

It was the penultimate night of August and I was ready for anything, dressed in a gauzy PG-13 outfit, standing on the patio of a soft-boiled party filled with talking backs and healthy-looking pink mouths. Things were just starting to get boisterous and someone standing near me was vaporizing chartreuse liquor, and wisps of green gas were wafting around the patio like little souls on their way to the underworld. I sipped and shuffled, posed and pouted, eyes on a platter of finger food balanced on the bar.

Eventually I was approached by a beautiful boy with big rubber shoes and a blue hood pulled tightly around his ears. He introduced himself and complimented my look and soon we were talking about the beach, which was all anybody talked about those days—the liminal state of affairs down there, the big weird question mark stamped on our city.

The beach in our city had once been a normal, generic beach, you know the kind, with sand, surf and all the regular seaside fixings. Then one summer the entire coast had been purchased by either an asset management company or a real estate investment trust—it wasn't clear which—and what happened next was a series of ownership changes, financing issues, construction delays, legal challenges and chronically delayed re-opening dates. The beach changed hands several times and some scaffolding was erected around it while the project plans were being ironed out. We were told that the 587 acres of coastal wetlands were supposed to be renovated into 2.1 million square feet of beachfront space and 1 million square feet of to-be-determined on a 206-acre tract, with the remainder to be converted into stormwater retention basins.

But then a few agencies started to publicly oppose the project, followed by some permitting issues, at which point the project was renamed. Then the following year, someone started pushing for an urban village and brand-new plans were submitted. I remember people talking about something called 'adaptive reuse', then the coastal tract being purchased again and someone saying the scaffolding was yucky looking. Then huge delays after a subsidiary missed payment, went bankrupt, causing other lenders to withdraw from the project. Parts of the coast were leased at that point but not all the parts, then more pull-outs, total collapse and a halt to construction.

By that point the scaffolding around the beach had calcified into a kind of heavy-duty steel wall and we'd been waiting for the beach to officially reopen for well actually fourteen years.

Then earlier that summer, we'd been told that something nasty was happening in the water, that we should probably stay away from the shoreline, that for Health and Safety reasons the project would remain stalled until further notice. We still had access to a bridge leading to the mainland, but the coast itself was technically walled off and hazardous—what we chose to do with that information was obviously up to us.



Me and Rubber Shoes established that neither of us had ventured down to the beach since its closure, although we both had friends who'd gone for it, which wasn't unusual. Hobbyist trespasser friends and activist friends and friends with an interest in industrial decay and friends who liked surfing and fishing, friends who missed seafood. People who went to the beach didn't generally ever come back but that wasn't surprising, and it wasn't really our business. We covered all the usual bases: first Health and Safety, next security, then timelines and permits and finally worker's rights. Things got heated when we started throwing savage insults at the big dogs who'd bunged things up so badly. It was a conversation I'd had about a million times but that didn't mean it wasn't an important one.

