

OH, TO BE BREATHTAKING IN ALL THE RIGHT WAYS



Figure 1. Shoebill mother with chicks. (Still from BBC Earth, 2:00.)



Figure 2. Younger shoebill chick crumpled at mother's feet. (Still from BBC Earth, 3:36.)



Figure 3. Older shoebill chick receives all the water. (Still from BBC Earth, 3:49.)

1. *on being chosen*

There is one four-minute sequence in Sir David Attenborough's series on Africa (*BBC Earth*) that has never left my mind. I remember flipping through television channels as a porous child and eventually, unfortunately, landing on this. The lens pans across a wetland scrawled with spines of tall grass, to settle on "a giant, prehistoric-looking bird" as she plunges beak into water, hunting.¹ We're then introduced to "the reason for all this fishing:" two sibling shoebill chicks, the youngest of which trembles and crumples back into the grass as it tries to stand upright on lanky legs.² When the mother leaves to fetch water for her young, the larger chick seizes the opportunity: looming over its weaker sibling, it pecks and tears at the little one's downy feathers, forcing it to the edge of the nesting ground and into a sad heap. "This is more than just a scrap between two siblings," David's voiceover warns us.³ As the mother returns, the little one tries to nestle under her, seeking comfort. Recognising what's happened, the mother eyes the larger chick, and for a moment there's hope of compassion. She quashes it. Understanding who is more likely to survive, she distributes nourishment accordingly; she ignores the smaller sibling, stepping over it to instead approach the larger, giving it all the collected water.

This scene becomes entwined with something else which surfaces from the past to haunt: the confrontation of my partner's dating history. One of his exes in particular webs her way through my skull, the acknowledgement of their past intimacy casting shriveled entanglements through each mental landscape.

Not much more is needed to elicit a sense of threat. The reality of their prior union is weight enough. I scowl at traces and shadows of her, brain soaked through with

¹ *BBC Earth: Africa*. 2015. [video] Directed by D. Attenborough. BBC.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

imaginings. We've never met but, riddled with resentment, I declare war. Her presence in his life – however long ago – taunts me. Despite his efforts, no amount of reassurance can settle the bitter curls which rise in my gut when she is evoked. I find myself in a headlock with the past, engaging in a battle which can't be won.

Call it petty jealousy if you will but the impulse is in our bones. She and I have been proclaimed alike by our dating trajectories, and rivals always were those who came a little too close for comfort. The term derives from the Latin *rivalis* – meaning brook or stream.⁴ That is, your rivals were those across the embankment, those who seemed so similar, so comparable, until it came to survival. You see, there is only so much land to gather from, only so much fruit to pluck; resources wane with so many mouths to feed.

Competition can only occur with correspondence, and the stakes shoot ever higher when an external factor is responsible for distributing nourishment; similarities mean there's a potential for substitution. Jealousy, therefore, is innately woven into hunger. Jealousy, rivalry, competition – these are all instincts toward survival. They are the manifestations of a fear of not being fed enough.

The shoebill siblings elucidated this. The cruelty of natural selection is not to be reckoned with.

Something else glints bright in Attenborough's scene: the role of appearance. The smaller chick's weakened state is undeniable. The way it hunches in on itself, the unkempt nature of its patchy down feathers – these are the signifiers of a reduced ability to survive. As the larger chick stands tall and proud, flaunting its superior coat, we're enlightened to its method. When it comes to being chosen, the secret lies in plumage.

⁴ Merriam-webster.com. 2021. *It Takes Two: The History of 'Rival'*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/it-takes-two-the-history-of-rival>>.

2. *the trauma of Treppenwitz*

In episode 368 ('All Rings Considered') of the design podcast *99 Percent Invisible*, Joe Rosenberg recounts a time in college when he was forced to decline a call on an abandoned mobile phone which had been ringing in a library, just as the owner arrived to retrieve it. He was then accused and berated by the owner, in response to which he stuttered and left, and remains haunted by the memory decades later.

He attributes the persistence of this memory to an absence of Treppenwitz ("staircase wit"): the sharp retort which occurs only after the argument is over. To Rosenberg, staircase wit provides a moment of closure, like reassurance that one was correct all along. Even if no one else bears witness to the perfect comeback, it at least exists. "I've never figured out what I should've said!" He laments, the weight of the memory still heavy on his shoulders.⁵

Treppenwitz is one of few reliefs for a moment passed and snapped closed, for the tug of minor altercations from which we emerged from woefully. When such an instance of gratifying epiphany never arrives, failure clings like tarnish.

The past is fiendish like that. It provides such little opportunity to amend, to retract. Monolithic in its presence, once over, its contents are immutable. The ghost of X haunts on.

On the battleground, I begin to veer dangerously towards a Gatsby-esque mode of thinking. Clambering for a seamless love story, I become convinced that the past must either fold to my desired storyline, or be edited out.

GATSBY (CONT'D)

She has to tell Tom that she never loved him...
You see, Daisy and I are going to start over, just as
if it were five years ago...

