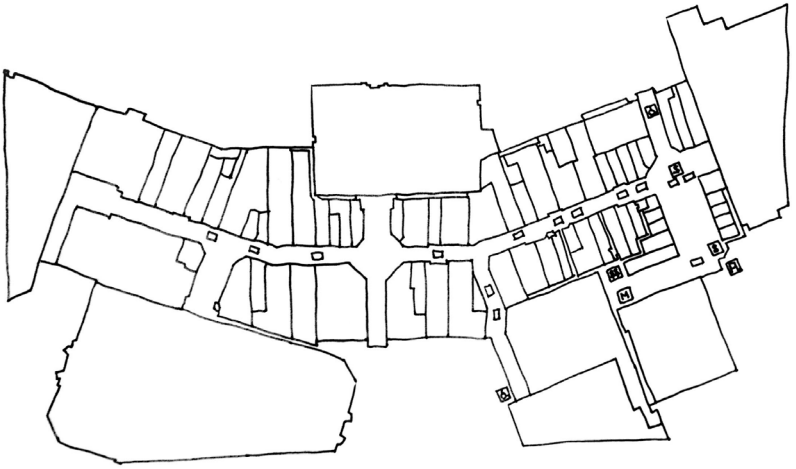




**Maze in  
4 Voices**





I WANT AN UN-LOGOED BODY; I want it to fight back; I want it to move, gesture, and recover; I want it to sway and conjure an emotional landscape; to expressteth while it taketh away; I want it to run, fly, or swim; cross borders and break through locks; see you; SEE THROUGH YOU; and, even if it's never believed, I want it to believe what it sees. I want this body to have an ambiance; I want it to haunt. I want it to save the day. I want it to be loved. I want it to be at the center of a posse of girls who are all versions of her: sisters, or a sisterhood of sorts. I want this body to possess a strong, unapologetic character who speaks her mind; who is articulate; a girl with moxie, a girl next door, who, like anybody, has a dark side, a light side, and a past; inherently unhappy, inherently frustrated, and trying to hold it all together. Desperately wearing a mask.

The show I am creating was adapted from a short story I wrote when I was twelve: “While perusing the sale racks at 5-7-9, the mall closed and locked me in. I walked from exit to exit but none opened. A pink vapor held its hands out to me and I followed, seduced by a smell at once familiar and sublime.” I have been rewriting this story for my entire life—certain scenes have appeared, reappeared, and disappeared. You know what they say: “rediscovery is better than discovery,” “we tell ourselves stories in order to live,” blah blah blah. It’s like I constructed myself; I was a child and had a vision of who I would become, I wrote myself into my own shell. I worry that once it’s finished, I will have no space left to do my living.

They are casting for some TV show and it couldn't sound more *worn out*. A girl gets locked in a mall, and something in the mall is hunting her; she doesn't know what. My agent says that because of my recent work for catalogs and pharma ads, I would be perfect for the part. She says I can be typecast while "elevating my brand." She pitches this to me as part of the "new wave of feminist TV shows with really strong female protagonists." Like a good superhero, I neatly compartmentalize all my versions of myself and call a spade a spade, call one in the bird worth two in the bush, or whatever it is that they say... I tell myself I am already *on my way*.

I'm in an interesting predicament, having created a story as an adult from a story I wrote when I was a child, looking for someone who somehow resembles what I imagine, as an adult, I was like as a child. Thus, when I'm casting, I always ask myself if I can picture this body in an abstract maze, in a trap, in the middle of an onion that is the condition of entrapment, because that's the whole point of this sort of horror: there's nowhere to turn to, no one to trust. By now, this trope has become *worn out*. I believe that viewers want to witness that very normal person's revenge, so when the girls stand in front of the camera and recite some of the lines in the script like, "just do it," "this is not a pipe," and "does this thing spark joy?", I'm primarily trying to intuit if they can relate to their character's underlying objectives, losses, and motivations. And when I explain to them that they are trapped in an abstract maze, I ask them, "What's so scary about a maze? They are made to trap monsters and transcend the body." One girl in particular catches my eye. She responds, "Most paths lead to a dead end. There's only one path out." The last thing I do is ask her to look at me as if she's the killer.

