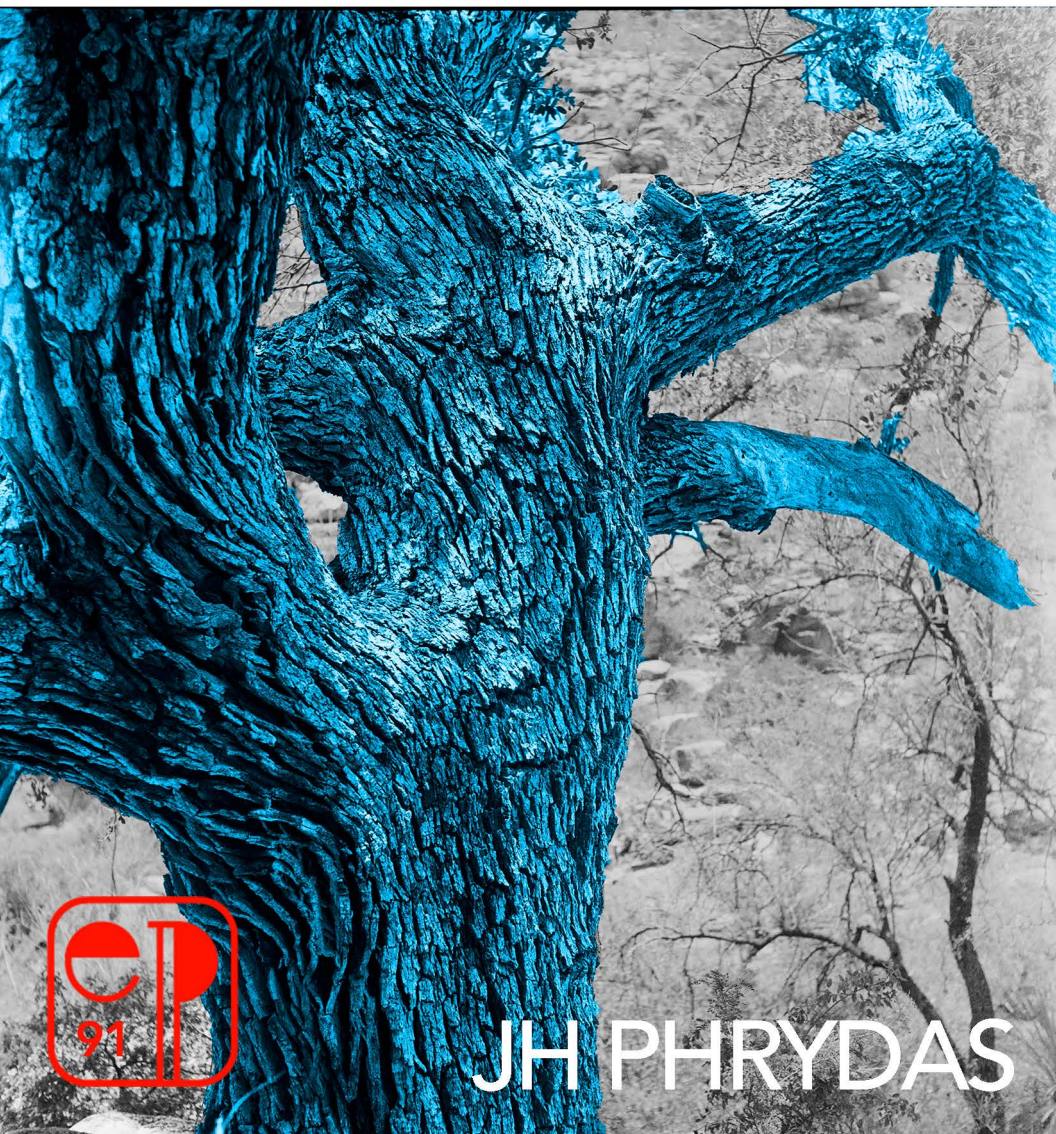


EMPIRE IN SHADE



JH PHRYDAS

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#91

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, I wrote a story about how bodies communicate without words. I wanted the story to not only describe such an exchange but also to perform it. The communication would be visceral—the exchange melancholic yet full of lust. I wanted the words to retain the unsayable: the subtle movements of a body in heat. In the years since, I kept rewriting this story, using different techniques, different syntaxes and forms, in hopes that I would find a successful method of gestural writing. In each, there was one requirement: the narrator must start on cement and end on dirt. Compiled with essays on somatic writing, language as a plastic art, and figuration studies, these stories became the basis for *Imperial Physique*. Included here are three sections from that work.

