We Didn’t

Stuart Dybek

We did it in front of the mirror

And in the light. We did it in darkness,

In water, and in the high grass.

—Yehuda Amichai, “We Did It”

We didn’t in the light; we didn’t in darkness. We didn’t in the fresh-cut summer grass or in the mounds of autumn leaves or on the snow where moonlight threw down our shadows. We didn’t in your room on the canopy bed you slept in, the bed you’d slept in as a child, or in the backseat of my father’s rusted Rambler, which smelled of the smoked chubs and kielbasa as he delivered on weekends from my Uncle Vincent’s meat market. We didn’t in your mother’s Buick Eight, where a rosary twined the rearview mirror like a beaded, black snake with silver, cruciform fangs.

At the dead end of our lovers’ lane — a side street of abandoned factories — where I perfected the pinch that springs open a bra; behind the lilac bushes in Marquette Park, where you first touched me through my jeans and your nipples, swollen against transparent cotton, seemed the shade of lilacs; in the balcony of the now defunct Clark Theater, where I wiped popcorn salt from my palms and slid them up your thighs and you whispered, “I feel like Doris Day is watching us,” we didn’t.

How adept we were at fumbling, how perfectly mistimed our timing, how utterly we confused energy with ecstasy.

Remember that night becalmed by heat, and the two of us, fused by sweat, trembling as if a wind from outer space that only we could feel was gusting across Oak Street Beach? Entwined in your faded Navajo blanket, we lay soul-kissing until you wept with wanting.

We’d been kissing all day — all summer — kisses tasting of different shades of lip gloss and too many Cokes. The lake had turned hot pink, rose rapture, pearl amethyst with dusk, then washed in night black with a ruff of silver foam. Beyond a momentary horizon, silent bolts of heat lightning throbbed, perhaps setting barns on fire somewhere in Indiana. The beach that had been so crowded was deserted as if there was a curfew. Only the bodies of lovers remained, visible in lightning flashes, scattered like the fallen on a battlefield, a few of them moaning, waiting for the gulls to pick them clean.

On my fingers your slick scent mixed with the coconut musk of the suntan lotion we’d repeatedly
smeared over each other’s bodies. When your bikini top fell away, my hands caught your breasts, memorizing their delicate weight, my palms cupped as if bringing water to parched lips.

Along the Gold Coast, high-rises began to glow, window added to window, against the dark. In every lighted bedroom, couples home from work were stripping off their business suits, falling to the bed, and doing it. They did it before mirrors and pressed against the glass in streaming shower stalls; they did it against walls and on the furniture in ways that required previously unimagined gymnastics, which they invented on the spot. They did it in honor of man and woman, in honor of beast, in honor of God. They did it because they’d been released, because they were home free, alive, and private, because they couldn’t wait any longer, couldn’t wait for the appointed hour, for the right time or temperature, couldn’t wait for the future, for Messiahs, for peace on earth and justice for all. They did it because of the Bomb, because of pollution, because of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, because extinction might be just a blink away. They did it because it was Friday night. It was Friday night and somewhere delirious music was playing — flutter-tongued flutes, muted trumpets meowing like cats in heat, feverish plucking and twanging, tom-toms, congas, and gongs all pounding the same pulsebeat.

