

Dressing Stone

Art is Struggle Art is Torment Art is **Bliss** Art is Ecstasy Art is Glorified Art is Sanctified Art is Suffering Art is **Vanity** Art is Anything Art is Everything Art is Nothing Art is God Art is Ego Art is Rare Art is Profane **Art** is Trendy Art is Trivial Art is **Trite** Art is Adequate Art is Consequential Art is Paramount Art is Fine Art is Course Art is Fun Art is Joy **Art** is Pain Art is Craft Art is **Concept** Art is Beauty **Art** is Truth Art is the Goddess Art is Common Art is Faddish Art is Now Art is Next Art is **Ancient** Art is Primitive Art is Prehistoric **Art** is Primal Art is Past Art is Passé Art is Present Art is Therapy Art is Toil Art is Effort Art is intention Art is Entertainment Art is Struggle **Art** is Torment Art is Bliss Art is Ecstasy Art is **Descriptive** Art is Abstract Art is Amorphous Art is Cliché Art is Agreeable Art is Argument Art is Open Art is Closed Art is Theory Art is Spontaneous **Art** is Pure Art is a Construct Art is Choice Art is **Commodity** Art for the Masses Art Mass Produced Art Ready Made Art is Exclusive Art is Inclusive Art is a Statement. Art is a Stand Art **is** a Bottle Rack Art as a Joke Art is Wit Art is Raw Art is a Prank Art is a Con Art is Waste Art is Deconstruction Art is an End Art is the Beginning Art is a Subject **Art** is Object Art has no Objective Art is Objective Art is **Non-Objective** Art is Eccentric Art **is** Hubris Art is Hauteur Art is **Vision** Art is Defiled Art is a Mistake Art is **Trash** Art is an Excuse Art is Malice Art is a Drug Art is a Toxin Art is a Demon Art is Love Art is Heat Art is a **Scam** Art is a Swindler Art is a Destroyer Art is a Start Art is an End Art is Dead Art is a Redeemer Art is Just **Art** is Cheek Art is Bluster Art is Perspective **Art** is Figure Art is Ground Art is Old **Art** is New Art is Modern **Art** is a Post Art is Plain Art is **Fancy** Art is Paint Art is Stone Art is Brass Art is Hope Art **is** Healing Art is Helping Art is Smut Art is Excessive Art is **Obsessive** Art is Regressive Art is Degenerate Art is Transgressive Art is Glorified Art is Sanctified Art is Suffering Art is Vanity Art is Conceit **Art** is Devout Art is Subversive Art is Divine Art is Pompous Art is Priggish **Art** is Pretentious Art is Preposterous **Art** is Obvious Art **is** Obscure Art is Dark Art is Clear Art is Minimal Art is Complicated Art is Confusing Art is Concise Art is Heavy Art is Light **Art** is Deep Art is **Shallow** Art is Intricate Art is Illegible Art is Occult **Art** is Cryptic Art is Ambiguous Art is Enigmatic Art is **Esoteric** Art is Mysterious Art is Vague Art is Broad Art is **Profound** Art is Vast Art is Lost Art is Hidden Art is Found Art is Underground Art is Above Board Art **is** Fathomless Art is **Infinite** Art is Restricted **Art** is Abysmal Art is Tremendous **Art** is Shit Art is Abundant Art is Ample Art is Insignificant Art is Miniature **Art** is Excess Art is Lucrative Art is Monumental Art is Commendable Art **is** Laudable Art is Privation Art is Exquisite Art is **Offensive** Art is Inelegant Art is Obscene Art is **Refined** Art is Delicate Art is Pleasing Art is Accomplishment Art is Skill Art is Talent Art is Triumph Art is Fulfillment Art **is** Attainment Art is Rigor Art is Misery Art is Investment Art is Actualization Art is **Anything** Art is Everything Art is Nothing Art is a Subject **Art** is an Object Art has no Objective Art is Objective **Art** is Non-Objective **Art** is Eccentric Art is Hubris Art is **Trite** Art is Trivial Art is Popular Art is Trendy Art is Rare Art is Common Art is Adequate **Art** is Consequential **Art** is Paramount Art is **Fine** Art is Course Art is Fun Art is Joy Art is Intention Art is Craft Art is Concept Art is Beauty Art is **Truth** Art is the Goddess Art is Ego Art is Faddish Art is Now Art is Next Art is Ancient Art is Primitive **Art** is Prehistoric Art is Primal Art is Past Art is Passé Art is Present Art is Therapy Art is **Toil** Art is Effort Art is a Grind **Art** is Entertainment Art is Struggle **Art** is Torment Art is **Bliss** Art is **Ecstasy** Art is Glorified Art is Sanctified **Art** is Suffering Art is Vanity Art is Conceit Art is Subversive Art is to Devine Art Ready Made Art is Found Art is Passé **Art** is Anything Art is Everything Art is Nothing Art is God Art is Ego Art is Rare Art is Profane **Art** is Trendy Art is Trivial Art is **Trite** Art is Adequate Art is Consequential Art is Paramount Art is Fine Art is Course Art is Modern Art is a Post Art is Plain Art is **Fancy** Art is Commendable Art **is** Laudable Art is Privation Art is Exquisite Art is **Offensive** Art is Inelegant Art is Obscene Art is **Refined** Art is Delicate Art is Pleasing Art is Accomplishment Art is Skill Art is Talent

