

CHAPTER

12

the Future Life Band

The Blues OF The Future

Side

1. The Blues OF the Future.

MBL Records
MBL - 000145

2. Going to Pandle Handle Park Blues.
3. Going to Kentucky Fried Chicken ordaining chicken thigh Blues.
- A. Going to Hope's House on the 33 Ashbury Bus Blues.
- B. I Found a quarter on Mission and 16th Street Blues.
- C. Hungry to Death Blues.
7. Going Home on the 29 sunset Bus Blues.
8. the Halloween Frightful Blues.

Trauma Time: A Still Life

Kathleen Stewart

1

Sometime in the 1990s, ordinary things had started to buzz with the currents of possibility and dread as if they were divining rods channeling something. Like a series of electrical shocks wired directly to the social body, scenes of sudden impact caught the senses: L.A. in flames, a trailer wrapped in crime scene tape, the memorial ribbons and stuffed animals laid at the feet of a still-smoking building.

The imaginary had grown concrete on public stages.

Plot types became so familiar that we could list them in shorthand: disgruntled workers and jilted lovers and kids with guns opening fire in public; orderly men who kept too much to themselves revealed to be serial killers burying bodies in their backyards; black men beaten by cops; home-grown militias whipped into rage at the sight of unmarked helicopters and the stench of lost freedoms; messages coming through the mail as literal letter bombs now; anthrax coming in the white powder or the brown, sandlike substance. News of the weird featured stories like the one about the educated couple who calmly went away on vacation, leaving behind a hundred cats—some dead, some alive, wild ones living in the walls. Even the human-interest story had become a graphic repetition of animals that kill.

Trauma time grew pervasive, leaving us suspended in cocoons of half-known memories and unwitting expectations. It tweaked a nerve in the already frenzied exhaustion of a dream world dancing on a high wire without a safety net. The roller-coaster ride of the American dream came into a razor-edged focus. Overwrought dreams met crushing realities. It was mesmerizing to watch a dream drop out of a floating vertigo only to rise

up, renewed, from the ashes of its own self-destruction like the monster in a horror film or the fool who keeps going back for more, thinking this time it will be different.

Lines of escape were fascinating, too: the rocketing fortunes of the rich and famous, the dream of a perfect getaway cottage, or the modest success stories of people getting their lives together.

Lifestyles proliferated at the same dizzying pace as the epidemic of addictions and the self-help shelves at the bookstore. A floating mix of uncertainty and self-affirmation wedged itself into the body and then melted, flowing out into the vast expanse of the collective dream world. The cultural lingua franca of stress tracked the double charge of a sensibility happily speeding along with the force of things-in-the-making and yet punctured by times of exhaustion, resentment, and worry.

A person lived in pulses of distraction and sharp attention. Every new technogadget that came along sent a shock effect through the body gyrating to mold itself to it. There was even a soft drink named Jolt Cola in honor of the addiction to the sudden awakening of the senses brought on by maximum sugar and caffeine. Or whatever. Your drug of choice. One minute we were playing happy little real-life games to test out the latest toy, and the next we were dreaming of a true self, or justice.

Things were up for grabs. We watched for a final slackening in things or a sudden berserking. The figure of a beefed-up agency became a breeding ground for strategies of experimentation, reinvention, self-destruction, and flight, as if the world rested on its shoulders.

Straight talk about willpower and positive thinking claimed that everything was just a matter of getting on track, as if all the muddled business of real selves in the real world could be left behind in an out-of-this-world levitation act.

Against this tendency, a new kind of memoir began to work the lone self into a fictional sacrifice powerful enough to drag the world's impacts out onto secret stages. Self-help groups added density to the mix, offering both practical recipes for self-redeeming action and a hard-hitting, lived recognition of the tortuous ways that compulsions permeated freedoms and were reborn in the very surge to get free of them once and for all.¹

People began to experience life on the level of surging affects, forces unfolding, events erupting, and impacts suffered or barely avoided. The grammar of daily life found its punctuation in a rhythm of shocks that seemed to be saying something, though we weren't sure what.

We're in trauma time now. Where the here and now drifts between the future making of awakened expectations and the dragging dread of lurking threats and half-remembered horrors. Things seem to be simultaneously leaping forward and falling back. One step forward and two steps back, or two steps forward and one step back; the difference marks the line between "winners" and "losers." Push out the losers, expel them from the national banal of strip malls and master-planned communities, and they only come back to haunt, splayed on the networks as news of the weird.

