

EMILY ABENDROTH

from SOUSVEILLANCE PAGEANT

It Looked Like What You Needed And Then It Needed You

Sousveillance Pageant has one older brother who is in lock-up and one ex-lover who is there. Within any single given year, the Pageant also has anywhere in the whereabouts of four to eight companions who rotate in and out of an assortment of state-enforced and gated walls. These persons sit perched in windowless stalls whose mission statements sometimes emit elaborate calls for “public protection” or “personal rehabilitation” or “community safety” or “violence abatement” or “lifetime sobriety” or “suicide watch.” Whatever their lofty advertised missions, the looming watchtowers do not differentiate; they glisten with strong-armed derision over every facility.

Unlike the others in her immediate community, the Pageant’s brother and the Pageant’s ex-lover do not rotate, although their daily prominence in her existence does at times shift. This is a drift in the intimacy of affiliations that is sometimes of her own doing and sometimes of theirs, but more often is the result of being caught in the painful crosshairs of institutionally created barriers, be they of rising fares on highway tolls, or transfers to a new and distant polis, or ancillary red tape, or a basic menu of facility prohibitions so extensive in its drafting, so voluminous and ever-mutating, that it can’t be provided in paper form.

To normalize or streamline your efforts of maintaining relations with your loved ones, Sousveillance has learned that you often just have to intuit the forbidden. Almost everything that you can conceive of doing that strikes as kind or personalized or tied in any fashion to self-determination should probably be excised without consultation. But this anticipatory reasoning also runs certain alternate risks to one’s fitness and well-being. If you get too good at receding your genuine desires, it can create its own kind of problem.

microfidgets, microglitches
microinhibitions, microblockades

can accumulate into a macroevasion of feeling

The other day Sousveillance tried to describe with concision what the relegation of her brother's position to "permanently imprisoned," when she was barely seventeen, had meant to her own understanding of the patterns of time and the lines by which a calendar might either ossify or be thrown into riotous gyration.

"You become acutely aware," she shares with a friend, "of the slots of the day, of its increments, especially in relation to the artificial and arbitrary limits which determine when this person—blood of your blood, now sundered—has access to a phone, when they might try to reach you, if they are trying to reach you. You can't ever call back, so all you can do is attempt to be ready, to be available. And this makes you aware of things in an odd way that you wouldn't be otherwise. At 10:30 AM, for instance: Is it windy? Are your hands free? Could you pull over on a dime if necessary?"

"At 2:25 PM, while attending an undergraduate lecture at your present university, you look about somewhat harried: are you seated near a door, is the speaker pausing, could you dash away to engage elsewhere without being noticed or verified as doing so, or at least without causing an unforgivable or grade-altering level of disruption?"

In the understanding of one place, is always the attempt to be in contact with another.

A double occupancy carved of single quarters.
A distortion, yes, but not a falsity.

"You carry someone in your head," Sousveillance testifies, "who causes your eyes to dart nervously, causes your appendages to pause at the onset of known counts or mealtimes, even though you're not being counted, you're not having a meal then, you're not headed to or prevented from attending yard. This schematic that you've absurdly adapted to isn't imaginary, this person isn't figurative—they're as real as real can be, at least they're trying to be. But they can't be with you. Really, I mean it, they can't. The state won't allow it. Ever."

This is a severance of not just meddlesome, but schizophrenic proportions

the microderisions, the microsubdivisions of permitted linens and
permitted attire
the intimate microreality of the organs themselves, the microvascular
trespasses
the macrocollapse

It happens like that sometimes.

The small runs large; the free runs up charges; the hidden guns for
visibility.

In their ongoing collaborative performance project, initiated in 2013, the Bay Area based Feminist Economics Department (the FED) scrutinizes the US obsession with “security as profession” in its many contemporary and historical guises, asking probing questions concerning just who or what is “protected” by such roles, and, more seditiously, what a complete roll-over into an alternate theory or vision of “protection” could look like.

The FED calls its project the Poets’ Security Force (PSF) and, in its words, PSF is a mutual aid society that invites security guards to self-define what it is that they would like to safeguard outside of other people’s property. PSF propaganda encourages those so employed to: “Write poetry while at their other job. Use the ‘report’ as a creative project. Protect on behalf of all people, even when only assigned to protect the interests of a few. Act vulnerably. Represent their own complexity.”¹

In the daylong workshops which accompany the Poets Security Force training experiments, participant workers are asked to describe:

What are you hired to protect in your work ostensibly?
What are you *really* protecting?

The participant workers project their answers with a delicate expansiveness.

¹ For more on the Poets’ Security Force project see poetsecurity.net

One of several self-designated poets on site is surprised to find herself replying:

“As an adjunct professor at a private university, I protect students from the reality of my own precarity and of theirs. I protect the illusion that institutional education is still or ever was in its majority a liberatory experience and a sustainable one. I falsely present myself as a ‘sustained’ being. There are strong reasons for doubt and disbelief—and I cover up that doubt hourly; I flout a confidence which I wrench forth from the air alone, and contrary to all counterindications.²

“Along with my morning coffee this Thursday, I encountered an article in the *San Jose Mercury News* reporting that almost 4% of the total student body in California is homeless (some 270,000 students)³. Although my experience validates this reality, my mouth does not. I swallow what I ought to spit, protecting the college advertising kit that pronounces ‘We make success,’ a lamppost flag dressed in the vestments of garish school colors and the cherished fonts of royalty seals.”

Another woman slowly reveals the nature of her own daily duties to those gathered around the wobbly formica table:

“I work in events security—concert halls, stadiums, auditoriums, and large outdoor venues. I generally work ‘entry.’ Our task is to collect the cell phones of ticketholders as they enter into big name celebrity shows. We are told that we do so to prevent bootleg filming or unauthorized audio recording, in a law-abiding attempt to curb the black market availability of such items. It’s chaotic and it’s stressful because, as you can imagine, no one wants to give up their phones. In fact, they are sometimes next to hysterical at the mere prospect.

² In July of 2013, I participated in one of the daylong Poets’ Security Force workshops in Manhattan. While the content of some of the “quoted speeches” of participant laborers in this section of my own piece is influenced and inspired by that participation, these are by no means actual quotes from participants. Instead, they are flights of invention that draw upon the range of concerns and examples raised that day, but also embellish, re-imagine, and construct wholesale from air as needed.

³ Harrington, Theresa. “More homeless students in California, but decline in some counties.” *San Jose Mercury News*, September 12, 2014. http://www.mercurynews.com/my-town/ci_26523941/more-homeless-students-california-but-decline-some-counties

“As for us,” the woman notes, restraining herself from cussing, “as security staff, we are required to sign a waiver, as stipulation for receiving the job at all, which says that we grant full permission to the management company to use our own images to any end they should desire. At any time. Our signature qualifies as permanent consent—howsoever and wheresoever those images might appear. Failure to sign this form is cause for immediate termination of one’s position. Our pay is \$7.25/hr.

“I guess you could say that our duty is to protect the power of one class of people to maintain its secrets at the expense of our own complete and mandatory exposure.”

This final overture causes many of the room’s heads to bob and nod involuntarily. A few heads lob knowing, affirmative glances toward the speaker.

Someone else creaks loudly in their chair, breaking their own respectful listening carriage to vocalize how certain very adamant anti-privacy advocates have repeatedly been caught going to tremendous, even obscene, lengths to maintain control over the visibility of their own most token activities or information.

A predictably asymmetrical policy of implementation