Dressing Stone

A Post-Postmodern Picaresque

Scott A. Feero



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The Enlightenment Project Press

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Dressing Stone is a work of fiction. All well-known actual people, events, and places that figure in the narrative are used fictitiously. All other names, characters, places, and occurrences are pure fabrication. The citing and use of all historical events, trends, practices, beliefs, quotes, persons, places, bodily afflictions and diseases is merely the author's interpretation, and no claim to accuracy is made or implied.

All technical terms, foreign words and other esoterica are used with great precision—even when used erroneously. There are many bowdlerized English, Latin and French terms found in the text used with varying degrees of accuracy by the characters. With regard to esoterica, *Lolita Punkku* (*Lolita Punk*) was a 1990's niche fashion phenomena in Japan, while *L'inconnue de la Seine* (*The Unknown of the Seine*) is a death mask of a young (*Mona Lisa* like) drowning victim that inspired a proto-Grunge look among women in the Weimar Republic. Again, no claim to historical accuracy is made or implied.

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The only good artist is a dead artist.
—*The Art Collector's Credo*

Art is anything you can get away with.
—Andrew Warhol

There are no mistakes in art— just happy little accidents.
—Bob Ross

A painting that does not shock is not worth painting
—M. Duchamp

They don't care much for art in Iowa.
—Grant Wood

Art is knowledge made visible.
—G. Courbet

A painting is not made to be sniffed.
—Rembrandt van Rijn

The people who call my art abstract are imbeciles.
—C. Brancusi

Avant-garde is French for bullshit.
—John Lennon

An empty canvas is full.
—R. Rauschenberg

Silence is so accurate.
—M. Rothko

Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.
—Susan Sontag

It's not the bullet that kills you, it's the hole.
—Vito Acconci

In theater blood is ketchup; in performance art, everything is real.
—Marina Abramovic

Take me, I am the drug.
—Salvador Dali

My art is an exorcism... a guarantee of sanity...
—Louise Bourgeois

You shouldn't have to justify your art.
—Judy Chicago

A. Internal Monologue		
01	Blue Painted in Blue	3
02	Hors de Commerce	14
03	Objet Trouvé	28
04	Writing Fiction	37
05	White On White	57
06	Plain Language	73
07	Bullet Points	90
B. An Audience of One		
08	Heart Shaped Box	113
09	Fragments of a Faith Forgotten	128
10	Smells like Teen Spirit	145
11	Déjà Who	160
12	Ars Gratia Artis	177
13	The Novel Nouveau	197
14	The Tenth Muse	214
C. A Mistress in Kind		
15	Where Epics Fail	233
16	Count the Ways	250
17	Wall Drug	268
18	The Last Best Place	284
19	Strum und Drang	302
20	Acquired Patination	321
21	Chiaroscuro	339
22	Surpassing Fancy	359
O	A Painted Ship on a Painted Ocean	385
O		
	Acknowledgements	398

What is said about art is most often too much.
—DeBris

Part A:

Internal Monologue

1.0 *Blue Painted in Blue*

1.1 *Thought Bubbles*

Dropping my lunchbox on the kitchen counter, I sank into a stool, and punched the answering machine. I felt like I'd been in a twelve-round fight that ended in a spectator brawl. God, that poor kid—NYNEX returned my call wanting confirmation of the job-phone's cutoff date. Hell's wrong with him anyway? The plumber called to confirm for tomorrow. How could his mother let him go on howling all day like that? The electrician also confirmed he'd be there. That kid's relentless shrieks—drilling my head like an auger... Cheryl left a pretty annoying message: *Hi baby—can't make it by seven. Sorry—seven-thirty, 'K? Funny, thought you should be home by now—just wanted to tell my hubby-wubby how much I wub you.* She blew a kiss into the phone.

God, I hate baby talk. I punched the machine, punched it again clearing the messages. I especially hate it when lawyers use baby talk. I could just picture Cheryl negotiating contracts and fighting court battles—judges and litigators alike reduced to putty as she spoon-fed them her Gerber garble.

At least she hadn't cancelled—far too frequent an occurrence since becoming lead counsel on some sort of M & A swindle she's been on for the past six months. Right from the start, hasn't had time for anything, let alone an evening out with *moi*. I made a martini, downed it, and then made another. Wolfing down half a dozen olives I restrained myself from making a snack. Hungry as I was, I wanted to save my appetite. I was really looking forward to tonight, especially after a day like today. God, that mother of his... Love it when I can't remember the client's name—fuck was it? I made another drink, carried it with me to the shower. Right—Cynthia. What a woman. 'Craig, be a *peach* and change *my* bulb for me. Be a *peach* and move *my* boxes... Oh Craig, that's just *peachy*...' What a whack-job. Two weeks to go—just two weeks left, and mother and son suddenly move in. I'd only met the husband once, and that was some months back when he'd come from Seattle for a final meeting with the architect before work commenced.

