

The illusion of gray created
by an arrangement of
alternating black and white dots



This is Grayscale #10, a zine for
Intercourse, and an Obsessive
Press Publication #²¹¹213, from
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5 December 1998



11/14/98

I worked unexpectedly late last night with a videographer, finishing up a comic book-inspired screen for a law enforcement training video. (The macho wildlife warden tries to break down a door and ****THUD!**** lands on his ass. I created the ****THUD!**** screen) After Farmi and I successfully patched that screen into the video, I grabbed my jacket and pack, strapped on my biking helmet, ran out of the building, and jumped on my bike. Well, maybe "jumped" isn't the right word. If I had jumped, I would have to insert a ****THUD!**** screen into this paragraph, but I'll say more about that later. I biked the two miles down to University Square Theaters in a record 5 minutes, managed to lock up my bike, purchase a ticket and settle into my seat before the movie began.

It was a pretty good movie. I laughed and even cried a little. It was a tear-jerker which made it a perfect film for me to see while Scott was out of town (to see his beloved Iowa State football team, the Hawkeyes, play in their home stadium against Ohio). Scott will go to tearjerkers only if they get extraordinarily good reviews ... or if they involve pigsaw. So I went myself and had a good time.

My ride home in the dark was considerably less frenzied than my breakneck race against the clock a couple hours earlier. The night was sparkingly clear. Amber and white lights danced in the road ahead of me; the Capitol building glimmered and glowed in the distance, made fantastic by dramatic lighting and the stars in the clear sky. On nights like these, I like to pretend that the capitol isn't a government building but some sort of otherworldly castle. As I settled into my ride home — about 6 miles — the beauty of the urban world, the cool air rushing over my face, and the sounds of a lively city all around me, I enjoyed one of those rare, intense moments of *being*. You know, when you're not thinking about what you're going to be doing a few moments or hours or days later, but are occupied completely by the moment. And the moment stretched for my whole ride home. Few trees still have leaves clinging to them since the big wind storm last week, and the leaves themselves seem to have been swept completely out of town. The smell of wet vegetation, the drifts of leaves one expects at this time of year were absent. But the landscape was alive and bright, not dreary at all. Even as I swooshed down Wilson Street's hill on the other side of the Capitol and crossed onto the bike path that runs along the railroad track, leaving busy streets behind me, I continued to feel as if the air was alive.

There's something wonderful about biking at night for me. I use generator lights that draw energy from the rotation of my back wheel, and theoretically I know this slows me down because I have to peddle harder to both propel my bike and keep the halogen lamps lit. I think it must be the limited field of vision illuminated by my bike light that creates an optical illusion that I'm actually moving faster than I do in daylight. In any case, it's a heady feeling to zip through the cool, beautiful night so silently. I was almost sorry to peddle up onto our driveway, swing off my bike and hang it up in the garage. I felt good.

I know a lot of people feel depressed when November comes, but I don't feel hemmed in by the winter and monochrome colors until I finally carry my bike down into the cellar for the season. I usually do that when the snow and ice comes and doesn't melt away with the morning sun. But this year might be a little worse than other years for me.

Since early this past summer, I've been struggling with sciatica. At least that's what my doctors say is what's wrong. About the only time I don't feel any pain in my left thigh, knee and shin is when I'm really busy (because I'm too distracted to pay attention) or when I'm biking. So, I'm *really* not looking forward to putting my bike away. I've been going to physical therapy weekly and exercising religiously — and I've benefited quite a bit from that — but still, the pain is there almost constantly, even when I go to bed. Most of the summer, in fact, the very worst times were when I was lying down, which made it hard to get sleep. Scott and I had to cancel our plans for a long camping trip around the coast of Lake Superior in September and I'm still limping a lot when I stay on my feet too long. I'm really getting tired of it. But I've got a stationary bike ready to use when I retire my mobile bike for the season, and I'm determined to fight my way through this.

