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CARLOS/ISHIKAWA

DELIQUESCING

Steve Bishop



## In all the old familiar places

Orit Gat

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## 1. STANDARDS

I'm listening to jazz standards as I write. Steve Bishop shared them with me via Dropbox; it's a playlist he compiled for a work called *I'll Be Around* (2017). In it, the songs emanate from a found object—a plastic radio, a circular gray box containing the wiring, topped by a miniature sculpture of a couple, a blond man and black-haired woman, his right hand around her waist, his left holding onto her elbow. Their faces are expressionless and their gaze is directed elsewhere. They are absent, standing on a rock with a small green bush and a pink flower at its edge.

There's nothing unique about this object. The couple brings to mind the toppers of wedding cakes, only they wear oddly casual clothes: the woman in purple trousers and a peach vest over a long-sleeved white top; the man in gray slacks, a green vest over a white, buttoned-down shirt. They wear matching necklaces (it's a weird detail that I cannot explain). The songs Bishop chose for them are all instrumental, but I know the familiar lyrics. "And now you say, you say you love me. Well, just to prove you do, come on and cry me a river." The songs you just know, without knowing why you know. Standards, songs that form part of a repertoire, that are covered and performed in so many versions an original is never a reference. Experiences so often shared, performers singing or playing someone else's heartbreak, over and over and over again.

The radio rests on a pedestal, which, if the viewer walks around it, in fact turns out to be a worn set of shelves. Hiding from view on a shelf, under the couple's back, are the leftovers of an afternoon snack: two mismatched tea cups (one full of milky brown liquid), a single plate with an open, half-empty packet of cookies, next to some crumbs and half a cookie. It feels abandoned, forgotten, left behind. Possibly forever.

## 2. FOUND OBJECTS

Back to the radio: who mass-produced these things, so full of feeling, Bishop wonders when we talk about it. "There's a mood to things," he explains. The couple standing on a rock feels like a dated object, but I cannot place it. When were such things made, who bought them, and why are they now the fodder

of vintage stores. Why is there a pang of sadness when one sees these kinds of objects at a second-hand shop. We often call them "kitsch," then look away, because they are so known, so familiar, so anonymous. Or we look away because they expose so much emotion. Because someone made these objects, and someone else bought them. Someone saw that couple on the rock and thought they wanted them on a shelf, or offered it to a loved one as a gift. Someone thought it was a funny, or sweet, or practical object. Someone once listened to music and the news on that radio. These objects carry histories within them, then become anonymous, dated, and somehow still a bit too sentimental. A raw feeling of an emotion too plain to see. Bishop tells me, "No one is that sincere anymore." (Maybe that is why we look away.)

## 3. ANOTHER CUP OF COFFEE

On a gallery's floor, a folding bed tray, the kind meant for breakfasts in bed. On it is a half-drunk glass of water and half-full cup of coffee, an almost-finished cereal bowl with a bit of milk and some forgotten flakes, a spoon dangling. Next to the ceramic bowl is a French press coffeepot, still somewhat full, mostly sediment. There is a soft purple light emanating from the window which was covered with a gauzy curtain and purple filter. And there is a radio. A chunky Panasonic radio, its antenna stretched. Again, the atmospheric jazz. Sonny Rollins playing "To a Wild Rose" on the saxophone, Kenny Burrell's guitar, "Tenderly." The tunes Bishop chooses are longing, ambient, and full of emotion. The sound, the light, the attention to the small and the minute in this piece, called *I Can't Get Started* (2017, named after the song performed by Oscar Peterson, also in the playlist), all create a mood of aching, slight sadness. Bishop explains, "I think of emotional weight as a formal aspect of the work."