Showered, dressed, and still fooling with the same drink made earlier, I punched the remote just to have some background noise. Inadvertently switching on the VCR, a movie came on in mid plot. Something vaguely familiar, Bette Davis and Leslie Howard—something Cheryl was in the middle of watching. I settled into my chair with a yawn. In a vindictive fit, Davis drags her mouth down the length of her arm, spits—God, the way Cynthia was dressed in that get up. Comes floating past, wearing this checkered jacket, lime over fuchsia stripes—that hideous blouse topping that dowdy skirt. Maroon tartan. What is she color blind? Tartan and check—pattern blind too? No. Punk! That's it—not real Punk, fashion-punk, that swope of mascara ringing her eyes said it all. Caught me staring. She stops, plants her knuckles on her hips. I can't help but grin, too late to teach this girl how to dress. She asks me if I have a minute, wants me to move some boxes. I follow her into her bedroom. Sitting on the bed, dangling her feet in those little peep-toe kitten-heels like that? Where else were my eyes going to go? She leans back on her elbows, telling me where to put the boxes—pointing with her toes. God, what a tease. Nevertheless... Nevertheless I was a gentleman—wasn't I? Throwing a blanket over her when she fell asleep all sprawled out like that. A shriek, and the glint of a dagger drew me back to the TV. Grinning like a lunatic, Davis ransacks Leslie Howard's flat, gleefully slashing his paintings and drawings, going off on a tear destroying the contents of his studio. My kind of girl...

The sound of the VCR rewinding woke me. Checking the time, I pulled myself together, and a half hour later I was sitting in *Il Forno* still stifling yawns. The twenty-five-table restaurant was about half full, and Galina offered to seat me straight off, but I preferred waiting in the bar. Loretta Spadaro stepped up greeting me as only a Brooklyn girl could, "Dere he iss—been on a trip?" I shrugged dully—slipped her a twenty. Didn't expect anything—just didn't feel like talking. Fact was, I was spent, almost fragile—the tip gave me a sense of security, like I had someone in my corner. "We've an Umbrian just aerated." Wisps of dimples fluttering her cheeks, she held up the decanter swirling the ruby liquid, "Nice nose, as the man says."

Easy on the eyes, and always friendly, the Bensonhurst beauty knew me well enough to know I usually drank wine. I knew her well enough to know the twenty-something was trying to lose the accent, and had a laugh that could curdle milk. But what I especially liked about the four star *Cucina Toscana* was that they sold select wines by the glass. Unpretentious and a little hardscrabble, *Il Forno* was owned and operated by Sergio Forno and Galina Tsareva. Among the last people who still knew me by my *nom de guerre*, DeBris—I knew them from way back—back when they used to have a little gallery at 131 Wooster St. also called *Il Forno*. After the Art market tanked in '86, no one was surprised when the buoyant Italian and Russian refugees from So-Ho landed in the restaurant business. The surprise was that they landed in Park Slope—bet they never thought they'd be priced out of Manhattan. Practically everyone working in the restaurant was a refugee from Manhattan, waitstaff, chefs, bartenders, dishwashers—all of them, actors, painters, musicians, even a writer who mopped up at the end of the night. Loretta was a singer—supposed to be pretty good, obviously not good enough.

More rear-guard than avant-guard, the place had atmosphere, what was lacking was oxygen. Except for the handful of pieces hauled over from Manhattan by the bankrupt gallery owners, all the art on the walls was made by inept locals—save the bronze relief made by moi, hung in pride of place on the wall between the restrooms. Top to bottom, spanning the four directions the walls were covered with Transgressive art. That's what earned the place its nickname—*Il Porno*. Not that the art was smut—but just aberrant enough to generate a smug reference to Mayor-Expurgator Giuliani, and his gimcrack attack on the Brooklyn Museum.

Between Loretta and the liquor bottles it was no contest, I'd rather listen to her prattle on, than be stuck waiting in the dining room staring at the art-drecked walls. From the moment she'd set me up with a glass of wine, Loretta had been exercising her pipes, talking up some dismal movie called *Four Weddings and a Funeral* she'd seen in an exclusive preview earlier in the day. She described it in such excruciating detail I was thankful I'd never see it. Like I said, she's not hard to look at.

Called away to fill a drink order, I snagged the pad and pencil Loretta left on the bar, and doodled absently... a bed, a prone figure—girlish—with a cherub's butt... She returned. I flipped the page. Catching her eye, drawing one ellipse atop another *I said*, "Artist walks into a bar, and orders a draft beer." Two lines joined the ellipses, a little shading gave the cylinder dimension, "Bartender says, *Sorry we don't serve artists*. Artist says, *That's okay I'll draw my own*." I stood my sketch on the bar, a beer mug brimmed with froth running down the side.

