

ARCHAEOLOGY

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Tactical error #1: Use newsprint with four-color photos.

Making paper. I'm making paper when I should be doing something else. The sink is spotted with ink and drying bits of newsprint. I keep coming back to it, plunging my hands into the ugly gray mass which resembles so little my original plan. I had in mind delicate colors and some kind of intersection of music and spoken word, and yet here I am, glops of paper mush all over the sink, coating my hands with black ink. I had this idea to use the front pages of the newspaper with the new four-color photos, all the best disaster pictures of the week: the picture of three Africaaner right wingers begging for their lives before a black South African soldier, and then the picture of them shot dead in the Bophutswana dust they had wanted so badly to keep; an assassination in Mexico, a car bombing somewhere, a photo of a poppy field, because suddenly it is spring, even here where there are no seasons. A native, I know there are. I know spring when I see it.

Tactical error #2: Look outside. See that April is coming.

I keep looking for my neighbor to come walking up the path. It's an event, her coming home; she is one of those people who makes an appearance of walking by the window, a moment, a presentation. I hear her boots on the steps, and there she is, suddenly this few feet of space, the arching trees, the geraniums turn their faces toward her, the long red wool coat, open, black motorcycle boots, her mouth tight around a cigarette, her bright blond, tow-headed boy's head down.

I lift my hands from the bowl and they are paper mache hands. In a flash she has swept up, to her door one set of steps above my apartment. The door opens, closes. I hear her in her kitchen. Which reminds me that I should be making lunch. I fill the bowl of paper pulp with water and set it on the counter to soak. And then I go about preparing carrot sticks and peanut butter sandwiches for Erin.

Somehow I've crunched everything down to virtually nothing.¹

The Spanish bungalow type apartment building, actually two buildings, had been built on a steep hillside in Silverlake, on Tularosa south of Sunset (a culturally important distinction) sometime in the thirties. South of Sunset was nearly the barrio, the lower streets being dominated by seedy twenties era apartment buildings, while the streets higher up the hillsides were dotted with interesting older houses in which well established gay professionals lived stable, mildly interesting lives. Sunset at the time was dotted with gay clubs; at the bottom of our hill was the Flamingo, a women's club where I often went dancing.

Tactical Error #3: Listening

Erin's hands are stained. There are carcinogens in newspaper ink "Go wash your hands," I tell her.

In a cooperative mood, she gets down from the chair and runs to the bathroom. Through the walls I hear the evening's fight heating up, first the man screaming and then a murmuring voice, the woman. I've only seen her a few times in the six months we've lived here, in Silverlake, passing down the long flight of concrete steps to her car, head down, never looking around. But right now, she is murmuring upstairs, maybe a hooker calming her pimp. I indulge all my worst prejudices about her. I hate how she wakes me in the middle of the night with her cat-like crying, and her murmuring voice, and her moaning.

Between the two buildings ran a long walkway, painted red, with five flights of concrete steps leading up and up to each set of apartments, and each apartment had steps leading up to the door. The apartments faced each other across the walkway, and each had wide French windows through which we could spy on each other.

A sudden crash and then the pitch of the voice rises - I can nearly make out the words. Another crash.

The walkway was planted with tall trees, Australian ferns, four o'clocks and star jasmine, always a bit dark and fragrant, so that, when I opened the gate, I felt I was climbing into a forest. Except that at the very top was an open space, and the sun would shine brilliantly off the beige plastered wall across the back of the complex, nearly blinding after the cool darkness of the climb.

Water is still running in the bathroom. I go in and find Erin dangling her long fingers in the water, making a mess, staring at the water with her head cocked to one side, listening.

Later, in the bathtub, Erin tells me a story about a cat and a magician. She has me write the sentences down. This seems very important to her:

Erin's Story

Once there was a cat who lived in Paris. He was a very fine cat. He lived with two good people. Their names were Kelly and Karma, and they had a mother who was very good to her children. But one day, a traveler was coming to town. The traveler was carrying boxes and toys. He was a magician and a toygiver. He went straight to the cat's house and he knocked on the door and the people answered.

They opened the door and they said, "What are you here for?"

And he said, "I am a magician. I can change things to animals and I can make things disappear. Which one would you like? A new animal? Or to make something disappear?"

The man is shouting again, indiscipherable curses; the woman's voice, through the wall, murmuring. We go back to making paper. I rinse it over and over. The ink won't come out. It blackens my sink. I don't know what I'm doing.

