

Creative Response **First Prize**

Queen of Merge

by Jill Dearman

Response to David Wojnarowicz, *Tommy's Illness*, 1987

Michael pulled up beside her in his father's Volvo. He pointed to a parking spot across the street and Katie understood that he would park and then dash through the rain to join her in her car. A yellow Ryder moving truck wormed up the street between them. She could feel the ground shake from the heaviness of the load inside of someone's new life beginning or old life ending. Bergen Street felt so wide compared to the Manhattan streets she usually drove on. Since getting her license four years earlier at the rather advanced age of thirty-three, Katie had become one of those New Yorkers who practically lived in her car. She loved negotiating traffic; nothing was as satisfying as waving a pedestrian through as a red light turned to green, and finding a good parking spot in the city was like solving a mathematical equation: clean, precise and with no awkward remainder left dangling.

"You drive like a man," Michael once told her.

"And you run like a girl," she said.

"No, I'm impressed. You're really Queen of the Merge. You find an open space and you slip into it: quick and shameless."

After that, she thought of him every time she cruised ahead of the pack on Canal Street on line for the Manhattan Bridge.

Katie turned on the radio as she waited for him to park. There was a Yaz song buzzing around the back of her brain that she suddenly longed to hear: something about watching

) met with students who participated in this year's art collection writing about her work *Event Horizon*. As in the previous year, the majority of this piece. It is the most recent addition to the university's site-specific.

a man's hands while he drives. Instead, New Order was playing, "Blue Monday," a staple from Katie's club days, and this retro radio station's depressingly obvious choice for its start of the work-week lunchtime jam. Still, the synthetic throb of cerebral angst fit her mood, the opening beats perfectly mirroring the desperate knock you might imagine you hear while high out of your mind. The music triggered a languid memory of drinking Johnny Walker Red with her college roommate Grace at the Aztec Lounge on East 9th Street. They met there early on New Year's Eve 1989, to get drunk slowly and quietly. Now she rarely drank anything harder than Chardonnay, and saw Grace a few times a year at birthday brunches and baby showers. The Aztec was long-closed and all those goth kids were surely either dead by heroin or by real life. Everyone moves on eventually.

She watched Michael as he dashed across Bergen. He tried to shelter his hair and face from the rain with a Trouser Press magazine, his record collector's bible. His blue "Radiohead" tee-shirt was half-soaked and his jeans looked sweet on his thighs. When he slid into her Toyota, he immediately exuded a delicious boy scent that blended perfectly with the rain.

"Man, It's really crazy out there!" He leaned in to kiss her luxuriously on the mouth. The rain from his lips felt good on hers, like whipped cream on hot chocolate, just a little more decadence than usual.

"Michael..."

"Uh-oh," he said, shifting back in his seat. "I don't like the way you said that. Call me 'Jacques' or 'Pierro' instead. Just make sure you say it like you want me."

She unsnapped her seatbelt, but immediately felt even more constricted. Henry's old-man style ergonomic back pillow would not detach from her body. Strangely, a sexy pain began to wash over her tailbone and soon rose all the way up to her throat; it was a dull yet pleasant sensation, as if the words inside were like wax softly burning through her skin. Katie looked at him, wishing they could touch, but knowing that could never happen again. There was no easy way to say this, though if she were still his age there probably would be. She had to get the canned lines out of her mouth immediately.

"It's over. I can't put it any other way. I'm really sorry."

He gave her a too wide-eyed look.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"I'm married," she said turning the volume on the radio down. "You had to know this was coming. It went on as long as it could, sweetie."

She regretted adding the bitchy "sweetie." He wasn't one

Who the hell is he to break it off with me? She didn't even know if he meant it or not. She sensed he was just trying to steal her thunder.

"Well, I guess I should go," he said, reaching for the door handle.

She felt a trembling in her gut. Was it terror? Or something else? Every part of her wanted to make him stay. She was weak. She put a hand on his hand. His skin was so smooth; the metal of his stupid Wiccan ring felt cool and calming under her fingertips. She traced the pentagram shape over and over, lulling herself into a trance, then finally said: "How 'bout a hug goodbye?"

