

Bag of Flesh: MFA Thesis

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Abstract

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Bag of Flesh is a collection of short stories and poems centered on dysfunctional personalities. Using a range of voices, the book explores issues of identity and selfhood in restrictive societies. By employing tropes and images from popular culture, the narratives dip in and out of surrealism, unsettling the reader and leading them to question the prearranged notions of femininity and success that they bring to the text.

bag of flesh
MFA THESIS

stories by ellen donnelly

delirium can get so referential-

—Chris Kraus

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Deed Thief

“Hello?” she said.

“Hello?” I said, “is this the finance lawyer?”

“Oh,” she said, “yeah that’s me, how can I help you?”

“I’m having trouble with my mortgage,” I said, “the bank wants to foreclose.”

“Oh I’m very sorry to hear that, let me see if we can start assisting you today. Can I have your name?”

“Febbe Freudenshaud” I said.

“Hi Mx. Freudenshaud, my name’s Shalicia. I’m just going to ask you for some information to make sure I can help you. How many months are your payments past due?”

I told her my story. I told her how I really started to get into trouble with the bank when I missed that first payment, the one after the big down payment that I made in cash. I know I signed all the paperwork, but I’ve never taken contracts seriously. I’m the kind of person that thinks that age is just a number and the same goes for a credit score. My identity, in that regard, is like wet bread to me.

I plunked down the change to move in, painted a mural in the kitchen, and didn’t think that much more of it. I went to work, lined my shoes up by the doorway, bought a 12 pack of toilet-paper. It was where I lived.

Shalicia said she could help. “I understand that a lot of people in your position are really dealing with a crisis in their lives,” she said, “and I want you to know that I’m going to help you get your money back and save your house. You can trust me,” she said, and then she said “hang on one sec.” I heard her press her phone to her chest and shout

“MAWM, I AM ON THE PHONE-UH!” down the stairs. I looked at my watch, it was just about dinner time.

“You think you can help me?” I asked. She was sweet. I imagined her wearing chipped green nail polish. I imagined her room to be covered in dirty laundry and for her to have a pet hamster that she only occasionally cared for with close attention. But she was smart, I could sense that. At least she knew how to build websites that showed up when you googled “help with foreclosure.”

**I do not do foreclosure bailout loans, I refinance your house so you don't have to.
Dream big and keep living where you are, when you are. It won't be that big a deal.**



“The first thing we need to do is start a file with all your info, OK? I’m going to put that into the computer,” she said.

Then she asked me everything about myself, more than anyone has ever cared to ask. She started with the kinds of questions that are on the forms for loyalty clubs at the grocery store: name, DOB, address. Then she asked the same things the bank asked when I got the loan in the first place. Then she went into things you’d tell to the doctor when you’re getting tested for STD’s. Then she asked things you say in your first meeting with a psychotherapist. I really needed to get going, so I walked down the street towards the bakery to get scones while we talked. I was just explaining to her about how my parents had never married and my father had children with another woman and one of them was really cruel to me when we were kids but then he’d found God and called me to apologize one Sunday afternoon about the way he’d acted when he was young, and I said I really didn’t resent him, and then I told the cashier “Oh and throw in some of those donuts, please.”

“How is your relationship to food?” asked Shalicia. I said that it wasn’t great but I’d stopped beating myself about eating carbs a while back.

I was so grateful for her help that I didn’t even feel weird about telling her how many bowel movements I typically have in a day. “One if I’m lucky,” I said.

“OK said Shalicia I think I have about all I need for right now. I’m going to put this information together and send you over some forms later tonight. I think this will be a pretty easy case. We’re going to save your house Mx. Freudenshaud.”

I stood on the corner of Tubby and Tubby and watched a man in a cherry picker fastening an oversized Christmas wreath to the side of a building. “Thank you Shalicia,” I said. “Thank you so much for your help.”

Walking to Ariel's house I had a contented smile on my face, like a hard shell of worry had been peeled back and there was my succulent fruit bursting up underneath it. It was just that easy I thought. One minute I could be scared that I'd done everything wrong in my whole life, and the next I could be floating through the streets like a helium balloon.

All through our discussion of *Debt* by David Graeber my mind would slip back to my conversation with Shalicia. She hadn't responded with any judgement when I told her about my sexual history, how my bouts of promiscuous behavior had come fast and loose since the age of 15, or how my need for validation by strangers had caused a number of embarrassing incidents. I thought that maybe she was so understanding because she'd grown up on the Internet. She knew more about how life works than I did at that age. She seemed to know that it was always more complicated than it sounded.

As the second round of wine was being served, Jarnica said, "what do you think Febbe? You've been so quiet tonight." I took a sip of my wine.

"I think," I said, "I think that people are inherently good. People in general want to help other people."

"Oh" said Jarnica, "so like, our finance economy stems from this tendency towards communal free exchange that we have?"

"Yes," I said. Jarnica thought that that was a very interesting take on the book.

The next afternoon I received an official document in the mail. *Dear Mx. Freudensheud*, it read, *this notice is to inform you that your claim to quit the warranty of your house has been received and that the deed for 1808 E Prospect St Seattle WA 98112 will hereby and henceforth be found under the ownership of one Mx. Preciosa Maxwell.* I had to put my glasses on to make sure that I was reading this right. I didn't

remember signing any claims, just the forms that Shalicia had sent over. And I didn't know any Preciosa Maxwell, I didn't think. But I was running late to meet friends for happy hour, so I slipped the letter into my purse and nearly forgot about it. The whole way home from drinks with Rapley, Bontia, Swen, and Selly I was worried that I would be arrested for drunk driving and reckless endangerment.

As I pulled into the parking spot in front of my house, I saw a dark figure standing on my doorstep. For weeks I had been saying to myself that I should get a pepper spray or taser for self-defense, and now, as I imagined my feet tied together and hung from the ceiling of my new house, I wished I could do the things I said I was going to do, for once in my life. I dialled nine and one on my phone like I'd seen the women do in movies. I got out and slammed my car door. From the street side of the car I shouted CAN I HELP YOU? hoping that maybe one of the neighbors would hear me and would run out in their slippers.

"Hi there," the intruder said. "Are you Febbe Freudenshaud?" He walked down the steps, looking at his feet.

"Yes," I said.

"Mx. Freudenshaud, I'm here to tell you that you have one week to move out of your house."

"What?" I said, putting my elbows up on the roof of the car. "Did the bank go through with it?"

"No no, I'm representing Preciosa Maxwell, the new owner of the house? She wants you out within the week."

"Fuck," I said, and used some more expletives that I'm not proud of. I stalked back and forth in the street, my hands shaking with anger.

We buy capital through coercion, manipulation, and targeting of the weak and frail. We turn GOOD money BAD and vice versa. Why settle for something in finance when you could be ltd?



Before, when I had imagined Shalicia, she struggled with her body image and was socially awkward when she was not engaged in a meaningful task. Now, she was proportioned perfectly and was so precocious that adults often mistook her for a college freshman. I felt rage and violent thoughts towards her, and I was disappointed that I had lost one more friend out there in the virtual world. Of all the things that were turning through my head the most final was this: Oprah had just *done* a special on victims of online predators, they wouldn't be interested in my story for at least another season.

"Do you work for Shalicia?" I asked the man in leather who was standing on my front walk jiggling his keys in his hand.

"I know Shalicia."

"Don't you think you should be a better role model for her?" I took the stance of a high school principal in a hard knocks district.

"Man, Shalicia has her own thing going. We've met like twice."

"Still, how could you let a young girl like that fall into such untoward behavior. It's reprehensible." The man looked at me like I was an old woman counting pennies at the cash register, unable to keep the total amount in my mind long enough to get there. I went back over to my car, opened the passenger door, and pulled a Diet Coke out of the cup holder. "Don't you think you have some responsibility," I said, untwisting the cap, "to our youths?" I maintained eye contact as I took my first sweet swig.

"Shalicia is her own person," the man said.

"Oh is she?" I retorted.

Being Watched

I found out a few months ago that my webcam was active and linked to a live streaming site called studiokafe.com. Someone had broken into my house and installed secret hidden cameras in all the private spaces of my home, so that when I moved from one room to the next, motion sensors would click a new lens into activity and broadcast me at all hours of the day. My bathroom: bugged. My bedroom: bugged. I don't know how I missed the camera taped to the fan pull in my kitchen, hanging above my head like a satellite with a bird's eye view of my eating habits, but it took me weeks to see it. Oddly, I didn't find any of those little mysterious eyes in my living room, where I relax.

The violation was sort of in keeping with the way I've always felt when I am home alone, like one of the last remaining Giant Pandas, who the world is anxious to see mate. When I found the lens tucked into the air conditioning vent in my bathroom, I didn't immediately recoil. I had actually been thinking about putting together a Get Ready With Me video, though at the time I didn't think my daily makeup routine could garner an audience of 1,117, as it usually does now.

I *don't* feel like something precious has been taken from me, as you might imagine. I always wanted to be the star of my own TV show, silently exhibiting my tupperware collection (stored with the lids on), showing my audience how I prefer to put my bra and Tshirt on before my bottoms, like Donald Duck. The cameras, really, are a logical extension of the way I think about myself, finally, some expressive channel for the thoughts I never could put words to.

Aack

I've asked Cathy out to coffee because I'm writing a book about Diets, and I've noticed that she's recently lost 14 pounds but doesn't look any better. Her face I mean—her eyes still pinch together in worry, as if to squeeze the correct way to live from between her eyebrows.

"My doctor says my cholesterol has gone down" she brags, and takes a sip of her coffee. As she pulls a bunch of celery from her purse, leaves on, she tells me that she's been on The Diet for 3 months, that she is getting through it by sheer domination of will. She bites into a stalk of celery and tears a chunk away indelicately, crunching on the fibrous threads in a way that bears little resemblance to eating. She offers me a stick and I accept. My new food mentality is to put food out of my mind.

