

## Breathless\*

## for the motorcycle betrayer

To light a cigarette while you're being filmed. It's poetry, it's the American gesture. It's what Jean-Paul Belmondo died for in *Breathless*, his exhale on the camera, his hopeless European envy. The fulfillment of a thousand film noir fantasies, blowing out smoke on camera. It's the true American dream.

Dana Spiotta, *Lightning Field*, pp. 38-39

Like two vinyl records,  
     these alternate versions of "Breathless,"  
 stacked on a surreal  
 turntable, as if  
 pressing them against each other  
 might allow us  
 to hear sounds from  
 both disks—a decade and a half apart

First there is Belmondo,  
 whose name is like a racetrack to me,  
 the image of his thoroughbred long torso,  
     naked almost curried chest  
     emerging from sheets,  
 tall against the headboard.  
 Smoking in bed, he's the  
 trickster,  
 the shadow,  
 the one who brings out  
 the *noir* in the blond. I want to be that blond,

would even start smoking cigarettes  
 if that would get me in bed  
 with this hustler  
 whose feet are like the paws of lions  
 walking their constellated walk  
 through the night sky.  
 I could paint my nails Rita Hayworth red.  
 Next to him Richard Gere,  
 even though reprising his role,  
 is only a pussy cat,

a boy reading a comic,  
 an embarrassed fan asking  
 for his autograph,  
 but this is where the records imprint, vinyl ridges  
 melting these two flaneur faces  
 together.

Trumpets of animals,  
in stalls and cages, call  
these men until comic books,  
with superheroes like the Silver Surfer,  
take over.  
The boy on the desert,  
the murderer,  
the tame lion  
imagines he is on his cosmic silver surfboard—  
a galactic questor.

He is not Humphrey Bogart,  
or anyone like him.  
He's metallic and doesn't need a gun.  
In bed, billowing his sheets  
    Milky Way,  
        Andromeda,  
            Magellanic Clouds

sizzling through,  
skidding, skiing, riding the linen waves,  
searching for the missing  
blond.  
I'd give anything to be her,  
that blond.  
I'd even paint my nails and learn to smoke  
a Gauloise, as I said,  
though they smell to me  
like old hotel rooms,  
or bars before they are swept out at night—  
    if he would just light one for me,  
        take it out of his mouth  
            and offer it to mine.

It's the inhale of smoke  
that makes him so tempting on the screen;  
it's the inhale of perfume made out of night;  
it's the gasp, the intake of breath, the moment when  
his hands cup the flame against the cosmic wind,  
the flare, the moment of seeing  
when all breaths are held.

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Belmondo,  
    Belmondo,  
        Belmondo.

You've caught me  
being a fan.

Once a man is on the screen  
and takes your breath away,  
he too is beyond breathing, no longer  
touchable.

He is light, but the smoke  
coming out of his nostrils brings us back  
to the movie theater  
where a film can still snap  
in the sprocket and whap whap whap  
until the projectionist,  
    preferably Aiden Quinn thinking about Rosanna Arquette  
    whom he thinks is Susan, whom She  
    is desperately seeking

can fix it.  
In fact in this world  
occasionally  
you will still see the film burn,  
the hole searing its way  
through a face or a mouth,  
like a cigarette burn,  
and then snap.  
Celluloid traded in for  
a cosmic surfer.

They all leave me breathless,  
these men on screen, of any era,

even the men in my life.

Breathless.

\*In 1959, Jean Luc Godard made this quintessential film, "Breathless," with Jean Paul Belmondo as a petty crook, imitating Humphrey Bogart, in one of many gestures linking French New Wave film with *Noir*; the genre of American black and white gangster films the French had so admired. In 1983, Jim McBride remade the film, starring Richard Gere as an aimless drifter who longs to be the comic book character The Silver Surfer, thus linking the new *Noir* to the world of pop culture more than gangster culture.