part 5

SMASHING

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Awakening as a graduated process that goes on in the life of the individual as in the life of generations. Sleep its initial stage. A generation’s experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned toward dreams, the child’s side. For the previous century, this appears very clearly in the arcades. […] What follows here is an experiment [Versuch] in the technique of awakening.

– Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project
I don’t know why they tasked me with this. Perhaps it’s a mandatory initiation protocol. A form of hazing. Like the sorority rite de passage. I read about it in a New Yorker short story. It shocked me, that communal contract with cruelty. But I don’t want to compare this assignment with that aberrant display of power.

This is my first time as spokesperson for The Bettys. It’s an honor and a horror if I’m honest. I’m not at all sure I’m capable of this type of reportage as my languaging finds little comfort in urban and regional slang. I’m rarely funny. My jargon is archaically formal. My bad. I’m working on it.

I observed what occurred, so I have a perspective on the event the others do not. It was a by-chance being there. Almost a withnessing. Have you ever wished you’d turned left at a random moment rather than right? Realized your futures hang in the balance of every autonomic, nonconscious action as well as those oh-so-over-estimated pivotal choices? I carry the contours of these conundrums close to the bone. This I believe is why they’ve asked the impossible from me. To be the teller of the tale.
I was dining at Bappa Cuisine with non-Betty friends. BAP was brilliant that June morning. The sun poured through the skylight, bathing every surface with exaggerated contrast. All colors were brightly saturated when not obscured by bands of bright. Every shiny membrane was blindingly refractive, prismatical magical. The quinoa in my salad sparkled like I’d never seen before. We all remarked on the dancing light of this peculiarly amazing afternoon at the renovated BAP. The shine rendered the ubiquitous urban grit holding stone and mortar together invisible.

Black Betty, Infrared Betty, and Cyan Betty were ascending the southwest climbing wall. New vibrant handholds replaced the dingy crimps. The colorful wall objects brought a new sensibility to the atrium. Once the interior panorama, I remember this as a child, was so dismal, so dirty, so scary, I never wanted to return to that mall. Certainly it was exciting to watch my mother climb the Netting to purchase something or other essential to our livelihood but the building itself terrified me. I expected The Dragon to pop out from a pillar at any moment. Or worse.

On this day, the arcade was a radiant playground, an eye-popping pantone panoply. Little blisters and warts of the visible spectrum glimmered from the walls. If there was a present danger and a gruesome backstory of failed effort in the molecular composition of this place, it was masked that day by the splendor of the spectral. We all felt that heady mix of purpose and play that is BAP’s raison d’être.

I watched he, she and they make their ways towards the atrium skylight. BB and IRB were wearing goggles, which was unusual. BB is expert. He’s been climbing nets and walls and real rocks for decades. CB is also facile, unafraid
of the upside-down horizontal routes. The cliffhangers. IRB was talented enough. They’d coaxed them into training and though a reluctant acrophobe, Infrared B admitted the ascent was thrilling. This day they were chalked up and without harness so the climb was to be a milestone. The sunshine bode well. From my lazy, secure viewing point I was mesmerized by the delicate movement of all their tiny goatlike bodies on the sheer face of the dark wall.

Of course I couldn’t hear the conversation between them, but I could see they were communicating. Could follow their fine skeletal motility, even at a significant distance. I could discern that BB was instructing IRB, pointing with his head and words towards the best holds. CB was acrobatically off on her own. Those that watched from ground level followed her daredevil movement but my eyes were focused on BB and Infrared. They had both been especially kind and welcoming to me, the intern, the Gen Z GenTel, the admittedly strange, nouvelle vague Betty. I liked them both immensely.

This day they were experimenting with color perception. They were almost always experimenting with the more-than of sensation. Fascinated by what is in excess of experience, that’s how BB would put it. He was wearing red-filtered glasses. This would, the thinking went, equate his color vision with IRB’s. The thing is, they could never be quite sure about spectral equivalence. They had long talks about this and often included me in the conversations as my “in-sight,” we could say, on vision is uncommon. Any attempt to equivocate the perception of color is always approximate, even among typicals. As science and philosophy tell us, the intensity of the sunlight, the temperature in the space, the particulate in the air, the subject–object equation, all effect the subjective experience of color. For BB and IRB, attuning their cod-
ing, expanding their differential fields, is what they most enjoyed. IRB chose a yellow filter for her goggles that day. This would be fun they told me as we drank chai together before their adventure.

As the trio headed for the wall CB called the “plane of immanence,” Bob joked that he was happiest when surprised.

What transpired transpired in a split second. 2.86 seconds to be precise but the cliché feels appropriate. I can attest to this as my sense of chronological time is acute. IRB had reached a difficult juncture. Their left hip was awkwardly aligned with their right shoulder. Bob later told me that he called out a color code to assist their vertical navigation. This was the plan. His directives required an accurate, speedily applicable (their little joke) correspondence between visual and proprioceptive perception.

IRB had climbed high, drawing a bead on the steel rafters still thirty meters overhead. Three meters beneath them Bob could smell their excitement. Then the agitation, the fear. He saw their prototype toe shoe slip on the pinch. Spotting the nearest, best handhold from his vantage point he shouted “Pink” as their right hand searched for a landing site, a bubble anchored to the wall that would support their dangling weight. They saw, must have seen, a tumorous “chartreuse” sloper at 2 o’clock (aviator slang). Within right arm reach. IRB hesitated. The lapse (.386 seconds by my estimation) was long enough to lose balance entirely.

Infrared Betty’s fall, like Red’s before her, was short and long. A freeze frame of totality and nothingness. This is my best guess. I have imagined the word that rang in their ears as they fell backwards was “precarity.” But that is specious of course. It might have been “milk” or “tattoo” or “heavy.” It may have simply been “Help!” There
may have been no words at all. How are infinities measured really? When does heavy fade to light? Henri Bergson thought about it and though I find his assessment insufficient it’s a beginning:

The distinction between the heavy and the light may seem to be as oldfashioned and as childish as that between the hot and the cold. But the very childishness of this distinction makes it a psychological reality. And not only do the heavy and the light impress our consciousness as generically different, but the various degrees of lightness and heaviness are so many species of these two genera.

— *Time and Free Will*

Bob later told me that Bessie Coleman probably had a more profound idea regarding this issue but we would never be privy to it.

That evening the BAP link on the Worldometer ticked up a notch.

321. Tick 322. Tock.

The RIP and DIFFRACT requiem once again blew up on Twitter as did “It was there a horse soon dancing.”