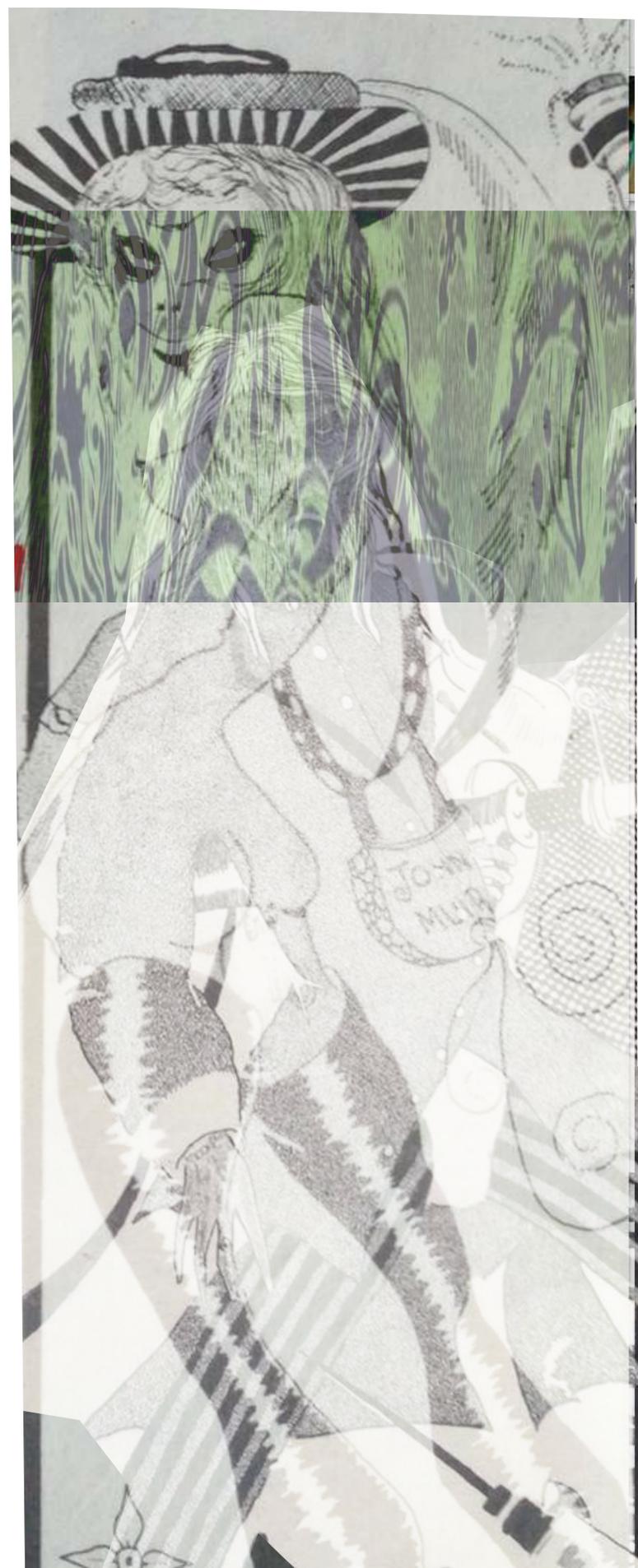
We remained in our corner, 'thick as thieves', trading personal coastal memories from the pre-wall-erection era. Memories of floating on our backs, of water snakes and manatees. I confessed to him that there were a few wet sensations I'd tried recreating over the years in showers, pools and bathtubs—but that nothing came close to that authentic ocean feeling. I was at the end of my rope, I confessed. I wanted the real thing.

He had a few botched, beachy memories of his own, not all of them as nice as mine were. I gave him supportive body language as he recounted his years spent at a coastal-sick-boy-rehab-centre. Long story short he was a bulimic ten-year-old. Basically a fear of choking that got way out of control. He fondly recalled the shoreline greenery and rolling surf that'd been visible through the bars in his window. Green coastal shrubs, bikini waxed with a sensitivity to natural growth patterns. He wondered what his coastal-sick-boy-centre looked like now. Bulldozed and flattened? Reclaimed by fungi?

Well, maybe he'd find out soon enough, he speculated, because apparently, he said, apparently there's a group of civilians talking about jumpstarting the coastal development again.

Huh, I said.

On our own terms, he said. Storming the wall, bootstrapping and re-booting the beach into a communal, crowd-sourced space, he explained, that people would be able to check themselves into, he described, for free, he clarified, if they wanted to deal with what was going on—(what was going on??)—in a kind of a comfortable, palliative way.



Huh, I said.

Like a luxury place—Rubber Shoes was repeating himself now—I mean, like a luxury communal human locker, that’s just what they’re saying right, how we all deserve it, how people are tired of being crammed in the middle.

As he spoke, I pictured thousands of tiny bodies running around inside a shrinking ring, crowding into its center, compressing into a big clear diamond. Beautiful, I murmured, but the word floated away.

The people trying to storm the wall and collectivize the coast were probably the same ones I’d been seeing around the city recently—the ones wearing elaborate LARPing costumes, war-core harnesses, ultra-tactical getups and neo-medieval apocalypse armor. Earlier that week I’d been handed a flyer promoting a DIY build-your-own-action-gear type party and come to think of it, it did have promotional language on it related to squatting in speculative vacation property.

The ultimate holiday, I said to a lightly-eyebrowed man who was now standing near us on the patio. The lightly-eyebrowed man wasn’t really interested in this luxury communal human locker racket, he told Rubber Shoes and me.