PREFACE

*Do you heed the imperial decree
to use your body to promote
good citizenry?*



THE CITY IS ASLEEP, and the parks are dimly lit. Notice circling: sweat in night's heat. A writing emerges from this heat, an interest in cruising as ritualized, repeated acts which, although being replaced in the twenty-first century via online body shopping, still occur in social spaces, both urban and along the conduits of civic infrastructure. What was once a heavy presence in city parks has now been relegated to the virtual and domestic space: the dorm, apartment couch, or halogen-lit bathroom. The contemporary cruise, made more efficient and effortless, is now the "looking?" or "sup?" cellphone conversation: physical contact initiated or foreclosed with a dick pic.

MEANWHILE, in open-air cruising, words are hardly used. It is in the turn of a head; repeated eye contact; a shift of a hand toward the thigh that initiates libidinal exchange.

The silent and subtle ritual of open-air cruising reveals the way nonverbal communication acts as a physical call-and-response system toward and away from consummating desire. The body speaks for itself. Muscle, skin, posture, and facial expression combine to produce, extend, and negotiate regardless of money, voice, or familial, social, and historical realities. As physical movements become the basis for acceptance or rejection, certain re-inscriptions of oppression remain—cruising does not, by any means, open up a space of utopic sexual play. However, the index of bodies within public spaces creates micro-scenarios of choice: out of these bodies, which will I pursue? On the outskirts of economic regulation, late in the evening, away from the major avenues and wide sidewalks of urban commerce, bodies shed in order to open toward a lone stranger.

AND YET, this ritual is not just relegated to parks, abandoned shipyards, alleyways: unspoken gestures occur in broad daylight, on the subway car, in a grocery store, at the gym, in a museum. What cruising does is electrify this sequence of movements, elevating body positions to the point of pure pleasure, even when consummation is secondary to the thrill of apprehension. Queer or otherwise, everyone is implicated in this silent rite: it is part of our species' imperative.

And those that proactively seek it? In cities and interstate rest stops, one enters the space of cruising by becoming, in effect, a useless body—in wait for a synchronic indication. And yet, waiting implies a foreseeable event: a prescription filled at the city's public hospital; a bus ride to the beach; the bloom of California poppies along coastal rocks. There is nothing to fear in one who waits, since the hope of production tethers them to a future act. The unpredictable lies in loitering: our animal body allowed to stand idly, without apparent purpose. A passive reception of color and sound—improper—suspect. An indolent traveler wastes time along paths with frequent pauses. Non-productive, the body enters the space between city and wildness, human and animal, scanning the landscape for any slight movement.

YEARS AGO, Stanley Frank and I were drinking Jameson at the Stud, a gay bar in San Francisco. The crowd hemmed us in along the wooden counter: intense muscle-smell, a sea of bare shoulders. Strobe lights lit dancing bodies and left corners dark, without contour. In the red pulse, he turned to me and said: "All anyone wants to do is sniff each other's butts, but we can't, and this," gesturing to the crowd, "is our coping mechanism."

And we cope. Of course, scientists can and will study the effects of pheromones, body type, hair patterns, the relative size of body parts and their subsequent relation to evolutionary characteristics, supreme adaptations, and the strength of genetic lineage. Some, however, know that when allowing desire to exist outside of Darwinian progressivism, always bent on advancement and health, sexual drive is far messier than a mechanism to purify and strengthen the species as a future organism. Non-productive desire has rawer directives. In high school, I met a young woman at the Majestic Diner in Atlanta who told me: "I fuck everyone I meet to get to know them. It's easier to proceed once you find out how your bodies feel together." Another friend, years later in SF, gestured to a man across the room and said: "He shakes hands with his dick."

