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from S P R A W L

Danielle Dutton

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DANIELLE DUTTON

from SPRAWL

The cat spends the whole day trying to find the perfect place to sit down. He is shiny and metallic grey, merging into white in the middle. Also, he opens up with brownish patches near the bottom like a fan. He hunts in backyard gardens and brings home clicking insects or birds. He arranges these various prizes half-alive in glorified transpositions of hunting scenes, which are mainly documentary in character. This makes him a poacher and also indicates how he is driven by hunger and want. On the sideboard: a mysterious orange stain, a blue dishtowel, a silver tray under an empty glass, a wilted piece of lettuce, the top to a bottle of seltzer, a small silver bowl with its silver spoon, cracker crumbs, a tiny fleck of relish. At some point, Haywood writes a check with no real desire to buy anything. We read the check over and over. Meanwhile, on the lawn across the street, bronze chipmunks chew small bronze nuts. You could reach out to touch them from the black and white striped furniture, which is the other aesthetic object in this picture of a front yard. In the middle of the street, facing east, I am fascinated by performances in front

of the PlayStation in the house next door. Voices emerge from an open window: intergalactic space stations, plumbers, child trouble, cancer, belching, etc. In the springtime it's like this. Suddenly we know we will survive. The whole street gathers together in self-inflicted ecstasy, in the Richardsons' backyard. Mrs. Moody wriggles alone by the swimming pool, which is covered in tight blue plastic. Some strange newcomer hands me a beer. He looks at me and then he makes an alteration and then a car pulls into the driveway, which is distracting. Later I watch as he communicates himself to others — he opens the backdoor and stands outside it with Mrs. Don. It is a noticeable shift from winter's operatic melodrama. We sit on blankets and contemplate grass, handsome strangers, mouths, mouths, cotton brassieres, ketchup. I could do all sorts of things. I stare at a blank vertical wall, sometimes, a real wall, which builds a proximal space. Or else I register the elongated flappiness of the body, or long-necked pitchers, or a thumb pinching off clay. On the edge of the table, a jar, its strange softness, the way it records light and the action of hands on fruit and other surrounding artifacts. There is an alteration of bright yellow and bright green on the insides of my eyelids when I imagine a spatial value of nearness. Haywood stands at forty-five degrees and runs his hand through his hair. He is, at times, disinclined to be visible. He gets into bed and presses my leg under the sheets. There is a burnishing, a tactile space for

rubbing, which is strangely motionless at some times of the year. Other times there's a real positive self-help philosophy and we partake of it. The division of labor is clear. Maybe I fool around with singing or with having *beautiful* nails or just walking down the street. Maybe I'm possessed by some new ideal, to preserve historical patterns and boundaries, or be merely decorative. For example, there's a new addiction local women negotiate in different ways, on separate blocks, in pantsuits and bathrobes, in houses and public spaces. It is concealed between stones and transferred from neighbor to neighbor via gossip. I involve myself in it like anyone else. Or maybe I just think about it. Anyway, the book says lemon and orange juices have medicinal properties. It shows sweet and sour citrus fruits together on one page. Other fruit is admired for its geometrical construction (apple, melon, cucumber, etc.). I am completely interested in plates of fruit, or fruit baskets, or baskets of fruits and flowers. I have theories of arrangement I share with Mrs. Way and Mrs. Daniels when they arrive. I set out one basket of peaches and grapes, and then I set out a plate with peaches, grapes, apricots, and roses. In the window facing the street is a large vase of flowers (carnations, irises, tulips, blue bells), and one seashell, and a bowl of candy, and a cricket. These displays are in a state of perpetual readiness. Moonlight pours in the open window. The mixture of consumerism and eroticism is particularly commented on. For dessert I serve

cherries and strawberries in dark china bowls on a white tablecloth with hard precision. They fight for them like animals. Meanwhile, Haywood and the other husbands eat “normal” bread and place the mustard front and center. I walk outside different conversations. I make my way into the background like a chorus girl or serving wench. I do it on purpose *and* by accident. All sorts of men look at me as I move in confined spaces, with a few tears, or while I exercise. I say, “Take a picture.” I sidestep very interesting eye contact. I watch myself like a hawk. Or, more simply, I set my sights. Nobody even looks in my direction. This sort of thing usually has to do with a husband or boyfriend, or a particularly uncomfortable moment, or an embarrassing argument. It’s upsetting and isolating but it’s what we all consider normal. On the drive home I rejoice that there are frogs croaking unseen in the grass. I lay my hands on the steering wheel and admire my painted nails, which are waterproof and a new kind of color with a strange sort of name beginning *gl* (reminiscent of lichen and bird eggs). On the evening news someone is always shocked about public masturbation. I can think of five-hundred reasons for such behavior. It depends on what sort of effect you’re going for, whether you want to be ignored or avoided for some particular reason having to do with taste or decorum or for any other reason you can think of.