

Unless

VIRTUE IS PERFORMANCE," I said to Danielle Westerman on Wednesday when we had lunch in her sunroom. "A form of acting. Someone said something like that, but I can't remember who."

"Yeats, I think," she said dreamily, stretching in her chair.

"Yes, Yeats."

She is a woman with twenty-seven honorary degrees and she's given the world a shelf of books. She's given her thoughts, her diagram for a new, better, just, world.

A high school in Ontario is named after her, and in France, in the small city of Mâcon, there is a Danielle Westerman Square, a surprisingly beautiful public space with linden trees and cobbled paths, where, when Tom and I walked there early last March, we seemed to move through the drifts of perpetual springtime, as though the people passing us, families, old people, had never known a time of fixed gloom or shame, that they had never been without the filtering, healing buzz of warm sunshine.

In her last years Danielle has become cranky, even with
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me, her translator. She suspects I've abandoned the "discourse," as she always calls it, for the unworthiness of novel writing. She has a way of lowering her jaw when she skirts tis topic, and her eyes seem freshened with disappointment. She is such a persuasive force that I often find myself agreeing with her; what really is the point of novel writing when the unjust world howls and writhes?

Novels help us turn down the volume of our own interior "discourse," but unless they can provide an alternative, hopeful of course, they're just so much narrative crumble. Unless, unless.

Unless is the worry word of English language. It flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it, and yet everything depends on its breathy presence. Unless—that's the little subjunctive mineral you carry along in your pocket crease. It's always there, or else not there. (If you add a capital s to *unless*, you get *Sunless*, or *Sans Soleil*, a very odd Chris Marker film.)

Unless you're lucky, unless you're healthy, fertile, unless you're loved and fed, unless you're clear about your sexual direction, unless you're offered what others are offered, you go down in the darkness, down to despair. Unless provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. Unless keeps you from drowning in the presiding arrangements. Ironically, *unless*, the lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective, cannot be express in

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French. *À moins que* doesn't have quite the heft; *sauf* is crude. Unless is a miracle of language and perception, Danielle Westerman says in her most recent essays, "The Shadow on the Mind." It makes us anxious, makes us cunning. Cunning like the wolves that crop up in the most thrilling fairy tales. But it gives us hope.

At eighty-five, she's not quite lost her superstitious hold on the belief in bad luck and good-luck. She's had enough of both bad and good, so that even when occupied with changing the world, she comes on like an old Presbyterian, accepting her mixed lot. Her new book is selling briskly everywhere, praised for its originality and sinewy analysis. No author tour, hardly any adverting, but

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Carla Cruz 17/3/2016 15:51
Comment [179]: Relating to or denoting a mood of verbs expressing what is imagined or wished or possible

Carla Cruz

All My Independent ~~Wo~~ / men

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~~and~~ in that name I expressed my mild embarrassment at the idea of exhibiting my work
~~but~~ also the hope that we would autonomously move along to authentic exhibiting in the
very near future.

I think I was too busy thinking about the business of being an artist, about being ~~artistly~~ and
fretting over whether A's ego was threatened and being in B's shadow,
~~never~~ mind Pollock, and needing my own thinking space and turning thirty-one, and feeling
older than I've ever felt since.

"~~Wo~~/men possess power, but it is power that has yet to be seized, ignited, and released,"
Who cares about J and her woven placemats and her hopes for the future?

I sat in a plastic chair in the plant-filled terrace, shorts and bare feet, a kerchief on my head,
scribbling day after day, and thinking:

I want to make art. I can scarcely believe in such innocence.

~~its~~ twin, its cancelation is *worth* – we know what that means and know to distrust it.

"Relativity has no moral position. None whatever."

~~but~~ I have no plans to be charming on a regular basis. Of all the social virtues, charm is, in
the end, the most unrewarding.

"Tell me... how are you able to balance your family and professional life?"

Oh, shut up, shut up.

Rude and difficult people are more likely to be taken seriously.

~~friends~~.

What they share is their dominion over this granite building, whose brown stones hint at the
~~colour~~ of the earth beneath, that land so wisely ~~set aside~~ for the public good.

~~but~~ especially art, art that describe the ~~unwrittenness~~ of unremarkable ~~wo~~/men.

"What force have these books had on the world?"

Boo ~~hoo~~.

~~then~~ I got up one day and cleaned the bathroom as it had never before been cleaned. I was
better able to cope after that.

Except lately. I can't talk anymore. Toads will come out of my open mouth. I'll hurt people's
feelings.

My, my, such a good ~~wo~~/man, so organized, too.

Cleaning gives me pleasure, which I'm reluctant to admit

