

by JOANNA NOVAK

*"The Great St. Louis Bank Robbery," "Rivers and Tides," "Killer's Kiss," and "INLAND EMPIRE" are part of a series I'm writing in response to films, are part of a series I'm writing in response to films, often chosen somewhat at random. I moved to a new city at the end of August and made a resolution to watch one movie a day (and write a response of some sort). Though I broke my resolution quite early in September, I've ended up tracking my reactions to the films in a blurring of previous (and tentative) interest(s) in feminist film theory, prose poetry, and memoir-in-motion.*

## RIVERS AND TIDES

—August 29, 2007

When art is a form of nourishment, even at sixty-something your thighs will still be as taut as they were during your college track days. You will definitely never speak of The Wicker's Man sustaining properties. When you are nourished by art, seeds and forest berries taste better than any of the five perfect sauces known to the French. When you are nourished by art, the real work is change; you are nourished by what you cannot get rid of; you wear fingerless gloves so you'll feed the fire between man and rock.

Andy Goldsworthy may be gray and ruddy now, but I can see when he bends over that he must've been the heat forty years ago. His habits are boyish: he tugs on an ear, he bends over and rests his hands just above his knees, he retains the weather in the channels and valves behind his face. Andy clicks with his tongue. Andy always shakes hands with his gloves off. Andy does not know that I fell in love just by taking off a glove. He doesn't know that my gloves split at the fingertips—that pink leather will open up just the same as black leather or brown leather, even with a pure cashmere lining. Andy mainly suits himself in gray or navy outdoorsmen outfits and he doesn't like fingers because gloves stick when you try to stack sticks into a sculpture.

A bracket bloodies your hand. A last-season bracket blackens. Below the surface, heat rushes through the ground. The basement of the library

contains the letter A and squad of robots. If I were to lose my way among the stacks, a conical sculpture of books might help me out. In the woods, the rocks swell and shrink—a plump teardrop, a kernel, a seed, an improper egg.

Soon, the surface will rise and the egg will disappear. The seed is a gift to the sea, the sea-all-knowing, the sea—source of upheaval and shock. The word shock asserts stress on all the creviced parts of Andy's person: In the crook of his elbow, current is no longer a stranger.

Every day we misread our landscape and today I misread at a kitchen table, I misread in a classroom, I misread on the bus. I misread at a computer and I misread mid-stride on a machine. But I am a stranger here and I make my excuses last long enough to buy me some time.

Look: This morning, a man wore black pants and a big watch and pigeon-stretched on wood floor and split cables with a tool and a shake of something encased in white in an attempt to connect me to the seamless web, the unceasing net of push and tug. Look: If he were to change my settings, he'd be responsible if I required a service call. Look: He wore a hat that said Raiders and he checked his watch now and again because, the truth is there's nothing harder than trying to make art while you're losing time.

Finally. Spinning halo, crafty wreath. Bird's nest. Hoop skirt. A black hole where your waist goes. According to Jackie Kennedy, it takes an awful lot of effort to make something look effortless. It takes an awful lot of time to learn about time from the river.

By the fourth collapse, we're a step closer.

## THE GREAT ST. LOUIS BANK ROBBERY

—August 28, 2007

I would definitely smoke a cigarette from Steve McQueen. Young and smooth, he resembles James Dean but, even in a letterman jacket, Steve-O is still leagues smoother.

On the left side of the jacket is a giant O. I could try not to think too hard about that O but this is the night before and I believe in signs. Sixty years ago, Steve McQueen drove down Kingshighway and reluctantly planned a heist in Targrove Park beneath the pavilion that still stands. Last week, I attended a picnic sponsored by my college beneath that pavilion. Grills that flashed in the black and white background were freshly scented with brats and burgers.

So far, I've learned that a caper can be more complex than just chasings and casings. Confiding in your buddies kid-sister is a big NO. Dropping out of college and believing that, just this once, you can get away with something—that never got anyone anywhere. Even if your mother makes you work twelve hours a day at age twelve to bring money home for her booze habit, she'll still beat you till you're forced to stay home sick. A beer in a bar in St. Louis means a Budweiser. If you're fancy, you drink martinis. If you're scared, you scan the ceiling while you're shaving, you watch water blacken down the drain, you jiggle the doorknob just to make sure; then you belly-crawl to your bed like a little dog with a wicked itch.

Black-haired ladies are tramps. Waitresses are tramps. I am lucky to be a student and no longer a waitress. I am lucky to have brown hair that's not even dark enough to be confused with black. On the morning show of a popular radio station, once I heard a joke about women with black hair—what do you call a woman with black hair...but a black *head*? At Tom's Grill, I will never bother Steve McQueen while he's doing the crossword puzzle and trying to enjoy a cup of coffee.

A girl will never solve the crime. Two girls taken hostage both have black hair. When you're married for two months, it feels like two years. Both parties can withdraw money at any time from a joint checking account.

I have saved twenty-six lids, dozens of plastic bags, and a few handfuls of change. Soon I will be environmentally aware and proud of it with an organic cotton tote bag. I've been keeping my plastic containers of yogurt, my little tins of tuna fish, empty bottles of pop—all rinsed clean and lined up by the kitchen sink in my brand new apartment—luxury finishes! When I get my tote in the mail, I'll fill the plastic bags with the recycling, fill the tote with the plastic bag, carry the tote on the train with me, ride until I arrive at a facility with recycling capabilities and then I'll recycle in a commingled receptacle.

