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PRAISE FOR *TORPOR*

"Chris Kraus writes about the strangeness of the world in a clear American prose filled with emotion, but with no vapors of style … Chris Kraus is a great writer"

— Michael Tolkin, *Artforum*

"Feelings about messed-up relationships cut back and forth with painful proddings of historical events, all rendered in a kind of open prose that allows a dirt road to lead to Desert Storm and end up in an analysis of *Thirtysomething*. The effect is so startling that it resuscitates words long fallen out of fashion: *Torpor* is honest and true"

— Alex Kitnick, *The Believer*

"*Torpor* takes aim at the traditional bourgeois novel about marriage and family and delivers a book full of bullet-holes: the death of the novel, the fall of Europe, the end of the family, devastation of the arts. What is left standing? A battle-scarred but indefatigably hopeful *I-Love-Lucy-esque* Chris Kraus"

— Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*

"Kraus is at work on a kind of philosophy … It is possible, she finds, to turn on in ourselves the bright light of the interrogation room … to expose all experience always to direct and sustained evaluation … Through the intention, perpetual effort to comprehend it, existence is transformed from a series of events … and therefore the world in which it is lived is something within our power to comprehend"

— Elizabeth Gumport, *n+1*

"[*Torpor*] has more heart than any intellectual of the author's caliber has gotten away with having since Celine. And, like Celine, she knows that life, alas, is not about feelings"

— Gary Indiana, author of *Three Day Fever*

PRAISE FOR *I LOVE DICK*

"The intelligence and honesty and total originality of Chris Kraus make her work not just great but indispensable – especially now, when everything is so confusing, so full of despair. I read everything Chris Kraus writes; she softens despair with her brightness, and with incredible humour, too"

—Rachel Kushner

"*I Love Dick* is a classic. Here pain is the aphrodisiac and distance is the muse. Unrequited love is transformed into a fascinating book of ideas"

—Zoe Pilger

"I know there was a time before I read Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (in fact, that time was only five years ago), but it's hard to imagine; some works of art do this to you. They tear down so many assumptions about what the form can handle (in this case, what the form of the novel can handle) that there is no way to re-create your mind before your encounter with them"

—Sheila Heti

"Tart, brazen and funny … a cautionary tale, *I Love Dick* raises disturbing but compelling questions about female social behavior, power, control"

—*Nation*

"Ever since I read *I Love Dick*, I have revered it as one of the most explosive, revealing, lacerating and unusual memoirs ever committed to the page … *I Love Dick* is never a comfortable read, and it is by turns exasperating, horrifying, and lurid, but it is never less than genuine, and often completely illuminating about the life of the mind"

—Rick Moody

"*I Love Dick* is one of the most important books about being a woman … Friends speak of Kraus's work in the same breathless and conspiratorial way they discuss Elena Ferrante's novels of female friendship set in Naples. The clandestine clubbishness that envelopes women who've read and immersed themselves in the texts shows how little female desire, anger and vulnerability is accurately and confidently explored in literature and culture … the book reveals far deeper truths than standard and uncomplicated love plots tend to"

—Dawn Foster, *Independent*

TORPOR

CHRIS KRAUS

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Foreword by Fanny Howe

A Great Ride

From the description below, you will not get how deep and devastating this novel is. Sylvie and Jerome have houses that they own but no home. They head to Romania to adopt a child and never make it to the orphanage. Jerome is a philosopher and cultural critic with a traumatic childhood. Sylvie is much younger, a filmmaker and writer who is deeply insecure. She is also hilariously funny and it is her view of the passing world that drives them along, her self-deprecating, ironic but naïve certainties about what they are doing going to Romania. They love a dog in common. But abortions haunt them as signs of the torpor that is the state of the novel.

They share an aesthetic in their work of buying houses to fix up and rent. They want the most bourgeois kind of smug nostalgia imaginable, the kind that is embellished by kitsch from thrift shops. The dog Lily helps.

> "Look, Jerome!" Sophie would have exclaimed, "this is Lily's season." Lily's small rust-colored body would have blended perfectly with the fallen leaves. "Ahhh," Jerome would have replied, "she is a dachshund," although they both knew well that like them, Lily was a mongrel. Each of Jerome's approving

> utterances about the little dog would have brought the couple closer. Their rhapsodies about the dog were practice in the basic words of parenting, a language which—it was becoming clearer every day—they'd never speak first-hand with each other.

