



*A Bundle of Perceptions**

Danielle Winterton

With the idle pleasure of a vacationer, a wanderer, one whose attachment to the land is experienced as transitory and infused with whimsy, and in the company of friends with whom I visit only a few times a year, I have participated in the act of arranging nature's refuse, spawn and slough-off into patterns that please

** "We are never intimately conscious of anything but a particular perception; man is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement."*

David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, I, IV, vi.

the eye and gratify the longing to gaze upon a visual reproduction of an archaic set of symbols. The urge to project yourself onto a landscape that will erase your imprint within a matter of hours, if not moments, is a curious one to harbor and indulge. The charred stick crumbles into a charcoal that smudges the fingertips and leaves streaks across the forehead, cheeks, nose, belly, breasts. Sand sifts and buries the stones that mark the corners of the path to the lake. At Midsummer there would be a ritual. The arrival on the island was always barefoot ecstatic. We came in at night, cutting the car through back country roads, making the final leg of the trip across the lagoon in a small motorboat.

Danielle Marie: Do you remember what you did yesterday?

Danielle Marie: Yesterday, on the beach, Aaron touched my toe with his. We had a sexual encounter on the sand. I imagined we were making love. We laid on our backs and had a spirited conversation about the stars.

There were galaxies above and galaxies beyond; each one mirrored the others. Today Aaron is laid up on the couch. His foot was sliced open by the scythe left carelessly on the path he tread from the beach to the cottage after the midnight hour. Today he doesn't look at me or speak to me. Today he reads. Yesterday he was inside me. We smelled bacon cooking when we woke.

Danielle Marie: What else happened?

Danielle Marie: August laid out like a crucifix before the shrine we constructed. Her face was in the sand. The loose cloth of her skirt clung to the muscles of her buttocks. Her arms extended and her palms turned downward. She had a tattoo of a snake on her left bicep. She's a healer.

Danielle Marie: What gives you a sense of constancy, routine, and safety?

Danielle Marie: The sun rises over the marsh and sets over the lake. The moon rises over the marsh and sets

over the lake. In the same moment, the sunset on the west side of the hill and the moonrise on the east. I transverse simultaneous day and night. How do I know the sun will come up in a splintered sky, exploding into wild orgies of scarlet, mauve, violet, and aquamarine? Because the silver crescent moon is already sinking over the lake into a clouded haze of powdery pastel lavender, pink, and blue. Lakeside it's night, and the eye of the moon sags fat over the frictionless mirrored surface of the water. Marshside it's morning, and gentle reggae beats from the porch radio greet the oncoming bleed of a new day.

Danielle Marie: What happened yesterday?

Danielle Marie: Yesterday? There was a sun, and a moon. There was Aaron and stars, a circle of fire in the sand, and braided crowns of mountain laurel. August swam silver in the deep blue lake.

How does ego assert itself in the absence of a lasting

object? When one is in a euphoric state, causation seems blurry and vaguely irrelevant. Images and sensations penetrate, then morph and change, but never stop moving. The face relaxes, the chest expands, the body exhales. The tide comes in and out, we walk up and down the beach, the patterns continue but shift with each rotation. I want to be famous. I want never to be alone. What carries us over from minute to minute, phase to phase, experience to experience, is the faintest thread of memory, accompanied by virile thrusts of ego. Ego remembers and holds on, contracts. Self releases and loosely contains. I want to be admired, remembered. I want to live to reap the fruits of my labor and leave a body of work. May all the Saints and Boddhisattvas of all the years past accompany me along the way.

Danielle Marie: And how does ritual differ, if it does, from passion?