Remember what I wrote up there about not exactly "jumping" on my bike? Well one of the really humorous results of having sciatica is that it's been necessary to develop an unusual strategy for getting on and off my bike. When my leg was just starting to get really bad, I had a couple accidents as I mounted my bike. I'd swing my right leg up and over, and a spasm of pain would lance through my left hip. Twice, I lost balance and fell, the bike on top of me. This happened two days in a row. The next day, Friday, I realized I was terrified of it happening again and I took the bus. And I spent a bit of time over the weekend mulling over the fact that if I didn't get over my fear, I might not ride my bike for the rest of the summer. After all, I feel fine biking; I feel more than fine; it's just the getting *on and off* my bike that hurts. So I thought about what I could do to solve this problem. Well, I look a little silly, I guess, to anyone who scrutinizes my behavior when I wheel my bike out of the bike racks area at work, over to one of the big brick pillars. On the other hand, I bet it's possible that nobody has ever really thought about why I seem to lean, ever so slightly, on that pillar or wall as I slowly lift my leg up and over my bike, or why there's always a wall close

to my left side when I dismount. I laugh, though, when I imagine how it must look. Still, I'm glad to have found a way not to be afraid.

Almost as difficult as swinging my left around and up onto my bike, was *telling* people that something was wrong. I spent several months this summer denying that anything was wrong, and attempting to hide my limp from Scott. I made excuses when he noticed or tried to walk normally in spite of the shooting pains. And then, after I finally went to see a doctor, I spent a month denying that it would have any impact on our camping plans. I was most irritated by not being able to sleep: it was the one time I couldn't occupy my mind with other thoughts and distract myself from most of the pain. This is what I thought, even as I realized how ludicrous that thought was: Once I tell people that I've got a problem, they're always going to be asking how I'm feeling and drawing attention to something I am trying very hard to ignore. You know? When Scott and I changed our vacation plans, I had to tell friends *something*, and sure enough, right away, they started asking me how I was feeling all the time. I was astounded at the rush of irritation I felt, which I barely restrained, telling them that it would take a while before the exercises would have any effect. I don't bring it up as a subject of conversation. In fact, it's been really hard to write these paragraphs.

But it has all clicked in rather neatly with some experiences I had in that Perceptual Learning Theory workshop I took earlier this year. (I wrote about it in *Grayscale* quite a while back.) There were three exercises for each of the three learning "modes" — audio, video and kinesthetic — each designed to reveal how much we noticed in each of the modes.

We listened to a tape recording of a rambling one-way conversation. Some people listened and were easily able to summarize what they'd heard. Other people got so irritated by the too fast, very disorganized speaker, that they tuned out most of the recording. I was mostly amused and constructed a parallel story of what the speaker's companion might be thinking of her long-winded story.

We each examined two very complicated images, with no seeming connection between them. Some people described their pictures with lots of detail; others were amazed that anyone could say more than a few words about them. I found lots of detail and constructed several elaborate hypotheses involving religious symbolism and color theory to

account for the two pictures' juxtaposition.

Then we were asked to close our eyes, dive inside ourselves, and think about what we felt for a couple minutes. I found myself tongue-tied. I'd barely begun to sweep away the distractions of thoughts and conversations before people started cataloging the sensations they were feeling in their *eyebrows*, for god's sake! When it was my turn, all I could say was that my elbow hurt, that I must have bruised it earlier in the day. I couldn't remember when it had happened. I realized that I must sound very much like the people who expressed exasperation that there should be more than a couple words to be said about their pictures.

So I've learned that I tend to ignore my body's sensations as much as possible, except when I'm enjoying them a lot, and sometimes even have a hard time describing what I'm feeling. ... Which physical therapists find rather frustrating. And I have to really fight the urge to avoid talking or writing about what's going on until it's over and I can make a funny story about it, in the past tense. But this is going to be an ongoing situation for me; it's impossible to hide, and it's affecting how much work I get done. I seem to need more sleep than I used to, possibly because I wake up so often at night. And I'm having to be careful about doing too much stuff that requires standing up for long periods of time. But the exercises are helping ... gradually, and I expect to feel a lot better in a couple months.

