

HOTEL AMERIKA

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Objective Correlatives: A trialogue on love

Mary Cappello

HOW IT STARTED

How it started was that she climbed the stairs to her office, knocked, and, breathless, asked if she would come to dinner.

How it started was that she climbed the fire escape, hiked up her dress, and descended through the window, rather than ring the bell, wait for the door to open, and mount the stairs on her arrival for dinner.

How it started was that she wore open-toed sandals and stroked a cat at a dinner party they both attended with unsatisfying men.

How it started was that they wrote between the lines of each other's writing.

How it started was that she wore a leopard mini-skirt.

How it started was in the hallways of prolonged eye contact.

How it started was that she gave her postcards of the Medusa head, of a pot filled with mussels, of women's naked bottoms on the floor of a Ford sedan and it disturbed her.

How it started was that girls who wear glasses never get passes but she didn't pass her by.

How it started was that the filament on her shoulders in the sun was fine and downy.

How it started was that one put her hand on the door to unlock it and the other put her hand on top of hers to both stop and help her and so on and so on.

How it started was the necessity for one of them to arise at 5 am for an office job and the other rising too to fix her breakfast on freezing cold bottomless Buffalo mornings.

It started with the words "anise" and "serene."

It started with artichokes, avocados, and bagels.

How it started was in her inability to get the ravioli and sauce onto their respective plates, the ravioli weighed and the sauce was reluctant, as though she were afraid to feed her, afraid to sit with her, overcome by the thought of strawberries for dessert.

How it started was with a great deal of tugging of hems, and bell cords, boot straps and locks, of hair. It started with

a telephone dial, cradle, ring, and a feather duster.

How it started was with a shirt that rose from time to time to show midriff and a tanned belly button.

It started and stopped but never for long because a tugging would bring them into proximity again and again and again.

Because for one of them sex was visionary where for the other sex was dirty, and good and bad, and bodily.

It started on a warm day, a cold day, a dry day, a moist day, a thunderous day, a fall calm day, a windswept day, a squall day, a balmy day, a relentless day, it started and started and started, in Buffalo many weathers come and go in any single day.

It started with her slitting open an envelope and her fingering a fork tine.

It started with her furrowing and relaxing her brow, and with an increase of tears, the body suddenly liquid.

It started with her wanting to take her, and to places also.

How it started was their being opened to the same page alongside one another reading, "For this reason, continued my father, with the most Cervantick gravity, I have the greatest veneration in the world for that gentleman, who, in distrust of his own discretion in this point, sat down and composed (that is at his leisure) fit forms of swearing suitable to all cases, from the lowest to the highest provocation which could possibly happen to him—which forms being well consider'd by him, and such moreover as he could stand to, he kept them ever by him on the chimney piece, within his reach, ready for use."

How it started was that like Dadaists they opened the book, pointed at a rocking horse, and found meaning therein.

It started with one of them having to urinate badly, and the other walking with her a long distance to find a bathroom.

It started with labyrinthine prose, with disorientation, with being all over the map, it started with words that didn't even point but only looked a certain way on the page, they both were in love with unsolvable puzzles.

To say it started is to say it had a beginning and an object, but of course the object was her buttocks, the object was her wrist, the object was the removal of a ring that she never otherwise took off of her finger, the object was to roll backwards onto a couch and let the weight of love crush the lenses in her glasses. The object was laces, and never a reprieve from words but books as the skin they enter together, the skein they unwind, as well the wallpaper of solitude never to be shared but respectfully to leave each other to it when she may.

Neither candles nor coffee and cigarettes made up their opus but combs and bells. Cake. Satyrs. One gardenia sitting in a dark box in a Parisian post office, uncollected, the scent overpowering even there.

She tells her that she loves her.

She asks, "what does that mean?"

She turns, looks upward through her binoculars for birds.

She turns, seeking variegated moss, mushroom clouds, the nearly extinct indian pipe beneath her feet.