Can we lean toward a potentially more utopic topology based around these notions? What is at stake in positioning ourselves as animal—wild—when safety, or lack thereof, is an inherent force of carnality? What are the politics of a visceral life? Does cruising bring about the destruction of religiously and politically sanctioned notions of decency—self-worth—the social bond of our moral and ethical requirement? Can we cruise and remain good citizens?

THIS WRITING REVOLVES around the loiterer: the way the city and the park, the double-body of temporal displacement, resonate at each breath in the space of anticipation—one usually thought of as breathless—the back against the tree—each attempt failing and begun again. Maybe there are more waiting to be written, like the tree-leaning body: write me, they say. Come to the page and write me.

The knowledge of these underlying interests may be unnecessary. Instead, there is an impulse. How does gestural desire—these silent bodies interacting in urban and wild settings—emerge, arise, cause shifts of perception, potential differences in how we think, what we feel—in effect, raising the question: what drives us?

I desire the passivity that writing demands. This may register in reading, itself a sensual act, when the sensations, body narrative, and position of the author emerge through the rise and fall of the breath of the line. In the circulation and consumption of books, can we not see a mirror of cruising behavior? Ritualized, repeated, we enter into books—and for what purpose but to make some sort of contact? A caress.

THE ELUSION ARTIST

My memory wavers—
an oscillation from sternum to feet.
The city expands to many times its size:

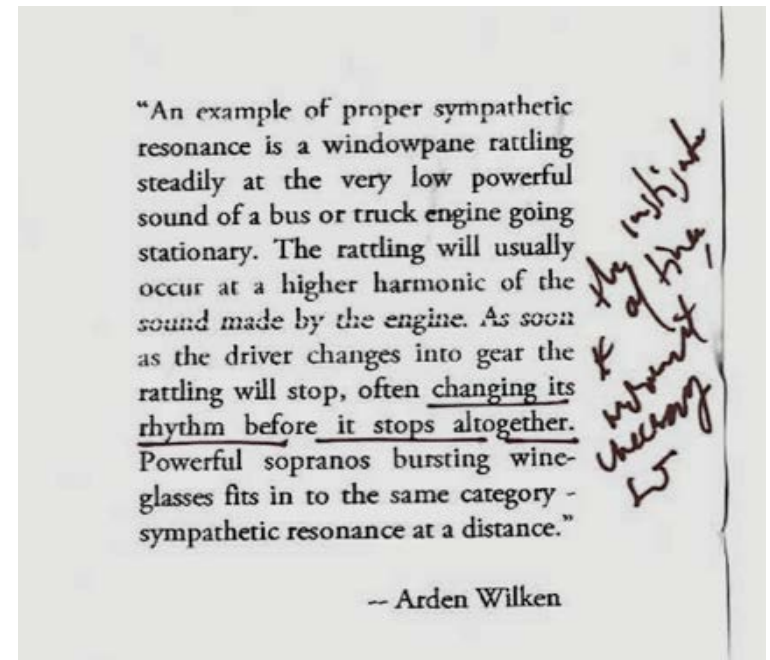


FIGURE 2A. Stability causes its own vibration.

1.

The hotel room was sparse, almost windowless. A self-contained box of brown paintbrushes, knocked around for years, emptied of its contents, and yet: a residue. The lights were as if candles, haloing cheap Italian bedspreads. The wallpaper may have been peeling off around corners, reaching for a baser state.

The shape of a man sitting on a bed dominated the darker forms of chair and desk, long silhouettes held taut, inviting singular repose. His edges retracted in that light, editing themselves for future inaccuracies, a constant wash, as if to decide on *this* width of arm the air must become less stale. Stability causes its own vibration.

More importantly, a suture—two mattresses: then one.