Why not, Rubber Shoes asked him, and the lightly-eyebrowed man aggressively tapped his temple with his forefinger and said, well we all knew that the coast was only kind of cordoned off, only partially leased, that nobody owned the majority of the down-there region, not anymore. I mean all those vacated half-builds, he said, great place to avoid unwanted attention, great place for parties that made ours—he motioned around the patio—look totally regressive. He told us that friends of his had told him that friends of theirs had gone down there and purchased designer hazmat suits from a disaster-core pop-up, the latest thing on the treadmill, literally baroque and obviously incredibly weatherproof.

Rubber Shoes looked wild with jealousy and then our conversation ended because the woman with the nipples walked over to us and said sorry, she’d been eavesdropping, all super interesting but to her understanding, the coast would be back in action soon. It was getting not an expansion, not a beautification, but an infrastructural update, an effort to create an open, updated erection in which versions of the beach could be integrated, physically overlapping, grounded in constant change. Then she asked to borrow me. She was hoping to talk to me about my personal life—away from the phalluses, she said with a conspiratorial wink, which I returned with an equally deranged expression.

We walked inside and she asked me a few questions. How happy had I been that summer? How was my work-life balance? My skin looked great. She took a few notes on her tablet. Everything is my material, she explained. I saw you and I said, I want that.

Oh wow, I said, it’s time for me to go. I made my way to the front door.



Back at my place I ate a late-night sandwich, my slim-thick backside awash in the squash-glow of the crescent moon. The sky outside twinkled expensively. I marveled at its beauty, the incidental kind worn by car crashes and bioluminescent mushrooms. The twinkling beckoned, the ancient night held secrets. Then and there, I decided I needed to go see the ocean—I needed to go that night—to smell the fishy air, maybe take a dip, maybe for the first time in years get properly soaking wet.

The twinkling got stronger as I walked through the complex, past the crumbly molehills earmarked for revival, down the strip, around a long, low building dedicated to solutions. I got on the bus and it took me up the A-45, all the way to the very last stop, the one I hadn't taken the bus to in years: the old-town beach boardwalk.

I arrived at a parking lot surrounded by dense thatches of palm fronds and cut-back bush snappers. Old sand sat in drifts around the perimeter and I could see the wall lining the far end of the lot. It was brutal, elegant, too high to see over. The parking lot funneled you towards a low building with a kind of lobby where a kind of person sat at a tall desk behind a sliding panel. There were chairs and rubber mats and it smelled like a clinic. Procedural, functional, all the stinky stuff hidden in the back. Decals with para-military insignia were on the walls but the aesthetic said Private-Contractor. It had the uneasy phishing sensation of contaminated online banking.

Up at the desk I was made to fill out a pretty generic form, stuff acknowledging the risks associated with deliberately entering the coastal zone, liability stuff, stuff about my actions being made willfully with an understanding of the attendant body gambles, general questions about how many sexual partners I'd engaged with in my lifetime, was I willing to permit them to use my info? Was I a homosexual? Was I aware that I was entering a contested zone? A re-zone? A red zone? Did I want to buy insurance? Had I read the safety instructions? Did I know that there were registered guide companies? Who specialized in overnight trips? A tour was starting in two hours? Was I interested?



I let him know that I had been a seaside frequenter as a kid. I was hoping to see what the deal was these days. I had a lot of really special memories, some pretty intense cravings, was more of a salty lady than a sweet-tooth-girl. It was my understanding that you got grilled at this booth, turned away and fucked around but I mean it when I say it was potatoes for me, it was nothing. He looked at me and said Ok Cutie and waved me through a kind of pedestrian tollbooth. It blew airport-style puffs into my armpits and snapped my picture. Then it greenlighted me through.

I was met with a scene that felt void, not quite like a beach but not unlike one either and the dark body in the distance I guess was supposed to be the ocean? It looked like a leather belt had been stretched around the horizon's lower belly and it wasn't moving the way I wanted it to move—no swells, roils, or crests. I wondered if seafood lay dormant in there, if fins had fused with analogue junk and opalescent cartridges. Holes pocked the ground, some filled with water and others with an oily mud that was catching the light in technicolor tracks. Being a stick in the mud means you don't want to party and being dragged through the mud means being publicly shamed. My friends and I were into mud, grease and wetness and well wasn't that why I was there in the first place? I felt uneasy, foggy.

As it turned out, the stalled coastal zone was not a vacant lot. People were roaming around down there in thin groups looking like the spaced-out leftovers you find after the tents come down at a big deal festival. Ladies on drug-fueled pilgrimages, boomer dads with death-wishes, hippie scum, technopagan LARPer in cursed outfits. One woman had wet hair and I wondered if she'd taken a dip, or maybe it was wet-styled, maybe she had used a kind of putty?