Loretta drifted off sighing, "Don't tell me youz an oddest too...?"

Enticements wafting in from the dining room started to eat into my resolve to wait for Cheryl. Hitching a ride on the aroma, snippets of conversation drifted past. *He used a club, not a cane... Fresh pepper...? Not Jeff Gillooly, I'm talking about Michael Fay, you know—the kid in Singapore... More grissini please... Piece of junk didn't stop them from stealing my car... Lina Bertucci's far more evolved than Serrano—Serrano's had like three ideas his entire career... I just love my new shoes, don't you...? Of course you can club someone with a cane, but what I'm talking about is more like a whip...*

Bet Cynthia cracks the whip—I could see her in those peep-toe kitten heels cracking the ole cat-o'-nine tails on her husband. A real ball breaker I bet. Already on my second glass, Sergio, an owner not too proud to wait table, stopped by to praise my choice of wine. Indeed all the waiters stopped by to greet me, Enrico, Marko, Paula, Gina. Even Galina came by—interrupting my conversation with Sergio—offering a less formal greeting than given at the front door, at the same time telling me to slide my barstool a bit further from the wait-station. Turning to Sergio, she told her oft soused husband to stop talking so loud, jerked her thumb at me, and grunted, "Put some food in him while he waits for his wife." After scolding Loretta about being slow in filling drink orders, the unrelenting Russian stalked off.

Sergio went off with a shrug, only to return moments later, practically pitching the plate at me he said, "Carpaccio." Leaning in with an easy intimacy I'd never tolerate if I hadn't already a few drinks in me, he took hold of the stem of my glass sloshing the wine with a coarse finesse, "The Umbrian, go with thish dish perfecto. Gusto—gusto."

I knew what was going on here—Galina still hadn't forgiven me for that thing happened last December, when I forgot to cram something between the wine and my wits—when maybe I got a little too rowdy for her taste. I shrugged, and dug in. Dull, blank, happy, I dispatched the appetizer and glass of wine with as slow a deliberation as three bites could endure. Sopping the remnants of the dish with bread, I sat there wondering what I'd actually say to Cheryl about my day—about that kid—about Cynthia. Propping chin on knuckles I pictured a callow Leslie Howard as an upper crust fop—or maybe it was Hugh Grant—explaining the unexplainable.

Um, darling you wouldn't believe it, but today after the movers finished—funny thing really—the client bullyragged me into her bedroom to rearrange her boxes. Mind you dear—her boxes. Quite funny really, as moments before, she just happened to let drop that the old-pan left her for lonely. Gone a good week. Then while I was slogging her rather bothersome boxes A to B, she fell into a sort of swoon, and let drop a snoot full of that other species of bothersome box one is more apt to sit upon. She actually fell asleep bottoms up, festooned as it were in tartan, an impudent thong afflicting her with a chronic wedgie. It was diabolical.

I was trying to cook up a little cicchetti to tease Cheryl with, but it wasn't working. If anything, she'd be more inclined to scorn than any kind of titillation. Probably accuse me of being juvenile just for bringing it up. As I'd done earlier, I threw a blanket over it. Still, I couldn't dismiss the feeling that Cynthia maybe wasn't really asleep, that she was fake snoring—even though I knew she wasn't. But either way I don't give a shit. I'm so often in the homes of women I barely know—stuck in seemingly compromising positions in closets, bathrooms, and bedrooms, just a tape measure between us—it often left me feeling like a eunuch enduring the half dressed traipse of the harem.

Draining my glass, I tore into the bruschetta Sergio had just set in front of me. Goddamn it Cheryl, where the hell are you? *Four shots of tequila please...* Cramming the entire wad in my mouth, I looked longingly over my shoulder through the plate glass facade. *More water...?* The inchoate drift of the diner's chatter making me more lonesome. *You haven't seen The Caine Mutiny—really..? Yeah, crossing the bridge in a van, they just shot them... We ought to cane our graffiti artists, not for vandalism, but for lack of ideas... What's-his-name—José Ferrer, he played that lawyer...*

Having a lawyer for a wife—not something I'd recommend. It's a rationed relationship in which the wife is also wed to her firm, and at never under a twelve hour day—as far as timeshares go, it's a pretty iffy-fifty deal. Hers is an absolutely scheduled life—every burp and fart logged to accounts billable—they pretty much only let me have her when she's sleeping. *I'd like my salad as a starter please...* If not for Saturday-morning-sex on the docket, I don't know what we'd have. *I feel like something sweet...* Staring over my shoulder out the window didn't get me anything. Goddamn it Cheryl. *We just got back from Munich where we saw Nirvana at Terminal One... Hasidic Jews are convenient targets for hate... Are there any other kinds of juice...? I wish I never cut my hair...*