"So the diet is...you can't enjoy any food?" I ask, my pen poised on the blank sheet of my notebook.

"Right. I'm trying to undo all of society's conditioning that food should taste good."

"And you've lost weight?"

"Every time I eat a salt free Wassa cracker with low-fat, no-garlic hummus, I lose something." She breathes loudly through her nose, chewing on a glob of celery cud with her mouth open. I have known Cathy a long time, she and my mother sort of grew up together. Her brand of benign hopelessness was a big part of our household when I was young.

"How much do you want to lose?" I ask carefully.

"I'm going on a cruise in March. I want to be Kate Moss by then." She turns her head towards the window, gazing wistfully out. The lines under her eyes have doubled

and tripled. She starts to drift off, her chin dipping towards the applique heart on her purple sweatshirt.

“Cathy, are you OK?” I ask.

“Wake me up when I’m a size five” she says, and sets her forehead against the window.

I clear my throat. “So you’ll enjoy yourself on the cruise? You’ll eat the buffet?” She jumps awake and turns towards me. The pupils of her eyes move in to touch each other. Little drops of exasperated sweat leap from her head. “ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!?” she croaks. “One bagel with cream cheese and I’ll bloat up like Shamu! All my hard work for nothing!”

“So after the cruise then?”

“Well, no, after the cruise I’m going to a destination wedding.”

“Oh? Who’s?”

“Mine. I’m hoping to meet the man of my dreams on the cruise.” With a dreamy smile Cathy clutches her hands together under her chin. Her naked egg eyes suddenly grow lashes as vaporous hearts rise and float around her in a corona of misguided lust. She can’t control herself, the thought of Mr. Right sends her right back to 1989.

“And what if you don’t find him?” I ask.

“Well, then, I’ll find a pan of brownies that loves me.”

When I was a kid, I didn’t know that love was so hard; I thought Cathy’s perennial failure was just a side effect of her desperation, a cruel catch 22. Then I turned 30.

“Cathy, you seem tired, are you sure you’re alright?” The doom of cloud cover begins to thin outside, and the sun lights up Cathy’s face through the window. It is pale

and crinkled and hollow. Cathy is old now, and she has spent her whole life yearning. She has spent her whole life believing that she could become a myth if she could just gain some control and change herself.

“I’m fine,” she whispers. “I just need to eat a little protein.”

Being's Believing

My patient said to me “Look at my face, doctor! Look at it! Does this look like the face of a principal?!”

I hesitated. “No,” I said. “No it doesn’t. It looks like the face of a ghost.”

Her mouth was quivering and there may have been tears in her eyes, but who could know? I had sewn them mostly shut, just two black pearls floating sadly in her orbital sockets. Her voice was soft and innocent, pouring eerily out of her cadaverous face.

“I can’t go to auditions like this,” she wept. “I can’t emote with this brow!”

I warned her to be careful with her stitches. I said that Sometimes change makes us afraid to see truth, that her *new* face would be *her* face in no time. Wait until the swelling goes down. Drink some tea.

I turned toward the window while she dressed. In the time that it took me to jot down the line items for her invoice, she had come to radically accept her newness. She had found some value in the feeling that she might be able to strike something strange into people. Before I knew it she was down on the street. I could see her crawling into a yellow cab and heading toward the studio on Lexington & 85th, having thrown her yoga pants on under her paper gown, her dance bag on her shoulder.

I canceled my appointments for the rest of the day. “Tell them I have a family emergency,” I barked at my receptionist.

In a hallway crowded with limbering bodies, with 180 degree standing splits and side bends and hovering spider walks, she peered through the observation window of the sprung-floor studio with the to-die-for natural light and it called to her like a creatureless lake on a hot summer’s day. She wanted to strip down and dive in. She

wanted to float weightlessly in all directions, plunge into the melody around her and release her sense of Up for an eight count, and then come bounding toward the light again, breathless, gasping for air on the surface. Dancing in her living room was no longer enough, she wanted to hear the gravel of the director's voice as she barked out the tempo and turn and kick and ball change Pah. She wanted to stand blind in a spotlight, drawing out and eliminating the last bit of weakness from her center body pillar, laying it all down for the hungry eyes of her audience to lap up. I could tell.

With her limited peripheral vision, my patient didn't notice me, not until I stepped up beside her and placed my hands atop hers, hoping that she would remember that they were warm and soft, expert, sought after, that they had done precisely what she had asked them to do; she had wanted to be unique and unforgettable. Looking at the twee bodies topped with well-boned and tight-skinned faces that lined the hallway, I knew that I had done good. If not good, then genius.

At one end of the audition studio was a plastic folding table with a banker's lamp and a vase of white lilies. Three judges sat with their Styrofoam cups of coffee, chatting and reviewing resumes while they waited for the first auditionee to be let in. One of the judges' faces was obscured by the flowers, only his tweed jacket and his hands illuminated by the glow of the lamp.

My patient didn't know when her turn would be. She put on her sweat clothes. She stretched her hip flexors. She wiped drool from her chin, still coming down from the heavy sedatives I had given her. She ignored the moment of heartbreak that flashed across the other dancers' faces when they looked at her, her empty eyes flirting with their deepest and darkest sadnesses.

Together we watched the first dancer. She moved like water, not a lump or a joint out of line. We both stiffened as she turned her head again to spot in her triple pirouette. She was a textbook bunhead who'd let her hair down to appear more free. When I was a boy, I loved the ballet. I thought the dancers so beautiful, their limbs had such weightless elegance. Effortless. Alien. I wanted my mother to be one so badly! But she was fat, she labored with every movement. I hated her.

The second dancer danced just as well, a full inversion dropping her into a controlled tuck-roll that sprang up into another inversion like a men's gymnast finalist on the uneven bars. Her feet pointed in a masterly way, as if they knew everything about dancing but weren't out to make a show of it. When she did a lateral leap, one leg en passe, the other spinning on her axis and providing her power, it seemed like she would never come down again. She was born with it. The sight of her talent made my patient's low gut tumble with nerviness.

The third dancer was just a speck of a thing, and somehow that made every movement appear larger and penetrating, a child claiming her womanhood each time her head rolled on her shoulders sensually, every unexpected degage a kick into growth. Her floor acrobatics evoked something between a freak show contortionist and a practitioner of kama sutra. On and on the dancers all moved along the same spectrum of flawlessness, inflecting their perfection with the glimmer of personality required for Art.

Because she had registered so late, my patient was among the last to be called. When it was finally her turn, she tightened the laces on her jazz shoes, adjusted her legwarmers, and made sure that the rise on her hi-cut leotard was in place, not showing too much. She gave her shell-like curly hair one last fluff, slung her black leather bag over her shoulder and stepped into the studio. Immediately the judges took

notice—she had a dancer’s form and posture, like the countless hopefuls that had come before her, but something was different. Her face was featureless, it was melting, shifting, hard to pin down. If the judges weren’t as jaded as they were, they would have been horrified, but with a job like this, you get harder to shock.

My fearless patient walked across the floor in full possession of her body. She pulled a vinyl record out of her purse and shakingly applied the needle to it. Late nights she had found herself twirling, pushing her spine in new awkward motions, recommending herself to be graceful and daring. She had been working on this piece beyond all reason, embarrassingly in love with the feeling of one hand being lifted with the first chord and then falling into a chanet around the back with the next. She found strength in her navel and this gave her peace.

She was hitting her choreo perfectly, and it was her own gritty blend of precision and power and threat. She had danced it so many times, but today it lit a new light in her, it burned truer. I had ruined her face but I hadn’t removed it, and it still hung there like a fist bursting through every note, moving with the agony of each eight-count. She was thirty-four. This was the first time that the expression on her face seemed to come from the same well of memory that moved her body through the world in its haunting way. Finally, it was the face of the troubled life that she had been living, a face that called to her heartache like a psychic calls to the dead.

She had come to me fed-up, in need of something to tip the scales after all of these years of dancing with no one to watch it. She wanted cheek implants, maybe some rhinoplasty. I suggested freestyle, and she hesitantly obliged. I knew watching her through the observation window—the sun starting its descent toward night, the

obscured judge's hands clasped together passionately—I knew I had given her a wonderful gift.

The audition was going well. Even the harder to impress judges were faintly smiling, their eyes glossy with emotion. The obscured judge sat at the edge of hir seat. Ze loved the show, ze loved my patient on the dance floor. Nothing could stop her, she had such a feeling. What a feeling.

As the song reached its climax, the vocalist nearing the peak of her range, my patient employed a move that she'd only toyed with in rehearsals, thinking it maybe too bold or too gimmicky, too aggressive for a company that plays it safe most seasons. After a series of fouette turns into an arabesque leap towards the judge's table, my patient addressed her audience. She took a bouncing stance in front of Judge #1, pointed her finger at them and set her beady black eyes on theirs. Even from where I stood at the observation window, I could see Judge #1 prick up the back, unable to turn away from the abstraction of a face that beamed towards hir, the blurry sketch of a human that I had created. The judge was afraid, not of my patient per se, but of her possibility. Wouldn't she die of loneliness?

Judge #2 covered hir mouth with hir hand and tried hard to look away from my patient's indistinct features, worried that staring too long might ruin everything. Judge #2 had always believed that in form was divinity, and here was that notion slowly coming apart, like the two sides of a hand sewn seam moving their opposite ways.

My patient was nearing the end of her drama, sweat clustering under the breasts in her leotard. She backed away with a box step and took a swaying stance mid-floor, a wearied ungulate stabilizing after a fight. A visible fleck of energy ran up from the floor through her body, toes, knees, hips, ribs, and forced her arms into the air in a stick-up.

As her fingers pulled streaks down the imaginary window in front of her, the judges started to sweat, as if the glass might break, releasing her hysterical figure onto them.