The O on his jacket stands for Oh baby, oh baby. Stands for onanism. Steve for onanism. Start the onanism. I have never masturbated but baby-faced Steve McQueen makes me wanna start. There is an O on his jacket and I know his voice could tear me to bits. I am sixty years too late for Steve McQueen, but I know I'm never too old to give the old trick a new try.

First, we are in the pavilion and the air hangs onto the scent of the last barbecue of the day, even five hours after sun down, when the charcoal briquettes no longer glow neon, when I find myself in a sundress with Steve McQueen, all lettermanned out and leaning on a wooden support while I sit at a picnic table, my back to the table, my knees together but my feet wide apart on tiny space of concrete rectangle that I'm a part of on this pavilion. My feet are definitely not bare—they're propped up in a pair of round-toed baby blue heels—the heel curves in, just in case Steve is totally into shoes, I chose this pair because, rubbing the skinny, satin covered curve over my neck this morning—I twitched like crazy.

Then, we are in Tom's Grill and, in this world, I have never worried a minute about germs so I am happy as a punch to be ducked beneath a booth, the diner is empty but music plays, the lyrics involve different menu items so I hear hotdog, hamburger, ketchup, French fries, milkshake, mustard, dill pickle, popsicle as I suck Steve off on the sly, I just unzipped his pants and tugged down the waistband of his black briefs and didn't think about the Juicy Fruit stuck to the underbelly of the star-spattered formica table that could be adhering to my flipped out ponytail and I didn't think about the gorgeous, ruby

red metal flake booths and how slick the seat would feel against my stomach if Steve were to pound me from behind, one hand gripping the table and the other hand gripping my ass—I didn't think about any one but Steve and I didn't think about anything but Steve's cock, I didn't think about anything but communicating through each tongue touch, each long lick—I love you, I love you, I love you.

## INLAND EMPIRE

—Saturday, September 1, 2007

I've never begun with a record spinning, I've never started off by letting a cycle collapse and crumble. Right off the bat, I'm no good with the crackle, with tending to tiny creases. Once, though, maybe I knew the needle.

Lynch teaches the viewer to feel with colors. He manipulates the mood with focus and definition and ambient sounds that hum like my house hyped up on mosquitoes and grass hoppers. In July, the cicadas returned after their seventeen year hiatus and they clung like amber party lights to the trees; then, their corpses crunched beneath our feet—fragile paper lights, delicate spun sugar, tissue paper origami.

The rabbits really make them laugh. The mother wears a pink dress and irons. I admire people that use ironing as a stress reliever. This is a hobby I wish I'd just develop all ready. I would turn my black pants inside out to avoid a sheen. I would have convictions about creates and corners. I would never neglect Shark's water levels.

Before the rabbits, there was a girl with mascara like printing ink. I used to paint and draw and make art. I knew how to properly gauge lineoulem and I knew how to handle a woodblock. I knew that gloppy ink wouldn't come off skin, not until hours of scrubbing wore away a layer of skin.

I do not know which is which: epidermis, dermis. There are always more layers to learn about.

The girl with the mascara fucked for money. A man without a face paid her to undress. Later, the blonde actress would crouch in a corner and spy on a room full of teenage girls, girls in shorts and tank tops, with smooth skin and the bad make-up that looks sexy on young girls but would just look trashy on an older woman. It doesn't matter what realm you're in—the women are still part of a vast empire, a veritable network of products and substances, ritualized encounters with strange concoctions.

I started my day with coffee and I ended with water. I boarded a connector flight but, before that, I put my shoes in a bin. I stare at my shoes all day long—the bows are fat and lush.

But now I'm two days past the film. Before Monday, there was Sunday with ice cream, and before Sunday, Saturday with sushi, then Friday with pizza and popcorn and root beer.

He really makes the best cappuccinos. Before that, she takes her coffee black. An old woman sees the future. In the future, murder. In the future, bright colors will give some clues. A magenta fuzz ball. Pale pink furry slippers. The prettiest dress uses a boat neck to reveal stark collar bones, a busy floral print so she'll camouflage beyond the gazebo. Nikki Grace comes into focus.

## KILLER'S KISS

—Sunday, September 2, 2007

The eyes atlas faces, screens, pages. Our eyes look for eyes. A triangle forms. A gaze can be mapped.

I am a sleuth. Sylvester Stallone and I looked at the same film. Davey's two fish don't have names but they do get fed with a shake of food, such a baby's sneeze of a shake that his boxing must've suffered. His muscles knew a softer touch. So his head springing off the floor of the ring like a bouncing ball shocked.

Her soft mouth was the road to sin-smearred violence.

Later, her name disappeared from public record. She squandered her savings on thousand dollar sheets. She may have lost her glamour photos but she knew the ins and outs of her down comforter. She introduced nieces and nephews to the luxury of the duvet cover.

Once, they whispered, she was more beautiful than Grace Kelly.

Once, they whispered, a man bit her right on the throat. The neck, someone argued. No, definitely the throat. A cousin piped in—what's the difference. No one responded.

Aunt Irene receives visitors swathed in sheets.