For Jerome "History was a code-word for Holocaust." His childhood was detoured by war, in France, as a boy, when his parents disappeared and he was taken into foster care and made to change his name. His life is like a fairy tale, one of the early and perplexingly surreal Grimm stories that seem to prophecy the sadism to come. The grotesque figures and obstacles in those stories characterize his life, and have set him on a permanent course with no fixed resting place. He hates everywhere. He "sees a prescience of horror in the disjointed texts of Georges Bataille and Simone Weil; Artaud, Celine. It's as if these people had experienced, alone and in their bodies, events that would be massively played out a decade later." Sylvie mistrusts almost everyone, especially people in the art world, and so Jerome and she are perfectly matched, and a thoroughly modern comedy team to travel with.

A road of prose is unknown in advance. Where it goes is both the reader's and the writer's guess. When you set out on such a road, the words write the words to follow. If you have an intention, it quickly gets lost in words you never expected to see in the first place. It is as if you have taken a wrong turn onto a wide toll highway, with a destination in mind at first but now missed. The wrong miles stretch ahead of you and you may not have enough money to pay the toll to turn around and go back again. Your ever-accumulating outrage

and alienation turn into the content of your journey now. The prose becomes a story about the progress of a hope.

If a dog crosses the highway, it becomes part of the prose road, because it is by now a story where there are contingencies, surprise entries, relations. The story is like the driver of a car who is lost. The driver has heightened, even burning consciousness of the weird, the accidental, the dangers of weather and health. The driver laughs by herself. Surreal flash-memories of her known life take on a comic dimension. She curses herself as an idiot who, despite everything, wants things to control the world. She wants that so much she might think, "I meant to get lost."

She might pause by a cliff and consider suicide. Feel the gravity haul at her bones when she stands at the ledge of air. But she backs away and drives on. She never mentions this episode to anyone. The reader might pause at the same time and think of abandoning the book, but be unable to do so. It would be too intentional in the situation of complete randomness in which she and the heroine are living for this time. Such a long error with repetitive surges of hope and disappointment, the error becoming the actual fate (perhaps even the pre-determined one!) can develop into a metaphysical desire or stay wholly modern. In this latter case, there is little distinction between living people outside the book/car and imaginary people inside the head/car of the driver/writer. Not only a dog might wander by, but also Michael Jackson or Vaclav Havel. There is nothing metaphysical here, only the developed world bouncing on air.

