

The Breaker's Whole Thing

He's there again: a young man, maybe nineteen, medium build, wearing electric-blue sweatpants and a T-shirt the color of pollen. His chest says SOUTH BRONX BREAKS; his face, All Business. Nikes glow on his feet, and they're laced in a special way without being tied. She's seen him before when she's walked to work this way, but this time she stops to watch.

As usual he's set up his space on the sidewalk near the northwest corner of Forty-fifth and Broadway, and his dance floor is a couple of cardboard refrigerator boxes flattened and taped together—the kind street people use to sleep in. They were everywhere these days, those boxes. Paula stepped around them all the time just a block or two down from the Deuce, near the Port Authority. Practice coffins came to mind when she looked at them. And luck. If she hadn't landed in the shelter she had when she first came to New York, she might be brown-boxing herself.

Wearing a T-shirt like his older partner's and a fuzzy red Kangol that skims his eyes, a little boy stands by a boombox on a corner of the cardboard. On a nod from his partner he squats down and pops a tape into the cassette player, launching Kurtis Blow's rubbery, Bootsy Collins-like voice: *These are the breaks!/Break it up, break it up, break it up!* And with that directive the Breaker takes off—his Nikes bombing invisible tags on the cardboard, intricate, hard to follow as a three-card monte; the wings of victory blurring on his feet.

A groove change, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five are delivering “The Message.” *It's like a jungle sometimes*, they say. And they're right. Because it's Trickle-

Down Time in the South Bronx and other parts close to home, wherever that happens to be—or not be anymore. Where the Jolly Roger flies over land, clackity-clack-clacking his skully jaws while buildings burn and people sleep with their shoes on in case they wake up with their walls on fire. Where deliberately burning down the house can earn you a few smoky dollars—the cost of getting the hell out of Hell, or at least moving a tad farther from the heat. Where .9s chatter and the wheel of blood spins, round after round after round; eclipsing hearts, minds, faces, hands, and the history that lived in them. Where, like perverse metal moths, the bullets fly, killing the flame they tunnel through flesh to find. And where the music of the day is rock played on a pipe. *It's like a jungle sometimes.* But the Breaker chooses to scribe these words in water, swimming through the monstrous flotsam, not in a flailing—there is nothing of the drowning man in him—but in an undulation, like an otter translates the river it lives in with the wave of its body.

Then, just in time, Afrika Bambaataa motherships to the mix and chants through a vocoder: *Rock, rock to the Planet Rock. Don't stop.* By his decree, the beats leave the funeral and jack up to Homemade Electro-Heaven where everybody's invited to the crib. Even Paula McClarity. Invited out of the bodied world where she presently keeps still as stone. Invited, freed, to be a not-body, to shake herself to not-pieces.

The Breaker is different. He is at once body and not. His legs lunge in and out, and the crowd, who are bodies made one by him, accept him as their gladiator of the broken, a boxer priming for a ring without ropes. For them, they believe, he is dancing the dance of the anchor, of weighted foot connecting with solid ground, dancing them comfort, palpability, certitude. *Don't stop,* they say in one silent voice. *Let us stay here. Be the dance we want.* Their desire surfs through his body, which he feels, understands, then shatters. He is, after all, the Breaker. And by breaking this desire that is he and not, he

restores himself to himself: a man entire, and a granary of atoms whirling in the grip of energy; a spirit complete, and a storm of stained glass flying, forming, re-forming. So he shatters their desire and gives them another.

The closing music comes in “Rapture,” and the Breaker, moving hand over hand in tight circumference, simultaneously twists his legs in the air before his feet return to the cardboard; orbiting in ever faster circles, like a sundial sped up. He is leaving time and traveling light. It is then, as Deborah Harry chants, *Back to back/Sacroilliac*, that the audience senses the cue; the mention of a bone that sounds holy will signal the Breaker’s final metamorphosis. He coils his body into a ball and spins on his back, making a globe of himself, and the crowd, even as it appears rapt and relatively still by city standards, circles with him, revolving on invisible cords. There they have it, the Breaker’s parting gift, their last new desire. He is taking them for a ride somewhere. Wheeling around, they feel themselves flying away from him, then flying back. At first, they rebel by trajectory, straining at the apogee to get at that sexy centrifugal tease: *Let us go*, they say. *We want to know what we don’t know yet*. Then they reconcile on return, bending like prodigals to the curve and the Breaker’s centripetal will: *Hold us*, they ask of him. *We have always wanted to be embraced*.

Just as the rest, Paula has been flying, too, but when the Breaker begins to slow down and give the audience back to themselves, Paula goes another round in her head. In his gradual deceleration and opening of limbs, she sees release, as though he were the turtle of tribal myth who held the world on his back, but now, deeply tired of his burden, has decided to turn upside down and let it fall away. She glides on the thermal of this idea while the city reasserts itself around her.

But instead of the world, dusk falls, slivered by Times Square neons, and the crowd fractures the air with their clapping. The small boy guarding the boombox shuts the machine off, carries it with him to a spot a few paces from the Breaker, and sets it down. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” the boy says, doffing his Kangol with one hand. “I’m Benny Beats and this here is the South Bronx Breaker. If you thought the breakin’ was def and you’re able to give something to show it”—Benny smiles for the first time—“your appreciation is appreciated.” Making a bowl of his Kangol by turning it upside down, he places it on the cardboard and steps back to stand beside his partner.

Tribute comes quickly as the crowd differentiates and breaks itself down. The weary-faced businessman from Philly is the first to step up, pulling all the change he has from a pocket in his suit pants and letting it spill from his hand into the hat as he bends down. “Thank you,” says Benny, and the Breaker nods. The man nods back, mildly embarrassed to be acknowledged, but somehow these small graces buoy him a little, too. They will float with him back to his hotel room, into the scotch he’ll drink, and inside his voice when he calls his wife and they talk longer than usual. The skinny girl who works at Burger King always puts fifty cents into the Kangol when she stops by. A lucky quarter for each, because she thinks they might be brothers and she lost one of hers to the Virus last year. The woman who has to catch the Port Authority bus to Jersey gives a dollar. Her daughter likes the kind of music they used. She’ll ask her about it, get her to talking again. Maybe her daughter will tell her what’s wrong.

Above the dispersing audience and the performers, the zipper loops headlines around the One Times Square building. A real-estate tycoon flips another property; Carl Lewis wins four gold medals; the national debt ticks onward, all in a dot matrix of lights. Paula has held back, but she has to leave for She Walks, so finally she, too, steps onto the

cardboard. After she drops a couple of singles into the hat, she looks up at Benny and the Breaker. The little boy does his usual grin and thank-you, but the Breaker frowns as if he's trying to figure something out.

Not wanting to linger, she has already stepped off the cardboard when the Breaker suddenly says, "Hickory." In reflex, she jerks around, shaken by his mention of the name. "Hickory," he says again. "I've seen you." He smiles, revealing a dark gap where two bottom teeth should have been. It's a rare smile, with no mockery in it.

"Th-Thank you," she stammers, then she turns away fast, nearly tripping before she can cross the street. Why did she say that? Her nerves made her act stupid. By the time she's just down the block from Eighth and the Deuce, she can see the She Walks, She Talks marquee glaring bright pink. To know her stage name, he must of seen her at the club. What had he seen? She just didn't get it. How could he create a whole thing like that and still make her fall apart?