

Atmospherics of Risk

Katie Stewart

An atmosphere under pressure is a self-sensing surround, like thought taking on water. Imperatives swell. Material passes into compounds of sensation; objects become registers; characters are called up.

One night in college, driving my old Dodge Dart through a snowstorm, headlights slicing white clapboards of the old houses and the corner of a porch, my car went into a full spin on a patch of black ice, wind whisking snowflakes off into the dark. I lived a long minute when there was nothing I could *do* but I was *in* it – the story, the skidding tires, the winter light show throwing weight into a turn.

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Even a walk to Walgreens can take you *into* something. You see homeless men coming from Sunday Breakfast at the church, walking so slow and in single file, not saying a word, but alert. A super-yoga crowd of young women crosses their path, crisp and snappy on their way to the earth mother who wears wraps and holds eye-contact; her ex-husband touches when he teaches.

At Walgreens, the pharmacist-tech asks the young guy ahead of me to sign a form for Sudafed and then counsels him not to *take* the Sudafed-laced allergy medication with another one he's *also* buying. The customer spreads Halloween props on the counter – scrubby black rubbery things and a plastic pumpkin – and this was *August*, the whole thing a little off and only slightly interesting in a way that's now ordinary.

Some things we barely notice but that doesn't mean they're nothing: the harsh glances from behind, a smell in the air, cartoon figures tattooed on legs.

Things half-seen out of the corner of the eye have the sense of a question and *questions* get basic: “Did you see *that*?” “What *was* that?”

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Thought muscles through on a vibration or the frankness of a word. Elements cohere not through a logic but through contact.

When the artist Nina Katchadourian found torn spider webs one morning on her porch, she made a practice of repairing them with red thread and tiny tweezers. The next morning, she found the red threads on the porch floor as if the spiders had surgically incised them, spit them out, and re-repaired their webs. So she started filming the spiders by night. Artist and spiders worked together not as an ideal but as form-makers in a territory claimed.

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You know you're in an atmospheric when you walk into a cloud of smells or you live in a toxic place. Oblique events and background noises gather like a fog. The toxicity shows up in a rainbow sheen on water flooding under a tree where children are playing.

A field opens in a note struck or in the thickness of a duration. Barometric pressure is atmospheric but so is a mood, an October mountain, this cloud of unknowns or that swagger.

Something hangs suspended in the air. At the ski area this morning, it was twelve degrees and the advent of winter had arrived in bodies. Workers raced around on snow-mobiles in full gear and helmets. Forty ski-patrol were getting recertified in CPR and learning to check COVID symptoms in open-sided tents in the parking lot. They walked with loose hips and a little low to the ground, their voices now rising out of a body that skis.

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We wait in the company of others for what's still cutting together and apart, aroused by the suggestion of a coherence.

At first, the time of COVID was a time of image flab in overdrive frontier days but it was just getting toilet paper

Inside houses, things shaped up like figurines. projects bloomed, accidentally-bought industrial-sized cans of corn piled up in the back cupboard.

Outside, ordinary enigmas dangled.

Visitors stood in the street like fictional characters, this one doing calf raises on his truck tire while he talks to his friend over the hood.

Golf-ball sized hail came down on a hundred-degree day.
One day there were giant toads in the yard, full-bodied, wet-skinned, with huge black dots on their backs
None of this exactly believable.

Other people become an even bigger problem. The dying longed for the proximity of a warm hand. The living veered off from the harshness of knowing that life was happening. Is there a story?

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At gas station convenience stores, I'd freeze to wait for an unmasked someone gazing at a rainbow of energy drinks to move on. The room would almost whisper: "calm down", "who do you think you are?"

Hundreds of maskless people in white skins descended on the McDonalds in their town at exactly twelve noon. Families dressed nice for an outing, the women with highlights and French nails, walked across the parking lot with heads high as if all *this* was still *good enough*.

At Buy Nothing you find a baby gate for your dog, get rid of your extra shovel, sign up for local fruits and veggies. Algorithms set in motion by Facebook likes or on-line petitions take you into Kayaking and the natural history of rivers, or an addiction to looking at houses on Trulia, or monthly payments to have your body turned into two cubic yards of compost when you die.