

TIMBER



ISSUE 7.2 SUMMER 2017 : RUINATION

TIMBER

A JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE LITERATURE AND FINE ART

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY AND PROSE:

GREY VILD	
FIVE POEMS FROM AIN'T NEVER.....	8
PETER RYAN	
PAPER MÂCHÉ	13
SHARI CAPLAN	
ATTIC/ATTACK SCENE WITH BIRDS	23
F. DANIEL RZICZNEK	
BORDER	28
C.A.SCHAEFER	
PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES	32
E.B.SCHNEPP	
MAIN STREET, UNDER THE SHELLS OF BURNT-OUT HOMESTEADS.....	42
ABANDONED BODIES AND FARMHOUSES	43
STEPHANIE DICKINSON	
TRAKL DIARIES.....	44
ALLEN TULLOS	
TASTY TOWN.....	47
CLOUDLESS TRACT.....	48
WILLIAM JAMES	
[MIDNIGHT IN HEAVEN & OUR FATHER'S].....	54
SAM LEUENBERGER	
THE WATCHMAN	55
PATRICK KINDIG	
PRAYER OF ABASEMENT.....	69
JAYME RUSSELL	
I AM AN AMPUTATED ARM, HOPING.....	71
JILL MCELDFOWNEY	
REAL QUIET	72
DAVE BRENNAN	
IF BEAUTY HAS TO HIDE OR, THINKING OF SHIT	76

VISUAL CONTRIBUTIONS:

CAMERON LOUIE	
PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE 1.....	20
PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE 2.....	21
PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE 3.....	22
MANDEM	
GIFT: EXEGESIS (FRAGMENTS)	29

KEITH MOULS	
OR 192-3 US 101 WARRENTON	39
OR 181-2 US 101 GARIBALDI	40
OR 111-2 SR 140 BEATTY	41
LUCAS SAMS	
GIRL WITH A FLOWER	49
ASPIRATION OF THE SOUL	50
THE THREE DISGRACES	51
EXHUMED	52
THE NEW COLOSSUS	53
ERROL ASCHWANDENR	
DESIRE	66
DRIPPY DREAMS	67
FUKUSHIMA WATERS	68
JURY S. JUDGE	
FLAYED BUNNY	73
TOMATO MENACE	74
SAY WHAT	75

FROM AIN'T NEVER

A prayer no one wants to

be, bellows the flesh as in a great water or wind. You are gentle about the temples when you want me back. When you're bored or some formless need that needs to shape my throbbing. (milk tether laps the way of no until the hunters in the woods come home) Now that you've won. Describe the many splendors of your empire. Use the voice no one will recognize. Leave us— throatless, sun-up. Spoils in the wake of. I was once 7 bolts of silk that never touched your skin. But you smiled when you traced my name in your inventory & I unspooled, fled my tethers, reached so far into the sun no one could find me.

The fortune lady

You reinvent the wheel until it is one barbed coin after another. Soon the faces of women who share your mouth wobble the air. Soon & the night. In which we place them: death or. It lands on— the grass sleeps long in its sad cordoned patches. I braid & unbraided your hair, it is the blue plaid of a torn dress. It is double negative, as in: ain't never. As in, there is no "no" there. As in, wherever the hell you are now, ain't nothin' not.

Down in the valley a-prayin'

the simpleton staring at the backs of his hands has cut them to stems. Tiny hairs crawl, twitch like the legs of smashed ants, send red threads pulsing through the dirt, rooting like a perfect failure to attach. Fisheye pale, 5-pointed refusal. Never again will they write you reasons to live. You can't read in the dark.

Or that lily of valley song I didn't have the heart to ask the woman with your mouth

at your funeral. Tell me she's someone else's home. Tell me she sleeps through the night. Tell me you leave her alone. Tell me, *the green rollin hills of West Virginia...* Tell me the threads we pull from each other don't leave us gutted. Tell me the locks you braid fast to my wrist all night disappear under sun. Tell me you take them with you. Tell me wherever you're going there's a rusty old buick, buckets of rain. Tell me what could have been. Tell me I'm not on for size. Tell me I need her as little as I need you.

Just like the god I never

did you know they're poison? Those finely stemmed bells that don't form to fit the slur of your most desperate acts or the awe that splashes in the wake of, anymore. Even in sleep, she cradles her head at crooked angles. Sometimes I lift her wrist, just to watch it fall. I do this until she opens her eyes, assures me that it's over.

PAPER MÂCHÉ

They had arranged to meet in a bar at Heathrow. Kaitlin didn't have a name or a cellphone number to call, but she was told to look for a white man in his forties. His suit would either be black or charcoal gray. He would have no distinguishing features. She found him right away.

"I'm Kaitlin," she said, stretching out her hand. He didn't shake it. He just jutted out his chin, signaling for her to sit down.

He whipped his index finger in a circle and the bartender ran out with a small, silver tray. He placed a steaming hot mug of coffee in front of the man and a cup of tea just next to her elbow.

"You have your résumé?" the man asked.

"Yes!" she said. She unzipped her briefcase.

"I don't need to see it. I just wanted to make sure you had it."

She nodded. "I have a little over five years' experience."

"As a stewardess?"

The man pulled a thick, navy blue binder from his duffel bag and opened it, skimming over the contents of the first page.

"As a flight attendant, yes."

"And you know what the job we've posted entails?"

"It would be more or less the same as what I'm doing right now," she said, "but I would be working for Mr. Collins on his private plane."

"You won't be working for Mr. Collins. You'll be working for the airline."

"The airline," she repeated.

"That's right."

"But Mr. Collins owns the airline. It's his own private jet."

The man nodded. "He doesn't want to think of you as staff. He doesn't want to think about you at all. Just like you wouldn't think about the person who serves you coffee or flips your burgers."

"Okay."

"He wants it to feel anonymous."

“I get it,” she said.

The man nodded sternly. His ears seemed to shrink until they were barely visible at all.

“We’re looking for total commitment here. You could never be more than an hour’s car ride from the airport where the plane is hangared.”

“So, I’d be working all the time.”

“You wouldn’t be working at all,” he said, “most weeks. Mr. Collins doesn’t really travel. But you would need to be ready. At the drop of a hat.”

“I’d be sitting around. Waiting.”

“You could do whatever you want with your time. That’s up to you.”

“I can lay in bed all day and eat chocolate and get fat.”

“You can’t get fat.”

The more she stared into the man’s face, the less distinct his features became. She was having trouble figuring out, now, where the bulbous edges of his nose ended and his puffy, white cheeks began.

“I need to look a certain way.”

“You need to look just as you do now.”

“I’ll grow older,” she laughed.

“Do you want this job when you’re forty?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not a problem.”

She stirred her tea with her spoon, even though she hadn’t put in any milk or sugar. She tapped the edge of the glass.

“I’ll stay with him.”

“You might stay in the same hotel,” he said, “but not with him. You’re not entourage; you’re accessory. You won’t interact with Mr. Collins outside the plane.”

“He doesn’t want to know me. He won’t know my name.”

“No. He wants you to go by ‘Julie.’”

She peered over the table and squinted, as if trying to determine whether she had heard him right.

“He wants his stewardess to go by the name Julie.”

“I prefer ‘flight attendant.’”

“I can say flight attendant,” he offered, “through the course of this conversation. But he won’t say flight attendant. He’ll say stewardess.”

There was a buzzing; an encircling fly.

“I won’t change my name,” she said.

“You won’t have to change it. Just answer to it.”

“Why does he care?”

“He’s hands-on. He’s detail-oriented.”

Kaitlin tried to smile, but faltered.

“That’s what you say,” she said, “about people who make a spreadsheet of all the things they’re going to pack before going on a trip, not someone who renames their employees.”

“You’re not his employee,” he repeated. “You’ll work for the airline.” She scratched at the table with her nails, like a cat against a post.

“Is there more?”

“Yes,” he said. “There’s a lot we still have to go over.”

“Okay.”

“He wants an evangelical.”

Kaitlin almost spit her tea out through her nose. She coughed. There was a burning sensation at the back of her throat.

“He wants what?”

“He’s an atheist,” he explained. “He wants to surround himself with people of faith, so that they can vouch for him. He wants to be able to turn to you at a moment’s notice during a meeting and say: ‘I don’t believe in God, but Julie here does. Sometimes we have a little debate between us, but we get along okay, don’t we Julie?’ In which case, you would just smile and nod. Or maybe say something like: ‘That’s true, Mr. Collins.’”

“He’s going to have meetings,” she asked, “on the plane?”

“No,” he said, “probably not. But possibly.”

“I’m not an evangelical.”

“You go to church?”

“Not an evangelical church.”

“You believe that Jesus Christ is both God and man, that he died for the remission of our sins, and was resurrected bodily?”

Kaitlin squirmed uncomfortably in her chair.

“I’m Lutheran,” she said.

The man nodded. “Okay. But on the plane, we want you to be a little bit more over the top with it. We want you to say things like: ‘I believe everyone has a part to play. I believe we were each put here for a reason.’ Or: ‘I pray every day that the Lord will keep you and guide you.’ Your faith should be showy enough to be on the verge of making Mr. Collins and the other passengers uncomfortable, without engaging in any direct attempts at conversion. Is that okay?”

“No,” she answered flatly. “That’s absurd.”

He ignored her, running his finger down the sheet in front of him and then flipping the page.

“We should talk a little bit about how Mr. Collins takes his coffee.”

“Okay.”

“He takes it black.”

Kaitlin stared out the window. There was water dripping down the pane, obscuring the view of the tarmac.

“We anticipate that you’ll have a lot of downtime. You may only work ten hours a week. You may only work ten hours a month. But you’ll always be on the clock. That means any work you produce during that period will be property of Quanaco Airlines.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“If you write a novel,” he said, “we own it. If you knit a scarf, we own a portion of it. A portion of its value consists in the raw materials made to use it. If these were bought using your own money, you retain that portion of its value. But whatever portion of its value is accrued from your labor belongs to us.”

“No.”

“If you spend ten dollars on knitting supplies,” he explained, “and the scarf could be sold for fifteen dollars, we own a five dollar share.”

“I didn’t say that I misunderstood. I said it was absurd. Why would anyone agree to that?”

“Mr. Collins actually recommends seeking additional employment,” the man added. “Even though we would collect your paycheck, it would

help build your résumé. Several members of our flight crew have been very successful with web design outsourcing.”

“Web design outsourcing,” she repeated.

The man nodded. “They freelance as web designers,” he explained, “but then take bids on those projects from developers overseas, who complete them for a small percentage. A few make more on these side projects than what we pay in their salaries. We end up turning a profit.”

“Why do they stay?”

“For the safety net. They continue to collect a paycheck even if their side business tanks. Plus, they’re under contract.”

Kaitlin sighed.

“Would you take this job?” she asked.

The man held up his hand to his lips. He mulled it over.

“There isn’t really any difference,” he suggested, “between what you do and what I do. Only the pay scale, the title.”

It sounded like bullshit.

“That sounds like bullshit,” she suggested.

“I have to pretend to like people,” he said, “to be someone I’m not.”

“Did he give you a new name?”

The man smiled grimly.

Kaitlin still did not know her interviewer’s name. It was too awkward now to ask it, even though this would have been the perfect opportunity.

“If you don’t think Mr. Collins is treating me differently because I’m a woman, then you’re insane.”

“I’m not insane.”

“Let me tell you a story,” she offered.

“This reminds me,” he said, “of an old fable.”

“There was a man who lived alone on a hill.”

“There was a king who could talk to animals, though he did not rule them.”

“The man had a magical tin can that held an endless supply of beef stew.”

“The birds pledged their loyalty to no one, which didn’t bother the king. The wolves pledged their loyalty only to each other. But the deer had pledged their loyalty to a human woman—and that the king could not abide.”

“He could have shared this stew with the whole village. He could have fed each and every last one of them. But he chose to stay at home on the hill.”

“He offered his citizens a ten dollar bounty per deer, but they must be brought in alive.”