All those bodies lined up on the talk shows, outing their loved ones for this or that monstrous act. Or the camera busting in on intimate dramas of whole families addicted to sniffing paint right out of the can. We would zoom in to linger almost lovingly on the gallon-sized lids scattered about on the living room carpet and on the faces of the parents, and even the little kids, featuring big rings of white encircling their cheeks and chins like some kind of self-inflicted stigmata.

Risk society brings us the worst-case scenario in the very effort to insure against it.² Advertising commodifies fear along with the dream of personal, exceptional safety in selling everything from insurance, to schools, to cars, to high-priced skin creams like Charles of the Ritz "Disaster Cream," Estée Lauder "Skin Defender Cream," and Golden Door "Crisis Cream."³ The media flow provides a flood of half-information that comes with supplementary warnings and contradictory advice and reminds us that we are never simply at home but chained to the grid.⁴

In the chanting mantra of American public culture, a second voice whispers in the ear, haunting the solidity of the truth:

Beware financial advisors who make a profit on your investments. . . . Yesterday's magic diet to keep you safe from heart attack is not right after all. Drink wine, eat aspirin, oatmeal strips your veins clean, walking is just as good as running (but how fast? how often?) What about your genes? Don't panic. Panic causes disaster. What's everyone else doing (what do they know that I don't)?

Violence and abjection are seen as a contagion, like a virus; self-control and social containment are the only known vaccine.⁵ Talk shows suggest that social and psychological problems are everywhere and our job, as audience, is to recognize them in everything we see.⁶

America's Most Wanted prints photos of bank robbers with and without beards so you can scan the faces at the 7–11 for a match.

TV news recasts the ordinary, everyday violence of inequality and the dismantling of social services as a threat of illegal immigrants, race wars, and terrorism.⁷ Then it is reported on the news that a recovery movement guru suggests we simply stop watching the news, listing it as one of the five major causes of stress today.

The “middle class” becomes a womb of safety and stasis,⁸ while the poor (and the otherwise real) have dropped out of view except as criminals, spectacular failures, and dangerous urban mobs. Master-planned communities conflate a dreamy nostalgia for small-town America with the resurgent modernist utopia of the new and clean and up-to-date. A still life takes form inside the gates against a “wilding” exterior of crime, chaos, drug-addled monsters, danger, disease, decay. Inside, fears and accusations settle down into an unnatural calm.

The little family stands beside their SUV in the driveway, looking up. Stock portfolios in hand, everything insured, payments up to date, yards kept trim and tended, fat-free diet under their belts, Community Watch systems in place. Martha Stewart offers advice on the finishing touches.

There is a search for new forms of sentimentality and a longing for interiority. We find ourselves in the mist of the self-help movement, privatization, cocooning, family values, utopia walled up in theme parks and franchise culture, feel-good movies and colorful décor. Action stories of masculinity play out a fast-switching dialectic of pending disaster and last-minute reprieves in which agency gets to stretch its muscles. Movies made for women imagine a picture-perfect scene of an Inside—a Home filled with tangible objects that mean and a Self filled with the intricate dramas of dreams launched, wounded, and finally satisfied or abandoned.

Home is where the heart is. You can get inside and slam the door. But take one foot out of the frame, and things get sketchy fast. We watch for shock while looking for recluse. At the unwanted knock on the door, or the sudden ring of the phone at night, you can feel the uncanny resemblance between the dazed state of trauma and the cocooning we now call home. Progress drifts into trauma in the flick of an eye until you can't think one without the other: careful saving, half-information, steady march forward, crash and burn, crisis, contingency, dread, magical release, start the cycle over again. There is the trauma that shocks when something happens; some people live in a constant mode of crisis. But there is trauma, too, in the anesthetized distraction of an OK middle ground defending a womb against the world. Here, fear of falling meets a more profound fear of burst bubbles. The fear burrows into action, breeding disciplines (the healthy

diet, the tended lawn, the daily lottery ticket) and compulsions (the scanning for news, the need for the new and improved, fetishisms of all kinds).

