

The Physics of Sunset

Jane Vandenburg

A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF FAILURE TO ZIGZAG



C O U N T E R P O I N T

The Physics *of* Sunset

JANE VANDENBURGH

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Praise for *The Physics of Sunset*

"The Physics of Sunset is a gorgeous poem to human and physical observation. Reading it is like being given the gift of second sight."

John Burnham Schwartz

"Set against the low-key affluence of the Berkeley hills, *The Physics of Sunset* is like the fusion cuisine served at her characters' parties. By boldly ignoring the incongruous, Vandenburg successfully mixes nostalgia with satire and melancholy with hot sex. The result is an original and worthy follow-up to her acclaimed first novel, *Failure to Zigzag*."

San Francisco Chronicle

"A flawless tapestry of verbal imagery . . . a *novel* novel about a time-honored subject, adultery. *The Physics of Sunset* is unlike anything you've read before in this vein."

Donald Harington, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

"Jane Vandenburg knows these people. She knows how they worry and how they kiss. She knows how they buy their cheeses at Andronico's but get their toilet paper at Safeway. She knows how they take their coffee. Most of all, Vandenburg knows how Berkeley people think."

Contra Costa Times

"[*The Physics of Sunset*] admirably grapples with the idea that doomed passion can have a place in our lives. . . . A curious mix of . . . breathtaking erotic defiance and unabashed romantic existentialism—much like adultery itself."

New York Newsday

“Right from the start you will realize that this is not a book to be raced through, but rather, to fully appreciate the author’s amazing skill and talent it should be carefully and slowly savored. . . . Rarely will you find another author who so clearly takes the time to write each sentence exquisitely and with such profound insight.”

Rapport

“Vandenburgh’s meditations on such diverse subject as physics, architecture and nostalgia enrich this regional tale with shimmering metaphysical depth.”

San Diego Union Tribune

“An impressive novel about husbands, wives, and destructive self-indulgence that originates from an honest quest for meaning, *The Physics of Sunset* suggests a raw tug-of-war between intellect and emotion, family and independence.”

American Way

“Since her highly praised first novel, Vandenburgh has kept readers waiting a decade for this second effort. A smart, witty, sadly ironic novel about neighbors in Berkeley who become lovers, this is an even more elegantly crafted and perceptive work. Rich with intelligence and feeling . . . Vandenburgh’s depiction . . . is scaring and poignant. Intensely erotic, its transports are tinged with pain—physical and emotional—and the knowledge of finality . . . Vandenburgh has created a memorable portrait of fulfilled love and bereavement at its loss. Her compassion infuses this story with insight and grace.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

The Physics *of* Sunset

ALSO BY JANE VANDENBURGH

Failure to Zigzag

For Jack Shoemaker

There was never any more inception than there is now.
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

I .

Queens Rules

That one body may act upon another at a distance through a vacuum without the mediation of anything else, by and through which their action and force may be conveyed from one to another, is to me so great an absurdity that, I believe, no man who had in philosophic matters a competent faculty of thinking could ever fall into it.

SIR ISAAC NEWTON,
in a letter written to Richard Bently while
Newton was working on the
Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica

Outdoor Survival Skills

VERONIQUE CHAKRAVARTY GREW up in a little town in the south of France—she called it my *veellawwge*. The sun rose there over golden hills to shine on a river crossed by a Roman bridge. The scape of land ees similar to theees one, Veronique said. She pressed her lips together, looked out from her hill above the water of San Francisco Bay, then gestured in the dismissive way that showed she, being French, was superior to either of the two perfections.

The light, she asked. And this air? Veronique smiled at Anna, who examined the atmosphere as if it were gauze between her fingertips. The light was clean and white, the air soft to the point of feeling powdery, as if it contained particles that multiplied light's brilliance. California was dry, Mediterranean, and shadows did fall in that sharp-edged, bluish way, but it was the molecular density of Veronique's soul that had allowed her to be transported intact to her new land from that more ancient one, Anna knew, and allowed her to feel at home.

Springtime, a bright morning, the air cool on Anna's naked

arms. The past winter had been rainy so the hills were lushly green. A soft breeze moved up the Chakravartys' canyon.

