

Nude Awakening

The dangerous naked machines.

LAST SUMMER, I watched a fellow passenger at Washington's Reagan National Airport as he was selected to go through a newly installed full-body scanner. These machines—there are now 40 of them spread across 19 U.S. airports—permit officials from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to peer through a passenger's clothing in search of explosives and weapons. On the instructions of a security officer, the passenger stepped into the machine and held his arms out in a position of surrender, as invisible milli-

meter waves surrounded his body. Although he probably didn't know it, TSA officials in a separate room were staring at a graphic, anatomically correct image of his naked body. When I asked the TSA screener whether the passenger's face was blurred, he replied that he couldn't say. But, as I turned to catch my flight, the official blurted, "Someone ought to do something about those machines—it's like we don't have any privacy in this country anymore!"

The officer's indignation was as rare as it was unexpected. In the wake of the failed Christmas bombing of Northwest Flight 253, the public has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic about these

scanners. A recent *USA Today* poll found that 78 percent of respondents approved of their use at airports. Western democracies have been no less effusive. President Obama has ordered the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to install \$1 billion in airport screening equipment, and the TSA hopes to include an additional 300 millimeter-wave scanners. Britain, France, Italy, and the Netherlands have all made similar pledges to expand their use.

Let's not mince words about these machines. They are a virtual strip search—and an outrage. Body scanners are a form of what security expert Bruce Schneier has called "security theater." That is, they give people the illusion of safety without actually making us safer. A British MP who evaluated the body scanners in a former capacity, as a director at a leading defense technology company, said that they wouldn't have stopped the trouser bomber aboard the Northwest flight. Despite over-hyped claims to the contrary, they simply can't detect low-density materials hidden under clothing, such as liquid, powder, or thin plastics. In other words, the sacrifice these machines require of our privacy is utterly pointless. And, as it happens, it's possible to design and use the body scanners in a way that protects privacy without diminishing security—but the U.S. government has failed to do so.

MILLIMETER-WAVE scanners came on the market after September 11 as a way of detecting high-density contraband, such as ceramics or wax, that would be missed by metal detectors when concealed under clothing—while avoiding radiation that could harm humans. The machines also reveal the naked human body far more graphically than a conventional x-ray. But, from the beginning, researchers who developed the millimeter machines at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory offered an alternative design more sensitive to privacy. They proposed to project any concealed contraband onto a neutral, sexless mannequin while scrambling images of the passenger's naked body into a nondescript blob. But the Bush administration chose the naked machine rather than the blob machine: Some blob skeptics argue that blotting out private parts would make it harder to detect explosives concealed, for example, in prosthetic genitalia. Of course, neither the blob nor the naked machine would have detected the suicide bombers who have proved perfectly willing to

The Bush administration worried about explosives planted in prosthetic genitalia.



conceal explosives in real body cavities, as a Saudi suicide bomber proved in a failed attempt to assassinate a Saudi prince using explosives planted in a place where the sun doesn't shine.

Former DHS director Michael Chertoff, whose consulting firm now represents the leading vendor of the millimeter machines, Rapiscan, has been a vocal cheerleader for body scanning: He called the Christmas bombing a "very vivid lesson in the value of that machinery." In 2005, under Chertoff's leadership, TSA ordered five scanners

from Rapiscan, claiming that its naked images were less graphic than those of competitors. TSA also introduced one additional privacy protection: Agents who review the images of the naked bodies are in a separate room and, therefore, can't see the passengers as they're being scanned. According to the TSA website, the technology blurs all facial features, and, based on some news accounts, private parts have been blurred as well. But because the TSA remains free of independent oversight, it's impossible to tell precisely how they're being used.

Most troubling of all, the TSA website claims that "the machines have zero storage capability" and that "the system has no way to save, transmit or print the image." But documents recently obtained by the Electronic Privacy Information Center reveal that, in 2008, the TSA told vendors that the machines it purchases must have the ability to send or store images when in "test" mode. (The TSA told CNN that the test mode can't be enabled at airports.) Because no regulations prohibit the TSA from storing images, the House (but not the



DEATH OF A POET

Rachel Wetzsteon, 1967–2009

DARK TIMES CAN ALWAYS GET DARKER. We begin the year at this magazine in a long shadow of sadness. Rachel Wetzsteon, our new poetry editor, took her life at the end of December. She was forty-two. She left a thoughtful and compassionate letter in which she described the magnitude of her despair. She also expressed her gratitude to this magazine for the honor of her appointment. The honor, of course, was ours. Rachel was a genuinely remarkable poet. She believed in form, but was not exactly a formalist; she believed in emotion, but was not exactly an emotionalist. Instead, she made sense of her experience, and discovered beauty in it, by submitting it to the play, and the rigor, of rhythms and rhymes. She was certainly one of the great writers about life in contemporary Manhattan: She made the Upper West Side into a poetical place, which is of course a considerable achievement. More powerfully, she transformed a single woman's existence in New York into literature—wry, bruised, reflective, lyrical, and delicately observed literature. Her looking-for-love poems are wiser about love than many love poems. She knew how to be tenebrous and whimsical at the same time. Her verse chronicles her struggles with her demons, and their regular defeat by her talent for truth and pleasure. In the end, however, they were not defeated.

Rachel threw herself into her work as our poetry editor; her mother says that it was one of the last stays against her doom. In her brief association with us, she chose more than six months' worth of poetry for our pages. We will publish all her selections, though it would be morbid, and too painful, to keep her name on our masthead. Her editorial decisions will keep her memory alive for us in the seasons to come.

It is our policy not to publish poems by our poetry editor; but now, alas, we are no longer constrained from putting Rachel's work before you. Gratefully, and with undimmed admiration, we offer two poems from *Sakura Park*, the strong and elegant collection that she published in 2006. LEON WIESELTIER

Short Ode to Morningside Heights

Convergence of worlds, old stomping ground,
comfort me in my dark apartment
when my latest complaint shrinks my focus
to a point so small it's hugely present
but barely there, and I fill the air
with all the spiteful words I spared the streets.

The pastry shop's abuzz
with crazy George and filthy graffiti,
but the peacocks are strutting across the way
and the sumptuous cathedral gives
the open-air banter a reason to deepen:
build structures inside the mind, it tells
the languorous talkers, to rival the ones outside!

Things are and are not solid.
As Opera Night starts at Caffé Taci,
shapes hurry home with little red bags,
but do they watch the movies they hold
or do they forego movies for rooftops
where they catch Low's floating dome in the act
of always being about to fly away?

Ranters, racers, help me remember
that the moon-faced fountain's the work of many hands,
that people linger at Toast long after we've left.
And as two parks frame the neighborhood—
green framing gray and space calming clamor—
be for me, well-worn streets, a context
I can't help carrying home, a night fugue
streaming over my one-note *how, when, why*.
Be the rain for my barren indoor cry.

A Turn for the Better

Strangely stable today, and a rain-slicked street
that once pierced me with its sorrow has turned
limpid and various as a view of Delft.
And the song I murmured yesterday—

*Oh heart that aches
and trust that breaks,
for your poor sakes
may all the charming flakes
and no-good rakes
be burned at spiked, enormous stakes*

has just revealed another verse—

*The road is wide, is ravishing.
Until I walk on solid ground
no one is allowed to sweep me off it.*

Senate) voted last year to ban the use of body scanning machines for primary screening and to prohibit images from being stored.

As long as the TSA fails to blur images of both faces and private parts, the machines will represent a serious threat to the dignity of some travelers from the 14 countries whose citizens will now be required to go through them (or face intrusive pat-downs) before entering the United States. Some interpretations of Islamic law, for example, forbid men from gazing at Muslim women unless they are veiled. It's also unfortunate that, a year after the Supreme Court declared, 8-1, that strip searches in schools are unreasonable without some suspicion of danger or wrongdoing, virtual strip searches will soon be routine for many randomly selected travelers at airports, rather than reserved for secondary screening of suspicious individuals.

But the greatest privacy concern is that the images may later leak. As soon as a celebrity walks through a naked machine, some creep will want to save the picture and send it to the tabloids. And the danger that rogue officials may

troll the database is hardly hypothetical. President Obama's embattled nominee to head the TSA, Erroll Southers, conducted two searches of the confidential criminal records of his estranged wife's boyfriend, downloaded the records, and passed them on to law enforcement, possibly in violation of the Privacy Act, and then gave a misleading account of the incident to Congress. That's why the images should be anonymous and ephemeral, so agents can't save the pictures or connect them to names.

