

DAVID HUEBERT

## WITHOUT SEEING

DANTE IS STANDING IN THE PARK, screaming the word “Lonza.” Lonza is the name of the Havanese he has been walking, the Havanese that has run away. The surface of the park is covered in a thick layer of snow and Dante and the dog are the only animate figures on the white expanse. It is early, just after ten in the morning. The park consists of a soccer field, two baseball diamonds, a pool, a hockey rink, and a fenced-in rectangle where dogs are allowed to roam off leash. Dante did not latch the gate properly when he and the dog entered the enclosure, and Lonza did not hesitate to seize her chance.

The dog is only twenty metres away, but Dante cannot see her because her coat is the same colour as the snow. Dante is legally blind. He relies on the contrast between colours to distinguish planes of vision. Psychologists and doctors call this “sight without seeing.” Dante can usually identify blobs of image and colour and, with the help of his intuition, construct the world around him. But today, with the snow, this is tricky.

Dante spins from side to side as he shouts, calling the dog’s name with desperation plucking odd vibratos in his vocal chords. Lonza is standing on three legs with one paw raised and her left ear twitching. Her head wags back and forth as she shifts her attention between the hysterical man across the park and an all-but-irresistible scent on the far side of the street.

Dante sets off towards the baseball diamond, still shouting. He stops when he catches something in his left eye, a perceptible movement in the midst of the whiteness. He sniffs the air and changes direction to face the dog. Lonza remains as she was, still and quivering, perched in the grip of indecision.

Dante turns towards her and sets out, his boots crashing through the snow’s crust and sinking until they disappear completely. With each stride the snow comes halfway up his calves before he heaves his leg up, lurches forward, and crashes through again. After two or three steps he shouts the dog’s name, his voice taking on a new pitch of desperation.

Lonza turns and scampers off, gliding across the crust as she approaches the road.

Dante is playing bass. He is on stage wearing maroon corduroy pants, white leather shoes, and a tight black t-shirt. It is Saturday night. Five days from now Dante will take Lonza for a walk after a snowstorm and the dog will run away.

His left hand struts up and down the fretboard as the fingers of his right walk on the spot. The bass is a 1974 Fender Precision, and Dante holds it as if it were a beautiful woman. He is aware of every curve and contour of the precious instrument and it clings to him with elastic ease. A sports coach or a music instructor might describe the way Dante handles the bass as “an extension of his body.”

Several women in the crowd are watching Dante with interest. They are luxuriating in the twitching, spasmodic movements of his pecs, biceps, and forearms, in the understated lilt of his knees, and in the honkey-tonk shuffle of his leather-clad feet. The women, when they whisper to their friends, feign disinterest. But while they watch the band their eyes linger on this tall, sandy-skinned bass player. They are not used to seeing non-white performers at this Hamilton country bar, and Dante is among the best bassists that have ever walked this stage.

Dante does not meet the eyes of these women, but he is not, as they likely presume, ignoring them. He simply does not see them. It is dark in the bar and the crowd is obscured behind the spotlights. Dante’s eyes are closed for the most part and when he opens them all he sees is a field of movement, like watching the world through a heat-detecting camera. But even if he could see these women, he wouldn’t want to. Dante is not living with his eyes. He is living with his ears and his fingers, with the toms booming in his shoulder blades and the bass drum thudding through his chest and the voice of the singer settling into harmony with the mournful twang of a B-minor chord.

The song hooks around the bridge and settles into a final chorus. Dante jigs his shoulders back and forth and crouches on his bowed knees as he and the drummer build towards one last climax. Many bassists have a tendency to play on their own. They are known to be the recluses of the band, like goaltenders or pitchers. But Dante has always valued his connection to the drummer. He knows he is part of the rhythm section and that the minute he strays from the drummer the entire fabric of the music begins to tear.

Dante does not look at the audience as he plays. Instead he stands to the side, facing the singer and the drummer. The singer is filling his lungs. And now he is emptying them, emptying his entire body into the final line of the final chorus. The drummer is leaning into his closing roll, his flexed arms glistening, and Dante is waiting for his moment before hitting the low F-sharp at the last possible instant.

