1975

Stages

Jim Cole
St. John Fisher College

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?
Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle
Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1975/iss1/4

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1975/iss1/4 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Stages

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I took a bus to her city on a Sunday. Travelers are sparse on Sunday and for once I didn't end up next to a wino. The trip itself wasn't bad. I like moving towards places. She was waiting at the bus station. She looked much smaller than the last time I saw her or at least as I remembered her. We kissed, I put my arm around her, and her hand squeezed my hip reassuringly. Things were starting right."

Cover Page Footnote
Appeared in the issue: 1975.
I took a bus to her city on a Sunday. Travelers are sparse on Sunday and for once I didn't end up next to a wino. The trip itself wasn't bad. I like moving towards places. She was waiting at the bus station. She looked much smaller than the last time I saw her or at least as I remembered her. We kissed, I put my arm around her, and her hand squeezed my hip reassuringly. Things were starting right.

In the car, it was small talk. The windows of her car were dirty. She lived in a walk-up. I followed her into the apartment, letting her shut the door and I made a show of looking around. Everything looked fragile, figurines on the coffee table in front of the couch, every windowsill held potted plants with shiny leaves. The curtains were delicate, the sounds of the city far away. I liked the place. When she asked me how I liked it, I said it was very nice, but I was already plotting my escape. She turned the stereo on low and left me listening to Cat Stephens. I heard her making coffee in the kitchen.

I wondered what she expected. Letters are like talking in the dark and it had been months since I'd seen her. How can you measure the effect of words without seeing the face you're talking at, I'd find out, for sure, but I'd drink her coffee first.

Watching Sharon put sugar into cups and smile at me from the kitchen saddened me, because I knew she was wondering what I expected. It had been a while. She had been beautiful when I first met her, then interesting, finally only human. That final knowledge had colored my resolve. When she found a job in another city, I'd made no objection, but then I followed and now I was back in her room. She acted as though she was a part of me. She was treating me as before. Her motherly closeness left me unable to move or speak.

After we both agreed that the coffee tasted good, she asked, I said nothing. We sat there for a time in the dim room on a dim day, both of us feeling dimmed, I guess, and then she tried again. "How's the acting going?"

I knew what she meant by the question. "Fine, the lines are familiar now, but the feeling is hard to come by in my part. I am a bad actor."

She was watching my face. I knew she would tell me I was a good actor, though she'd never seen me onstage. She'd believe it too, which depressed me even more. I drank the coffee. It was too sweet.

"It sounds so exciting, from your letters."

I shrugged. "You make the best of what you've got."

Sharon repeated that she thought it was very exciting and I could tell that she really meant it. If I told her it was a pain in the ass, she would laugh. She'd go on believing it really mattered. So I agreed. Yet it was exciting. Then I kissed her and asked her what she had planned for me. I had the jump and she looked into her cup.

"Well, how long can you stay?"

It was up to me. "I've got rehearsal tomorrow afternoon."

Rehearsal was in the evening, but I wanted a margin. Also, it meant leaving in the morning. She knew I wasn't sad about leaving, but she was ready to go along with it, so I told her. "Whatever you want to do today is fine with me."

"I thought we might go to the art gallery. And then, you know, walk around for a while."

"That sounds great," I said, but I sounded too quick.

I helped her clear the cups and saucers away and she looked a little surprised. I was giving myself away. In the kitchen, while she washed...
the dishes and put things away, I smoked. It was a small kitchen, too small, and she brushed me every time she passed. She wasn't finished.

"Ross, there was so much I wanted to say..."

I shut her up with a kiss and told her to get ready to go to the gallery. We'd talk later.

She wouldn't. "I don't know. Things seem different. I'm not sure. We both seem so quiet together, like six months ago didn't happen."

I pulled her to me, ran my hands down the small of her back, over her buttocks and she shivered. "It happened," I whispered. I was miserable by then, wondering why everything had to be so complicated.