At certain times of the year the brush cherry trees would bloom in yellow tufts, and then drop the flowers like snow across the walkway. The paths of drunken bees wandered across the drifted flowers. In the hot months, spiders spun webs from tree to tree, across the walk.

Tactical Error #4: Add bleach.

The pulp has been draining all day; it smells of Chlorox no matter what I do. Over and over I fill the bowl with water and work the paste through a colander with a big wooden spoon. I dig my fingers into the mass, squeeze it into something like submission. But I am beginning to lose faith.

Erin's Story

So the magician told them to get their cat and he put the cat in a box it could fit in. He put it in other boxes - the box in other boxes and other boxes until he had the very biggest. And he said, "Wizidy, Wizidy, Wizady Wand - make this cat disappear." And it did it as soon as he did the last box. He was gone. Poof!

Where the curvature is negative, particles will flow away, leaving voids.¹

In number one, at the bottom, lived a tall, brown skinned transvestite who designed clothes; below and across from me, a couple who fought a lot and threw lots of parties and made strange noises; next door to them lived an Asian man, an architect, who liked to play his Yamaha synthesizer late at night; directly across, in the other two-story unit, was a young hetero couple who wore black, played the club scene, and had lots of skin-headed traffic in and out of the apartment. The woman next door had a child with her for a while, and then the father came and took it away. Later she got a cat.

One day the fights stop. She starts having girl friends over. They climb the long flight of steps up from the street, past my window, to the apartment next door. Through the walls, I hear her laughing. On the way back from the park with Erin, I see her pause to light a cigarette as she gets out of her car, a yellow Volkswagen, pause long enough that we don't have to speak.

Tactical Error #5: Holding your breath.

Some small sound next door awakens me where before it had been the shouting. I check the clock: two-thirty. I hear the scrape of a chair in her kitchen. She's probably a waitress or a topless dancer, maybe a bartender. But I can finally relax, and fall asleep again, listening to the sound of a teapot being filled, and her humming.

I sleep a lot. Naps in the afternoon help, because the days get too long sometimes, and my eyes and my hand tire from the work. The walls are so white and blank, I can't bear them and so as a relief too from the small scale of my current project - the tiny brush and the lines - I've been working in charcoal's all shapes and colors shading and light on the walls themselves. Horses, mostly. Magic arrows and spears. Petroglyphs perhaps?

While Erin sleeps, I wander through the dark apartment, checking the doors and windows, letting the cat in. Sometimes, as I lie in bed with the child's small body curled against me, I hear rustling in the ivy outside the window - a possum or coyote - but tonight it is so quiet, and so warm I get up and pour myself a glass of wine. I open the door and sit on the steps. The jasmine is blooming, and orange blossoms, and geranium. Up the walk, a cigarette glows in the darkness.

Then I start unfolding space and time and trade them off.¹

These rooms echo and I hear the next door neighbors thumping and banging. Sometimes the little girl cries and it gets confusing. At night, after work, I climb these steps through the shadows of the trees and her lights are on. She's still up, and I know she's listening for me.

Tactical Error #6: Think too much.

(In her studio at the top of the building, looking out across the City, she pauses, the brush ready for the next stroke. Before her, the paint splattered drawing board, drawing pens and brushes in big jars, boxes of charcoal.)

I find out that she bartends at a place down near Melrose and Virgil, and one afternoon as I pass by, I see her car parked out front, the yellow bug, which is so distinctive. I go inside, and the bar is full of smoke; the afternoon sunlight slants across the floor in big block, so that the corner tables are in pools of darkness. The bar is busy for a Wednesday afternoon. I am one of only two white women in the place; sunlight strikes across the bartender's white-blond hair through the smoky air. She's a Sunday School angel mixing Cuba Libres.

Where the curvature is negative, particles will flow away, leaving voids.¹

I was watching cartoons when she said she had a headache and would I please turn off the television, it was driving her crazy. So of course I turned it off, and she laid down on the couch. I colored for awhile, and then it started to get dark in the house so I went around and turned the lights on, except near her, so she wouldn't be disturbed. Pretty soon it was really dark outside, and she was still asleep. I opened a can of soup for our dinner and heated it up on the stove, expecting her to wake up any time, especially when she smelled the chicken soup. But she didn't wake up. And I didn't know what to do. I was afraid and didn't know who to call.

(I just want to be able to pour out poetry,²

stuff about waiting and speechlessness,
and floating on air.

But every time the paper is right there
the words drag out in darkness.

I want to keep it light and clear, and

I want to be known more
than anything in the world...)