The obscured judge reached his arms across the table and grabbed the lip of it with both hands, the brass buttons on his blazer glistening under the light of the lamp. Watching that judge, I felt I was seeing a disaster averted. Weeks ago I had been enjoying an iced coffee on a crisp spring day uptown. Taking little sips of its cold creaminess through my straw, I had stopped to admire the emerging signs of growth in the tree boxes and all around me. A smile on my face, I heard the distinct sound of a 27 year old lawyer driving a Maserati, whipping it up the avenue without caution. Instinctively frightened, I looked up and saw a young woman wheeling a le bjorn baby carriage in one hand, clutching her older charge's wrist in the other, asking the child perhaps what she would like for snack that day, or if she liked the flowers in the ground, paying very little attention to where she was going, having walked the same path to the park every other day for the past 29 days. I saw that she didn't notice the Maserati starting to take a sharp turn onto the street where the wheels of the baby carriage were just now beginning to roll into, or the walk sign abruptly turning into a blinking orange hand. I swallowed my coffee and was just about to yell out when something miraculous happened. Behind her a fellow nanny friend called her name. "Asla!" she yelled, waving her free arm. "Asla, what's up you bitch!" she said smiling. Asla turned to look and drew the carriage back with her, only moments before the Maserati entered the crosswalk.

This was the miracle that was developing as my patient dripped her hands down the air, panting. That the obscured judge saw his baby saved in my patient was clear. My freestyle surgery had turned out differently than I had imagined. Whatever I thought

was unique and peculiar had only been given a body, and my patient was very brave to put it on.

Being Watched

I really don't mind being followed. In some ways, it makes me feel like my pursuer might be able to see my individual light, that they are attracted to it somehow, or perhaps, they are threatened by my forthright presence, as if they had been raised in a place where the people are invisible. Being followed makes me feel like I will never fade away, like my body has stacked the cards to make me impossible to ignore, and so in some sense, I am infinite. I am able to pass through lives.

Everywhere I go, the world admires me. I feel this most while shopping at Sephora, my favorite treasure-house. They ask again and again if I need any help. Can I help you with something? they say, and stand close.

Each time my hand hovers over a jeweled pot of cream blush, I feel the eyes of all the actors (they call them actors there) peering over the displays, making sure I don't perform a sleight of hand and slip a lipstick up my sleeve. It happens too at the convenience store, around the fruit pies and the almonds. Sometimes, they even take the trouble to come from behind the counter, an eye on all my movements.

You might think that the attention would go to my head, like I would start to feel that I was somehow special, isolated, set out and down, a snagged thread in the fabric of the world conspired by the shopkeepers, the forgotten weft. But I keep going on as if nothing is different for me. I simply pretend that I do not see them, standing there behind me.

Clickbait

You try to recall the last time you had enjoyed eating something. You remember the sweet burnt smell of the pizza parlor your parents used to take you to after soccer games *win or lose*, the sweat and dirt on your forearms burning against the oilcloth in your bad manners, your mother touching your shoulder lovingly every once in a while, a referent in her very adult conversation. You had enjoyed this ritual once, on the Saturday that you scored a goal. On that day you were allowed an orange soda and though the pepperoni was the thin kind that hardens up in the oven and the amount of parmesan you had administered clumped inside your mouth, you remember the tip of that first piece falling between your teeth and almost bursting as you bit down. The perfect temperature. The perfect squishiness. The sauce a sour that you loved, the whole thing searing with the saltiness you were learning to appreciate as you grew up and became a man, and the garlic. Your mother had allowed you to down four pieces before looking at you in her worried dinnertable way and saying “ok Larry, that’s enough.” Those fifteen minutes were as blissful as any you can remember.

This afternoon you take a bite of your nitritous turkey and watery yellow mustard sandwich and you think of regurgitation. You wonder how long this sandwich could exist as a paste in the upper portion of your digestive system, paste up, paste down, a yogic cycle, an exercise in sustainability.

You touch a little bruise that’s on your elbow to the table, like a button to rehearse this memory: *lia_* waits in her blue shearling coat slipping on the ice and you, romantically, trying to catch her, but only *achieving contact*, through your big coats, your left hand firmly under her waist and your right elbow catching the bike rack. And

then only you fell, only you on the ground. You wonder how many times you could press this button; recall, invert.

jessicakes186 has come across an old version of you, secreted in the recesses of a turn inside the internet, not at the end of any one line, but at the intersection of many insignificant ones. She has had to navigate a vast directionless darkness to find this paunchy, years-back avatar, described as a simple guy. People seem to like me ha ha. I am always up for conversation and hanging out. Never really know what to say in these things. I guess you have to know me to get to know me.

Here is an artifact that you have forgotten exists in the world. Your old myspace is like an impression made on someone with whom you have since lost touch. You have erased that person from the limited space of your memory, but from time to time, without consequence, they will recall you and your unique gait, your gesture of feigned wisdom after telling a boringly bad joke, the de-forested look of your sparse chin stubble, the sour laundry smell you carry with you every three to four weeks, your confusion of the words 'mare' and 'mire' (and your once exclaiming that you were stuck in a 'virtual quagmare'), your inelegance, your doe eyes, your astonishingly rapid thumb-movement on a game console controller, the rare sound of one of your unselfconscious laughs, the meatiness of your torso, the slowness with which you speak, your preference for diet sodas, your fear of dogs, your love of dogs, the tender way you say 'bye see ya soon', your ability to pull off the occasional piece of jewelry, your chewed-up saucony's, your chewed-up cuticles. They will remember you Larry, they will remember your smile and your pitchy voice with its accent from Nowheresville. They will remember you, and you will be none the wiser.

jessicakes186 txts u that she likes the picture of you in the blue tshirt when your hair was long and the camera is up above you as if you had tumbled into a pile of autumn leaves with it like a new lover and your face is very pale but you have a gentle open-mouthed smile that makes you look actually happy. She says

you look cute

You recall the hours spent trying to capture yourself in a way that didn't look captured, but ongoing. On that tedious afternoon of selfies you had stumbled out of the house in just your shirt sleeves, though the temperature had dropped dangerously and they had been warning of snow. It took longer than is polite to say to photograph yourself as a sort of attractive dude, and once you had taken a picture that seemed almost good enough you snapped a couple couple couple couple couple just a couple more, the purple goosepimples on your arms forming a sandpaper grit. In the winning photo you'd had to do some expert cropping and blurring to remove any trace of your homer simpson pajama bottoms.

thanks that is so old lol. how'd you even find that?

She doesn't respond for several hours. You try to gain access to your account but cannot remember your screenname and password, and give up, perhaps not wanting to re enter the user experience of that particularly lonely year. Instead you think about how many retroactive impressions you might be making on people and feel ashamed. You wish you had been more careful all along.

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Larry, it seems you never win. It seems you are stuck in a continuous condition of suck. This is the only thing that is clear. Your new oracle is counting on it. jessicakes186 is the rare combination of eyes:grn hair:brn height: 5'6 BMI < 20% who is very sweet looking but still sort of porny. When she found you you went through every photo, comment, like, update and gesture that qualified as you on the internet, hoping to see what she saw, fresh perspective of an eyes:grn hair:brn height: 5'6 BMI < 20% girl. This assessment took days of your life, and when you were done you concluded that you were just as you had always been, which deserves no description. Your profile against her profile did not match.

When she finally does write back to you, you realize that you've been occupying a very familiar state of self-pity for almost four hours. Your ass is numb, your eyes sting. She says

hey cutie what are u doing

You know she is not who she says she is, jessicakes186. Or jessicakes186 is not who has just texted you. Or the woman, the physical woman, in the 326 photos jessicakes186 is tagged in does not know you, Larry. Or you are communicating with

someone (thing) who could not slip on a patch of ice. Or jessicakes186 is too good to be true. Or jessicakes186 is who she says she is, but no one can ever be that, who they say they are.

Or she is a nice thing to text to at night. This is the third and a half time an oracle has lured you into a state of near-contentment with yourself.

The first time. You should have known better. A beautiful blonde msgs you from out of the blue and says she's into Dr. Who too and maybe you two have a lot in common. She flatters you for two weeks before she ever mentions Landmark and how 2G is really not that big of an initiation fee. You are close to booking a flight out to LA but realize that you will have to give up the fantasies you had of making love in front of an open fire or holding hands while rollerblading down Venice Beach boardwalk and you decide that you would rather stop talking to her now and lie to yourself about what transpired between the two of you than find out that you have been recruited into a cult by an oracle who either doesn't exist or fishes for men like you for a living. You tell yourself that she went back to her old boyfriend and feel rejected but not nearly as vulnerable.

With a felt tip pen you draw figure eights on your mousepad. You open up your webcam and take a few photos, your monitor the only source of light. In one you look like you haven't been outside in a week (almost true). In another your double chin is prominent. There is one in which you look casually disinterested in the cam's gaze, your eyes fixated on something on the wall to the right of your computer. You post this one and tag it

just bored after work, idk

Within moments you hear the comforting chime that means she has liked it. And another minute later she comments

Awww, so cute!

You review the evidence again.

=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=6&ved=0CEUQFjAF&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sheknows.com%2Flove-and-sex%2Farticles%2F1_014045%2Fsigns_-youre-getting-catfished&ei=N89OVNSpBYSQyQSH14HwDg&usg=search?client=safari&rls=en&q=am+i+being+catfished&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8=0CD8QFjAE&url=http%3A%2F%2F%2Fposts%2Fam-i-being-catfished&ei=N89OVNSpBYSQyQSH14Hw

Your catalogue-model oracle with the cosmetology degree and angel wing tattoos on the back of her neck cannot be true. Whoever or whatever you have been writing to these past weeks cannot inhabit the supple caramel colored body she says is hers. She must be a crusty and lonely 50+ man, who (like you) can no longer bear the white walls of his condominium, but will make no effort to connect with anyone irl because his deep fear is that he will be exposed and hurt again. You wonder what would happen if you did meet this man, who's posing as your oracle. If you would be friends or if maybe you'd find yourself attracted to him, because of the things he tells you. You ask the oracle

did you get a web cam yet?

no I didn't have time to go to best buy, work has been so busy!

you should get one I want to talk to you face to face

I no! I will this week I promise

You cannot remember when it was that you slipped on the ice for lia_waits, between which time and after what date. A moment that exists only inside your elbow. You rehearse the memory, your padded bodies thudding against each other for the splittest second. She hadn't been who she said she was either, but she had existed enough for you to touch her after a brief and disappointing coffee date.

