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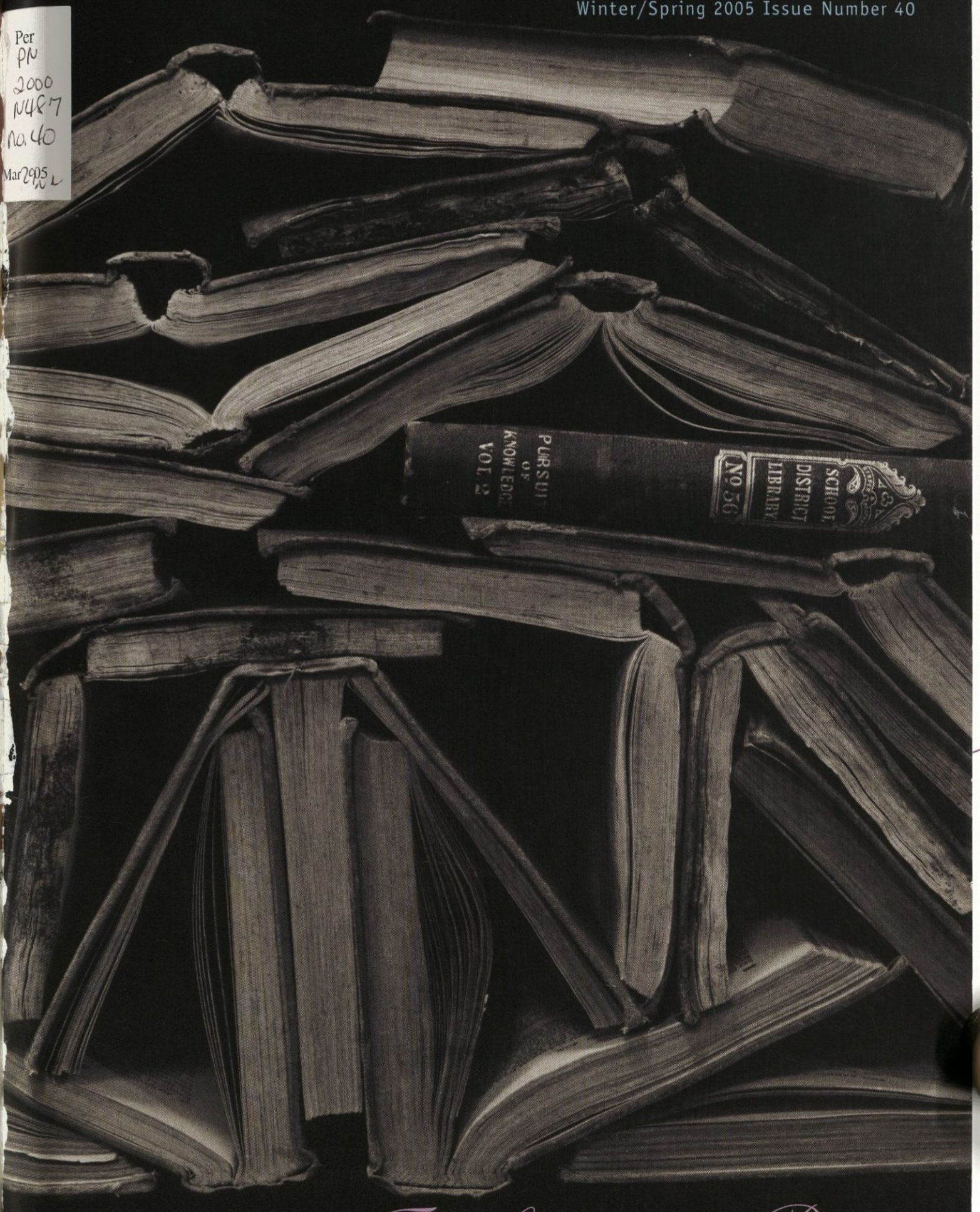

DESSA ROSE

The Light in the Piazza

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Front cover photograph: Fawn Potash, *Big Pile of Books* (detail), 1995. Courtesy of the Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York City.

Back cover photograph: Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura Image of Santa Croce in Office*, 2000. © Abelardo Morell. Courtesy of the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York City.

WHISPERS & SHADOWS: THE BROKEN NARRATIVE OF STOLEN LIVES

WALTER JOHNSON

"Master," the fugitive slave William Johnson remembered, "used to say that if we didn't suit him well he would put us in his pocket real quick." That threat, with its imagery of outsized power and bodily dematerialization, was one that hung over the lives of enslaved people in the United States. Whatever they managed to build existed in the shadow of the slave market. Family, community, friendship, love and hope: all of these might be forever stolen as easily as white men could pass a piece of paper from one hand to another.

Southern archives are full of these slips of paper: bills of sale that are reminders that in the years between 1820 and 1860 there were close to two million slave sales in the United States—two-thirds of a million of them made by long-distance traders whose coffles of chained slaves walking to market were a common sight on Southern roads. The most recent scholarly estimates suggest that, of the long-distance sales, twenty-five percent destroyed a marriage and fifty percent a family; many were the children who were left behind as their more valuable parents were traded away. Each one of those archived papers, that is to say, represents a world destroyed, its broken pieces traded, fingered, fondled, possessed and sent out to build a future the slaveholders were planning for themselves. Among slaves, the traders were known as "man stealers."

