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LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

THE PAGER

By KIM YŎNGHA
Translated by DAFNA ZUR

Visionaries dream about reality. Believe me, reality is what visionaries dream about.

Chang Chŏngil, from *The Woman Crazy For Sylvia Plath*.

1. Pager

Should I?

I picked up the phone, started to dial, put it down again. Hmm, maybe now's not the best time. She may be sleeping, in which case she'll be a little short of pleased to hear from me.

Bottom line is—I behaved totally out of character yesterday. Maybe that's why my heart starts to race when I recall the scene. I hadn't tried a stunt like that in all twenty-eight years of my life. I'm the vacillating, wishy-washy type, who ends up doing a whole lot of nothing.

Then I thought of Suji. Three months ago, she tells me she's going overseas to study. "You mean, your parents agreed to send you?" I said, surprised. She

stared back at me with a very perplexed expression. “Obviously I’m not going alone.” I was still clueless. “What are you talking about?” I said, annoyed, pressing her for an answer. “You still don’t get it?” She said sharply, picking up her pocketbook. “I’m breaking up with you, I’m marrying someone else, and I’m going abroad to study. Now do you get it?” I nodded. As she got up, I grabbed at her pocketbook and blurted, “Good luck in your studies.” She gave me the most pitiful smile. And that was it. My parting words sounded ridiculous even to me.

I sat in the coffee shop after she had gone. Our last moments left me completely red-faced, so that the full realization that I’d made a mess of the relationship escaped me. I thought about it long and hard. Where did I go wrong? And what made her so pompous and confident? How could she do it? How could she walk out on our two-year relationship, marry someone else and go off to study? At this stage, I was a bit angry.

On reflection, I knew I’d gotten it wrong. Breakups aren’t one-sided. They don’t happen because of one or the other’s mistake. Relationships end because they’re meant to end—isn’t that what love is all about? Still, I agonized about where I had gone wrong. If I’d made mistakes, they’d include my habit of religiously watching two videos a day, buying her only cheap earrings, and never attempting to write a resume or CV. Anyway, she was gone. At this moment she’s probably parked her Japanese car in front of a supermarket in Boston, and she’s inside with her husband buying an armful of frozen meals, just being happy. Of course, Suji’s husband is presumably ecstatically happy, too. Suji’s the kind of girl who knows how to hide her feelings.

Good luck in your studies. I started playing with the idea of showing up at her wedding to take back what I had said. I fantasized endlessly about walking up to the bride in her waiting room, surrounded by all her friends, and whispering something devastating. Fantasies—they were all the revenge I was capable of, my only entertainment. My best line: “I was in the neighborhood, so I stopped by.” Picturing myself hanging over her, whispering in her ear with a nonchalant smile put me in the best of moods. She’d be tense, expecting the worst, and then she’d giggle nervously in relief.

My final fantasy was about the moment at the end of the ceremony when the photographer asks the friends of the bride and groom to step forward. I’d squeeze in on the groom’s side. Later, when they look at their wedding photos together, they might even get a strange thrill from seeing me standing there.

But I never did go. I stayed home and rented the comedy, “Four Weddings and a Funeral.” I took part in the movie’s four weddings and one funeral. I remember enjoying the film, but I can’t recall the storyline now. That’s the way it always is with me.

Should I try to page her again?

I fingered the phone again. As I did so, her presence from yesterday vividly came to mind.

It was about 3 PM, at Ch'ungmuro subway station. I was walking along the yellow line, the one the announcement warns against: 'The train is arriving; for your safety, please step behind the yellow line.' Maybe I was safe, maybe not. I like that kind of tightrope walk. My favorite tightrope is the one that divides reality from fantasy. Sometimes I think that reality is fantasy; sometimes I go through life believing that my fantasies are real. But this blur never struck me as problematic. It's like watching a film: I explore my fantasy world within a fixed framework of time.

It was on that subway tightrope walk that I met her. She wasn't standing on the brink like me; she was leaning back against the much safer wall. Strands of straight brown hair fell over her shoulders; a long, voluminous knitted sweater came down to her behind, complementing her oval face; and her jeans, frayed at the bottoms, dragged down to the floor, giving her a sexy aura of decadence. But it was the girl's pose that held me spellbound. She was leaning against the wall, one leg stretched out straight, one slightly bent, and her hands were in her jeans' pockets. But this doesn't really describe her. The key was she knew how to adopt the pose that would make her look most beautiful. She must have a full-length mirror in her room. Because I'm sure that only people who watch themselves endlessly in the mirror can pose so impeccably. I imagine her looking at herself naked in the mirror. Stripped bare, she slowly walks up to the mirror. And she strikes that pose, listening to her walkman, swaying ever so gently. The music? Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" would be best. Nudity and death—I liked the combination. The two have one thing in common—exposure. Nothing to hide. Nudity exposes that original human form normally hidden by our clothes; death exposes the secrets of the dead. Death snatches away the sexual complications, absurdities and extravagances from the defenseless hands of the dead.

