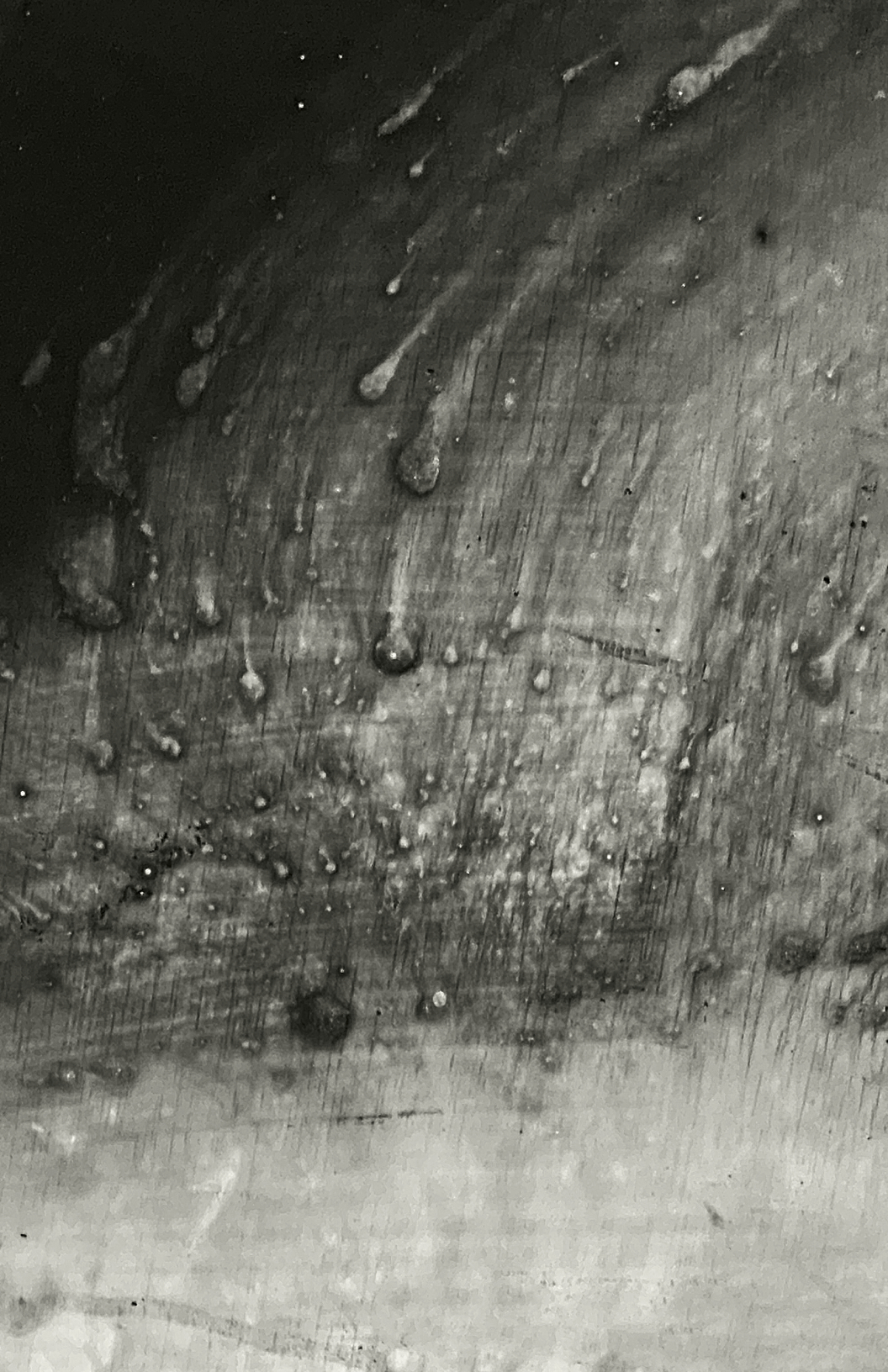


CARYATID

A story by
BRYAN MANNING





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Artworks: *Experiments in Abstraction I, II, and III* (2022) by Suzanne Yeremyan

Art and layout by Suzanne Yeremyan

Distraught, Paul Desmet scours the shallow surf beside Cranly Pier. The water is swift and chaotic, and locating Vivian's toy seems like a hopeless prospect. But he knows how attached his daughter is to this small plastic figurine; she hasn't put the thing down for two whole days. The pathetic expression on her face is enough to ruin the morning for him, possibly the entire trip. He can't give up yet.

