

Posing in Porcelain

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You can't really call it dancing. It resembles dancing, but its physical manifestation more closely resembles the involuntary spasms of a dehydrated sailfish. It is ungainly, outdated and strange, but fun. I'm lost in my helpless array of flailing footwork, and as much as my friends glare at me and insist that we leave for our swanky hotel room in South Beach, I just want to keep on dancing. After all, I'll only go to my senior prom once. Nonetheless, the band of impatient, precocious teenagers gets its way, and we're boarding a leviathan of a limousine for the after party, which will usher in the beginning of their evening and lower the curtain on mine.

I made the decision a long time ago to avoid drugs and alcohol, for reasons I still don't completely understand. As far as I can gather, the objection stems from control issues and my innate timidity—qualities that don't lend themselves well to inebriation. So I knew, even before we pulled up to the Dorchester Hotel, even before we stepped into our white stretch limousine, even before I lost myself in my own obscene variation of the Macarena, that I did not belong at that after party.

It is odd to watch your peers transform in front of your eyes. I sit in a peculiarly situated bathtub—located in the living area, not the bathroom—and watch Justin, my best friend of eight years, smoking from an apparatus that looks an awful lot like a penis. Justin wears a shirt that reads “Hugs Not Drugs.” That used to be a playful mantra. Now it's a party joke. I watch Stephen, the smartest person I know and my own personal calculus tutor, as he stumbles sloppily and slurs his words. I watch with wonder as Rebecca, an obsessive-compulsive student council officer who is my date for the night, proves adept at beer pong. I watch all this from the safety of my bathtub, where I simultaneously yearn to join in their fun yet find myself unable to do so. I sit in the bathtub helpless and peerless. It sits in a bedroom, surrounded by carpeted floors, with no towel racks or soap dishes in sight. We are both useless and alone.

And yet, as I slump solemnly in my bathtub, something strange happens: I begin to own it. Suddenly, the bathtub is my domain. Suddenly, alienation becomes individuality. In separating myself from the pack of hedonists prancing about, I establish my own identity. I sit taller. A knowing, yet disapproving smile inches across my cheeks. I bat away offers of drinks—“No thanks, I’m driving.” “No, but why don’t you have one for me?” “Hey, I’m just taking it easy”—and emanate self-confidence. Suddenly, I’m the coolest guy in the room. But I’m still alone.

Roland Barthes, author of “Camera *Lucida*,” would insist that I am “posing” (14). Barthes explores the human tendency to “pose” for photographs, to attempt to project an idealized, perfect version of the self that only obscures one’s true qualities. Admittedly, Barthes writes of photography, and his essay speaks of “posing” exclusively within that context. But the idea of “posing” suggests a lot about human behavior in general. The subject of a photo poses to satisfy numerous criteria. As Barthes describes, “I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (15). I try to be all these things, and I realize none of them.

The desire to “transform myself in advance into an image” only transforms me into an inauthentic version of myself (14). And this desire extends far beyond photography. It happens anytime someone is hyperaware of how he or she is being perceived and fights to alter that perception. As I sat in that bathtub, which I considered my porcelain throne, I was really just posing for a prolonged picture, a picture in which I strove to pass myself off as “cool”—possibly too cool.

Brent Staples also feels himself pressed, by context, into the artificial role of an outsider—yet the process is very different. In his essay “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space,” he explores how he has no power over his own image as seen by others. That power lies with the others, the figurative “photographers” or spectators, the passersby who view him, judge him, and interpret him. Staples, an African-American male, unintentionally frightens the (mostly white) citizens who encounter him on streets. He writes of a run-in with a young white woman who, witnessing his imposing figure—his “broad, six feet two inches . . . beard and billowing hair”—quickens her pace and runs away from him (131). Yet Staples, a journalist and proclaimed pacifist, poses no real threat to her—he’s only out for a nighttime stroll. This type of behavior repeats itself, as a jewelry store owner uses a sizable Doberman pinscher to force Staples out of her store, and Staples’s leisurely nighttime strolls continue to terrify passersby. He presents

no affectation, no “pose,” but he is still not himself. This misrepresentation emerges from the eye of the “photographer”—the “operator” who, as Barthes puts it, looks through his or her “little hole” and employs “contortions to produce effects that are ‘lifelike’” (13, 15). But of course, the opposite effect is produced: What others see is not a “lifelike” version of Staples, but a stereotypical creation, an inert and false reproduction.

These false characterizations infuriate and alienate Staples. He is continually the victim of a kind of public scrutiny—an interpretive scrutiny—that makes him into something different from what he is. And yet, Staples acknowledges the public’s fear as at least partially legitimate. “I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination,” he says, referring to the street violence that is prevalent among impoverished young black men (132). Staples grew up surrounded by this violence in Chester, Pennsylvania; he made a conscious choice to reject it when he found that his peers “were finally seduced by the perception of themselves as tough guys” (132). Staples chose “to remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor,” avoiding the performative bravado of his childhood peers (133). Yet even in his avoidance of posturing, he was posturing in a certain way, as a “shadow,” an outsider who broke with the status quo. And when he feels himself “posed” in someone else’s photograph, interpreted against his will, perhaps it is because he is trying to pose for another one.