The girl also had big eyes, and her gaze stayed fixed. Only people who are used to being the focus of public stares can do that. Like anchors on the nine o'clock news, or TV stars. Normal people look all around in subway stations. Those that don't look around know that if they do, they're most likely to clash eyes with someone else.

Yesterday—the day we met—started off on the right foot. A Taegu university magazine commissioned fifty pages of manuscript. They wanted an analysis of recent commercial advertisements, looking specifically at those that borrow words and concepts, which in the past were used exclusively by social movements. For

example, they asked me to decipher the social significance of ads like this one, for jeans: “The motion of tireless revolution.” Blue jeans and revolutionary motion. Commercial imagination is such a melting pot. Throw in Lenin’s collapsed bronze bust; add rhetoric born of radical ideas. That’s why this kind of imagination can’t be called imagination at all. This kind of imagination probably dreams up chemical defoliants and industrial mergers. Anyhow, they’d pay about 200,000 won for the completed manuscript. That would be enough to cover books and cigarettes for the next while.

How long do you plan on living like this? Suji used to ask. To be honest, I wasn’t all that content with having to survive on miscellaneous articles in school papers and magazines. But answering that type of question with the “I promise to get my act together” line was even worse. Moreover, there was no reason she’d believe me. You say things like that to justify yourself in politics. She was going to leave me, and this was her way to secure the foundations for a final farewell.

Fortunately, I feel the girl I met yesterday suits my temperament infinitely better than Suji. Suji always blamed other people for the misfortunes in her life; this girl didn’t. The kind of girl that can pose like that, the kind of girl that watches her naked reflection in a full-length mirror couldn’t maliciously blame others for her own problems. And when you think about it, my pathetic attempt at a farewell—*Good luck in your studies*—was not entirely my fault either. Inevitably, I became flustered and hesitant in front of a woman who played her role to such ‘political’ perfection. She was always whining about how I’d ruined her life. She kept saying that had she met someone decent, she’d have continued her studies.

Imagine how refreshing this new girl is!

As soon as the train started coming in, the girl leaning against the wall stepped behind me. I heard a faint jingle. I stole a furtive glance in her direction. The sound must have been coming from the two rings hanging from each ear that were swinging even as I looked away. Did she know that the accessories dangling from her ears emitted a sound that stimulated some man’s auditory functions?

A love affair with a stranger. What an exciting thought! And a totally new experience for me. I’ve always dated women I knew long and well, women I met at work or some gathering. I’d find an appropriate weekend, watch a second-rate porn film, drink draft beer in the back alleys of Kwanch’öl-dong, and spend the night with whoever would. Soon, formal speech turned mutually familiar, and next thing I know she’s demanding I say I love her. Affairs devoid of any imagination. It was scary, sometimes. Nothing was up to me—I just had to fit together the right puzzle pieces.

But the girl from yesterday—she’s different. In that brief moment of time

between the jingling of her earrings and the opening of the train door, I was able to construct a photo album with hundreds of still shots. That's how different she was. I imagined her in a minor role in a light porn film; then as an understudy appearing only in the sex scenes; then as the fiancée who lost her husband-to-be when the Samp'ung department store collapsed in 1995; and finally as the heroine of a tragic love story, whose beloved runs off with another girl to study abroad. Of these, the body double role was my favorite: a girl who does the full nude scenes that big movie stars avoid. She dreams of stardom, but necessity forces her to do this kind of work from time to time. She's got the perfect body and a face to match, but she hasn't had her lucky break, and so she makes a living as a body double. She loved a man, but one day he discovered her on the screen and dumped her.

The doors slid open. A man in a suit with the sports section of a newspaper in his hand got off first. Next, a man with tightly-bound hair, and a woman holding a black drawing board. They were followed by two or three hefty middle-aged women who pushed me clumsily yet determinedly out of their way. I thought of the girl with the jingly earrings staring at the back of my head, and I waited until everyone had gotten off. I leaned against the exit door, and she stood opposite me. We were in a perfect position—all we had to do was look up and we'd be facing each other. But of course, she didn't look around or lose focus.