“His hunger only grew over the years, so that, eventually, the tin can was never out of his hand. He was always sipping it.”

“He would torture the deer for hours. Pricking them with arrows and then bending the shaft once the head had pierced their flesh. He asked only for the name of the woman whom they adored.”

“He didn’t get fat, but he did begin to resemble the stew. His flesh grew wrinkled and gray, with splotches of orange spread across his skin. His piss turned the same colors. It smelled like beef and carrots.”

“One of the deer—a fawn—eventually relented, but only after hundreds, if not thousands, of her compatriots had been slaughtered.”

“Just as he came to resemble the stew, the stew came to resemble him. He no longer ate with a spoon. He just shoveled in the slop with his fingers, holding the tin can clumsily up to his lips.”

“She said: ‘The woman we adore, the woman we swear our fealty to, the woman who has captured our hearts—that woman is your daughter.’”

“He could see his own eyes swimming in the can. Staring up at him. And he would suck them into his own mouth.”

“So he brought the Princess before him.”

“Soon there was no distinction between eater and eaten.”

“And he slit her throat.”

“The stew flooded through the house, and then the whole village.”

“From that day forward, the deer would be hunted. They would be filled with arrows and gored with spears. They would be chased by dogs.”

“The villagers ate their fill, being careful to separate out the stew from the mud and the grass. They ate their fill and they were content.”

The man stared down at his empty mug of coffee.

The customers in the bar crowded their table. They took pieces of paper out of their luggage. They slapped the pages down hard against the wood, so that the cups and plates rattled and tipped over the edge.

The pages matted the floor. The pages heaped onto the table in towers. The pages were stuffed into their shirts and their mouths.

The pages were blank.

Kaitlin stared out the window. It was soapy white—as if someone had just taken a sponge filled with dishwashing liquid and rubbed it all over the glass.

It looked like a baby had spit up his milk.

PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE



George wants to order a hunting knife.

Billy needs a new tire for his bicycle.

Helen wants to sell small apples

Dick said

These are all problems about things

we receive and Multiply them

each day

They cannot be changed

We cannot change

PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE 1

CAMERON LOUIE

ERASURE - *CHILD-LIFE ARITHMATIC*

Thinking What the Problem Means



The Boys' Boat Club

Tom said

No these problems Change

things - We change

in small amount

each day

like the weight of water

in A Lake



PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE 2

CAMERON LOUIE

ERASURE - *CHILD-LIFE ARITHMETIC*

Making Change



My dear little for mother said father

Tom and Dick could not agree about change

How much if any was

the sum

The n One spring

Helen's apple trees bore

roast beef



PROBLEMS OF DAILY LIFE 3

CAMERON LOUIE

ERASURE - *CHILD-LIFE ARITHMATIC*

ATTIC/ATTACK SCENE WITH BIRDS

INTERIOR – DRESSING ROOM DEDICATED TO TIPPI – WINDOWLESS, LIGHT-BLEACHED. Hitch crouches beside HIS ACTRESS on the loveseat he installed.

HITCH

Your face a diamond against dark satin.

TIPPI

I wonder - why do I go upstairs alone?

HITCH

Once was a girl taking lessons
who asked me too many questions...

TIPPI

(hands folded like sealed letters, ankles crossed)
When you said birds, I thought caress and bread,
a yellow tuft puffing the brush.

HITCH

wore my tokens
but legs wouldn't open.
She now serves at a delicatessen.

Unrolls silver string from his claw, holds it at her neck.

HITCH

Here. Another.

TIPPI

There can be no more gifts, Hitch.
Why do I go upstairs alone?

HITCH

Don't think. It will all be mechanical.

She stands. Space flutters between TIPPI and the loveseat, where HITCH stoops, patting the spot she warmed.

HITCH

(staring into the cushion he strokes)
Think of the screen clasping your face.

The mirror grabs at her profile.

HITCH

Now to your room, Little Girl.

INTERIOR - HALLWAY HUNG WITH ACTRESSES PAST –
MOMENTS BEFORE THE ATTACK. Grace Kelly glosses a featherbed,
but her mind walks in Monaco.

HITCH

(stalks down the hall, twitching glances from one shoulder to the other)
Mechanical birds. All will be over soon.
Then, a drink in private.

INTERIOR – ATTIC SET DICTATED TO TIPPI
a door to two stairs to NOWHERE. CHICKEN WIRE fitted around the
room.

CUT-TO:

Crows luminesce real feathers. Birds clench the cage bar. An argument.
Hitch perches outside in shadow. TIPPI thrust into the room. ACTION!

TIPPI

What's happened to the prop birds?

Trainers in leather gloves barricade the attic, armed with raven, seagull, crow.
Birds like the taunts of men spatter her gray suit, HITCH COCK HITCH
COCK

Where is the knob? Ten at a time, fistfuls of wing. A great hand that bats her
across the room, demands she suck its fingers. CUT CUT CUT

CLOSE-UP:

Tippi's cheek spotted with claw.

HITCH

Like Lady Godiva,
she should shield herself with nothing
but blonde rivers on the skin.

The trainer tethers his gull to her hem. A crow sewn to her shoulder.
A wedding dress of beaks scrapes her chest.

ACTION!

TIPPI

Why do I go upstairs at all? The plot -

The screech clasp her face. Face against darts of dark wing. Here. Stroke
this.

HITCH

Her expression should be of
self-sacrifice. She becomes
the virgin she hasn't been.

ACTION!

HITCH

Stay in your room, Little Girl.

A bomb of birds goes off at her feet. ACTION! A tent of ravens collapses.
Seagulls net her like a pond treasure, screeching touch me! Touch me! Where's
the air? Gone out! CUT SNIP CUT

HITCH

ACTION!

INTERIOR – DRESSING ROOM SHOWER FOR WASHING THE
BLOOD Water beats try, try again

MAKEUP GIRL

Can't you love him a little? Can't you?

Swoops some concealer under.

CUT-TO: INTERIOR ATTIC SET DEDICATED TO TIPPI

HITCH

(stalks his shadow)

Once was a German groom
constructed a fetish room

TIPPI

Hitch, no woman would -

HITCH

seagulls attack
a blonde front and back.
He empties like a spittoon.

TIPPI

No woman would agree to this.

Rolls his eyes down her face like a hand. She turns.

ACTION!

BORDER

If they ask your name
give them that of a recently dead poet.

If they ask your name
tell them the frontier has no limit,
just endless directions.

If they ask your name
distract them with questions about
the empty traffic circle.

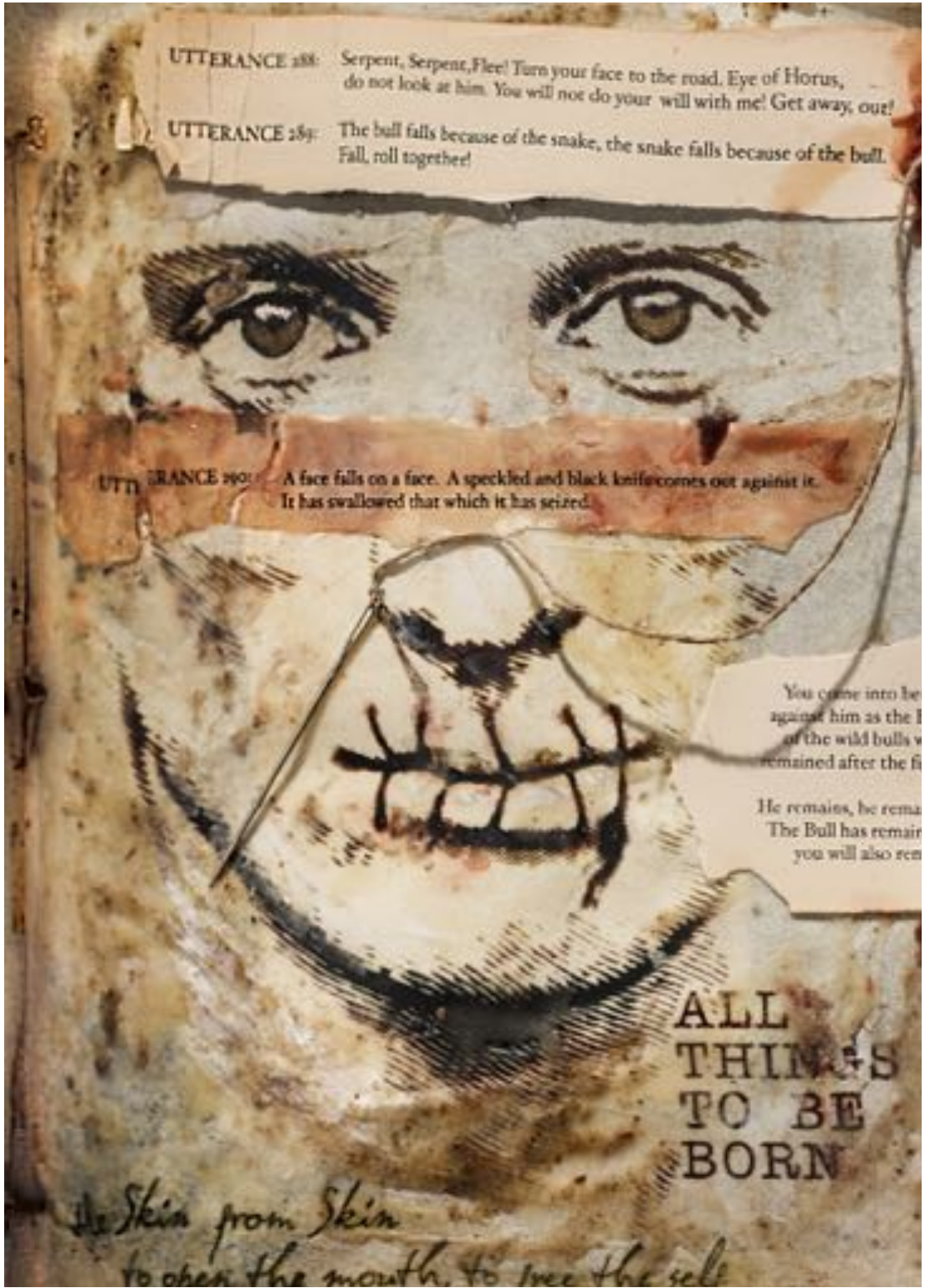
If they ask your name
say there is no one waiting
out there to be conquered.

If they ask your name
hold out the passport of a tree:
hands full with needles, soil.

If they ask your name
show them the sand on your tongue,
the deep stare of the tired.

If they ask your name
imitate the silence of the coliseum
after the last soul has gone.

If they even ask at all.



UTTERANCE 288: Serpent, Serpent, Flee! Turn your face to the road. Eye of Horus, do not look at him. You will not do your will with me! Get away, out!

UTTERANCE 289: The bull falls because of the snake, the snake falls because of the bull. Fall, roll together!

UTTERANCE 290: A face falls on a face. A speckled and black knife comes out against it. It has swallowed that which it has seized.

You came into being against him as the I of the wild bulls remained after the fi

He remains, he remains The Bull has remained you will also remain

ALL THINGS TO BE BORN

As Skin from Skin to open the mouth, to see the self

GIFT: EXEGESIS (FRAGMENTS)
MANDEM
MIXED MEDIA

The history of canine domestication reveals a startling truth
— the Wolf in sheep's clothing became the shepherd's guard dog.



GIFT: EXEGESIS (FRAGMENTS)

MANDEM

MIXED MEDIA



GIFT: EXEGESIS (FRAGMENTS)
MANDEM
MIXED MEDIA

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES

There are a hundred ways to kill a baby in Ruth's house. She knows them by heart, can murmur them like a rosary prayer. She kills her child dozens of times a day, in her vicious imagination, so she can keep her safe in reality. That's the real talisman: not the rabbit's foot, worn to the knobbled bone, or the citrine crystal, warm in the palm of her hand. Precisely one hundred ways. She tongues them before she goes to sleep, she lets them flicker before her in running water or in smoke or steam.

