

“Before It Reverses”

A review of *Intimations* by Alexandra Kleeman

The men are everywhere. “Strange furnishings, they filled the space without filling the silence,” an uncanny replication of the seemingly ceaseless stream of virtual men in dating apps—except this isn’t a dating app but the narrator’s house, an IRL space in which she must make a decision familiar to anyone who’s used a dating app: Which man to choose?

This story, “Fairy Tale,” the first in Alexandra Kleeman’s collection *Intimations*, opens with the narrator at the dinner table with her parents and just one man—a man she doesn’t recognize (she won’t recognize those other men either). In that first scene, as everyone looks at the narrator, her father tries to steer her back into what she was saying: “You were announcing your engagement,” he tells her, and she responds, “To who?” He replies, “To us,” and she wonders, “All of you?” It’s a thrilling bit of linguistic play, the perfect launch into a book that deals in the uncertainty that comes from the mere fact of being near other people, held in the same physical space.

The narrator then asks the man, “I am announcing my engagement to you?” and he says yes. The narrator, who remains unnamed, is still unsure though: “It seemed impossible to phrase the question in a way that would yield a perfectly unambiguous answer.” This kind of ambiguity, this inability to actually do anything to make a given situation cohere, drives many of the stories, both the more surreal ones and those that are more realistic. Kleeman’s women feel the need to act, but they are also ambivalent about acting, unsure that they’ll improve what’s happening or have any effect at all.

The latter is more of the case for the “Fairy Tale” narrator, who, when she meets the first man to show up (that is, the first non-fiancé romantic interest to appear), wonders, “If I had been designed to function within this situation or, instead, to somehow undo it.” What can be done and undone—whether an action can actually change anything—thematicallly links the collection’s protagonists (who might all be the same woman, or who might not be, and who are sometimes unnamed and who are sometimes named Karen). In “Fairy Tale,” the narrator considers the possibility of change—and its direction—before the men appear, when it’s just her parents and her fiancé, about the goose on the table: “We’d

better carve it before it gets cold, or hard. Before it reverses. We'd better do something before it changes."

They do not carve the goose; the men start arriving. Eventually, her house is filled with men, men she can hardly tell apart; her mother asks her to choose one. How to choose when faced with "the structural similarity of men, and their ability to be represented both as ideal, like Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, and as average"? Men, the narrator says, could be a standard of measurement: "with such an abundance of men, we could gauge anything we chose."

The trouble, the narrator finds, is that an "abundance" of these units of measurement makes any one of them basically interchangeable. But choices must be made. The narrator tries to consider them as "men replete with difference" and finds in that difference the fact that one has flowers. She chooses him only to have him confide in her: he's trying to kill her, he says, and begins looking for a knife.

A chase of sorts ensues, towels are used as weapons, and the story ends, unresolved. Despite it all, the narrator still wants companionship: "I wanted to feel someone's, anyone's, hands on me, even if it was in that way I hate, the fingers all over my face and jaw." Who that person is doesn't matter—just that he's there. And so the story ends, harkening back to the feeling of app-dating: an abundance of men—of choice—makes loneliness seem like a logic problem.

Many of the problems the characters in *Intimations* face are framed as logic problems, as if the world could be puzzled out bit by bit. "Fairy Tale" is representative: A woman trapped in a physical space tries to communicate with those around her, all in language that's beautifully precise. With its *intimations* of misunderstandings, decision-making, and agency (or lack thereof), it primes the reader for what follows in the book's eleven other stories, which range from just a few pages to more than forty: a woman tasked with baking a cake while in an exitless house with a man, a woman who finds herself at a murder-mystery party whose scenario may actually be real, a lonely woman accidentally on a long date with a stranger. The stories are split into three sections, but they all draw on a tone Kleeman set in her first novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, where she emphasizes, with unrelenting rigor, the physical, whether it's the houses her characters live in or, more disarmingly, the bodies of the people they interact with. In "Choking Victim," for instance, the protagonist considers her baby: "She examined its face, an abbreviation of her own." She is drawn to her husband's face, but "when he was away for too long, she found it difficult to remember how the different parts of his face fit together, even though they had been married for almost five years now." The body, split apart by sub-

jectivity, becomes foreign, as if undone or taken apart by observation: “I looked down at my body as if for the first time,” says the narrator of the murder-mystery story “Fake Blood.” “It seemed impossible to get an accurate view of myself without a mirror or camera, something on the outside to look in.” Such focus on the body pulls the stories together around the strangeness that is physical existence, the strangeness of having an effect on and being affected by a world that seems both predictable and totally mysterious, both rule-filled and completely random.