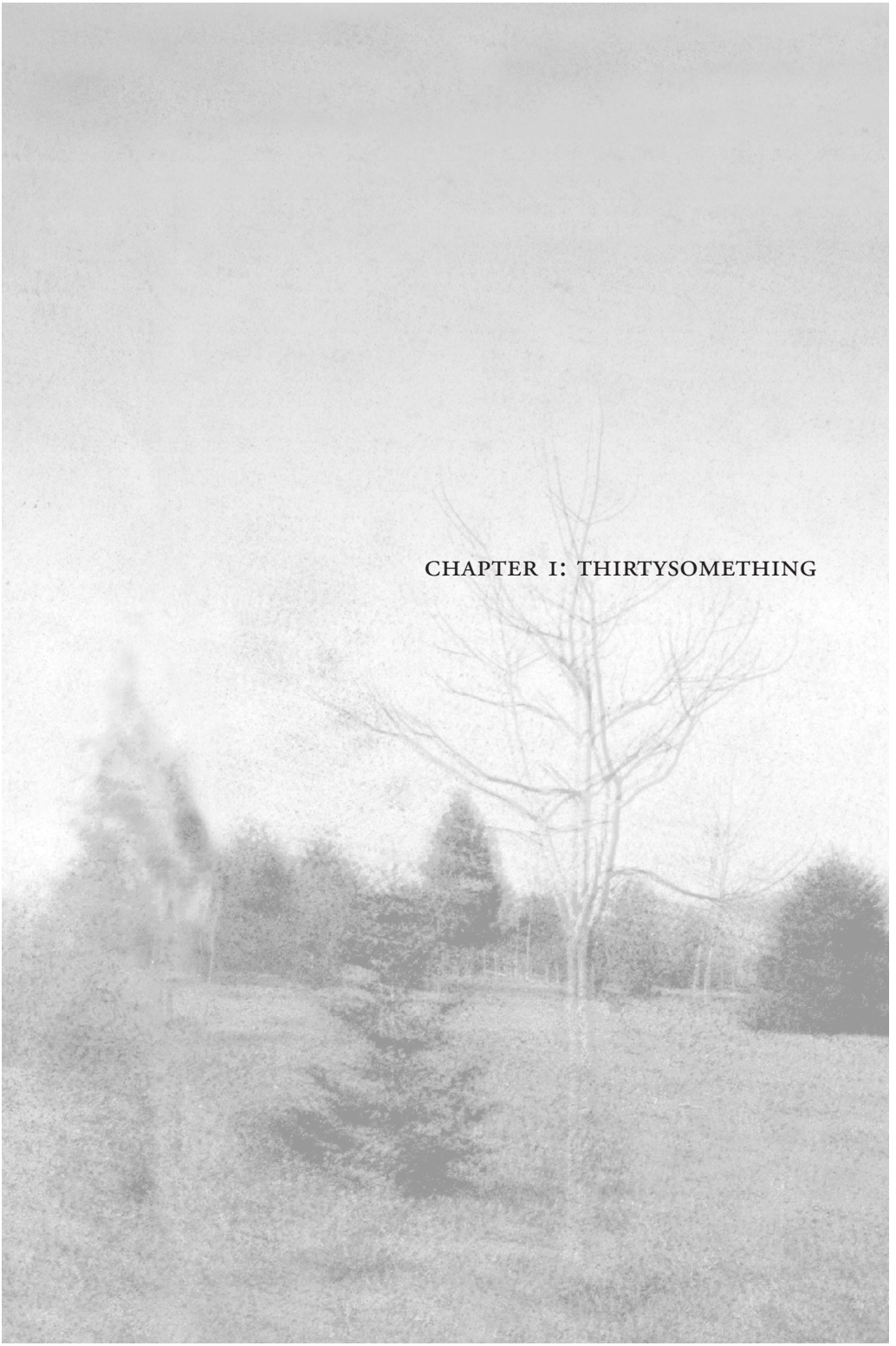
The marriage of Sylvie and Jerome, grudgingly agreed to, over the issue of health insurance, actually seems to be a marriage of something deeper, funnier, sadder, truer than romantic love. It is of

course tested on this strange erroneous journey where the future is worse than empty, not a place to which you are going, but a study of tread-marks, skids, spilled oils, infertile fields, a Chernobyl landscape….these are what you pass and enter simultaneously. All experience moves in a cocoon, as if swaying back and forth on a stick, rather than in a direction. Is No Time the New Time?

They travel to Germany where he has work (an unwritten book she calls "The Anthropology of Unhappiness") and then on to Central Europe to look for orphans. It is here we enter the desolating perplexity of modernity. "We are the last generation to whom things really matter," said Gilles Deleuze. It is 1991. The Serbo-Croatian war is brewing. Peace-keepers are fleeing. Sylvie and Jerome pass through Prague as tourists and head on to Austria, not knowing where it is. She doesn't want to go; they argue; they go. And then the journey fizzles before they return to New York.

"There was a gorgeous Rheingold sign above the bar: a large electric clock featuring an autumn scene, with two red setter dogs looking up above the blazing maples at a pheasant. Each smiling dog had one of its front paws pointed. Outside sanitation trucks thudded over potholes onto West Street, but on the Rheingold sign the pheasant soared against the sky's heroic turquoise plastic surface."

What is torpor outside of this brilliant, entrancing and heart-rending novel called *Torpor*? A condition in which not even collapse or entropy occurs. A fertile field wreathed in yellow watery matter where Yes, Maybe and No rub together without consequence. You have to read this book to get the great ride it gives. A ride where torpor steams in all directions without interruption, minimal will or curiosity; torpor is the name of the spirit of the leftover world.



CHAPTER 1: THIRTYSOMETHING

THIRTYSOMETHING

"The Sugar Maple is easily distinguished at any season of the year. In winter the cone-tipped branches are distinct and characteristic. In spring the beautiful yellow-green blossoms in pendant clusters are different from those of any other Maples. In summer the broad leaves with their rounded sinuses enable one to identify the species at a glance. And in autumn the key-fruits and brilliant yellow, orange and red leaves serve a similar purpose. In woods, the trees grow straight and tall, and in open situations they develop a wide expanse of foliage, which makes them ideal for shade."