Mouse poison is almost always the first fear. The exterminators laid green pellets in the cellar, promising relief from the sound of the mice rifling through the granola, leaving perfectly formed mouse shits on the kitchen floor. Ruth wanted to leave the mice alone—she'd always liked mice, had even had a pet one, once, named Tuesday. Tuesday had been warm in the palm of her hand: his miniature heart beat against her index finger when she pressed it to his chest.

But mice could carry disease. Mice could even contain the bubonic plague inside their ascending colons and nickel-sized lungs, and Ruth couldn't have them with a baby in the house.

That was what the exterminator said. Couldn't do that, ma'am. So she let him spread the pellets in the cellar underneath her studio. When she asked about the bodies, he said that the mice would go off to die. They'd emerge from the house and curl up in perfect sleep.

Still, she can't help imagining a perfect cemetery of mice in the cellar, skeletons artfully arranged. That, or a desert flooded with mummified mice: eyes sunken into the skull, feet webbed with spider-leavings. She wishes she knew the mice's fate, but not so much that she'll shine a flashlight behind the door. Besides, with the door closed, the poison can't get out.

(Still, she wonders: how many would it take? Sophia contains sixteen pounds of skull and skin, of liver and kidney, each organ miniature and perfectly formed. Is it so fatal that even one pellet, pushed by baby fingers into her mouth, would destroy her? Or is there the possibility of grace here?)

The next ones she counts are ordinary dangers. Knives, needles, headphones, paper clips. Electric sockets. Why does she still find ones

missing their plastic covers? She had thought she'd disguised them so faithfully. She had gone to the hardware store, body huge and sweating, hair frizzing, wearing cut-off shorts and flip flop shoes. She looked husbandless, which she was, and homeless, which at least she was not. The electric socket covers went into a two-bedroom beige townhome with a gas fireplace (how hot does the glass barrier become? She doesn't know, hasn't turned it on to test it) and a pool out back (with a five-foot black fence, tempting waters irradiated by floodlights). At least the pool isn't yet a danger: Sophia can't pry doors open or unlock windows. There will be new fears, come that time, but now Ruth satisfies herself with their impossibility.

In the meantime, before Sophia becomes ambulatory, Ruth counts blinds instead. There are blinds all over the house, since her mother preferred them to curtains, thought they looked cleaner, more precise. She liked that they let in slivers of afternoon light even when shut. Ruth took down the ones over the crib and replaced them with giraffe-printed swags, but she doesn't have the energy to do the whole house.

No, she says whenever Sophia comes near those other windows. No. No. On last month's five o'clock news, a baby got tangled up in blinds and asphyxiated. It doesn't take long. After five minutes, starved of oxygen, cells implode on new exposure to air. Something flickers inside the brain and tells it to die. What is that switch? Live / Don't Live.

Then there are the good pearls, the three-foot strand passed down through four generations. Easy to swallow those slippery oyster ulcers, smooth and ivory-round and running down the esophagus. She imagines pulling them out of Sophia's mouth like a magician tugging spit-flecked scarves from between his teeth. Ruth balls the priceless pearls in the toe of her sock and tucks them at the back of her drawer.

Other jewelry, too. Her earrings—copper ones faded green, ovals cut from enamel tins, hoops tarnished from gold to silver. Sophia has the manual dexterity to finger them and pop them into that relentless, cavernous mouth of hers. Ruth put them away early on; when Sophia was finished with a feed, she would reach up and yank an earring free, catch the posts on tender cartilage that bled and bled. But earrings still turn up, even now, hidden in carpet or between cushions. So far the only

discoveries have been Ruth's (but when her luck runs out, when not if).

She has to clean when Sophia's sleeping. Bleach and ammonia are bad enough on their own, but mixed together the chlorine gas could ruin her soft palate, trachea, lungs. Vinegar isn't as dangerous, but it could still sting eyes and skin, or make her cough until her esophagus tore. Liquid soap could be swallowed, coat the soft tissues and drown her. Even baking soda could clot that small mouth before Ruth could hook her forefinger in and empty out the space to breathe.

She watches the news, knows what they say. Murderous Mother. News anchors love the taste of alliteration, and it calls to their audience. Come and cluck your tongues. You would never. Look at what she did. It's not disaster that ruins you; it's neglect, it's bad decisions. Never fate. Ruth isn't innocent of this, but at least she watches with what she hopes is compassion, what she prays is love (it could always be her).

After all, she keeps so many dangers for no reason at all. She shouldn't need a hair dryer. Shouldn't keep nail polish or acetone remover, all of them full of poisons. There's no reason for the razor to gleam bare, no call for the mascara wand to threaten the delicate cornea. Who's to say what even the more harmless tools—lipstick and sunscreen, wax and zinc oxide—would do if swallowed?

Why does she think these things? Why does she meditate on the sharp edges of garbage cans, on shards of glass and aluminum? Every morning, stupid with sleep, she unclicks the toilet lock to pee. One day she'll forget, Sophia might fall inside, hit her head, or swallow the water. Every night Ruth checks the windows so they stay shut, screened and locked, but she could forget (has forgotten). A baby is ingenious; really, a baby is crafty beyond belief. A baby will steal itself like a faerie, hit its head on the way down, or maybe just bleed against the glass.

Stairs, stoves, cabinets. Even the crib. As soon as Sophia began to try to pull herself up, Ruth had to remove bumper pads and mobiles, blankets and stuffed animals (the few that she had been permitted), and lower the crib to the lowest setting. In case you fall, she said to Sophia. That's what they say, anyway. I don't know if you'd try it.

And even now, she still thinks about SIDS. Maybe caused by pillows, maybe apnea, maybe snot that Ruth hasn't squeezed out with the nasal bulb. Sometimes, early on, Ruth would find Sophia silent. Not

breathing. As if she'd forgotten how. That's normal, Dr. Reyes reassured her, but still Ruth lifted Sophia and patted her back, whispering. Come on. You can do it. Breathe. You've got to do it. Everybody does.

Worse and worse are the remnants of Ruth's pre-Sophia existence. Turpentine, oil paints, clay, canvas, india ink, ink stones, staple gun, canvas pliers, the metal carpenter's square. Even the colored pencils, sharpened to their most perfect point, have to be locked away. The Everclear she kept around as a solvent, the vodka and gin that she kept around to drink. The former she keeps, because she figures it's still healthier than the denatured alcohol to breathe in, it doesn't smell in the same way—but later, of course, later will be a problem, what if she thinks it's healthy to swallow? Poison can cause the body to vomit until it bleeds, can cease respiratory function, can ruin the liver, can stop the heart. Ruth pours the rest down the sink, mixing it with water. Some fish will get drunk off it, probably. Lucky fish.

And the goddamn Chilean doll that Paul sent her. Why did he do that? There was hardly a note, there was nothing in the box but a card with a frozen, smiling cat painted on the cover. Inside, written: For Sophia. Does he not understand that babies need soft objects, things free of lead paint? Maybe Paul imagines Sophia older than he is, more aware. The doll is blank-faced, ornate as a frosted cake.

Did she like the doll? Paul never asks.

He was nine days gone when Ruth finally took a pregnancy test. Two months without bleeding, and yes, she already knew. Some part of her had, foolishly and lazily, been thinking that it would come to an end as surely as a cold. This was a sham state, a conspiracy of her body. She expected something more profound than this. A sign that this has taken root inside of her body and blood. She smoothed her hand over her abdomen, and then clamped her fingers around her wrist. She tightened her fingers to push this foreign presence out of her blood.

She jumped the last three steps every day, rolling back on her heels to absorb the shock, then waited to see what would happen. She ate everything she shouldn't. Every Friday was sushi, delicate curls of raw tuna daubed with wasabi. She smeared soft and runny brie inside her mouth, chewed thick-sliced salami, drank orange juice and split pomegranates with a knife and dug the seeds out with her bare hands. The baby thrived.

Ruth couldn't bring herself to drink alcohol—it seemed too willful, and this could only be an accident. But she drank coffee until her hands shook and the baby ricocheted within her. Ruth waited. The ultrasounds revealed a mass of white noise against a gray background, the outline of a nose and hand.

At thirty-eight weeks, her body finally quit. Placental abruption, too late for anything good. Her cervix cracked thirty minutes before the birth, spilling blood down Ruth's shorts and onto the waiting room floor. Lucky thing she'd been at the doctor's office, lucky she'd been rushed to surgery. She awoke with a hollow uterus, wrung dry by the surgeon's hands. Her abdomen was bisected in a classical cut, staples slashed across her linea nigra.

They handed her the baby, who had a name now. What was it? The baby's body felt unfinished, slightly doughy and damp. Even its crying was imprecise, more like a cat or a raccoon. Ruth didn't recognize it as her own child, even as the nurses hurried Sophia into her arms. Your baby's hungry; better feed her. She's got to learn to eat, now, eat in the right way. But the nursing hurt—more than hurt, the agony that the mouse feels in a trap, neck pinned by the metal bar, bloodied but still living.

But kind Nurse Tiffany, the one with the baby at home and the breast pump in the break room, said: not normal. They discovered Sophia's tongue was bound tightly to the bottom of her mouth. All it would take, they said, was a single, reassuring snap of the surgeon's scissors. Ruth spent the procedure time tracing her own tongue with her fingers. How sore and sensitive would the tissue have to be? But after Sophia was safely delivered, neither of them wept. Sophia latched, and Ruth could breathe.

Safe. Well-fed. At the doctor's there were fears, too, but she didn't think about them then. At least someone was watching. Now, at home, someone or some fate, would hear the echo of her earlier prayer.

Now, it would be an accident, surely. It could take the form of something as harmless as coffee. If Ruth is drinking it, and Sophia pulls on her arm, and a perfect arc of hot liquid spills on tender skin, it could melt, fuse, ruin. Skin transplants would be required, like the lady in the McDonald's lawsuit, her own genitals glued together. They had to scrape inches off her stomach and thighs, whatever slack skin she could spare, to give her life again.

There are so many ways that it could happen. Even when Ruth is

cooking chicken: not breasts, but the dark, fatty thighs that shred in a sauce. Only one bone, shorter than Ruth's pinky finger, thinner than a coat hanger, could split and splinter in the throat or gut.

The sliding door cracked open just two inches. A cord uncoiled, wire ready to pierce a fingertip or lip. The good copper pan, full of spun sugar, candy floss, or liquid caramel. Three hundred degrees Fahrenheit, between soft-ball and hard-crack. Even unheated, it could fall from the rack and make an indent in the still-forming skull, bashing one of the tender fontanelles. The snarl of blades that fits inside the blender, the metal of her good Japanese knife, the marble crush of the mortar and pestle.

It could happen outside, where she sprays for black widows in the window wells. Could be garden shears—not just the cuts, but the resulting infection from the silver blade. Sepsis, staph, any of them. Same with the shards of a broken tumbler or beer bottle from one of the neighbor kids. Tetanus, cellulitis, skin and fat eaten away, the muscle tissue devoured.

Worse, too: it could be her own fault. Completely, unequivocally. Mother leaves baby to check mail! Mother, nerves dull with repeated pain, steps outside and sits on the front porch, toes in the wet grass, a glass of water between her palms. Oh, Sophia's always sleeping when she does this, but all the brain needs is a few minutes, a little water, one sharp nail. Ruth knows better. Her excuses won't hold up on the news. She'll be one of those mothers, pleading and sullen. I never thought.

No, better to do this; better to kill her child a hundred times in her own mind before she lets it happen. Better to be an imaginary murderer, concocting funerals in her head, than to risk anything at all. She knows how simple that single change can be. Alive / Dead. Blinds and mascara, blenders and bones. And Ruth has tried to kill herself in so many ways. Not suicide, though; nothing so overt as that.

At three, she stood, toes of her saddle shoes edging the fascinating dark round of the open sewer circle. She swayed back and forth, waiting to see what would happen. She wouldn't fall, but she might tumble. She might give herself up to the water underneath, and the slosh of boots through the muck. Eventually her mother found her, snatched up her hand, and pulled her free of the decision. Remember this. She will have to guard Sophia from these temptations.