Veronique had attacked the landscape like one of her Roman ancestors scooping out irrigation ditches, adding sand to the clay soil of the deep beds she'd dug into the terraced hillside. Her kitchen garden contained the same herbs and vegetables her mother grew: *tomates*, *aubergines*, *persil*, *asperges*. Veronique came, behaved as a conqueror, the earth responded, was changed by her.

And the local idiom was being altered by the force of Veronique's will. Anna Bell-Shay was a poet and had a hesitation in her own speech that encouraged her habit of listening carefully. Head down over the basting of a satin blanket binding or in the active grief that had yawned open for no good reason in the middle of her life, Anna attended her friend's various beats and breaths and emphases, unreasonably imagining Veronique Chakravarty was somehow teaching her fluency.

English was becoming ever more complex to Anna as she grew older. In the matter of a dash, for instance: how much pause might a dash be asked to carry? The dash was modern, also seemed to contain all of history. All her favorite writers seemed to balance there and so exist in the tentative.

Veronique didn't worry about this kind of thing. She went crashing off through the underbrush of everyday speech, imagining, for instance, that people rushing to their therapists were going to see their shrimps. This was Berkeley in the 1990s, where everyone was, or had been, or soon would be in some variety of therapy, the latest being traveling to the far-off reaches of the world to walk the most famous labyrinths. Veronique's husband, who was from Delhi, had an almost better than perfect English. It was elegant, carefully nuanced, slightly archaic. Because of Ravi, Veronique said *cawn't* and *shawn't*, she rode a *lift*, lifted the *bonnet* of the *caw* she'd hired.

Ravi's was a high old culture, his wife's more new and raw. His eyes gleamed, were deep-set, thickly lashed, so brown his dark glance might catch, take hold. His gaze possessed a person—Anna

felt it grab the muscles of her lower belly in a cramp that was frankly sexual. Ravi and Anna sometimes locked eyes at dinner as Veronique plunged on and on—he might lift a brow or move his full lips slightly at something his wife just said. Ravi very pointedly did not correct her, seemed also arrogantly to defy anyone else to do so. Anna understood this. She suffered the same attraction. Veronique's being so noisily alive being why each was drawn to her.

The Chakravartys lived up the hill from Anna and Charlie, whose older house lay in the flats of Berkeley in the section of Northside called the Gourmet Ghetto in the real estate ads. Anna and Veronique had had babies within weeks of one another, their friendship—Veronique called it *free-end-ship*—had deepened over upchuck and earaches.

Nearly all aspects of early motherhood were without intellectual challenge, they soon discovered—even talking about children was often boring in the particularly overeducated way of the developmental psychologist, whose clinical language made Anna feel she might need to shoot someone. She might feel better, she often thought, if she killed something. She would probably need to commit one small crime some day soon. She needed to turn criminal or she needed to go book an hour in a Tokyo sleeper. These were the modular sleeping capsules she'd just read about. Japanese salarymen rented them so they could power-nap on their lunch hour in order to be rested enough to go out drinking with their bosses again.

Anna's own mother confirmed it: infants are no more wonderful than any other subset of humanity. God does, however, make all small mammals look cute and smell good so you'll want to nurse them, Margaret Bell said when she telephoned. Also make you less likely to toss them out a window.

Anna and Veronique sat together on the Chakravartys' wide deck, their children playing nearby. The light shone on water radiant as aluminum—they seemed to sit in a bowl of noon. With pregnancy Anna, who was blond and fair, developed new sensitivities; she now had a form of sun allergy. She wore big loose dresses

and a wide hat and huge, very dark dark glasses to protect her pale eyes. Charlie called this Anna's Edith Phase—Edith was Anna's own unlovely middle name. He sometimes said to people that if life was a costume party, his gal Edith was going to come dressed as the *echt* artist/mental patient. She'd arrive with her head swathed in bandages, ear gone, her face all smeared with white stuff, dressed as Mrs. Vincent van Gogh.

It was the chemistry of pregnancy that changed her, Anna thought. Her mind turned dull as her skin became more sensitive. She was a prism now through which light fell and broke apart. If what Anna was experiencing was a natural splintering of focus, as her mother suggested, when was it that she might begin to pull herself back together? Anna had once been smarter—of this she was nearly certain. She recently called her mother to ask if this wasn't so. Margaret Bell now lived year-round in upstate New York in what had been their summer house.

