

Water Games

“In an ocean of noise, I first heard your voice: ringing like a bell, as if I had a choice.”

-Arcade Fire, “Neon Bible”

“He don’t care about expensive things, cashmere coats, diamond rings - no, all he cares about is love”

-From the musical “Chicago”

We watched as our rocks were swallowed by the water. “I don’t have any luck with this sort of thing,” Kanye said, “Honestly, I don’t understand how two people can stand to be in each other’s company for more than a few minutes.”

I picked up a flat rock, snugly secured between my thumb and forefinger. Slowly, I moved my arm back and forth, preparing to release the stone. “Present company excluded, of course.” Kanye smiled crookedly, sending a rock flying lopsided into the water. I watched a heron creep silently along the bank, leaving sharp, three-pronged tracks in the mud. Kanye shook his head and slammed another rock into the water. “Damn it, she never could understand that calling her bitch was my idea of a compliment.” The bird glanced up, newly alert, and froze with one claw lifted in the air.

“I should be buying furniture. You know, fur pillows are actually really hard to sleep on,” Kanye stroked his sideburns thoughtfully. The heron, choosing to ignore us, resumed picking at the debris near the shoreline. The water stirred gently, almost nervously.

“I know.” A wry smile spread across my face. “I check your twitter account every day.”

Kanye slung his arm playfully around me. A heavy steel bridge overhung the river, cars swishing over the water. A stream of spandexed runners and sleepy dog walkers flowed along the sidewalk. I wondered if passerby would assume we were a gay couple - two lovebirds, settling down to watch the sunrise.

Kanye and I met suddenly. Several years ago, just after recording my first LP, I received a small, square envelope. Printed on heavy, yellow-white paper with thin gold edges, the letter was two sentences long. “You are cordially invited,” the paper read, “to record with musician Kanye West, at a time of your convenience. I have long admired your work, and am curious to hear and

any ideas or insights you may have.” I sent Kanye a postcard - a loon sailing across a placid lake - and, a few days later, I called to confirm the date and time of my visit.

“Hey there!” Kanye smiled warmly, throwing open the house’s door. The room was spacious, with polished chestnut tables set discreetly against each wall. Kanye had failed to inform me that I was not his only guest. Loose clusters of people stood scattered around the room, skewering bits of lox and mushrooms from rounded dishes of hors’devours. “Once I knew a few people were coming, I arranged a little get together. Cocktail?”

A few days later, Kanye brought me to the water for the first time. “God damn it, I used to go here all the time when I was a kid.” He gestures towards the wide sidewalks framing the bridge. “I used to know every person who passed by. Hardcore joggers, neighborhood dog walkers, local crazies stumbling around with a bottle - I watched them every day. If I didn’t know a person’s name, I would just make one up - there was Alfonso, a fat mustached guy with a saint bernard, Marshall, this skinny guy constantly wearing an army uniform, and a fuck load of other ones. I used to play little games-” Kanye paused to chuck a misshapen rock into the water - “Wave, wink, give the finger to people passing on the bridge. Find out which ones would wave back, or get mad or whatever. I was lucky one of them didn’t come after me.” There was something brittle in Kanye’s voice, a metal-edged tone which I could not identify.

From that moment onward, I was Kanye’s constant companion. “We’ll work together, come up with a collaboration for my new album,” he used to say, sunglasses sliding across the bridge of his nose. “You should rap more often-you have natural talent.” Innumerable times, I was shoved towards a shaggy-haired stranger and told to “get acquainted.” Kanye’s house acted as a combination safe house and rest stop for artists, a constant flow of amps and instruments passing between its doors. No matter how awkward the timing, every guest was expected and immediately welcomed. “He’s a great friend - we go way back,” Kanye would yell, cranking up the stereo. I always expected to be introduced to a girlfriend, but - at least in public - Kanye was never in a woman’s company.

The following week, I met Sharon in an ice cream parlor. Her hair hung just past her shoulders, folding gently into the dip in her collar. Each of her shirtsleeves flowed from her armbone, like the thin wings of a bat. When I entered the Dairy Queen, she rolled her sleeves

back slightly and began to cut her ice cream into sections, with a fork and knife. A novel was propped open on the table, pinned down by her elbow. After Dark by Haruki Murakami. Two crumpled napkins lay on the stained countertop. The sun shined off the table's thin layer of grease. I stumbled and practically threw myself at her feet.

A "Finally, I have the honor of meeting you." Kanye gently lifted Sharon's hand.

"I heard you're good at board games, so I figured I'd bring this old thing. It was my father's." Kanye gestured towards an ancient checkerboard laid against the mossy ground. Grass peeked through tiny cracks in the cardboard. Kanye laughed jarringly. "Some kind of family heirloom, eh?"

We played: black moves one square up, red follows suit; red king left up, black king right down. A solemn back-and-forth, almost a dance. My red disk jumped diagonally across the board, collecting pieces. Kanye nudged Sharon's shoulder softly. "Watch him," Kanye whispered conspiratorially, "he's a sneaky one." I quietly staked my captured pieces, forming tiny towers in the dirt. Kanye turned away, his smile fading, and gazed across the river. Up close, Kanye's eyes appeared almost colorless, like a glass of clear water.

The heron was creeping along the river bank again, neck curved into a question mark. Casually, Kanye picked up a pebble and threw it in the heron's general direction. With a rough squawk, the bird lifted off, heavy wings spraying droplets of water. "I'm sorry, that was stupid. I was just playing games, I didn't mean to scare it." Sharon shifted my piles of pieces as Kanye's voice echoed across the empty parchment colored sky.

On the eve of my departure, Kanye invited Sharon and me to a one-night concert. The venue was packed, fans plastered against both walls. Sharon and I were shoved towards the middle of the cavernous room, borne along by waves of people.

Kanye West strutted across the curtain, microphone held loosely in one hand. The back up band sent throbbing chords across the room. Kanye danced through the first single, riding bursts of applause. The audience erupted, screaming and leaping towards the stage. Voice ringing loudly in the stifled air, Kanye sprinted down the steps to personally address the first row of fans. For a brief moment, Kanye glanced up, and our eyes met. In the glare of the overhead lights, Kanye's face reflected a sterile ocean.

After almost two hours of continual, bursting energy, intermission was announced. Sharon gestured, motioning towards the door. The sky was a faded, half-lit gray. From the bank of a river, a heron watched motionlessly. Sharon's kisses were soft and somehow unobtrusive, like the rhythmic licking of a cat.

The night was silent except for the shallow splashing of the river. I could imagine Kanye inside, hailed by the heat and sweat of the concert hall, white teeth bared as he played games with the sea.