

# WHITE ON WHITE

Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
—But who is that on the other side of you?  
—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, lines 360-6

## THE CARD, WHITE ON WHITE

*Forgetful Snow*: three naked white women stand about on a rectangular white shag carpet in a white-walled gallery space illuminated from above by a square of white neon tubes. The audience enters into this proposition, to sit on risers at the close end of the box. Enter downstage right naked-white-woman-number-4 with a large white board, about four by three feet. She walks halfway along the side of the carpet, pauses, and begins to fan one of the dancers. The dancer's hair shifts in the slight breeze. Slowly, she raises a crooked leg, and the dance begins.

Number 4 becomes my pole star. In this world of white, she is the different one. The others dance about, at first thawing, full of pauses, later in furious squalls of self-involved abandon. These three are unto themselves, purposeful but opaque. Trapped, perhaps—figments of another's imagination. Why do they move as they do, when they do, in sporadic fits? Unreadable, unapproachable. Then there is 4, the one of repetition. She pauses, then returns to fanning.

I learn from her. I can count on her, forget her for a while, watch the others, come back. She establishes a reference. Her focus on one dancer makes the others subsidiary, creates causality, for example; this one thaws then the others slip and jerk. She changes her fanning technique, and I notice the beautiful ordinary movement of shoulder-elbow, shoulder-elbow.

Close by, she turns to face us. A little shock. She breaks the fourth wall of our gazing at the nude bacchanal, making a footprint in the pristine snow. Now she fans us, obscuring our view at times, distancing them as she crosses downstage front, establishing a liminal audience-performer zone. She wafts their news to us on air currents from realms just beyond.

Sometimes she is one of them. She races to the center back wall with her board and plasters it there, white-on-white, and she's a lunatic's compass. She pins the board to the wall with her head, corroborating the others' movement with an arm and a lunge, momentarily stealing their beauty. Yes, I think, *it's like that!* I admire the others but I return to her. I need my bearings in this blizzard of dance; I notice that I've become a little dependent on her clues. Suddenly, she flips the board; the other side is a mirror. She wears it like a yoke, reflecting women and rug. At another point, she covers a dance coupling with the

board as if to say, "This is private"—though we half-see it anyway. Did she create the intimacy through her edit? Later, she kicks the board with her knees in a rhythm, and the dancers frenzy. And I see it again, the beauty of ordinary knees-in-movement. All the while, I delight in watching the others frolic. But I know, somehow, I would not see them as well without her.

## THE READING

Naked white women dancing on a white shag rug in a white room. Why are they dancing? No, not dancing—thawing. Art come to life. Are they objects? Or subjects?

Get your bearings: *Forgetful Snow*—we have the title, a reference to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

*Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.*

Proceeding, we have the strange bedfellows—World War I and the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. Red herrings? We have choreographer Merce Cunningham's stage-space-of-equal-weight. Though not the no-center stage of Merce Cunningham. Add to it white, the universalizing abstraction. This dance is all-center. The three women are snow, each intricate interaction as mesmerizing as the last. They pile up and I'm lost, drowned in references.

*Note on line 360-6: These lines were stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton's): it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was one more member than could actually be counted. —T.S. Eliot*

Number 4 appears. While the others drift, she helps me shovel. If they are the Senses, then she is Oliver Sacks' Disembodied Lady, the one who lost her ability to feel her body through a disorder of the sensory nervous system. She relearned to walk by using her vision. Now she shows me how to look.

I had already forgotten their nakedness by the second sentence. Their nakedness had become a kind of costume. An ill-fitting, naked suit of flying movement, wild in its awkward, unexpected puzzle-piece moments of contact and multi-angledness. Yes—those angles, private places made public. I am privy to it all, all at once, the dance of it. These women's bodies are not pinned to a wall. The Disembodied Lady shows me how to look at the bodies before me, naked women's bodies in too much movement. She reveals the body is movement, not a frozen dream.

#### THE DIVINATION

You have pulled White on White: Forget the footnotes. Enjoy the wild goose chase. Make sure to bring your lunatic's compass. Grab some white space. Feed your desires but keep them lean. Steal some beauty and give it to the people.

Your time has come, don't wait for it to stop snowing. Find an excuse to do a little dance.

—Melinda Buckwalter

