

The Palimpsest of American Inscription

An experimental preface by:
John V. Nance, Editor

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

DETECTIVE JOHN BLACK, mid-30's, worn and dressed in a black suit, sits at a desk situated between two sloping extremes of a rotting ceiling. At his desk is a colony of surveillance gear: A video camera with an extreme zoom, computer screens, Audio receivers. He has headphones on and is listening intently. His eyes remain fixated on the computer monitor, showing a live, streaming video of a female subject in her apartment talking on the phone. She hangs up. She sits on the sofa and turns on the television.

A BEAT.

Black takes notes on a notepad. He puts down the pen, leans back in the chair and lights a cigarette. He sighs.

Cut to:

INT. DIMLY LIT ROOM-DAY

ABNER, young, skinny and moving with a calm demeanor, toys with a small knife in his hands. He studies with great complexity the object lying beneath him. DOLLY BACK to see a MAN bound with tape on top of a desk. He futilely squirms and struggles, tears streaming out of his eyes, mucus out of his nose. Abner looks to the ceiling, breathing deeply, smiling.

ABNER: You are difficult to read. I'm trying to decide if, after I cut you open, if you should be disemboweled slowly so that you can see your things, your parts... the way they want to be seen? We can label them anew if you like. Create new names...

The man squirms and screams something beneath his gag.

ABNER: No need to be rude. There is a saying from all the way back in Aristotelian Greece, though I do not, unfortunately know the Greek. Probably good for you though. Anyway, the saying goes: "Proof is institutional." Do you know what that means? That means I'm going to tell you who you are. I'm going to write an identity on your flesh. And my discourse is cold and angry.

He laughs.

ABNER: You see, it is the duty of power structures to torture suspects to arrive at a confessional 'truth.' That's where the phrase comes from. I think you can see where this is going. You see, identity, truth, these things act as an important part of the institution. The real is not naturally real. It is produced.

He looks around the room whimsically and smiles.

A BEAT.

ABNER: See because much like the Greeks, I not really interested in truth and discretionary nonsense like that. I just want to hear you sing. Feel the truth of your words as you beg me to stop. Because, as you now finally understand, men will say anything when put on a slab. The man screams again beneath his gag.

ABNER: Yes. Yes. I imagine this is all quite uncomfortable.

He begins to put on latex surgeon's gloves. The man squirms.

ABNER: Works such a bore! So I guess, well, we should you know, start, everything. What do you think?

He takes the knife in his hand and moves to cut open the man's chest when suddenly: His phone rings. With his ritual now disturbed, Abner reluctantly puts down the knife and patiently removes his gloves. He reaches into his pocket and answers the phone.

ABNER: Hello?

BLACK (O.S.): I believe she was sincere.

Fade to:

INT. APARTMENT-DAY

Detective Black sits in a high backed velvet chair facing MANN, 60's, anachronistic, and RACHEL, young and beautiful. They are seated on a nicely upholstered couch that seemingly remembers a simpler time. To the left of the scene, there is a spherical television playing a video that we cannot see or hear. The T.V. abruptly shuts off.

MANN: Very interesting Detective.

BLACK: Is that good enough?

RACHEL: No.

MANN: We need something a little bit more persuasive than that Mr. Black.

RACHEL: This video, though it may provide us with a very good indication of the dacoit's attitude, lends itself to the possibility of tampering and thus becomes doubtful.

MANN: Discs are very easy to make. Especially ones without fingerprints.

BLACK: Yes. I know. Then why have me make them?

RACHEL: Hmm. As it seems you have no problem gaining access to the suspect, take a look around. See what's there.

MANN: Could be nothing.

RACHEL: But then again, she did seem a little too sympathetic.

MANN: Photographs. Statements. Electronic documents...

BLACK: Yeah, yeah I get it.

RACHEL: But be careful. She...

The two on the couch exchange a slow, cautious look.

A BEAT.

MANN: ...is very dangerous Detective.

RACHEL: Your frequent sexual engagements with her, though not recommended, are working.

MANN: Keep it going Detective. Your daily reports are stellar.

RACHEL: You're doing a great job. The tape is a promising indication.

BLACK: She told me that the government conducted a NSS- IV Hysterectomy a few years ago. The Subject believes her body to be institutionally edited. She explained to me under the influence of post-coital dopamine saturation. She trusted me. In my opinion, her seeds of sedition were sewn with that experience. She was sufficiently frightened away from any acts of violence.

RACHEL: Surely, you don't think she's telling the truth?

MANN: We told you she was dangerous, Detective.

BLACK: She isn't dangerous. The story checks out.