I wished I hadn't told Loretta that joke. I wished I had another appetizer. I wished I hadn't seen Cynthia lying on the bed like that. For the second time I'd sketched it out on the pad in jumbled tableau. Legs crossed, leaning back propped on elbows—flat on her back—lying on her side. That pert little cherub's butt. I started shading it for dimension. On the page it looked all right, but that didn't stop me from seeing it as a series of awkward moments frozen in time. In any case the incident didn't have the makings of an erotic amuse-bouche to tease Cheryl with. *Roger, you're rambling again... Check please... Four Egyptians on trial for the World Trade Center bombing, and four Jews shot... Will that be all...? Did you know Kurt Cobain's worn the same sweater for the past five years... Roger, I never said you were selfish, I said you were cheap...*

Sergio dropped a dish of calamari with red pepper sauce in front of me, "Loretta pour the Canaiolo—tart, voluptuous—will send dish aloft."

I shoveled a fork full of squid in my mouth. Chewed. How dare Cheryl bring up selling my loft again—Jesus that's spicy. Guess I started it though. I poked the redbird peppers with my fork, slurped the wine, crammed in more calamari, and washed that down with more wine. Complaining about her work schedule always starts it. Cheryl never liked the loft—been trying to talk me into a house since we married. But this wasn't about the loft, it was about moving on. Moving past the failed-artist stage of life—dumping the loft and packing up all the untidy fragments of a faith forgotten. But I didn't want to move on. I was the contractor with a secret life. I had a secret self who felt he was always on the verge of picking up the tools and sculpting again. How could I move into a house? Gobbling down the appetizer without tasting anything but the burn, I drained my glass. Slammed it on the bar. I couldn't picture myself without my loft—because even a failed artist is still an artist.

Sure sure, I know what's-her-face is no longer using, but you should've seen her back then—she used to crawl... We're meeting at Bridge Space... I dunno, it's kind of like having your mouth washed out with soap—all that hermeneutics of hermeneutics stuff—it basically leaves Sontag's critique of criticism more pompous than the very criticism underlying her critique...

I got up to pee. Outside the restroom I paused to admire my work. A smaller version of a piece that could be seen in the Brooklyn Museum—part of my Manhole Cover Series: 'Escape Velocity'. An early piece, three deformed manhole covers appear to erupt from the wall. I ran my fingers over the surface still feeling the latent heat of the molten bronze. The patination gorgeous, the composition superb, the detail in the rendering refined—it's not my art, but the art world that's substandard. In this fin de siècle world of commerce, the only real talent an artist needs is the talent to convince others that they possess a limitless talent. That leaves me, a man of limitless

talent, left wandering in an inelegant wasteland of impostor, ersatz and fraud. My crime is simple. I did not die young—like Haring or Basquiat. Nevertheless, I pushed into the men's room confident that no matter what the world now thinks of my shit, I am at the very least *il miglior fabbro*.

Back at the bar Loretta refilled my glass. It might have been vinegar for all I cared. Cheryl was nowhere in sight. I knew what was going on—this wasn't the first time— *You gotta see his show, not only has Nari Ward appropriated Matta-Clark, but he has succeeded in extending the vocabulary... Honesty is unbecoming a drunk Rodger, so please shut up... Last week it was Calista Flockhart, this week it's Clair Danes. Man, all the women you're attracted to got no ass—they're like all rexy...*

I gazed at the little tableau of headless figures in my sketch, tore it from the pad and crumpled the page against my forehead... I threw the pencil across the room, crossing my arms in abject refusal. My mother was so angry that she duct-taped a pair of *Derwent Graphitint* sticks, one to each hand. Christ, I was like eight years old, I wanted to draw aliens and monsters, rockets and ray guns, but she tore all those up. My hands had gone numb from being forced to draw the same reclining figure first with one hand and then the other. I could still see the poses. Sitting on the edge of the bed, legs crossed—two minutes. Leaning back on elbows, knees pressed together—two minutes. Lying on her side with her knees drawn up—two minutes. Lying on her stomach, an arm turned back, draped across her buttocks—two minutes. Lying flat on her back, feet dangling over the edge... I caught my breath, and uncrumpled the paper—the headless figures I'd drawn weren't of Cynthia, they were the figure studies forced on me by my mother—the same relentless studies she had me doing since I could hold a pencil—the same poses she modeled for me every day until—

I drained my glass, picked up the pencil with a twitch, fixed a stare on Loretta, and sketched furiously. In a few moments I got a pretty good likeness down, shading and detailing as she stood showing me her profile—ringing up receipts, yakking on the phone, and working the length of the bar tending drink orders. The restaurant door banged open, and a party of twelve entered loud and exuberant. A train wreck rolling over the hostess station, the newcomers were so boisterous all four waiters rushed in, joining Galina and Sergio in herding the crowd into the bar as diners and drinkers glared New York aplomb, or rubbernecked with Jersey gusto.

