

Of Potential

The woman in the black dress with lavender flower-prints returns him his pen. It is now oily with the moisturizer she was working into her palms before they met. He's unwilling to replace it in his shirt pocket. The film of lotion along its black plastic surface seeps into his pores, a faint luxurious stripe across the inside of his knuckles and down the love line of his palm. Not crude but highly refined oil, an admixture of essences and extracts harvested in far-off provinces ruled by despots, potentates, and prime ministers. She only used a little of the pen's sticky black ink, a mere trace of it on the lavender-lined pages of her address book, and he will not miss that smidgen at all. The pen remains nearly as potent as when she first requested it.

And then the bus halts with a jerk -- doors shudder open. He motions goodbye to her in the slight way strangers are dealt with, but she is busy with her cellular phone and her address book. He steps to the sidewalk and dry heat gushes upon him and fogs him invisibly, pushing him back into the bus. Then it changes its mind and drags him outside with its convected arms. The heat of the day is his indecision.

Underground, gray trains are announced and depart. He idles against a tiled wall and waits for one bearing his destination's name. The pen breathes in his shirt pocket. Black tube of cheap plastic encasing a straw thick with ink, thick with unwritten words and unformulated numbers and undiagrammed charts, all to be written, brimming with what will or will not be written; a sword of potency. It rests against his left nipple waiting to transcribe again.

And now it is exposed. His fingers cradle the instrument. It is the practiced grasp of an

actor before an audience. He play-acts he is preparing to write and commit to reality some notion of importance, although this pen has only been used to record the detritus of daily trivia. He is without paper. The potential for writing exists, but without that garden bed to accept the ink, the potential remains unrealizable. He clicks the chrome stud and the microball emerges into air. Click again and the microball scurries into its hole. A gush of warm tunnel air jets across his face and a gray train cries to a stop before him. It's headed for the wrong destination and he's no longer sure where he wishes to go.

The oil on the pen stripes his hand once more. Evaporation has purified its essence. He runs the meat of his thumb along the pen's spine, sensitive to the lotion's boundaries. The pen knows the afterimage of her touch. The grease has coupled with the oil of her skin, connecting her to the pen, and now to him.

There, hidden in the bustle of human cargo transporting itself about the platform, a dead field of baseball caps and earphone buds and a woman reading *Butterfield 8*, there, unknown and invisible to the mob, he brings the pen to his nose and drinks in the potent fragrance of unrealizable sin.