

Her Smile and the Scent of Light

by Tim Gilmore

(Excerpt)

Excerpt from “Her Smile and the Scent of Light”

I was too young, in 1972, to suffer a stroke. Born on Leap Day, 1804, I’d just celebrated my 42nd birthday, and 42’s too young to die.

The light surged through me, brain lightening, suspended me in the flashing. Voices spoke into my ear, anyone who’d ever called Jacksonville home, and everyone to come. I couldn’t tell what they said, but I smelled their breath.

I’d been following her so long. I knew her smile so well. I decided to show to the rest of the world her face and light.

But I couldn’t raise my arms. This stroke! My stricken nerves!

She’d taken a century and a half to flesh her outlines.

So I rose my hindered hand to my canvas, flexed my palsied palm, and let her dictate through me what she would.

My stricken hands made dots. My brain mapped her smile. I remember.

So I grew and harvested a raw pointillism. I patterned the spaces before me with dots.

With dots, I determined her face. My arms defeated my vision. Months slipped away. When again my hands could make faces, I couldn’t discard those dots. They’d saved me. So I drew full faces, but I covered them with veils.

(Full piece)

“Her Smile and the Scent of Light”

In these halls, after hours, in the dark, when the structure of the building shifts imperceptibly, when something creaks, when corners lurch and currents charge, deep in inaccessible spaces behind spaces folded into the landing, she smiles still.

I remember when first I saw her.

Against the lotus that blooms from her collarbone, she smiles.

Beneath the fulgent white flowers in her hair, she smiles.

She smiles still in the stillness and quiet that pertains particularly—only—to three a.m.

I remember when first I followed her. So many years.

What’s the city, however, but a compost of all the stories of its people, cross-fertilized with killers and angels, seeded throughout with light?

I remember. It was 1821. I first followed.

She smiled, tilted her head slightly, turned to face the joy of some joke.

Houses hardly yet stood. Roads filled with pig shit and swamp. No one in town owned a mirror. I don’t believe in ghosts. But faces cast on the surface of the river waited 75 years to reflect.

I saw her in the river, mirrored just over my shoulder, the lotus on her collar, the flowers in her hair.

I turned my head. There was no one there. I remember.

I could smell her. Sweet white blooms flooded the dark beauty of night. Jasmine and citrus, Magnolia, Gardenia. Nowhere could I see her, but I followed the scent of her light.

The hoops in her ears refract that smile that radiates more from her eyes, more from her mouth. Her hair falls in strands either side of those cherried cheekbones.

1896. I remember. The elegant lobby of that little hotel had built itself, cut, carved, and curved its walls, wainscoting, cornices and railings of mahogany and cedar and oak. Every shade of brown and gold shone.

That establishment stood crooked in the corner of a corner of LaVilla between staircases crooked in 10,000 tall houses. I remember them all, and I miss them.

I recognized her instantly, having seen her long ago look up from the river.

I don't know what we said. People whispered of the spirit of the city. She scoffed. As though there were only one.

I told her I'd been following her since 1821.

As though she didn't know.

Then one night, 3:17 a.m., barely Christmas, 1899, she stood, half filled in, watching me at a distance, urban in the dirt of the sleeping streets. Her hair rose, outlined but empty, without texture, without color, form most bare, her image yet unfinished, the frames of her glasses half black, half empty. She smiled.

Then came the fire. 1901. The light that constitutes Hell comprises the eyes of the angels. I had not known.

I stood at the epicenter of a city no longer existing. I guess I always had. No green thing grew. But in the ash that blanketed the landscape continued the city's bloom. It had business to conduct, suffering to alleviate, broken bodies and hearts to mend and console.

The lines had begun to fill themselves in.

I could bore you with the recurrences. I'd trained as an accountant. No institution offered job training in poetry.

Seven sightings in 1907. Five again by 1913. Then came 1933.

That image first cast on the water reflected herself forward and filled in the outlines. I'd followed her since the beginning.

My friends who knew better mocked me for making another H. Rider Haggard's She.

The critics said her smile was "performance art."

The activists called her culture "politics."

The racists called her glowing smile beneath her wide nose "white."

The atheists said the light in her eyes was God.

Historians said she'd inhabited the city since before it was born.

Sexists called her a streetwalker.

Artists called her creativity.

But her smile was never about being pretty. And artists must be willing to disfigure their faces and shit themselves on stage. Art dies without vulnerability.

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I learned that a ghost could be as many different things as light. Though my stroke spoke the dead in my ear, I still granted ghosts no ground, but light had convinced me of light and of the recurrences of history.

After all, I'd followed her so long.

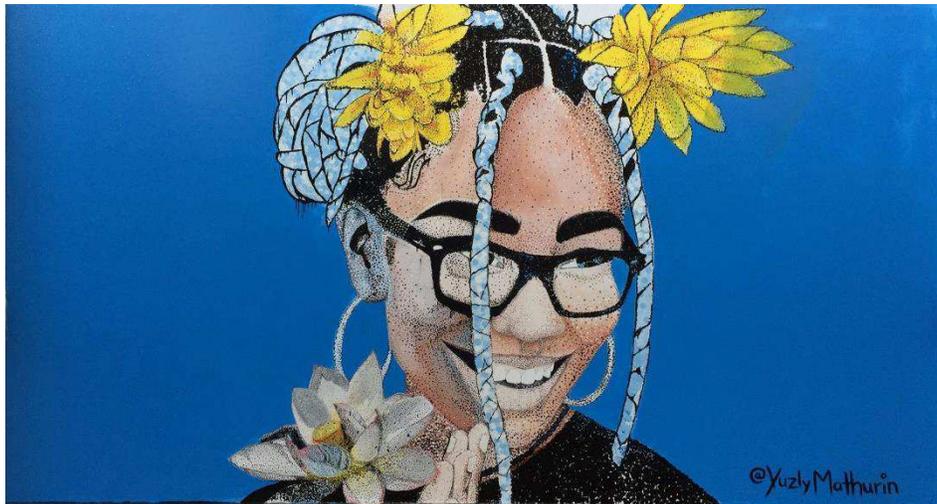
Now when I close my eyes, I see her eyes look down into mine. Hers is the light I've followed behind my eyelids.

All I have is words. I do not have her lips. I've no access to her hair. The particular parabola of her eyebrow is not mine. That light lusters through her eyes and is her light only, though it's part of the light of all light.

I'm grateful to bear witness.

I've followed her light through the city since far before the beginning.

Despite everything I've said, in spite of all my words to the contrary, I've not written or spoken one word equal to the moment of her smile.



Paired with mural: Ingrid Yuzly Mathurin