peel everything off. Tape, bandages, clothes. I stare at my blurry self in the bedroom mirror for a few minutes. I take my eye drops and let them course down my cheeks like fake tears. Then I take my last Xanax with a warm glass of milk.

Love is a dirty drug with hideous side effects.

The thing they don't tell you about choice, about freedom, is that it's just another gimmick used to sell life. You don't own your moments. Every door you pass through slams shut behind you, locking away your unseen history in the great vault of time. Your footsteps fade and you move on down the line as the universe shoves you through, impatient and impartial. In the factory of life, we're all child-labor, grower ever stronger and more powerless as our bodies race towards total failure. A seed dropped on the forest floor becomes a tree. The same seed dropped in the ocean becomes food. The only difference between imagination and history is the number of people who choose to agree with you.

Life is a kaleidoscope of gorgeous, untold lies.

As I lay on the bed the reflection of the city pours through the window and it is a painful, beautiful thing, ticking along the painted tin ceiling in parade solely for me; emergency lights, street lights, red lights, green lights, cigarette lights, warning lights, advertising

lights, mourning lights, beacons, all of them, of the world as we randomly create it.

I turn off my phone and my lights and the sounds come pouring through, finally; my eyes wet and closed, things beyond me waiting to be seen, the great world grinding ever on, people weary and shining, asleep and awake, hovering as they must.

I'll remember it all.