A group of boys in biohazard suits walked by and it occurred to me that theirs might be the designer gear the lightly-eyebrowed man had been talking about earlier that night. It was hard to tell if the suits were functional or ornamental, seam-sealed against airborne spores or just decoratively tactical. Italian-made safety buckles, ballistic nylon bags and shock-cords slapped around their groins. They were hot and loping and I wondered what they thought about my gauzy chiffon party outfit, hand-painted and sheer, the orange braid that hung way down behind me. I hoped they knew I wasn't a hippie, that I was viscous, performative, post whatever. Definitely into heterosexuality and sex magick techniques of the psychic wedlock variety.

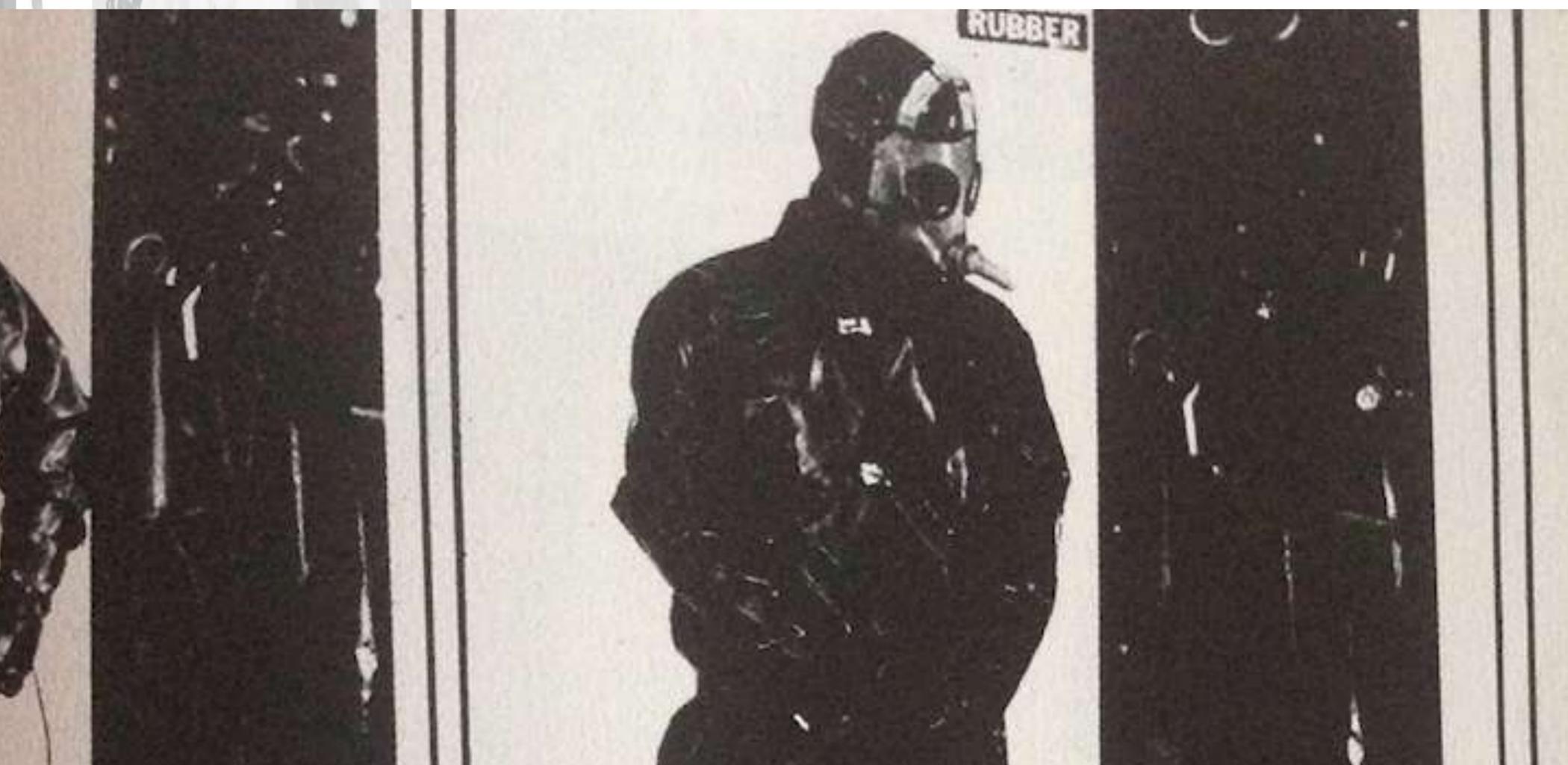


It struck me that they were moving in a pretty unusual way, a sort of grotesquely mobile swarm executed in the style of sped-up crowd simulation software. They parkoured off stone ledges and power-lunged and skanked with old-school mountaineering techniques up the side of a fried looking lifeguard chair. Kicking up oily mud and ollying wet-style, these guys had bunkerologist swagger and a level of tactical heritage panache that most people I knew could only ever dream of.

I fell into stride with their pack and they eventually acknowledged me. They told me they were doing Urbex research, that they were really into off-limits infrastructure, such a goldmine here, they said, crazy scaffolding back there, they pointed behind me, that they were just coming from now. They explained to me that they were into decline, old military installations, storm-drain networks and disaster zones. Hardcore, kinky, tactical trespassing, we've got blueprints for the entire project, you have no idea, they said, I mean this area, they said, gesturing around us, is deeply fucked. They told me that I should enjoy it while I could, the aesthetic payoff was good, that everyone was technically a landscape architect these days. That they were kind of hiking. That this was kind of land art. Not an Earth Liberation Front, just here to take hero shots while it all goes down. And I mean it's fucking beautiful, zero city, can you believe it?

I could not believe it, how incredibly punk. I followed them around for a few minutes, but it wasn't long before I started to lag behind. I couldn't jump as high as they could, and my cat leap was undeniably lame in comparison. Over the past fourteen years, as the calcified erection around the coast had grown taller and harder and more confusing, the world seemed to have redesigned itself into ever more niche brackets, ever more liminal, marginal little camps with their own special dance moves, viral strains, fashion trends, and aesthetic strategies. For the radical empaths among us, the ones who wanted to be and feel everything because it all looked so good, this presented a kind of really desperate problem.

Soon their tight ballistic butts were just pixels in the distance. They seemed to be accelerating towards something dark and vast, the huge night-core, the black pill at the bottom of the bowl.



