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1997 Forces

Peggy Brown

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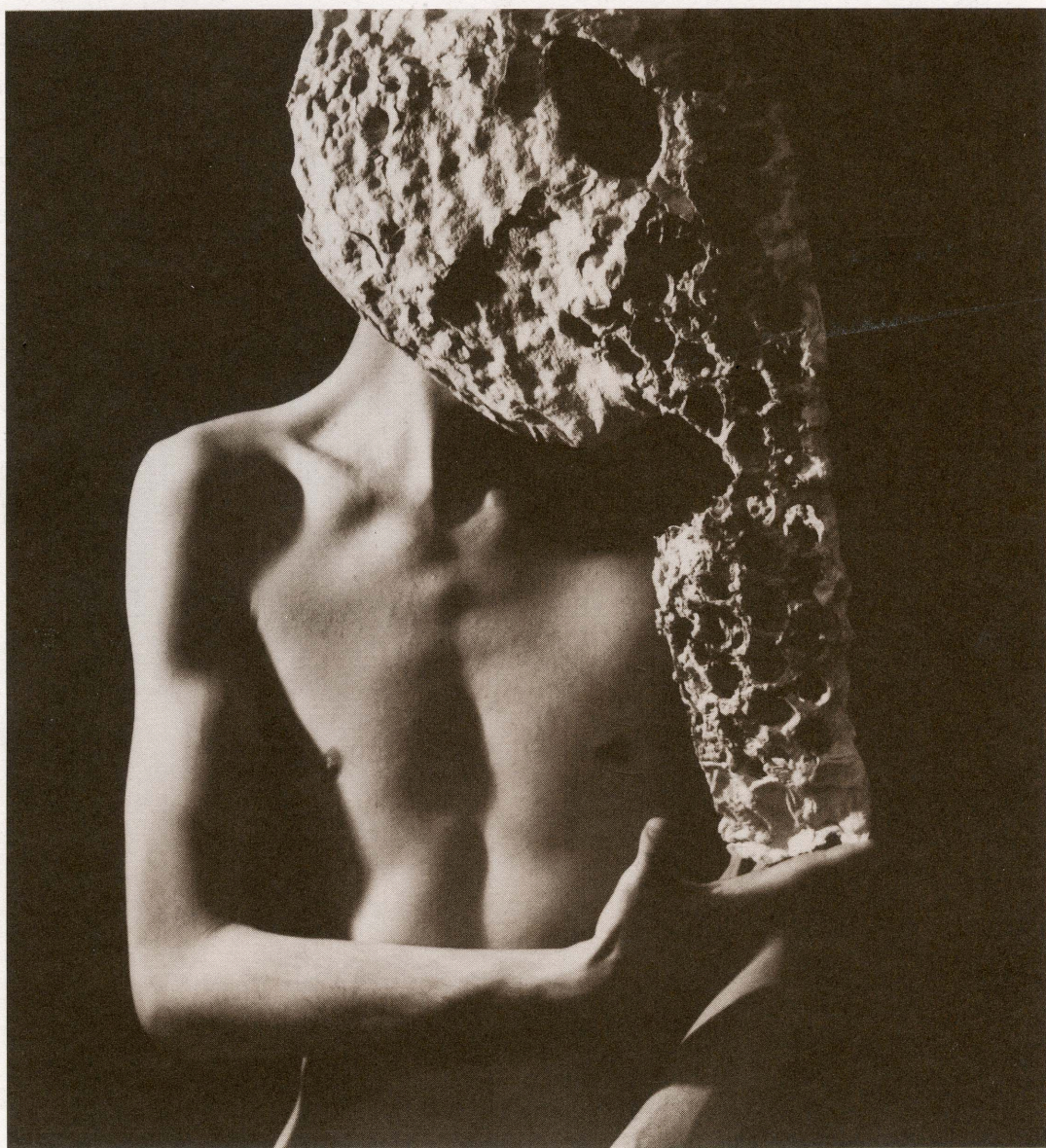
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Forces ⁹⁷ FORCES