You imagine sitting across a café table from an old man in an undershirt, the two of you flicking your eyelashes at each other over a shared adoration of the band Fleet Foxes. You decide this would be alright.

You find the transcripts of your relationship with jessicakes and you read them through, slowly. Your heart flutters at the exact moments your heart had fluttered when you first read them. The first time she called you sweet. When she said she'd been waiting all day to talk to you. When she said she felt so comfortable with you. When she said you were like, the smartest guy Larry. You feel aroused the same way you felt aroused when she sent you the seductive studio shot she had just gotten back from the photographer, a white sheet barely covering the side of her breast and her glossy mouth parted in the way that always means "I wanna have sex with you." You cannot pinpoint the moment that you knew that this oracle was a figment, an apparition, but you aren't trying all that hard. When you get to the end, you read it over again, even more slowly and attentively. You have found a nice equilibrium in her, you don't question it.

when can we meet irl?

idk babe im super busy through the new year

maybe we can have valentines together?

yea maybe, that sounds nice

While unbending a paperclip it occurs to you that this happens to you an awful lot. And it's not like you are a stupid guy. Or really all that gullible. But somehow three and half times you have been targeted to become the butt of a very sick but increasingly comforting joke.

The first and a half time. You had been commenting on a thread about Julian Assange for some time when you garnered lia_waits' attention. You two talked for 4 months. You told her every dark secret and fear you could come up with, you even invented some. The pictures of her were beautiful, you were motherfucking in love. When you drove an hour to meet her for coffee, you found that she was not pretty. Not in the slightest. But you didn't mind Larry, did you? You had already shared so much with her, things that weren't even true. You tried to be kind about the fact that she was different than how she had said, was a flatter, ruddier version of the self she had shown you, but she became ashamed and ran off, slipping on the ice. She never talked to you again. Regretfully you erased her text messages from your phone and unfriended her. And now you are stuck rehearsing the one memory of her that made its impression on your body.

And months later when you first met jessicakes186, eyes:grn hair:brn height: 5'6 BMI < 20%, you walked into your house and sat down on the couch, your phone in your hand, without taking your jacket off or even setting your keys on the coffee table. You had had to pee for about 45 minutes but thought that her tiny thumbnail image might disappear altogether if you so much as touched anything else for even a moment. She told you that she was bored. You were bored too. She told you she thought she had seen everything there ever was on netflix. You also. She said modeling was sort of tough because people want you to always be happy. You couldn't relate, but you offered your

sympathy. She wanted to know what it was like where you were. You told her nothing much, its not like anything. It has sidewalks. She loled and you smiled. You knocked your knees together, touched your lips. In this instant you saw a little future opening up, the loop of your experience breaking forward through a tiny chink in the curtain of your loneliness.

Little Dirty Puppy

On January 15 I was abducted on my way to work by two masked men in what some people refer to as a 'rape van.' As the car slid to a stop at the curb and they reached their black gloved hands out to pull me in, I felt relief that I didn't have to go to work. When I lived in the suburbs, I used to pray that I would get in a car accident on the interstate so that I wouldn't have to show up to the office that day. Now whenever I have to fill out a form asking if I've ever had suicidal thoughts, I waver.

The men placed a balled up rag in my mouth and put a piece of duct tape over it. Tears instantly streamed from my eyes, but I think if you could see my expression objectively you might take it for allergies, there was no fear or sadness there. I was soothed by the way the two men sat facing me, their torsos jiggling as the van cruised over potholes, their forearms resting on their bent knees. They were quiet and calm, and built, and I imagined setting my head on the one on the right's chest, imagined that he smelled like fabric softener and breakfast and that he ached to be touched as much as I did.

The GPS showed a thick blue line, our course, abreast the gentle creases of the Potomac, but I didn't recognize the stretch of river we were creeping very slowly along, cars snaking around the bend for rush hour. They had zipped my hands together with a zip tie in front of me, and my butt cheeks straddled one of the raised grooves on the floor, which was bare and so cold I thought my coccyx might snap in two. On Thursday January 15, at around 8:45 AM, I felt my body prickle awake to my thoughts.

In the long night of my birth my mother fainted several times, screamed in agony when they snipped her perineum to extract my wriggling, curious body from her own. As I grew, it could not be said that I was an attractive child. My face was beset with the most grim horror, like a painting from the oeuvre of Munch. In what despair I looked to growing older, with nothing but a life of ugliness ahead of me! From an early age I saw how contemptible I was by nature. I walked about the world an infant ghost, never stepping into life or thinking that I could. I poured everything into my fear of pain. I lived to cry.

On the cold winter's morning of my 8th birthday I was walking my little pet dog, a creature for which I had the utmost affection. My dog and I delighted in each other's company, and even up until the morning of the incident I had demanded that he sleep with me upon my pillow, his hind legs tucked beneath the warmth of my bed clothes. On all the Earth wide, there's not much more full and pure a love than that between a boy and his little, dirty puppy. Just as I turned the corner away from the block of our apartment building, two men hurled themselves out of an idling van and captured me, leaving my cherished puppy, Clocky, on the curb. My first thought was of the piercing dread of separation; I had failed my one and only friend and now, at the tender age of 8, wished to die for it. I sobbed inside the van as we stumbled through my neighborhood, my small body flinching at the shock of each pothole we passed over.

The men spoke to me with patience.

"Don't be worried little man, we're not going to hurt you," said the one on the right, and though reason would have had me trembling in fear, I grew calm. I didn't dread being violated, or tortured, or killed, or any such terror that could overtake a young boy of 8 abducted by two men into a van and driven up the river. I thought of

Clocky, yes, and felt some great remorse for my abandoning him, but was soothed in moments of soft exchange between my captors.

“Where are we headed after this one?” said the one on the right to the one on the left.

“Out to Silver Spring.”

“Oh good, I could use a coffee.”

Now, you all know that I am alive and well since I am writing this post, and you may have seen pictures of me at happy hour just last Thursday, so I can assure you I wasn't harmed in any way. They didn't even take my purse. That day I was not afraid of dying, or maybe I had accepted that I might. Some of you may feel the same way: you do not *want* to die, but you also do not desire what you have in front of you.

Eventually the car came to a stop and the men opened the double back doors. We had driven into a field of brown grass, white sky standing blankly over a thicket of old oaks and maples. This is not something you would take a picture of, but it was beautiful, the cold air hit my chin and neck with a slap. I scooted on my butt towards the exit, the masked men flanking the car as if to extend an invitation to all I ever wanted, here in this dead field with crows cawing. For a moment I resented them then, these white men handing me my freedom, but I guess guys, they had what I wanted.

Tears gathered at the boundaries of my eyes, but not in fear per se, or even sadness as it's known. I looked upon the men in longing, wished to crawl between them and press my head against the larger of the two's impressive arm to find a sleep that had evaded me those past few weeks, lonely as I was, relegated to the cold back room of our duplex apartment while my parents cooed about the imminent arrival of my younger sister, a baby they would soon name Lily. I lay against the chill floor of the van, one arm hooked under my head for a pillow, and sniffled as tears streamed from my eyes and seemed to move from a recess in my person that I was only just on the verge of understanding to its depth. One of the men reached out his hand and said to me softly, "C'mere buddy." I crawled into his warmth and with my bottom upon his great thigh and my head against his shoulder, I drifted off, my thumb in my mouth (as I had not done in years), exhausted.

When I awoke the men had thrust me out through the double back doors of our impressive vehicle onto the dry grass of a barren field. They told me not to worry, that life was full of sweet surprises, and drove off. Oh how then I wished for my cherished Clocky, how gladly would he have jumped and leapt through that crunching field, and made me forget for just an instant the direness of my solitude. I stood there, clutching myself and shivering, watching a pair of ravens gambol in the sky just above the treeline to the north. At so young an age, I had thought of death too many times, and we may add this moment to that long list of moments wherein I wished to be struck immobile where I stood, to choke on the immensity of my own tongue, to cease to breathe, to suffocate on feeling. But alas, it is the error, or perhaps the gift, of living, that it must, and somehow does, go on.

You might take issue with the ethics of my hiring two men to capture the neighbor boy and drive him to the inland of a state park. To have had myself zipped up and gagged and taken missing so that I could find some footing to navigate my own quarter-life crisis, it might seem too creepy to find wisdom in. I know. This is not a gloating post.

But friends, when I saw that boy moping around the streets of our neighborhood with his dirty little puppy, my pity for him grew until it was a mania. A child shouldn't go around limping in melancholy, perplexed by his freedom. And a woman like me shouldn't be silenced by her own sublimated impulses. I had a classic case of mental gentrification; my dreams of job stability crowded out a lot of other, potentially valuable dreams from the limited real estate of my inner life, until my head was too heavy to lift. I was going to book myself a massage and take a personal day from work, but this plan came to me and I went through with it.

There in the field, I set my boots down and blades of dry grass crunched underneath them. I stood, and took a step forward, and before I could feel my legs again they were slamming the car doors and driving off, having deposited me. I reached up slowly and peeled the duct tape from my mouth, spitting the gag out with a noise and dropping it to the ground. My hands were still zipped together but I wanted badly to urinate. I looked around me. About 100 paces to my left was a pond, not totally frozen, with a picnic table and a weeping willow void of all its leaves. They had taken me to the exact spot I had told them to, although I was never quite sure if it was a right from the entrance of the park, or a left. As six year olds we had swung here once on the frail limbs of the willow, had a picnic on a summer day with gnats and bologna sandwiches. I remembered Jon Steffen-Plack clutching onto the tree and jumping forwards with a

Tarzan yell, and Jon Steffen-Plack's 6-year-old arms not being strong enough to hold him, and him falling into the warm, muddy water, and being so angry as he pulled himself out of the shallow lake that it almost kept us from laughing, but it didn't, and we rolled in unparalleled giggle fits at his misfortune. Through the trees on the other side of the pond I could see the second van rounding the bend of the park road, but otherwise no movement or sign of activity. I maneuvered my pants down and squatted, impatiently watching the steam rise as my urine hit the near-frozen ground. This is not how I had wanted to meet him.