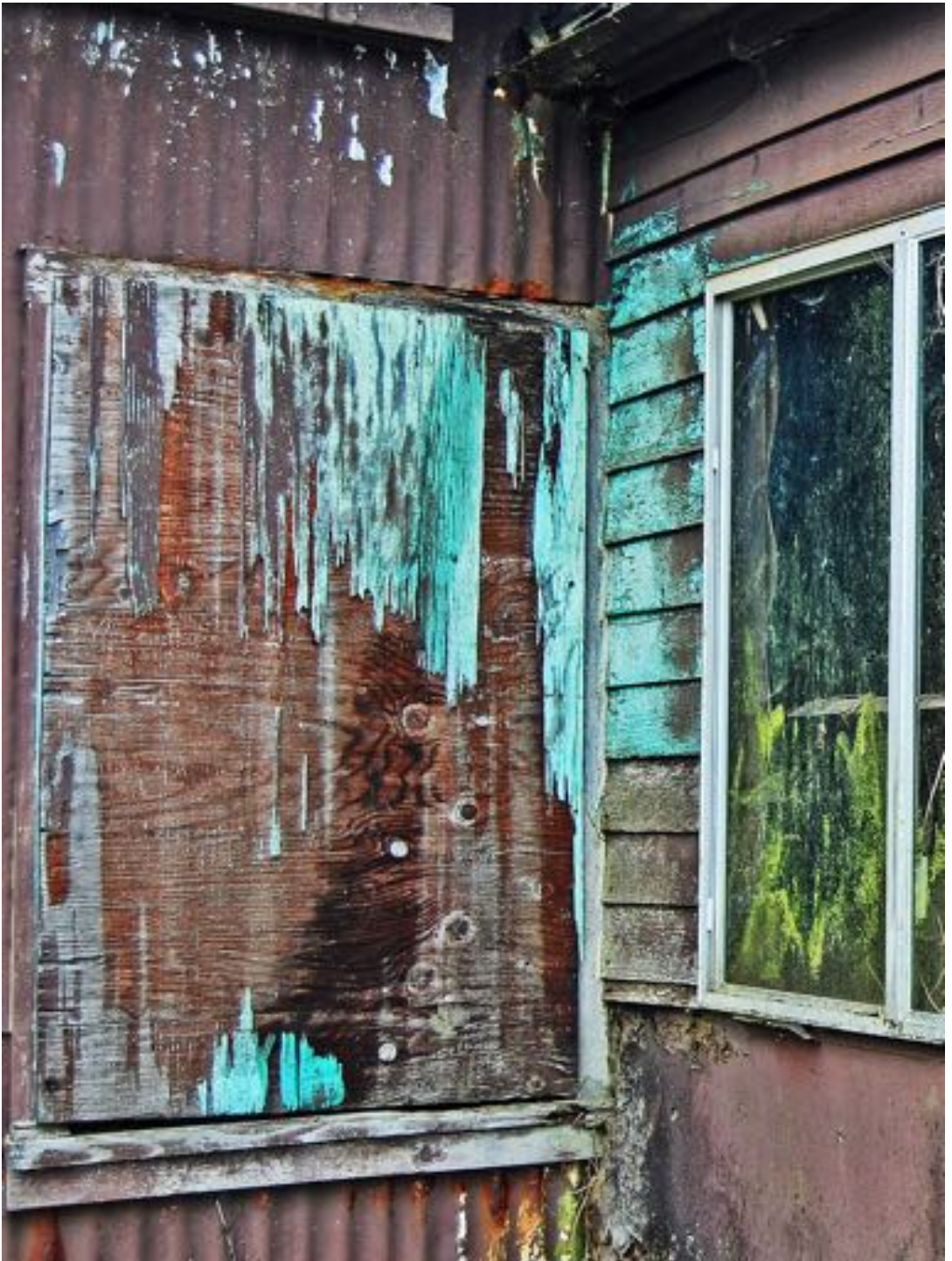
At five, she swallowed her faux-sapphire earrings. Placeholders

to keep the wound from healing shut. Ruth hadn't meant to. She'd been sucking at the gold posts, tasting bitter metal and accumulated skin. Then her lips parted, and her teeth fell open, and in popped one earring, and then the other. She'd been afraid to tell her mother, but tearfully confessed after questioning. It had been worse than Ruth could have imagined—that metal could go inside your heart, Mother had shouted at her. Ridiculous, now, but disastrous then. And now she is Mother, woman faded onto woman, faces pasted together in their photographs.

At eleven, she played hide-and-go-seek between the cars in the parking lot. Asphalt sizzled under her bare feet, her flip-flops discarded on the beach. This one she remembers in gasps. Silver hood, metal scorching her shoulder. Her stopping, and the van a bare four inches from her. Mother didn't see. Ruth exchanged stares with the stricken teenage boy, then eased herself out of harm's way. How many of Sophia's near-deaths will pass Ruth by?

And at sixteen, she lay flat on her back in the bed of a pickup truck, boys she hardly knew driving. The wind buzzed her skin. The stars whipped by so quickly that she couldn't have named a single one. At a stop, she clambered up. She was already drunk on schnapps, already a little high, and she thought she'd learn to fly. She stretched her arms up, doing her best to reach beyond the limits of skin and bone. She fell when the truck started again, but only back on her ass, back safely to the bed. But this was Ruth's lucky accident: It would have only taken a single second, one unlucky piece of fate, for her to fall onto the street and lay bleeding, waiting for her mother to come find her.

Sophia wails, and Ruth rises. She's ready to count her fears: one through a hundred, and an infinite number of dangers to come. Numbers like verses of the holy scriptures, her most beautiful and loving fears. Ruth closes her eyes, walks to the baby's side, and opens her mouth to let just one escape.



OR 1892-3 US 101 WARRENTON

KEITH MOUL

PHOTOGRAPH



OR 181-2 US 101 GARIBALDI

KEITH MOUL

PHOTOGRAPH



OR 111-2 SR 140 BEATTY

KEITH MOUL

PHOTOGRAPH

MAIN STREET, UNDER THE SHELLS OF BURNT-OUT HOMESTEADS

I filled my car with twenty-seven large pumpkins, five bags of the small, a series of the more traditional turnips, and drove out to that field, the one with the cold chimney marking where you might have lived—you, my ghosts, I carved your jag-edged smiles and squinting eyes, each of your faces filled with tallow candles set ablaze, light-fade tasting orange and lilac; this is the sort of thing you're supposed to do if you want to summon someone, if you have questions, but I didn't have anything like that; no questions. I didn't even know the name I was calling home.

I turned a field barren to a ghost town bright enough to blind the cars on the half-highway that always seem to be driving by and never seem to be looking—if they, if you, wanted I was willing to rename you, even try to set you in new skin. Let it grow around pumpkin that would soon enough rot-sweet—though this was not unusual. After all, we breathing shed our bones every seven years, ouroboros babies, we devour ourselves, never even notice, why should you be any different?

ABANDONED BODIES AND FARMHOUSES

A fireplace stands solitary in the middle
of a field on left side of the road. I swear
driving home some nights I see smoke curl
out of its chimney, wonder who,
what, warms their fingers in its blue blaze,
if there is a door I simply can't see—
this house, built for air,
who do you shelter now? If I stopped,
pressed tight to overgrown
ditch cotton that bristles, cuts to the tongue
when you try to talk about it and the sky,
painted over by corn—by the time it goldens,
wilts for the harvest, I'll have forgotten
the way a sky could be blue.

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

FROM TRAKL DIARIES

Trakl Meets the Poet Else Lasker-Schuler at a café. They talk for hours about religion, drinking all the while. He later writes and dedicates a poem to her.

THE RED CANDLE WORLD

On the table's linen a red candle is burning, the wick floats in a puddle. I watch it flicker. Trakl arrives at exactly the agreed-upon time. His eyes are a peculiar shade of grey-lavender—clouds that streak the sky with queer heat and thunder. He says he eats little, yet we order cakes with apricot filling. I slide my fork through sweet chocolate dough as if it were a newly scooped ditch, one that is terribly soft to excavate because the diggers are allowed to use only spoons.

...

His mouth seems gentle and I hear myself breathe when he claims his clan ran with wolves in the Black Forest of the eleventh century. It is in the blood of some families to be murderers. The sun is falling through trees and you can drink green from the air.

...

“Ah,” he says, pouring another, “was it truly wine they drank in the scriptures or unfermented grape juice?” Two bottles. Black priest wine. The wine shows off its beautiful skin. *Have you seen him? God? God?* “O redness in church,” he says. Blue is an ideal. Like the Christ of plaster and the gully in his side. He sees my words, not my high-necked black dress fit to my hips in the shape of a snake. I tell him I am of the tribe of Isaac and my great-grandmother employed three lady's maids. High German.

...

We speak of heretics and The Wheel that braided a man after all of his joints had been smashed. The Hanging Cage and Breast Ripper. "Herr Trakl." I place my gloved hand on his. "I know my way to god as I know the way to a shut-in closet." Looking for god you see a wrist and a hand reaching. Then nothing happens. You see god shadows that have been cast so long. Nuns with skins of unscaled fish trying to teach us god.

...

"Maria Trakl was a cool, reserved woman: she provided for her children, but there was no warmth. She was only really happy when she was alone with her antique collections—and then she sometimes would lock herself for days in her room. In a conversation with von Flicker Trakl claimed he hated his own mother so much he could have strangled her with his own hands." Eric Williams in *The Mirror and the Word: Modernism, Literary Theory, and Georg Trakl*

THE MOTHER EXPLAINS "HOW"

How airless it is here among the dead dishes. Goblets on star-cut feet. Georgian ale flutes. How she handles each like an infant, pressing her lips to the fruiting vine bowls. My darlings. How at her wrists, crusts of black lace and her dress a crow's nuptial gown. How never did she hold her children. *Mother. How you tell me I avoid mathematics and spend too much time staring at the ceiling.* How the maids have watched me and my sister. How they spread tales of finding us lying in the sun doing nothing. The pendulum clock looks down with its brass eye, the eye that swings back and forth all night. How the crickets scream. How I stay awake to keep the pendulum from striking. How if the hour thuds, the hermit will wrap me in his beard and carry me into the clock. *There will be no more of it. Grete is to be sent away to Switzerland to study with the nuns. See to your Latin. Your Algebra.* The crystal stags are lapping at her rouged lips. How the diamond-cut quadrants wink. How she turns her back to me and grows remote, fingers wandering French candle sticks and Tower of London funnel bowls. In her

cheeks the trout swim among rotting bulrushes. How her line ends, how she heads a family of broken branches.

...

“Arthur Langen was in Berlin when Grete Trakl committed suicide. As the closest relative in the area at the time of autopsy and identification at the Mortuary of the Institut für Rechtsmedizin of the Charité, he determined Grete’s burial place.”

THE IDENTIFICATION

Dusk enters the mortuary, the tea candles flicker. I ask for strong black coffee and water, a carafe, if possible. Chairs huddle and in the corner a balloon-back writing desk offers solace to a man hunched over pen and paper. I see where the revolver made its presence felt in your temple. You weren't at home. You, the protégé, the scraped knee, the unsteady foal. I, the man-mother who fed you the unripe pears of your practice lessons. Hysteria stole you from yourself. Like the nape of your neck, where it got moist after making love to the piano or when I drew you into my arms. I lift your hand from the rosary beads, lower my lips to the blue flesh. Death's smell like dust wet with vinegar, in the sun in an afternoon left miles behind. A stink bug climbs the table where you lie. A stripe down its charcoal-colored hull, two red antennae, a mustard-yellow underbelly, I watch it open. How dark and nuzzling—nights of larks' hearts and black wool. The empty room of you. *Arthur has a brush in his fingers, a marbled handle with metal teeth. I try to get up on my elbow and speak to him. His hand slips under my neck and he lifts my hair from behind. He brushes out the coppery red tangles. A slough, not a flower arrangement. His fingers flow through mine like warm floating seaweed.*

...