I stripped your bikini bottom down the skinny rails of your legs, and you tugged my swimsuit past my tan. Swimsuits at our ankles, we kicked like swimmers to free our legs, almost expecting a tide to wash over us the way the tide rushes in on Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in From Here to Eternity — a love scene so famous that although neither of us had seen the movie, our bodies assumed the exact position of movie stars on the sand and you whispered to me softly, “I’m afraid of getting pregnant,” and I whispered back, “Don’t worry, I have protection,” then, still kissing you, felt for my discarded cutoffs and the wallet in which for the last several months I had carried a Trojan as if it was a talisman. Still kissing, I tore its flattened, dried-out wrapper, and it sprang through my fingers like a spring from a clock and dropped to the sand between our legs. My hands were shaking. In a panic, I groped for it, found it, tried to dust it off, tried as Burt Lancaster never had to, to slip it on without breaking the mood, felt the grains of sand inside it, a throb of lightning, and the Great Lake behind us became, for all practical purposes, the Pacific, and your skin tasted of salt and to the insistent question that my lips were asking your body answered yes, your thighs opened like wings from my waist as we surfaced panting from a kiss that left you pleading Oh, Christ yes, a yes gasped sharply as a cry of pain so that for a moment I thought that we were already doing it and that somehow I had missed the instant when I entered you, entered you in the bloodless way in which a young man discards his own virginity, entered you as if passing through a gateway into the rest of my life, into a life as I wanted it to be lived yes but Oh then I realized that we were still floundering unconnected in the slick between us and there was sand in the Trojan as we slammed together still feeling for that perfect fit, still in the Here groping for an Eternity that was only a fine adjustment away, just a millimeter to the left or a fraction of an inch farther south though with all the adjusting the sandy Trojan was slipping off and then it was gone but yes you kept repeating although your head was shaking no-not-quite-almost and our hearts were going like mad and you said, Yes. Yes wait… Stop!

“What?” I asked, still futilely trusting as if I hadn’t quite heard you.
“Oh. God!” You gasped, pushing yourself up. “What’s coming?

“Gin, what’s the matter?” I asked, confused, and then the beam of a spotlight swept over us and I glanced into its blinding eye.

All around us lights were coming, speeding across the sand. Blinking blindness away, I rolled from your body to my knees, feeling utterly defenseless in the way that only nakedness can leave one feeling. Headlights bounced toward us, spotlights crisscrossing, blue dome lights revolving as squad cars converged. I could see other lovers, in the beams, fleeing bare-assed through the litter of garbage that daytime hordes had left behind and that night had deceptively concealed. You were crying, clutching the Navajo blanket to your breasts with one hand and clawing for your bikini with the other, and I was trying to calm your terror with reassuring phrases such as “Holy shit! I don’t fucking believe this!”

Swerving and fishtailing in the sand, the police calls pouring from their radios, the squad cars were on us, and then they were by us while we struggled to pull on our clothes.

They braked at the water’s edge, and cops slammed out, brandishing huge flashlights, their beams deflecting over the dark water. Beyond the darting of those beams, the far-off throbs of lightning seemed faint by comparison.

“Over there, goddamn it!” one of them hollered, and two cops sloshed out into the shallow water without even pausing to kick off their shoes, huffing aloud for breath, their leather cartridge belts creaking against their bellies.

“Grab the sonofabitch! It ain’t gonna bite!” one of them yelled, then they came sloshing back to shore with a body slung between them.

It was a woman—young, naked, her body limp and bluish beneath the play of flashlight beams. They set her on the sand just past the ring of drying, washed-up alewives. Her face was almost totally concealed by her hair. Her hair was brown and tangled in a way that even wind or sleep can’t tangle hair, tangled as if it had absorbed the ripples of water—thick strands, slimy looking like dead seaweed.

“She’s been in there awhile, that’s for sure,” a cop with a beer belly said to a younger, crew-cut cop, who had knelt beside the body and removed his hat as if he might be considering the kiss of life.

The crew-cut officer brushed the hair away from her face, and the flashlight beams settled there. Her eyes were closed. A bruise or a birthmark stained the side of one eye. Her features appeared swollen, her lower lip protruding as if she was pouting.

An ambulance siren echoed across the sand, its revolving red light rapidly approaching.
“Might as well take their sweet-ass time,” the beer-bellied cop said.

We had joined the circle of police surrounding the drowned woman almost without realizing that we had. You were back in your bikini, robed in the Navajo blanket, and I had slipped on my cutoffs, my underwear dangling out of a back pocket.

Their flashlight beams explored her body, causing its whiteness to gleam. Her breasts were floppy; her nipples looked shriveled. Her belly appeared inflated by gallons of water. For a moment, a beam focused on her mound of pubic hair, which was overlapped by the swell of her belly, and then moved almost shyly away down her legs, and the cops all glanced at us—at you, especially—above their lights, and you hugged your blanket closer as if they might confiscate it as evidence or to use as a shroud.

When the ambulance pulled up, one of the black attendants immediately put a stethoscope to the drowned woman’s swollen belly and announced, “Drowned the baby, too.”