I saw a woman there, abreast a willow tree, its branches bared against the winter air. I would have run to her immediately, begged for her to help me find my way back home, where my Clocky was, and where mother would be, and where I could sit beneath the soothing glow of a cartoon show and eat sugar cereal and be happy. But before I could take a step I saw that the woman was squatting in a way that barred approach. I was mortified. I turned my head away and sucked in too big a gulp of freezing air. I scanned my new environment for a place to run, but found my sneakers held fast to the ground, my legs immobile.

I called to the boy.

“Hey!” I said, my arm waving above my head. “Hey kid, c’mere!” He spun around in a circle. I thought for a moment that he might be scared of me, a little bias he’d been taught to have without much proof for it. But he was standing alone in the middle of a field, and there I was, a mother type.

My walk across that brown and dying field seemed interminable, the distance between us stretching like the mystery of my predicament. The closer I became the more fearful of the truth I was. What path had I wandered down in my short life that had led me to this field? How naughty had I been? How wretched? What kind of woman would so brazenly invite me to her side after what I'd seen? Did she not know what I had witnessed? That we, so soon, had breached the limits of intimacy appropriate for such a meeting? I walked with my head down, set my focus on the mounds of my white knees as they pressed forth beneath my short pants.

“Hi.”

“Hello madam.”

“Man, it’s cold isn’t it?”

“Yes, there is quite a chill in the air.”

“Do you want my coat? It’s really warm.”

“Oh no madam, I’m quite fine. I’ve grown quite used to the cold.”

I took off my coat and crouched beside him, placing it over his shoulders. It reached the ground, making him look like a tiny king out for picnic lunch. His eyes raised for the first time since I’d called to him, and he thanked me. “What’s your name buddy?”

“John Sebastian Theodore Duncan, madam.”

“Hello, John Sebastian, my name’s *redacted*.”

“Quite pleased to meet you *redacted*. My mother calls me Theo.”

“Well, Theo, we’re in a kind of funny situation aren’t we? Do you have any idea where we are?” I reached into my trouser pocket and felt the metal disk that I’d been carrying for him. Weeks ago it had resurfaced in a box of my old things at my mother’s house and though I had never met the boy, I saw him in it. *That sad boy should have this*, I thought, and stuck it into the recesses of my purse to give him later.

“I haven’t the faintest clue madam, it’s quite peculiar,” he said “and quite dreadful.”

“Well, I think I’ve been here before, when I was about your age. We used to swing on this tree. Have you ever swung on a weeping willow?”

“No madam, I don’t believe I have. Is it quite fun?”

“It’s a blast. But it’s maybe too cold today to try, we wouldn’t want to fall into that water.”

“I’m afraid madam I’d be too scared to try, in any weather. I’m quite a scaredy cat.”

Her big afro hair cushioned around her head like an angel's halo. My mother had warned against women like Redacted.

The look upon her face then was one of apprehensive understanding, kindness running through her, filtered by a life of isolation to a slight degree. It was clear that Redacted was, like me, ever on the periphery of social pleasure; able to see through it, to long for it and to understand it as a mist that's meant to dissipate upon approach. On Redacted's ears laughter fell as it did on mine, like a siren call from the hollow inner caverns of the laughter.

“I have something for you.”

“For me, madam?”

“Yes, it used to be mine. When I was a kid.” I handed him the slammer, warm from my pocket. It was 1 1/2” in diameter, steel pressed into a coin shape and plated gold around its edge. In the center, where on a quarter you would find the head of Washington, was a ghostly holographic portrait of a puppy. It’s sad face floated in a pool of nothingness, each shade of detail a different hue of green or orange.

“It looks just like Clocky!” Theo shouted, and pressed it to his heart. “It’s quite the best gift I’ve ever gotten. Quite quite quite.”

Expensive Hair

I have expensive hair. If you're wondering what I spend monthly, you have expensive hair too. You cannot tell because no one ever put it that way. You didn't realize there was cheap hair, free hair, and expensive hair, like mine. I'm talking dollar amounts.

Your vocabulary is probably just as expensive as mine is too. If you are not sure of your output, you can deduct any amount earned working in the food services or hospitality industry from the net total spent on education and cultural programming, to find the grand total of how much your vocabulary costs. Probably about \$100/year, the national average. That's taking into account public radio donations and late fines from the library. It seems low, I know, but there are a lot of casual encounters and exchanges that really drag down the bottom end of the range. In 2017 we are hoping people will spend at least \$112 on the words they use frequently.

Some folks seem to spend well above the average on their vocabulary. They rarely step foot in workplaces and use all the money they have to be be suitably cultured and educated. They still use the phrase "pretty cool" to describe almost everything, which is regrettable, in our opinion. Though they have expensive vocabularies (in disuse), their hair is often very cheap. They dye it with kool-aid packets and cut it in each other's' living rooms. That practice probably balances out any over-spending in the words and colloquialisms department.

Myself, I get a full foil of highlights every eight weeks and went to Oberlin College, Ohio USA. Amounts spent on college tuition roll into annual expenditure in \$300 increments on March 1 of each year. I won't need to spend anything else on my

vocabulary for the rest of my life. The hair, on the other hand, requires more upkeep. I am in the uppermiddle range of hair/vocabulary balance expenditure.

It's not as simple as you might be thinking. Someone who spends very little on their hair and has spent little or plans to stop spending on their vocabulary could very well fall into the same hair/vocabulary balance expenditure range as I do, yet still be living in abject poverty. Or, as is often the case, someone could spend a much higher percentage of their total net worth on their hair and vocabulary and fear that they will not be able to afford dinner, although we spend the same dollar amount on hair/vocabulary. There are so many factors when determining an individual's hair and vocabulary expenditure, and the balance thereof, that it is sometimes not worth the trouble. In most cases, experts rely on superficial indicators to assign singular persons to range groups which they most closely resemble, but may not strictly fall into.

In my life I've not always been happy with the range group that I fall into. Sometimes, I even go so far as to think that the number on my annual report indicating my total net worth compared to my hair/vocabulary expenditure (47.8%) is meaningless. That 47.8% says no more about me and my life than the word 'pickle' does. Unfortunately, without that number it'd be difficult for me to file my taxes.

Thought Disorder

I looked at him and told him to get back
and he was just staring at me, almost like to
intimidate me
or overpower me.

The intense face he had
was just not what I expected from any of this.

When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like
a five-year-old
holding onto *Hulk Hogan*.

He's obviously bigger than I was
and stronger and the,
I've already taken two to the face and I didn't think

I would,

the third one

could be fatal

if he hit me right.

The only way I can describe it,

it looks like a demon.

(That's how angry he looked.)

When he gets about that 8 to 10 feet away,

I look down, I remember looking at my weapon and turning off the safety,

all I see is his head and that's what I shot.

And when I shot,

the demeanor on his face went blank,

the aggression was gone,

(it was gone, I mean),

I knew he stopped;

The Threat was stopped.

When he fell
he fell on his face.

The Transgression

The individual must try, as best they can, to deepen their shallow breathing.

The individual must try not to feel the greasiness of their lips, the gloss of fat coating their mouth and the uppermost portion of their esophagus, impermeable to any amount of licking or swallowing or wishing that they had stopped halfway through The Transgression. The individual must press the pad of their thumb to their brow and check themselves for fever, accompanied by sweats.

The individual must try to look less piqued as they approach the counter at the neighborhood bagel café and ask the young man standing behind it if he wouldn't mind if they used the restroom, though there is a sign taped to the register that reads, in humidity-bled magic marker, RESTROOMS FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY. They must try not to let on that they would pay one hundred dollars for a day-old everything bagel if it granted access to a toilet behind a closed door.

The individual will heed the teenager's instructions with alarm; entry to the restroom will require a code committed to memory, but the majority of their thoughts are now occupied by the effort to keep

control of their bowels.

The individual must acknowledge that it has only been an hour, that not one hour prior they were walking through the streets of the city as an upright if unremarkable citizen, and now here they are, moments away from the loss of their dignity. All for one simple, innocent dietary mistake.

Their rectum will lurch into an unmistakable position, from which there is no return.

The individual will not care that they audibly hiss the word “yes” once the code has been entered into the keypad, and the two green lights and double beep indicate that they’ve gotten it correct, and the handle gives to their touch, and they are able to push open the door and step onto the acceptably clean tile floor and regard before them two stall toilets with the doors swung wide open, totally unoccupied.

The individual must, for a flash of an instant, feel something like gratefulness, must think “by the grace of God” somewhere in their frantic mind as they rush into the stall on the right and slide the latch into the locked position. As they unbutton and pull down their jeans,

pulled fresh out of the wash this morning, and lower their thighs onto the toilet seat, they must understand that in this moment they are the recipient of a very serious luck. How lucky they are to be sitting on this clean toilet. How lucky they are to have eaten so much ice cream.

As their body finally releases its sickness in a long, hot, shameful torrent beneath them, the individual must humbly acknowledge that their life is full of unimaginable blessings and privileges.

But the individual will only have a moment to thank their creator before they begin to hear footsteps echoing down the linoleum-floored hallway in the direction of the bathroom where they now sit, indisposed. Being that their digestive system hasn't finished expelling its offensive material, the individual's chest will start to burn with dread. They will wish that their privacy was inalienable.

But someone will enter. And even as the individual's sludge continues to exit their body in undignified glugs, the entering person will make their way to a position directly in front of the individual's quivering form, separated only by a thin, slate-colored, aluminum door.