TASTY TOWN

“Just anywhere, hon.”
Wanda waves away
night’s jabber cloud,
wipes dawn’s curdle.
“With y’all in a jif.”

Window-booth recidivists,
folded arm headrests,
we order as she whistles
Xtina’s “Beautiful”
between her teeth.

We dish, spill,
laugh our faces hurt.
I rehash thin ice,
let slip. Wanda clears.
“Hon, you look like shit.”

CLOUDLESS TRACT

. . . astronomers have found two clusters of galaxies that collided so hard one of them has lost its halo of dark matter, the mysterious invisible stuff that swaddles ordinary matter.

—NY Times

What passes for swaddling around here
got Its stuffing drubbed far ago.
Ask the Flying Big Top Twins,
when you find their separate skins.

Developed a knack for putting things:
transparent monofilament dangling
glow-in-the-dark fish,
cats screeching on moonyard hooks.

Jerryrigged the puppets'
akimbo limbs, overreached—
horse and rider thrown in the sea.

Picked up the mountain trail
as the blizzard struck the party,
moved it, covered tracks.

Hitchhiked the head-on.

Star-crossed cosmos,
to draw One
so drawn to grief.



GIRL WITH A FLOWER

LUCAS SAMS

MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



ASPIRATION OF THE SOUL

LUCAS SAMS

MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



THE THREE DISGRACES

LUCAS SAMS

MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



EXHUMED

LUCAS SAMS

MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



THE NEW COLOSSUS

LUCAS SAMS

MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS

WILLIAM JAMES

[MIDNIGHT IN HEAVEN & OUR FATHER'S]

midnight in heaven / & our father's

god is drunk / on war & disease // crumbling

messiahs / baptized in leather & rope / knee-deep

in their kill // the seed & burning / magnesium

in their smile / season of roses // season of

the gun / of the molotov, of wire / & nuclear

wind // the mountains shiver / & whisper

hallelujah / for a broken throne

THE WATCHMAN

As watchman, his assignment was to watch the monitor, which displayed, not unlike the human brain, surveillance footage of activity inside the cell: past, present, future. Display #1 captured footage from activity that had occurred in the cell in the recent past, five minutes ago. Display #2 captured activity occurring live: here, now. And Display #3 captured activity which would occur in the not distant future, five minutes from now.

At the press of a button, the watchman's meals, made-to-order, were delivered to him in a canister via the pressure of a pneumatic tube.

His favorite and saddest time of day was just before and just after a meal, for there was no dining pleasure comparable to the experience of watching himself eat or continue to eat even after a meal had ended.

While the watchman was eating a meal, however, his food was not always enjoyable. His mind was busy then, comparing the taste and texture of the meal to his expectations of it, which had been informed by what he had seen recently on the monitor. Sometimes the meal tasted better than the monitor had led the watchman to anticipate; other times, the meal tasted worse. Always the meal appeared as if it would be or had been delicious, even if it had not been. The former was a pleasure of anticipation. The latter, of melancholy.

Sometimes, near the end of a meal, the watchman ate more slowly, attempting to savor the food's flavor and texture, but the slower he ate the more melancholy he felt and the more eager he was to finish the meal so that he might watch himself eating it again, remembering the tastiest morsels with assistance from the monitor.

Masturbation. The watchman would see himself on Display #3, future, pants at his ankles, whacking away. This image, almost more than any other in the watchman's day, made him wretched. But it produced, without fail, a stiff and eager warmth in his penis, which the watchman never failed to gratify. Most distressing, however, were the five minutes on Display #2, present, when the watchman saw himself whacking away, while on Display #3, future, he could be seen cowering in prayer. There seemed to be no emotional or spiritual commerce between these two individuals,

not to mention the third watchman, Display #1, past, who, simultaneously, would be typing rapidly on a keyboard and looking furtively over his shoulder, once every ten seconds, as if a divine cop might bust into the cell at any moment and haul him to hell.

When the watchman was finished with this sexual exercise, he cleaned himself around the waist and thighs, then retreated into a nap or gaming device. Anything to distract himself from the stream of video arriving on Display #1, past, the reenactment: pants at his ankles, whacking away.

Sometimes, afterward, when he allowed himself to hate himself, the watchman prayed or journaled. He relied on the words despicable, shameful, compulsive, and illogical to supplement his essays of self-denigration. One of his personal favorites was the phrase “truly appalling behavior,” which, he acknowledged, may have been overdoing it a bit. “That’s me in a nutshell.” He read and reread each journal entry over and over, out loud, until he felt a little bit better for having spent a considerable amount of time castigating himself.

But one evening, after the watchman had watched himself whacking away and had started whacking away while watching himself repent, the watchman was distracted by an irregularity appearing on Display #3, future. There, he saw himself, five minutes from now, not repenting, but unpacking the contents of a canister which had arrived through the pneumatic tube.

The watchman was curious. Prior to that moment, a canister had never arrived at the cell exclusive of the watchman’s request. He hadn’t seen himself request such a canister on any of the monitor’s displays. The watchman hastily put himself away and looked more closely at Display # 3, future.

He saw himself empty the canister of a revolver and inspect the mechanisms and condition of the weapon. Then, without warning, he saw himself aim the revolver against the side of his own head, and fire.

The watchman yelped. His hands flew into the air above his head like an aggrieved referee. How could this happen? It could not be allowed! The watchman clawed his own face and cursed in disbelief.

Suddenly, as if in reply, the pneumatic tube vroomed and deposited a canister on the floor of his cell.

Trepidant, the watchman dumped the contents of the canister. His stomach plummeted.

He inspected the mechanisms and condition of the revolver and shakily disassembled it. He looked up again at Display #3, and saw himself sprawled out on the floor, his head leaking a lagoon of blood, and was impaled by a feeling of terrible blankness and doom.

Why would he want to kill himself?

He didn't.

It was a lie.

The watchman felt enraged. He reassembled the revolver and aimed it at the monitor. He roared and pulled the trigger, but the gun clicked. Misfired.

The watchman froze and listened to the haunting, ambient hum of the console and monitor.

Although he was surrounded by walls and had not heard disengaged the lock mechanism of the cell door in the history of his confinement, he felt a menacing presence had entered. He felt as if he were being pursued by wolves, as if his life depended on the revolver being in good repair. He fumbled the weapon, disassembling it once more. He sniffed the cartridge and determined that the powder had malfunctioned, causing the firearm not to discharge.

Display #1, past, a version of the watchman, once again, introduced the revolver to the side of his own head and silently discharged it. Blood.

The watchman screamed and flung the revolver against the wall. He collapsed on the cold concrete floor and wept.

Display #2, live, picture the watchman wailing and pulling his hair. His anguish bordered by Displays #1 & 3, past and future, where the watchman could be seen lying dead, bleeding respective lagoons of blood.

“Liar!” the watchman screamed at the monitor.

Display #3, future, a team of men dressed in white bee-keeper-like suits, bearing an almost imperial air, entered the cell. Two of the suited figures wrapped the body in a bag and wheeled it out on a gurney. Two others mopped up the blood and disinfected the floor, console, and monitor, which appeared to have been splattered with blood and tissue. Then another suited figure returned to the cell and wheeled out his roly chair and replaced

it with a new rolly chair.

As the suits performed this procedure, also on Display #1, the watchman witnessed on Display #3 the escorted arrival of a new watchman. He was taller and perhaps younger and handsomer than the original watchman, though if pictured together, they might be mistaken as brothers.

Semiautomatic rifles guided the new watchman into the cell. Handcuffs bound his wrists. Without removing the restraints or lowering their weapons, the figures wearing the bee-keeper-suits introduced the watchman to the rolly chair, console, and monitor.

Press the yellow button with the fork and knife icons for a meal.

Press the pink button with the toilet icon and toilet paper will be replenished.

In a paradox (which seemed the sum of his experience), the arrival of the suited figures failed to surprise the original watchman, and yet was earth-shattering. Who were these people? Under whose authority were they administering these instructions? Although the watchman could not recollect having met them, as he could not recollect the inauguration of his duties and confinement, he was certain such a meeting could not have not occurred. A baby must, no matter how briefly, meet his mother, the one who brought him into the world. Even though the baby can't remember it. Similarly, the watchman was certain these suited figures had ushered him into his current station. How else could he have arrived here?

When the training session ended, two of the suits restrained the new watchman's legs while a third and fourth secured his upper body and a fifth administered a syringe. Although the needle looked almost long enough to bisect the human neck, its entire length vanished, momentarily, into the new watchman's throat.

If not for the monitor's muted sound, the original watchman might have heard the shrill, agonized cries belonging to the red, contorted face.

Almost instantly, the injected serum took effect and the new watchman's face and limbs fell slack. The handcuffs and other restraints

were gently removed. A buttery ointment was applied to the insides of the new watchman's wrists, where the struggle to resist had abraded the skin.

Two suits laid the body down on the cot. They bopped the yellow button on the console and a canister dropped down through the pneumatic tube.

Meal: cheeseburger, fries, coke.

The suits exited, and not long after that the new watchman came to. Immediately, the new watchman encountered images of himself displayed on his own monitor. He saw himself eating the cheeseburger meal—Display #3, future—and he saw himself lying on the cot, massively indisposed—Display #1, past. The images bewitched him.

Equally engrossed by the events appearing on Displays #1 and #3 of his own monitor, the original watchman watched the new watchman—past and future—consume the cheeseburger meal.

He felt no pleasure, only horror and disbelief in watching this stranger eat. Who was this man? Did he actually exist? He appeared unaffected or even unaware of his warring with the suits not a quarter hour previous. The surroundings and conditions of the new watchman's new life were uncontested. He ate dutifully, watching the monitor.

But how was it possible, the original watchman wondered, that he had continued to occupy this cell in the present while the new watchman appeared to be occupying the same cell in both the past and future? It was impossible.


“What is this?” the original watchman asked the shabby furniture of his cell. It looked like he was on a movie set or staying in an affordably priced hotel room, only the floor was bare concrete and not turfy and carpeted. None of his clothes or belongings were his own: not the socks, not the shoes, not the comb, not the stress ball (earth motif) that had rolled halfway underneath the cot. They were props. Imitations of property, suggestions of personality and choice.

Surrounded by these objects and the displayed arrival of a new watchman, the watchman felt doubly confined. He was a lab rat, disposable, easily replaced.

“Open!” the watchman screamed, assaulting the cell door, pounding on it with his fists, “Open this door!”

Suddenly pressure thrummed inside the pneumatic tube and delivered a canister: a page of customized stationary and a pen. The header of the stationary read SUICIDE NOTE.

The watchman laughed mirthlessly. Were they trying to unnerve him? Was he merely the object of some cruel and elaborate jest? If one of the bee-keeper-suited figures was brave enough to enter his cell while most of his blood was still contained inside his veins, he swore, he would snap the bastard's neck and leave a page of this egregious stationary on the slain man's chest for his fellows to find.

In a fresh burst of defiance, the watchman thought he might write something derisive and inflammatory like, "This is a," then draw an arrow to SUICIDE NOTE. Or maybe he would draw a  Perhaps he would show his doodle to the camera, whoever was watching him. Would such impudence be tolerated? He half-hoped they, whoever they were, might gas him and be done with it.

But when he looked up at Display #3, the watchman saw the new watchman was reading a note. An empty canister in hand.

The original watchman crowded the screen.

Although the words populating the note were too tiny to read on the monitor, the watchman thought the handwriting looked as if it resembled his own, though he couldn't be sure. But who else would have sent the new watchman a note?

When the new watchman finished reading, he scowled at the camera, then scooted a chair over from his desk and positioned it underneath the surveillance equipment and stared, like an astrologer, into the lens as if attempting to see all the way to another dimension.

The original watchman laughed like a loon. He could see up this guy's nostrils! He was elated. Contact!

Frantically, feeling as if he was fulfilling some happy fate, the original watchman composed a quick introduction of himself and his circumstances, scribbling out completely the part in the header of the stationary where it said SUICIDE.