Mann and Rachel exchange another look.

RACHEL: We postulate that you are getting too close to the suspect. Emotionally.

MANN: Clouding your logic.

RACHEL: Impeding the progress of the project.

MANN: We thought you were stronger than that Mr. Black.

BLACK: Look I did as I was told to do. I spied. I've collected data. After two weeks, this is all I have. As a trained domestic intelligence agent, my expertise and technical knowledge of this situation tells me that The Subject is not an active terrorist.

MANN: Two weeks is hardly enough time.

RACHEL: You should know this.

BLACK: She is innocent. I'm beginning to question your motives.

MANN: The truth, Mr. Black, can be slippery. She is not who she says she is.

RACHEL: At least consider it for a while, continue your surveillance for another week. If nothing happens, well, then we can accept your conclusion without a doubt. If she is innocent, prove it to us. Empty the category we have constructed.

MANN: Sometimes these things take time.

Black sits silently, considering.

MANN: There is more of reward in it for you, of course. We would love to retain your services for further investigations if you do a good job.

RACHEL: Just do a good job Detective Black. Indulge us. One more week, that's all. The bounty will be plentiful.

A BEAT. Black slowly removes a cigarette and lights it. He nods.

BLACK: One week. That's all.

He rises. Mann hands him an envelope.

MANN: That's the spirit. And don't worry, we understand. We know its in your nature to be suspicious.

Black takes the envelope and tucks it into his jacket pocket. Exits.

Cut to:

EXT. CITY ALLEY - NIGHT

It is fully night in a damp and forsaken pit of the city. In the deep darkness, steel infrastructure rises like a pool of phantoms reaching for the silhouette of the moon. Moisture gleams like ink climbing down the walls. Abner aggressively urges Black, weakened, forward. Abner stops before a large door, simply a stop in the drain, and knocks.

A BEAT.

BLACK: Maybe they're at church.

ABNER: Shut up cop, or I'll tell them I stabbed out your intestines when you tried to escape.

BLACK: Why would I want to escape all of this wonderful hospitality?

Dull metal turns, groans, and the door opens.

ABNER: Too late.

Cut to:

INT. CLUB- NIGHT

The room is bare and dimly lit. BOSS DEQUINCY, gaunt and middle aged is dressed in a bland suit. He sits with perfect posture at an impeccably organized large wooden desk writing on a notepad. He is flanked on either side by two hulking BODYGUARDS. A single chair is positioned in the center of the room with chains lazily draped over the arms. A naked lightbulb gently sways above the chair.

DEQUINCY: Detective Black, please make yourself comfortable. Abner, get a drink in the other room. Do not disturb us.

Black smirks at Abner and sits down. The two bodyguards approach Black and fasten the chains to his arms and legs.

BLACK: Official business Abner.

Abner exits.

BLACK: Well, what exactly can I do for you Mr. Dequincy? I would have appreciated a phone call or an appointment. It seems that I am in high demand these days. Oh and where do you find these people? I feel as if I was thirteen seconds away from being skinned and worn as some sort of jacket.

DEQUINCY: Abner is a necessary tool in establishing my power identity Mr. Black.

Dequincy stops writing.

DEQUINCY: Now, your little investigation seems to have imploded on you Detective, you appear to be persona non grata to government agencies and no longer do you pose a threat to me or my organization. I want to be clear about this. No one does what you did and gets away with it. No one. If I ran my corporation like a fucking monkey house it would lose its vincture and that spells disaster. I admit this is selfish, but logic compels you to understand selfishness. It implores you to know that maintaining order through discipline is the only way to make a lot of money and I like making a lot of money Mr. Black.

BLACK: I think I lost you.

DEQUINCY: The only reason why you are not rotting in a cage somewhere waiting for your second day of ceaseless pain and suffering is because I know you had family die from the parasite. Well, I did too detective, and I am instructed to practice sympathy. However, all that does is buy you time. Precious, life-giving time. Despite the glaring similarities between us, I'm forced by the natural law of these here parts to punish you Mr. Black. In an impossible way. It's just how things are done.

Dequincy motions to the bodyguards who move quickly towards Black. They each forcefully grab one of the prisoner's arms.

DEQUINCY: You tried to bring me down John. In a world full of fire breathing dragons and quick trick demons on the street making meat pies out of your citizens? Me? This will not due. You have one week. ONE. To retrieve an object for me of extreme importance.

BLACK: Sorry, I'm retired.

The bodyguard assigned to Black's left arm removes a small, crude knife and slices open his shoulder with a quick motion. Black winces in pain. A deep wound. Blood pours, quick on the sterile metal of the chair.