Danielle Marie: The emphasis shifts. The ritual itself is a magnification of a process we undergo daily, hourly,

even minute by minute. Passion is a peak experience. There may be a peak to the ritual, but that isn't the goal. The intent is to slip into trance, to heighten intuition, to infuse the fingers with super-sensitive capacity, able to detect and decipher the coded messages sent in every touch, each instance of contact or exchange of matter against matter, the heat that builds as two objects get closer, and dwindles as they repel. That heat, too much of it at once, can kill you, or at least slowly erode you over time. Maybe you are in the habit of trying to turn things over quickly on the other end, rejuvenate, exfoliate, purge, replenish, renew, or attempt transformation through a creative project. Some currents defy transformation, but all are subject to redefinition. Your level of skill in manipulating your own energy field is a factor in the final formation of the new incarnation of each current, and how it continues to manipulate you.

My eyes are filled with sun reflecting off the shore.

August, down the beach, kneels to pick up a rock. She tosses sticks into a pile. She hangs a thick rope of seaweed around her neck. I am floating flat-backed at the surface layer of the water. The trick is to keep the pelvis light, the lower back arched, the legs slightly spread and bent at the knees. The sun warms the belly and the pubis. I want my core to dissolve and my mind to cease. There's something beneath the boundaries of my thinking self, something I can access. I chant the mantra. We are your servants, and we are ready. I wish to purify myself and be reborn a virgin, unsullied. At core there is an inexhaustible well of vulnerability and a tremendous amount of tenderness, which turns out to be a limitless supply of strength and vitality, if not a constant source of joy. Yes, it's true - there's nothing there but a bunch of space. The harder you look, the more any attempt at recognition of form eludes you. What can become fixed, however, is neurosis itself, traveling its well-worn route, aggravating your hormone production, provoking your central nervous system, cutting ever deeper grooves in

the metaphysical life blood and tissue of the body and brain. One grabs and hooks the other, there's a counter-return, and it begins.

On the shore, flecked with sun-filled water droplets, August and I built the altar out of rocks and driftwood staked upright in the sand. We waded through the woods and collected armfuls of mountain laurel clippings, then wove braided cables with the boughs and draped them over the rock formation of the altar. We tied a twig to each stick so the entire shrine was almost entirely hidden in a dense cloud of pink angular blooms: miniscule Chinese lanterns split open on one side, revealing tiny gaping fish mouths. On the beach, the wind picked up, and the sun, in its final hours coming almost to touch the horizon, blazed its closest and gentlest light in tones of copper, rust, amber, and goldenrod. The sand lit up and appeared as a puddle of liquid. On the hill behind us, the dune grass swayed and bowed to the right; its tips grazed the surface of the sand. We held onto our hair and skirts, ducked our heads,

faced out toward the water to look for sign of a storm—often you could see systems downstate moving north over the lake from miles away. But there was nothing, a completely clear sky, set to sink into cascading tones of aquamarine followed by violet, then sapphire. We dug a circle around the altar and trenched it in.

Danielle Marie: If passion is a peak experience, and the point of the ritual, conversely, is to heighten sensitivity in a prolonged bout of concentration and reception, why does the experience become addictive?

Danielle Marie: Why is anything addictive? Once returned to mundane activity, the body craves the adrenaline boost received from ritual activity. The allure is not surprising; ritual takes on the seductive properties of fantasy, outside the bounds of civic reality. In primitivist expression, true deviance is possible, permissible, and revered: masks allow participants to disappear inside themselves and act out in ways they might otherwise be ashamed to. You might say each

individual possesses a *dark side* in contrast to her public persona, a sub-self underlying the socialized, civilized and/or spirit self. Or, to remove the hierarchy from the metaphor, we can use the Taoist yin and yang, or Wiccan Sun and Moon: light and dark together as opposite and interconnected poles which, as you may imagine, are inherently interwoven and dependent upon each other for definition. In contemporary America, the overwhelming set of symbols encourages the values of the *dark side* but forbids honest expression of them. This creates a schism within the psyche of the being, which above all else seeks experience interior and exterior consistency. Primitive practice allows one to open the gates to the *dark side* and thus subsume it to be integrated into the fabric of the public being or ego-identity, thus achieving a catharsis that produces the *effect* of existing in the *state* of a fully integrated being. One may argue that if this ritual is not regularly executed, the shadow self asserts itself in public life regardless: “I hate it when I act that way,” or “I don’t like

it when I do that.” Alternatively, the shadow self may take root and thrive in addictions that uselessly seek to permanently mute its own whispers and screams.