She walks ahead and clears the path for her of rocks,

She herself hard as a rock in her convictions.

They both like fountains.

I imagine my girlfriend kneading my face.

I will ask her to do it.

I like the double entendre:

imagine someone needing your face.

She clasps, folds her hand into her lover's on the train, dozing, but when the conductor arrives, she shoves her hand into the space between the seats.

SHE

She trained her mind on stencils and cut-outs, wanting to punch out forms or fill them in with something, petals perhaps.

I begin by surveying the bric a brac in Salvation Army. Dented tumblers, bright pin cushions, a set of dominoes. One yellow fluted vase, "as is." Blanched cutting boards, gold rimmed china (chipped), milk glass. I cruise the racks and barrels, the shelves of things, knowing there is always something worth finding, some small unforgettable, an unlikeness to anything that is humdrum, uniquely used.

Then I hold a tarnished mirror up to the light—it's not *all* junk. But the object with an aura can't merely be found by listening to the tumbler on a safe, by cracking the code, by hard looking. More often, the thing finds you. By surprise. But you have to go your ten yards. You have to be willing to go to it, lift it from the shelf, and take it into your hands as if you might own it.

At this point, depending on the day, I have one significant object or a cart-full. Only recently have I become eager to survey the clothes. Usually it's me among the objects and (you) Jean flipping through the plastic hangers for a two dollar (designer) summer blouse. The woman at the checkout recognizes me but she never smiles as broadly as I know she can, as if she considers me a kind of thief: the type of person who shops at Salvation Army even though she doesn't *need* to.

When I learn that Salvation Army won't help queers, I still can't stop going. It takes a gay person to appreciate this stuff: a sleeper sofa from the 1940s complete with a secret storage area into which some housewife stowed her hand-sewn drapes; a castaway park bench that will suit a shady corner of my garden; a child's refrigerator with spumoni painted inside the freezer door; the hardback book version of a favorite film, Daphne DuMaurier's *Don't Look Now*, complete with lesbian subtext; a vintage edition, torn at the edges, of Parker Brothers Password; a wooden clock that someone woke to at a place removed, a different time: I love the jingle of its tired alarm. To each object, a story, stories, but only if it is used, cast off, lost, stolen, disappeared, regained to be rekindled in a different place. I feel

sublimely aided, securely won. Salvaged? Saved?

But what will you do with these things, you ask? Live among them, and let them speak to me. I will intuit a collective memory.

RANDOM OBJECTS

“... In this unnatural, dreamy state ...

... the objects you have been contemplating ...

... take on a life of their own ...

... in and for themselves ...

... It seems to you that you are eavesdropping ...

... and can understand their private language ...” Ashbery

The sound of a purse clasp, old-fashioned, mid-poetry reading, and the rain, in between, the sound of rain saying: “pleat, pleat, pleat, polite, polite, polite,” and so too the sound of the pen falling, tapping onto paper.

I am leaning on my side on a beach watching a caravan of details float by, untouched by them, head propped by arm, I am leaning on my side on a beach, waving at waves.

It seemed she spent the entire summer staring into waves—not that anyone noticed—and when they moved from the seaside, she planted beds of moving shapes and color, aptly named “morning’s glories” in the garden, to serve the same mesmerizing, meditative purpose.

How did “touched” come to mean “crazy” and “moved”? Nothing can touch me. Do I want to be touched?

Composing is more like listening to music than dancing to it.

To be a person didn’t always entail having a personality.

Accumulated experience could neither be stuffed into a dresser nor stowed in the body. It needed to be given form, so that someday it could be said “your experience becomes you.”

When my father assembled a new bed for me at seven, I got so excited that my mother took my temperature and found a fever. Now I need lay in that bed for days.

It wasn’t very nice of my father to put real coal in my stocking one year at Christmas, except if perhaps he knew I enjoyed collecting rocks and fancied myself a budding archaeologist.

