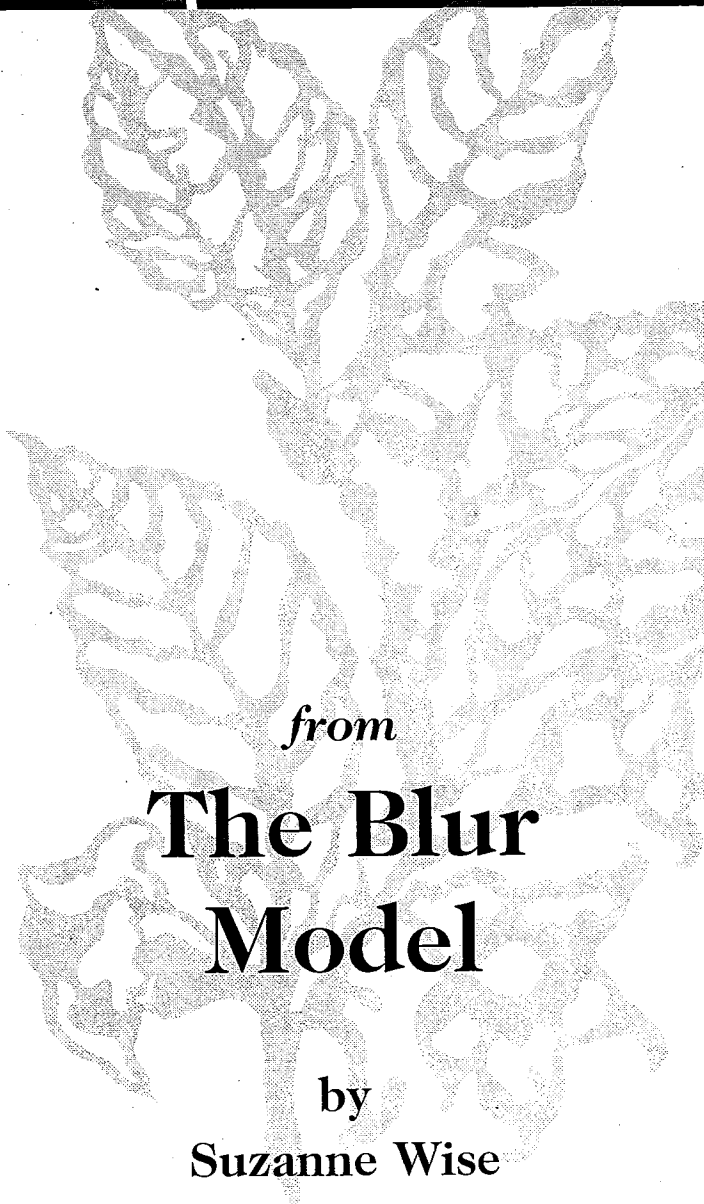


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Spring 2003



*from*

# The Blur Model

by

Suzanne Wise



deadly nightshade, a cardiac and respiratory stimulant, having purplish-red flowers and black berries



from *The Blur Model* © Suzanne Wise 2003

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**The Blur Model**

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## The Blur Model



All the keys look the same to Joe and, though her sublet is three months old, she has developed no system for figuring out which of the seven keys go to which of the four locks. (The purpose of three spare keys remaining unknown.) But, finally, as always, miraculously, the keys work—the right convexities sliding into the right concavities. The door gives and Joe stumbles forward into the dark, narrow corridor.

Tonight the darkness is darker than the other nights. And busier. The molecules disturbed and ricocheting. Joe can see them spark and swirl, little silver furies pushing into her.

And the hallway has reorganized itself into some kind of vowel, a lower-case *e* perhaps. And so Joe can't seem to walk straight, can't find the door and instead stumbles around in something almost like a circle. She crashes into one wall, then its opposite. Then trips and is scratched by tiny sharp teeth that turn out to be the metal rivets of a boot. Careening forward in slow motion, the thick air giving out, Joe rockets into the living room.

And there is familiarity: Fish tank on the floor with the

three little red fish quivering together in one corner of the tank. And the small table with the two chairs, where she eats her meals alone. This night, however, Joe is not alone. This night something else is sharing the air, there in the middle of the black heart of the apartment.