It was natural, her mother said, that the soul of a female person should be riddled by empathy. This was a natural adaption. That mothers were porous to the wishes of those around them was what had kept humanity lurching from meal to meal all down through recorded history. She was herself now finished with that portion of her life, Margaret said, having relinquished responsibility for the heavy organs of appetite to the new generation. This new lightness was one of the surprising and very wonderful things about being a grandmother.

Days ticked by. Anna's daughter was one year old, now turning two. The photosensitivity began to ease. Anna often wanted nothing more than to go alone into an art museum, to stand in front of a great painting and be sliced apart by all the levels and degrees of silences. A great painting made its own quiet room. What she disliked most about poetry, she'd discovered, was that it seemed to so depend upon the noisy apparatus of language.

Until Anna witnessed it from within—experienced in her body the nubs of what might have once been deemed a *personality* being

so rubbed down and burnished—she'd never been so attracted to people as ardently selfish as Veronique sometimes seemed.

Anna became so diffuse at times that she felt intoxicated by the mere presence of any other stronger individual. She experienced this as a profound psychological calamity, a loss of self. The experience felt tidal, she became rapt, went *out*, it might take days or even weeks for her to come back in again. This happened both with women and with men. Writers, in particular other poets, in particular other women poets of about her age, were most necessary to avoid, particularly those who were beautiful or might turn out to be honestly talented or to exhibit some originality. It wasn't the threat of her own plagiarism, so much as Anna's worry that she might be swept so easily into their sea, actually begin to be subsumed by them.

Anna loved Veronique because she was French and the French are a stubborn race that refused to be eradicated. Veronique also refused to kneel and worship at the altar of maternity. She said the things that Anna needed to hear in order to keep her sanity: that playing Legos isn't fun, that almost all children's literature is intrinsically inane.

The Chakravartys' house overlooked that of Alec and Gina Baxter. Alec was an architect and theirs was a famous house in Berkeley, poised on the opposite side of Ravi and Veronique's canyon. Very chic, Veronique said sometimes, looking down her French nose at it. Very BCBG, I suppose, but do you actually *like* eet?

Anna was too porous to decide. The house was clean and modern. In a certain kind of light at various times of day, its surfaces became invisible, the glass side going sun-gone, the tint of the walls inside matching that of a whitish sky. The house shifted, changed size and shape, was sometimes nothing more than the reflected patches of scrub oak and evergreen standing against a brushy hillside.

The house was large enough to have been imposing except for its tendency toward atomic dissolution. It was also somehow a little

out of place in Berkeley, Anna thought, as if it landed there not from the future but from another parallel reality, the lost world that would have taken the place of this one had things gone slightly differently. It was there, in the world beside the world, that Anna felt she actually resided rather than in the real town of Berkeley, California.

And while this town, with the university at its heart, harbored more Nobel laureates than any other and there were other major and minor geniuses of every kind all up and down its social ladder, Berkeley had the pretense of hating pretense. It preferred its geniuses dead, its great houses to be wooden and old, foursquare and democratic, like those designed by Bernard Maybeck.

I ated that ouse, Veronique said to Anna one day, ated them for making it. Then when the lorry comes and I see they ave that what eees theeeese thing? theeeese baby swing? and my hurt breaks for them and my ope flies up again.

So it always honestly did come to the same sad questions, Anna realized, the ones all the interesting women they knew struggled with: How to negotiate the inward and outward currents, when the job of making a household ran against the pull of a worldly ambition? How was anyone to accomplish this once mute and simple act, that of raising children? And how, in the face of the awesome privilege she and her friends enjoyed, to justify these twin burdens of despair and jealousy?

The disappearance of the mass of the Baxters' house seemed to be a poetic technique Anna might study and employ if she ever wrote again. She envied the painters, like Gina Baxter, or the architects, like Alec Baxter, those who made wordless physical objects, who put walls up, hung paintings there, things thick with dimension, dense objects that didn't depend upon the little markings that made letters that stood for sounds upon a page.

She and Veronique drank wine as the sun went down, Anna watching the Baxters' house as its essence changed. How to be completely and truly present on the other side of the work, she wondered. How to give away nothing yet still speak with intimacy?