The director asks me to wear something minimal, neutral. I wear: an Old Navy white t-shirt, which I think is race-less, class-less, and All-American. When she asks me that question about the maze, I think: I'm in a maze. I fill in all its abstraction with the sights and smells of my youth: Cucumber Melon, Banana Boat, Tide coming off a clothesline... I imagine all that saudade clumping together into gooey, sweet, and acidic walls made for me to run into, or break down. I scream, sob, run in fear, and experience agonizing deaths. I say things like, "the perfect tee is the perfect vessel," "I wear it, it doesn't wear me," and "I'm good enough, and it's good enough for me." I approach every line like a cannibal whose desire I must defer or I'll die. I'm cast on the spot. "You're fierce," she tells me. "You're perfect. You slay." I leave the office, flash the birdie to all the tragic girls in B-Town, and treat myself to an In-n-Out burger and a steam.



I follow the pink thing for some time, until it congeals into walls so gooey, sweet, and acidic I lick them. The mall transforms into a nocturnal carnival where strangers collapse into suckling poses or get freaky, and the hawks at each counter try to grab me, lure me into their orbit. At the perfume counter, I recognize my teacher, with hair piled as high as Marge Simpson, makeup thick and flashy. She pulls me behind the counter with her. She says I must be careful; I am not safe. She says she will protect me. She stinks like cigarettes and Chanel No. 5 and I feel like I am seeing something obscene, but I can't put my finger on what the obscenity is. All I can surmise is that I'm seeing something my 12-year old me has never seen before, that she has never shown me, and I understand that this side of her is to be hidden from children, and because it is hidden from children, it is obscene.

We work side by side for 20 years, selling perfumes, soaps, and lotions. I worry at first about the lack of fresh air, forgetting where I came from, etc. I worry that her dirtiness and egregious sexuality will rub off on me, make me disgusting. I worry that I will shrivel up into a mothball or a piece of dust. I am surrounded by mirrors and I check myself constantly, but weirdly, I don't become grayer, I become lighter and brighter, as if the aromas and essences are activating my aura and I am finally, truly alive.

This teacher character—she’s a composite of all TV sitcom moms, including our contemporary iterations: real housewives. She’s got slow zooms, she’s got ridiculo responses, she’s got hairspray. Imagine someone cut up the cookie-cutter version and exposed of all the dirty, inner layers that made her move. She works at a soap counter, I tell them, she sells women a dream of something they want to be. I tell them not to act out the emotion they think the character would have, but a certain blankness through which the viewer can project their pathologies or disgusts. For each take, I change gears: in this take you’re good, in this take you’re a villain, now you’re aroused, now you’re all numb inside. What, so am I the killer? The actresses ask. I respond, do you want to be the killer? It’s a part of the audition they don’t know is coming, but always comes. What type of actress says yes? I still haven’t figured it out. Eventually, I cast a woman who looks like she could be anywhere from 20 to 50 years old, maybe from plastic surgery, or maybe it’s something behind the eyes. I like the idea of the teacher character being a magical lady, a witch. The unknown you can stare at, that stares back.

The director wants a star so I google TV SHOW STAR and give her what I see in the pictures. I slick back my hair, I put on red lipstick, I wear vintage denim and fur. The look screams: close to the person you are, yet just out of reach. There is absolutely no moment when I interact with her that I am not playing the role she is asking of me. I do everything as though I am being watched. I can't even tell you what it is to be alone anymore... I don't know what that means, because at the very least I'm watching myself. To be clear: I'm not faking, I'm not performing, I'm just *becoming*... and she gave me a creative constraint to work with, to fit my body into, and it fit like a glove.