2.

"I want to sit on this bridge forever, on the edge of the world, each of us now someone else's horizon. The river Arno, and its tributaries: Sieve, Bisenzio, Era, Elsa, Pesa, and Pescia, converging."

To deflect. To refuse. To remember: that room, its eggshell glaze, and the shaded sun.

The shower wasn't long enough to commit me toward a means of escape. Grasped, I wanted to be released; once released, I found the confinement of a tiled, white bathroom entranced—each tile a beam.

I wrote on each tile with translucent soap. I sharpened the edge into a point. I rubbed the corners along grout, the underside of the faucet. I kneaded the shavings into the wooden cabinet to hide the excess. Luckily, like spit, soap disappears when worked.

Here, with this point, I drew a crouching figure, its head against a wall. Here, an attempted toe-touch. Here, a head, neck too thin to support it. I did this on the surface of every tile until it was daylight.

He chose when it was daylight.

3.

A streaming—inward. Will you show me? Polite thrusts.

4.

I reached the edge of the sidewalk, an urban rumble, the end of limbs.
The toe of my shoe left an imprint before my coming. Earth knows
the sizes and weights of our bodies when it begs for a lie. Cement
steeps in wet weather: under this—sand; and under this—fire.

A slab of pink pavement, its indentations filled with red chalk.

Caves, inundated with surging seawater, act similarly.

5.

This is not an origin story. There was heat, a sense expanding on
an unreflective surface: brick and stucco, rough—these hills were
once volcanoes Aeneas built to shelter wolves. This is a lie: false
histories parade as coping mechanisms. Alchemical ancestry
requires something more: in rejection the room does not fade. It
must be made into other more complex exits.

A woman from Brazil once told me the mind creates containers our
memories fill to figure solid narration. Manic, when pressurized, we
feel an upward thrust and thus begin anew: the color of perception,
surplus on each surface. "Beauty," she said, "is effusive: the way
molten rock sublimes." Broken mirrors leaned against eucalyptus,
bark scoured by the weight. I can't remember how I found myself
there, but I welcomed the palm-reader's touch in the absence of
closer bodies. Loneliness: another type of divination.

6.

I departed the thin hotel by means of old avenues lined with the tilt of buildings I couldn't read. Sequence, they say, retains a sense of form. I therefore moved forward, trying to forget that tiled wall I would meet in hallucination at each cornered turn. Thread from the overflow of weekend markets filled alongside gutters; engorged, windows overhead lined with soil, anxiogenic to the point of breaking.

The trees were old, their height determined by arid soil and a high sun: size not governed by assiduous pruning. I imagined this. Then, like a bellowing whale, a bus engine cranked down the way, beached.

Rain marked leaves shivering in the throttled afternoon, and I breathed to let settle the disturbances surrounding me.

7.

My walking became a method. Toward what, I didn't know, but I could hear the bus, still warming. "When does the structure dissolve to let us move freely?" I thought, incessant with each step, the foot's vibration, and the shift in timber when encountering dirt in departure from cement. Crossing, curving around contour to hug and give form, a slight push, holding the landscape there, that slight rise. A hand waving in dissolution.

8.

Castor and Pollux were elephants in Paris eaten when Prussia gave siege.

9.

Until: a fence surrounding a forest. The woods are centuries old, a point of referral but also severance. I should have been more circumspect arriving at such an unsettled square. Where streets align: a patch of leaves in trees where sight lines cut and multiply.

10.

A picnic afternoon was meant for a more public lawn. In the morning, the soil turns itself, incrementally regaining the form it has lost. This is the evidence of sculpture: Michelangelo's *Unfinished Slaves*, encased in stone, caught among different shades of shame. Holding, as if in protest, their own substance, that which makes them mobile, the soil that spills around his hesitant shoe, digging troughs at the foot of cypress: back erect in waiting, my feet slipping into mud.