NICK

⁵ Mars, R., 2019. *All Rings Considered*. [podcast] 99% Invisible. Available at: <<https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/all-rings-considered/>>.

Jay... You can't repeat the past...

GATSBY

Why of course you can. Of course you can...
If I could just get back to the start... If I could just
get back to the start I could find it again.⁶

This didn't end well the first time. One thing the past *can* offer is wisdom. Shuddering from Gatsby's eventual abandonment, I turn from this unyielding history and set my gaze towards the future.

3. curating, rearranging, invoking

When one is traumatised by the tardiness or total absence of staircase wit, one begins to prepare for upcoming occasions: imagining future scenarios, practicing retorts & perfect comebacks. The very existence of X has become a point of tension to which I can't return to undo. Only now, in the stairwell, do I have my epiphanous moment. I leave the building wounded but plotting; envisioning moments to come and proceeding to ensure that, next time, I am properly suited. Images of the shoebill siblings linger in my mind as I metabolise this vital realisation: *composure blooms from impeccable presentation*.

The *School of Life Dictionary* delineates in a segment on clothes that they “are a way of making a crucial introduction to the self... We're communicating to others who we are and strategically reminding ourselves.”⁷ Clothing directly informs one how to carry oneself.

Anna Catalani, in a report for the journal *Fashion Theory*, quotes a subject whom she had interviewed about “extreme” high fashion footwear:⁸

⁶ *The Great Gatsby*. 2013. [film] Directed by B. Luhrmann. United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

⁷ Life, T. and de Botton, A., 2020. *The School of Life Dictionary*. La Vergne: The School of Life, p.98.

⁸ Anna Catalani, *Fashionable Curiosities: Extreme Footwear as Wearable Fantasies*, Fashion

by wearing such shoes, they thought that they would change, become special; as if these shoes had the power to make them feel “cool and eccentric.”⁹

Clothing becomes costume, a method of embodying a persona. Tina Belcher becomes her alter-ego, “Dina,” with the swapping of hair clips.¹⁰ Coraline Jones gathers her strength from an embellished paper-boy cap.¹¹



Figure 4. Tina Belcher's visualisation of becoming her alter-ego. (Still from *Bob's Burgers*, season 2, episode 5, 6:36.)



Figure 5. Coraline Jones dons her paper-boy cap. (Still from *Coraline*, 26:54.)

Theory, Volume 19, Issue 5, pp. 565-582, 2015.

⁹ Catalani, *Fashionable Curiosities*, 565-582.

¹⁰ *Bob's Burgers*. 2021. [video] Directed by B. Derriman. United States: Fox Broadcasting Company.

¹¹ *Coraline*. 2009. [film] Directed by H. Selick. United States: Laika.

I scroll giddily through potential personalities offered up by the illumination of my phone screen.

Sex & the City dances across my vision, Miranda's first encounter with Steve's new girlfriend dazzling my desperate mind. Miranda is momentarily stupefied watching them approach as Carrie's voiceover narrates: "Steve might have gotten knocked out the other night, but Miranda had no idea his *girlfriend* was a knockout!"¹² One internet blog pronounces her "The Upgrade."¹³

This is what we're going for. I set my sights. I picture potential gatherings, fanciful situations in which X and I are faced with one another, and the showdown ensues.

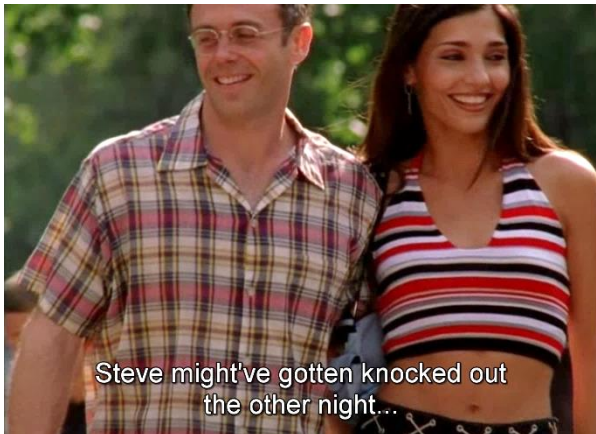


Figure 6. Steve and Debbie walking across the park. (Still from *Sex and the City*, season 6, episode 11, 16:33.)

This calls for a wardrobe brimming with perfect outfits – a flawless appearance to

¹² *Sex and the City*. 2003. [DVD] Directed by D. Star. United States: HBO.

¹³ French, I., 2018. *Sex and the City - Season 6, Episode 11*. [online] Television of Yore. Available at: <<https://www.televisionofyore.com/recaps-of-sex-and-the-city/sex-and-the-city-season-6-episode-11>>.

ascertain flawless appearances. I'm intoxicated by the simplicity of it, the sweet attainability. I can't risk the shopping-equivalent of Treppenwitz. All bases must be covered.

It quickly becomes a compulsion. I am dizzy with the power of clothing, delirious with the prospect of securing my place as the superior choice, as the one to be fed.