Carried by obscure currents, the girl's missing toy is ushered beneath the pier, and Paul finally spots it floating beside one of the bulky support pillars. He trudges through the water toward it, stumbling in the breakers. By the time he gets there, his quarry has already drifted someplace else.

The morning is hazy and grey, and everything under the deck of the pier is subdued. Disordered accumulations of barnacles climb the sundry dark pillars, which rise out of the water in even rows. The salty air is brisk, wet, and suffused with the reek of damp wood. Having caught sight of it once, Paul is more determined than ever to find the mislaid souvenir. He weaves deliberately between the pillars in water up to his knees, wondering where the immense tree trunks they use to build these kinds of structures come from. Something materializes to his left and he lunges after it, grasping.

It's only a soggy cigarette butt.

"Shit," he mutters, tossing it aside.

"Paul!" his wife Emily shouts from the beach, "Paul, just forget about it!"

She's standing in the sand at the edge of the pier, bearing their wailing toddler in her arms. Paul can hardly make out what she says over the child's sobs and the hiss and roar of the waves.

"I'll only be a minute, it's around here somewhere," he replies distractedly as he wades further into the bowels of the pier.

The water now reaches Paul's midsection and all of his clothes are drenched. He instinctively pushes off the ground a little whenever a swell moves past. To his left, on the far side of the pier, he sees a family in colorful swimwear building a sandcastle. That's how he should be spending his time at the beach, he thinks bitterly. He turns back and regards Emily and Vivian. They're far enough away now and lit in such a manner that they appear to him as one being, a top-heavy organism gesturing frantically in a bid to convince him to abandon his search. Yet, his daughter's shrill cries, which bound mournfully among the sodden pillars, signal to Paul that he must not return empty-handed. He lifts his arm and waves to them in a way that he hopes is reassuring, then moves even deeper into the water.

Before he knows it, Paul's feet no longer reach the sandy ocean floor. He swims from one pillar to the next, clinging to each in turn so that he can examine every sector thoroughly. The barnacles dig into his fingers, though his hands are so cold and wrinkled that there's not much sensation left in them. A deep shiver courses through his body. The water is frigid and impenetrable, and a leaden gloom hangs in thick curtains all around him. Paul begins to regret swimming out this far. It seems that Emily was right, that he should have already given up this futile pursuit. As often happens in matters related to his daughter's happiness, he got carried away, and now he feels ridiculous for expending so much effort on something so trivial. He should have let the damned thing wash out to sea. In fact, that's precisely what he resolves to do. It'll be a simple matter to replace it, he reasons. There are hundreds, probably thousands, of similar trinkets to be found in the tourist shops that line the promenade up above. Vivian won't know the difference.

Muffled voices and organ music from the carousel on the pier filter vaguely through the planks overhead. The carousel is located somewhere around the middle of the pier, and Paul suddenly realizes just how far he's traveled. He's exhausted and struggling to keep afloat. Mercifully, he spots a sturdy beam running between two of the pillars, and he manages to hoist himself onto it. He leans back to rest. It's peaceful enough and dark enough here that he could almost fall asleep. The faint, hypnotic music persists, blending with the rhythmic crash of the waves on the beach. Deep within the nebulous melody there seems to be a voice, or something like a voice, singing a sorrowful tune.

Peering into the water, Paul is transfixed by the myriad colorless particles suspended in the depths. They look to him something like dim stars. As his eyes lose focus, the drifting motes sprout halos and appear reminiscent of the lights from the shops and attractions lining the deck of the pier. He's been observing them every night from the Desmet's lofty hotel room. The sprawl of the boardwalk from on high is breathtaking, and when the mist rolls in the lights take on a spectral quality. During these moments Paul imagines that he's seeing a city laid on its side. Each point of light represents an individual life with its own history, perspective, and purpose.

There seem to be more of them every time he looks.