A tap on my shoulder drew me back around to the bar, and Loretta leaned in pressing her broad cleavage in my face, husking in my ear, "Cherry coo-awled, said she key-ant make it, so ga-head, eat wit-out huh."

Dazed by the aroma of sweet sweat, I toggled my eyes between the mounds as a translation slowly stitched together. I took in another snoot full of her scent feeling sublimely settled on exactly nothing. Yeah, I was pretty wasted. Slowly excavating schnozz from the décolletage—scaling full red lips—I smiled into her livid puce eyes.

"Said to say, she'll see youz at home—soon as she key-an." Patting my cheek, Loretta showed me a pout, "Poor baby, dat don't sound too promising."

"Hey Loretta," thumb over my shoulder, "What's with the cattle call?"

"Like I need dis," Loretta leaned in giving me another snoot full, tapping a nail on the sketch, "I want dis pitcher a me—k?" She brimmed my glass with the cruet, and turned to deal with a trio of ogling dorks crying for beer.

Watching the Rubenesque bartender work I turned the page, and began outlining head—torso... breasts—hips... thighs—eyes—lips. Working my pencil, an acute sense of the feminine presence before me enlarged as the swirl in restaurant and bar receded. Twenty minutes of that—I flopped back in the stool pining for my wife. I mean, Loretta is sexy as all get out, but I was tired of the Bensonhurst naïf and her too big everything. Enough. Besides these jerks in the bar were way too bumptious. I wanted my check. I wanted to go home to my Cheryl.

Sergio swooped in with a bowl, "Linguine with fresh grilled sardines."

"Sorry Serg—you have a chance—need my check." I bent my chin over my shoulder as another group surged in through the door. "What's going on, Saint Patrick's Day come early this year?"

"Is opening after-party." He blew air through his lips and went to herd the new stragglers out of the dining room.

The crowd packing the bar was flying off in all directions, bouncing back to street, blocking the entrance, shuttling between bar and bathroom in nattering nose wiping groups, while some clod strolled the restaurant like a beggar, mutely placing postcard invitations on the tables of the diners, until finally being shooed out by Galina. Up and down the isles the patrons were calling for checks, stabbing cigarettes in uneaten food, loosing patience, groping after scrambling waiters. Apology and excuse bounding the room, drinks and desserts were comped for those in less of a hurry to desert their tables. Wolfing down my Linguine, anxious to join the exodus I was momentarily distracted by the appearance of a pastry spiked with fresh raspberries floating in molten chocolate,

the ammazza caffè an added enticement steaming by its side. Tucking into the confection, tweening sips of the grappa-infused espresso endowed me with a sort of subdued impatience as the waiters dispatched the more agitated among the diners. The last seating dwindled to nothing, and I killed the coffee watching the staff arrange a row of four-tops down the center of the room. Sergio placed my check on the bar, and as a *coup de grâce*, tipped a bottle of Nardini Bianca over my demitasse, brimming it with a flourish before I could refuse. He breezed off humming *Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu*.

Check paid, demitasse drained, I stood up so thoroughly content, I could barely stand to leave. Let down by Cheryl, I looked longingly at Loretta wondering if I could induce her to have sex with me. I thought a hundred bucks might do it, but then again—honesty unbecoming a drunk—I decided on the better part of valor, and instead signed my drawing of the bartender. Still, I clung to the bar aching to say goodnight to the Bensonhurst beauty, but she was just one more working girl with no time for me. I took my watch off, tucking it under the sketch—because it was high time I left before I said something I might regret. Making for the exit some guy from the after-party cut me off at the door, pressing an invitation at me. Just soused enough, I stopped, took the postcard and read aloud, “The Sanddike Gallery presents ‘Kitchen Debris: Installation & Appropriation by Kraig Debro.’” My head lolled back, and I howled, “Debris by Debro? What is this? The artistic half-life of halfwits.”

Artists are such assholes. With a bloated understanding that no two bodies may occupy the same point in space, artists strike a pose, perch on an angle, squat on an idea, and then proceed to homestead the concept in an all-out effort to grandfather a common tract of knowledge as their own. Having staked their claim, they defend the territory as if it were actually a vision unique to the world. The contemporary artist’s sole discovery has been that they occupy a distinctly useless point in Postmodernism’s endless aesthetic continuum. My only wish is that these artists who make such a show of rejecting the very *notion of art* in their art, would *just-Sit Down*. All they’re offering is a self-cancelling conceptualism—really, why bother?

I heard it said somewhere, *honesty is un-becoming drunk*—so I thought maybe a little truth telling might sober me up. Hiking up my pants, I sauntered up to the table addressing the near end, “Who’s the show—the guy with debris?” Several people pointed to the pinhead squaring up a stack of invitations on the table. Too pie-eyed to put the brakes on now—I tapped the top postcard, “Sh-shouldn’t ‘Appropriation’ come before the ‘Installation’? Doesn’t the thief steal before he stashes?”