The individual will notice the disrepair of the entering person's shoes. The individual will say, in an exasperated disgust

Can I help you?

feeling that, if they should feign confidence over their terror, the entering person, who is clearly delusionally resolved to something as yet undiscovered, will suddenly understand that on the other side of the door the individual sits with their haunches just inches above a stew of their most recent mistake. It would be kind and neighborly for the encroaching person to leave the individual alone with their problem —or else offer an electrolyte drink and a box of saltines. The entering person must understand that it isn't as it seems; the individual's life is not like this. The entering person must understand that the individual is currently undertaking the delicate process of making peace with their errors, which are many, which have no end.

When the encroaching person doesn't respond to their question, the individual will decide that the encroaching person is compromised. They are a compromised person. The individual will be embarrassed by the compromised person's shoes. The individual will wonder how the compromised person got in here, as it clearly states in both the bagel café and the Quiznos that restrooms are for customers only. The individual will feel less shy when the next wave of lactose intolerant muck exits their body. The compromised person has clearly seen worse in their life, and done worse themselves. The individual will let it all out, their lower abdomen burning.

When the compromised person starts to rattle their stall door, the individual will quickly but coolly shout

There's someone in here!

feeling the same surge of confidence one feels when instructing an overly friendly dog to GET DOWN! NO JUMPING!

When the compromised person does not stop their rattling, the individual will start to become scared. They will wonder if they are in bodily danger, if the compromised person is possibly a schizophrenic off their meds and prone to violent behavior. How did the compromised person even find their way to this neighborhood? This strip of shops and restaurants is by design hard to reach without car.

As the compromised person continues to push against the door so that it shakes within its frame, the individual will scan their mind for implements for their own protection. They will be wishing they had carried a tranquilizer dart with them when they left the house to meet friends for brunch earlier this morning.

Just as the individual will start to believe that the rapid leak from their backend is coming to a close, the compromised person will lift the stall door slightly, push it towards its hinges and open it with aplomb.

Hey hey hey! the individual will say.

Hey the compromised person will say.

Batting at the door, trying to shut it back up, the individual will press their knees together and avoid eye contact. They will try to remind themselves that the compromised person is probably struggling with an episode of impaired mental health and that anything but a cool calming tone might only exacerbate the compromised person's disorientation. But in this moment, with the compromised person's wide eyes staring down on them, the individual will struggle to find any cause for pity.

C'mon! they will shout. C'mon I'm in here!

Now they will search the compromised person's eyes for signs of psychosis, but the individual will find nothing of note. The compromised person will blink normally, they will search the individual's face in a way that is normal and ordinary. Their expression will be blank but not void of emotion, and they will scrunch up their nose involuntarily, a normal reaction to the dense, oily smell that has stretched up out of the toilet and into the air they are both breathing.

The compromised person will look at them as if the individual has started to ask a question, but is having trouble spitting it out.

What do you want? the individual will say.

The compromised person will open their mouth thoughtfully, then pause, bringing their finger to their chin.

I know your sister the compromised person will say.

The individual will think of their sister with her newborn baby, will see in their mind the nest of natal hair ripping its way out of their sister's vagina, an image they will, until the end of their days, wish they could scrub from their memory.

What? the individual will say. They did not think that compromised people could know their sister.

Yeah I know her. She just had a baby. Man she gained a lot of weight didn't she? Sheesh.

Well. I. How do you know my sister?

You should wipe.

What?

Your butt. You should wipe your butt now. You're done right?

Are you serious?

Like your sister wipes her baby's butt.

I'd like to do that in private.

Yeah, that's only natural. That's only human.

So will you shut the door please?

Oh yes, forgive me! I'm sorry.

The compromised person will take a step towards the individual deferentially, perfunctorily, as one does on a subway car as it begins to fill up during rush-hour. The compromised person will lean to one

side and rise onto their tiptoes to allow just enough space for the thin half door to squeeze by their bottom and close. They will lock it. They will stand with their chin dropped softly to their chest, a foot on either side of the individual's, and they will wait for them to pull a ribbon of toilet paper from the roll and crumple it into a palm-sized wad.

Ca\$h

The day of the robbery had started well. I had flung my feet over the side of my bed without the suspicion that the floor was an optical illusion imposed on my bedroom by malevolent forces. My mouth did not feel dry. The day didn't seem like an ugly puzzle that would guide me back into sleep, should I figure it right. I brushed my teeth without watching my hands move, as if all I could see was my skeleton. I felt good, fresh, fleshed.

I went through my morning routine without my usual anxiety about the order in which I do things. I stepped outside in my exercise clothes and went for a little run, then came back and cooked myself a breakfast with a nice, hot cup of coffee. While dressing in the mirror I did not see a kaleidoscope of indistinct persons, unable to find the true figure. I did not get the sense that once I *did* find the right clothes, once my outfit was settled, a steam locomotion would crush through the wall and flatten me.

As I stepped out my front door, I read a text message that I hadn't been interested in earlier. It was from Laura. It said are u busy today? I need your help with something. As I walked to the bus stop I could see the filmstrip of my first beautiful day in so long starting to falter, the ends going loose in projection. yes i have a lot planned, what do you need?

I had asked Laura to stop contacting me, after one too many of her misguided plans had set us both spinning, dreidels banging against the walls of our neglected apartments. its something fun! just meet me for a coffee and we'll talk about it.

Laura was wearing all black, and as we sipped our lattes she passed a black hoodie and ski mask over the table.

Inside the penthouse there was a smell. On the stove was a pan that had been left from last night, a piece of chicken in tomato sauce grown dull as it cooled. One of the tiles of the backsplash was broken. The knife block didn't quite fit on the counter. I opened the fridge and all of the greens were wilted because no one had wanted to eat them.

The apartment was on floor 26 and I felt that if I screamed as loud as I could, the only one to hear me would be Laura. She stepped into the living room area of the open floor plan and beckoned.

“C'mere!”

In the hallway, a piece of art had been removed from the credenza. I peeked into the office space on the left, where a wall of bookshelves had not yet been filled. From the doorway I spied a title I recognized: *The Tropic of Cancer*. There was a small pile of dried out dog feces in the corner by the window.

In the walk-in closet, which was filled with luggage, just a couple of somber dresses hung. I found Laura standing over the safe, the code to which she knew. She opened it and it was filled with ca\$h, diamonds, rubies, and coke. She clapped her hands together and shouted “Haha!” diving her fingers into the booty as if it would cleanse her. I held a stack of one hundred dollar bills in my hand. I had never seen the kind of money that was crisp like this, as if it was custom made straight from the workshop, just for me. All of the dollars I had ever had had been passed from hand to hand and wrinkled and sat on by so many people that by the time it reached me I felt I was borrowing someone's old towels. When deposited, the figures had stood in my bank account like transient workers, providing me something just briefly before they were off again, unpossessable.

Laura and I shoved as much of the treasure as we could get into our pockets. I waited for my body to change with all that wealth next to it. I wondered how much disarray could be fixed by each additional thousand.

“Cmon!” said Laura. “We gotta get outta here.”

Because no one could suspect us we went for margaritas. We got chips and a large guac. I ate my share and found that it was just as delicious now that I wasn't worrying about what a large portion of my weekly food budget it represented, compared to its nutritional value. It was perhaps even more delicious just after the robbery. When I went to the bathroom I pulled a ruby out of the lipstick pocket of my jeans and found that it was still very beautiful now that I thought it was mine. It brought me very much joy.

That night I slept with a bundle of \$10,000 under my pillow and had the same insomnia I always do around day 14 of my cycle. I could not get my temperature right, too hot under the covers and too cold out, so I slept with one leg bared, the comforter dividing my two halves awkwardly.

The morning was appropriately dark. I slipped my hand around the warm surface of my bed and found my brick of ca\$h like a bible or firearm under my head. I brought it to my nose and smelled it but could not peel back the sheets. I looked out onto my bedroom and I could swear to you that I saw my floor ripple, reveal itself as an immaterial expectation that would never come to be. I was scared. I spent all of my energy in composing a text message to my manager that said I was quitting but couldn't find the strength to send it. The day was passed in this way, hoping that something would show up across my mind that would make me want or desire to move. Around 3PM I heard the neighbor kids running down the block after school, and then silence.

Pygmalion had seen them, spending their lives in wickedness, and, offended by the failings that nature gave the female heart, he lived as a bachelor, without a wife or partner for his bed. But, with wonderful skill, he carved a figure, brilliantly, out of snow-white ivory, no mortal woman, and fell in love with his own creation...Often, he runs his hands over the work, tempted as to whether it is flesh or ivory, not admitting it to be ivory. He kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned; and speaks to it; and holds it, and imagines that his fingers press into the limbs, and is afraid lest bruises appear from the pressure...[and then one day] the ivory yielded to his touch, and lost its hardness, altering under his fingers...The lover is stupefied, and joyful, but uncertain, and afraid he is wrong, reaffirms the fulfilment of his wishes, with his hand, again, and again.

-Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book X, trans. A.S. Kline

Being Watched by Pygmalion

Not watched so much as seen into existence.

What You Have To Look Forward To

In some ways, this week, you might feel the overwhelming pressures of the cosmos, confused by a sense of dread unattached to any object, event or person. You will demand of yourself extraordinary control over your minutest choices, whether in clothing, food, or activity.

On Monday, July 26, an acquaintance will move into a position much closer to you, physically or emotionally. They will engage in dialogue that allows you to see a situation that has been bothering you more clearly, and by the end of Monday you will feel a sense of wholeness and well-being that you have not had in many months.

The good vibrations will not last long however, as on Tuesday, July 27, an unexpected package will arrive. You will find it delivered at around 1PM. It will contain a piece of electronic equipment that you ordered many weeks ago and no longer need. Hearing the UPS man's footsteps on your porch, you will feel a prick of hope that you are instead receiving an unexpected visitor! For the most part however, this hope will be overshadowed by your foreknowledge of the unexpected package's arrival, confirmed upon your opening the door and scribbling your signature for it.

