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Rants, Raves, & Rhapsodies

*** AMERICAN ***

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PROUDLY PUBLISHED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

THE SOUTHERN MAGAZINE OF GOOD WRITING

3 YEARS AFTER

NEW ORLEANS AND THE GULF COAST

IN THEIR OWN WORDS



\$5.95 USA | \$6.95 CANADA



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DISPLAY UNTIL OCTOBER 2008

Nuptials and Violence

A formal announcement.

One thousand and eighteen days after their first meeting, Deborah Luster and Kevin Sullivan married on April 19, at 6:30 P.M. in the KKProjects in New Orleans. The KKProjects is a collection of six abandoned houses in the St. Roch neighborhood, in which invited artists work their mojo in the spaces-as-they-are. Installations of anything and everything—bottle caps, purloined tarp, decoys, mounds of dirt, old clothes, and gold-leafed appliances—instill the block with a derelict lyricism akin to happiness. The wedding, then, took place under a swollen moon on Villere between Arts and Music Streets in the city of New Orleans.

Deborah Luster is a photographer. Her 2003 book *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* is a gallery of formal, yet intimate, portraits. The photographs are printed on treated aluminum plates, suggestive of tintypes. The metal plates have been exhibited, collected, and circulated widely. Paper prints of the portraits were given to the inmates to keep or swap or send to their people in the free world.

Currently, Deborah is extending her visual repertoire of the violence that surrounds us by photographing landscapes marred by human predation. She is also using video to film survivors, including prisoners who are commonly victims as well as perpetrators. For too many here, it seems as if all roads lead to Angola, Louisiana's maximum-security penitentiary.

Each place continues to yield its own quiddities, its own miraculous movements, and its own tragedies. "Everywhere there is has everything there is to look at," wrote the poet Bernadette Mayer. So Luster visits places with which she has some identification, some familiarity; that speak to her in the most immediate terms. Every picture strives to shorten the distance between "us" and "them."

Six weeks earlier, a double homicide occurred two blocks southwest of the KKProjects, both men found in a room with gunshot wounds to the head. The shooting took place

before noon. Brandon, nineteen, lived a day after the shooting; Richon, twenty-one, was dead at the scene.

Violence, said H. Rap Brown, is American as apple pie. It is not assumed that aggression is soluble in art. It is just proposed that art furthers recognition, remembrance, and reconciliation. At the edge of hurricane and homicide season, Deborah has been working out the technical logistics—first building a darkroom in the trunk of her vehicle; then switching to a film that she can develop at home with station WWOZ setting the pace. There she can clamber out onto her roof to check the results in the lush, natural light.

Kevin Sullivan is Professor of Cell Biology at the National University of Ireland. For over twenty years he has been observing molecular life in living cells. He works with chromosomes and how they move when cells divide. The object of his attention is the *centromere*, a super-duper motorized master regulator machine that directs its own movement and that of the chromosome it is part of. The *centromere* is quite unlike a gene—which we understand pretty well and which is like a volume of information in a library—and instead mystifies us about what it is and how it is duplicated and passed from generation to generation.

Arkansas-born Deborah Luster is a resident of New Orleans. D.C.-born Kevin Sullivan is a resident of Galway, Ireland. They met at a presentation given by Deborah at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego. Their relationship developed over dinner and two years of e-mails that eventually filled a credenza on the second floor of her Marigny home, e-mails that by Deborah's admission became increasingly unsuitable for public consumption, though they bound four-hundred-plus pages of this correspondence as a keepsake.

Kevin's mother was six-foot-one and worked as a secretary in Naval Intelligence at the Pentagon prior to having her four children, one of which she bore after becoming wheelchair-bound due to complications fol-

lowing a medical procedure. Her husband was a chemist who worked at the Naval Research Labs in the early '50s and then in the oil-drilling industry.

Following his Ph.D. from Santa Barbara and post-doc at Johns Hopkins, Kevin worked at Scripps Laboratory from 1986 to 2006. His daughters, Megan and Shannon, therefore grew up tall and lovely in Southern California. His sisters, Kathy and Fran, are misplaced Californians living in Boulder.

Deborah's father, Daniel Dean Nolan, is a retired businessman living in the Phoenix area. He was born in Oregon, in 1925. Her mother, Jean Gunter Tovrea, was murdered at her home in Phoenix on April 1, 1988. It was a defining loss though Deborah was raised by her grandparents in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, her parents having divorced when Deborah was an infant. The first defining loss. There is a stepdaughter, Lila, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Deborah—fair, freckled, hair on fire.

Deborah's next-door neighbor, Kenneth Holditch, a Tennessee Williams scholar who has long been enthroned in Marigny, officiated.

A small park in front of the house lays down a daytime soundtrack of children, dogs, and airborne insects. By nine, the park is locked; the first set is warming up at the Spotted Cat. The trombonist takes it out on the sidewalk to loosen his slide.

Some nights, the chop of helicopter blades makes talking on the phone undoable.

A cornucopia of clouds drifts over Angola.

The wedding march, "Sexual Healing" by Marvin Gaye, was performed by the Hot 8 Brass Band, three of whose members have been killed by men and children wielding guns: seventeen-year-old trumpeter Jacob Johnson was shot execution-style in his home; trombonist Joe Williams was shot by the police (as a teen, Mr. Williams, along with his brothers and sisters, witnessed the shooting death of his mother by his father at the dinner table).