Paul's head jerks upright. His eyelids are heavy and already closing, but before he nods off again he's roused by the disturbing apprehension of where he is. In an instant his disorientation clears and he comes to realize that it has grown excessively dark beneath the pier. Moreover, the sea water is tepid, and as calm and flat as a small pond. A deep silence prevails. Glancing about Paul no longer perceives the beach on either side of the pier. He can't locate any end to the pier at all—the deck overhead extends as far as his eyes can see. In every direction endless rows of those identical, water-logged pillars abound.

"Hello?" he shouts, "Emily? Vivian?"

He calls out several times, but any sound that he makes seems to deteriorate within his immediate vicinity. How long has he been out here? He must have slept for hours. He wonders if Emily has gone looking for help, and he pictures her weeping in the Cranly police station.

“He just vanished,” he sees her mumble through tears to some bored detective.

Then a chilling thought occurs to Paul—what if Emily followed him? What if she is somewhere in this forest of pillars calling out to him? A sinking weight forms in his gut, and a shudder runs from the top of his head to his toes in a tingling rush. He looks around frantically for signs of Emily, or any life at all. He strains his ears, listening, but there is no sound beyond the water splashing at his own movement.

After a moment he comes to his senses. Emily wouldn’t put herself in danger, he assures himself. Nor would she abandon their daughter, or otherwise imperil that precious young life in some foolish act of heroism. Paul closes his eyes; if he just thinks for a moment, he can find a way out of this situation. Despite appearances, he knows that Cranly Pier is only a few hundred feet across at its widest point, and that it projects no more than half a mile into the water. He reckons that if he chooses a direction and moves in a straight line, he’ll soon emerge on the beach. Or, if he ends up somewhere out in the water, he can make his way back to shore along the perimeter of the structure. The key is to stay calm and to maintain a direct course.

Bracing himself, Paul takes a deep breath and slides off the beam, swimming to the nearest pillar and then to the next one as quickly as he can. Though he’s certain that any trajectory will lead him out from beneath the pier, he attempts to return the way he came. He follows this route unwaveringly for some time. Yet, after what feels like ten or fifteen minutes have passed, his surroundings remain unchanged.

He stops to rest and think. With his arms and legs wrapped tightly around one of the pillars, Paul hears again in the cavernous silence that faint, mournful singing. It’s so remote and indistinct that he’s unsure whether or not it’s real. The voice isn’t coming from any particular direction, rather it seems to permeate the atmosphere, to be a part of the salty air itself. He wonders if there’s water in his ears, or

if this phenomenon is some form of tinnitus. Perhaps this is merely his brain's way of filling in the vast emptiness all around him.

Finally, Paul shakes his head and strikes the water in an effort to mask the sound. He leans back and forces himself to laugh aloud. Later on, he envisions, when they're back in their hotel room wearing dry clothes, Paul and Emily will laugh about this together. He reminds himself that all of his life's great crises have appeared humorous in hindsight and this occasion won't be any different. Still, despite his best efforts at feigning confidence, his instincts signal that this particular incident is much more dire than the others, and on some level he knows that if he remains still for too long he won't be able to keep this fact from overwhelming him. Without further delay he presses forward.

Traveling from one pillar to another, Paul repeats the same monotonous journey over and over again. He might as well be swimming back and forth between the same two posts, though he's certain that this can't be the case. Once again fatigue is mounting in his limbs. He's growing increasingly sluggish. Each of the short stretches of water between pillars is taking longer and requiring more effort to cross. There is still no sign of the beach, nor is there any hint of surf or sky. The only appreciable change in his surroundings is the droning voice, which has grown steadily louder. Now no amount of splashing will obscure it.

As Paul approaches the limits of his endurance, a faint radiance appears in the distance. He grabs hold of one of the pillars nearby and scrutinizes the glow. He rubs his eyes and looks again—it's *real*, he's certain of it.

Paul sets off toward the light. His strength is replenished by the promise of freedom and safety. He swims quickly and easily, feeling almost cheerful. The light grows brighter as he advances, and he's so elated that he fails to notice the misshapen pillars around him. At first their variations are subtle and infrequent, but soon nearly all of the trunks he passes by are deformed in some manner, and the irregularities become obvious even to Paul's distracted gaze. Many are bent or contorted, while others don bulges as if something within the wood is trying to escape. A few of them are little more than splintered stumps breaking the surface of the water.