"No, I shouldn't. I know where those hugs can go. I better move on."

Was he really being this rational or just trying to lure her out of her controlled state? One time when they were driving around Brooklyn (a bridge and a borough away from her husband) they heard that old Simon & Garfunkel song on the radio: "I Am A Rock." Michael told her it was her song. She snapped that it was his. They ended up breaking the tension by singing along with the radio in over-emotive, folksy voices. They passed from Williamsburg to Greenpoint laughing hysterically. Now, instead of music on the radio, there was just a commercial for diet pills. Twenty seconds of amazing weight loss. Forty seconds of horrifying side effects.

She wanted to end things on her terms, but he had just screwed her out of her closing statement. And she wanted him back, even though, sitting next to her, rolling a pretentious little cigarette he seemed as insubstantial as a pop tart.

He passed it to her first. She shook her head.

"Come on," Michael said.

"Henry hates it when I smoke."

"But he doesn't mind when you cheat."

She snapped on the windshield wipers.

"Well, that's my cue, I guess." He stepped out of her car and back into the rain, lit cigarette still in his mouth. Too cool man. Just too cool. She watched him get into his car, check his mirror, signal, and then pull out, leaving her alone on Bergen Street to cry for the next twenty minutes. The pain in her belly shifted to a ravenous hunger, but she felt too weak to drive.

Instead she just sat there, eyes closed, and thought about the first time they kissed. It was a line she'd never crossed before in four years of marriage, six years total of being with Henry, and only Henry. But she'd seen Michael at the record store so many times, during her Brooklyn field days, when she was supposed to be reading medical records at Methodist



David Wojnarowicz, *Tommy's Illness*, 1987; acrylic and collage on masonite, 36 x 35 inches; The New School, 66 West 12th Street, room 504

her voice. "Honey, I really need to be close to you right now. Can you stop treating me like your goddamn child?"

"I'd like to tape record the way you speak to me sometimes. Next time I go out of town, you can snuggle up with it and listen. It'd be quite an eye-opener for you."

Henry was never this mean to her, never this certain of her meanness. It made her worry. Still, that line: how could a tape be an eye-opener? I am a snake, she thought. Worse. A pedantic snake. All she wanted was to be with him, the way they were before she'd started up with Michael.

She still didn't know why she did it, why she opened that door in the first place. It wasn't for the sex. She never let him fuck her; she liked to just fool around for a long, long time and then end by blowing him. Sexually the whole experience was good enough, but weird; there was always something missing. But maybe that's what she liked ... being able to fill in the blanks in her own head.

Near 8th Avenue they pulled over and switched sides. Henry tossed his briefcase onto the backseat, and threw his arm carelessly around her passenger seat as he checked for pedestrians behind him. He hadn't made eye contact with her

of her gay friends, and might not appreciate the attitude at a time like this. Instead, he began to laugh, first deep and low in his belly, then loud and high-pitched like a teenage girl. It sounded idiotically fake. She didn't respond. She was not in the mood for a drama, even though she knew one was coming and had prepared for it.

"Listen, I'm sorry, it ..."

"Katie. I was going to break up with you!"

"You were?"

"Yes. I was coming here to tell you ... I met someone else."

"Oh really? That sounds awfully fast, or awfully false. Who is she?"

"Are you jealous?"

"Should I be?"

"She's younger than you are," he said, the corners of his mouth turning slightly.

"But not sexier, I'm quite sure."

"Your confidence is such a turn-on. You are the ideal older woman. And aging just like a fine wine," he said grinning.

"You little creep," she laughed.

She wanted to make some joke about Orson Welles doing the Gallo "we will sell no wine before its time" commercial — made when he was a big, fat, has-been who'd squandered his genius — and use it as an excuse to persecute Michael over his pothead love handles. But in the heat of her humiliation she couldn't think of an insult quickly enough, and she refused to use any line before its time. She took a different tack instead.

"Don't tell me it's that histrionic twit from your Latin-American Writers class? Elizabetha?"