It would be false to claim that I don't feel like myself anymore. I am *more* than myself, I am evolving *beyond* myself. What's the difference between what I do and what an athlete does? We both labor to be aerodynamic to the extreme. While Teacher becomes more grotesque and angular, I grow soft as putty. I consider the fact that I might be becoming the pink fade with hands that initially led me to this place, and I have a sinking feeling that this slow swallow is consuming its buyers for the purpose of selling more product, but there is always lots to do and it's tough to follow a path to any one conclusion. Over time, I suspect Teacher of cruel wrongdoing. I mean, in a good horror story, when the one you trust the most betrays you, there's no more foundation, there's only shifting sands. Teacher reminds me of a praying mantis. Eating their prey alive, but paralyzing them first.

It was an insane transformation. Walking down the street, heads would turn. She was a complete KNOCKOFF when I started working with her and it just goes to show you that with the right look and attitude you can fool a crowd into thinking you are THE REAL DEAL. No detail went untouched by art direction. Each time I met with her she got a little better at her look, going from all Kodak-soft-at-the-edges to crisp-Canon-5D. If she went under the knife, the results were goddamn subtle: her face shifted from what once functioned to, like, bond and communicate with others, to now just be a thing to be photographed and to perfectly reflect light. Her whole vibe was so out there, it was like a perfume, but I don't know, I just couldn't buy into any of it. Sadistic thoughts began creeping into me. A feeling like she was a better version of me, she in her eternal newness, her sharp contours. Did she even sweat anymore? I wanted to cut her down. I told myself that her brand would fade. It was sad, truly: her future as trash.

All this deconstructing and reconstructing signaled an impending collapse, and after a while, the whole thing became boring, and tedious, and a huge energy drain, and for what? At the end of the day, what makes a trash and what makes a treasure? It seems like all things go to the same realm as hair clippings, bits of nail, rubbed off skin on the floor, tar: the abstract maze you made out of all the things you were living with, that poured you out of the world, and into the darkness. And what's the difference between walls and darkness, what does it matter what's beyond them when there's no way out of here? I think about escape, always. I think about a time when I felt I was always on my way.

We find one another slowly, align surreptitiously: the shoe that doesn't fit joins other shoes that don't fit, and they become a tribe, cast in such a way as to have the appearance of something that doesn't fit, while still maintaining the appearance of a shoe. In other words, there's still an opening for the foot to insert itself, but it's been closed off. The foot won't go in. The color is removed, the function is removed. The identity, once housed, has been evicted, and it's exhilarating: this uselessness as distraction. The steam, off-gassing, and aromas grow cacophonous, toxic, noxious. *O Nikes*, we chant, louder and louder and with saudade. *Remember that age of innocence? I want to pluck your wings so I can fly to the sky! I want to pluck your wings so I can fly to the sky! I want to pluck your wings so I can fly to the sky! I want to pluck your wings so I can fly to the sky!* We place our ears to the walls and they rumble.



By now I am one hundred and ten, and the maze is no longer a maze, it is a sunless sea. Who dunnit? Who to blame? Who to take down? How to get out of here? How to communicate danger without putting myself in danger? Nothing feels simple. The girl beside me is becoming steam and this disgusts me, but I am attached to her in this Trash Paradise/Purgatory. Every day I think about how I got somehow exiled from the life I imagined for myself as a child, while I stack soap into elegant little pyramids. One morning, while everyone else is sleeping off last night's excesses, I touch the soap and I swear it touches me back with its grimy little hands. "Get the hell off me!" I hiss. I'm living my best life, I am one hundred and ten, I have only just begun my ascent, stacking elegant little pyramids, elegant little pyramids, secretly plotting revenge against the system I abhor, while I secretly decay, secretly disappear, secretly spin out of control and explode.

*Maze in 4 Voices* was written by Kim-Anh Schreiber for Ellen Schafer's "You're Fierce. You're Perfect. You Slay," at New Jörg Kunstverein, Vienna, Austria, June 22nd, 2018.

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