

JACQUELINE WATERS

from THE PENTAGON

A person has to live with the facts.
Say something critical—tell everyone, for instance
that you find your boss eerie
or a hypocrite
and it's you who'll be associated
in your listener's mind (more or less forever)
with eeriness, and with
hypocrisy.

You live. You complete sixteen of the seventeen tasks assigned to you.
For the seventeenth, you call your supervisor.
No need to sign in today, he says. No work.
You find a stall and close the door. [laughter]
*

I start by asking everyone what they think, he said.
I work it in there with their name
and a few things about hometowns.

This one, eyes closed, accounting for it all, drawing deep invisible
lines past which one does not walk, retiring to a small apartment,
reading a trade magazine before bed, a little scenario of vegetables
cooling on an upturned lid...

The best way to open a movie, he said, is with an auction house
scene. Get your audience
to root for
a buyer!
*

Bland detail: You told the hotel clerk about the problem with the
vending machine. She moved parts of her face into second position,
told you to fill out a waiver and sign it.

If you're shy you're at the mercy of people considerate of people who are shy.

One afternoon as you left the building you saw the supervisor chaining his bicycle to a parking meter. You stood there, outside the health food restaurant. You said

Hello
and he said
As if.

Again, if you're shy your main friends will be people interested in people who are shy.

*

This isn't
safe in
fact anyone
can easily
get at you
they'll search
your body
for two rows
each carrying
hundreds of
identical teeth
forced together
by a slider
hiding in its
throat a
Y-shaped
channel
and hold
something
hot to it
till you
break open
along
perforated
lines.

Or try sweetener packets
stuffed in
little yellow
gratuuity envelopes.

That's grace, the filled envelope.

That full meal on that
sturdy plate.

*

We have to get this project launched before the announcement, they said. So you can see our problem here.

I can see your problem there. You're just going to eat a roll or whatever that brown block is.

An air of costliness: crumpled wrappers, torn cardboard, pried-apart plastic clams.

Treat all conversation as *ad hominem* argument, he said. Always think about what you might be able to find out about them.

Them. What we all called: *filler*.

Filler die. First the men of the family, usually, and then the women not long after.

Or it's the women who die, and the men live another ten or twenty years, being better able than women to do the business of living, and then the men die.

And then the children die, one by one, and their funerals are held on Saturdays and Sundays in buildings that look like houses but lie suspiciously close to the town center, on a corner, or main road, immaculate residences zoned as businesses.

Everyone takes a break, drives off in separate directions, two go down to the quarry and walk, three to the mall to eat, several carloads drive back to the southern section of the state.

A woman opens a crystal shop
in a strip of shops by the water.

She covers the counters with velvet, three chairs with silk slipcovers
of yellow and sea-foam green. The legs of the chairs she gilds. A
package of balsa wood paint stirrers

and some pink edging brushes
in a plastic bag behind the shop as seen

from a satellite-based telescoping camera.
Behind the shop, ugh. Germs! The smell is bad.

*

You're looking through passenger lists, you're freaking out about
military records.

You open the inhaler and point it at your mouth for after you figure
out a fact. You thought you knew where you came from, lulled by the
family crest, framed and nailed to a paneled wall, but that crest was
ordered from a direct mail ad by a family that taught you nothing but
how to decipher middle initial monograms on towels.

Keep copping to it, he said. You are a god and when you're angry you
stay angry whether or not bolts are discharged from your fingertips.

You felt they owed you congratulations, if not interest on it, since it
had been months, and your achievement collected attention wherever
it was reported. Yet the department held back, and your supervisor,
in particular, held back any recognition of the general feeling in the
department that the department was holding something back.

You had said: there'll be a huge line. He had said: no, I don't think
anyone cares.

*

She told him she would have to think about it. Meanwhile she was
counting on him to keep her posted. He left her office with the sense
of a decision having been made. He cleared some papers that had been
left on his chair. It was supposed to be a paperless office, but
occasionally it was there: paper.

If a teacher can lead a student to contradict herself, then the teacher's point is strengthened. Classic Socratic method.

It seems to be about asking questions, but its real purpose is to create confusion, to reveal internal contradiction and elicit self-doubt in the student.

But the student must interpret the feeling of losing an argument as self-doubt.

The presence of self-doubt as wherewithal to grow.

You grow as far as you may then retreat. You retreat as far as you dare—

What a short day it has been! Still holding in our hands the few poor flowers we helped each other to, the roast squirrel we exchanged for a cold bag of apples

for who wouldn't want
a place to get well
a salutary place
to get sent?