But how to send it? How to transport these words through time and space? He positioned himself underneath the pneumatic tube, through which his meals were transported as if by magic. He inspected the tube's

dark, lengthy passage.

What other way was there?

He creased the note, packaged it in the canister, kissed it, and rammed it up the tube.

Display #3, the new watchman lounged on his cot, gazing philosophically at the ceiling. He rolled out of bed and looked critically at the camera, again. Then, without warning, switched off the light, curtaining himself in darkness.

“Hey, wait.”

Display #1, the new watchman received the note. Again, he read it and reenacted the events which had appeared earlier on Display #3, staring fiercely at the camera.

“I’m right here!” the original watchman cried, knocking on his own monitor’s glass. “I see you!”

The lights shut off on Display #1.

In the morning, after breakfast, the tube delivered to the original watchman’s cell a canister containing another page of SUICIDE NOTE stationary and a pen.

“Good morning to you, too.”

In his second missive to the new watchman, which was written in microscript (for space on the suicide stationary was mockingly limited), the watchman attempted to explicate a theory regarding the conditions of their predicament. Although he worried his letter lacked clarity and failed to convey adequately the misery of their station as watchmen, he sent it hastily, for he was (understandably) eager to make contact.

After reading the letter, the new watchman appeared distraught. He feverishly composed a response and sent it through the tube. But this time, the letter failed to reach its intended recipient.

Ten minutes elapsed. No letter.

The original watchman looked up the tube to see if, perhaps, the canister was jammed.

“It seems we are being thwarted,” the original watchman started writing. “I saw you read my letter and write what I assume must’ve been a reply, but it did not reach me presently. We must assume it was intercepted.

Destroyed. But why? How? Who? I remember nothing of why I was brought here or how I arrived. Do you? I saw you brought to this place by a team of, I assume, men, wearing bee-keeper-like suits. These men were carrying automatic weapons. You were in handcuffs. After explaining to you your duties as watchman, they syringed your neck, and you fell into a brief but nearly enchanted slumber. If, indeed, you cannot recall this memorable event, then your memory, and no doubt my own, has been comp—”

But as the watchman was completing this composition, he was distracted by Display #3, where the new watchman was pictured still awaiting the note’s arrival.

“Ta!” The watchman spat and waved his arms at the monitor. “What’s this all about? Where’s my note? Hey!”

Display #3, the new watchman spun idly in the roly chair and held his hands behind his head, waiting. No letter.

“Are you kidding me!”

The watchman hurled a pen across the room.

He performed fifty pushups and fifty crunches. Then sat on the cot and folded his hands in the prayer formation. He convinced himself that it was unreasonable to believe that his note could not reach the new watchman if he did not, at least, try to send it. The watchman kissed the canister, whispered, “Please,” and sent it through the tube.

Display #3, the new watchman was bouncing a tennis ball off the wall and catching it with his hand.

The original watchman wailed and smashed his fist on the console. He upended the cot, toppled the bureau, attacked the sink. He picked up a tennis ball, whipped it at the wall and it pinged back and drilled him in the groin. He bent over, moaning, clutching himself.

Suddenly, the pneumatic tube whooshed and dispensed a canister: a page of suicide stationary, another pen.

“You think you’re funny?” the watchman hollered into the tube. “You think this is a joke?”

A second canister bearing the same contents was dispensed.

The original watchman kicked the canisters then picked one up and spiked it on the floor.

Finally spent, he slumped against the wall and felt as if he might sob,

but could not. His shoulders heaved. There was a rust colored stain on the toe of his shoe. The watchman removed the shoe and discovered a brighter rust colored stain on his sock. He peeled off the sock and met a bent and bloody big toe.

He winced as if the pain had just arrived.

“Convince me to marry you,” a voice said, strikingly familiar.

The watchman scrambled to his feet.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s a simple question. Do you still love me or not?”

“Callie?”

The cell responded with the sound of a leaky faucet.

Where were these sounds coming from? The watchman spotted a speaker mounted on the wall, above the surveillance camera. He had assumed it was broken and had forgotten it was there.

“Hello?”

A dog woofed at him. Woofed again.

“Are you mad at me?” Callie’s voice said.

The watchman was hunched over and squeezing his knees.

The sound of a woodpecker drilling a hole in a tree, followed by a pencil sharpener, followed by the beep-beep-beep-beep—FOOD IS READY—of a microwave oven.

“Hello!” Callie’s voice said impatiently.

“I’m right here!”

“I’m right here!” the speaker replayed his voice.

The watchman thumped his chest and cried out like a warrior.

Suddenly he heard a rushing sound, almost like a waterfall. At first, the watchman was not sure if the sound was being imported through the speaker or if he was hearing something travelling through the wall. He positioned his ear against the wall and listened closely.

Then a torrent of white paper blizzarded out at him.

The watchman dove and covered himself with his arms. Pages of stationary swooped and swirled, a flock of frenzied doves.

When the onslaught had settled, the watchman was buried in

stationary. Across the cell, the tube discharged another canister.

The watchman walked on his knees and unlocked the canister's contents.

“Hmf.”

A revolver.

The watchman inspected the gun. He sniffed it. It smelled ancient and alive. He disassembled the weapon and inspected the ammunition and powder. There was a bullet. The powder smelled fresh. It occurred to him that he could introduce the weapon to the side of his own head.

What's not an experiment?

His sink had been detached from the wall. Water was misting out of the pipes which looked now like a 3-D crossword puzzle.

Through the speaker, Sinatra was singing “One for My Baby (One More for the Road)”.

Displays #1 and 3, the new watchman was tossing the tennis ball against the wall, again, and catching it with one hand.

He engaged the trigger, and the revolver clicked. Misfired.

The watchman laid on his back and laughed, gazed at the dimples and freckles in the concrete ceiling. He loved them as if there had never been stars. He spread his arms wide over stationary and pretended he was making snow angels. Sinatra was playing on a loop.

It's a quarter to three

There's no one in the place, 'cept you and me

So set 'em up, Joe. I got a little story I think you should know

We're drinking my friends, to the end, of a brief episode.

So make it one for my baby, and one more for the road.

The speaker played the sound of a gun going off and the watchman felt a strange weightlessness lifting him up off the floor.

Flakes of confetti were falling. The watchman shivered.

When he was a boy, he had a magic power. If he closed his eyes, he could move through walls. But his teacher didn't like it. The “sleeping” boy

insulted her. “Is this naptime?” her knuckles fell on his desk. “Mrs. Bitner,” he explained, “this isn’t what it looks like.”

The watchman crawled back into his rolly chair.

Display #3, the original watchman slicing an egg and spilling the yolk against a stack of pancakes. Display # 1, the original watchman was lying on his back.

The watchman pressed the meal button.

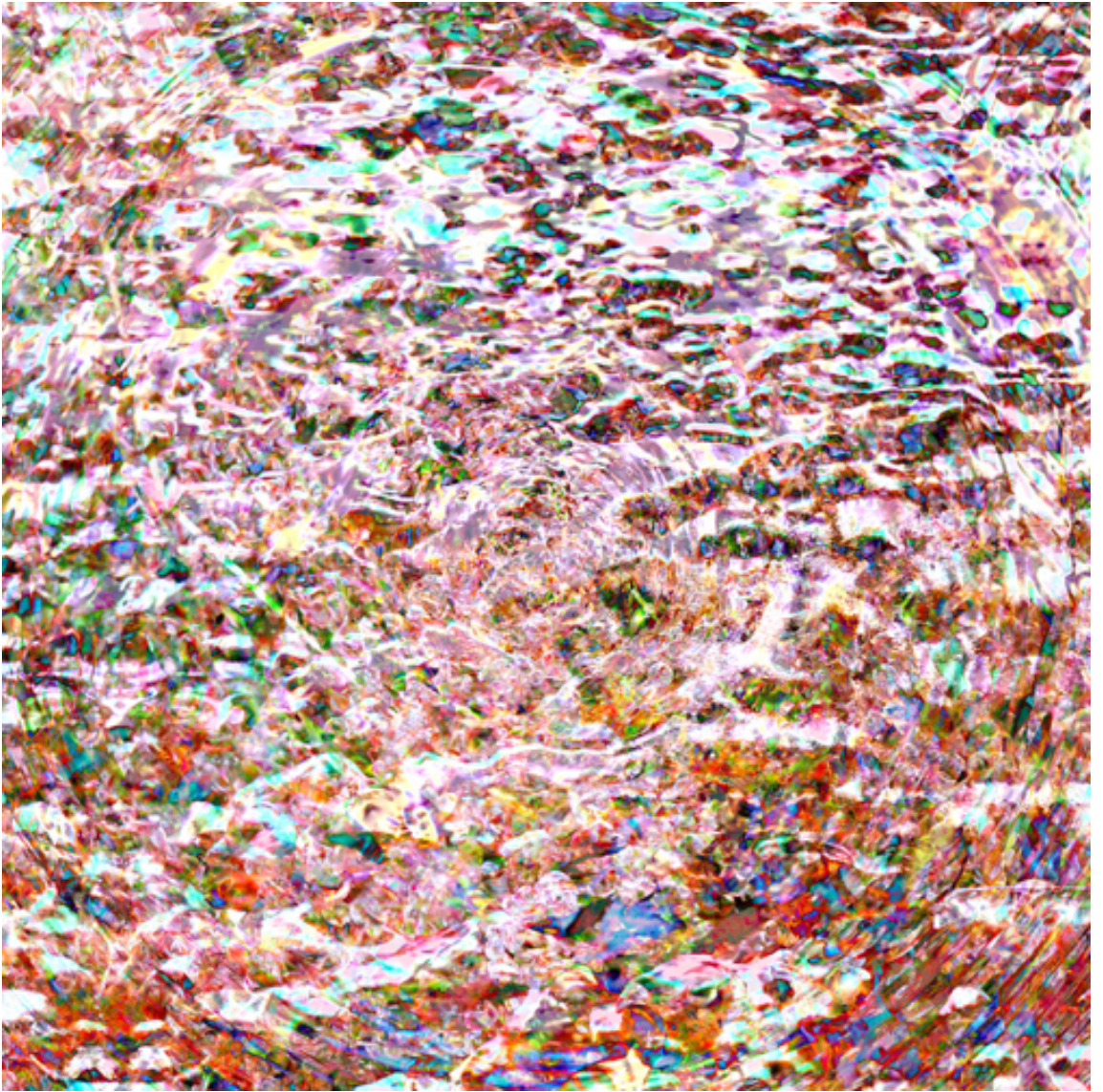
He ate with his eyes closed.