Who could ever imagine me in my off hours balancing on a rickety valet in Salvation Army, stretching to reach two soft prints, aging, of fishing rods and lakes and trees, like paper cutouts really, for my father, whose dreams are fitful

(these will calm him) for Father's Day?

Usually, my father explained to the doctor, he had the sensation that his heart was going to stop. This speeding up was new.

When my parents bought their reel-to-reel, we had to find ways to use it, so my father took to pretending he was a newscaster interviewing citizens on the street. He asked me at eight, pointing the microphone from his mouth to mine, "What do you think of the world situation?" "I think there should be more love and less hate. We need to put an end to war," I said twirling the edge of my plastic fringed vest. "Now can I belt out a song, Dad?" and I proceeded to sing "L'Chiam" and kick step into the taut center of a tambourine.

To imagine a world devoid of heirlooms.

Her governing planet was Venus. Her gems diamond and opal. Her astral colors were black, crimson, and light blue.

His governing planet was Mars, and the gems topaz and malachite. His astral colors were golden brown, and black.

Her governing planet was Mercury, and her gems beryl, aquamarine, and dark-blue stones. Her astral colors are red, blue and white.

Tender Buttons encourages finding the uncanny in arrangements of things, making one want to be more attuned to the work performed by forms. Encourages arrangements and what our arrangements make possible.

Object is that which I touch not what I see.

As though he had more than one set of eyebrows.

She, bobbing, floating, recognizable from a distance? and the sun coming down.

To "horde meaningfulness in objects"

Forty years later, the same lock of hair and the same way of lift, pulling it back with an index finger.

In the theater, they used confetti to suggest snow. They shook a brown paper bag full of paper clips to suggest rain.

Opening a window atop a carriage like the door to a cabinet resembled the opening of a book.

Reading *Anna Karenina*, I was merely imitating the act of holding something in one's lap and looking down into its face. I wasn't reading yet, and yet, what was I doing if not desiring, setting in motion the desire that would make me want to read?

"Meg went back to toast her feet, and read *Ivanhoe*, and Jo began to dig paths with great energy. The snow was light; and with her broom she soon swept a path all round the garden for Beth to walk in when the sun came out, and the invalid dolls needed air."

What these hands could do, if they could, these hands.

The air made of patchworks when hands face forward, palms, energized.

Her hand facing the mirror as though to thrust her body into a different space, her hand plunged into the mirror without breaking it.

As a child, when she presses her finger to a string, it sounds; she breaks the stem of a flower and it bleeds; she places a too small piece of clover into the tiny mouth of her pet rabbit and its front tooth slices through her index finger. She bleeds.

Sound of horns or music in the background of a message left on answering machine.

Writing was like entering a shell not turtle or sea but more like the shell of an acorn or a peanut.

Rowing was a favorite image but never an activity.

The quiet, or a quiet: the particularity of each instance, each experience of quiet.

You can always stretch further than you think you can—the idea limits the reality not the other way around.

H.D.'s first meeting with Freud disappointed him. He said, a little sadly, "You are the only person who has ever come into this room and looked at the things in the room before looking at me."

Or a man alone in a city park, dressed in a bright red long-sleeved jersey, grey trousers, and the kind of cap golfers may have worn in the twenties throwing a ball out to his side and swatting it with a baseball bat.

After my niece leaves, I notice she has rearranged the objects in my mirror: the cats are together now, the clown is given a teapot, the box balances the candle—a different symmetry so that I might not notice a difference at all? And this what she and her friend were doing for part of their few hours together in this room without a television or a radio?

Snow is no object.

Money is no object.

A book used as a doorstop, to hold open a door: it was an image that came to me in a dream and that solved the enigma of the book altogether. This is what it would be about.

At Easter in her family, the children would be given confetti-filled eggs. They'd crack them on each other's heads to make them hatch.

Two boys use their arms like pretend swords before the church's entryway, a duel underway.