The knot in Paul's stomach returns when he realizes all at once that the approaching light can't possibly be the open sky at the end of the pier, for the pale glow ahead is concentrated in a small area. Even so, he must discover what it is. It could be an opening in the deck, or some kind of maintenance room built under the pier. But it's difficult for him to remain focused, even with this potential exit imminent, because the singing is now overwhelmingly loud. The sound is unlike any Paul has ever heard—an enchanting, mysterious tone, at once simple and complex, diffuse yet direct. It washes over him in a relentless flux.

Soon, the evenly spaced pillars open up before him and Paul enters a broad clearing. He treads water and looks out across the cavernous glade, at the center of which is a circular formation of backlit columns that appear to be made of stone or concrete. Powerful beams of light shine out from the gaps between them, filling the open space with a harsh white glare. There's no sign of life, only that piercing illumination and the deafening chant resounding from somewhere within the colonnade.

"Hello?" he calls out. "Is anyone there?"

His voice is lost in the din.

Paul approaches cautiously. His senses are inundated with light and sound, both of which seem to intensify with every stroke. When he reaches the columns, the compulsion to flee is overpowering. Every cell in his body pleads for release. But, if he's right, then he must continue forward. He's certain that there is an exit within the heart of this anomaly. He clings to one of the columns like a barnacle. Its surface is ancient and pitted, and pieces of friable stone come away at his touch. In the column's meager shadow Paul watches some of the crumbs float for a moment before sinking quickly out of sight. The dreary tone vibrates his entire body. He can feel it even beneath the surface of the water.

He peers around the column but can only see light—the pristine brilliance of some unthinkable infinity. Nevertheless he perceives that something is there, or perhaps someone, and he feels drawn to this presence. Like an unscratchable itch, the impulse gradually overwhelms him, until he can't think about anything else.

Slipping into the colonnade, he finds an unexpected serenity within. Paul is in awe of what he sees; at the center of this interior chamber there is another column as white and immaculate as a cylinder of pure light. It reminds him of a bare fluorescent light bulb standing upright. He can't seem to look away, and as he examines it Paul begins to make out contours on its surface, like the features of a statue. Soon he discerns long wavy hair and an elaborate headpiece where the column meets the deck of the pier. The figure is dressed in a robe or a cloak that flows from its shoulders in crisp folds of pale stone. Two perfectly shaped arms hang at its side.

Paul recalls a sculptor that Emily once mentioned who places their work in various underwater locations. He wonders if this could be the artist's latest installation. If so, they've really outdone themselves here. This sculpture is more elaborate and more realistically carved than any he's ever seen. Before he knows it, Paul is swimming toward the statue. His gaze is fixed on the generous curves of her bare hips and thighs. The creases of her cloak seem to be waving gently.

Briefly, Paul scans the clearing for loudspeakers or some device capable of blaring the siren-like chant that rattles his body. The nuances within the song are remarkable; it feels as if the singer is addressing him directly. The music soothes him the way a warm bath might, and Paul feels all of his fears and apprehensions melting away.