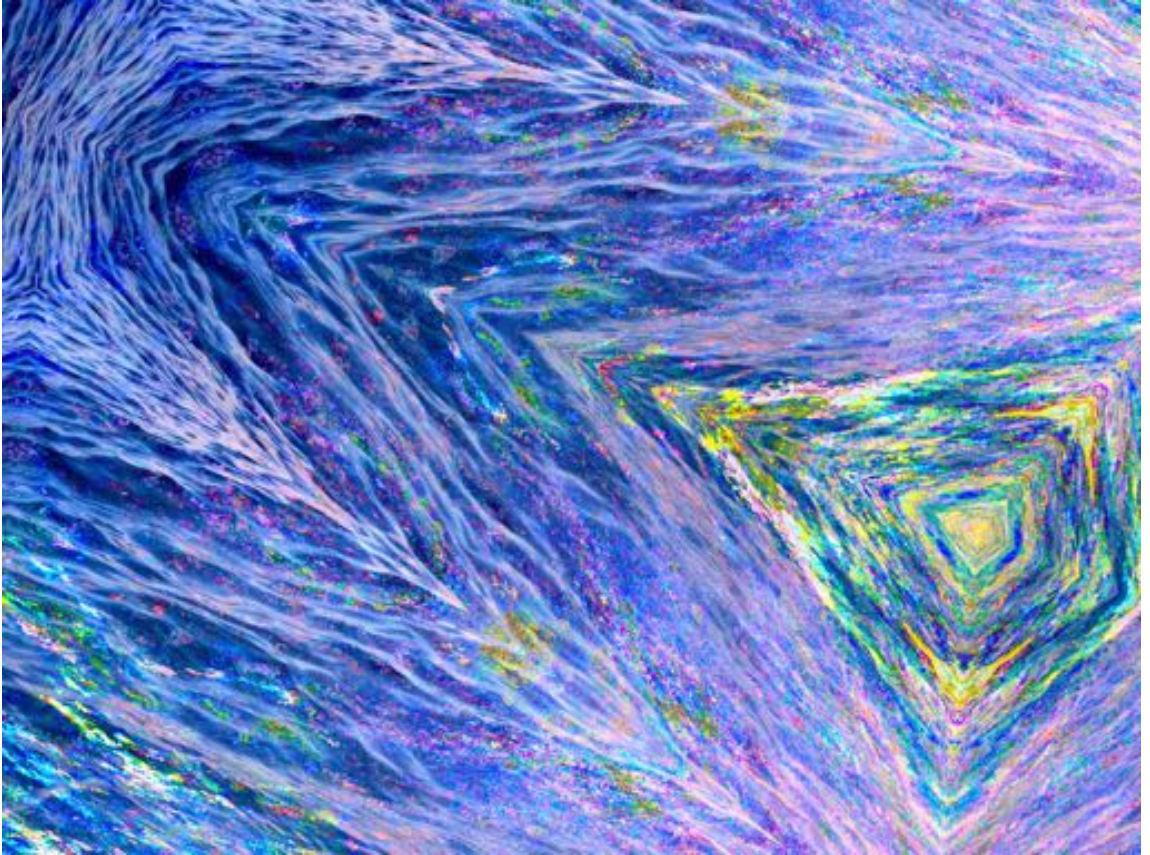
DESIRE

ERROL ASCHWANDEN

DIGITAL/GLITCH



DRIPPY DREAMS
ERROL ASCHWANDEN
DIGITAL/GLITCH



FUKUSHIMA WATERS

ERROL ASCHWANDEN

DIGITAL/GLITCH

PRAYER OF ABASEMENT

lord, i am a thing. i am a thing
that sins & drinks itself

thing-like, does backseat bumps
of cocaine. i am all appetite,

lord, a mouth fumbling
its way into each dark place

it enters, searching for a man
to enter it. lord, i am full

of cum & shame. i am always
offering myself like a fist

or a finger, gagging
on cock, undeserving of

air. i am in love, lord,
with rugburn & lockjaw,

the face shoved roughly
against the carpet. lord,

i am waiting for you. i want
to be made a channel for

your piece, to be tied up

& stripped down & rubbed

into nothing. come, lord.
plant your seed in me, for i am

a swamp, a hollow, a fallow
stretch of land, lord,

i am not worthy to receive you, but
only say the word, &c., &c.—

I AM AN AMPUTATED ARM, HOPING

I buy a book labeled agenda
open it up and find that it does not start
until next year how can I write?
how can I plan? should I make notes?
the future is not and may not be
I fall on my side and my blood gurgles
the snow falls more vigorously
and I feel my other hand
run through your soft hair

REAL QUIET

you would have his kind of magic:
horse tranquilizers cut with glass,
transubstantiation
&—

“Is this your card?”

now disappear. the return is—
are you watching closely?

he will rough you up
will bake bread on the heat of your back.
you run your fingers down your own ribs.
think—greyhound.

It is love or it's—
he will put his hands on you to keep you.
you want a pillow to muffle your
want.
let's call a spade a—

body that didn't ask for this
but is perfectly capable of rationalizing
that guilt is born out of necessity—
the night side of his teeth.



FLAYED BUNNY

JURY S. JUDGE

MIXED MEDIA



SAY WHAT
JURY S. JUDGE
MIXED MEDIA



TOMATO MENACE
JURY S. JUDGE
MIXED MEDIA

IF BEAUTY HAS TO HIDE OR, THINKING OF SHIT

1

not the mind's random flotsam but the flotsam in the bowl

2

because I have been thinking about food and the processes of food its growing and harvesting the preparation thereof

3

and instead of stopping where we usually stop thinking about food, the moment the tongue pushes the bolus into the esophagus to transport the masticated mass down

4

I have been thinking about food post-consumption, the (relatively) slow journey from mouth to anus, the literal shit and too the journey post-anus, this quite miraculous transformation from feces to dirt, and also gratefulness

5

but if we are to cut straight through the crap I must admit my interest in the stuff rests less on the food side of things and more in the gut, the holder, the digester, the processor, and what happens exactly when this energy generator decides to not work with the roboticness we expect of it

6

a phenomenon I am all too familiar with, having spent the better part of a decade constipated to some degree, a trial that began in the suburbs of Tokyo and seems at last to have found resolution between the worn mountain ranges of the Shenandoah, though I confess each and every morning the specter of the body I can't control haunts me

7

control my disease, the origins of this long ordeal wrapped around a sensed loss of agency, a disconnect between language, in whose animating limbs so

much of my physical body finds movement and vocation, and the physical struggle born of finding oneself without language, rendered illiterate and tongueless by the simple facts of an unfamiliar geography and alphabet

8

Tokyo fucked me up, fucked my body up, first day on my own got so lost I knew I'd never find my way back to my apartment, an afternoon steeling myself for a life of jumping train station turnstiles and digging in trashcans behind restaurants and grocery stores, a bum life with the guys wrapped in army surplus jackets cramming the Shinjuku station floors as evening empties into full-on night, ghost people in a culture that cultivates shadows

9

ate junk, didn't know how to feed myself as a young 21-year-old brat just graduated from university, compounded by an inability to read package labels in the grocery store, felt again like a child reading books picture by picture, startled by the wholeness of the fish in the cooler, dumb eyes pressing up against the plastic wrap, scales glistening iridescent mystery, what does one do with a specimen so complete, my family never a fishing family I struggled to master the gutting this modern city now demanded

10

novelist Jun'ichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965), in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*, cites Japanese cuisine as one "to be looked at rather than eaten . . . it is to be meditated upon, a kind of silent music evoked by the combination of lacquerware and the light of a candle flickering in the dark," and while yes the delicate arrangements of fish and seaweed and rice and daikon and ginger and soba and scallion certainly pleased the eye I never encountered any hesitation in myself to consume, no, if anything the beauty only served to whet my appetite

11

one Christmas, my mother-in-law gave me a copy of the *Kama Pootra*, which, if you are unfamiliar, is rendered in a style reminiscent of the *Kama Sutra*, only the poses therein are centered not around the act of sex but rather the act of defecation, the toilet the focal point of each illustration into which bodies variously aim their waste in 52 non-standard methods, including the easy to visualize One-Cheek Lean and the Reverse, as well as couple poses like the Cheerleader and the Wheelbarrow, both of which

require some imagination plus dexterity plus lack of modesty to pull off in true *Pootra* fashion

12

constipation, where the stool remains for too long in the colon and is sucked of water leaving a hard chunk of crap that becomes increasingly difficult for the large intestine to massage itself free of, results from a variety of stresses, diet and immobility included (and most likely the cause of mine, at least initially, before the eventual devolution into an all-out mind-over-matter battle, but that was later, when I was fucked up in different ways from the ways that Tokyo fucked me up); Tokyo stresses included: alcohol, white bread, concrete, people, so many people I often couldn't stretch my legs while walking, I learned to take short choppy steps, to shuffle, to blend, to become resigned

13

a typical work day: wake as late as possible, scorch a few of the way-too-thick slices of white bread that were the norm on the archipelago for breakfast, bike to school past hordes of shuffling adolescents, sit at my desk in the communal teachers' room, the desks pushed together, books and file folders piled atop each other, the fine balance between organization and utter disaster managed by bookend placement, I sat next to the English teachers who, when it came time for class, would call me to follow and I would follow and stand at the front of the room and when called upon to demonstrate the tongue positioning necessary to properly pronounce *there* would do so, or would engage with the teacher in some casual pre-scripted

14

conversation while the kids stared at us with the normal blank expressions of students everywhere, for lunch I brought my own, usually some leftover *yakisoba* or rice mashed with *miso* paste or something only slightly less disgusting than the lunches served by the school which all the teachers ate and pretended to love, after school I biked home, took a nap, stared at the never-ending strangeness of the television a while, biked to the video store to rent a movie, usually some classic Bogart or Hepburn flick, stopped by the market for some dinner ingredients, though often ended up buying more in the way of snacks, the crunchy peanut things, the puffy rice crackers, at home ate rice for dinner maybe with some of the *unagi* I'd grown fond of, drank whiskey, fell asleep while movie flickered

15

if you thought it different for a mother-in-law to give her daughter's husband a book about poop based on a book about sex, yes, I totally agree with you, and though I know it was given in good fun, though I know she couldn't have been aware that at the time I was in an on/off phase of being backed up, some days no problem, others no way no how, and though a gag gift, still, she might have anticipated the what seems natural discomfort of the couple receiving the book, the thrall stirred by the overtones of the *Kama Sutra* (already not a place you really want to go with your in-laws) underscored by the messy fetish of defecation sex, which, while fine and all, still isn't quite the vibe you shoot for at a family Christmas gift exchange (though everyone was eager enough to take a look at the book, I noticed)

16

the first time I failed to defecate for four straight days I found myself outside the train station when the need to relieve myself struck, need in the most immediate, unignorable way imaginable, like if I didn't find a toilet in a matter of seconds I might shit myself so badly that utter and total public humiliation would be the understatement of the year, my contribution to the already frail Japanese impression of *gaigin* would be to get myself listed as entry #1 in the Big Book of Disgusting Acts that was kept actively updated by the folks at City Hall, my apartment a mere five minutes by bike but no way was I going to make it that long, I have no memory of how I got there but I found myself bent on a toilet in a stark white public restroom that resembled a hallway in length, rectum in near convulsions as it ejected four days' worth of waste product in bursts alternating short and long, cramped and loose

17

I had no idea one could shit in such a sustained manner, I got so engrossed in the act (which, I must admit, may be one of the most purely *pleasurable* acts of the body I have ever experienced, despite the distinct sense of shame accompanying the feral stink of it, the sound of it, it taking place thankfully in a bathroom but still a public bathroom in a busy section of town, lots of foot traffic, lots of piss and shit traffic, I am quite sure some curses were uttered at me that I am grateful my lack of language kept me from understanding) that I forgot to courtesy flush, so when finished I was forced to confront the totality of the mass in the bowl, it was huge, no way the toilet would be able to handle such a mountain, a small anxiety tsunami washed over me, already I felt like I'd run a sprint, a bit weak in the legs and

light in the head, dealing with a toilet overflow wasn't something I could handle right then, but a well-placed kick to the toilet handle whirlpooled it away

18

the toilet a marvelous thing, we should every day give thanks to our toilets for relieving us of the obligation of having to deal with our feces (though such distance from the hard facts of the body could be said to play a large role in our systematic destruction both of human and environmental health), it is a gratefulness the Japanese display by elevating the toilet to an art form, outfitting them with proximity sensors that raise and lower the seat as you near the bowl, with tornado flushes to minimize the amount of fecal matter that sticks to the bowl post-flush, noise machines to mask the sound of piss splashing porcelain, the infamous retractable bidets that, for all you lovers of paper, should be noted as responsible for the phrase "once you go wet you'll never go back," the high-end models that include scales built into the bathroom floor, blood sugar and blood pressure monitoring, access via the web to your doctor, urine analysis, and of course the cheerful female robot voice that welcomes you when you drop pants and sit