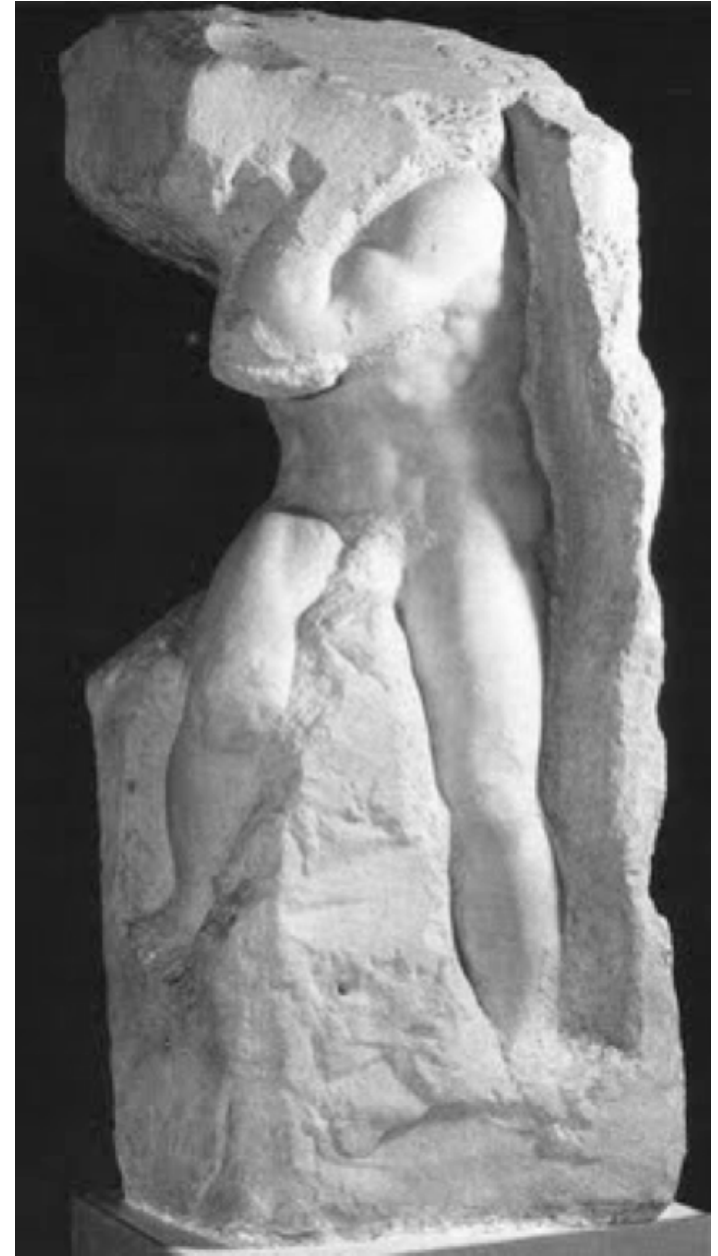


FIGURE 2B. *This is the evidence of sculpture...*

11.

To search, in the multiplied light of two suns, the body that casts an irregular shadow, and to welcome that body, its gradated hues of gray and pale yellow. Unlike the topiary garden, this forest is malignant: by day refracted stains converge under the waste of leaves and sandwich wrappers. Later, one can still hear laughter and see a lying form, a figure reclined, as if moon-bathing to keep its skin opalescent, tissue paper pale, reading a folded newspaper.

12.

Then: one mattress . . . or two—a suture edited for inaccuracies. The shape of a man: a constant wash. Sympathetic: his edges retraced. The width of an arm: retraced; and retraced; and—what could I do that, in doing, finally makes of his body an error?

13.

But my feet don't stop, and the shrubs, when lingering, become a menace. Frustration seeps like sunlight through trees unaware of the coordinated dance below: see, the dark figure, idyll-gazing? Its position pantomimes a water feature, a garden overrun and left to seed.

WILD HORSES OF MOURNING

I'm looking for someone: a receding form.