"That's a terrible Bar-the-Jona accent."

"No worse than hers. Every time you mention her I think of Penelope Cruz in 'Blow'. A sort of psychotic hot-head — minus the movie star sex appeal."

"Well, it is her."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you want to smell her on me?"

She moved in close to him as if she was going to sniff him like an animal but instead she just lowered her voice to a growl.

"You really are a bastard, aren't you?"

He didn't say anything back to her. That was the sign of danger. They stared into each other's eyes. His eyes were so brown they were practically black. It was such a surprise. It isn't often you see beach-boy blonde hair with such dark, almost Asian eyes. Katie found the whole bad boy / innocent boy routine enthralling, even when it was so transparent she wanted to kill him. Today she was not going to fall for it.

Hospital. He'd recommended the Interpol CD to her. It was aurally familiar to her from the very first note, yet somehow just out of reach of her heart. It didn't move her the way her own music did, the songs she came of age with. Yet somehow it induced a feeling of longing in her; he probably planned it that way, or maybe she was just projecting her desires, and her desire to be desired, onto him.

When she made Michael a mixed CD and brought it to him at Casual Vinyl she was fully conscious of what she was doing, and so was he.

"I get off in like ten minutes," he said. "Wait for me, and then let's listen to it in my car, 'kay?"

The first track was a favorite Velvet Underground song: "I'll Be Your Mirror." By the time the song started to fade out, he had his hand in her hair. She nuzzled in close to get a scent of his face, and rubbed her cheek against his. His skin felt so much softer than Henry's, and his eyes were so much darker, almost opaque. There was no way to know what he was really thinking. She kissed him first, to see if she could find out. By the time they got to his apartment, she still didn't know what he was thinking, only that she liked looking into the sexy computer-like void of his eyes and losing all sense of time, space and self. His lips were more welcoming than forceful, so different from Henry's. She felt like she was in charge with Michael, even though she sensed that could change at any moment.

There was a strange rhythm to Henry's walk as he slipped out of the revolving door of his office on Park Avenue South, and made his way over to the car, double parked on the corner of 33rd Street. He looked strong, like he'd worked out at lunch. When Katie leaned over to kiss him hello, he nervously twisted the side of his mouth, as if he didn't want to give her a cold sore.

"How are you?"

"Okay. Today was an annoying day. Still, rumors of our company's restructuring have been greatly exaggerated, so I guess I should be relieved. He took off his tie, his after-work ritual and leaned back against the seat: "Are you sick?"

"No. Do I look sick?"

"No. You look really pretty."

Nice save, she thought, but didn't waste the repartee on him. She was still spent from her five minutes with Michael — and the five days of build-up to their final meeting. That is, if it was indeed final.

"Let me drive," Henry said.

"I'll pull over when I can,"

"Why are you acting so skittish?"

"I'm not," she said, hating the unattractive flintiness in

yet. Usually he searched her eyes to see what mood she was in. Tonight, for once, she wondered what his mood was. Not knowing made her shiver a little. She felt like she was going to be punished but she didn't know how. She just knew that she wanted to do something to please him, to turn him on.

His brown hair was starting to recede in a widow's peak. It made him look older, sexier. She reached out to touch it, but he pulled away, which jarred her. In that moment she could visualize him in a bar with his tie off, a couple of scotches in him, and some pretty young advertising wench, straight out of an Ivy League business school, sitting on his lap. He wasn't without needs and desires, she suddenly sensed. She wasn't the only one living alone in her own private hell. It was an almost Buddhist realization. They were the same. This seemed comforting. Then she remembered that all life was suffering. She felt like crying again and pressed both her palms against the cold, streaked window.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing. You're the one who's in a mood. Don't take it out on me."

"What did you mean — when you said you really need to be close to me now? Why now?"

"I don't know. I've just felt distant from you, I guess. I've missed you ..."

She put her hand on his bare arm but he didn't respond. She let it slide off. He knows, she thought, panicking. But how much? She'd been so clever, she thought, but now here it was. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye baiting her to confess. She wouldn't do it. She deliberately looked out the window as he drove, keeping clear of his gaze. They trudged slowly and safely through rush hour traffic, missing every opportunity to get ahead of the 7th Avenue bus he was tailgating.