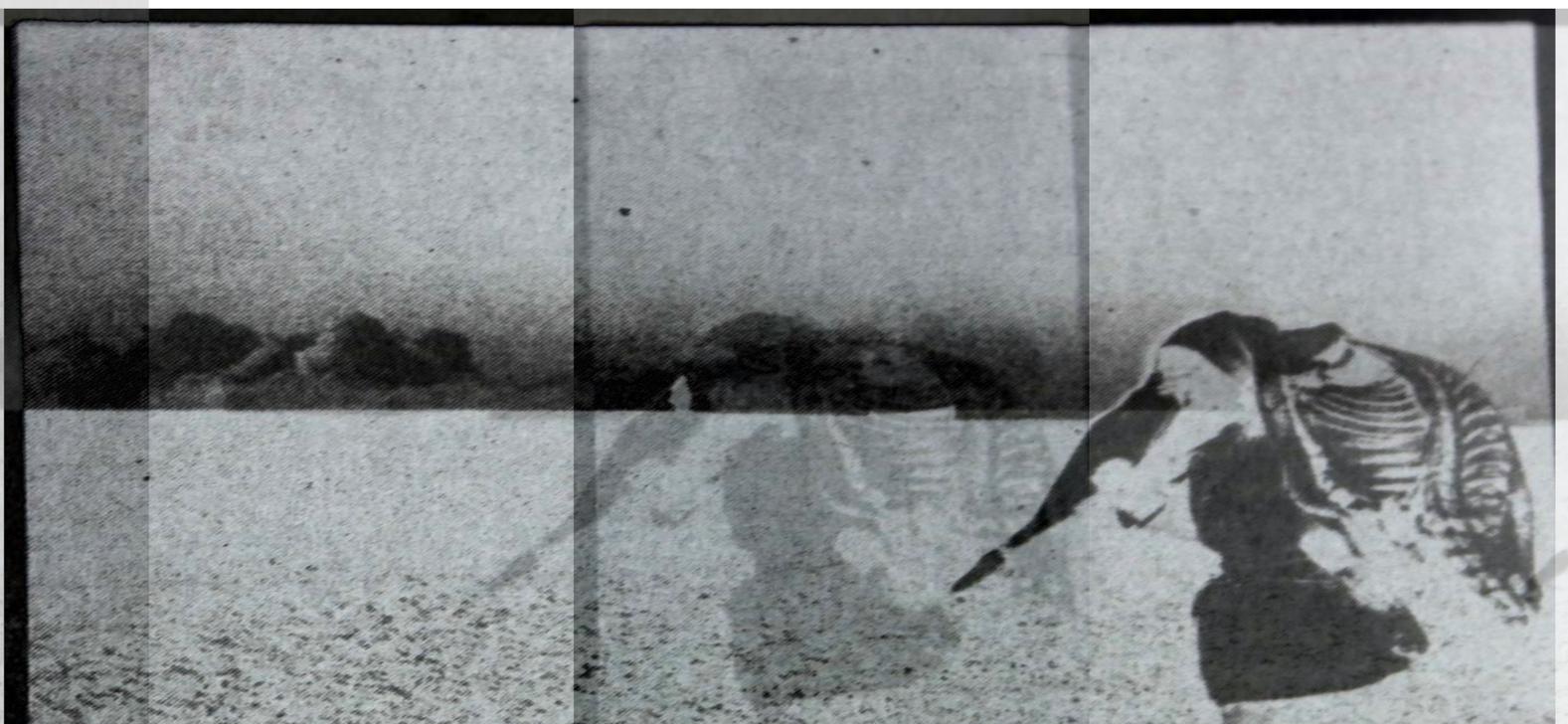
The sky was flickering now and soon it was raining substantially. Those boys were too die-hard for me, they'd probably break their faces doing a spicy move or a spatial necrophilia maneuver gone tragically wrong. And I mean of course I coveted their off-the-grid adventurism and Italian suits, but only a little because—and I needed to take a moment to remind myself of this—because it just wasn't my brand. Not my brand, I said to myself. Not my brand, not my brand, not my brand. This was a Cognitive Behavioral strategy I had learned from a best friend who was right when she said it: you really had to choose. You had options up to a point, but eventually you needed to make your choice, pick your thing, then really commit, to the bitter end.

And it's not like we had a shortage of options. Everybody had a thing and there was something for everyone. CBT, CBD, benzos, mindfulness, spirituality, mysticism, sex magick, writing, walking, ultra-sports, getting off grid, parkour, conspiratorial thinking, ecological poetics, necrophilia, ecosexuality, cosmic pessimism, mystical anarchism, primitivism, egoism, keynesian reganism, transhumanism, Trotskyism, third-wave coffee, fourth-wave feminism, christianity, obviously and etcetera. We had options, up to a point we had options.

I decided I would walk in the direction of the surf and would let my face get pummeled by the big cold air. Punish me daddy, I said to the wind. The only real indicator of developers ever having been down there was a bit of barbed wire, an overgrown sign that said Triple Star Construction and a partially collapsed wall with the enigmatic words TMNT SHELLRAISER carved into it. What was painfully evident was that we were never getting the beach back. Not the pre-erection beach. Not like it had been.