— *Our Trees: How To Know Them*, copyright 1936, Clarence M. Weed, D.Sc., Teacher of Nature Study in the Massachusetts State Normal School at Lowell

THERE IS A BROAD dirt path behind Brant Lake that slopes up gently through the woods along the ridge between Hawk Hill and Sand Beach Mountain. The path begins where Ike Hayes Road dead-ends. Originally a wagon trail, it was used later as a logging road, but now no one uses or maintains it.

On this mid-October Wednesday afternoon, Jerome Shafir and Sylvie Green, two rootless cosmopolitans who split their time

between investment rental properties in the depressed upstate New York town of Thurman and Springs, East Hampton, are walking on this path with their little dog. Though Jerome is a professor at Columbia University, the pair can no longer afford an apartment in New York City. Their two "homes" are seven hours apart, in quaint rural slums adjacent to resorts. Both locales involve a grueling four-hour drive from Manhattan. Still, they find this arrangement preferable to living in a cheap apartment in Hoboken or Park Slope. At least, they think, they get to see America.

It is a classic bright fall day: the kind of picture that still gets cranked out on the mimeograph machine by teachers at North Warren Central School in the picture-postcard town of Brant Lake Village. Incorporated in 1838, this southern Adirondack town boasts a duck pond and a water-mill, a white clapboard Episcopal church, a granite Roman Catholic church, and an unreconstructed general store called Daby's that still sells hardware, blankets, cigarettes and groceries. Brant Lake is one of Thurman's richer cousins, and Daby's is the kind of store that will soon inspire product lines by Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren. Hunting season hasn't started yet. The town has emptied out for autumn.

It is 1989 or 1990. George Herbert Walker Bush is President of the United States and the Gulf War has just begun in Saudi Arabia. "Collateral damage," a military term coined to describe the accidental wasting of civilian populations, is just beginning to crossover into self-help therapeutic terminology. Somewhere in the Persian Gulf, civilians cower in the rubble while in New York, Sylvie's friends discuss the "collateral damage" of their break-ups. Everywhere, there is this yearning for simplicity.

The most popular TV show for Jerome and Sylvie's white, college-educated, 28–54 demographic is *Thirtysomething*, but they

rarely have a chance to watch it, because they're never in one place long enough to rationalize spending $40 a month for cable. *Thirtysomething* is a well-written, well-performed ensemble drama about lives of people like Jeff and Carla, the nice young couple who are subletting Sylvie's small, rent-stabilized East Village tenement apartment. Carla, a model, is taking classes in fine furniture restoration because at 28 she wants to *keep her options open*. Jeff quit his band three years ago and now makes money doing high-end apartment renovation. Like the cast of *Thirtysomething*, but unlike Jerome and Sylvie, Jeff and Carla lead lives that they are invested in, where cards like Marriage, Family and Career are played closely to the heart, and small decisions matter.

Sylvie is amazed by the tremulous sincerity that grips these people when they talk about their futures. Having grown up with Iggy Pop and the Sex Pistols, she remains faithful to a philosophy so brilliantly contained in just two words: *No Future*. The only thing that really matters to her is their small dog, Lily, who is bundled up this afternoon in her cable-knit blue sweater. October days up here get chilly after sunset. Beneath their feet, the trail is softly bedded down with tiny hemlock cones and pine needles.

"The 30s are all about *heart*," Melanie Griffith confided recently to *People*. She meant, of course, that decade of her life, and not the century's. Melanie and her formerly-abusive husband, Don Johnson, have just gotten back together. After completing residential rehab programs in Boca Raton and Minneapolis, respectively, the pair bought a 200-acre ranch outside of Aspen, Colorado so that the children of their blended family (two of their own, two from Don's last former marriage) could have a "normal" childhood. Melanie's scaled back on her career to try and be a better mom: "I'm learning now how much family really matters."

Meanwhile, her rugged husband Don stumps around campaigning for the re-election of George Bush I, because, he says, "I like his strength and character."