Danielle Marie: Is there a healing phase to the ritual? Do you endorse the peace of restoration?

Danielle Marie: Oh, you mean, do we accumulate scars until the end, until our battered bodies finally give out? Maybe. Does healing mean returning to or drawing from an original state of earliest essential wholeness? Was there one? Would you consider yourself “whole” before you were scarred? Or could healing instead imply the completed integration of that which came before with that which presented itself later, a new whole constructed out of new parts?

Danielle Marie: When does the sun come up in the splintered sky?

Danielle Marie: In the morning?

Danielle Marie: You really are a selfish bitch, aren't you?

Danielle Marie: How did you know, about the sun?

Danielle Marie: Put your clothes back on and go home. Pick the sand grains from your crevices and forget any of this ever happened.

Danielle Marie: (Silence.)

Danielle Marie: What of your linguistic facilities?

Danielle Marie: I - want to be good.

Danielle Marie: How would you know if you were good?

Danielle Marie: Rebirth me a virgin. Make me whole and pure. Take it out of me, I want it out. Can I unleash an agony against the stars, can they sustain it? How can I fix it? Who bruised my face and broke my fingernails? Who slipped his fingers inside me as I slept?

Danielle Marie: How do you know who you are?

Danielle Marie: Born 2:32 a.m. Sept. 2, 1977. Named Danielle Marie. Brought home to Robinson Lane, New Paltz, New York. There was a marsh down the street and a litter of newborn Irish Setters in the backyard. The momma dog sat watch over my bassinette. My family moved to California when I was three, and back to New York when I was 6.

Danielle Marie: What about you?

Danielle Marie: Me? I was a quiet baby. I liked to be read to. My parents took me everywhere with them —out to dinner, on hikes and camping trips, on beach vacations. My mother carried me close to her breast in a Snugli pack. My father carried me on his shoulders.

Danielle Marie: These are not even your memories.

Danielle Marie: There was the golden glare of the sand and the russet glow on the rocky cliffs of beaches at Corona del Mar, and the emerald green of the orange

groves bathed in the flood of sundown. There was a frightening stilt to Catskill Mountain fir trees when they angled into the night sky. I was face down on a blue shag carpet before I learned to walk, and again in the dirt under the forsythia bushes in the front yard as I crawled on my belly beneath a low canopy of willowy branches specked and spangled with tiny blooms whose sharp pert petals formed five inch-long triangles around each tiny nub of a center. I look to the sky whenever possible, to trace the outline of the figure that abuts it in my particular momentary plane of vision. Leaves form exquisite lacy patterns. Skyscrapers provide clean lines and reflective surfaces. Clouds assume shapes that seem to intuit objects. Sun and moon dance in what appears to us to be an eternal rotation.

The night sky was clear when we brought a basket of hand-sized paper men and bread men down to the beach. The starry layers cast mirrors off each other. The lake was choppy and waves surged the shoreline.

I called out to August but couldn't hear her return. Aaron was there. His belt weighed down his worn-out jeans, as if to drag them off his skinny hips. He made eye contact and he smiled. I smiled back and bowed my head. He held the can of gas in his right hand and held it lightly as he filled the trench. His bare dirty feet imprinted the surface of the sand as he walked. When he finished, he crouched, and lit the match; the fire quickly rippled, then exploded into a ring around the altar. The mountain laurel appeared in a sudden blaze. I stood and hiked my skirt up around my thighs to absorb the onslaught of heat, and turned my cheek to face the stars. Aaron stood and touched my toe in the sand with his. The paper men we wrapped in twenty dollar bills and burned. The bread men we ate. August swam silver and moonlight rippled in her wake.