The bubble man holes up in his house, free from contaminants, but he needs the airwaves to keep the information about contaminants flowing. A warning leaks in in the very effort to keep risk at bay.

The OK middle ground has to be constantly enacted in the manicured lawn, the picket fences, and the self-governing, responsible subject in tune with the times. Pushing itself to the limit, it grows haunted by its own excesses. The picture-perfect living room takes on the anxious charge of something trying too hard, or a little off, or always already out of date. In the gated community, the rules of community order reach a tottering point open to parody and endless legal contestation: garage doors have to be kept shut at all times, drapes in neutral colors only, no digging in the yard without permission, no clotheslines in the yard, no pickup trucks in the driveway, no planting without permission, no grandchildren visiting in a senior compound. No exceptions. The desire for security becomes a phantom search, part image, part real, like the signs on lawns that announce the presence of alarm systems, as if the signs themselves would magically ward off burglars. And on the mobile homes, a sticker in the window: "This Place Protected by a Smith and Wesson Three Nights a Week. Guess Which Nights."

Public specters have grown intimate. Horror stories leak in over the airwaves. Seemingly ordinary intimate spaces are revealed to be scenes of hidden corruption, catastrophe, isolation, and crime: there are children on welfare beaten to death in their homes between visits from the social worker, men who burst into their ex-girlfriends' trailers, shooting them and their new lovers in their beds, bodies discovered only after the neighbors heard the dog barking in there for days on end.

At odd moments of spacing out, a strange malaise may come over you. These are moments when the cheering mantra of the American dream meets the nightmare of its own exclusions, blindnesses, and anxieties. Specters of conspiracy, violence, disaster, and abjection become tactile images that impact. The streets are littered with cryptic, half-written signs of personal and public disasters like the daily sightings of homeless men and women holding up signs while puppies play at their feet. *Hungry. Will work for food. God Bless You.*

Propelled into a netherworld, we dream of the day when our ship will come in. Some invest in the wild-ride stodginess of stocks and bonds. Others wait for the kind of magic that comes in a flash.

The sweepstakes cameras appear at your door while you're still in your housedress, big bunches of balloons in primary colors are released into the air, and the music plays in surround sound.

Or . . . UFOs come in the night and lift you up in an out-of-this-world levitation trick. . . . Chips implanted in the back of the neck make you a literal link in the information highway. . . . Everyone knows about the supermarket scanners and the new drivers licenses.

Like a broken record, trauma time repeats what is not directly encountered, known, remembered, or imagined.⁹ It gives us a present that is present to itself as a haunting and a desire. It's as if something that has already happened lingers as a half-known force resonant in traces, and something else is already set in motion, carrying jangled nerves along on the wave of an inexorable, unrelenting future. Things come to a head in a haunted still life, and then they break up and diffuse again in a dense, prolific circulation that links everything.

Trauma time has the restlessness and obsessions of modernity's simultaneous overstimulation and numbness, alarm and anesthesia.¹⁰ It exists most powerfully not as an idea but as felt seductions and intoxications, as symptoms and warning signs and repetitions, as numbness and shocking moments of impact, as daydream and daily routine. We can see it in dramas that cull intensities to a point of recognition, but it is also lurking in still lifes of the most ordinary kind that seem to capture something.

3

What follows here is a collection of ordinary still lifes. These are scenes gathered out of the soup of circulating signs we call everyday life and out of the archaeology of forgetting and unforgetting that motivates dreams of escape and fears of burst bubbles. These still lifes are not representations, or ideas, about histories and futures but the traces of technologies, or practices, of making pasts and futures inscribed in forms of feeling, sociality, power, contingency, and agency. They do not so much signify something that can be gathered into a generalizable code or system as they do ferment and record a series of moves.

Think of the definition of a still life. A still life is both a picture of small inanimate objects and the things themselves—the fruit, the flowers, the books, the vases left on a table, perhaps by a window. The word “still” refers both to the state of being at rest and to an apparatus used for distilling liquids—a still. Here I am interested not so much in stillness as in the still itself, not so much in the picture of a still life as in the objects that draw

attention to themselves as qualities at a standstill. I present these stills in a way that evokes the logic of gap, contiguity, and nervous interconnection because these are the logics of the discourse networks out of which their stillness emerges.¹¹

There are countless such stills evident in the concrete (yet elusive) realm of everyday life. There are the still lifes of pleasure collected by the life of privilege like marbles: the writing desk with flowers illuminated by a warm ray of sun in a profoundly still and secluded interior. Or the still lifes of a vitality satisfied, an energy spent: the living room strewn with ribbons and wineglasses after a party, the kids or dogs asleep in the back seat of the car after a great day at the lake, the collection of sticks and rocks resting on the dashboard after a hike in the mountains.