Katie fidgeted in her seat and kept snapping at her seat belt, in time to the slaps of the window shield wipers. Henry shot her an irritated look. She turned the radio on. Whitney Houston. Not a good sign. She flipped around. All top forty. Every station. The same songs. This was her life. She would have to accept it and find peace with it, she thought.

"Where were you working today?" he asked.

"Methodist in Brooklyn. I told you this morning, remember?"

"You've been working there a lot lately."

"They're revamping the way the hospital deals with AIDS cases. I've had to go back and re-read a lot of medical records. The doctors still don't seem to understand what constitutes a diagnosis."

"You should've been a doctor, Katie. You're certainly

continued on last page

smart enough."

"I like doing research... for now."

She smiled at him, relieved that he was beginning to soften up.

"You could apply to medical school, you know. I've always said I'd support us, if you wanted to. But maybe it's too big a commitment for you."

"I have some news," she blurted out, amazed that the words just dropped out of her mouth like that. Was she brainless? What about good timing, atmosphere?

"I'm taking the West Side Highway," he said.

Henry made a crazy left, cutting off a cab in the process, and zipped onto the Highway. He was suddenly driving very fast and Katie felt a churning sense of panic seize her stomach as he weaved in and out of traffic.

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

"What? Are you pregnant?" he asked, laughing.

"Actually, I am."

"Is it mine?"

She wanted to die.

"Of course it's yours."

"Don't say 'of course' when of course it could be someone else's."

"It's not," she said, then started to unravel. "We didn't even —"

He suddenly careened the car off the highway.

"I don't need to know, all right?"

"Honey, please slow down. You're scaring me."

He sped up to 65 miles an hour on West 72nd Street, and then turned around and got back on the highway, heading north, past their exit.

"What are you doing?" she asked, terrified.

"Driving to the country."

"But it's Monday."

"We're driving to the country."

"I don't understand. Baby, please stop. Let's get off and talk about this."

"No more talking. I want promises. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes. Slow down."

She looked at the speedometer: 80 miles an hour.

"If we're going to do this together that means we have to go all the way, Katie. Do you understand what that means?"

She nodded, and in that moment she did understand, the way you understand fear and lust and all those primal emotions, in a nightmare. The way that those feelings in your body are a thousand times more real than what you feel in real life. When she was twelve and her mother died from cancer, she didn't feel it. When her great love, Marco, broke up with her in college, or even when her best friend Andy died from AIDS she didn't feel it. But when Mom or Andy or Marco visited her in her dreams, she did feel it. She felt them, just as she felt Henry now, and understood somehow that she had to let herself feel things when she was with him. She closed her eyes and hugged her belly, trying somehow to protect all three of them.

When she opened her eyes they were on the Taconic Parkway. She could see mountaintops and the sky looked like a world of irises — all purple and yellow — as the sun set.

"I love you, Henry. Don't do this."

The police siren sounded from out of nowhere. It took them a moment to see the cop's car speeding to catch up with them.

"You'd better pull over," Katie said, relieved.

He put his hand on her leg and slowly eased his foot off the accelerator. When he got down to 60 miles an hour she began to breathe again.

"We're going ahead with our lives," he said, then added: "Together."

She wanted to say "yes, yes," but could only see the words in her mind, not speak them.

"I don't know where we'll end up, Katie, but you're going to do things my way from now on. You really don't know what the hell you're doing. I can see that now. But it's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay."

Henry kept repeating those two words; the sound of his voice lulling them both. He will be a good father, she thought, imagining him reading some awfully frightening fairytale to their child, and to her. He continued to gradually slow down, and then eased onto the shoulder. They waited in silence for the patrolman. Katie placed her hand over Henry's and pressed it into her thigh. She wanted his flesh to push through hers and dissolve inside her, to change the chemistry of her body, like a vaccination. She wanted to disappear inside his certainty and be cured forever of her ambivalence.

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