Staples tells us that he “learned to smother the rage [he] felt at so often being taken for a criminal” (133). The choice seems odd—is smothering this rage not equivalent to condoning racism? No, it turns out, it is not. Staples doesn’t merely choose to stifle his anger, he actually gives in to the frightened white citizens in public places, “letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them” or “[giving] a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours” (133). Staples not only chooses not to fight back, he actually buys into the fears of his “victims,” and takes steps to accommodate them. By taking these measures, Staples respects the fears of the skittish New Yorkers in the lobby and on the subway tracks; he establishes himself as a person *of* respect. He “warbl[es] bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*” as a “tension-reducing measure” to alleviate the fears of passersby (133). He is posing once again—posing as the man he wants to be and the man they don’t imagine he’ll be, the man he may or may not actually be. Only he is aware of the act.

Staples’s “posing” calls to mind the musical *Passing Strange*, which was recently captured on film by Spike Lee. The musical confronts issues of black identity and “posing,” though it calls this phenomenon “passing.” It centers

on a character simply named Youth, an avatar standing in for the film's creator and onstage narrator, who watches and sings as his life is acted out before him. Youth journeys from Los Angeles to Amsterdam and Berlin, and then back home, in search of what he calls "the real"—an artistic and spiritual understanding that he expects to be enlightening. Played by Daniel Breaker, Youth "poses" at every turn—from the affected, contorted glances of disbelief and disapproval he gives his mother to his faux-confidence when smoking a joint for the first time with the Reverend's son, Mr. Franklin. Youth laces all of his actions with different performances.

The greatest of his poses comes when he arrives lost and confused in Berlin and stumbles upon a highly experimental artists' colony. This absurd collective of creatives is, at least in Youth's mind, the community for which he has long searched, the place where he will find "the real" he has sought fruitlessly in Amsterdam and Los Angeles. When the members of the colony reject his plea for admission on the grounds that he has no pain, no suffering, he invokes his past as a black man, blurting out, "Do you know what it's like to hustle for dimes on the mean streets of South Central?" (Stew 74). Of course, as the narrator is quick to point out: "Nobody in this play knows what it's like to hustle for dimes on the mean streets of South Central" (74). Youth invokes a past he doesn't have, one he probably only saw on television, and adopts as his own. He "passes" for black, posing as the kind of tortured, street-bred soul he thinks the artist colony would like to see. He reveals his desperate need for an identity—even if that identity is false.

Staples and Youth strike different poses, but they are both posers. They both aim to project an idealized, nearly false persona. And they both feel real pressures to do so. Youth is compelled by the pressure he felt throughout his life to "blacken up." A childhood crush he affectionately calls "Brown Sugar" tells him, "You're not black enough for me" (Stew 19). Youth is encouraged from a young age to "pass" for black—so it is no surprise that, later in his life, he does. If affecting the pain, suffering, and stereotypical behavior of a black man means finding a community and identity, Youth will do it. He aims to find himself, but the "self" he's finding isn't entirely his own.

Staples too poses as something he really is not. In whistling and avoiding the skittish citizens around him, he performs, and "poses" for himself as the man with all the power. He poses as the enlightened black man strolling down the sidewalk, whistling symphonies for fun. His performance is intentional, and his "pose" is intentional, a pose designed for the benefit of others. And yet a second pose exists just for himself—that of the man who pulls the strings. When he clears the lobby or whistles his Vivaldi or moves down on

the subway platform, he controls the relationship between himself and the white citizens around him. For one of the first times in his life, he is in control, and he seems to take these measures because he enjoys that power—even if being in control means acting passively—posing to obscure and ameliorate.

I suppose that, as I sat in my bathtub, celebrating my independence from the inebriation and chaos around me, I was pining for the same type of control Brent Staples and Youth seemed to crave. Alienated and lonely, I reached out for some kind of upper hand, some pose that could allow me to escape my relegation to the bathtub in the corner. And it was in embracing that relegation that I found escape *and* power—power that I derived from posing as a strong, individualistic, happily independent citizen of a higher plane. When they took my picture, I posed and tried to make sure they all knew just how happy and independent and sovereign I was in my bathtub. I wanted them to see that I was just as confident and free in that bathtub as I was on the dance floor, in my strange rhythmic machinations. I posed, asserting power and happiness. (Happy enough to whistle Vivaldi, perhaps?)

Unfortunately, when they took the picture, all that showed was a scared boy slumping in an oddly-situated porcelain bowl, lonelier than ever.

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