The still life can turn ordinary life into a daydream of finished happiness captured in a scene. But it can also give us pause to consider what we call, in cliché, “the simple things in life”: the unexpected discovery of something moving within the ordinary, or a still center lodged in the smallest of things.

The still life fixes attention on the fluid space where emerging and submerging forces meet. Its hold is temporary; the everyday drifts back into the open disguise of things so ordinary that they can’t be seen for what they are. But sometimes it lingers like a shadow or a promise that a moment of intensity will emerge within the ordinary—a stopping driven by the desires it pursues and makes, still.

The stills selected here encompass moments of anxiety and abjection, moments of being “taken aback” and wild leaps of hope, fetishizing moments, back talk, conspiracy, and obsession. They emerge in ordinary practices like keeping a diary, making lists, planning, keeping up with technological gadgets, keeping house, the art of finishing touches, and packing for a celestial trip on the tail of a comet. Chosen from countless possibilities, they do not begin to exhaust them or even to gesture at a grid for mapping them. On the contrary, they cut across the grain of a full-speed-ahead analytics of “the future” to consider, instead, the traces, the impacts, lodged in the still lifes of the everyday—“the inaccessible to which we have always already had access.”¹²

a

Take Martha Stewart, for instance. That’s one history of the future. She’s a technology of finishing touches. She makes the picture-perfect domestic scene, the obsessive self-discipline of the bourgeois subject, the icing on the state of readiness (house in order, beautifully prepared hors d’oeuvres

all ready in the freezer should anyone stop by). She is ornamentality, the perfect fit of femininity and class mobility, the technology of taking time. Today she's making real Mexican salsa. She says if you chop the vegetables in a blender, you're not making real Mexican salsa. She has a chef with her, and he's chopping the tomatoes and onions expertly, professionally, as you and I never could.

She's also a whipping boy for parody and contempt. She's a machine of excess, and she produces opposition, laughter, envy, anxiety, despair, hope, and little projects that give people something to do with their hands. She's a form of pleasure. She's a nostalgia machine for the authentic and the handmade, and she's a future flyer into progress and modernity (again). She's comforting, light, and entertaining (not like the stock market, for instance), unless, of course, your life happens to depend on picture-perfect scenes of efficient beauty. Then it's more serious.

b

Another still life of the history of the future is the daily encounters we all have with new gadgets. Like the day I was in the office at the Humanities Research Institute in Irvine, frantically copying journal articles from the institute's library because the Histories of the Future fellowship was running out. Time was running out, and I was packing up and didn't want to miss something crucial. Maybe there was a kernel somewhere in one of these articles. Or even a key. Stephen walked in. I asked him if he wanted to use the machine and started chatting distractedly while my hands turned page after page of the journal, grabbing quick images to be scanned later in the search for the kernel or the key.

Stephen said he just had to use the stapler. Then he stuck a paper into a slot on the side of the copy machine, pulled out the stapled paper, and walked off. I was literally taken aback to discover that copy machines now had staplers built into them.

Suddenly, I could feel my mother's anxiety at trying to keep up with things: answering machines, computers, having to pump your own gas and pay the pump with a credit card, ATM machines. Neither one of us can get her car phone working yet. I avoid upgrading my computer like the plague.

The fear of new gadgets is a fear of first times or the fear of finding yourself helpless in a future still life where using the new technology is not a choice but a necessity. It's also the anxiety of being out of the loop, of not knowing what everyone else always already knows. It's like illiteracy.

We're always behind because we're always trying to keep up (even if we don't want to). One step forward is always two steps back—a leap forward into something new only to discover you're already way behind (and dragging your feet anyway). There's doubt, dread, a wish to stay back, to go back to the past—a wish that only comes because of the future thing in your face that demands an agency now.