Likewise, each week on *Thirtysomething*, new parents, Hope and Michael, and their best-friends, Elliot and Nancy, move backwards through a poison fog of culturally-induced reflexive irony towards a New Traditionalism. The births of their amazing offspring have led these former hipsters to rethink everything. As the network TV season advances, their childless former friends move closer to the fold. Ellyn, Gary and Melissa (a city planner, college teacher and photographer, respectively) begin to recognize the foolishness of thinking they can fulfill themselves through careers in education, art or social activism. Unlike these three, alpha-couples Hope and Michael, Elliot and Nancy have had the courage to *grow up* and come to terms with the empty, idealistic posturing of their Princeton student days. They no longer want to change the world. Now, they are *creating families*.

Post-punk, pre-grunge, the United States stands behind its President to Support Our Troops somewhere in a Persian Gulf sandstorm. Sylvie and Jerome have never felt so alienated. Because the world itself is now unfathomable, the only complexities that really count are small moments of domestic life that combine to trigger deep emotion. There is no longer any way of being poor in any interesting way in major cities like Manhattan.

It is the beginning of the New World Order, which means that wars can now be fought and won without any US military casualties. Yellow ribbons line the road on trees from Brant Lake to New York City. Yellow ribbons—a symbol of America's Norman Rockwell past salvaged just in time by Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan—had long ago bedecked front porches, mailboxes and office doors

during the First World War. In those times, the yellow ribbons symbolized a nation's willingness to put aside its minor differences (racial lynchings, union busting, the accumulating wealth of trust conglomerates) and join hands across the great divide to pray Our Boys Will Come Home Safely.

And then again, after the Black October stock market crash of 1987, the *Ladies Home Journal* leapt to restyle itself as the bible of "The New Traditionalism." Full-page color ads appearing everywhere depict the soft, expressive face of a female Ivy-educated Thirtysomething. Once a lawyer or a stockbroker, she has re-thought her choices. A banner headline runs above her earnest, pretty brow:

She was looking for something to believe in… And guess what she's found? Her family, her home, herself.

Sylvie herself has flirted briefly with the New Traditionalism. A punk-formalist film and videomaker in her early 30s, she's in Brant Lake to do a Warren County Artist-in-the-Schools residency. It's the only grant, or job, she's had this year. Since they've moved upstate, she mostly lets Jerome support her. When Sylvie isn't writing applications for grants she'll never get, or in bed, depressed and reading, she decorates their "homes" with ideas adapted from *The American Girl's Guide to Handy Homecrafts*, a 1920s book she discovered in a thrift store. Jerome has little interest in these "homes." He only grudgingly agreed to marry Sylvie so she could be on his medical insurance. Happily, Columbia matches his payment on her premium, so without having to petition anyone for a raise, he can extract another $150 a month from the institution. Jerome has little interest in the bittersweet significance of family life. French, and 18 years older than his "wife"—a term he never uses without airquotes—he's never heard of *People* magazine, much less

of *Thirtysomething*. Jerome stopped listening to contemporary bands around the time that DNA broke up and Lydia Lunch retired. Joy Division left him cold, with their earnest, pretentious pop lyricism.

It would have been Jerome's 53rd or 52nd birthday, that day when they were walking in the woods: the height of autumn foliage upstate, the 15th of October. Although Jerome doesn't use the word "upstate." Instead, he calls it "upper state New York," in phraseology borrowed from Edith Wharton, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Though he's lived in America now for almost thirty years, his English remains defined by the expat-Englishmen who taught at the Sorbonne when he was a student in the 1950s. He fills his drug prescriptions at the chemist, speaks derisively of the Middle West, and gets his shoes fixed by the cobbler. Verbs like "make" and "give" continue to bewilder him, despite all of Sylvie's best efforts to correct him. He "makes" a party, "gives" some phone calls. It's as if for 30 years, he's managed to not hear a thing.

Birthdays, for Jerome, had never been a cause for celebration. Each new and passing year just sucks him farther from the source of who he really is, though who he really is, is hard to say, and no one guesses his identity. Born on the heels of Crystallnacht in Paris, 1938 to two bewildered Jewish immigrants from Poland, Jerome imagines he *is* history. He is the fall of France to Nazi Germany in 1942, though France will always be a country that he hates. His father was deported two years later, thanks to the collusion of the French, and all of Jerome's early years were spent in hiding. His father died at Auschwitz, and Jerome is hiding, still. Before he says his name, Shafir, few people even realize that he's Jewish. Jerome has light brown hair and ice-blue eyes. He speaks a soft and traceless French, and pronounces his name *Chezfaire*, a little private joke.