*The way you present yourself is a kind of magic – what spell do you want to cast?*¹⁴

I had read this as a teenager in the online magazine Rookie, and now I'm drunk on the incantations of advertising:

cottage-core
model-off-duty
ultimate cool girl.

Steve's new girlfriend was named Debbie.

Debbie.
Debbie.

It starts with a top.

I decide to be a yogic dream girl and this means wearing beautiful ballet-style wrap tops. I envision one in soft green, pulling it around myself like folded wings; tying it tight like Anne Carson's daydream of Bridget Bardot and her robe in *Contempt*.

As a single action she shrugs it on, flings the belt around her waist, draws it tight with both hands and leaves the scene. It's stupendous... Are you an innately unbounded thing? the movie asks Bardot and instead of

¹⁴ Gevinson, T., 2021. [online] Rookie. Available at: <<https://www.rookiemag.com/>>.

answering she wraps herself in boundlessness and exits.¹⁵



Figure 7. Camille enrobed. Still from *Contempt*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1:33:56.

That is composure. I fantasise about coming out of a perfect dancer's pose and securing myself in soft cotton, ready for anything. I trawl the internet and buy the closest thing I can find.

Scenes snap closed with every piece obtained, only to widen again with a new, unaddressed scenario. When the top arrives in a bundle, gleaming with promise, I clutch it tight before tucking it away like a creature preparing for winter.

My armory fills, drawers jammed tight. Every possible confrontation is accounted for. I have dresses to be the perfect summer girl, shoes to be metropolitan chic, all manner of tops to distinguish my grace. I call upon ethereal blouses for elegance, patterned skirts for enviable playfulness, track shorts for that forever-sought-after stylish nonchalance. Seamwork emulating corset boning informs the world of sex appeal. Sunglasses which glint deep green broadcast a cool prestige.

Everything is stowed away in anticipation. A mental inventory builds up, pieces corresponding to their designated scenes. One scenario in particular lays itself out

¹⁵ Anne Carson, "Contempts," in *Float* (London: Penguin, 2016).

like a base. My research indicates that it is the most likely of encounters. I visualise it over and over, watching it grow more fanciful with the incorporation of every purchase I slip into, each shiny new character I don to trial. An ability to conquer in this one arena becomes a prerequisite for every persona. It goes something like this:

***FADE IN - EXT:** OUTDOOR SEATING AT A BUSY CAFÉ. THE TABLES ARE ELABORATELY SET WITH CUTLERY, NAPKINS, CANDLES, FLOWERS. THE SUN IS LOW, CASTING A GENTLE GOLDEN LIGHT OVER THE SCENE.*

X IS B'S EX-GIRLFRIEND. SHE IS ALREADY SEATED AT A TABLE WITH HER CURRENT PARTNER, Y. X IS SCROLLING THROUGH HER PHONE. Y IS LOOKING AROUND, A LITTLE RESTLESSLY.

ENTER: A AND B

***CLOSE IN:** AS A WEAVES GRACEFULLY BETWEEN OTHER DINERS. SHE IS DRESSED IN _____ AND APPEARS EFFORTLESSLY STUNNING. X LOOKS UP AND IS MOMENTARILY TAKEN ABACK. UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO, SHE FIDDLES WITH HER OWN OUTFIT AND CHECKS HER HAIR IN THE REFLECTION OF HER PHONE SCREEN. SHE SUDDENLY SEEMS NERVOUS AND A LITTLE CLUMSY.*

A AND B REACH THE TABLE. THEY APPEAR ALMOST RADIANT AS THEY GREET X AND Y.

CUT TO: FLASHBACK OF SATC CLIP

DEBBIE SAUNTERS ACROSS THE GRASS IN HER IMPECCABLE CROP TOP, APPROACHING MIRANDA, WHO LOOKS NOTICEABLY WINDED BY THIS CONFRONTATION.

(V.O.) - CARRIE

...but Miranda had no idea his girlfriend was a knockout!

BACK TO: CAFE (W.S.)

THE GROUP IN THE EARLY STAGES OF CONVERSATION. X AND Y GLANCE NERVOUSLY AT THEIR COMPANY, CLEARLY MAKING AN EFFORT TO MODERATE THEIR INSPECTIONS. X PINCHES THE EDGES OF THE LAMINATED MENU, STRAINING TO SHIFT HER FOCUS TO ITS CONTENTS. Y BABBLES ANXIOUSLY, RIGHT PALM ROLLING BACK AND FORTH OVER THE CORNER OF THE TABLE.

CHATTER FROM THE SURROUNDING DINERS ENVELOPS THE SCENE AS **WAITER 1** POLITELY INTERJECTS TO TAKE THE GROUP'S ORDERS. THE GROUP CONTINUES TO CONVERSE AS **WAITER 1** EXITS THE SHOT. **X**, STILL VISIBLY RATTLED, IS SLIGHTLY HUNCHED OVER, AS IF CURLING BACK INTO HERSELF.

CLOSE IN: ON **A** WHO, RECOGNISING THE REVERENCE SHE HAS INVOKED, SITS A LITTLE TALLER AS THE FIRST DISH ARRIVES AND IS SET BEFORE HER.

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