As I urge the ATM machine on my mother, I remember her growing up on the farm during the Depression: watery potato soup to eat, the childhood traumas of driving the plow behind massive horse haunches, then learning to drive the truck at age ten so she could fill in while her father disappeared on a drunk, then all those tense dinners in the fifties when scientific household management demanded a square meal (meat, potatoes, one green vegetable and one yellow) on the table at the stroke of six, with all the kids underfoot. Progress demanded slipcovers on the living room furniture and penny-saving discipline channeled, over years, into four college educations. Now she likes sunny rooms and keeping busy; she paints folk art objects to give as gifts and to cover her walls, and she watches Martha Stewart to pick up tips, saying she knows people make fun of Martha, but Martha is real—she really does all these things on the show.

In trauma time, ordinary things gathered into the scene of the still life can be screens that simultaneously hide something and project it, larger than life, into public view. In that moment they are both a figure and a material trace. Remember, for instance, when the Heaven's Gate followers went up armed with lip balm and quarters, and how they placed their glasses, carefully folded, on the beds next to their hands. In a moment of crisis when the past meets the future, the vibrant thing can project the anxiety of a future that is leaving you behind (the stapler), or it can make an unlikely yet certain faith tangible (the lip balm). When things in themselves act as conduits channeling the literal into the figural and back, "meaning" is no longer something simply and surely located in a symbolic system or in the eyes of the viewer but a spark generated out of the very shiftiness of subjects and objects.

c

One day as I was walking around the master-planned town of Irvine, California, I came across a small "affordable" neighborhood in the midst of this place where, outsiders say, the trash cans sit on doilies and the weeds grow in perfect rows. Parked at the curb in a tucked-away cul-de-sac was a late-model, fire-engine-red Ford sedan with a huge logo inscribed on the

driver's door that read "PMS POWERED." A snazzy car with an in-your-face voice, it not only back-talked PMS jokes but claimed their force as a technology—a still to distill fuel out of social snickering. This car drives around town as the material trace of an attitude adjustment. But when I walked around the parked car to check out the other side, I saw that both of its tires on that side had been stolen. The car was listing precariously on one hastily placed jack, just as it had, apparently, been left by the thieves. Now it was a figure and a material trace of something else. Back to trauma time. I wondered how long it had been sitting there accruing meanings.

In the everyday life of things, dreams and losses are lifted into circulation in concrete forms and dropped out of the loop again. They can come to roost as ruins, temporary setbacks, or the literal residue of past- and future-making practices that others might chance upon and recognize, re-discover or attack.

d

Carrie is a self-styled witch and gypsy. Not much over four feet tall, her jet-black hair falls past her waist. She had been a clerical worker for years when she invented a future-making technology of free pet sitting. Since she is also obsessively organized and compulsively hyperresponsible, she soon built up a big enough clientele to give up renting a place of her own. She kept her day job but moved from one housesitting job to the next (or stayed with friends in the down times). Her phone was a beeper she carried around her neck. When I met her, she was getting her feet back on the ground after she had gambled everything on a love affair that took her to Australia and, when things went badly, stranded her there. She had made enough for a ticket home and a few thousand dollars to spare by card gambling. Turns out she has a talent for gambling.

Once, when she was due to housesit for me, she called from the road on her way back from a quick overnight to Vegas. Actually, she never made it to Vegas, she said, but stopped at the first cheap little casino on the Nevada border, walked in, and found a machine with an aura she picked up on. Then she waited until the time was right. She checked in, watched a couple of TV shows in her room, and came back to check the machine. The time was almost right. She chatted with the woman at the next machine, listened to the band in the bar, drifted by the machine again, watched another TV show, and finally returned. By this time it was after midnight, and her neighbor at the next machine was cheering her on. The time was finally right. She played a couple of dollar slots and hit the jackpot. Later that night, the same machine paid off again.

Here, the slot machine is a technology that traces histories of the future. Stuffed full of lost tokens, it holds them up as the promise of a big-win future. Getting a feeling from a slot machine means gauging the pasts and futures sitting still behind all the flashy distractions. It also means making a name for yourself in history. It holds up the dream of becoming the exception. Yet the very possibility of this wild leap of faith depends on a half-known knowledge of all the real failures that have come before and extend as far as the distracted eye can see into the future of gambling for the common one. The gamble, and the talent, comes in being able to keep your eye on that machine while specters gather at the corner of the eye.

e

Trauma time is a haunted peripheral vision that demands hypervigilance. An uncanny, alien presence captures your attention out of the corner of your eye but remains unassimilated and nagging. It weighs down the present with the equally compelling anxieties of a history of failed agency or the tendency to leap recklessly into uncertainty.