Most recently, the band lost snare drummer Dinerral Shavers, whose accused murderer was acquitted, but then charged with attempted murder for a shooting following his release. The alleged shooter was seventeen at the time of the prior charge. A million-dollar bail has been set for David Bonds, the accused, nineteen. Now he is officially a man.

The terrible stories proliferate. They get passed on and passed down. They become a kind of legacy, the father's violence, the son's. Resolutions stall.

The U.S. Naval Criminal Investigative Service is the only federal unit of its kind, a cold-case squad. The unit's motto holds: *To the living we owe respect; to the dead we owe the truth.* What the camelback houses, the unemployment lines and family histories, the inert rocks and animate grasses themselves have to tell us are all part of the mysterious record of who we are and our penchant for destruction, as well as our thrust toward normalcy, toward righting wrongs, and toward eventual recovery.

The true function of art, says Allen Grossman, is to keep the image of persons as precious in the world. *Everywhere there is has everything there is to look at.* Asked whether Deborah considers her new work-in-progress more futile or more beautiful, she responded, equal parts futile and beautiful.

There is an obsolete word, *meuse*, which referred to the form of an animal left by its lying, particularly a hare and other creatures of game. It is imagined that all of the world bears our mark, holds our form, and that the land is reminiscent in detail of all that ever came of its issue, was built on its foundation, or came to great harm on its surface.

The murder board at St. Anna's Episcopal Church is updated weekly by Father Bill.

In the wake of the murders of filmmaker Helen Hill and musician Dinerral Shavers, which occurred less than a week apart, a citizens group named SilenceIsViolence was formed at the Sound Café to intervene through human engagement. The people will not countenance this bloodshed; the earth will not receive it.

The wedding address was delivered by the groom's brother, Chris Sullivan, an artist, currently collecting poetic essences in glass vials that once contained his insulin.

In other quarters of the city, Nathaniel, nineteen, Antoine, eighteen, and Lorene,

twenty, were shot on the day of the wedding. All were dead at the scene. Another of the week's homicides was Guy McEwen, twenty, a witness to the shooting of Hot 8 drummer Dinerral Shavers. Dinerral also led the band at Rabouin High and mentored at the Youth Music Clinic at the Sound Café. Dinerral, they say, was all about doing good and playing music.

Deborah's wedding dress was made by a former East German Olympic gymnast, Ute Porath, who sews for the film industry and is based in Vancouver and New Orleans. The silk dress, lined with drapery fabric, was worn inside-out, stitched with transfers from Kevin's molecular research and billets-doux between the biologist and the photographer. The little lacy shoes were handcrafted in Burbank and arrived the day before vows were exchanged. The groom wore his one-time jacket.

The big-paper-flower attendants had on some crispy-transparent-copperish thing over their party clothes. They were the following: independent curator Barbara Bloemink (NYC), visual artist Kathy P. Thompson (Fayetteville, Ark.), visual and performance artist Pinky Bass (Fairhope, Ala.), performance art-

ist Rada Dada (Ky. and Hi.), installation artist Kim Irwin (NYC), and mixed-martial-arts fighter, fisherman, and poetry lover, New Orleans native Kristian Rothaermel (whose father's drowned body he recovered after the storm). The attendants stood on the twin staircase of a wiped-out Katrina house and spun their big paper flowers during the reading of the epithalamium. Walker's pulled pork and a high-end champagne were served to everyone's capacity.

After the nuptials, the Pine Leaf Boys of Lafayette performed for the revelers who ground their dancing shoes in the asphalt, armpits going all goaty.

The mosquito-stuffed martins rested under the causeway, and the stink damp spread along the far side of the lake. The repulsive orange teeth of the nutria went to work on the roots of grasses in the canals. Heavily armed men began to troll the streets behind the tinted windows of SUVs. Blotter time. Three men down.

Sirens were heard now and then but between Arts and Music, only kissing occurred under a full, howling NOLA moon, clouds copulating with abandon. 🐔

EPITHALAMIUM

For Deborah Luster & Kevin Sullivan

by Forrest Gander

This couple will have one kiss to seal
this marriage (one public and ceremonial kiss)
in this best company that their company might be blessed
(with that kiss) by our vouchsafe, their wedlock and
leg-lock, but if we only shout our avowal now
into the middle ear of the stone-deaf dog of expectation,
that dog will piss in the flowers, mere ritual,
it's frisson we'd miss (the flowers are quivering),
the groom has slouched recklessly toward Bedlam to be un-bored,
magnetized by the bride's prodigious freckles
and her something-drenched eyes, so let's open
a space for them among us and turn (face to face)
(the flowers are twirling), may he unpetal her until she screams,
may she bend his stem nine ways, may all their steeped
plans go splendidly amiss and may we spark their
formal kiss with our kiss (the face next to you, kiss),
let no shyness efface this moment, *bésense con gusto*,
bésense profundamente, kiss against the flood
of forgetting, kiss and make it deep, seal it in
against the outrage of oblivion and routine, kiss
like you mean it. Mean it. Kiss.