After a few months she sometimes comes down and knocks at my kitchen door and we drink coffee together. She has this way of curling her legs around her on the chair; her eyes, very green, narrow through the smoke. We discover we have both been to see the Van Gogh exhibit at the County Art Museum; we shout at each other over the Irises - we have never seen such glowing irises.

So it was a few days before my grandmother came by and of course by then, things had gotten bad, and I guess I haven't ever gotten over that particular phase of my life. And there is some plant, something in the air, this time of year, whose scent can bleach my mind as blank as a sheet of paper, make me nearly blind.

I was seven when she died. She had been healthy, but drank a lot and for awhile we lived with a man who hit her often, so I think perhaps the stroke that killed her - and she was only twenty-nine - had something to do with her lifestyle.

Tactical Error #7: Admit anything.

Later I find out that the man with whom she'd been living, the man who threw things and shouted all night, had died, suddenly, of a massive heart attack on the front steps of her apartment. An autopsy revealed that cholesterol deposits had so blocked the blood flow to his brain that his behavior had been affected.

He died right on the front steps, and she had tried to give him CPR. "He was dead before he hit the ground," the paramedics had told her.

I lived with a guy for awhile at that apartment. He was okay when I first knew him, but later he became abusive. He'd throw things and push me around, shout at me, call me names. I kept thinking I should leave, but how could I leave my apartment? I had a view from my studio of downtown - perfect light - the air off the ocean when the wind was right. How could I leave my only home?

Tactical Error #8: Make things disappear.

After many days, the paper pulp seems less gray. While Erin is busy playing with a friend, I work food coloring into the muck. I color it in batches, and spread it out on aluminum foil on top of the stove. The pink looks like hamburger. The green is almost pretty. I press the batches together and the colors bleed into each other. I have no idea how this will turn out.

At this point the idea of making paper seems silly and stilted. I wonder what I was trying to do, except fend off April, the cruelest month. Once she told me that our parents are not the people now that they were then, when we were children. They've changed and grown

wiser, she said. Back then they were monsters.

Writing immediately after reading your letter because it's been so long since we've known each other I guess I feel poignantly compelled to remember what, who I've missed and because, too, some things you say trouble and touch me...³

One night she comes to the door, really flying and I think she's taken something. She talks so fast I can barely follow what she's saying, suddenly she breaks down crying. She says it's her birthday, that she's twenty-nine.

"Hey, have a beer. It's your birthday," I tell her. Of course, how could I know?

Tactical Error #9: Grow Preoccupied

"We're hungry," the children call from their room.

"Okay, just another minute."

I'm pressing the colored liquid out of the pulp. I've said "another minute" at least three times. Green and pink all over my hands. I'm making paper; I am slaughtering trees. I am staining the world with carcinogenic ink.

(Soon the cat was no longer in boxes. He was in a dark wood. He heard the voices of crickets and the rustling of possums. The damp earth pulsed with trails and destinations, traces of a recent kill. Far off, a larger creature broke tree branches and made short grunting noises)

Finally I put the paper on the aluminum foil in the oven, and I turn the oven on very low, so it will dry overnight. My head is full of ideas - I think I will do pictographs on the paper in ink, and I will look up Egyptian symbols, the ones that stand for life and rebirth, and the signs for Isis and Osiris who stand for the transformative power of love beyond death. I read stories to Erin with half of my mind; several times she jabs me with her elbow and says "Wake up Mommy!" but I'm not sleeping, I'm dreaming.

When she falls asleep, I take a long, slow shower, with the water very hot and lots of steam. The phone rings and rings, but I'm not answering. I always take a shower when I need to think.

The ratio of trade-off for spacetime depends on the curvature, which depends on energy density.

Coming through the gate I thought I smelled smoke. I ran up all five flights of stairs - I guess I knew where it was coming from - and there was smoke pouring from under the door. I pounded on the door and started yelling to wake them up. All the neighbors came out in their bathrobes. Then I picked up a flower pot and threw it through the window. I heard the little girl crying in the bedroom and went straight there - the fire was in the kitchen, burning up to the ceiling from the stove - I picked up the little girl, so light in my arms like a feather and I carried her out and then the mother comes running out behind me in a blue silk kimono, her hair wet, saying "Oh my god, oh my god," like she'd lost her mind.

If you make the density just right, then the curvature of space is just right, so the unfolding costs you zero.

Tactical Error #10: Believe that the unfolding costs you zero .

NOTES

1. From 4/94 OMNI Magazine
2. Poem, Cathi O'nan, unpublished
3. Personal letter, Margaret Lavin, unpublished