You will be somewhat sobered by your memory of what's about to happen, but again, as you dig your house key through the cellophane tape across the cardboard box, a familiar glee will rise, wondering if maybe what you know is wrong, and instead of a USB adapter in the box, it is a nice watch, or a very expensive jar of preserved fish.

Seeing that you have indeed received a cheap adapter for a hard drive that you no longer own, an old familiar weight will come down on you, and you will imagine it like a piece of lead shoved into the box next to your unnecessary item, as dunnage.

Finding this lead weight delivered to you on Tuesday, you will be reminded of a heartbreak or great disappointment that you have recently experienced which until that moment you had not thought of in weeks. This disappointment might be related to family, work, relationships or the time that you fell in love with a coworker.

If in the past you have succumbed to physical desires that you found inappropriate or exciting, or if you have come close to doing so, or if you have had a physical desire that is libidinal, carnal, hunger-related and generally impossible to ignore, or if you found it possible to ignore but did not want to, and if you acted on these desires with the knowledge that it seemed like a bad idea from the outset but still held the foolish belief that this particular instance was different than anything else that it was similar to, and found that your rational knowledge, in the end, was spot-on correct and that your emotional hope had to wither away as reality set in and you learned that you could not, in the end, keep the thing that you most wanted, then, dear reader, I would recommend that you take a short trip that is inexpensive but that will give you great relief, on or before the day that you are expecting the unexpected package. To be reminded of that recent disappointment, of the first secret days of lust in the midsummer heat, sun glistening on the water, stolen private conversations or however it was for you then, it will set you into a tailspin. To remember yourself in that moment, when your need to touch or lock eyes with your new lover superceded even that for food and sleep, will bring you into a melancholic period from about the 26th

through the 31st of the month. It would be best to avoid receiving the unexpected package entirely.

If however, you cannot get away, or think that this information doesn't relate to you, and are home to receive the unexpected package and upon opening it do feel the weight of your pain fresh again, it will be coupled with the uncomfortable knowledge that in both instances, in its original form and in its reliving, the pain could have been avoided. That you have been given the tools to protect yourself but still do not use them. Perhaps, after the unexpected package arrives, you will lie on the couch with the endless feeling that if you would allow yourself to let go of that original, incendiary hope, your suffering would stop, but reliving that hope is also the only thing that eases your suffering. On Wednesday, July 28th give or take four days, you will enter into a phase which will feel like you are walking back to the beginning. You will be stuck in the cycle that starts with a physical feeling like a blast to the chest and lessens, deadens and numbs into the thought that you have brought the blast onto yourself, in turn opening you up to still another blast, weaker each time but only just slightly. You will occupy this rather dark period until the time that you are able to leave it.

On Friday, July 29, there will never be a better time to do some productive work, perhaps on a large project or on a relationship, and, dear reader, you will find that you are unable to force yourself into anything. As your recursive darkness subsumes you, you might be convinced that you are finally facing your heartbreak, disappointment or let down in a process of healing or growth, and will soon be able to move past it. But you can rest assured, dear reader, that you will not move past it for at least another year or two. This week, as you relive your original pain which telescopes away from you at any attempt to relive the joy from which it originated, the pain will also be amplified in a

new way by the new knowledge that you will be stuck in it for some time because you are unable to let go of its original joy. You may find yourself indulging in behaviors that you usually avoid, such as eating unhealthy foods, drinking alcohol, or if you have a problem with it, promiscuous activity. You will engage in these activities but will not be able to enjoy them because you will know that they are an inauthentic expression of your sorrow, which will remain with you until you make the decision to let go of the original hope that failed you shortly after its arrival in your heart. You will wake up on Saturday, July 31 feeling guilty, and your guilt will compound your distress which will be compounded by the knowledge that if you were able to force your original hope out of your head you would be able to let go of your distress and would stop doing things that make you feel guilty. By Saturday, July 31, you may think that you should have taken that short trip to avoid receiving the unexpected package and being reminded of your heartbreak which set you into the dark period of longing and guilt that you are currently experiencing. You will think that you could have saved yourself from this bad long-weekend, and you could have, but even with the foreknowledge of all that it would bring, you did not.

All in all reader, you have an exciting week ahead of you, but you will be more or less unchanged by it.

Arch Emesis

When Augustine walked in, I could tell he wasn't alone. He was wearing an eau de toilette.

"A. Vulsa," he said, "I'd like you to meet my best friend and creative partner, Attrition."

What he meant was soft-bullying. I'd read about soft-bullying on my social media devices.

I laughed, confused but appeasing. I had met Augustine at the gym a few weeks earlier; he was giving me personal training sessions at a really good rate because, he said, he truly cared about my form. He said good form was his passion, and he could tell that I had some fundamental problems.

Perching on my barstool I wanted to evacuate from nerves, but over the years I have learned to subordinate those feelings, to act as my own antacid. Immodium-I. Sweat stung at the back of my calves. I was my elevated heart rate, which I tried to slow down to a rhythm that better coordinated with the sexy R&B song that was playing on the jukebox.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I understood you correctly!" I said, embarrassed. Augustine sat down at the bar with his well-toned elbow next to my cosmo. His eyes reached mine. For a moment he had the look like he'd seen a permanent cockroach, but it faded into grim delight as he began to insult me.

"You don't understand? Are your ears clogged? You don't understand that word? Attrition? You've never met someone whose best friend was a tactic?" He asked these questions in rapid succession, giggling, not expecting me to respond. "Where'd you grow up again A. Vulsa?"

“I’m from Burlington, Vermont, actually” I laughed.

Augustine let out another chortle, and laughter, at any expense, is delightful. I was charmed by his white teeth and his eyes like a cow, but the wearing down was embodied all around us. I felt it standing impolitely close to me and was suddenly aware of the mild acne on my chin, wondering if it was visible under Attrition’s gaze, even in the bar’s low lighting. I went absent wondering this. I had gone.

“Sounds like a blast,” said Augustine.

“It was a really fun place to grow up actually,” I said.

On our last Thursday @ 11:30 appt, my femur bone wedged between us as he stretched out my hamstrings, Augustine told me that he had never noticed how pretty my eyes were, that they looked really good up close. He wore a scent that dropped onto me in nauseating glugs, a distracting power that was impossible to look at. I’ve always been one to avoid confrontation because I’m a pleasant person, and it’s well known that reversing your socialization is a major, irredeemable cause of hysteria. I told him ‘thank you’ politely and waited until he’d finished loosening the major muscle groups found in my legs.

The bar’s playlist switched over to *Pony* by Ginuwine. “Did you live on a farm?” he asked me. “You look like you come from Good Solid Farm Stock.”

“Oh do I?” I said. I took a big gulp of my cosmo. I loved this track. “You look like you have a big dick.”

Perhaps I had meant *you look like a big dick* and my meaning was somehow lost in expression. *Dick, you look big. I’d like a big look at your dick. Your dick’s like a big you. Look you dick, I’m big.*

“Woah!” said Augustine. He went greasy all over, the delight of a child gifted the most current technology of toys lit up his glistening face. “Damn girl!” he said, “you move fast!”

“Well how fast do you want me to move?” Suddenly, I was speaking without really caring too much how it sounded. “I bet you’re packing some heat down there, huh?” I slipped in.

We were sitting so close, I feared I would be sucked in by the dark light of his insecure loneliness.

“Um. So Vermont huh?” he shuffled out.

“Yep, where are you from?”

“I grew up mostly in Jersey, but I came to the city a lot.”

“I bet you were a lady killer in high school huh?”

Augustine’s smile grew up his face and he became shy. “Oh I don’t know about that...I didn’t start working out until college.”

“I bet you were still cute. Did you go to your prom?”

“No, I didn’t really know how to talk to girls back then.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“I guess so.”

“Do you shave your pubic hair?”

When Augustine texted me that he wanted to grab a drink sometime, I was excited by the possibility of a real conversation.

“What?” he said.

“Oh sorry. I guess I’ll just have to wait to find out, right?”

Augustine asked the bartender for a Corona. “Man, you’re forward.” He squished his lime wedge into the neck of the bottle. “I guess you kind of have to be with your looks, huh?” There was a moment when neither of us moved or spoke, the kind of happy hour standoff seen in bars and restaurants all over the city. “I’m just kidding. I think you’re really pretty, actually.”

“You wanna fuck me in the mouth?”

“Jesus!”

I took a closer look at his face. Up until now I had been intimidated by his good looks, but I noticed a specific lack of specialness, his head emanating from his, admittedly, impressive traps as if it were questioning which muscle it was. Augustine, in this light, was not a unified being. He was cut.

Attrition had a funny way of acting in the moment. Finding my usual line of defense mysteriously absent, Attrition made empty aggressions towards its phantom, acting like a 3rd wheel, inserting itself into the conversation where it had no place. I was flattered.

“So you work at a magazine, huh? Who’d you have to blow to get that job?” The whites of Augustine’s eyes were a little bloodshot, like he had sat too close to the television set while watching cartoons.

“Just the doorman,” I said.

“I’m just kidding, I’m sure you’re a totally capable administrative assistant, or whatever you do.”

“Not really,” I said. I took an olive out of the bartender’s fruit tray and snacked on it loudly. I felt very relaxed, as if I had been wondering about an important moment

in my life, and immersed in the stale rum of the bar, I had made my decision. *If you're horny, let's do it, ride it, my pony.*

A woman more beautiful than I am walked by. She glanced down at her thighs and her shoes, gave a quick tug to her top. She wished for a screen against Augustine and Attrition's gazes, a landscape for them, apart from the body she lived in. She thought that they might be able to see the sick tan color of the tampon string that rested inside of her pants and her panties, that they could smell its stickiness and the onion-musk of the sweat that seeped from the crease of her inner thigh, her crotch. The walk from her seat to the ladies' room stretched out before her like quicksand, slipping beneath her, her bowels performing their monthly cowardice, her fallopian tubes wrapping around her colon in an effort to express the most of her womanhood, the worst of it. She raised the corners of her mouth at Augustine as she passed him, a diplomatic answer to his unambiguous stare.