Less a need for air than room to move. He leaves the apartment for streets that expand on the horizon: multiple vanishing points, wooden struts. Leather sticks to my forearms while my heart, leaving the lungs, rises up my throat. *A flightless bird, a blur of static caught in quick glide.* Clinging to stucco, the click of boots: a descent.

A city is also an extended plane in the way streets move,

in the way bodies move through cities where neon lights mask subtler intentions. What do I remember? Pressed coffee through cheesecloth. The way he exits buildings. Words spoken through walls. A note. A node. But "this isn't a conversation," I say to the brocade. "It's a game of marks." His words made Xs across the whitewash, and mine, small ^s like cuneiform. The rise and fall of breath scratched into plaster smudged by the feet of black flies.

Sometimes, stairways end in water.

I imagine grey flashes, the contours of a face, how the photographer used filters of resonant reds and dark blues, intensifying his sides and multiplying. Likewise, architecture returns to its constituent parts: mud, dust, fibers, colorful piles.

The intensity of sunlight through venetian blinds.

I sit, looking back. Beige, a stain on the morning, soaks into my arm. Thin ridges cross until a thicket wraps me, eyes toward the door. And through the door, a form against a park bench. Rising from the dunes, a live oak. Motionless, its bark etches a rough silence.

But where did these roads lead, ending in pale sand?

Figures line the dunes under a row of palms. Along the edge, drifts hold the streetlights distant. There, soil is more complex than sand where a mound's rise elicits firm skin, an arc of spine. One could imagine the cool of a hill dragged over them, *our houses, ordinary piles and bits of upright stationery*, immersed, like wet roots, in between clenched toes.

Turning, I lift a foot

and walk toward the shore along the saw palmetto: figures stand with wild horses, holding reins invisible, each arm ending in a fist. Darker forms stand in the oaks' shade, folding in the heat. The sun makes the land swirl, a slight tug to the left: vertigo, a polarized shine. Below the beach a floor emerges, terrazzo—pale yellow and mauve—while sand, a dull beige, forms piles that lengthen toward broken oyster shells used frequently in local architecture. Cement pools fill with seawater.

I open the door to catch a breeze.

Bodies lounge around the pool, now covered by beach-tea croton. The sound of waves, silent. Higher up, a fleck of clouds imitates the low tones of a dust storm's approach. Slanting, the ground ebbs toward the call of waterfowl and salt collecting along the tips of Spanish moss.



Under oak, palmetto. In the dunes, wild horses. The figures are there: children in the way waves splash their feet and the glisten of palomino skin. On return, the figures remain, though the horses are now dark bay.

FIGURE 5A. *Under oak, palmetto. In the dunes, wild horses.*

My head against hot leather.

I kick sand to expose the floor underneath:
here, a pale yellow mixed with mauve. Who
else loves the way stones polish beneath the
soil? And the pools now empty. Low tide.
Oak branches lower. Armadillos rustle sea
oats along the eastern shore. Sand fleas crawl
from tiny cuts in the ground. I find a trunk to
lean against, bark coming off in small clumps
where my hands, in reaching, rip. Breathing
in short bursts, I lean toward sunlight coming
through the canopy in jagged lines among
the palms.

My hands, a hot wall.

Light serrates through palmetto. In the shade,
movements along the beach become hazy,
over-saturated.

The expanse spaced fitfully with trees,

there is touch. I see him lie in the dunes. The cord-grass near his head oddly motionless. The only movement along the shore, a sandpiper sucking the soil. "*It's not soil,*" he says, seeing himself there: a mound, some grass, and a grey expanse that slashes the horizon.

With each turn another copse in view.