'The train is about to depart—please watch the closing doors,' came the announcement, and the train left Ch'ungmuro for Tongdaemun station. Only three stops left to Hyehwa, my stop. Will she get off at the same station? And if she doesn't?

When I get anxious, I start fiddling with my belt. It's a bad habit I acquired growing up. I got all my brother's hand-me-downs, and I was always scared my pants would fall down. It's about time I stopped since I'm at the point in life when I buy my own clothes. But whenever I get antsy or uneasy I still keep pulling up my pants. Thanks to that habit, though, I remembered my pager. I read a story once about a girl who only gave her pager number to her boyfriend, so that every time it went off, her heart would skip a beat. The Pavlov effect, I think it's called. The story made me laugh. Even if she dated other men, her reflex reaction wouldn't easily disappear. People may disappear, but conditioned reflexes stay on.

I pulled out the beeper and started fingering it. A generic model, selling for 30,000 won, it was the most basic of pagers—a stumpy thing with a black frame, unimpressive design, of course incapable of giving the time, showing nothing but the phone number of the caller. And now that I was stuck at home all day struggling with my writing, it was a pure nuisance, swallowing monthly payments of 10,000 won.

Then it came to me—why not just give it to her? That’s it! I started to fidget. What if I just hand it to her and quickly get off the train? That will leave her completely confused. Still, I don’t think she’ll throw it away. She just wouldn’t feel right about it. And since she doesn’t know the number, she won’t be able to use it for herself. The pager will be waiting for my calls only. That’s when I became aware of my erection. I was aroused. Never in my life had I attained such control—someone’s destiny lay in receiving my call.

She’s about to face her destiny. To acknowledge the fact that she can’t just toss the pager away, and that she has no choice but to wait for the call that will set it off.

‘Next stop is Tongdaemun Station. Tongdaemun Station. The doors will open on your left.’ One station to go. The palm holding the pager started to get clammy. What should I say when I give it to her? *I’ll be in touch*. No, that’s weird. *I’ll page you*. That won’t do, either. At times like this I completely lose my power of speech, or everything I say comes out garbled. What will I say? The sweat I felt in the palm of my hand I now felt running down my back, and my groin felt moist. I shut my eyes tight.

‘Next stop is Hye-hwa Station. Hye-hwa Station. The doors will open on your right.’ I approached her. A billboard put out by the National Security Bureau read, “Drugs, Smuggling, Industrial Spies—International criminals threaten our society...” When I approached her, she looked up wide-eyed, as if she’d noticed my existence only then. The expression on her face froze me in my tracks—it was the kind of refined expression that only those with heightened self-awareness are able to pull off. The door slid open. Desperate, I blurted out the one thing that came to mind. Maybe it was the dizziness. I think I was swaying slightly when I stepped off the train.

Strangely, those moments felt like a dream. Isn’t it true, though, that the most decisive moments in life are always so intense that they are, in fact, elusive. First kiss, first sexual experience, first confession—you can talk about them, but that’s all. It’s like when a typhoon comes—you only know its power after it has passed through. Anyhow, I have just a vague memory of what I said:

“It’s set to vibrate. Please, carry it on you at all times.”

I remembered that much before exhaustion overcame me. I’ll page her tomorrow. With a blanket over me, I fell asleep on the sofa.

2. Pagee

She was about to get her period. Her head was starting to pound, and moving around just made her grumpy. Tomorrow or the day after, she thought to herself. PMS was awful—this time of month she invariably felt like having her womb extracted.

She kicked off the cashmere blanket, stood up, opened the door to her room and walked towards the kitchen. The kitchen of her eleven *p'yǒng* apartment was always too dark because the windows were so small. She took out the cornflakes, poured the milk and started to eat. It's supposed to be a low-fat meal, great for her figure. Should I try the grape diet? But grapes are so pricey. Can you survive on grapes? She liked the sound of it. Living and dying on grapes.

Beep. Beep. Beep. The pager in her room went off. She pushed aside her bowl of cornflakes and went to get it. Looks like they're filming today, after all. She picked up the cordless phone and returned to the kitchen.

"Hello? It's me, Songhwa... yes.... Two o'clock this afternoon? How long will it take? About two hours? Yes. That's fine. I'll see you then."