## 4. CHRONOPHOBIA

The first time I saw this term, chronophobia, was reading Vladimir Nabokov. It's self-explanatory: a fear—phobia, even—of time. I look it up and learn chronophobia is especially common in prison inmates and the elderly. I learn there is a related condition that is the fear of clocks and devices to



*I'll Be Around* (2017)  
PVC, plate, ginger nuts packet, cups, laminated  
chipboard, radio playing playlist:

"In Your Quiet Place" — The New Gary Burton Quartet  
"I'll Be Around" — Marian McPartland  
"I Can't Get Started" — Jim Hall  
"Cry Me a River" — Dexter Gordon  
"Round Midnight" — Dorothy Ashby  
"When Your Lover Has Gone" — Mary Osborne  
"I Want To Talk about You" — Ryo Fukui  
"Skylark" — Paul Desmond  
"Waltz for My Grandfather" — Emily Remler  
"Song for Sarah" — Tomasz Stanko Quartet

106 × 89 × 40 cm

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show the passage of time, chronomentrophobia. Chronophobia is a form of anxiety, but I know: it was given a term, a name, to disguise the sentiment. We call it phobia to distance the fact we all feel it, only most of us treat the passage of time not with fear but with acute sadness.

How I learned it: Nabokov's autobiography opens with someone else's story. In the first page, he writes, "I know, however, of a young chronophobiatic who experienced something like a panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth." Nabokov explains how this young man saw his house, his parents, a still unused stroller, "and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence."

The haunting sense of absence in Bishop's works —of things left behind, not in a rush but with abandonment—is echoed in the video on view as part of *Deliquescing* (2018). It was shot in a mining town in northern Canada whose residents all left when the mine closed shortly after the town was built. Only it's not a ghost town: there is a groundskeeper who ensure the lawns get mowed, the buildings are heated, the place is preserved in its emptiness. The camera moves down a street, slowly contouring the houses lining it. Then it shifts to interior spaces: a deserted supermarket, grocery carts lined, shelves empty; a community center or gym (the bulletin board blank); a vacant restaurant; a waiting room where no one waits; and homes—bedside tables, pristine couches, stocked kitchens. The architecture is so recognizable: it's an everytown, only not one anyone has set foot in since 1983 except the lonely storybook character—the caretaker who maintains the fragment of a life that is the town whose population now measures 1.

The camera, inside one of the homes, pans slowly on a made bed (the swivel orange in the patterns of the sheet, like the polished faux wood of the nightstand, firmly plant this bedroom in the 1980s), and I think of Roland Barthes, writing in *Camera Lucida* about a photograph by André Kertész of soldiers in 1915. "Here are Polish soldiers resting in a field; nothing

extraordinary, except this, which no realist painting would give me, that they were there." That where humans were, their absence is registered. That they leave a sign. Again, Barthes: "What I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution, a piece of Maya, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real."

Another haunting aspect of the video: the silence is audible. The hum of a life not lived, of birds and wind, the sound of everyone gone. As the camera lingers, the town feels like a dollhouse and a disaster at once. "I found a town that feels like my installations," Bishop says. And like the installations, it feels like fiction—like an often-told story, manifesting in real life.

#### 5. HOME

A billboard, black, with just white writing: "You'd be so nice to come home to." It stood above the building housing the gallery where Bishop showed an installation of the same title: *You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To* (2016). There is wall-to-wall carpeting, a single brass lamp. In the corner, another breakfast tray: this time, the glass half-full of orange juice, the cereal (almost as empty) is Cheerios. The radio receives a playlist via an FM transmitter—soft, lulling jazz, including Art Pepper's version of "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To." (As I type, I hear Sarah Vaughan singing in my mind, "Under an August moon burning above... You'd be so nice, you'd be paradise, to come home to and love" and think about the sense of promise unrequited love allows.)

There are other homes in Bishop's work: in *What Would It Be Without You* (2017) there's vinyl flooring, a counter with a bowl of pasta and a fork next to a wine glass, sediment in its bottom, and an empty bottle of red; the room is empty and dark, the only lighting emanating from beneath the cupboard. In *Standard Ballad* (2015), viewers could crawl into beds set up at the gallery and watch Bishop's video works on televisions set on nightstands, with sound emanating from the alarm clock by the bed. There was also wall-to-wall carpeting, that aspirational sign of coziness, of feeling at home, or wanting to.



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This billboard looked out over 6817 Melrose Ave in Los Angeles from January to March 2016.