When my grandfather told me he would take me, just the two of us, fishing when I was a child, I always pictured a

lunch pale and a rod.

On closing my eyes, an image of purple crushed velvet bejeweled. Did I see this today? No. Then where did the image come from?

When she closes her eyes, there is debris, cleaning supplies, a piece of black crushed velvet, a child peaking leaning from behind a door.

He asks us if we want to play chess, move chess pieces, rooks and kings and queens across a board in a park in New York.

Every day I hear the cardinal but don't see it.

She shows me how to open palms so that dogs are welcome rather than a source of fear. Later she talks about stretching hands open, inviting, pointing upward. Later, another person tells me if I do that, the dog will bite my hand off.

Her latest male love interest told her she was like a fine Italian car that needed tinkering, adjusting.

SHOESHINE LYRICS

My father gave me a quarter on Sundays for shining his shoes.

Eschewing penny loafers, I gained an idea. To tape those quarters to the bottoms of my shoes and practice tapping in the basement to a memory of Fred and Ginger.

When the angel fish died because I forgot to feed it, I buried it beneath a quarter in the garden.

I fancied myself the black man, who, after all, Fred was imitating, and who got to brush off his clothes.

Underdog was also a shoeshine boy, but only on the surface of things.

After one visit to a casino, I swore I'd never return after dropping forty dollars worth of quarters into the same slot machine in five minutes.

Having been told that money was the root of all evil, I tried to have nothing to do with it and spent my silver quarter coin collection on candy.

After earning enough quarters to start a bank account, I bought my father a hideously loud display of flowers.

If you lost a tooth, it led to quarters appearing beneath your pillow.

I especially liked the carnival game where you placed your quarter on a number and watched them all disappear from the table, swept by a special long-handled broom into a huge trough.

I liked to make people behind me wait while I fished for change.

I always made a point to place coins directly into a cashier's hands rather than on the counter—otherwise, they think you don't wish to touch them.

Given my credit card debt, it could be said I don't have a quarter to my name.

What shall I do with what I have acquired? What shall I make?

You must acknowledge having been given something before you can make something.

I felt both embarrassed and compelled to drop a quarter in the drag queen's tip cup.

After my father gave me the quarter, he asked me, what are you going to do with it?

If I put a quarter in the bus driver's bank, it would take me somewhere.

SHE/SHE

I pet the armchair as though to tame it.

You crease your pant leg, a paean to line.

You wish you'd climbed the ladder to change the light bulb before I arrived.

Stroking my own leg now, I dimly remember having been stung by a jellyfish.

You blunt the end of your cigarette into a clear glass tray and ask "what's in the bag?"

I thrust the bottle of wine I've brought before you, having chosen it merely for its colorful label.

I talk as though I am dialing a phone.

You talk as though it isn't yourself who is talking.

I suggest we dance.

You pull me to the floor.

"Is this what you call dancing?" I ask.

You take a piece of ice from a glass and rub it between my breasts.

I remove a tiny globe-shaped earring and dangle it before your mouth.

You outspread your arms in the shape of a parasol above my head.

I inch my fingers from my ankle to my knee like a flower you couldn't watch unfurl.

In lieu of a purse, I wear a waist pack. Secretly, I own fifteen different purses to suit the color of a room, the tone of an occasion, the means of seduction, the imperative of emphasizing wrist or collarbone, clutch, or draw.

You can't take "no" as an answer.

As a teenager, I thrilled to the slap of a metal baton in four leg relays; I wouldn't be caught dead twirling one, half naked in a silly dance on the lawn. You wore a camera around your neck, heavy metal, and photographed events for a local paper. You couldn't be caught dead posing for one with your head thrown back, submissive.

"You're gorgeous," I thought.

"You're experienced," you said.

"Do you dig Fred Astaire," I asked?

"Oh my god, yes!"

Password:

She gives her the clue, she answers (etc)

Mary Cappello