Imperial Physique

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Do you heed the imperial decree
to use your body to promote
good citizenry?

The city is asleep, and the parks are dimly lit. The first thing I notice is a type of circling: sweat in night’s heat. Silhouettes of bodies in the trees, on a park bench, leaning against lamp posts. This writing emerges from this heat. I was interested in cruising as a ritual: repeated over and over across the world. These days, dating apps have replaced open-air cruising in many ways. What was once a heavy presence in city parks has now been relegated to the virtual and domestic space: the dorm, apartment couch, or halogen-lit bathroom. The contemporary cruise, made more efficient and effortless, is now the “looking?” or “sup?” smartphone conversation: physical contact initiated or rebuked with a nude selfie.
CRUISING IS NOT DEAD, though. Out in the open, yet secretly, people convene in public spaces both urban and along the outskirts of civic infrastructure. Here, words are hardly used. It is in the turn of a head; repeated eye contact; a shift of a hand toward the thigh that signals desire. This silent and subtle ritual is nonverbal. A physical call-and-response system toward and away from a touch many deem unholy. The body speaks for itself. Muscle, skin, posture, and facial expressions combine to communicate: yes, no, I want you, keep your distance, and in this silent dance, societal marks — such as class, money, and status — dissipate in the lamplight. As physical movements become the basis for acceptance or rejection, certain re-inscriptions of oppression remain — cruising does not, by any means, open up a space of utopian free-for-all. However, the index of bodies within public spaces creates micro-scenarios of choice: out of these bodies, which will I pursue? On the outskirts of economic regulation, late in the evening, away from the major avenues and wide sidewalks of urban commerce, bodies shed in order to open toward a lone stranger.
AND YET, this ritual is not just relegated to parks, abandoned shipyards, alleyways: unspoken gestures occur in broad daylight, on the subway car, in a grocery store, at the gym, in a museum. What cruising does is electrify this sequence of movements, elevating body positions to the point of pure pleasure, even when apprehension is secondary to the thrill of anticipation. Queer or otherwise, everyone is implicated in this silent rite: it is part of our species’s imperative. And those that proactively seek it? In cities and interstate rest stops, one enters the space of cruising by becoming, in effect, a useless body — in wait for a synchronic indication. And yet, waiting implies something to come: a prescription filled at the city’s public hospital; a bus ride to the beach; the bloom of California poppies along coastal rocks. There is nothing to fear in one who waits, since the hope of production tethers them to a future act. The unpredictable lies in loitering: our animal body allowed to stand idly, without apparent purpose. Someone passively regarding color and sound is improper and seems suspect — especially for certain bodies (black, brown, immigrant, homeless) for whom loitering is often seen as an illegal or unethical act. “I would join you in cruising Elysian Park,” my friend told me, “but if caught, you’d get a ticket. I’d get deported.”

Meanwhile, he wastes time along paths with frequent pauses. She leans against the brick wall for hours. They crouch in the shade of the magnolia trees without a cigarette to give them at least a semblance of productivity and thus good citizenry, of participating in the economic structure of things. Non-productive, the body enters the space between city and wildness, human and animal, scanning the landscape for any slight movement.
YEARS AGO, Stanley Frank and I were drinking Jameson at the Stud, a gay bar in San Francisco. The crowd hemmed us in along the wooden counter. I remember an intense muscle-smell and a sea of bare shoulders. Strobe lights lit dancing bodies and left corners dark, without contour. In the red pulse, he turned to me and said: “All anyone wants to do is sniff each other’s butts, but we can’t, and this,” gesturing to the crowd, “is our coping mechanism.”

And we cope. Of course, scientists can and will study the effects of pheromones, body type, hair patterns, the relative size of appendages and their subsequent relation to evolutionary characteristics, supreme adaptations, and the strength of genetic lineage. Some, however, know that when allowing desire to exist outside of Darwinian progressivism — always bent on advancement and health — sexual drive is far messier than a mechanism to purify and strengthen the species as a future organism. A loitering desire — non-productive — has rawer directives. In high school, I met a young woman at the Majestic Diner in Atlanta who told me: “I fuck everyone I meet to get to know them. It’s easier to know if you should be friends once you find out how your bodies feel together.” Another friend, years later in SF, gestured to a man across the room and said: “He shakes hands with his dick.”

It’s messy, I know — it can’t not be — but might we lean toward a potentially more candid topology that prioritizes our bodies and how they interact? What is at stake in positioning ourselves as animal — wild — when safety, or lack thereof, is an inherent force of carnality? What are the politics of a visceral life? Does cruising bring about the destruction of religiously and politically sanctioned notions of decency — self-worth — the social bond of our moral and ethical requirement? Can we cruise and, in the circling, dissolve structures that ensnare us?
THESE STORIES AND ESSAYS revolve around the loiterer: the way the city and the park, a doubled body, temporally displaced, resonate at each breath in the space of anticipation — one usually thought of as breathless. Back against the tree, each attempt failing and begun again. On repeat, night after night. And I found myself writing, night after night, instead of wandering the parks and alleyways, these stories. Maybe there are more waiting to be written, like the tree-leaning body: “Write me,” they say. “Come to the page and write me.”

I began to explore what is unsaid within a language that seems to reject that silence. How does gestural desire — these silent bodies interacting in urban and wild settings — emerge, arise, cause shifts of perception, potential differences in how we think, what we feel — in effect, raising the question: what drives us?

Like the figure in the woods, writing demands a type of passivity. Do you feel it as you read? Reading, itself, is a sensual act, as sensations, body narrative, and the position of the author as they write emerges through the rise and fall of the breath of the line. Is it me or a character that wanders into the wild? Can you feel the wind against his skin, your skin? Do these words make your heart beat with the rhythm of the sentence?

Reading is a type of cruise: ritualized, repeated, we enter into books — and for what purpose but to make some sort of contact — a caress?