As I got closer to the tide, I began to pass clusters of people wearing air force style flight suits and coyote brown combat shirts, military fatigues and knit balaclavas. Some were holding signs; some were heavily armed. Others were wearing Hawaiian shirts, sipping tropical beverages and doing honest-to-god beach activities like bean bag toss and boogie board play.

Who were these people? We were all kind of ignoring each other until I accidentally made deep and meaningful eye-contact with an older gent wearing wrap-around sunglasses and cargo shorts. He was standing square in front of me and giving me an eyeful. Was I beautiful, he wondered? Was I a sweet cookie? A softie? He was holding a sign above his head that read ADJUST YOUR BRAINS / OPEN UP THE BEACH. Thumbs up I said after reading the request, thumbs up and please I need to walk through you. The guy wouldn't move so I picked up speed and I'll admit I kind of flattened him, kind of showed no mercy because you couldn't just give it. Unsurprisingly, this prompted the other sign holders to shake their rattles at me. A few even cocked their rifles. I took the hint and ran the hell away.



I ran and ran and ran, past a dilapidated building with techno throbbing through it, past a morbid late-stage hunger strike, a hardcore bootcamp on a reality television set, some sort of political debate, then a large group of people brunching indoors at what appeared to be a fully functioning farm-to-table bistro. I stopped to check out the menu in the window, but it was slightly overpriced and I decided to keep moving.