And that someone appears at first as a two-D thing. A lopsided silhouette attached to a wood-spoked chair, one sharp shoulder jutting up above the curved back of the chair, the other lost in the spindly thicket of spokes and chair arms. Below the tilted head, the one tipped shoulder, the body is smeared out by the intersecting plane of a small table.

As the pupils of Joe's eyes widen to scavenge any bits of illumination in the room, more details pop into focus. Large-knuckled hand clasping a knee. Cuff of a blazer flaring downward like a spent flower. One shoe jutting forward—a gleaming men's Oxford.

Then the voice, husky yet clearly female, comes shortly after: “Hello,” it says. Tired-sounding, graveled and raspy but also strangely electric and clear, something sparking from her teeth. Then the raised flag of flame from the lighter, then the tiny moon of orange cinder at the end of the cigarette, then the ridge of one side of her face hollowed out under the cheekbone

by shadow. Also in that flicker of illumination: Drooped eyelids, heavy lashes, one smirking side of a thin mouth and then darkness again; just the jittery end of the cigarette as she shifts its position from one side of her mouth to the other.

She looks tall even sitting down and slouching, one arm flung over the back of the chair, her other manipulating the cigarette from mouth to the ashtray on the table then back to the mouth. Her hands are muscular, precise, elegant, even theatrical in the looping gesture of inhale, exhale and tapping off of ash.

“So,” she says, “You live here?”

“Yeah,” says Joe, “ ... do you?”

The woman laughs, a deep, empty well of a laugh, a laugh that is not particular to this occasion or any other. Joe’s eyes have finally begun to adjust to her and her darkness. The woman’s head glows oddly above the swath of dark body; peroxide blond hair cut short and slicked tight against the scalp. A severe part knifes a white pathway from brow to the back of the woman’s head, which Joe sees as the stranger turns away to blow a trickle of smoke toward the ceiling. A siren from the street screams in response.

Joe backs up so that she is standing in the doorway to the room; in a good position to escape, if necessary. The woman

fingers the edge of a small ashtray, cracks her knuckles, crosses her legs, sighs, smashes the cigarette out in the side of the ashtray. It is then that Joe can see the woman's fingers trembling. They both watch her digits dance. "My nerves are shot," the stranger says, almost gleefully. "Bad week at work," she adds.

Joe says nothing, wonders whether a police precinct is in close proximity.

"Slow," the woman says, speaking to the space above Joe's head. "Just three suicides this week. They always come in twos and threes. Last week it was three decomps."

"Decomps?"

"De-com-posed," she says, dragging out the syllables as if Joe is an idiot.

At that point, Joe steps forward and hits the switch of the tableside lamp. It is like a blow: The stranger pushes her chair back, blinking rapidly.

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Even if you meet someone who enters and leaves your life for no conceivable reason, you may begin to make a fixture out of that person, as in a light fixture, so that you can use that person as a circle of brightness to read your own thoughts by. Joe would choose the stranger for that purpose. A stranger named Blake, a medical examiner, a landlord, an elegant if retro-romantic masculine dresser. Blake would become her dark star, her black light, a bruise-colored miracle. Even the first time, that first night, in that first sighting of that blasted landscape of chalky flesh, that modernist architecture of high cheekbones and hard jaw, Joe knows she looks upon some refraction of her destiny.

The little red fish are thinking similarly. Three pairs of tiny eyes gaze upon the swash of black gliding by. They hope. But no colored confetti of food rains down from the sky. No, the black shadow passes through and beyond, leaving no answers, no evidence, and light splashes back to take its place, returns the dark future to today— blank bright air made of water. Joe takes a seat at the table. Strikes a match for the stranger's next cigarette.

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The smoke goes in. Wanders its way down to the willing, working lungs. The capillaries expand. The blood squirts along the tiny corridors. Thus, the blood lives its secret life, forever forced to go somewhere else.

But, once blood leaves the body, it has a story to tell.

Or so Blake will claim. Blake, who tells no stories herself, only facts extracted from stories. Information. She's inclined to present proof without anecdote. For example, she unfurls an official document. Proof she owns the four walls within which she sits across from Joe in the circle of one table lamp. Blake spins the pages on the tip of her bony finger so the contract faces Joe. Joe's name, of course, is nowhere in sight. Joe assumes the jig is up. Because this sublet, like all the sublets Joe has every known, and she has only known sublets, is illegal.