In the anxious stasis of a history of the future, everyday practices like making lists, cleaning house, and reading “how-to” books can guard against the moment of being taken aback. They can amount to something like what Svetlana Boym calls “graphomania”—the incessant practice of recording the details of the everyday in order to gain access to it.¹³ Like the guy I read about in the paper who spends his whole life recording everything he does.

Got up at 6:30 a.m., still dark, splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, 6:40 went to the bathroom, 6:45 made tea, birds started in at 6:53.

Or this other guy—a neighbor guy in Michigan when we lived on a little lake surrounded by woods. He was retired from the Ford factory, and his hobby was recording everything on video. Once I watched one of his videos and was mesmerized by its graphic mania. It recorded him walking on a set path around the lake including his every breath and footstep, a pile of deer droppings on the path, and the shape of snow piles. His run-on narrative voice-over told us everything in words, including the temperature of the air, the fact that he was walking, stopping, starting again, whose cabin he was walking by, which summer people were down in Florida and when they would be back. Then he came to a cabin with black plastic wrapped around its base, and he zoomed in on what looked like a large protrusion pushing against the plastic on one side of the house. It’s trauma time. He wondered aloud if it was ice from a broken water pipe inside the house;

maybe the whole house was full of ice. The still life, capturing a history of the future laid out on the landscape and opened to speculation, gave him the pause and pleasure of graphomaniac satisfaction.

It was too late to do anything about it now, and what would happen with the thaw? He would have to send a copy of the tape to Bob and Alice down in Florida.

Then, abruptly, he moved on in search of another still life. Back to the breathing and the mundane narrative of icicles on trees and footsteps in the snow. Tracking the banal, scanning for trauma. . . .

Graphomania is but one of many inscriptions that can fill the everyday with the material traces of trauma time even in the very effort to hold it at bay, or forget it, or resist it. Written under the sign of “keeping busy,” they can make anxiety a way of life. Or they can lay claim to agency in the face of the ever-present threat, or memory, of trauma time. Adding agency to the scene of trauma, you enter the land of abjection. Or at least the dance of abjection and release where futures and pasts come into focus in one moment and recede from view in the next.

My friends Barbara and Ted lived in the woods in New Hampshire. He was a lumberjack. She cleaned those little 1950s tourist cabins with names like “Swiss Village” and “Shangrila.” He had a drinking problem (there were trauma times involved in this), and she had left her husband and four kids after years of living straight in a regime of beatings under the sign of Jesus. She went out the back window one day and never went back. That was trauma time too. She met Ted when she was tending bar, and they took a walk on the wild side together that lasted for a dozen happy years (though not without trauma, and plenty of it).

They had no money, so they moved from rental cabin to rental cabin up in the north woods (there were trauma times in this), and they invited the raccoons into their cabins as if they were pets. She called him “Daddy” even though she was a good ten years older and pushing fifty. They had a daily routine of getting up at 5:30 to write in diaries—a still that made their lives together an adventure story with a past and a future. When they got home from work at night, they would read to each other from these diaries and look at the pictures Ted took when he was up in the trees—arty pictures of treetops and bee nests. Finally they were able to get a poor people’s loan to buy a little cabin they had found in a godforsaken place and fix it up. But last year the Christmas card came from Barbara alone, and it said that Ted had left her for “that floozy” he met in a bar. Barbara’s address was still the house they owned. I wondered if she still kept a diary.