*Whompf.*

The note bellows out of his amp and rings through the monitor, causing the snare drum to shuffle, as if it were trying to clear its throat. All these sounds integrate into a terrible, dazzling whole, and then dissipate like the bathroom light in the middle of the night, still shimmering red and blue in the darkness.

The song is over for an instant before new sounds take its place—clapping and screaming and whistles, chairs sliding back from tables, beer bottles being opened, the bellowed commentaries of drum-deafened patrons. The players make a few polite bows and Dante unplugs his patch cord as the drummer begins to disassemble his kit. An old George Jones album comes on the PA, and as Dante bends to put his bass in its case, he allows the maudlin swoon of the lap steel and the syrup-sweet pitch of Jones' tenor to seep into every opening in his mind. He closes his eyes and takes a moment to consider how thankful he is for these sounds, for this other world.

Dante does not have much money. He has never had steady work. The best job he's ever had was a stint as a session bassist in New York City when he was in his early thirties. He was involved with a big rock band and he would tour from time to time, but he never got a cut of the record sales. With the price of rent and the amount of booze and coke he was practically required to ingest, Dante was not able to save much money. After a couple of years he got a bad ulcer and had to quit drinking and during this period of sobriety he realized that he felt too old for that scene.

Now Dante drinks once a year. He is very methodical this way. It might be something to do with his visual impairment, the need to keep his world arranged systematically. Whatever the cause, he drinks for one week every year, beginning on the anniversary of the day he quit. He does it right. He buys a few bottles of tequila and four flats of beer and poisons his bloodstream for seven straight days. All his friends are welcome to cram into his bachelor apartment and get drunk and high, and by the end of the week the smell of

stale beer and body odour and cigarette butts makes Dante remember why he quit in the first place.

The rest of the year he doesn't touch anything but weed. He keeps a quarter pound of hydro in the freezer and carries a film canister full of pre-rolled joints everywhere he goes. He prefers the steady buzz of a joint to the deadening lethargy of bong hits. Every six months he quits weed for three weeks. He quits because after half a year of steady consumption it doesn't matter how many joints he smokes—he no longer gets high. The hiatus resets his nervous system, reinstates his tolerance. After three weeks without smoking all he needs is a pinner to turn his eyes into bloodshot slits and keep him laughing all night.

Dante has always kept in good shape. He takes care of himself. He loves to cook beans and rice and tofu and quinoa, and to make his own smoothies. He goes to the gym five days a week. He doesn't work out to get big; he does it to stay lean and cut. He starts with stretches, crunches, and pull-ups. Then he works his legs, shoulders, and chest. Light weights, lots of repetitions. After the weights he goes for a light swim, showers, and goes home. This routine has kept him healthy for the past twenty years.

Five years ago he added walking to his regimen. He walks ten miles a day, every day. If he wishes to retain his independence in the world of shape and colour and depth perception he must be sure to exercise his eyes. Sometimes he bumps into people on the sidewalk and once in a while a driver honks at him, and in the winter he slips on the odd patch of ice, but he always gets through his ten miles.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays he walks dogs. In addition to the Havanese, Lonza, there is Cayenne, a spunky Border Collie, and an ancient Beagle named Skittles. Dante enjoys the nuances of their personalities and feels a certain kinship with these creatures who, like him, see the world with their noses and ears as much as their eyes.

He has often thought of getting an assistance dog, but he does not want to be so conspicuous. He prefers to travel his own way, fumbling sometimes, but doing so himself. Since his vision was damaged, Dante has hated being cast as an invalid. So he chooses not to mark himself with a cane or a Golden Labrador. He would rather walk the streets ten miles a day, struggling to braid the sounds and smells into the web of world he is always creating.

He would rather face indignity once in a while.

He would rather grope.

Dante carries the corpse of the dog in his outstretched arms. He is moaning, emitting a sound he has never heard come out of his body. The noise is guttural and gruff and it reminds him of the sound his bass amp makes when he turns it on.

His feet are soaked and his throat is tight with tears as he walks down the sidewalk. The air has warmed to well above zero and the snow is melting rapidly, so he has to wade through an ankle-deep layer of sludge. A plow drives by and sprays him with muck. Grainy drops splatter his chin and he is unable to wipe himself. He holds Lonza as the warmth leaks out of her body, and moans.