Without saying anything, we turned from the group, as unconsciously as we’d joined them, and walked of across the sand, stopping only long enough at the spot where we had lain together like lovers, in order to stuff the rest of our gear into a beach bag, to gather our shoes, and for me to find my wallet and kick sand over the forlorn, deflated Trojan that you pretended not to notice. I was grateful for that.

Behind us, the police were snapping photos, flashbulbs throbbing like lightning flashes, and the lightning itself, still distant but moving in closer, rumbling audibly now, driving a lake wind before it so that gusts of sand tingled against the metal sides of the ambulance.

Squinting, we walked toward the lighted windows of the Gold Coast, while the shadows of gapers attracted by the whirling emergency lights hurried past us toward the shore.

“What happened? What’s going on?” they asked without waiting for an answer, and we didn’t offer one, just continued walking silently in the dark.

It was only later that we talked about it, and once we began talking about the drowned woman it seemed we couldn’t stop.

“She was pregnant,” you said. “I mean, I don’t want to sound morbid, but I can’t help thinking how the whole time we were, we almost—you know—there was this poor, dead woman and her unborn child washing in and out behind us.”

“It’s not like we could have done anything for her even if we had known she was there.”

“But that if we had found her? What if after we had—you know,” you said, your eyes glancing away from mine and your voice tailing into a whisper, “what if after we did it, we went for a
night swim and found her in the water?”

“But, Gin, we didn’t,” I tried to reason, though it was no more a matter of reason than anything else between us had ever been.

It began to seem as if each time we went somewhere to make out—on the back porch of your half-deaf, whiskery Italian grandmother, who sat in the front of the apartment cackling at I Love Lucy reruns; or in your girlfriend Tina’s basement rec room when her parents were away on bowling league nights and Tina as upstairs with her current crush, Brad; or way off in the burbs, at the Giant Twin Drive-In during the weekend they called Elvis Fest—the drowned woman was with us.

We would kiss, your mouth would open, and when your tongue flicked repeatedly after time, I would unbutton the first button of your blouse, revealing the beauty spot at the base of your throat, which matched a smaller spot I loved above a corner of your lips, and then the second button, which opened on a delicate gold cross—which I had always tried to regard as merely a fashion statement — dangling above the cleft of your breasts. The third button exposed the lacy swell of your bra, and I would slide my hand over the patterned mesh, feeling for the firmness of your nipple rising to my fingertip, but you would pull slightly away, and behind your rapid breath your kiss would grow distant, and I would kiss harder, trying to lure you back from wherever you had gone, and finally, holding you as if only consoling a friend, I’d ask, “What are you thinking?” although of course I knew.

“I don’t want to think about her but I can’t help it. I mean, it seems like some kind of weird omen or something, you know?”

“No, I don’t know,” I said. “It was just a coincidence.”

“Maybe if she’d been farther away down the beach, but she was so close to us. A good wave could have washed her up right beside us.”

“Great, then we could have had a ménage à trios.”

“Gross! I don’t believe you just said that! Just because you said it in French doesn’t make it less disgusting.”

“You’ve driving me to it. Come on, Gin, I’m sorry,” I said. “I was just making a dumb joke to get a little different perspective on things.”

“What’s so goddamn funny about a woman who drowned herself and her baby?”

“We don’t even know for sure she did.”
“Yeah, right, it was just an accident. Like she just happened to be going for a walk pregnant and naked, and she fell in.”

“She could have been on a sailboat or something. Accidents happen; so do murders.”

“Oh, like murder makes it less horrible? Don’t think that hasn’t occurred to me. Maybe the bastard who knocked her up killed her, huh?”

“How should I know? You’ve the one who says you don’t want to talk about it and then get obsessed with all kinds of theories and scenarios. Why are we arguing about a woman we don’t even know, who doesn’t have the slightest thing to do with us?”

“I do know about her,” you said. “I dream about her.”

“You dream about her?” I repeated, surprised. “Dreams you remember?”

“Sometimes they wake me up. In one I’m at nonna’s cottage in Michigan, swimming for a raft that keeps drifting farther away, until I’m too tired to turn back. Then I notice there’s a naked person sunning on the raft and start yelling, ‘Help!’ and she looks up and offers me a hand, but I’m too afraid to take it even though I’m drowning because it’s her.”