I met the man I have come to call “The Abject Man” in Las Vegas. He was the maintenance man in the trailer park where we lived outside Nellis Air Force Base, on the edge of town. I was alone for the year in a crazy, violent, pathos-ridden, wildly exhilarated, and deeply alienated place, and at night I would walk the streets of the trailer park for exercise, spectacular sunsets, and relief from isolation. This man walked too, and eventually we began to stop and chat. Things got personal right away. His girlfriend had left him one day while he was out, taking her three kids and the suite of blue velveteen living room furniture he had bought with the only money he ever won gambling. Now she would call him in the middle of the night to torture him with the details of her new sex life. One day, in a moment of masochistic overload, he went over to her new boyfriend’s place to fix his toilet for him while the new couple looked on maliciously. He was deeply depressed and addicted to gambling, cigarettes, and certain TV shows that came on in the early morning and during the dinner hour. He was also illiterate and filled with the built-up fear and shame of the traumas that illiteracy had caused him over the years. He had no driver’s license and couldn’t read the simplest instructions on equipment or even street signs or the names of restaurants, bars, and casinos. He had very restricted routes of movement. He hated his job because his boss was viciously cruel to him, his pay was below minimum wage, and he was “live-in help,” on call twenty-four hours a day to take care of anything that came up.

I listened to his stories every day as things went from bad to worse with one humiliation after the next and no future to imagine. Finally one night he called an old girlfriend, now married, from Houston. She had a daughter who as a child had adored him; now in her twenties, she had been left a paraplegic after a terrible accident and required constant care. He decided he would go out there, spend all his time taking care of her in the nursing home, and be her man. He plotted in detail how he could raise the money for a one-way bus ticket to Houston, how to get to the bus station for the midnight departure, and how to sell or pawn his few remaining things. Then one day he was gone, and the park manager was looking for him in a grim fury. No one knows what happened to him in Houston, or even if he made it to the bus station in Vegas.

From the desperation of a present-past misery he was caught in, he invented the fantasy of a new and improved still life. An other past, nostalgically remembered, became not only the site and living trace of redemption but the means to achieve a future. From a space entrenched in trauma time, a last-ditch, desperate agency propelled him into a history of the future.

William Pierce's novel *The Turner Diaries* is a racist prophecy of a new world order.¹⁴ A postapocalyptic world is set in motion by "the terrible day" in an invented past when government thugs broke into citizens' houses, tore apart seemingly solid walls to unearth hidden guns, and arrested hordes of people, rounding them up like cattle. The originary trauma time brings the repetitions of a no-exit present to a head; a moment of reckoning, it incites a militia movement fueled by a politics of resentment. In the end, the heroes are propelled into a place in history and into a future time fashioned after the image of a pure past—a future where trauma time can be remembered through the glorious anesthesia of the war memorial. A still life.

Reading the text, I was struck not by the power of its overly scripted plot but by its romance with domestic scenes and technical details. It reads like a virtual how-to manual for right-wing conspiracy theorists and survivalists, detailing tips on everything from how to organize armies and make bombs to the more mundane ingenuities of setting up cozy shelters and keeping house underground or fashioning implements for everything from cooking to an underground communications system. The heroes distinguish themselves not by acts of bravery and camaraderie but by honing skills in mechanics, engineering, shooting, sexuality, and leadership. A kind of Robinson Crusoe fantasy of building tools out of found objects, the pleasures of this text begin with its own status as a found object discovered in its secret, underground circulation and mined for details in the circuitous routes of the still lifes it traces. Reading it, I couldn't help but think of the well-tended suburban lawn and the Martha Stewart-inspired interiors or the practice of reading catalogs to imagine yourself in that dress, with that face, or holding that particular gun. I couldn't help but wonder how the racist rage at disorder, contamination, and decay might be both fueled and relieved by such fantasies of the moment when the ordinary disciplines and obsessions of a private life suddenly emerge into public view in a still life. Here trauma time builds a bridge, such as it is, over the chasm between an overburdened, hyperstimulated (yet starved), be-all, end-all intimate life and the distant image of an inaccessible, gigantic-scale public world of governments and corporations somewhere out there. It also fuels the search for quick-fix solutions and promotes a conflation of intimacy and public life: my nightmare image becomes the history of the future of the world. In trauma time, something happens. A still emerges.

Around the same time we were reading *The Turner Diaries*, “The Republic of Texas” took its stand. Traumatized by the circulating remembrance of Ruby Ridge and Waco, and feeling their sovereign citizenship embattled, the members of the Republic brought things to a head by kidnapping their neighbors. Center stage, they took their stand, and then again came the details of housekeeping, communications, arms caches, the details of the organization, newly found survivalist skills, a place in history, a return to a pure past as if it could be the future. An eruption carried the social densities of trauma time into an imaginary of chances finally taken and dreams enacted. And before the smoke had cleared there were men on the run in the wilds shooting guns at government helicopters.

In Vegas, my trailer was broken into one day in plain daylight. A brick had been hurled through a window, drawers had been emptied onto the floor, my computer was unplugged and ready to go, my stereo was gone, and a note was stuck on the living room wall with a large pair of scissors. The note said, simply, “Yeah, boy.” After drifting around in the disorientation of trauma time for a few minutes, I called the police and the park management. A week later I went to a community meeting to see if there had been other burglaries. At the meeting, the park manager claimed that all the trouble was in the past, so I protested and told my story. It became clear that others had long ago decided that the thieves were teenagers from the run-down, “trashy” trailer park next to ours. A group of stern-looking, bulky young military men lining the back wall of the Quonset hut made some claims that they could put a stop to it, and as we were filing out, one of them caught my eye with a hard stare I couldn’t quite read.

My feeling that the community meeting had only made things worse deepened over the next two weeks as people started noticing a late-model, brightly colored party jeep patrolling the streets at all hours of the night with its headlights off. One night when I woke to the sound of it slowly passing, I looked out and saw the dark shapes of four or five men hanging off the sides of the jeep with semiautomatic guns and spotlights in their hands. Another emergency community meeting was called to demand that they stop their secret patrols before they shot someone.

In trauma time, community and the public are entities that come into existence in the face of risk or at the precise moment that crime and criminal elements become visible as surrounding presences.¹⁵ Just as trauma time is not just an idea but a visceral experience brought to the senses

day and night in the repetitions of trauma TV and inscribed in countless still lifes of the everyday, so too “community watch” and “action” become scripted public-private viscerality of a subject surrounded by forces.

Don’t forget your lip balm when you get ready to go, and don’t leave home without a quarter (and a dime) for a phone call. . . .

4

An ideal history of the future—one made of civil ideals, free agency, and progress—free-floats in a dreamy mix of nostalgia, presumed innocence, utopian longing, and technophilia. This is serious business in America, and it’s also as thin as the talk at a supermarket.¹⁶ Trauma time is the specter that haunts it.¹⁷ It steeps everyday life in the American dream’s bad twin. It lives the life of the phobic, the abject, the betrayed, and the unspeakable. It screens (and stages) a “real” as a momentary rupture in the order of things, or a moment of impact when the subject is touched by an image or haunted by a missed encounter.¹⁸ It may flash up to expose a crisis and then amount to nothing more than a flash in the pan. And yet the technologies themselves may not only leave traces but actually lead a life of traces. The particular “stills” of trauma time may become sensibilities, or repetitions that “go nowhere” but lodge in the everyday.

In the public-private culture and politics of the contemporary United States, trauma has become the dominant idiom of subjectivity, citizenship, politics, and publics.¹⁹ It is a sensibility of impact for which there are, of course, many unspeakable referents: violence, death, AIDS, racism, the destroyed welfare state and broken social contract, grotesque extremes of poverty, wealth, and surveillance, abuse, addiction, new orders of discipline, social isolation, privatization, conspiracy, the global-order economy. But it is also a technology and material trace in its own right. As a technology, or “still,” it marks the wound or gap where a public politics might be. It traces the conflation of the public and the private, the inside and the outside.²⁰ It marks the nightmarish vulnerabilities of a subject who is subject to forces beyond her control or understanding and yet given total responsibility for everything that happens to her and to others.²¹ It marks a mode of attention at once deeply distracted and scanning for revelations and driven by the fury of its own traces.

Notes

1 Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will.”

2 Beck, *Risk Society*.

- 3 Mellencamp, *High Anxiety*.
4 Ronell, "Trauma tv."
5 Davis, *Ecology of Fear*.
6 Mellencamp, *High Anxiety*.
7 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*.
8 Brown, *States of Injury*.
9 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.
10 Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics."
11 Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*.
12 Blanchot, "Everyday Speech."
13 Boym, *Common Places*.
14 Pierce, *The Turner Diaries*.
15 Archer, "Gated Governmentality."
16 Trow, *Within the Context of No Context*, 22.
17 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.
18 Foster, *The Return of the Real*.
19 Berlant, *Queen of America*; Dean, *Aliens in America*; Sturken, *Tangled Memories*.
20 Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture."
21 Brown, *States of Injury*.