

Ambient

by S.H. Gall

When I finally get up the nerve to invite my co-worker into the apartment, I have to explain. “We view these rooms as extensions of the sidewalk. We don't go barefoot for instance.”

She seems to understand then, why the carpets are gritty, the linoleum begrimed, and the fan blades limned with dust. Part and parcel of the most *urban* neighborhood not yet considered a *ghetto*. “Normally,” she says, “I would take one look at this place and run screaming. But... it's cozy.” “It's homey,” I offer. She nods slowly and then beckons to the cat, who stares at her intently from the broken rocking chair.

I try to make conversation by showing her the washing instructions for the jeans I just bought for \$375.00. She reads slowly. “What, do they assume you live in Australia or something?”

“I guess,” I say, and shrug. The instructions recommend that you swim in the ocean wearing the jeans and then rub them with sand repeatedly over the course of a week, then rinse with Woolite Black. I don't know why her mind interprets this as something Australian. I could do that in Rehoboth, or Provincetown, or Martha's Vineyard. I could make my own salt water in the kitchen sink.

I hand her a bag of cat treats so she can funnel her confusion into feeding my tabby. She calls him with a series of hard glottal-stops. He creeps toward her, gingerly accepts a treat, and retreats to his perch to yawn and lick his ass.

The silence that follows is awkward for her, but a respite for me. I let her break it.

“What's that sound?”

“What sound?”

She leans forward and knits her brow. “Is that a generator or something?”

Then I know what she's talking about. “That's the sound of city air funneling into our garden well. It's like the distillation of street noise, chatter, helicopters, sirens, and rush hour traffic. The plants feed on it, and dance. Can I show you?”

When she sees the potted plants — flowers, herbs, peppers, tomatoes — writhe in the ecstasy of urban aural mayhem, she cracks a half-smile. “No wonder all my plants die. It's so quiet where I live.”

I nod knowingly. The cat leaps onto the window ledge, peers into the well of sound, and nibbles on some sage. When my co-worker starts to cry, I calmly walk away.