“Oh puh-leeze!” The artist installed himself at the head of the table, showed me his shoulder, and sulked.

Inspired by the brooding artist I grabbed a fistful of postcards, and springing them from hand to hand, I cut the deck shouting, “Voilà! I show you Appropriation.” Raising arms high overhead I shot the cards—Fifty-two Pickup—showering the people around the table with invitations. “I give you Installation. Voilà tout!”

People were crowding me, jostling and grunting untranslatable obscenities. I wasn’t so insensible that I didn’t note a couple people laughing, and—ignoring the anger—I sidled toward the smiles. Maybe they wanted to buy me a drink. Sergio stepped in laying a hand on my shoulder, “Okay DeBris, is enough for tonight.”

Sergio and Marko each caught an arm steering me toward the bar—another drink seemed like a good idea. Surprised at finding myself so suddenly standing on the sidewalk, I braced against the chill, struggling to match the two sides of my coat’s zipper. Gazing at my reflection in the restaurant window the bright toothy reflection of my grin seemed to occlude my face as I said, “I saw a hollow stone and I couldn’t just let it lie. I mean, I have a reputation to maintain here...”

1.2 *A Quart of Milk*

Landing in my neighborhood scouring the streets between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges for a place to park I found a spot on Water Street overlooking the East River, and sat there taking in the dank view, and nursing a foul mood. Manhattan cut a dark chiaroscuro in the thick haze as I ran my eyes over the skyline feeling like a dope, a dupe, and a doofus, wondering how it was possible I once believed this Babylon-on-Hudson—this Gomorrah-between-the-rivers was the cultural center of the universe. What a sham, a scam—an utterly filthy joke. There’s no culture in New York, it’s all couture.

I got out of my car slamming the door. The city across the river no longer held out any hopes for me—no dream of accomplishment, no fantasy of fulfillment—our romance was over. Across the East River the swarm of news helicopters sniffing out the next disaster were just an annoyance of flies circling a steaming pile of shit.

Crossing the shadows in the canyon between the bridges, I turned toward the loft on Plymouth Street. The stretch of blocks known as DUMBO is always fairly deserted at this time of night, the remaining factories not yet overtaken by lofts had disgorged their workers hours ago, while the local loft dwellers were homebound prisoners of the neighborhood blight. The cheap amber glow of the mercury vapor lights gave the streetscape an unhealthy glow, the sidewalks looked like jaundiced skin, the cobblestones like bad teeth. Passing a loading dock I glanced at the woman dumpster diving and quickened my step. This was not a street for the faint of heart. Carol—my ex—was right about one thing, if we'd lived in Brooklyn back in the day, Warhol never would have visited my studio. Coming from Boston, I was unaware of the condescension until I moved to Brooklyn, but no one who lives in Manhattan willingly crosses the East River.

Approaching my building, key in hand, I hurried up to my door stabbing it into the lock. Not quick enough. There was an urgent tapping on my shoulder, and I turned to meet the vapid gaze of my high-strung top-floor neighbor, Helen Yu, who I'd seen dumpster diving by the loading dock. Before I could head her off she said, "I hear you selling loft."

"Where did you get this little pearl, Little Pearl?"

"Cherry."

"She just wants to find out what you'll pay."

"How much you want?"

"Well, Helen, there you go, if you don't make me an offer, how can I turn you down?"

"I don't want you turn me down."

"Then don't make me an offer."

"Why not let somebody else have space going to use it make art."

That really frosted me. Unable to think of a suitable response, my hand twitched the key and I swung open the door. Taking advantage of my distraction, Helen pushed her way in, and running a lustful eye from ceiling to floor she bellowed, "Wah! All this waste space. Every time I see, mess gets bigger."

It was easy to see why people referred to the pushy performance artist as *Yellin' Who*. "Helen, I'm warning you..." She knew I didn't like her—sure, I slept with Doll Face once, between Carol and Cheryl—but she didn't care who liked her. Why else would the Yale graduate with the mid-Atlantic accent constantly assault friend and stranger alike with her faux Sino-Japanese accent?

"You should use this as performance space."

"Helen, don't be a pest," I said with threadbare restraint, I still couldn't get that chicken feather, marshmallow fluff, and blood soaked performance piece she'd done in Calvary Cemetery some years back out of my head. "Helen, I hate to break it to you, but a plot is not a patch of turf in which to bury the story. But then again, that's probably why suicide is considered the pinnacle of all performance art. I mean, who could criticize you after you accomplish that? How about it Helen? Got a suicide piece in your oeuvre you plan on performing—like tonight maybe?"

"You know DeBris, you really such asshole."

"I'm not the one who came crawling to you, trying to cut a real estate deal."

"Your wife approach me."

"I'm sure Cheryl did not."

"Ask her. She mention this morning."

"Goodbye Miss Yu." I drew up my bulk, "Not for sale. Not for U, not for V, not for fucking X-Y-Z. Now get lost!"

"Ask Cheryl," she said backing out the door looking a little rattled, "Ask her."