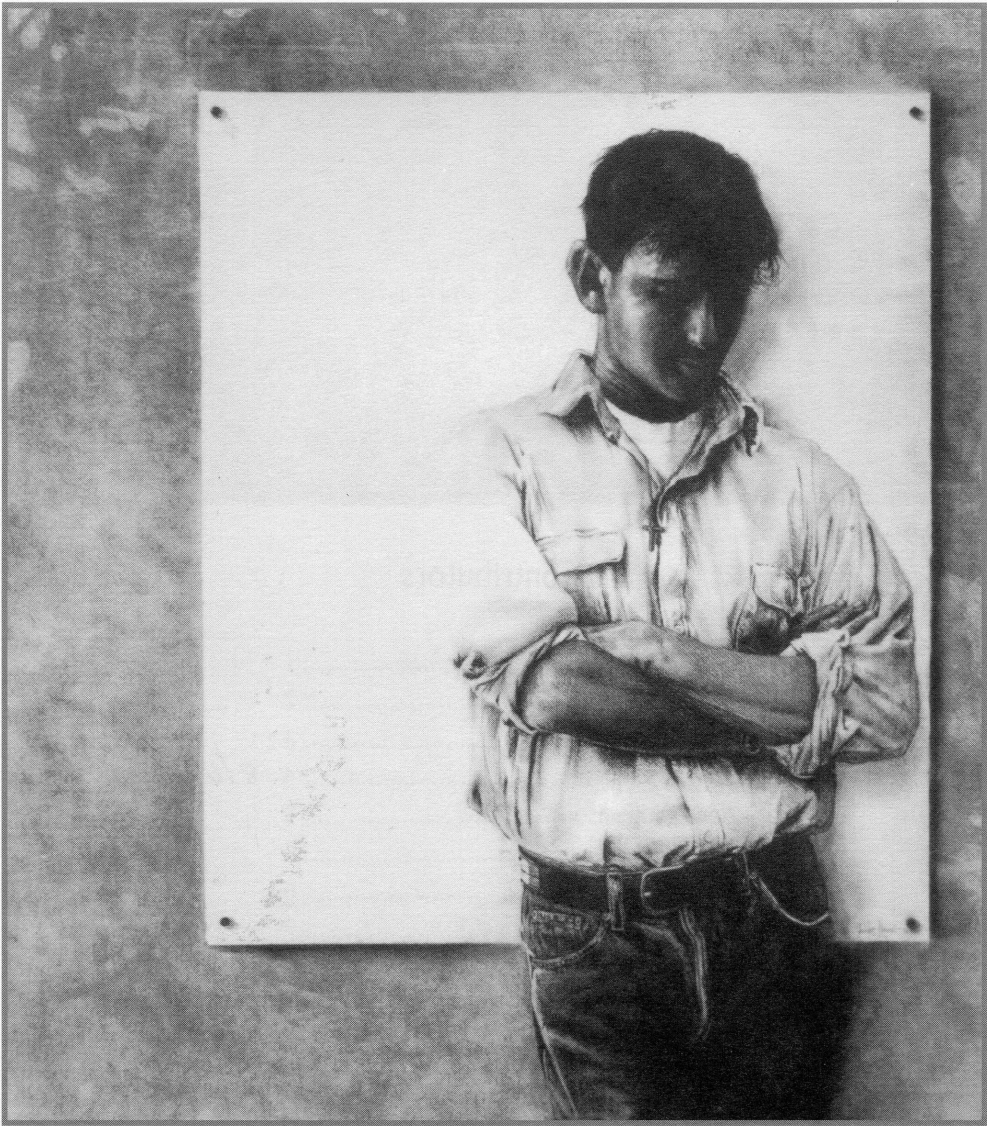
FORCES⁹⁷



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Cover Photos by Alison Fechtel



Untitled by James Adcox

Me

A teacher of words -

A lover of life -

I speak, I write, I draw, I arrange, I put
together.

I read, I listen, I think, I watch, I ask.

I feel...

I see.

I touch, and I embrace what is life - knowledge, wisdom,
dreams, and you.

I sing in the night.

I am free - barefoot I run in the grass. In the moonlight I
dance, lost in the beat, moving in time like the grass to the
wind and the tide to the moon. Experiences dictate tempo.
Variant notes of emotions make the melody - my spirit moves,
sways and swirls as I step in and respond to my life.

If you don't really mind, I should like to inquire, "Who are
you? Where have you been?" and "Tell me your name."

"Come here, please. Stride out and look; lean forth and
touch and see what you feel. Fly like a bird. Sing to the stars
and stand by yourself! Then perhaps we shall step together,
and in unison we'll sing, and the universe can dance to our
music that together we make.