*You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To* (2016)  
Wooden tray, ceramic, glass, resin, Cheerios, spoon, curtains, lighting gel, FM transmitter and radio receiving playlist:

"Windows of the World" — Pete Jolly  
"In Love in Vain" — Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock & Jack DeJohnette  
"Lonely Woman" — Pat Metheny  
"The Changing World" — George Benson  
"Haunted Heart" — Bill Evans Trio  
"Christmas Time Is Here" — Vince Guaraldi  
"Sweet Slumber" — Grant Green  
"I Hear a Rhapsody" — Bill Evans & Jim Hall  
"James" — Pat Metheny Group  
"Days of Wine and Roses" — Wes Montgomery  
"You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" — Art Pepper  
"How Deep Is the Ocean?" — Bill Evans Trio  
"Someone to Watch Over Me" — Keith Jarrett



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*Standard Ballad* (2015)  
Installation view, 2 single beds, 1 double bed, 5' 15" single-channel projection with 20' 29" multi-channel audio on alarm clock radios, 3' 10" DVD on CRT television, bedside table lamps, melamine covered chipboard, carpet



The domestic space, that supposedly safe place, is where Nabokov's acquaintance saw the possibility of a life lived without him. Or where sadness always lurks: the feeling of walking into an empty house. The fear of a life so prescribed that, if it doesn't pan out, leaves no other way of being. This life—so prescribed—doesn't pan out; it usually equals loneliness. Emma Bovary watching out the window daily to see her husband leave, where she would remain, "her elbows on the sill, between two pots of geraniums, her dressing gown loose around her." Every fixture and piece of furniture in a home can become a stand-in for the loneliness of its residents. And yet, we keep on trying: at the end of James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime*, after the narrator told a love story that wasn't his, one that he had only ever witnessed from the sidelines, he describes the girl in the years following that romance's aftermath: "She is married. I suppose there are children. They walk together on Sundays, the sunlight falling upon them. They visit friends, talk, go home in the evening, deep in the life we all agree is so greatly to be desired."

#### 6. SYNONYMS

When Bishop and I talk about the radio from *I'll Be Around*, and the emotional weight of that object, he describes the couple as standing on a cliff, not a rock. He said they were vulnerable.

I'm concerned I've overused the word "heartbreak" in this text (It may be an unfounded concern, but it is a palpable fear of giving away too much of oneself when writing). I check the thesaurus though I know there is no other way of saying it. "Heartbreak. (n.) See HEARTACHE."

#### 7. ANOTHER NOTE ON THE PASSAGE OF TIME

Writing this, I collected books from my library. I was looking for different descriptions of memory, of time passing. Georges Perec attempting to exhaust a place in Paris, beginning at a café, and stretching from it to form a whole memory of a city. Nabokov's autobiography is called *Speak, Memory*, a suggestive second title—he revised it fifteen years after first publishing it under the title "Conclusive Evidence," because life always interrupts every conclusion.

(Toward the end, Nabokov uses the term "the verge of the present," as if memory is always inching to destabilize a sense of now.) Joe Brainard's *I Remember*, where every line begins with "I remember." ("I remember getting rid of everything I owned on two occasions." "I remember many first days of school. And that empty feeling.") The first and last volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*—how across the last book, Proust capitalizes the *T* in "time," as if in the exploration of memory, the memory of the limbs which cannot be shaken and involuntary memory which is always a surprise, is not synonymous with an examination of time.

As I pile the books on my desk, a train ticket falls out of one (New York–Penn Station to Rhinecliff, September 2009). Then a yellowing metro ticket drops from my copy of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. I pick the book up for the first time in years, and in the back cover is an address in Paris. The handwriting isn't mine, and I remember: it was written there by a man I loved a decade ago. I remember the address, the door code, the staircase in the back of the courtyard that led to him.

(Lately people have been telling me I'm a romantic. It sounds like a shortcoming.)

**8. WHAT WOULD YOU CALL THAT FEELING WHEN SOMETHING IS HEARTWARMING AND HEARTBREAKING AT ONCE.** Like lingering on sadness, like linking joy with sun. Emotional resonance means empathy, it means that we see ourselves in things. As close to an answer as I have: the ache and warmth collide, in memory.

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