



THE MYTHIC CIRCLE

Volume 1988 | Issue 7

Article 12

June 2020

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Debbie Fersht

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Recommended Citation

Fersht, Debbie (2020) "*Editing the Sky*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1988 : Iss. 7 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1988/iss7/12>

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



EDITING THE SKY

by Debbie Fersht

The train pulls up at 5:33. Footsteps rain heavily upon the platform and flood into the compartments as if sprayed from a fire hose. Commuters anticipating their after-hours scramble for seats before their day blends into tomorrow morning's coffee.

I find myself crushed between a girl with frizzy hair and a familiar-looking man with a briefcase. Probably an executive.

"I'm going to get my Walkman," says the girl. I'm too tired for conversation.

"I'm on my way to my friend's house to pick up my Walkman so I can tune out of this world," she continues with an exotic candor.

I smell her cherry gum as she blows bubbles into the long, unsuspecting yellowed hair of the woman next to her.

"Wanna see me blow a bubble inside a bubble? I can do it," she brags.

Ignoring my lack of interest, she inhales loudly, her chest and cheeks expanded to full capacity. Slowly and skillfully, she pumps her breath into the bright red wad of gum emerging from her mouth like a baby's head. Her bubble recedes back into her cavity as she takes her next breath in preparation for twins.

"Did you see it?" she asks proudly. "Did you see me blow the second bubble?"

I shake my head.

"You just weren't paying attention. I'll do it again later," she promises.

She digs her hand deep into her abused army bag, which is laden with pins of all sorts, pulls out a few foreign objects, then ends her excavation with a firm handshake onto a Caramel bar. She bangs the Caramel bar against the rim of her seat until she succeeds in shattering her meal into chewable bits.

The familiar-looking man across the way speed-reads his newspaper up and down. Across from me I see three sets of eyebrows in a row, book-ended by a man leaning against the partition by the door. I watch, as the man's profile drops downward to the beat of the sunset. The sky displays an arrogant disorganization.

"You're very disorganized." My thoughts return to the work-day.

"We think you have potential here at The Company," the Editor informs me, "but you're going to have to show some progress."

"I hate you," I think.

"You have to discipline yourself. You're too distracted by your surroundings; you don't show an inter-

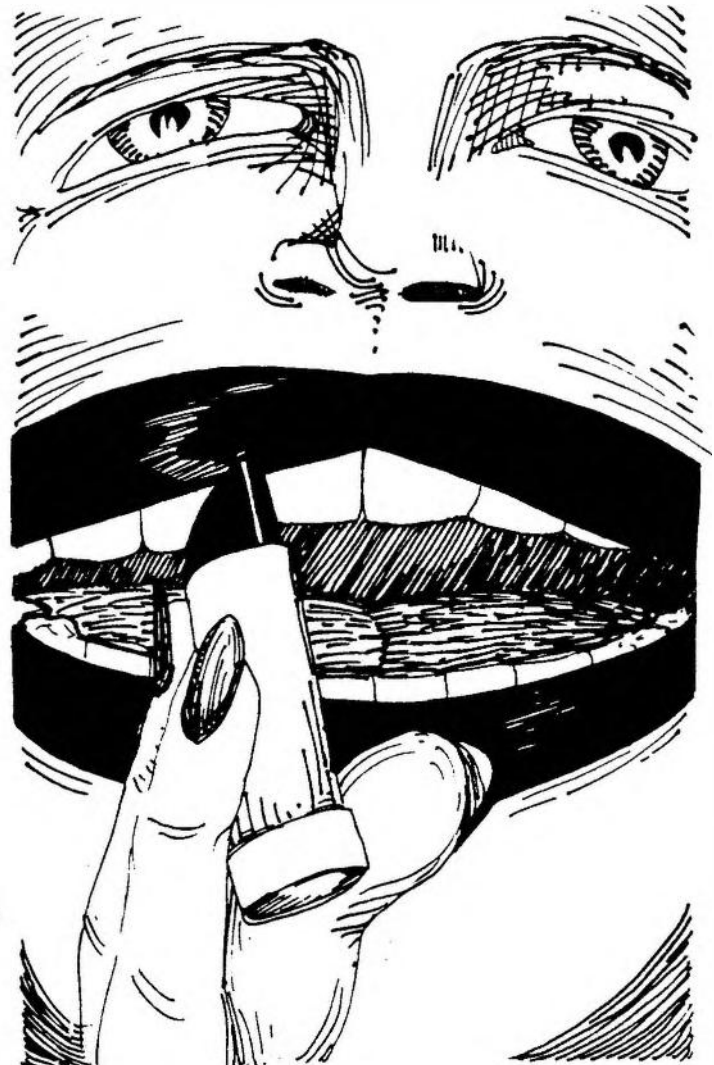
est in your work."

"May your computer have an orgasm," I curse silently.

"You talk too much to your co-workers" - she was on a roll - "and you must not bring your personality into the office. There should be a person for the office," she directs her index finger at herself, "and a person for outside the office," she points to the sky. "I don't want to sound like a cold fish," her eyes popped out at me, "but that's the way we do things here."

She gulps the dregs of office addiction as a concluding sentence, then takes her lipstick, lipliner and hand mirror from her purse.

"By the way," there was more, "by the way of general comment," she persists, while lining her outstretched



lips, "it's my way of thinking," she pauses to apply the lipstick, "that we keep this little chat private."

I follow my leader back to our office, saluting her behind her back, take my place at my desk, and steal an inconspicuous glance at my watch.

A fish comes up to me and whispers, "They treat me like an animal here. Have you noticed?"

"No," I revise, "they treat you like a fish."

Judging by the rings around her gills she had become a fish long ago. They're all fish, I realized, swimming around in stale, bagged water. Every other Friday they swim up to the surface for feeding. Some don't even bother, they simply lie dormant on the bottom of the bag and wait for the food to float down to them, in which case, I've heard, they don't make it. You hear stories about these fish who don't make it. They eventually float back up to the surface and get scooped out. Just like that. But what do I know. I'm the new girl.

It's time. I remember to date-stamp the day and stuff it in an envelope for the 5:00 mail.

* * * *

An oncoming train jolts me into 5:41. The girl has her head swung back and is loading ketchup potato chips down her throat.

"Scarborough, this stop, Scarborough."

I know that voice.

I open the door to my basement apartment and bury myself in my subterranean lifestyle. I pick up crumpled thoughts I had strewn across my rent-due floor, along with unpaid bills, and throw them in the garbage. A spider accompanies my hand, then scurries evasively away.

With mittens on my feet, I get into bed and close my eyes to find the day has conveniently condensed itself into Chinese script. I am the girl downstairs. Tomorrow, I chant to myself, I must remember not to let the new girl meet the girl downstairs. A six-year-old's piano version of "When the Saints Go Marchin' In" bangs above my head.

I wish I had my Walkman.

• poem

when the phone rang, abulatif parker answered it. when spring came, he wore shorts and listened to sheep bleating in the fields. when he listened carefully, he heard small flower buds bursting in the garden. when the sky opened up and tiny green extraterrestrials began to land on his driveway, abulatif knew some introductions would be in order.

if you look in the mirror for long enough, he told them, you see pablo picasso. sometimes you see marilyn monroe in a glass of water. you see small birds nesting in trees, the body of your lover sleeping. you see ramps when the highway closed for the weekend, the sun sinking over water. when the phone rings, he explained, you answer it & when spring comes, you are in another world.

gary barwin

You don't have to suffer to be a poet. Adolescence is enough suffering for anyone.

-- John Ciardi