DEQUINCY: The more you open your mouth, the more I open you up. Do you understand?

BLACK: I understand.

DEQUINCY: Ok, good.

He nods. The bodyguard assigned to Black's right arm removes a knife of his own and slices open his upper back. Blood trickles to the floor and collects beneath the chair, slapping the concrete with quickening droplets.

DEQUINCY: Now. Your project is, as you may have already guessed, not going to be easy. It is a data cube. It's location is, well, inside of someone else. In their guts. Dequincy playfully pats his belly and laughs. A disgusted gloom descends upon Detective Black.

DEQUINCY: So, as you have now heard my whole song, either you will get it...cleaning the relationship between us, die trying, or summon upon yourself Abner's unhealthy wrath if you fail. Either way, this is sure to haunt you for the pointless remaining years of your miserable existence. But at least you'd still be alive. The best part is, you have no friends left in this town. You are a fallen angel Mr.

DEQUINCY (cont.): Black, right in the middle of hellfire. I've talked to a few people about this, we all think this happens to be an extremely genius plan. What do you think? Please feel free to speak, I've mostly had my fun...don't want you too bothered before such an important errand.

The bodyguards remove the chains. Black gingerly moves his injured body and removes a cigarette from his jacket pocket. Left bodyguard lights it for him. Dequincy removes a manila folder from his aristocratic desk and slides it across.

DEQUINCY: The ghost of your dreams for a thousand years.

BLACK: Jesus Christ, will somebody please turn him off?

Right bodyguard lands a hard punch to Black's jaw. Blood seeps shyly. He wipes it away with his left arm and smears it across his face.

BLACK: Oops.

DEQUINCY: They say the devil was born from the jester Mr. Black.

BLACK: Why exactly, do you envisage I think you're so fucking hilarious?

Left bodyguard punches him violently in the stomach. Black cowers over, broken.

A BEAT. Dequincy bursts out laughing and falls into a strange maniacal fit.

DEQUINCY: Tear her up and open the world. Aren't you curious as to what the data cube is for Detective?

BLACK (struggles): No.

DEQUINCY: We're going to plant a tree. A great big beautiful tree of fire and time. The cube is a seed. It is a class four data collecting experiment conducted on some woman a few years ago when the government removed her uterus. I guess you could say we gave her a new one. She is part of an initiative, psychological of course, which seeks to observe at all times. Biorhythms. Chemical negotiations that read sincerity. All of this from the inside out. Streamlining the surgery will be difficult, but we have writers for that. Eventually, this hardware will have adaptive priorities. It will be able to not only observe, but control actions and emotions. Her data stream is important to what happens next. There is a lot of money in this subject construction business Detective. It will prove useful for the state. You care about the state don't you Detective? Her name is subject twelve.

He smiles.

Cut to:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Rachel sits smoking a cigarette. Black sits next to her, right arm in a sling, nursing a glass of whiskey.

BLACK: I want to know who this woman is.

RACHEL: I understand. Really. I do. However, the truth about this woman is the very nature of your experiment.

BLACK: Experiment?

RACHEL: Assignment.

BLACK: I see. Why is Dequincy involved? Abner? How was that maniac ever released. You're a lawyer, please tell me that.

RACHEL: I don't know. But maybe you should have thought of that before you indicted them. This vendetta may have nothing to do with us. The girl could be a coincidence.

BLACK: A coincidence. Of course. Look, something is wrong. I've been told to cut this thing out of her. To kill her. Is that what you want?

RACHEL: No. At least not yet. Calm down Detective, have another drink. (to bartender) Whiskey please.

BLACK: Not yet?

RACHEL: There are some things we are unable to tell you Detective.

He rises from the bar, begins to leave.

BLACK: You need to find someone else.

RACHEL: I'm afraid that's not possible.

BLACK: What do you mean "not possible?"

RACHEL: We are watching you Mr. Black. There could be consequences if you just stop everything right now. Prove her innocence and we'll protect you. If she's guilty, maybe it's better that you do it after all. Do what Dequincy wants. Better you than Abner.

Black shakes his head.

BLACK: Who is she?

Rachel looks at her watch.

RACHEL: No one important. Your job is to tell us who she is. However, I'm sure you already know. Even if you don't want to admit it just yet. Don't you agree? Well, look at that. I'm late for an appointment. So sorry Detective. We can always talk further some point in the future. Please just do as we've asked and paid you for. It's really better for everyone. Really.

She kisses Black on the cheek and exits swiftly. A full glass is placed before him on the bar. He stares deeply like a poet into a distant space, looking for words in the air like falling stars.