Blake shrugs. "It's alright," she says. "I need a tenant. The last one disappeared." The last one, in truth, died. A fact both Blake and Joe know but will not speak.

"And, as I said, business is slow," adds Blake. Joe offers to pay what she had promised the dead girl she would pay—\$500. A steal, that girl had joked, for a 12-foot-by-12-foot windowless apartment in midtown. Blake waves away Joe's crude business talk with a flutter of a business card. "Fine, fine. Just mail it."

Then silence. Joe floats upward on a ring of smoke, and looks down: two strangers sitting too close to each other in the dark of a very small apartment. Joe asks Blake how she likes her line of work. It seems the polite thing to do, politeness being necessary, given Joe's diminished allotment of power. As it turns out, Blake has a few things to say about job satisfaction. What she misses are the messy ones. She's had enough of overdoses, all the rage that spring. "Blood makes things real," she explains.

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Blood is Blake's specialty. It's her job to study the way it falls on walls and ceilings and floorboards and beds and couches and tables and chairs and sidewalks and car trunks and staircases and garden walkways and bathtubs and swimming

pools that have had the water let out. The patterns of blood drops are translations of what has occurred beside those walls, upon those floors, within those beds, those empty swimming pools, those bathtubs, those car trunks and so on.

“*Fling* for example,” Blake is saying just now. “My personal favorite. A very light blood pattern. Subtle. Elegant. It’s second hand. It doesn’t come directly from the body. It’s flung off a weapon. Blood on the ceiling that comes off a baseball bat, say, after it’s used as a club.” Blake spreads her legs, tips her torso back, folds her hands in her lap. Like an old guy relaxing into his wisdom. It’s a lecture Blake has given many times. Usually to police officers. But also to civilians at cocktail parties, dinner parties, at bars and health clubs. She likes knowing what she’s talking about. She likes the silence her particular brand of knowledge gouges out of every situation.

Meanwhile Joe shuts her eyes so she won’t have to see imaginary blood on the ceiling above her. As a photo retoucher, Joe should have no problem visualizing the elimination of unfavorable elements. But the truth is she’s never been well suited to her job. “When there’s lots of blood splashed around,” intones Blake, “it’s called *Splatter*, such as a body face down in a pool of blood. *Splatter* is less blood than *splatter*. Like blood

dripping from a cut in the face; it makes a freckly pattern on a rug or a quilt. *Spray* is the most delicate—very fine like a mist.”

Joe sees red puddles on a black street, a red river splashing past a red harbor, a red sun plummeting, a red mist collecting in the sky, red rain beginning to fall. She opens her eyes and the tiny fish in the tank are red and scattered throughout the bluish water. Joe would like to know where Blake is going with this but she’s doesn’t ask because she doesn’t want to stop the telling. She thinks if she can keep Blake talking about blood, she’ll reveal what she knows—if anything—about the dead girl. As for Blake, she doesn’t know where she’s going but she trusts blood to take her to the places of truth. Or rather, the pathways for circling around Joe, a stranger whom Blake thinks knows more than she’s letting on about the dead girl.

When Joe drops off to sleep that night she hears Blake’s voice reverberating in her memory: “If a wounded person is running away from somebody else, the blood drops are fat on one end and thinned out on the other. Like a teardrop. The thinned part points in the direction of what the person running from, and the fat part is closest to the escaping bleeder. And if the bleeder is running fast, part of the blood drop breaks off ... in a little blob. Like an exclamation point.” Blake had pointed to

the red paisley pattern in the scrap of carpet upon which the fishbowl sat.

To Joe, the paisleys had looked more like quotation marks than exclamation points. But perhaps that had something to do with the way Blake spoke. Which was ventriloquistic. Or as if everything was a caption for a picture that Joe couldn't see.

The apartment is so dark that for a moment Joe imagines she's gone blind. She flops over onto her stomach and searches the black until it disperses around the round edge of the fishbowl. In the darkness, the glass bowl looks like a large head. Three little teardrop shapes swim languidly to the top.



# belladonna\* Catalog

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