When I couldn't run any farther, I collapsed in a pile on the sand, a sad wet kitten just looking for a friend to hold in the face of whatever it was that was happening to us. I fetal positioned down there for a while and I'll admit I prayed to the big dogs, then to some angels I knew, then to T-Pain and Elvis and all the biggest acts. Crying in public is fine these days so I really let it flow. My tears pooled and swelled in a little sea in the crook of my elbow.

Lo-and-behold, when I lifted my head, I was elated to find that my prayers combined with my Pisces intuition and trusty legs had delivered me to the foot of the softest, loveliest situation I'd ever encountered—a group of beautiful, beatific womxn dressed just like me. We all had the same gauzy, sheer outfits on, all had variations of the same pointy titties styled deftly akimbo.

The womxn I'd been delivered to were steaming up the night with twinkly songs and incantatory psalms. I could hear them telling each other stories about muck, Golem, alchemical folklore and primordial sludge. Singing about botany and animistic deities with spider-webbed wings. They smiled and winked at me. Welcome to our scene! Now I was in the middle of it and somebody was handing me a tall glass of something cool. Somebody was dancing with me and I was offered some fruit. Now this was my brand. This was my thing.

Soon people were hushing—shh, they said—shh they're starting.



What happened next was that our group divided into two concentric circles. Then the people in the centre de-robed and started digging in the dirt. Once the holes were nearly human-sized, the ones who'd taken their pants off lowered themselves slowly and sensually down into the depths, where they began to thrust and writhe, hips hither-thither like vertical gyrating drills. I could feel my own hips starting to rotate, picking up the rhythm of their murky moves.

As I stood there, hips a-swivel, a lightbulb went off in my head. I'd seen these ladies before. I knew I had, but where? Could it have been on the feed? A photo? A flyer passed along through our Zoomer-Doomer grapevine?

Then—bingo—my brain alighted, and everything suddenly made sense. These were the Earth Fucking Cuties. I'd read their manifesto, and their controversial eco-sexual sit-ins had been provoking wild headlines for months now. The Big Dogs couldn't stand them. I'd heard recently through a friend that their group was now being sponsored by a sex toy company known for its bespoke floral bondage kits and reasonably priced plant-based libido tonics. Well good for them, I thought. They were really making it happen. I wiped the tears from my eyes. I re-applied liner. While some people were LARPing and some people were cocking their rifles and some people were playing bean bag toss and some people were just eating regular brunch, these divas were earth-fucking and well why the heck not? I watched them for a while before getting involved myself. It turned out to be fun. Intimate and rigorous.

By the eleventh hour our bodies had multiplied in scale and size. At our peak, there were maybe a hundred of us rotating down there in the muck, us irresistible rotisserie beasts, us mash potato rioters, a muddle huddle vanguard and yes it did feel good. After I'd taken my turn, I stood back with the audience, exhausted, outfit trashed but all the better for it.

A girl near me leaned in close to my ear. We're finding our E-spot, she whispered to me. It's really happening.

From where I stood, I could see water worms and cuttle fish, heart shaped tabulations of tiny pink planktons being pushed to-and-fro like mineral shaken babies. I gave the girl a wink and a bit of advice. If we paid enough attention to our hunger for play, freedom, sensual exploration and collective Eros, things would feel more fabulous as we rode the downward spiral. Down into the mud and the rank, down into the heaving matter teeming below us. It was ready, I told her. The earth was wet for us. And we both know that breakup sex was always the best. She loved what I was saying and we buddied up from there.

Soon a group of Bunkerologists zoomed by in a dark, speedy cloud, followed in succession by a large group of people. All of them walking towards I guess the ocean? The nice men with the rifles and the ladies on the drug-fueled pilgrimages. The boomer dads with death-wishes and the technopagan LARPer. There were some ravers, some late-stage hunger strikers and some reality television stars. Some talking heads, some brunchers, and some beefy men in impressive uniforms. A kind of parade. A kind of procession. 'In it together,' just like we'd been told.

They beckoned to our thrusting troupe and of course we fell into line. Because you just couldn't not. We surely all knew that. So off we all went, marching towards the surf.

Until one by one we vanished, into the curious bottle green mist.

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