Scott has been great. He tends to restrict his questions and comments about how I'm feeling to the times when I bring up the subject, which helps me deal with the situation, since it give me control over when we talk about it.

12/5/98

I've never ridden my bike regularly so late into the season. Here it is, the end of the first week of December, and I haven't missed a day since the big wind-storm in early November. All I need to wear is a light sweatshirt, the weather's been so warm. It's *very* weird. We've all been warned that La Nina is going to make this an incredibly brutal winter—lots of snow, very cold temps—but as far as I'm concerned, this is going to be an easy winter. The worst part of Midwest winters, after all, is the fact that it lasts so goddamned long. This morning the air smelled like Spring. I'm expecting to see mosquitoes any day. (I would be

delighted if there was a big hatch and then *bang*—before they had a chance to reproduce—the temperature drops below freezing and kills them all.) What a treat it's been! Every warm day has been a gift.

■■■

I'm really behind on mailing comments. But as you can see by the date above, I'm scrambling just to get a zine to Debbie on time. I accepted several free-lance jobs during the past couple months, which coincided with some clean-up work on the Tiptree book (*flying Cups & Saucers*) and the deadline for the first WisCon brochure, which I'd volunteered to produce. The free-lance work was welcome in terms of income, but hard to fit into my schedule because I wasn't managing to do my normal stay-up-till-4 a.m. thing when work piled up.

Working on the Tiptree anthology, by the way, was a wonderful experience. The actual work bore little resemblance to what I expected. It involved far more picky, detailed attention than I would have predicted. Nevertheless, I loved doing it. (And I'll never look at a book in the same way again!) But it was great working with Debbie and John Berry on this project. I feel like I've learned quite a lot, and hope to do it again someday. (John pointed me at some reference material which I am absorbing in my free time, so I've got some ideas for the future, and I've already got one tentative book job lined up!) *flying Cups* turned out beautifully, I think.

A big chunk of my recent free-lance work has been for a company called Applied Research, Inc., which is run by a couple guys I know through the DNR, who do market research in their spare time. I produce the charts, graphs and layouts for their reports. Their biggest client, lately, has been a giant insurance company that wonders whether some of its more politically unpopular activities of the past couple years are upsetting their customers, and whether the company needs to do anything to counteract bad press. (I'm pretty sure I'm bound by confidentiality in this matter, so I'm not going to tell you the name of the company, though you certainly know it. This company did some really nasty things to their employees last year. Several salespeople were fired when they lobbied for insurance laws not favored by their employer. There were also a few blatant red-lining incidents in Milwaukee last year. And here in Madison, the company made several illegal donations to politicians who favored cutting school expenditures and taxes.)

The fascinating and horrifying thing revealed in the course of the focus groups conducted, was how very, very little most people knew about any of these incidents. The employee scandal, the red-lining, and the illegal political donations all made headlines in the localities most affected. Scott and I had numerous, outraged conversations about all of them. And yet, only a tiny percentage (less than 10%) of people interviewed had even the tiniest inkling of knowledge about any of the incidents. And those that had heard something weren't much concerned. None of the customers interviewed had changed their insurance coverage as a result, nor did anyone have any plans to shop around for other coverage. I imagine that the reaction in the boardroom upon receipt of this study will be a big sigh of relief (that, and wow, what a cool layout, of course.). It will be business as usual for this insurance company. No need to treat their employees

equitably, no reason to change their racist assumptions, and no need to stop funneling money to regressive candidates....

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Scott and I just purchased tickets for the Florida Conference of the Fantastic (the March 1999 conference where the Tiptree Award ceremony will be held). The tickets were quite a bit more expensive than we'd hoped, but what can you expect when you're going to Ft. Lauderdale over Spring Break? Ah well. So now we're hesitating about Potlatch. I don't know if we will be able to afford it unless we get a really good price on plane tickets. We're looking for deals, though, and hope to be in Eugene in February.

My plan is to begin mailing comments on my backlog zines, a few a day, this week. Just in case you wondered.

—Jeanne