El Banco del Parque

Alisado.

Hecho más suave
por años de uso
y ser expuesto al sol,
el viento, la lluvia y la frialdad.

La superficie
aún a la merced de los mismos
elementos que forman
los dibujos propios.

La mano mía traza
el remolino tenebroso y
yo estoy abstraído.

¿Era que había conversaciones acontecidas,
momentos transpirados,
y toda la alegría de la bondad esparcida—
que aquí dejaron su marca espiritual?
Las lágrimas caen, la sangre fluye, el sudor gotea.
El agua salada permanece.

Y pule aún más suave
La madera.



Getting An Education

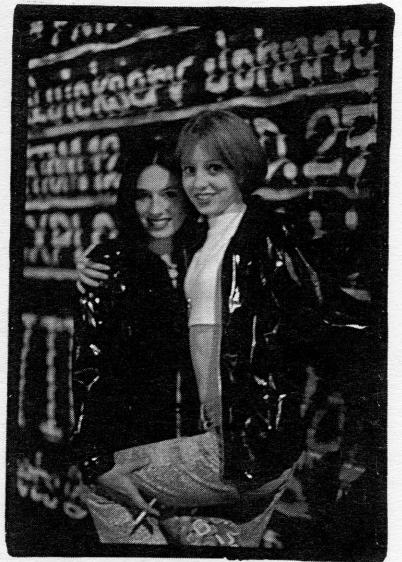
"Getting an education," Mr. Smythe, Newton College philosophy instructor once said, "is what you're here for." Together you pushed your cafeteria trays forward and surveyed lunch, steaming from the recesses of a platinum, gleaming swamp.

Someone bumped along behind you, while Mr. Smythe, just ahead, loitered over the brussel sprouts and yams, and that's how you stalled out before the special-of-the week, swimming in a laddle of grayish goo, sea of spittal served up by an officious cafeteria lady yelling, "Next!!"

"It's really not about credits, or diplomas, or pleasing your mother or father," Mr. Smythe continued, "although all of that is fine and good, perhaps necessary, too... but it really is about you."

"...it really is about you."

After two semesters with him, you had a shared history of sorts, and you trusted him. You'd found comfort in his perky little bow tie, the part neatly carved down the center of his cerebellum, his measured and punctuated way of speaking. He had become, in all of his odd mannerisms, perfect for you. You'll



always remember that first class you'd taken from him, how he'd convinced you that he could argue that a chair leg really was a ham sandwich and that God was a frog.

"...not all
learning comes
in a catalog..."

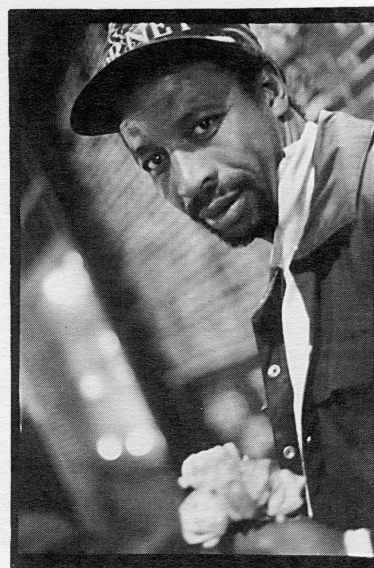
"It's summer," Mr. Smythe said, helping himself to the macaroni and cheese. "Get a job, travel a little; not all learning comes in a catalog with three credit hours attached." He was smiling at you, with his two larger-than-life God's eyes swimming

beneath his bifocals. You'd been only twelve hours shy of graduating, might have done it over the summer. But no...thanks to him you devoted your summer to working as a med tech dissecting lab rats, until Ann Putnam, an old high school friend, called from California and invited you out. You were only too happy to escape the smells of formaldehyde, the feel of plastic gloves, the images of rat feces.

Ann took you on a grand tour - Disneyland in Anaheim, Johnny Carson in Burbank, a quick whirl past the stars' homes in Hollywood, down into the arroyo of Pasadena's Rose Bowl, all topped off with a cruise up Highway One. Ann had put the Miata into cruise control, uncorked a bottle of Merlot, offered you some string cheese and crusty bread. She'd plugged in her daddy's Steve Winwood tape, then pressed the button, and the sunroof opened with a purr. The warm sunshine had poured in and you giggled all the way up the highway. Mostly you saw the ocean. The endless unfurling of the rolling blue fabric, fringed in white, lacy spray. It was almost as if someone was snapping the fabric just for you. It was so opulent, so rich, mile after mile of the blue, never ending, liquid promise. But then the highway took a detour, and you lost your blue view. The

It's a party,
right there in
your brain...

Miata sped through farmland, and you cut through lettuce fields dotted with the bodies of jeaned workers with red bandanas tied about their heads. The workers were doubled down, as if that was their permanent shape. You couldn't tell who was male, female, old, or young. At this distance, they all looked the same, still silhouettes, bowed shapes, bent among a sea of deep green furrow.



Later, you'd stopped at a one-pump gasoline station and an old man came hobbling out from the garage. He put fuel in the car, washed your windows. He checked the oil and tires, too. His movements were slow and budgeted, as if each act would cost. Ann hurriedly thanked him with a curt, dismissing nod and hightailed it for the highway. You looked in the rear view mirror and just glimpsed him there, disappearing into the swirl of your dust, like a phantom your imagination had created and then, in its omniscience, erased. After that, it had been a horrible day. You and Ann argued continuously, about nothing. And you decided you really didn't like her very much. She put you on the 737 for Dallas, and you haven't spoken since.

At the end of August, Bio-tech cut you a check for \$1,000, wished you well, and sent you packing with a fat brown rat you'd grown rather fond of. You're happy to be back at Newton; you like learning...that feeling of an itching brain, the two sides conflicted, night after night after some scintillating lecture, your empathetic heart siding with both sides, your mother's voice championing one or the other view, your father's voice, firmly but steadily endorsing yours, your libido

Will you ever
not remember...

tossing in a log or two on whatever fire is
burning out of control, your child's voice
wanting to make peace on all sides and not
caring, particularly, about the argument, just
so that all get out unscathed. It's a party, right

there in your brain, a chorus of voices singing and shouting and celebrating... right there in your head, a class meeting at four a.m. in the morning, in your bedroom, on the waterbed, bouncing up and down and punching it out for the podium, and this is about as good as it gets. Will you ever forget these words, these themes, these figures of Marx, and Jesus, and Darwin? Will you ever forget Ann and the fields of lettuce and the feeling of their backbreaking labor stretching your spine? Will you ever forget the lifting of those old eyes upon your young face, his figure repeatedly disappearing in your dust, a refrain which you hadn't understood until now...? Will you ever forget? Will you ever not remember, what it is to get an education...?



Photo by Alison Fechtel





Elmo is sleeping

It's 11:40 in the morning, and Elmo is sleeping. I put him to sleep not long after my daughter finally closed her eyes, because I can't stand the way he looks at me with those big, bulgy monster eyes when Alissa's not around. It's not that I don't like Elmo; in fact, I think he's pretty cute some of the time, but when the house gets quiet and the only two things moving are me and a small red furry monster, I get the weirdest feeling that he's more than he's

cracked up to be. Not really threatening (I think that would be going a bit too far) but mildly menacing, in a childish, bully-cum-watchdog sort of way. Anyway, he gives me the creeps, so I put him to sleep. I think I'm going to have to do something about him soon, before it's too late.

Elmo came to live with us not long after Alissa was born. In my infinite, new-mother wisdom I decided that since I had an impressionable young



mind in the house, I should stop watching Bryant and Katie every morning while I ate breakfast. So, Alissa swinging away in her Swyng-O-Matic, I turned the channel to our local public television station and invited Big Bird, Oscar, and the rest of the bunch into our home, two hours a day, every day of the week. Most of them were decent enough to go away when I flicked off the set, but Elmo was different, right from the start. He'd hang around the swing, talking a mile a minute; I swear, he never shut up. He'd watch Alissa click back and forth, and back and forth, and when the swing wound down and Alissa started to fuss, he'd wind it back up again. This was all right with me; he wasn't much trouble, and I liked the idea that someone I could trust was watching over my daughter. All right, I know he's got the mind and temperament of a three-year-old, but even three-year-olds can be helpful at times, and I had a lot on my mind, what with my first novel coming out soon and running the house and keeping my husband happy. You know how it is—you let things slide until you really must handle them, and then you take care of them all at once. Well, I thought I had the Elmo thing under control, so I just left it alone.