Even if the body scanners protected privacy, Schneier insists, they still would be a waste of money: The next plot rarely looks like the last one. But, if we need to waste money on feel-good technologies that don't make us safer, let's at least make sure that they don't necessarily reveal us naked. President Obama says that he wants to "aggressively pursue enhanced screening technology ... consistent with privacy rights and civil liberties." With a few simple technological and legal fixes, he can do precisely that. Blob machine or naked machine—the choice is his.

JEFFREY ROSEN

was speaking as an ordinary American. We have caught him in nothing we don't, most of us, feel ourselves.

It's a love-hate relationship we have with black speech. On the one hand, we associate it with emotional honesty, vernacular warmth, and sex—Marvin Gaye would not have had a hit with "Why Don't We Venture to Consume Our Relationship?" or even "Let's Have Sex," instead of "Let's Get It On." Yet it's not a dialect—a sound—that we associate with explaining Greek verbs or cosines or engaging in complex reasoning. Black English sounds cool, and even hot, and maybe "sharp"—but note that sharp is what you call someone whom you wouldn't necessarily *expect* to be smart ... and whom you don't actually think is all *that* smart.

That's a shame, because Black English is as systematic as standard English, and what we hear as "mistakes" are just variations, not denigrations. Try telling a French person that double negatives are "illogical"—South Central's *I ain't seen nobody* is Lyon's *Je n'ai vu personne*. The "unconjugated" *be* in a sentence like *Folks be tryin' it out* is used in a very particular way, to indicate habits rather than current events, making explicit something that standard English leaves to context.

But, in the real world, it's very hard to hear it that way. You can get a sense of it with linguistic training, or curling up with *Spoken Soul*, by Stanford's John Rickford, and *African American English*, by University of Massachusetts Amherst's Lisa Green, but, otherwise, Black English will always sound to most people like mistakes, in all of its warmth. We also feel this way about Southern "hick" grammar—race is not the only factor here. In both cases, we spontaneously demote a dialect born in illiteracy. It's a weird intersection: Unlettered speech is not "broken." The most "primitive" societies' languages are the ones that are the most complicated; often, the backwater dialects of a language are harder than the standard. Out in the sticks in Bulgaria, there are often three ways to say *the* instead of one.

Of course, that's all very nice, but real life is that Harry Reid hears black speech as lowly. Yet so do black people, as often as not. In 1996 and 1997, during the Oakland controversy over whether Black English should be used in classrooms as a transition to standard English, black people were laughing as loud as anyone at the idea that "Ebonics" is "a language." Or, over the transom recently, I got a copy of a presentation that James Meredith, who was the first black per-

ANTHONY RUSSO

Straight Talk

What Harry Reid gets about Black English.

TO TAKE HARRY REID over the coals about his "no Negro dialect" comment will bring to mind the Biblical passage about trying to take a speck out of someone's eye when you've got a log in your own. Pretty much all of America, black and white, feels exactly the way Harry Reid does about the way black people talk—and they aren't even worried about saying it out loud.

First of all, we need not pretend that, by "Negro dialect," Reid meant the cartoon minstrel talk of "Amos 'n' Andy." After all, why would Reid, a rational human being under any analysis, be under the impression that any black person talks like Uncle Remus, much less be surprised that one of them does not? My guess is that he said

"Negro" in a passing attempt to name Black English in a detached, professional way, randomly choosing a slightly arcane and outdated term—"Negro English" was what scholars called Black English until the early 1970s. Reid likely caught wind of that terminology—he's

been around a while, after all.

Second: Yes, there is such a thing as Black English. Sometimes one hears a claim that Black English is the same as white Southern English. We must always beware of stereotyping and be open to the counterintuitive, but here is an instance where we can trust our senses: There is a "Black sound." It's not just youth slang; it's sentence patterns—*Why you ain't call me?* (not a white Southernism, notice)—and a "sound," such that you'd know Morgan Freeman was black even if he were reading the phone book. The combination is what we all feel—with uncanny accuracy even without seeing faces, as linguists have found—as "sounding black." Of course, not all blacks speak Black English or have The Sound, and those that do (which is most) do to varying extents. But they do. That's what Reid meant—we all know it, and it's OK to know it.

Third: Reid's comment suggests that he associates Black English with lack of polish and low intelligence. But, before we burn him in effigy for it, or ask, "What's *that* all about?" as if we don't know, let's admit that most Americans feel like Reid does. He wasn't being a benighted "racist" holdout; he