The dreamlike worlds of many of the stories make them read like allegories. By defamiliarizing the quotidian emotions of late capitalism, Kleeman reveals how odd many of our given structures are and how arbitrary they are too, or at least how arbitrary they make individual decisions feel, as in the opening scene of “Fairy Tale” or in “Choking Victim,” when the protagonist considers speech and how we express ourselves: “It was possible that to cough, to choke was the root of all speech: the urgent need to evacuate something whose internality threatened to kill you. To express yourself or be expressed by extruding words. It was just a bodily function, like sweating or throwing up.” To consider interiority the result of the body, to consider emotions as physical threats, makes even the world of language, oily and uncertain as it may be, subject to some kind of rationality. But, as Kleeman shows, sometimes that rationality isn’t enough, and things still don’t make sense: a goose can’t be reversed and neither, it seems, can some decisions. So it is for the narrator of “Intimation,” a story that begins with a consideration of doors: “All of the best moments in my life had been preceded by entering or exiting a door, or maybe just having a door waiting there in the background, offering the possibility of escape. They were the only things I could think of that were truly reversible.”

“All except this door, which seemed to be unidirectional,” she says in the next paragraph. This narrator—unnamed again, but, given the stories it appears adjacent to, possibly Karen—finds herself trapped in a house with a man after her implied decision to go through a door. After some attempts at pleasantries, he begins mansplaining various subjects: “This ceaseless stream of talk might seem aggressive from some perspectives, . . . but I felt it more like light illuminating a room, a harsh and inescapable substance that was ultimately harmless.” She’s disconcerted by how at ease she feels, so she tries to escape, saying she has to go into the other room. Why? asks the man. To bake a cake, she says. In the kitchen, she finds “everything I needed, but nothing else.” She decides to think about something other than the ingredients and their presence, per a rule she has for herself: she can stop thinking about something only if she replaces those thoughts with thoughts about something

else she had wanted before to stop thinking about. “In this way,” she explains, “I would never be shirking my responsibility entirely.” So she thinks not of the ingredients but of “the problem of reversibility and irreversibility in physical processes. Why was it true that one could stir sugar into a cup of tea, but not stir it back out?” Or, for the narrator, why was it true that she could decide to make a cake but not unmake the cake, or to undecide to make the cake?

Again, Kleeman creates a character who’s confined by the order of things, trapped in what seems to be the inevitability of what’s to come—an inevitability expressed in the physical world. Objects stand in for emotions, and the reader wonders: Why can you feel something but not unfeel it, why can’t you unmake decisions as quickly as you make them? Stuck in a world of apparently haphazard certainty, the protagonist wants out: “What I really wanted was to opt out of the causal relation between myself and this cake, the causal relation that I couldn’t seem to avoid, living in this house that I now appeared to live in.” She turns to another coping method: thinking of words she knows “to fill up the blank space in my head” (“Couch,” she thinks. “Cuisinart.”) She returns to this practice at the end of the story, when she and the man are joined by a baby, mysteriously present. The man tells her to say something to the baby, and, not knowing exactly what one says to a baby, she lists “all the words I had ever known, in order.”

Those final two words carry a lot of weight. They insist on what keeps thwarting Kleeman’s characters: an order that can tie the interior and the exterior together in any rational way that might make sense move in both directions. Words come close to uniting the inside and outside, giving support to each narrator’s interiority the way physical objects structure the world around her, but ultimately it’s the intertwining of the two spaces that maintains confusion.

The final story in the book tells of a “quiet” apocalypse. The world is disappearing, piece by piece, including people’s memories, and to avoid the pain of being forgotten by the story’s “you,” the narrator moves away, trying to substitute physical distance for the emotional distance she can’t achieve. So it tends to be with these stories: the physical world hints at—intimates—an emotional world that perhaps could be just as real, if only we could see it. But we can’t, and the way of things remains unclear, just as the order in which things disappear follows no evident pattern. Sometimes, things just are. Sometimes, decisions are just made, and try as we might, we find no rhyme or reason for them—or what happens as a result.