"I intend to." Slamming the door in her face, now doubly pissed because I'd answered her. She was right of course, on both counts—Cheryl wanted me to sell the loft, and I am an asshole—but God what a buzzkill.

I kicked a bundle of 2x4's stupidly left standing upright against the wall. They toppled over in a clattering heap scoring half a dozen arcs in the paint as they took out several works on paper. Shucking my coat, I dashed it to the floor shouting what I wished I'd said, "Helen, I'll burn this place to the ground before I'll sell it to you." To look at the vast studio that greeted me was to behold the festering carcass of my muse. Stalking across the room clawing at my chest I ripped open my shirt wishing it were my skin. Snatching up a lighter, I lit a pile of papers on fire. Watching the flames grow I sneered through the gash in my soul, "Helen, making art is easy. Try making

sense, that's the trick." The smell of the dank smoke rising from the flames was invigorating, the thought of becoming ash liberating. I'd rather die than sell this place.

One of the nicest lofts in the city, my studio was profiled a few years back in the *Home* section of the *Times*, and duly proclaimed *One of the Nicest Artist Lofts in New York City*. With its soaring twenty-foot ceiling, the six thousand square foot street level space was ideal for a sculptor. The living space at the back is nestled in a two thousand square foot entresol overlooking the studio like an Anasazi cliff dwelling. The studio is outfitted with top notch equipment, a couple of trip hammers—a hundred weight tail helve, a quarter ton belly helve—winches, lifts, torches, planishers, slab rollers, kilns, grinders, a small forge, acid baths for patination—state of the art ventilation. All the tools I could ever need. Around the space—except where hand tools hung—the walls were covered with drawings and assorted clay and plaster maquettes in various stages of completion. Several dozen finished works in bronze relief hung on the walls, larger objects standing in the round filled nook and niche, while smaller *objets d'art* covered the shelves, sills and ledges built for the purpose. On the surface—that is, what could actually be seen amid seven years of accumulated junk—it appeared to be a fairly prodigious output, but my best work was behind me, done before I moved here. Sure, I've made hundreds of drawings and models since moving here, but nothing's been cast since '87—the bleakest year.

It's as though I went out for a walk one day, and was last seen on the back panel of a quart of milk. Hefting up a plaster bust of Larry Rivers, I hurled it discus style across the room. Hitting the wall a satisfying cloud of white blossomed in mid air as debris rained over the floor. People used to know me as *DeBris*—my nom de guerre—a pun on my grandmother's maiden name, which was Debric. A clever moniker for a sculptor, I thought. Now everyone calls me Craig, my given name—crag, a steep cliff, a big uncarved block, something you fall off—like the height of my career. Starting in '85 with the sudden surge in AIDS, I watched dozens of friends and colleagues being picked off one by one. With the death of Bethal Park, the Park Pace Gallery closed, and there were no shows. With no shows there were no sales, and with everything perfectly timed to coincide with the art market crash, the shit just piled up. The debris of *DeBris*. I woke up one day and everyone of any importance to me was dead. Bronze and plaster, bones and ash, the debris of *DeBris*.

Renewal always follows loss, and weary of the mourning process I pressed on. After completing this studio late in '88, I got back to work, but somehow the spell was broken. I can't blame it all on death. I'm certainly not the first artist to experience catastrophic loss. Something else went wrong. Maybe it's just bad fung-shui, but with the expansion—as if repulsed by the shiny and new—my mojo vanished. What seemed like a good idea at the time was in fact an idea whose time had passed. This loft would have been perfect for me ten years before I moved in, but it's completely wrong now. Wrong for the artist who is only occasionally working on paper. Wrong for the married guy. Wrong for the working stiff—impossible to subdivide and sublet—it's even wrong for a building contractor's storage shed. For the past seven years this studio has been nothing but a dumping ground—a landfill sinking under the accumulated leftovers from construction work. Everywhere the debris of *DeBris*. It was with intentional irony I took the moniker, as I'd envisioned once I was dead and gone, the remains of my studio should become—à la Noguchi—*The Museum of DeBris*. But as an enduring epitaph, this rubble doesn't add up to anything more than a filthy whore-shrine to failure.

The smoke filling the studio cut at my nose, and I called out my wife's name. I couldn't help hoping, but she wasn't home—be lucky to see her before midnight. Making my way across the studio to the stairs at the back I heard the sound I'd been expecting. The ventilation system finally caught a big enough whiff, and kicked in scrubbing the air, as the fire I'd set in one of the kilns now routinely used as a trash incinerator smoldered. As attractive as the idea was, for one living in a fireproof building with a state of the art fire suppression system, flame was not likely to be the agent of my liberation. At the foot of the stairs I snicked on the lights and went up. I've long considered building a hallway across the room, joining the entry to the back stairs just so I wouldn't have to look at my studio. That's just how wrong it is. The living space should have been built at the front of the building, and the studio at the back. That's just how wrong it is.

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