Slave traders did the dirty work of redistribution in the slaveholders' economy, moving slaves between owners who no longer wanted them and those who did, and between the declining regions of the Upper South and the emerging cotton-boom economy of the Lower South. Because they tracked markets and traded people over long distances, they packed their slaves into categories of comparison—prime, first rate, second rate, etc.—that made it possible to compare them to one another and to all manner of other goods. The traders' price-tracking made even the most counterintuitive comparisons possible: between old men and young girls; between a human being and a mule; between a scarred back and a barrel of flour. And yet, as much as the traders tried to wholesale these human lives, they recognized that this regime of commodification could be maintained only through violence, so they shored up their power with whips and bits, chains and high walls. The brutal material culture of the slave trade (as of slavery itself) has often been seen as emblematic of slaveholders' terrific power, but might equally be seen as evidence of the slaveholders' knowledge that their slaves did not do their bidding or go to market willingly. Many slaves were willing to risk their lives—as they did on a Kentucky road in 1829 (an event on which *Dessa Rose* is partly based) and countless other occasions in the history of slavery—rather than play the role they had been assigned in their master's history.

Once slaves reached the markets where they were to be sold—large, high-walled pens in every Southern city, and countless dusty crossings everywhere in between—they were prepared for sale. They were fed a fattening diet long on butter and bacon. Their skin was rubbed with grease to make them appear healthy, and their hair was blacked with shoe polish in order to make them seem younger than they were. Often, they were told to lie about their ages and origins, to hide any history of running away or resisting and to exaggerate their abilities in order to bring a better price—and told they would be beaten if they did not. The traders set the slaves to dancing and capering around the yard to make them seem healthy, lively and pliable. "Sometimes I have seen them dancing when their cheeks were wet with tears," wrote the fugitive slave William Wells Brown, who had been the enslaved steward of a Mississippi River trader.

When slaveholders came into the pens to buy slaves, they generally knew enough to know they could not trust the things the traders told them about the slaves. And so they asked the slaves questions. They tried to make tactical alliances with the people they were buying in order to flush the sellers' lies into the open; they quizzed and cajoled the slaves and threatened them with punishment if the stories they told in the market turned out to be false on the plantation. Slaveholders bragged to one another that they could look right through a slave, determining the truth of the matter just by looking someone in the eye.

Among slaveholders, discernment in the matter of buying human flesh was a mark of some distinction. Slave buyers put their fingers into slaves' mouths to check the condition of teeth and search for signs of illness. Buyers grasped limbs and worked fingers back and forth to measure strength and see whether the slaves had the manual dexterity essential to picking cotton. Buyers palpated women's breasts and probed bellies to assess whether or not the women had borne children. Slaves were stripped to the waist in order to uncover signs of illness or the scarring that, among the buyers, was taken as transparent evidence of "bad character."

Slaves suffered unspeakably in the slave market. And yet they were not simply passive receptacles of their buyers' predatory fantasies. Former slaves' accounts of the time spent in the trade are full of stories of the others they met in the coffles and pens, stories that are the artifactual remnants of the process of community building that happened in the teeth of one of the largest forced migrations in human history. Sometimes the connections slaves made with one another were charged with violent, collective revolt, but they could also provide information needed to assess the buyers who came into the pens and to imagine the labor and living conditions outside.

Sometimes, based on what slaves saw, they attempted, at great risk, to shape a sale to suit themselves. The fugitive John Parker, to give only a simple example, wrote of his time in the slave pen, "I made

Kara Walker, *A Work on Progress*, 1998. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York City.

Family, community, friendship... all of these might be forever stolen as easily as white men could pass a piece of paper from one hand to another.

up my mind I was going to select my owner, so when anyone came to inspect me I did not like, I answered all questions with a 'yes' and made myself disagreeable." This was not freedom, but it was a margin of opportunity through which some were able to keep their families together, stay close to home, shape the conditions of their work: it was survival.

Slave stealing took the inherently contradictory character of the notion of human property and raised it to the highest art form of nineteenth-century capitalism: the con. It worked like this: a white person (usually a man) would "entice" a slave by proposing an alliance and promising freedom in exchange for service. In this alliance of convenience, with the slave as a sort of silent partner, the slave would be sold to a succession of unwitting buyers and run away each time, only to be reunited with the putative seller to do the con again. In the transient, boom-time Deep South of the 1830s and 1840s, there were so many slaves for sale that it was easy for one to disappear into the human interchangeability upon which, after all, the very idea of an economy in human beings was predicated. The generic descriptions that made it so easy to advertise, categorize and trade slaves—"Number One man with large bones and dark skin," as a trader's standard description of a human being might read—were almost useless when duped slave buyers tried to track individual slaves backward through the con.

Indeed, so perfectly did this slave-selling hustle invert and undermine the political economy of the slave trade that it was the subject of much consternation among Deep South slaveholders. In the state of Mississippi, for instance, the penalty for "enticement," or slave stealing, was death, a punishment that was visited by a lynch mob upon sixteen white men and untold numbers of slaves in Madison County in 1835.

All of this is true: it is as much American history as the Revolution or the Civil War. And yet it is not the whole truth. As William Wells Brown, the fugitive steward, once said to an audience of abolitionists, "Slavery has never been represented, slavery never can be represented." Brown was referring to a sort of epistemological violence: a murderous, forcible forgetting of the history of slavery. Only slavery's victims—if it is possible to use the word "only" in the context of so many millions of stolen lives—might truly have told the story he wanted to tell. Brown reminds us that we approach the history of slavery by way of whispers and shadows, where truth has often been hidden in half-truth in order to be saved away for the future. *Dessa Rose*, which begins with a lover's song and ends with a mother's hope for her child, brings us into that hidden, violated history.

Walter Johnson teaches American Studies and History at New York University. He is the author of Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market, *which won several awards and was a History Book Club selection. He is currently at work on a book about slavery, capitalism and imperialism in the Mississippi Valley.*

Kara Walker, *Presenting Negro Scenes...* (detail), 1997. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York City.