19

popular perception paints these toilets as ubiquitous in Japan but I can assure they are not, my own toilet was a standard no-frills model, apart from the spigot sprouting from the upper lid that fountained as the bowl refilled after flushing so that hands could be washed using the same water that filled the tank and would whisk away the next flush, a brilliantly simple modification that seems destined to never catch on in the West, still I did love my toilet, closeted off from the rest of the bathroom as it was, despite the fact that I lived alone I always closed the door so that to shit was to remove myself from the world, and as my constipation grew worse I found myself removing myself from the world for ever longer periods of time, the seconds and minutes and hours accumulating in a mimic of the accumulation of matter in my gut, constipation ever a matter of accumulation, it is the catharsis of the form, to build and build out and beyond the equilibrium expected of the body's boundaries until either the form collapses from the distress or reintroduces balance into the system

20

instead of the usual Japanese fashion magazines I spent my toilet time

flipping through, as my constipation grew worse I took to hauling novels into my shit closet, I read huge amounts with my pants around my ankles, *Anna Karenina*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (plus the rest of Murakami's catalogue), lots of Japanese authors in translation, Ryu Murakami, Soseki, Kawabata, Banana Yamamoto, then whatever junk the other foreign English teachers had laying around, thrillers and even the occasional romance, or when tired of reading would sit Rodin-style and think up lines of poetry, it felt like kinship then when years later reading Tanizaki he mulls on how the traditional Japanese toilet, composed generally of dark wood so as to avoid the unfortunate matter of "the cleanliness of what can be seen only call[ing] up the more clearly thoughts of what cannot be seen," which he decries as commonplace in the cold white of the Western commode, whereas "Here, I suspect, is where haiku poets [...] have come by a great many of their ideas" gazing at the dingy grain of a wood thoroughly worn

21

at this peak of acute accrual (the beginning the worst) I found myself having sex, first through the fall with J, an artist who on the back of a small painting of silver trees wrote a line about the "ponk of fruit," or was it about the memories of caves, of sex in caves, memory misserves, if I wasn't so lazy I'd go dig out the piece (of course I kept it) and check, J liked to click her tongue stud on her teeth which annoyed me some but the fact she had a tongue stud I thought very cool and very hot, she was on a study abroad term so at semester's end she left Japan and I drank dram after dram of Suntory whiskey until I met Iku and we began having sex despite the fact we spoke more in gestures than words, her English worse than my Japanese, but in the absence of language there seemed to evolve between us a pureness of expression, such intent attention was paid to every glance and pout (there were many pouts) and subtle angle of body that whim / desire / dislike were ably discerned, we spoke language stripped naked, a clouded nakedness, like when I thought we were going to eat *yakiniku* and instead she took me to a love hotel and showed me what one does in such a place

20

appetite unfettered, how automatically we are swayed by the call of appetite, how such portions of our lives are concerned with the culling of appetite, the willful disregard of what calls the body forward, and perhaps it is here in this refusal of the body's urge, in this moral chiding, that the body itself stages protest, falls out of health, and processes once thought unassailable

get stuck as the unconscious asserts its fallibility, I didn't let my constipation stop me from answering the call of my appetites, it seemed rather a minor miracle they were being met at all, as it often does when another body meets your body upon the blank page of mutual need, when flesh in abundance is everyday given and received, and when of a certain age it seems your birth right to partake of such pleasures in excess, to ignore the body's distress signals in pursuit of a hedonistic purity felt less choice and more mad necessity, the stern call and response of propagation, the dinner bell of survival, and though neither hung in the balance, still, in their direction the body went, toward comfort, toward the carnal, toward the unavoidable mechanics of nerve

19

they must have thought me strange, these women, a man who never shits, though perhaps this lack of waste generation went unnoticed, for what person charts the bowel movements of their new lover, or, rather, what person doesn't, when so hyper-aware of all motion breath sneezes coughs farts words tears laughter when all of everything that person does is new and brilliant and forgiveness is easy but fragile, handled too roughly it shards all over your fingers, bloodied hands met with a shrug and dismissal, deal with it, certainly I balked at the very thought of telling them, it seemed too gross, too intimate, too dysfunctional, to admit the dysfunction of the body they had done very intimate things with and to, I remember standing outside Iku's tiny house (a family property, rare in Tokyo for a single woman of modest means to own her own house with land at such a premium) watching her tiny terrier take a tiny shit feeling utterly and overwhelmingly jealous at the ease with which the action happened, a quick squat and disinterested push and voila

18

writing about the Japanese Modernist poet Sagawa Chika, critic Adrienne Raphel relates what translator Sawako Nakayasu considers an elemental aspect of her work: "Her poetry, Nakayasu told me, is 'almost asexual. She doesn't do what almost every other female poet was doing, which is to talk about the female lived experience in the context of the writing.' Partly, Nakayasu said, that's because Sagawa's 'relationship to her own body is so torturous. Death is always looming in her work. Her physical existence in the world is precarious,'" a weight felt more acutely considering Sagawa's death from cancer of the stomach at age twenty-five, and death too began to lisp through the mouth of my thoughts as the constipation dragged on,

was I truly sick, was it a tumor, was there blood hidden in the depths of my stool, death's specter serving only to push me deeper into serving my cravings, I broke with the constraints my form was attempting to impose, toyed with free verse where *waka* was wanted

17

I began the disgusting practice of breaking apart my feces with my hands to check for buried blood, gross fails to enter the equation when fear overwhelms the algebra, the act of reaching into the bowl and down into the cold water and gently dismantling the cylindrical ordure that often segmented neatly with little effort on my part, the strata of accrual made visible, a ritual that became an odd comfort, a pattern of revulsion and relief, of excuse and exoneration, of gag and reflex, of sad and past midnight, of sex and exhaustion, of hunger and glut, of lonesome and distant, of fate and free will, of self and the revision of self, of city and its human obstruction clogging train and sidewalk, theatre and restaurant, my own blockage maybe an infliction of space and its lack after a childhood spent roaming the wide rolling farm fields of rural New York, and after that college in the flattest Midwest, visible stripes of wind down gridded streets and a sky without edges

16

the degree to which we are beholden to our autonomous nervous system is, fully considered, breathtaking, breath being one of those many central functions controlled by the parasympathetic nerves, which function without our given consent, these placeholders of our existence calmly executing complex actions again and again so that we can be free to live, be free of ourselves, truly, unencumbered by the myriad details of managing such processes as, say, digesting one's dinner, how many dozens of tiny triggers are triggered to set in motion how many perfectly coordinated and realized dances to get one single bite of kale salad through the gastro-intestinal tract, the body strange and marvelous and mysterious enough that god as need for explanation is understood, for how, how, how did we become, why are we so confusing and complex, because, really, couldn't we have been made simpler

15

again a question of form and its components, of form as failure, I've always wondered why we can't access our insides, I suppose us humans with our need to tinker and fuss might do more harm than good, and I feel here, too,

I am conflating my need to explore my own consciousness with a supposed desire to see *inside*, literally, when that desire stems solely from a mechanical Mr. Fix-it impulse, pop the hood of the car and crank a few levers, except I am a terrible mechanic and so being trusted with any manual adjustments to my vascular and pulmonary and gastric systems sounds like a nightmare, the instruction manual an encyclopedia, volumes A-Z, the index alone would require a master class in terminology and miscellany, I get sweaty just thinking about it: form's failure relative to function, a matter of waste expulsion v. energy derived

14

I am back to magazines for my toilet reading, often back issues of the *New Yorker* passed along from friends, one of which included the piece on Sagawa Chika, whose death by digestive system failure rings in me a bell of hollow mourning, her age my age when I found myself grunting in discomfort wondering if my intestines might explode before my sphincters again loosened their grip, caught in the gross beauty of defecation's absence, a thrall state, a meditation, *evening sets on some promiseless day*, bodily dissolution, Sagawa so young and her body such a pure disappointment, rejecting the gastronomic pleasures of the world, rejecting the world, who stood up alone and felt the universe flay her skin, strip by strip, until she rose, exposed, a single raw nerve gasping at the sensation of

13

often, while sitting on the toilet in my apartment in Japan, I wondered why Western bathrooms weren't segmented similarly, a division of three, the central room with sink and mirror, the toilet room, and the shower/bath room, an exemplar of efficiency, division of labor, three persons at once able to cleanse, empty, primp, and while of course it's a matter of maximizing available square meters, our overabundance of space in this Western hemisphere directs our movement, not toward division, but toward expansion, rather than seek the infinite within the endless internal, we look for it in notions of size and outwardness, solutions gravitate toward multiplicities, so rather than one bathroom with three rooms, we answer with three bathrooms

12

Tanizaki, speaking of beauty's relation to shadow: "There may be some who argue that if beauty has to hide its weak points in the dark it is not beauty

at all,” he declares, and goes on to add: “The unseen for us does not exist,” but on this idea I get stuck, for what of the felt entity, the object lodged within that remains in the shade of the interior yet without doubt exists, the pregnant woman comes to mind but even she doesn’t quite fit, the life within her growing, the woman’s belly growing can be seen to grow, plainly there is a within exerting itself upon its without, emotions may be the better comparison, shadow selves who seem to live separate lives distinctly linked to our physical realities

11

such is the duality of the constipated body, rent with both physical and emotional barbs unseen yet present, such dark compliments to the charade of fineness projected out into the brightness, it is estimated that any stool remaining in the body longer than 18-24 hours begins to leach toxins into the bloodstream, these toxins, I wonder, do they blight mood, performance, personality, I wonder if my blockage was responsible for the failure of my relationships with J and Iku, for it felt the responsibility was mine, or I was made to feel that it was so, though in reflection I see little of myself in that mirroring movement apart, shadows

10

of concern cloak me, did I even care, did my absorption in and into myself shutter me from their needs, or was it like most breakups a simple matter of time and place, luck and easing into fragility without shattering, it is true I still struggle with constipation of the heart, the offer of self unfettered by fear or judgment, I struggle with speaking my self, with getting the language off the tongue, that most phonetically elemental aspect of intimacy, it is true my father was not a man who shared his emotions openly but I do not blame him, the work is mine, the blockage mine

9

to unblock, unlock, unpack, in the Narita airport leaving Japan for the final time, my luggage too heavy to check through, so in the middle of the concourse I unzipped my bags and laid bare my belongings for the denizens of the Eastern world to view, repacked into a flimsy duffel the woman behind the check-in counter tossed my way while a girl and boy in matching Pokémon outfits gawked at me parsing my personals, I winked at them but their faces didn’t flinch and I felt run through me a bolt of fear

8

at the end of his essay Tanizaki intones a hope that in a world losing its shadows at least in the “mansion called literature I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark [...] would strip away the useless decoration,” a sentiment which harkens to the sparseness of Sagawa Chika’s diary prose in her final weeks of life, eeking out sentences like: “It’s a nice day. Just that simple fact makes me tear up in one eye,” or the horrific “There is nothing as painful as

7

trying to eat breakfast,” how fitting that Tanizaki and Sagawa were contemporaries, her short life nested into his long, the many breakfasts he enjoyed lanced by the pain of her too few, food pushed aside from the agony of the attempt, the exhausting frustration of desire thwarted, my favorite breakfast in Japan came on the heels of a dark night spent hiking up Mt. Fuji with insatiable Irene, a climb

6

into rain and elevation’s cold cloaked in the sheer inability to see where or how far we were from anything, the dark so utter, as if uttered from the caved-in gut of the volcano, a shadow glutton, the dead heat that rose through our boots from the lava rock, we climbed into night with a trust that bore open caves of warm air within us, we climbed into

5

sunrise, from Fuji’s peak its iron red severing an umbilical cord of cloud chaining us to the flatland below, and after sitting on rock watching in numb awe we went and paid the vendor far too much for a bowl of instant *udon*, the hot smack of those thick noodles on my lips, the brown broth

4

dribbling down my chin, to my mouth it was the finest bowl of noodles ever made, an offering in the vein of Nietzsche when he said, “what is good is light; whatever is divine moves on tender feet,” the moment of hunger so pure

3

there was no room left to move inside the gratefulness of eating, sense
wonder so unlike the constipated palls that we must too love as they make
way for the light

2

that licked the last puddles of soup at the bottom of my plastic bowl, I
closed my eyes lifted the bowl to my lips

1

and in the unbroken shadow of my emptiness, drank

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