She placed the phone and pager on the table and went back to her breakfast. Of all days, why does the bowl of cornflakes never seem to end? She spooned the food into her mouth, utterly aggravated. The director says two hours, but that's just his estimate—she knew very well it all depended on what time the main actress would decide to show up. She'd been working as a body double for two years now, and not once had she seen the main actress show up on time. Especially on days like today, when they were filming the sex scenes. If you think about it, it's pretty amusing. It actually wasn't hard to understand why they were showing up late every time these scenes were up.

Her mind wandering, she suddenly stood up. She walked back into her room as if she'd forgotten something and took a second pager out of her pocketbook. She checked to see if any calls had come in, and seeing that none had, she came back to the table. She stared at the pager for a moment. Black frame, cheap, nothing special. With all those light, pretty models out these days, "fashion" pagers and "card" pagers, why on earth would someone walk around with this thing? And yet looking at it put her off less than she expected. *It's set to vibrate...* The expression on his face as he spoke to her, placed it in her hands and hurried off was still fresh in her mind. And like he said, the pager was set to vibrate. But why wasn't he calling? Why wasn't he paging her?

She felt his presence even before they got on the train. He was balancing himself along the yellow line, walking in her direction. He walked as if on a

tightrope, his arms angled like a penguin, and when he stopped, she realized that he had his eye on her. So she did what she always does—she lowered her gaze, and quietly felt his movements. She always believed that you should learn to enjoy being looked at by strangers. No matter what people say, she thought, I'm still an actress. He seemed to stare at her for a while, and then as the train came in, he went to the front of the queue and waited. And she came up right behind him. But something seemed to have surprised him, and he looked back at her. He was sensitive to her movements. And it wasn't such a bad feeling.

She got up from the table, planted the bowl of leftover cereal in the basin and went back into her room. She took off the t-shirt she'd slept in and stood in front of the mirror. She was now completely naked. She admired her hips and back in the full-length mirror beside her dressing table. It'd been four days since she'd worn panties so that the line along her hips had now almost disappeared along with the bra line across her back and underarms. She had to stop wearing underclothes four days before a shoot because of those lines. She stared at her body absent-mindedly for a while. She's been at this for four years now. The first job her modeling agency had gotten her was a lingerie commercial, and that seemed to have shaped her destiny. It was always like that: grades, aptitude tests, personal records—they never seemed to affect her future one way or the other. The mood of her modeling teacher, the color of the sky that day, the level of humidity, the chance moment a certain man spotted her on the screen—these were the things that had decided the direction of her life. They were it. And that "certain man"... she'd loved him once. Or rather, through him she'd allowed herself to dream of a different world.

They first met in a jazz bar in It'aewon, and he said he worked for a semiconductor company. His company badge was stitched onto his smart grey suit. She introduced herself as a student majoring in theater and film. When he started discussing Sergei Eisenstein's montage techniques in "The Battleship Potemkin," she was thrown off. She hesitated, and he quickly covered up for her embarrassment, politely saying "So, you're an actress, then?"

"I was never a good student," she said with a weak smile.

"I thought you looked familiar," he offered.

Three months later, when they were on a summer vacation together in Pusan, he proposed. "Marry me," he said, and slipped his hand in her clothes. She believed him. Back then, anyway. A month later, he told her that he'd spotted a girl in a video who had the same particular freckle on her bottom. "What a coincidence!" she said, denying any connection. But then he waved a girlie magazine in her face with a triumphant smile. Inside, wearing nothing but a girdle,

her face turned, was a girl who was unmistakably Songhwa. He seized her arm as she turned to leave. "Give it to me one last time?" he said. She came back in and stripped. She stood under the fluorescent light, looked into his eyes as she peeled off her panties and took him in her arms. For the longest time he stayed soft. As she left the house, she heard the iron door slam shut behind her.

She probably always knew how it would end. But thinking about it just made her more miserable, so she shook the thoughts away. So what if I knew? And what if I didn't? It's all in the past anyway, and there's no way he's coming back. She started getting ready for work.

She placed a thin band-aid on her nipples to keep them from protruding and shaved her armpits. She loved the feeling of shaving cream on her skin. She slid a slip over her bare skin and put on a dress. It's not see-through now, right? She checked herself one more time in the mirror and left the house. The cold draft that snuck up between her thighs reminded her that it was autumn.

She was on her way out of the building when she suddenly realized she'd forgotten something and quickly turned back. She opened the door with her keys, picked up the stumpy, generic pager and stuffed it in her pocketbook. She knew she was being ridiculous, but she didn't take it out.

He's probably going to page me today, she told herself with considerable conviction. He would have been too shy to call as soon as yesterday and I'm sure he's got his own busy schedule. That would explain why he didn't follow her but just shoved the pager in her hands and took off. It's probably better not to lie this time, not to tell him the bit about majoring in film and theater. He seemed like a man who wouldn't leave her if she told him she was a body double in sex scenes. If he's the kind of guy to say what he did passing her his pager, and if he's the kind of guy to embrace that kind of indecisiveness and originality, then presumably he wouldn't leave her. But what if he really does page me today? Should I meet him like this, no panties on? Or should I suggest we meet tomorrow?

The pager seemed to exude a female animal fragrance. As long as she had it on her, he'd be able to call her anywhere. Carrying it meant that she had already accepted him. She wasn't particularly proud of her reasoning, but she still couldn't throw the pager away. She was somehow convinced that if she were to discard the pager, she'd be cut off from all relationships for the rest of her life. The pager was another scrutinizing gaze. Somewhere in this world, there were eyes focused on her. And she was used to this kind of scrutiny.

Once she went to a small pub that sold skewered meats. She spotted herself on the wall, right above her head, wearing a bathing suit and lying on a rock. It

was a hanging calendar, advertising a brand of chilled, clean rice wine. That day, she felt like the girl in the photo was someone else, and she turned her head and drank quietly. But after a drink or two she began to steal glances at the calendar she'd been ignoring. She ended up with tears in her eyes. Now, why should I be crying like this, over nothing? It's not even pornographic. I'm dressed in a bathing suit and everything. And dammit, it's my job, what I get paid for! I'm not crying because I'm sad, she decided, but because I look so cold in that photo. The day that shot was taken was really cold. The calendar shot must have been taken in October. Pretend it's summer, the team leader was saying. That was easy enough. She could pretend Kyōngp'odae was really Phuket, and that she was advertising some beauty product, not a calendar. But the goose bumps covering her entire body, they couldn't be fooled.

The moment she stepped into the studio, she steadied her nerves. It was ten to two; she started fiddling with her makeup but then stopped. What's the point? Her face won't even be seen clearly on screen. Two-thirty, and the main actress still hadn't shown up. Typical! Mr. Cho, the director, was calling the actress's cell phone, but he didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Cell phones, Songhwa thought to herself, staring at one. If a pager is a cheap prostitute behind a showcase window in Seoul's Miari Texas prostitute district, then a cell phone is a high-class call girl. She passed such a show window in a cab once, and the cab driver told her the girls were sitting there waiting for someone to ask for them. But there were also high class call girls and famous kisaeng entertainers like Hwang Chini, who had the privilege of choosing their partners, or, for example, paging whoever it was they wanted. Yes, the pager was definitely a low-class prostitute, she repeated to herself in self-scorn. At the same time, she made sure it was turned on. Nothing yet. Could he have forgotten? Hell, any of his friends will do as well. Could someone please just get this pager vibrating? She grasped the pager in her right hand and uttered a feeble half-prayer.

It's cold. She rubbed her arms. The studio was chilled with an early fall cold. It would warm up in a minute, once the lights were turned on, but for now it was cold. The staff huddled in groups of twos and threes, all waiting for the actress's arrival. Forty minutes later, she walked in wearing dark, pert sunglasses. Bad traffic, right? The director interjected on her behalf, before she had a chance to offer an excuse.

Songhwa stared vacantly at the actress, who'd set herself up in a corner of the set and was doing her makeup. Of course, she must do her makeup while we film the sex scene. As soon as she's done, the filming starts. The actress and the main actor pretend they're drinking cognac at the table by the bed. The cognac bottle is filled with flat coke. She delicately sips it. A moment later, she staggers, and when

he tries to give her a hand, she shakes him off and slaps him across the face. “Cut” calls the director. “That hurt, didn’t it?” the actress titters, rubbing the actor’s face.

“Hey, body double!” Songhwa is rarely called by her name. She gets up obediently and walks towards the bed. The director gives her a few instructions. You saw her slap him? He’s really angry. He slaps her back, throws her on the bed and rapes her. Got it?

She follows the actress to her dressing room, to change into her outfit. She steals a glimpse at the actress’s body—way below her expectations. “Great body,” the actress tells her, a tinge of envy in her voice.

Songhwa got slapped in the face four times. The actor never asked her if it hurt. He threw her on the bed five times, and tore her clothes off four times. She had to stand naked for about three hours, enduring the actor’s sweaty odor. “Try not to bruise me,” she protested gently, but it was as if he hadn’t heard; he didn’t bother to answer.

The filming complete, Songhwa was about to leave when the director came over and handed her a money envelope. When she came out of the studio, she bought two bottles of Gatorade and gulped them down. Gets absorbed quicker than water, they say... But while the glucose was being absorbed in her body, the pager had still not vibrated.

On her way home she stopped at the corner store and bought four Hite beers and a bag of peanuts. On days like these she had to have a drink, even on her own. She walked in, pulled off her dress and dug out a pair of panties and a bra. She felt a bit calmer. Without underwear she felt restless, ungrounded. She sat down at the table and cracked open a beer.

What’s he like? She wonders as she fondles the pager. She makes him into a cabaret-hopping pimp, then a poor student, then a rebellious second generation corporate son, then a writer. Of these, she liked the writer best. *It’s set to vibrate*. Only a writer would be capable of saying something like that. He probably got dumped by his girlfriend because he doesn’t have a steady job and does nothing but write all day. His ex probably ended up marrying somebody else and going abroad to study, and he was battling with loneliness when he met her. He’s probably thinking about her right now and writing a short story about it. That’s why he’s so scared of meeting her. Because if he does, and the fantasy is shattered, he’ll never be able to finish the story.

She decided to wait. Until he finishes the story. And when the pager does vibrate, it will signal that the story is completed. She’ll buy him a round of drinks with the money she made getting pretend-raped. Under a calendar advertising a chilled, clean rice wine.

3. No Page

When I opened my eyes, it was well past one. As soon as I was up, I deliberated again: should I page her, or not? Let's have a wash up first. I dragged myself out of bed and went into the bathroom. A scruffy-looking man looked back at me in the mirror.

"Imagination is another level of reality," I mumbled at the mirror. Suddenly, I was dying to see her. The girl I'd seen leaning against the wall in Ch'ungmuro station. The girl posing with absolute, perfect charm.

I began to feel hungry. I rummaged through the fridge and found a slice of cold pizza and some orange juice. The fridge was full of all kinds of food. Several times Suji had given the fridge a good cleaning. She'd gone after the fridge with religious zeal, like a Catholic priest after Holy Communion. But for some reason, I'd never really warmed up to that sparkling fridge. It was so clean and neat that eating anything from it actually felt like Holy Communion. She was like a descendant of light, and as befits a descendant of light she had no interest in the power of imagination. When you think about it, she did the right thing by getting out of this dark den and going to study overseas with a guy who has it together. Were we to break up all over again, I'd probably send her off with the same line: *Good luck in your studies.*

I chucked the pizza box in the garbage bin and sat at the desk. I was behind on the draft for the university in Taegu, and when that was done, I had to write a story for the end of the year volume of Spring Arts and Literature. Suji was right—I couldn't live like this forever.

OK, let's start. But before that, there's some unfinished business to take care of. I have to page the girl. I have to call her, now that she is carrying my pager, my plaything. I took a deep breath and picked up the phone. Slowly I dialed the ten-digit number, and my voice greeted me on the other end. "Hi, you've reached Yi Yōnshik. To leave a numeric page press '1.' To leave a voice message, press '2.' I'll get back to you as soon as possible." I pressed '1' and carefully entered the seven digits of my phone number. Then I hung up.

Would she have kept the pager on vibrate? What would she be doing at this moment? Could she possibly be thinking about me?

I didn't have to fantasize long.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Somewhere, a frantic signal was going off. I was surprised and completely confused. Turning my room upside down, I finally discovered the source of the commotion in the inner pocket of my jacket. The black, stumpy, generic pager. With my number flashing desolately in the display panel. I'd had it

all along.

So nothing had changed. As usual, I'd chickened out at the last minute. What would have happened had I really given her the pager? Whatever—real life is tedious, and fantasy is exciting. *It's set to vibrate?* What a joke! My laughter seeped into the corners of the tiny apartment.

As I turn on the computer, I decide to let go of the fantasy of paging the girl. I mean, it's just my own number that's going to end up on display. I ended up paging myself. That's what my fantasies amount to: an ex-lover's shadow, empty booze bottles piling up night after night, twenty fairy girls that can be created in the course of a single night.

I decide that this is a story waiting to be written. A short story that would start "She was about to get her period. . . ."

My mind made up, a calendar comes into my field of vision. Today is October first, but my calendar is still on September. I get off my chair and tear off September and scrutinize the half-naked girl lying on the rock. She looks so familiar. . . where have I seen her before?