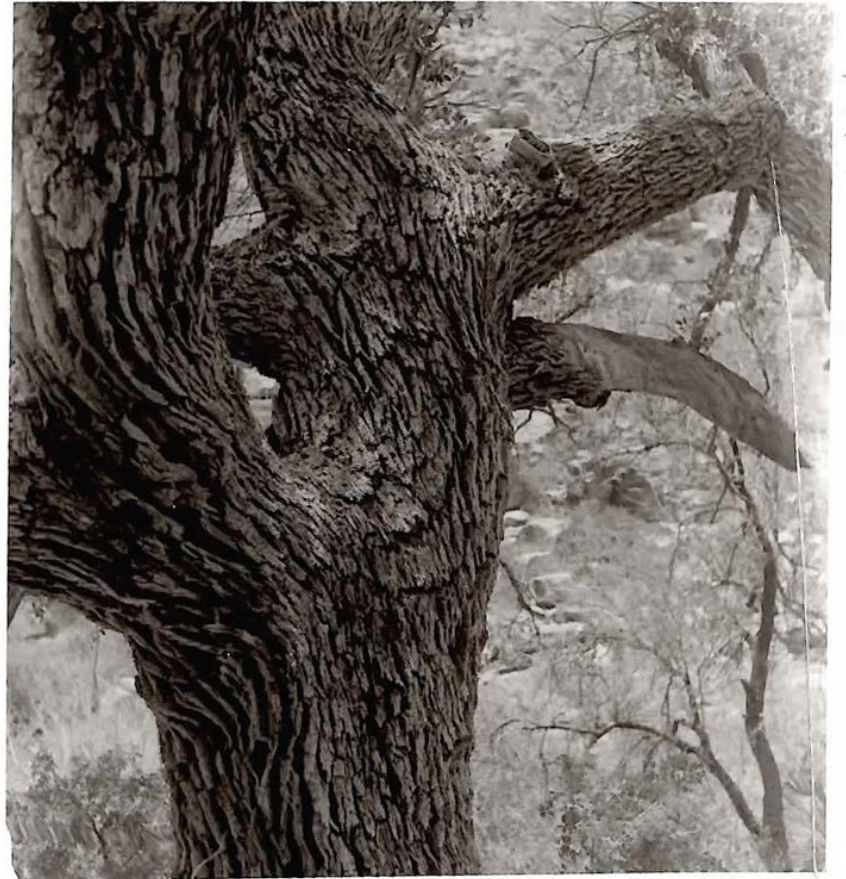


FIGURE 5B. *With each turn another copse in view.*

Pushed against the wall.

A breezeway.

And so he leaves: his form down the metal stairs, the clank of boots. I remember the tips of steel along my back; I see a small, wet-footed child, a motionless figure on the edge of the haze. Its fingertips dip below the shore. I notice bodies waiting in the dunes and scattered clumps of cord-grass, lounging under oak near pools filling with saltwater. I watch the way light shifts as streets end in sand and know that under waves: terrazzo—mauve and pale yellow.

IMAGES

FIGURE 2A. Wilken, Arden. "Inner Sound." *Sound Therapy and Music Healing*. Accessed 4 March 2013.

FIGURE 2B. *Atlas Slave*. Sourced from David Leeds' "Michelangelo at the Accademia, Part 2 – The Unfinished Slaves." *A Husk of Meaning Blog*. 27 August 2011.

FIGURE 5A. from *black notebook*, B+W photograph, UC Berkeley campus, JH Phrydas, 2004.

FIGURE 5B. Gelbart, Mark. Photograph. "Wild horses grazing on a beach dune on Cumberland Island." *Feral Horses Belong on the Georgia Coast and are a Natural Part of America's Ecosystem*. GeorgiaBeforePeople. 27 June 2013.

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AUTHOR BIO



JH PHRYDAS is the author of *Levitations* and curator of the long-term project *X21REQ*, which calls for artists and writers to answer the question: “What does the twenty-first century require of you?” After three years of failed attempts to gain admittance to universities to continue his research, Phrydas became a rogue scholar. Armed with library cards from local universities, he researches, writes, and creates collages for a future novel called *Against Daylight*. He conducts his research within the analog and digital divide: in the hopes that, by reconfiguring memory through embodied narrative, queered history, and alchemical ancestries, we might, as a culture, grind towards a new type of knowledge. One based in bone and written in the stars. He lives in Los Angeles with his partner, artist and DJ *Stanley Frank*.



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