She was right, but her bluntness was a way of maneuvering me into saying something. She smiled and cleared away the ash tray with my butts. As I watched her smile at me, I realized that I did like her and that put some truth into the lie I knew I'd have to speak.

In the gallery, arm in arm, we walked slowly and whispered. She knew about paintings, saw things in them that she showed me. I liked that. And I liked the feeling of round warmth of her breast against my arm as we moved together from painting to painting, sculpture to sculpture. While we were examining a Gaston Lachaise bronze, I asked her how she liked working in the hospital.

Her little shrug was painful. "The first couple of deaths were rough. When they've got cancer, they don't go easily."

That she worked with dying people, saw them die, saw them dead, fascinated me. I kept asking her questions about it. I stopped looking at the art, but she didn't take her eyes away from what was in front of us, and gave me only yes and no answers. So I asked her again.

"It's got to the point where I can laugh and joke with the other nurses when we wash off a body," she shrugged again. "I mean you get used to it."

"That's pretty insensitive, isn't it?" I felt a dread of being that body, washed and joked over.

"I guess anything can get routine," she was apologizing.

I had the upper hand again and for minutes I didn't like her at all. "Let's get out of here," I insisted. On the way to the car, she pressed herself against me, and I grew to like her again.

At the apartment, we made some drinks and talked. She told me about Hank, her old boyfriend, who didn't like me. He was going to veterinary school now and had told all their friends that he was never coming back. She laughed about him, said she didn't miss him even a little bit. Hank had used me to break up with her though. "That was the reason he gave. He said I loved you." She laughed again, but I could hear the effort in it, and that worried me.

The steaks had thawed and I broiled them while she tossed the salad. The drinks and the food made us feel warm and friendly. We joked and talked a little about the paintings and the sculpture that afternoon, but if I remembered that Lachaise woman, so powerful and grand, she remembered a strange Walt Kuhn painting of a clown, strong in its sadness. Then I told her how lucky I'd been on the bus not to have a wino sit next to me and moaning for his mother. When I was finished, she was staring, a faint wail of a siren across the city. "I'll bet you're a good actor," she said. There was a weight of judgment in it. I was flattered, then uneasy.

After dinner was over, things warmed up. I wanted to ask more about the cancer ward, but she said she tried not to think about it when the day was over. "But tell me about school and your acting." She was so deliberately changing the conversation, there was nothing more I could do.

The part I played was that of a young man who is the last living son of an Irish fishing family. In the play, I face the reality of life and in the last scene wind up a corpse. I joked that I was at my very best as the corpse. She laughed, but not much. I could see she didn't like it. She didn't know I was serious. I didn't tell her either.

As we talked, she became friendlier, and as we became friendlier, we talked less. I even enjoyed the little things she did for me, making hot chocolate, bringing me a pillow. There was warmth in her, in her rooms, and comfort, and I was lonely. As the city darkened around us, her room became our private stage.

But I still had to escape.

Later that night I was lying on the couch and I wanted to talk. It might have been the quiet or the faint wall of a siren across the city. Or the loneliness Sharon, moving silently the way some women do at quiet moments, was graceful, almost pretty. I had to start. "What's it like when someone dies in front of you?"

"Ross, not now."

"Doesn't it really bother you or anything?"

She stopped walking and the silent gracefulness fell away from her. She sat down next to me, heavily, awkwardly. Then she said softly, "What really bothers me is that most people come to in the last minutes and a lot of them are alone. All alone. There's no one in the room with them."

"You mean most people know it's the end?"

She nodded. "They know they're alone." She was silent for a long time. Her hands were folded in her lap, her head bent, "We lost someone like that two nights ago."

The thought of it sent a cold crawling fright through me. I tried a couple of drinks, then even an afghan Sharon kept thrown on the couch, but I couldn't get warm. She went quietly around putting things in order and when she said it was time for bed, I went into the bedroom first and began to turn down the covers.