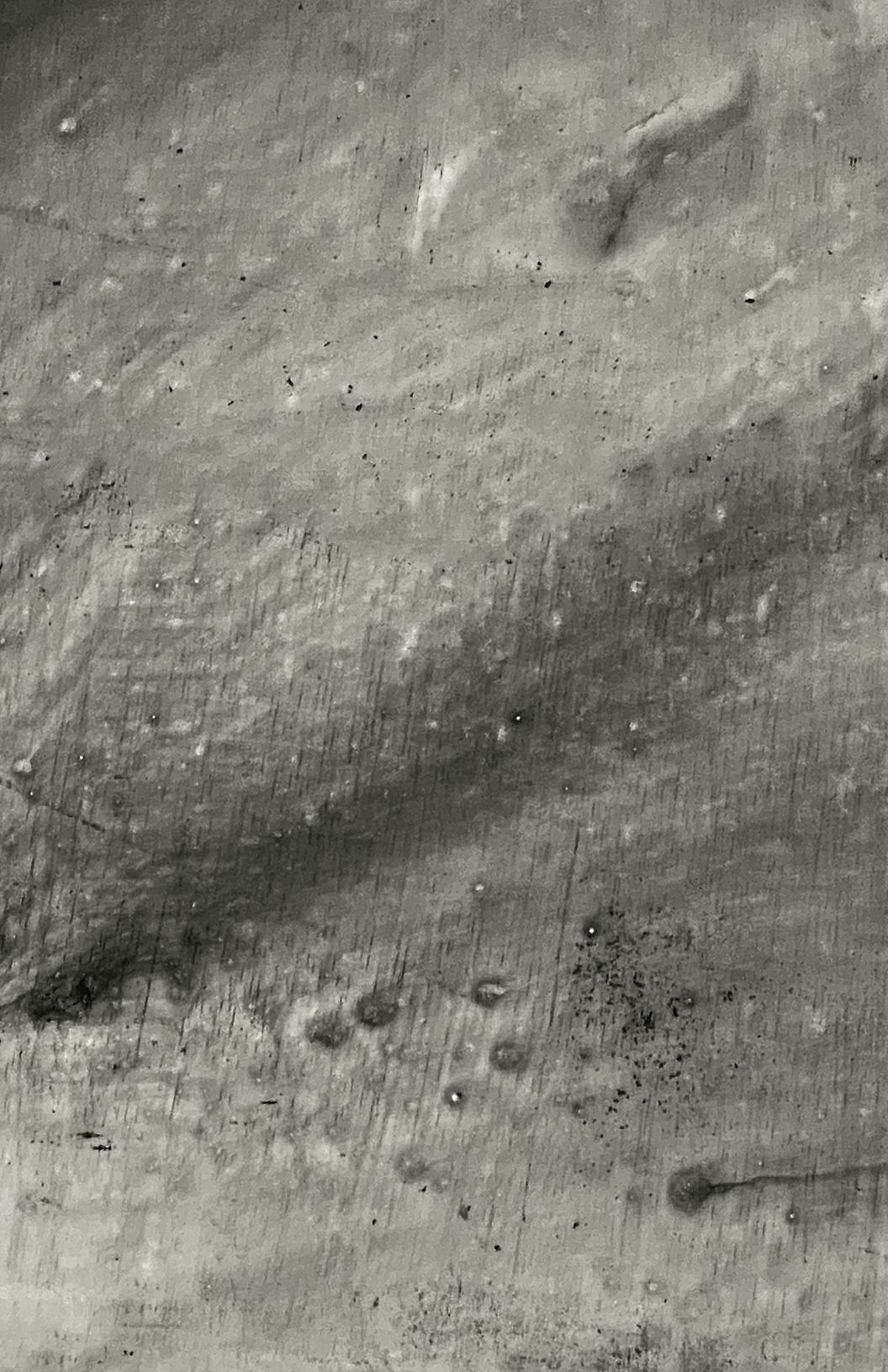
His feet strike something hard under the water—a platform supporting the sculpture. Paul stands on the flat surface facing it. This close, it feels almost like looking directly at the sun. Everything else is lost in a featureless night. The statue's face is exquisite, an unparalleled work of art. This is truly the product of a master, he thinks. Her proportions are striking; every feature is a paragon of beauty. Her blank eyes seem to study him. Down below, her cloak is open and billowing outward.

Paul flinches reflexively when he sees her arms outstretched and reaching down as if to grab hold of him. But he can't take his eyes off the lower half of her body; he fixates on the alabaster curves poised above the waterline. Though many of the sculptures he's seen in museums are nude, he doesn't remember any of them being as graphic as this one. As he continues to ogle her anatomy he's drawn into a hard embrace.

“Wait...” he pleads.

Pleasure courses through his body as the cold white stone presses against him, driving out the remainder of his thoughts. His mind explodes in a surge of blinding light and a flood of ineffable joy washes over him, blotting out the world.

After some unknown length of time, Paul Desmet awakens. He discerns again the comforting roar of the surf and screaming sea birds. Faint organ music plays somewhere in the distance. There is a prickling sensation at his side, like something has latched onto his waist, but he can't seem to turn his head to see what it is. He realizes that he can't move at all, that he no longer possesses the means to perceive his surroundings. Somehow he experiences the world without sense organs or nerves. A heavy weight presses down on him from above. His body is stiff, cold, and soaked through. He is steeped in frigid water that penetrates him all the way to his core, as it does to the other wooden pillars that range about him in evenly spaced rows. Something brushes past him, a discarded plastic toy borne upon a wave.





THE FLENSER LLC
PO BOX 31117
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94131 USA
TFB04