Only it wasn't under control. Before I knew it, he was hanging around almost all day, following Alissa around the house, eating all my Zwieback toast, and generally getting underfoot. I've tried talking to him, but you know what it's like talking to a three-year-old: it's practically impossible to make anything stick. I've even pulled out the "your mommy must be missing you" schtick but he doesn't buy it: the wonderful folks on the Street have thoughtfully forgotten to give him a mother, so my guilt trips don't work worth a damn. He just looks at me and laughs in that irritating way he's got, then scampers off to find Alissa. I think I've let him hang around so long because Alissa likes him, and he makes her laugh. Plus, I don't think I'd have been able to manage

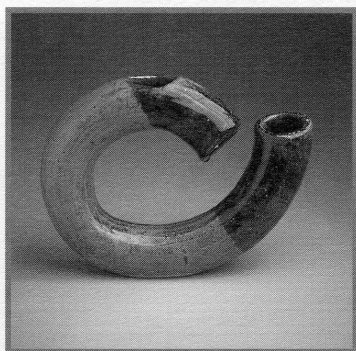
everything without him. This truly bothers me. I mean, it brings up those good old feelings of inadequacy that my mother so dutifully installed in me years ago. I guess she didn't know what to do with her guilt once I grew up, so she passed it on to me, bless her soul. Anyway, having Elmo around for the most part has been okay, but like I said before, he's starting to give me the creeps.

Things started changing about six months ago, around the time Alissa took her first steps. I think I first felt that little twinge of jealousy when she walked to Elmo and not to me. I jokingly said something along the lines of, "Alissa, honey, don't you want Mommy to help you instead of Elmo? He's pretty small to be helping you," and Elmo turned to look at me with those huge, unblinking, white plastic orbs, and I swear to God he bristled at me! The sensation passed pretty quickly, but I still get the shivers, thinking about it.

And then something else happened to make me think this was getting out of hand. I'd put Alissa down for a nap almost an hour earlier and was busy fixing lunch for us all when I got the oddest feeling. My mother would have said someone was walking on her grave, and that's probably the only way I can describe it. I turned around, and there was Elmo, standing behind me with a kitchen knife in his hand, watching me in complete silence. I have no idea how long he'd been standing there (monster feet don't make a sound on linoleum) or how he got that knife down off the counter, but it was just plain weird! I asked him to give me the knife, and I think for a minute he actually thought of disobeying me, but eventually he handed it over and walked away. That's when I found out I could put him to sleep. I just wished, firmly and with a bit of "mother's getting mad" in my voice, that he'd take a nap, too, and he just fell over without a peep in the middle of the hall,

dead asleep. I had to walk over and make sure he was still breathing, after I got over my surprise. This technique still works, but I've found that I've got to get just a little madder each day for it to take effect. So, the upshot of it is that I've now got to practically shout at the little red devil for him to drop off, but it's worth risking waking up Alissa. He really does give me the willies when she's not around, you know?

And, to make matters worse, I think he's stealing from us. Yes, the same monster that so cheerfully and willingly helps his little friends learn morals and proper behavior on practically every Sesame Street episode ever produced is actually stealing from me! I've caught him with his hands in my jewelry box more than once, and although I've not actually caught him with his little red mitts on the goods, I'm missing a few junk jewelry pieces that I



haven't worn in ages. It's just weird-why would he want my jewelry? I think he's also pinched a few dollars out of my purse, and once I caught him on a chair trying to get to Jim's handgun box in our closet. That scared me, and I scolded him roundly for it, but it didn't seem to sink in. He just stared at me like he always does with that glint of malfeasance in his cold eyes, and so I put him to sleep, right then and there. He fell off the chair in mid-snore and, of course, that made me feel guilty, so I put him in our bed and watched him for a while to make sure he wasn't hurt. Later, I had to laugh. Really...feeling guilty over a

stuffed puppet! Alissa certainly seems to love him, and I wouldn't want to have his 100% polyester stuffing on my hands. But then again, if he'd reached that gun box....