People have always been attracted to Dante, and he has had many lovers. It has often struck him that his partners are very visual in the attention they give him, always telling him he looks good and that he's easy on the eyes. Perhaps it's just that such metaphors stick out to him. Sometimes Dante wishes he could see more than brown lumps of feature, flashes of white teeth, and the black pits of his eyes when he looks in the mirror.

His work as an artists' model came about coincidentally. A friend of his, Gord, recommended the job. Gord is a cultural studies professor at Ryerson who comes to all of Dante's shows. He is one of these cool, youngish professors who make eighty thousand dollars a year teaching beautiful, eager girls about graphic novels and the history of rock and roll. He is overweight, excitable, and socially gifted.

When Gord discovered that Dante needed work, he mentioned a friend at OCAD who was looking for models. Gord said the job paid pretty well and, of course, it didn't require much visual facility. You just had to be fit and willing to remain still for long periods of time.

The job has worked out well for Dante. He was a quick study and the students enjoy sketching his body. The art professor, Eric, a gay man in his fifties with a deep voice and a sardonic sense of humour, took a liking to him. Eric recommended Dante to a few of his colleagues and soon he was working all over the city, doing ten or twelve gigs a week, sitting or standing or lying in front of art students for thirty dollars an hour. He even had a few higher-paying sessions with professional artists. Things were moving along smoothly and Dante had not thought much about how long he could keep it up, until this year. This year, Eric has begun to cause some problems.

After he has packed his bass, wiped the sweat from his brow, and greeted a few people he knows, Dante works his way over to the bar. The George Jones ends, replaced by Johnny Cash, and a few rowdy men at a table in the corner start to sing along to “The Ballad of Ira Hayes.” Dante orders a bottle of water. He would prefer Coke, but he doesn’t allow himself sugary drinks after dinner.

As the bartender grabs the water Dante notices the woman. She is alone, leaning on the bar, facing him. During moments like this he often gets self-conscious. He knows he is sending one unintentional message or another and he has no control over these signals.

He pays the bartender and glugs half his water. As he puts the bottle back on the bar the woman approaches and shouts over Cash’s rumbling baritone: “You’re a thirsty boy, huh?”

Dante nods and offers an affable grin. He prefers not to waste time being coy or mysterious. “Yes,” he says.

“What?” the woman shouts.

“Yes,” he repeats. “I’m thirsty.”

“Oh, right,” she says, sounding disappointed. “You want to go out for a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Neither do I.”

Dante shrugs, laughs nervously, and takes another drink of water.

The woman leans back and breathes through her mouth, frustrated. “Geez,” she says. “Can’t you take a hint?” She reaches out and cups Dante’s shoulder. Then, leaning towards him, she readies herself to speak into his ear. From this distance he can ascertain that she is slim and sweet smelling and close to his age.

“You were really sexy up there,” she whispers, nodding at the stage. “If you come outside you might get lucky.”

Some mixture of breath and pheromone courses pleasantly through Dante’s body. He shrugs again and says okay. The woman finishes her beer, sets it down on the bar, heads towards the door. Picking up his bass and his bottle of water, Dante follows.

Dante has just turned forty-three and Eric is beginning to turn sour. It began in September with a pat on the stomach and a few jokes about the beer Dante must have been drinking over the summer. He laughed this off

and told Eric he didn't drink beer. When he got a moment alone he pinched the flesh around his gut and hips but he couldn't tell if he had put on weight.

At the gym the next day he weighed himself and found that he had not gained a pound. But the following week Eric commented on some new wrinkles under his eyes, and he became worried about his situation. What would he do for money if he couldn't model anymore? He had no savings to speak of and he was already struggling to pay the rent on his Little Italy apartment.

Two weeks later Eric made reference to the breasts that were emerging from his chest, and Dante was thrown into a state of debilitating anguish. He was shocked that he could live forty-two years in near-perfect shape and then have his body turn on him in a matter of months. He began to spend an excessive amount of time smoking dope and staring at himself in mirrors. He would poke and prod at his stomach and tug at the flesh around his nipples and armpits, bringing his face within inches of the glass. Some moments he was convinced that his body was just as it always had been—firm, lean, formidable. And then, abruptly, he found himself looking at the reflection of a drooping old man with a face like a sun-bleached baseball glove.

He could get through his other gigs without too much difficulty, but when he worked for Eric he was miserable. His task was simple enough: he had to occupy various positions and remain still. In the past he had always done this with ease, and taken pride in his ability to do so. But now he found it unbearable. The thought of being scrutinized in his declining physical condition was torturous. He began to imagine that the students were repulsed by him, that they were sniggering to one another as they sketched grotesque, bloated caricatures of his body.

Dante is in the doctor's office. The year is 1980 and he is nine years old. His mother is sitting on the edge of her chair with her knees pressed together and her hands clasped in her lap. Dante is still learning to refine the blurry shapes he now sees into semblances of the precise images he used to know, but he can sense her discomfort as she perches beside him on the musty chair. He reaches out towards her and she takes his hand. He feels her looking at him and when he looks up he can tell she is holding her breath.

Last year Dante graduated from t-ball and started his first season playing with real pitchers. Dante's mother didn't like the idea of her son playing catcher, but the coach implored her. Apparently Dante had a natural

aptitude for the position. He felt very comfortable behind the plate and he wasn't scared of the ball, which was rare for a boy his age. His mother was worried by the fact that he wasn't afraid of the ball, but it wasn't a ball that injured him.

It was late in the game and the pitcher threw a lazy fastball. Trying to get under the pitch, the batter struck too low. The ball soared straight up into the air and Dante stood and threw his mask off, just as the coach had told him to, trying to get in position for the catch. As the runner left home plate he threw his bat too eagerly and the spinning handle struck Dante in the back of the skull, a few inches above the neck.

Everyone said it was unintentional, and everyone was probably right. Nonetheless, nine-year-old Dante lay prostrate on the ground for ten full minutes, and when he came to all he saw were splotches of colour and streaks of motion. The coach and his teammates all seemed to think it would pass, that he would be able to see after another five minutes and a little more water, but now it is two weeks later and his vision had not improved.

The doctor is explaining the nature of cortical visual impairment. It is a debilitating condition rooted in the visual centres of the brain. It can be temporary or permanent; it is difficult to say. The condition can occur naturally or result from disease, but it can also be caused by head injuries such as the one Dante suffered. Most likely, there is a problem with Dante's occipital lobes or his geniculostriate visual pathway. There is nothing surgery or glasses can do to correct the condition.

Dante's mother nods haltingly and snuffles as she listens to the doctor's words. Once he is finished speaking she blows her nose, wipes her face, stands, and thanks him for his time. The doctor rises and offers his hand. As they shake he whispers into her ear. Dante's mother bends over and tells her son to wait in the hall. He steps into the corridor and lingers outside the office door. Perhaps the doctor believes Dante has gone farther away or that the boy cannot hear him through the thick oak door. Perhaps he does not know that in the past two weeks the young boy's hearing has improved radically. Surely he does not intend for Dante to hear him when he says: "I'm sorry to say so, Mrs. Herrera, but your son might never fully regain his vision."

The sweet-smelling woman leads Dante around a corner and away from the traffic of the main street. She settles into a shadow behind the building and lights a cigarette. She must have been flirting when she said she didn't



smoke, Dante supposes. He doesn't comment. He leans against the wall and she runs the back of her cigarette-free hand across his chest.

"Quite the body for a man your age."

Though he tries, Dante cannot suppress his grin.

"I like a mature man," she says, sucking her cigarette.

Dante cannot help feeling flattered, although he is still not sure what this woman looks like. Some people think looks don't matter to those who can't see, but this is not true in Dante's experience. One can feel beauty as well as one can see it, and Dante desires the same physical characteristics as most men—symmetry, good skin, a fertile figure.

Finishing her cigarette, the woman lets it fall onto the pavement and twists her toe on the butt. She leans into Dante, but he pulls away. She doesn't smell sweet anymore—she smells like sweat and tobacco.

"What's the matter?"

Dante puts a hand on the curve of her shoulder and works up, towards her neck. "I don't see very well," he says. "Can I touch your face?"

A harsh snort followed by a few breathy cackles. "You're fucking blind," she laughs. "I knew something was off." She shakes her head, still chuckling. "Sorry pal."

Dante is naked, modelling in Eric's class. It is Wednesday night. It has been almost a week since the incident with Lonza, and he still finds it difficult to think of anything else. Eric has just made an unusual request, asking him to bend over on his hands and knees, spreading his legs in such a way that he will expose his anus to several of the students. This is something he is not normally required to do, and he is tempted to object. But, not wanting to aggravate Eric, he obliges.

It is especially awkward for him to do this tonight because of the girl that sits three or four feet away from him. Since classes began in September, Dante has often taken notice of her. She is older than most of the other girls and she sits by herself. She has bright crimson hair, which is pleasant for Dante because he can see the colour vividly. She sits close enough that he can notice her curvaceous figure. She smiles warmly at Dante when she arrives and leaves the class, and he can feel that she only looks at his body when she is drawing. When she draws she immerses herself fully in the act, committing to each thrust and swing of her pencil. He does not know much about art, but Dante imagines that she is very talented.

Now he is bending over so that this woman is looking directly into his exposed rear end. He begins to think about the hairs around his anus and the last time he moved his bowels. He lowers his head and sneaks a glance past his ribcage to where she sits. Her head is lowered and she is leaning over her notebook. Behind her a few younger students whisper back and forth and as he strains to get a better look they start to giggle.

Eric saunters across the room and takes up a position between Dante and the crimson-haired student, so that his face is less than a foot away from Dante's squatting rear end. He looks around the room until the murmurs dissipate. He brushes the hair from his brow and addresses the class. "Today," he announces, "we will be observing our subject from a new angle. The artist's eye must be versatile. You must be able to see the aesthetic potential in all things, and to approach a subject from all angles. You must be ready to appreciate the symbiotic relationship of beauty and ugliness, the necessary interplay of dark and light, the attraction of the grotesque and the revulsion of the sublime."

The students glance around at each other, a little confused. Eric gazes at them self-righteously, as if this confusion were precisely the reaction he'd been trying to provoke. After a pause, he continues. "Thus far we've been rendering the male body in magnificent and luxuriant poses, attempting to capture the power and vigour and virility of the male form. But today we view the subject in a new light." Eric pauses, examining Dante's body. He paces slowly around the padded table on which his subject is positioned. The entire class watches as he inspects each part of Dante's body, bending for a long time to scrutinize the face, the stomach, and the genitals. After he comes full circle, Eric opens his palm in Dante's direction, and says, "Today we portray the subject in all his unsightliness. Today we draw each wrinkle, each imperfection, each fold of sagging flesh. Our goal is to depict the aging process. Today it is your task to expose the subject as he is: embarking on the tedium of his late years, crawling towards the ignominy of death. This evening we capture the purgatory of middle age."

Dante arrives at the door on the residential street in Trinity-Bellwoods where Lonza's owners live. His boots are soaked through and his pants are clinging to his shins and knees. The cadaver is stiffening in his hands. The dead animal's limbs are stretching and its fur is wet with brown sludge from the road.

There are no cars in the driveway but Dante rings the doorbell anyway. He is not scheduled to be back for another forty-five minutes and Mrs. Haliburton often does errands while he is out walking Lonza. He does not know what he will do if no one answers the door. He moves Lonza onto his hip and holds her there, cradled in his elbow, as he rings the bell.

After three or four minutes he starts to knock, pounding on the door with all the violence he can muster. There are no sounds within the house, no signs of life. He pounds on the door until his fist is numb and then he sets the dog down. He places Lonza's corpse on the stoop, kneeling and extending the dog with both hands, as if offering a sacrifice. Once the dog is resting on the stoop Dante lowers his head. He settles onto his hands and knees in the thick brown sludge that covers the walkway, genuflecting before the dead animal.

He hears the car pull into the driveway and looks over to see Mrs. Haliburton stepping out of the vehicle with her hand over her mouth. But there is also someone between Dante and Mrs. Haliburton: her twelve-year-old daughter Lindsay.

Lindsay sprints across the snow-covered lawn and runs to Lonza, taking the animal in her arms, tilting her head back, howling into the ash-grey sky.

With ten minutes remaining Eric tells Dante he is free to go. Eric walks to the front of the class and begins to lecture as Dante puts on his robe and sandals and slips out of the room, heading for the bathroom.