“God! Gin, that’s creepy.”

“I dreamed you and I are at the beach and you bring us a couple hot dogs but forget the mustard, so you have to go all the way back to the stand for it.”

“Hot dogs, no mustard—a little too Freudian, isn’t it?”

“Honest to God, I dreamed it. You go back for mustard and I’m wondering why you’re gone so long, then a woman screams that a kid was drowned and everyone stampedes for the water. I’m swept in by the mob and forced under, and I think, This is it, I’m going to drown, but I’m able to hold my breath longer than could ever be possible. It feels like a flying dream—flying under water—and then I see this baby down there flying, too, and realize it’s the kid everyone thinks has drowned, but he’s no more drowned than I am. He looks like Cupid or one of those baby angels that cluster around the face of God.”

“Pretty weird. What do you think all the symbols mean?—hot dogs, water, drowning…”

“It means the baby who drowned inside her that night was a love child—a boy—and his soul was released there to wander through the water.”

“You don’t really believe that?”
We argued about the interpretation of dreams, about whether dreams are symbolic or psychic, prophetic or just plain nonsense, until you said, “Look, Dr. Freud, you can believe what you want about your dreams, but keep your nose out of mine, okay?”

We argued about the drowned woman, about whether her death was a suicide or a murder, about whether her appearance that night was an omen or a coincidence which, you argued, is what an omen is anyway: a coincidence that means something. By the end of summer, even if we were no longer arguing about the woman, we had acquired the habit of arguing about everything else. What was better: dogs or cats, rock or jazz, Cubs or Sox, tacos or egg rolls, right or left, night or day?—we could argue about anything.

It no longer required arguing or necking to summon the drowned woman; everywhere we went she surfaced by her own volition: at Rocky’s Italian Beef, at Lindo Mexico, at the House of Dong, our favorite Chinese restaurant, a place we still frequented because when we’d first started seeing each other they had let us sit and talk until late over tiny cups of jasmine tea and broken fortune cookies. We would always kid about going there. “Are you in the mood for Dong tonight?” I’d whisper conspiratorially. It was a dopey joke, meant for you to roll your eyes at its repeated dopiness. Back then, in winter, if one of us ordered the garlic shrimp we would both be sure to eat them so that later our mouths tasted the same when we kissed.

Even when she wasn’t mentioned, she was there with her drowned body—do dumpy next to yours—and her sad breasts, with their wrinkled nipples and sour milk—so saggy beside yours, which were still budding—with her swollen belly and her public bush colorless in the glare of electric light, with her tangled, slimy hair and her pouting, placid face—so lifeless beside yours—and her skin a pallid white, lightning-flash white, flashbulb white, a whiteness that couldn’t be duplicated in daylight — how I’d come to hate that pallor, so cold beside the flush of your skin.

There wasn’t a particular night when we finally broke up, just as there wasn’t a particular night when we began going together, but it was a night in fall when I guessed that it was over. We were parked in the Rambler at the dead end of the street of factories that had been our lover’s lane, listening to a drizzle of rain and dry leaves sprinkle the hood. As always, rain revitalized the smells of smoked fish and kielbasa in the upholstery. The radio was on too low to hear, the windshield wipers swished at intervals as if we were driving, and the windows were steamed as if we’d been making out. But we’d been arguing, as usual, this time about a woman poet who had committed suicide, whose work you were reading. We were sitting, no longer talking or touching, and I remember thinking that I didn’t want to argue with you anymore. I didn’t want to sit like this in hurt silence; I wanted to talk excitedly all night as we once had. I wanted to find some way that wasn’t corny sounding to tell you how much fun I’d had in your company, how much knowing you had meant to me, and how I had suddenly realized that I’d been so intent on becoming lovers that I’d overlooked how close we’d been as friends. I wanted you to know that. I wanted you to like me again.
“It’s sad,” I started to say, meaning that I was sorry we had reached the point of silence, but before I could continue you challenged the statement.

“What makes you so sure it’s sad?”