Alissa's waking up. I can hear her on the baby monitor moving and snuffling around in her crib. I'm going to have to make a decision soon as to what to do with Elmo; things just can't continue like they've been going. For one thing, I've decided to go back to work at the publishing company to help make ends meet, and I really don't want the babysitter to freak out the first time Elmo steps out of the TV and asks for a Zwieback. And the other reason, well, let's just say that I think things have gone a bit too far. Alissa won't play with any of her other little friends, and all my attempts at asking Elmo to stay home once in a while just aren't working. I suppose I could just stop letting Alissa watch Sesame Street, but it's her favorite program, bar none, and I know I don't have the will power to leave the TV off, even for a day. I've gotten too used to hearing it on in the family room, hour after hour, even if it is public television, and I never really watch it. I mean, it makes me feel like someone's here in the house with me all day, keeping me company. God knows, Alissa isn't exactly what you could call a great conversationalist, especially since she spends so much time playing with that damned ball of red fur.

I can hear Elmo stirring now, too, whispering to Alissa from his bed next to hers. I can just imagine the two of them with their heads close together and Elmo's bulging white eyes glimmering in the half-dark of her room. If I close my eyes it makes me think of conspirators and dark scary things and shining knives, but then I shake myself and think, come on, he's only a monster from a children's television program, and what on earth have I got to fear from that?



Photo by Mike Minadeo



Dance or Dream

As I reclined on my bed, Wind whispered softly in my ear and lightly brushed my cheek. The Wind teased me, calling my name. He wooed me and beckoned me to follow him out of the window and into the night. His arms curled around me, then into the trees with whose limbs he pointed the way. I followed him into the moon-lighted night, out under the stars, with the fireflies in flight. The tiny radiant orbs winked at me from the dark, here and there, and like magic the shadows in my soul fled. A warm glow crept through me and out. I became an earthbound star, a companion to the Wind, a beauty to behold.

I am night's light, and Wind's love. He is around me and through me. He is gentle and tender. His eyes never leave me. His dance is for me and no one else. We dance through the night until the day approaches, then he carries me home.

I stir in my bed. I open my eyes and I stare into Day. I wonder.... In the night did I dance with the Wind? or did I only dream?

The Starry Night

The canvas of the inner soul
Perspectives of the mind.
The canvas of the Universe
A starry night incline.

Blue, green, and yellow canopy
With torrid lines display,
The whirlwinds of life's perilous times
Where spirits find their way.

Through swirling lights; O'er shadowed peaks
With feelings dense and dark.
O'er mountains, hills, and valleys deep
With eerie, sullen hearts.

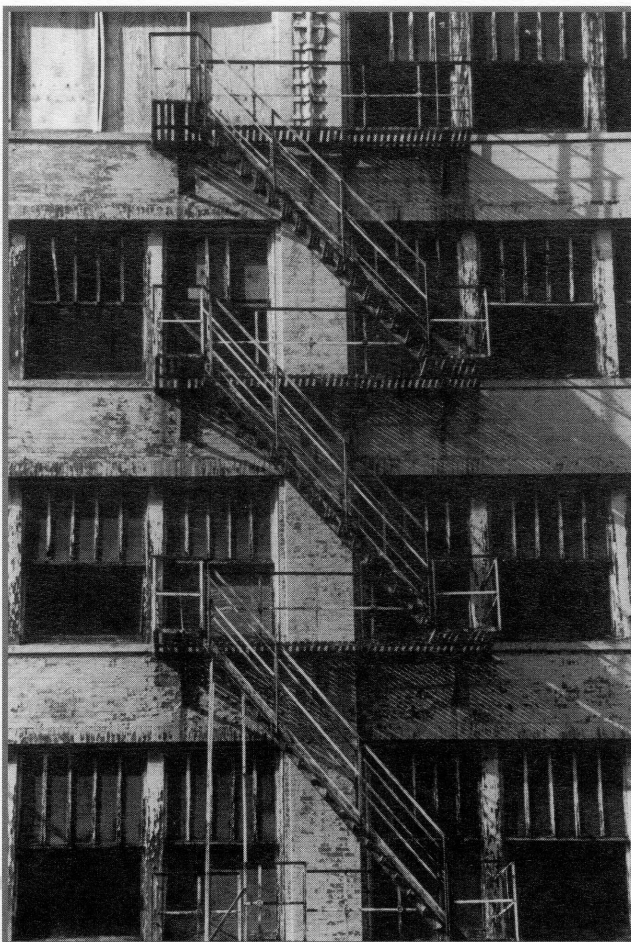
They search the night, to free the soul
Of inner strife that plagues
Each dawn as day ascends
Thus - blocking out the Sun's warm rays.

These spirits of the mind will flee.
But only when they're chased
Away - by human kindness, love,
And peaceful thoughts embraced.

Or if not these, they go beyond
And find their peace elsewhere.
In tranquil slumber ne'er to wake
Until the mind's fog clears.



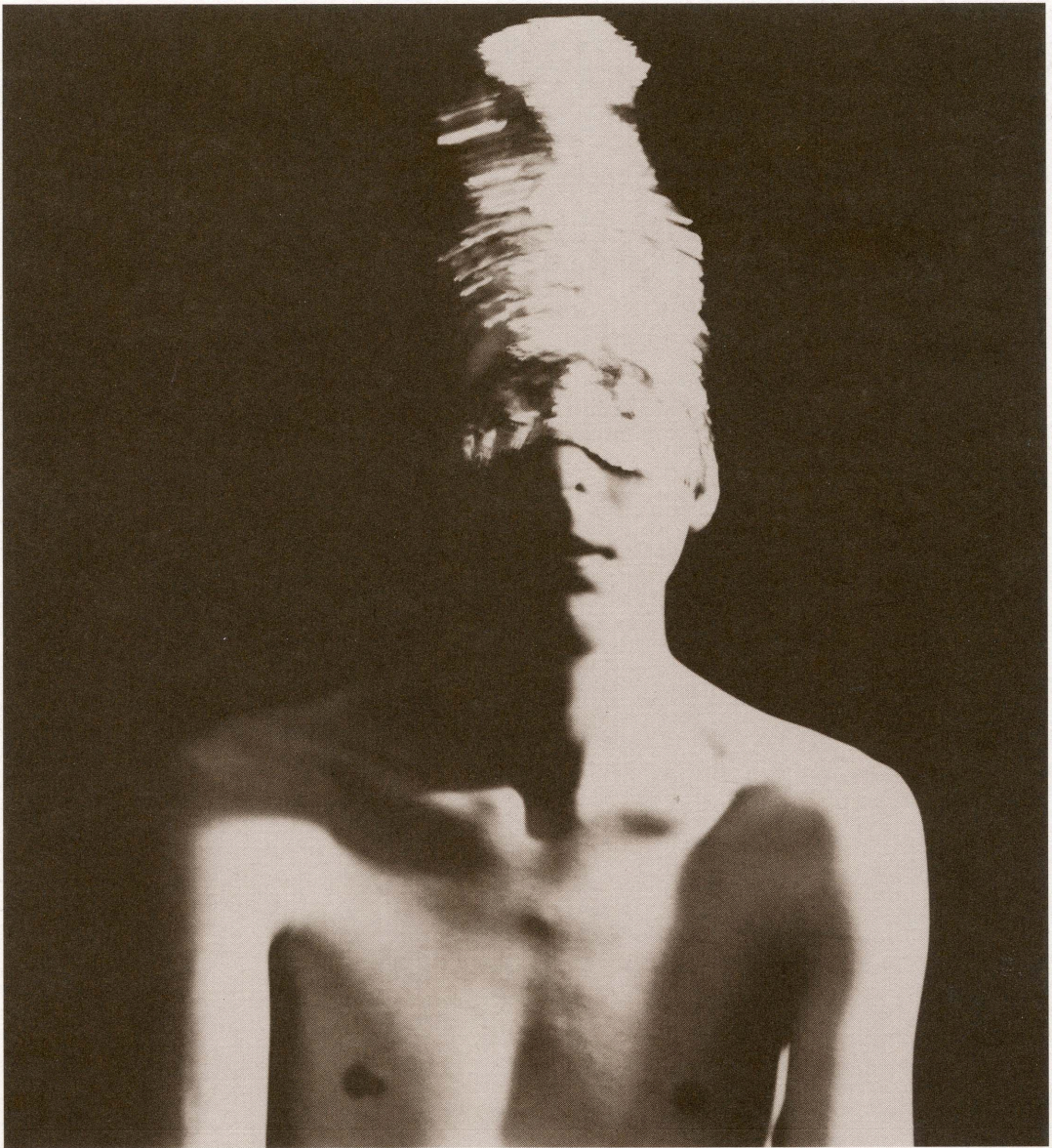
Untitled by James Adcox



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