In the bathroom he inspects his body carefully, but all he can see are the same flesh-coloured smears he always sees. He wonders why it matters so much, why he should care how he looks if he can't see himself. He wonders, as he often has, whether he would trade his ears for a good set of eyes. As always, he cannot decide.

On his way out of the building he realizes he has left his hat behind. It is a checkered cabbie hat, a personal favourite, and he gets nervous as he heads back for it. When he opens the door he sees the hat on a chair, exactly where he left it, beside her.

The crimson-haired girl.

They are alone in the room. She is packing her bag. He blurts, "I forgot something," nodding towards the hat.

Following the gesture, she looks down at the cap on the chair beside her, and back up at him. He remains still, standing a few feet away from her. She has finished packing her things, but she continues to stand, watching

him. Then she drops her eyes and says, "I'm Bea."

"Nice to meet you," he says. "Dante."

She stoops and lifts the checkered hat from the chair beside her. Cautiously stepping forward, she holds it out to him. He reaches for the hat and as he takes it her fingers brush, almost imperceptibly, against the back of his hand.

The building smells like bleach and antiseptic. The floors are gleaming and there is a muffled chorus of barks coming from another room. Before he spots her Dante hears the voice.

"Hello?"

He turns and sees a female figure sitting behind a bright, clean desk. He moves closer and discerns that the woman is young, with black hair and pointy glasses.

"Hello," she says again. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. I'd like to adopt a dog."

"Wonderful." She smiles. Dante finds himself smiling, too. The girl rummages through her desk and produces a sheet of paper. "You'll have to fill this out before you can see the dogs. It's policy."

Dante nods, looking down at the form. The barking has quieted. He examines the form for some time, unable to make any progress. He can feel the girl watching him and after a minute he meets her eyes.

"You'll have to help me," he says. "I have bad eyesight."

"No problem," the girl says. "That's what I'm here for."

Dante walks through Trinity Bellwoods with his dog. It is the beginning of spring and the sky is bright, though the trees are still bare. Dante has no real knowledge of his dog's lineage, but she definitely has some Golden Retriever in her. The park is wide open, but the dog does not pull or ask to be released. She's comfortable on leash, trotting beside Dante with her mouth hanging open. Once in a while she looks back and meets his eyes.

The woman gets very close before Dante recognizes her crimson hair. "Dante?" she says. "Good to see you. You look great."

He knows this is not true. He still walks ten miles a day, but he has stopped going to the gym. His chest has gone soft and he has grown a slight paunch. He's been smoking more than ever and it shows in the stains on his teeth and the pouches beneath his eyes.

Bea moves forward and opens her arms a little, hesitantly, hinting at a hug. Dante steps away. She looks into his eyes and he wishes he had brought a pair of sunglasses. She reaches down and musses the fur on the dog's neck. The animal raises its head to meet her hand, wagging its tail and pushing into the caress.

"Yours?"

"Yes," Dante says. "She's mine."

A circular tag dangles from the dog's collar and before Dante can stop her, Bea bends and pulls it towards her. The tag is inscribed with Dante's phone number and the dog's name: "Beatrice." She reads it and glances up at him, curious.

"You stopped coming to class."

"Yes."

"Are you still modelling?"

"No. I'm teaching bass lessons."

"Oh, neat. Where?"

He pauses. "From home."

"Oh," she says.

She knows everything. She knows he hasn't worked in months and that he's maxed out three credit cards and that whenever he masturbates he thinks about her. She knows he gave the dog her name so he could say it without feeling crazy. She knows about Lonza, knows that the family refuses to answer his phone calls even though he desperately wants to make amends. She knows that when he finally showed up at the door Mrs. Haliburton hissed: *We trusted you*. She knows that his eyes are worse than ever and that he quit the band because he couldn't face the idea of showing up for a gig with his cane or the dog. She knows that he cannot navigate the world on his own anymore, that he is terrified, and he needs someone to take his hand and guide him for a little while.

Does she really ask if he will go to her place and model for her? Do they ascend the narrow staircase close together, the dog scabbling behind? Does her arm brush lightly against his as she reaches for her keys? Does she make a pot of licorice tea and tell him to get naked and sit on the windowsill? Afterwards, does he ask her to describe what the drawing looks like? Do her words make him feel like he has seen himself—really seen himself—for the first time in more than thirty years?