“What do you mean, what makes me so sure?” I asked, confused by your question.

You looked at me as if what was sad was that I would never understand. “For all either one of us knows,” you said, “death could have been her triumph!”

Maybe when it really ended was the night I felt we had just reached the beginning, that one time on the beach in the summer when our bodies rammed so desperately together that for a moment I thought we did it, and maybe in our hearts we did, although for me, then, doing it in one’s heart didn’t quite count. If it did, I supposed we’d all be Casanovas.

We rode home together on the El train that night, and I felt sick and defeated in a way I was embarrassed to mention. Our mute reflections emerged like negative exposures on the dark, greasy window of the train. Lightning branched over the city, and when the train entered the subway tunnel, the lights inside flickered as if the power was disrupted, though the train continued rocketing beneath the Loop.

When the train emerged again we were on the South Side of the city and it was pouring, a deluge as if the sky had opened to drown the innocent and guilty alike. We hurried from the El station to your house, holding the Navajo blanket over our heads until, soaked, it collapsed. In the dripping doorway of your apartment building, we said good night. You were shivering. Your bikini top showed through the thin blouse plastered to your skin. I swept the wet hair away from your face and kissed you lightly on the lips, then you turned and went inside. I stepped into the train, and you came back out, calling after me.

“What?” I asked, feeling a surge of gladness to be summoned back into the doorway with you.

“Want an umbrella?”

I didn’t. The downpour was letting up. It felt better to walk back to the station feeling the rain rinse the sand out of my hair, off my legs, until the only places where I could still feel its grit were in the crotch of my cutoffs and each squish of my shoes. A block down the street, I passed a pair of jockey shorts lying in a puddle and realize they were mine, dropped from my back pocket as we ran to your house. I left them behind, wondering if you’d see them and recognize them the next day.

By the time I had climbed the stairs back to the El platform, the rain had stopped. Your scent still hadn’t washed from my fingers. The station—the entire city it seemed—dripped and steamed. The summer sound of crickets and nighthawks echoed from the drenched neighborhood. Alone, I
could admit how sick I felt. For you, it was a night that would haunt your dreams. For me, it was another night when I waited, swollen and aching, for what I had secretly nicknamed the Blue Ball Express.

Literally lovesick, groaning inwardly with each lurch of the train and worried that I was damaged for good, I peered out at the passing yellow-lit stations, where lonely men stood posted before giant advertisements, pictures of glamorous models defaced by graffiti—the same old scrawled insults and pleas: FUCK YOU, EAT ME. At this late hour the world seemed given over to men without women, men waiting in abject patience for something indeterminate, the way I waited for our next times. I avoided their eyes so that they wouldn’t see the pity in mine, pity for them because I’d just been with you, your scent was still on my hands, and there seemed to be so much future ahead.

For me it was another night like that, and by the time I reached my stop I knew I would be feeling better, recovered enough to walk the dark street home making up poems of longing that I never wrote down. I was the D.H. Lawrence of not doing it, the voice of all the would-be lovers who ached and squirmed. From our contortions in doorways, on stairwells, and in the bucket seats of cars we could have composed a Kama Sutra of interrupted bliss. It must have been that night when I recalled all the other times of walking home after seeing you, so that it seemed as if I was falling into step behind a parade of my former selves—myself walking home on the night we first kissed, myself on the night when I unbuttoned your blouse and kissed breasts, myself on the night when I lifted your skirt above your thighs and dropped to my knees — each succeeding self another step closer to that irrevocable moment for which our lives seemed poised.

But we didn’t, not in the moonlight, or by the phosphorescent lanterns of lightning bugs in your back yard, not beneath the constellations we couldn’t see, let alone decipher, or in the dark glow that replaced the real darkness of night, a darkness already stolen from us, not with the skyline rising behind us while a city gradually decayed, not in the heat of summer while a Cold War raged, despite the freedom of youth and the license of first love — because of fate, karma, luck, what does it matter?—we made not doing it a wonder, and yet we didn’t, we didn’t, we never did.

Stuart Dybek is the author of three books of fiction: I Sailed With Magellan, The Coast of Chicago, and Childhood and Other Neighborhoods. Dybek has also published two collections of poetry: