

Volume 2 Issue 1

Warren Pieces

RED



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Logan Simonson <i>CALDERA</i>
2	Logan Simonson <i>HOTTER THAN RED</i>
3	Logan Simonson <i>BENEATH THE MOVEMENT OF AIR</i>
4/5/6	Victoria Vieira "PASSIVE" AND "UN CONCERNED": <i>THE PERSISTING STRUCTURE OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN J.G. BALLARD'S HIGH-RISE</i>
7	Bronwyn Von Niess "RED" 1
8/9/10	"PASSIVE" CONT'D
11/12	Leda Shields "DANG IT!" 2 & "POUR ME/POOR ME"
13	Alex Bierlmeier <i>IN A HOUSE</i>
14	Doris Belusic <i>FINNING</i>
15/16	Austin Willis "UNTITLED" 2 & "UNTITLED" 3
17/18	Safiya Hopfe <i>INVISIBLE FRACTURES</i>

CALDERA

secreting in a ceramic bowl,
the goo of a monolithic ribcage,

of a stone coil, a rock bolt
of fabric of tissue, lung of earth + it

is ephemeral + running, always
in motion before coagulating.

the blood of a dome
comes, gush of earth scab,

onlookers knew then,
the tongue of insideout.

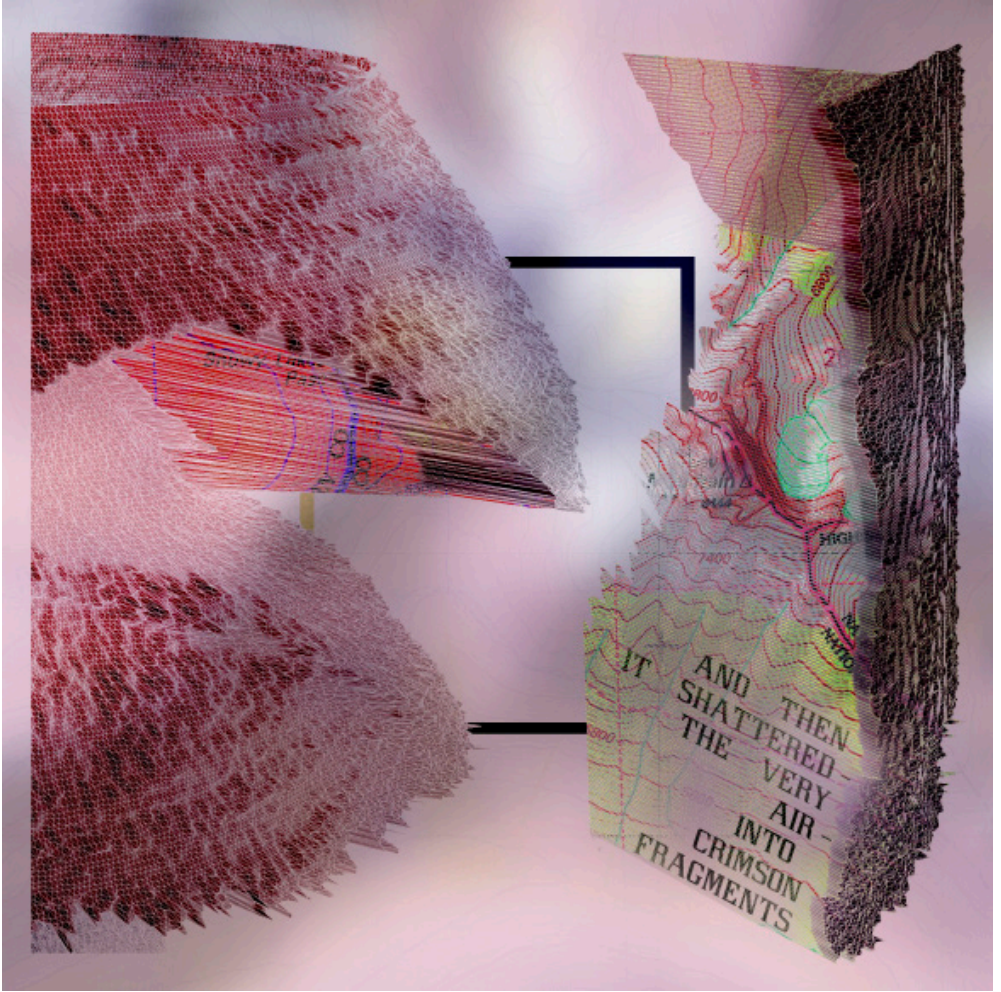
magnata is stone-water; mineral
juice. + words is

letters-water. + platelets harden
before passing.

+ onlookers know the meaning of
speechless.

HOTTER THAN RED (LARYNX)

A mechanical knife
has huge sprockets that
drive it and articulate its
movement in a ratio defined
by the math that comes before it
from an eon of calculating its trajectory
and it inches and centimetres toward
the thing which will be ever sliced and
its stygian wing, whetted in pitch its feathering
flick entomb or inundates the thing it hits and
its blade is so thin, so ground, it can not
be seen, even by the eyes that its motion
is derived by or that came before it or any
which will outlast it —
none will outlast it —
and is so hot that it can be
felt, its red melt
can be construed
by the infinitesimal sensors
of all who will not outlast its
edging, forward toward the thing
it's edging toward. Its mechanical
chugs are its severing words,
are its wail, are the ictus of fiery bird,
syringeal of ravens, mutated, opaque.



**“Passive” and
“Unconcerned”:
*The Persisting Structure
of Women’s Oppression in
J.G. Ballard’s High-Rise***

THERE is a dichotomous separation between genders, particularly when considering the patriarchal system that persists throughout society. This structure allows for an imbalance of agency between men and women, regardless of whether this is the intention of those in power. J.G. Ballard’s 1975 dystopian novel *High-Rise* portrays this normalized disparity between his male and female characters, specifically through extreme violence, both sexual and otherwise. Who is committing these acts upon whom represents the lingering inequality in their degenerated community. Moreover, analogues to the Gothic literary tradition lend context to the women’s increasing dehumanization throughout the novel; further, the subordinated autonomy of

these characters can inform our current understanding of women’s agency.

While men are the main violent perpetrators, a few women do eventually reclaim status above those who have terrorized them, although this does not necessarily equate to an elevation above their oppressors. Due to the extreme amounts of sexualized violence experienced throughout the novel, the band of knife-wielding women tyrannizing the roof at the conclusion do not truly regain the autonomy they lost at the hands of the male characters. Though they appear to consent to their new violent lifestyle, this is out of necessity rather than choice, as they must do so in order to protect themselves and their children. Ultimately, this implied subversion of the patriarchal system that the female characters are living under only works to further their disenfranchisement and objectification.



ONE avenue towards such objectification is through sexualization, which can be welcomed or even encouraged by women who have been conditioned to tie their worth to their physical attributes. However, psychological research into the consequences of such self-sexualization reveals its “association with sexist attitudes” and “mental health problems” (Ramsey et al. 259-260). Several female characters in *High-Rise* embody this adverse practice, particularly Charlotte Melville, who engages in dispassionate sexual acts with multiple men throughout the novel. One notable example occurs when Charlotte is beaten and raped by Richard Wilder and she responds by assuming a “passive expression,” appearing “unconcerned” (Ballard 184). Despite being victimized in a brutal attack, she objectifies herself by remaining indifferent, and allows herself to be considered a thing rather than a person.

This subordination continues into the climax of the novel, when Charlotte joins the band of violent women taking care of their children on the roof. They are forced to become murderous after being brutalized for so long, but by simply joining the newfound system created by the male characters rather than acting against it, they further their limited autonomy. Additionally, this is demonstrated when Wilder willingly approaches the women, implying that he approves of their newfound way of life. The women continue to appease and affirm the lifestyle that has been imposed upon them, rather than chosen by them.

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A truly autonomous act would be to take their children and leave the building, thereby abandoning the system entirely. Another example of the women insinuating themselves firmly in the societal structure created by the men

is their descent into inhumanity, further limiting their future autonomous options. One of the first examples of an act that subverts human expectation is Wilder drowning the Afghan dog, “giving in to a cruel but powerful impulse” and dragging it underwater (63). This impulse appears to be instinctual rather than logical, indicating its connections to the animal world. Further, one of their members wears a “long fur coat,” which physically identifies her with a beast (Ballard 240).

These associations represent the women’s abandonment of their human morality as a consequence of the brutality they have suffered throughout the novel; their interactions with others, specifically with men, have been abusive and violent, which has led to an alteration of their mental states away from conscious logic and toward essential needs. Their survival now depends on hunting and killing, which is not empowering for them or for

other members of the animal kingdom, as there is simply no other choice. One does not perceive a lioness as agential for killing an antelope; she is merely behaving in the necessary way to ensure the subsistence of her family.



THE women’s descent into animalism also has ties to the gothic tradition, where commentary on Darwinism and natural selection speculate on the possibility of a “destabilization of what had formerly been a fixed boundary between man and animal” (Hurley 56). By blurring the line between human and inhuman, the group is placed in a degenerate category of “abhuman entities, not yet ‘fully evolved,’ not yet ‘fully human’” (56). The abandonment of their morality, alongside the other residents of the high rise, is similar to the loss of one’s soul as described in Arthur Machen’s 1894 gothic novella *The Inmost Light*. The mysterious Dr. Black removes his wife’s brain, there-



by extracting her humanity, resulting in a creature more debased than even a “lower animal” (Machen 176), “but which retains a definitive identity as female” (Hurley 118).



THE persistence of Mrs. Black’s femininity, despite her monstrous descent, resembles the women in *High-Rise* dressing in “ankle-length dress[es]” and “long gingham apron[s]”; they embrace symbols of classic femininity while behaving with depravity (Ballard 239). By maintaining an inherent connection to womanhood despite their repeated victimization, they embrace this gothic element. Further, their dramatic decline from human decency as they maintain the appearance of normalcy exhibits the group’s adherence to the new social scripts in the building. What was previously commonplace, such as going to work or bathing, is now anathema to the high rise’s residents.

This is embodied in the women’s refusal to leave even after their continued brutalization; they are firmly complying with the new system they inhabit. Additionally, due to their newly imposed monstrosity that has left them unidentifiable as humans, they have become unable to abandon the current structure of control. It would be nearly impossible for them to leave the high rise, rejoin society, and reclaim the full extent of their autonomy, as they no longer coincide with the outside worlds’ expectations. An additional autonomous limitation placed on the women in *High-Rise* is the culture created within the building, which impacts their perceived identity. Sociologist Ann Swidler argues that while culture does not fully dictate one’s identity, it does provide a “‘tool kit’ of resources” to aid in its formation (Swidler 281). In particular, one’s “adult social identity” partly relies on “available resources derived from the community,” such as

the actions and beliefs of its members (Côté and Levine 123). Within the high rise, the community surrounding the women throughout the novel is increasingly violent, haggard, and animalistic, which thereby influences their newly inherited identity. Further, the female characters are continuously brutalized to the point of numbness; to Helen Wilder, “sexual assault itself had ceased to have any meaning” after being “molested by so many men during the past months” (Ballard 192).



PSYCHOLOGICALLY, these conditions result in a group of women whose collective identity is based on the repeated victimization they have experienced. After regularly being subjected to belittling and degrading treatment, with little to no opportunity to escape their situation, their self-image has been greatly reduced. It would be very difficult for the women to believe themselves autonomous, and act

accordingly, if their experiences tell them the opposite. The building’s patriarchal system is engrained in their newly created and cumulative persona and has influenced everything from the way they dress to their immensely violent behaviour. Further, as they have not been conditioned in any way to believe that they have power in their lives, they would most likely not believe in their own agency.

The perrsisting nature of this lack of autonomy reflects the oppressively patriarchal system that structures the building, leaving the women victims throughout *High-Rise*. As they are unable to reclaim their agency at any point, or even escape the physical edifice that entraps them, they remain subordinate beneath the superior male figures in the novel. The primary surface-level consequence of this implicit submission is the continued brutalization of the female characters; although, they appear to be fighting back

against those who have raped and violated them, the system they live in does not allow for a subversion of the existing dominant-submissive dynamic. Unless they physically leave the building, which is highly unlikely if not impossible, they will continue to subscribe to the organization of violence and disenfranchisement that has reduced them to subhuman creatures.

The absence of agency within the group of women also has implications outside the scope of the novel. Ballard appears to be commenting on the patriarchal system of power that persists in our society, albeit to a less violent extent, and the unfortunate ways that women may go about attempting to alleviate the strain. Often, it can be futile for women to directly fight against the oppression that they are subjected to in a variety of areas, including at the workplace, at home, and in schools. However, sometimes the only way to produce results is to conform to the unjust situation that

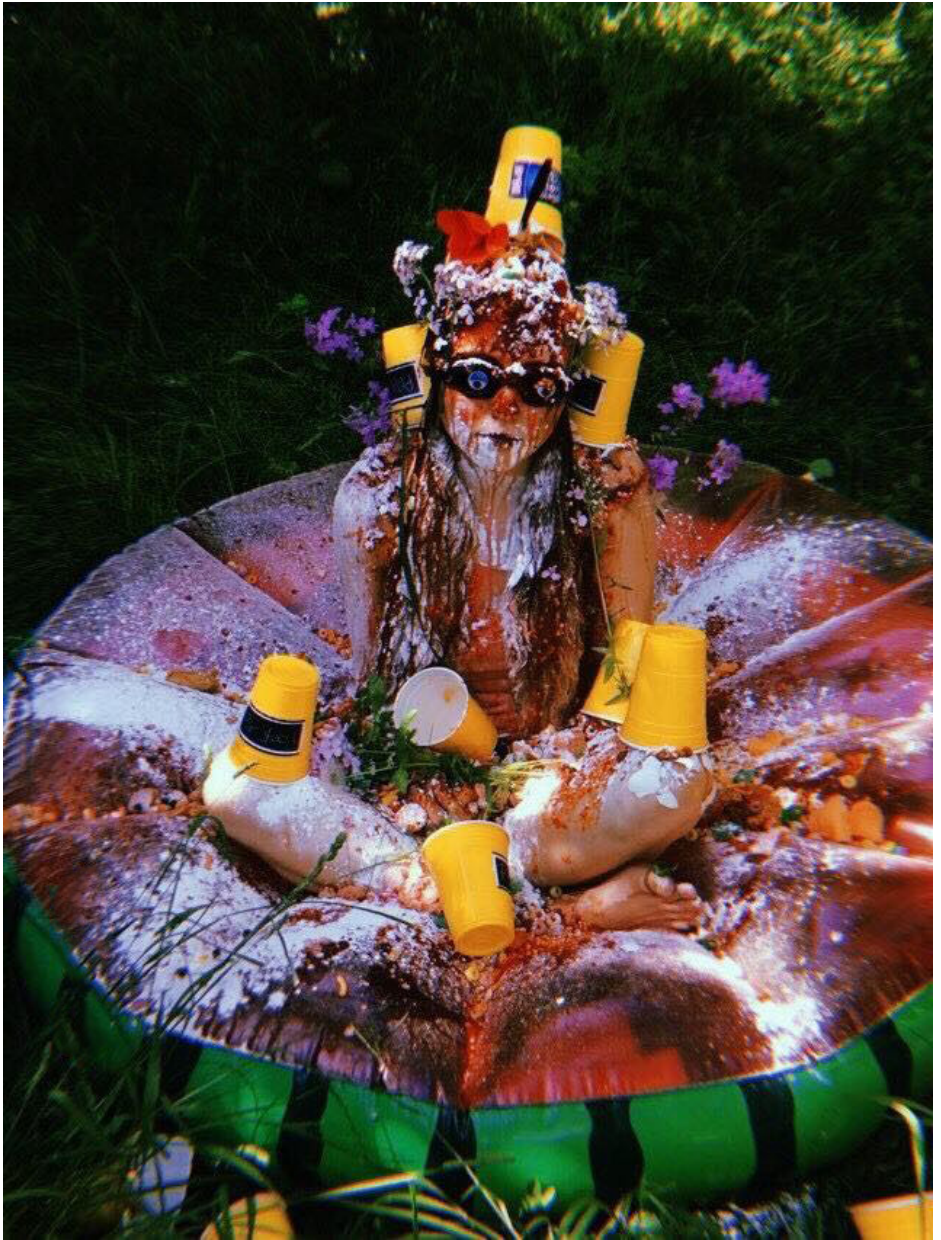
is presented; for example, when women aim to look a certain way in order to please men, or act as if it does not bother them when a sexist joke is told. While this is not necessarily an act that everyone puts on, nor is it a preferable, positive option, it does happen, and is reflected in the novel. When the group of women in the conclusion fully adopt the brutal lifestyle they are presented with, they gain the appearance of self-empowerment, but are simply working to survive in their cruel new world.



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IN A HOUSE

We all just sit there and watch you cry with food in your mouth and then fall over when even the dining table has legs to stand and a face on its underbelly with bubblegum eyes that mean to say Hold it right there, and take a step back, while I pop another one and fiinnaally this thing is working and we're getting fucked off our nut tonight man And now I'm screeeamming Like that voice we all still hear coming from the washroom upstairs even though we don't have any idea who's in there. Come to think of it why have we never left the house? We were born in here weren't we? What could be stopping us from leaving? I promise I wont get distracted this time... but fuckin' that voice again - He's trying to tell us to save you because we all forgot you were choking and you're down there still wilding out underneath the table.

But that was yesterday... Tonight has been really different.

Our table smiles back at me through a reflection in varnish,
And smells that I think are autumn are drifting in through my window on the backs of pine needles - offering me silence.
I set back under a layer of white satin sheets, much like the mountains this month, draped in their beautiful wedding dress gifted by the sky - giving the surface little pinches of electricity that remind me about my skin.
Aaahhhhhh
It feels good to be alone,
And fall asleep to the sound of breathing upstairs.

FINNING

thousands and thousands and thousands—
cylindricals, minus dorsal, pectoral
and caudal fins—spin,
bleed, drown,
fin-skinned
for the sake of soup
and the filling of medicinal tins.





INVISIBLE FRACTURES

your knees crack concrete, fail to bleed.

no evidence to speak of. come morning
your search for what

pupils cannot process. you won't find
a bruise, know flesh throbs

but not of the implication. nothing has grown
from the seeds you drenched—

will what matters ever learn
to be what speaks?

defined by the breeze
passing through it, matter breathes.

what are scars but red shadows? these cycles
not destination, but source.

do your gods tell you softly
to destroy what you can't let yourself forgive?

are you livid? are the cuts clean?
will you live? with this burden, not of weight

but necessary release—
what this world conjures of you

is most often a tease. what does the 7-year-cycle
of your skin leave of you?

there is more than what you feel.
your flesh hits the floor—bones

muster memories
that refuse

to stay inside you.
cells remember, teach you

lessons you do not want to learn.
strike the match, but what's blackened

will never quite burn.

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