"She's hot," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "She's kind of thick like you. I like a girl who can eat."

"Oh that reminds me, how *are* you at eating pussy? Like on a scale of one to ten."

Augustine chewed on the canker sore on the inside of his bottom lip. "Depends on the pussy," he said. He'd been eating candy on his way home from the gym some afternoons; it was a terrible habit he knew he should stop.

"You know what I could use right now?" I dropped my head back for the last drops of my vodka drink. "A massage. I look tense."

I flipped my debit card onto the bar and told the bartender that I would settle up for the both of us, slipping my head through the strap of my purse so that it landed between my breasts like the string of an archer's bow.

“Come on, I know a place,” I told Augustine.

I had been to this place, *Foot Reflexology Massage*, a few times before. For twenty dollars you could sit in a vinyl recliner and they would touch certain places on your nervous system that made your pain go away. A lot of times, the person next to you would burp uncontrollably, a reaction triggered by each poke of their first metatarsal. I liked to watch subtitled news programs as my masseur worked on the scar tissue in my right shoulder, remnants from a motorcycle accident I had years ago.

“We’d like a couple’s massage,” I told the woman at the front desk.

She led us to a sort of loveseat at the back of the room that comfortably sat two. A young woman bent down to line sinks with plastic and fill them with hot, soapy water for our feet. I sat down and zipped off my boots while Augustine stood on the other side of the chair, nervously shifting from foot to foot, his hands hovering at his belt buckle ready to fend off a waist-high attack.

“What’s the matter, Augustine?” I asked with my eyes closed.

“Uh...like...what are you doing?”

Augustine had told me once that he didn’t like being touched, that when his personal bubble was infiltrated, it was like his whole body was shattering. He didn’t mind it if he had some control, but if someone walked up behind him and affectionately placed their hand on his shoulder, he lost his shit.

“I’m getting a massage. You should sit down.” I patted the seat of the overstuffed recliner next to me.

“Nah, I don’t think so, I’m not really into...”

“Sit down,” I said. You really shouldn’t force people to face their phobias like this, but enough was enough.

Augustine slowly dropped his loose-fit-jeaned bottom onto the loveseat and bent his torso over his knees. He untied his shoelaces, though I could tell that his sneakers were the kind that you never tie but trust that they will cling to your feet through all of your adventures. His socks were brand new bright white, I liked that about him, and his feet were clean and skinny looking, like they didn't eat carbs. He rolled up his pant legs and tested the water with the balls of his feet.

"It's fucking hot!" he said. The young woman rolled her eyes and let the water run full-cold for a minute. Augustine had crumpled his body to one side of his chair, feet tucked up against his butt and knees hugged in. He had the frail look of an ancient mummy found bound in the fetal position for thousands of years, muscles immaterial, face stuck in terror. When his water was luke warm, we both sat soaking in silence, our forearms grazing each other each time we adjusted.

Eventually, our masseurs came over, squirming their hands into new gloves and kicking their stools into position at our feet. As the man who was working on my body lifted my left foot out of the water, I took Augustine's hand in mine, interlocking our fingers like the bones of a spinal column. He was now fully alone, friendless in my presence.

Our masseurs went in on our plantar muscles, the tips of their thumbs hot pokers on our points of tension. Augustine squirmed and attempted to break free of my grasp.

"Breath into it," I said.

"Ow, fuck man, you're hurting me!" he shouted. His masseur looked up, exasperated.

"Just relax Augustine, it's fine."

"No man, I don't like this."

But his squirming was beginning to slow. The therapeutic benefits of reflexology were starting to enter his system.

I attempted to feel his pulse through our palms. I wanted to see if, as Augustine's body relaxed, I could feel electricity running between us. Was I a conductor? Was it only a matter of finding our flow?

“Woah dude, what are you doing? That feels weird!” His masseur was palpating the direct center of his foot, the area associated with the stomach and love of the impermeable self. He looked at me in bewilderment. “Is it supposed to...” Suddenly, his abs and his diaphragm gave two small contractions, like hiccups that shook his whole body, down to his buttole. His masseur instinctively let go of his foot and reached for a plastic lined waste basket a few yards away. But it was too late, Augustine was finally losing it. All of the strongest muscles in Augustine's abdomen drew into each other and stayed in contraction, pushing the contents of his stomach up until finally the sphincter at the top of his esophagus relaxed and released the bilious combination of protein shakes and chicken with greens that Augustine had been collecting in his system since 5AM that morning. He had almost entirely made it into the sink at his feet, but some puke still clung to the rolled up hems of his pant legs, globs of blackened spinach plastered to the denim like flings from an artist's paint brush. Throw-up sank to the bottom of the sink in yellow-brown globs. The room smelled of beer.

The two masseurs looked at each other and then at Augustine with their eyebrows raised, not unkindly. The whole thing had been quick, Augustine had emptied the contents of his stomach in just one quiet heave. I gave his hand two pulsing squeezes, trying to comfort him. He tightened his grip and sustained it. It grew a new warmth and softness for me, sweating and loose like a child's just waking up from his nap. I felt

guilty for what I had done, but hoped that his pain was not arbitrary, that it would lead somewhere peaceful for both of us. With the back of his other hand Augustine wiped his mouth and tried to still the subtle shake of his torso.

“Oh fuck,” said Augustine. “Oh fuck.”

Thirty, Flirty, and Thriving

Regretfully, I have stepped out this morning without brushing my teeth, an oversight of which I am sometimes guilty. The last time that I made this mistake, to leave the house without brushing, it was on the day that a beautiful woman was going to fall into the apartment complex's swimming pool unconscious. She was, unfortunately, going to be drowning. I was going to feel for her, remembering the morning I had found myself alone at the beach, no recollection of how I'd gotten to that place, wishing there was someone there who could have helped me own it, or at least recall which bus I had taken to get where I was. If she survived, the beautiful woman floating face down in an aquamarine one-piece would need that help too, she would be searching for it after the shock of near-death had worn off.

The others were going to rush in and pull her by the armpits onto the deck, her hair splaying elegantly over the No Diving sign stenciled onto the warm concrete. Her bathing suit was going to be ridden up a little in the front, cleaving her bush in two and exposing part of it. Everyone would try not to notice that.

Angela from Albuquerque would address the group: Does anybody here know CPR?! and I was going to crouch. I do, I was going to say, I have my certificate. I was going to feel very self-conscious about the fact that I hadn't brushed my teeth that morning, and might've hoped in some way that I wouldn't be able to revive the beautiful woman, to spare her from having to smell the stench of my morning breath. I was going to overcome this fear however, in order to save her, and would feel relief when I cupped my lips over hers and took my first inhalation. She would smell of tequila and egg salad. I would be like a snake on her. I would perform abdominal thrusts. I would summon her back into life.

After saving the woman from drowning she was going to feel indebted to me immeasurably for delivering just what she needed, repositioning her just when she felt most impoverished. Of course, no one who's drunk all the time and lives in an apartment like that has too much to worry about, financially speaking, so it wasn't a matter of helping her see that she needed to get her life back on track, but rather, that she should learn to love and appreciate all that she has, all of the boundless gifts life had given her. They're too many to name, too simple.

She was going to start by taking me to dinner and ordering frog legs.

Then she was going to say to me What can I do for you? I owe you my life? She would be stabbing her fork into a gelato dessert with a spun sugar puff ball on top of it.

First it was going to come to my mind that I had always wanted to go into a stadium after all of the patrons and players had left and sing the *Ave Maria* over the megacom. But before I could utter this question it would press on and bruise the faculties by which I usually speak. The turning point in my life was going to come when I responded sheepishly: Oh no, it was nothing, it was just the right thing to do. And then: Well, I do need a job. I got downsized last month.

I would tell her how I had been working as the technician who cuts the sublingual glands from cadaver rats that have already been worked over by another lab or a high school biology class. When I closed my eyes at night I would have seen the globes of the rats' tiny organs bursting in ornate design over the back of my eyelids. But not in a scary way. Then, the story was, the lab had stopped needing the glands for some reason, so I was downsized from payroll.

The woman was going to pick up her phone and begin nodding aggressively, its blue light washing her face like smoke from incense. I can do that, I can totally do that, she

was going to say. My father owns like 5 companies. Unlike some other tenants, I had never accused the woman of playing boisterous music, and I had never given her and her overnight guests the stink eye as they stumbled through the lobby laughing and smoking while everyone else went to work. Sitting at the dinner table with the beautiful woman whose life I had saved, I was going to know suddenly how to put a smart look together, how to wake up early in the morning and go for a run.

The job that the beautiful woman was going to get me wasn't going to be in my field. I would struggle to fit into the workplace culture, though everyone would recognize what a hard worker I am, everyone would be able to see my go gettem. They would all start to like me because I don't put on airs. I walk into a room and I'm just Me, no faking. This was going to be how I described it to my talk therapist, who I could afford by then. I would tell her how happy I was but how sometimes, while getting ready for work, say, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and didn't know whether I was living the new life or the old life, the one I have now. She would tell me how normal that is, how most women in my situation go through that period of disorientation, but to let her know if it becomes unbearable.

This morning, having forgotten to brush my teeth, I would need to come up with a work-around. I would need to purchase a product from Walgreens intended just for my purposes, for the busy individual with drive who sometimes neglects or forgets or simply cannot accomplish the simplest habits of life. They're called brush-ups. They're pre-pasted disposable toothbrushes.

I would dread the thought of working all day as the beleaguered assistant to the Editor in Chief of an international fashion magazine without properly brushing my teeth beforehand, but I would think of my recent accomplishments and press on.

Over a few short weeks I would have tightened my theory of fashion and successfully raided the samples closet with the help of a kindly photographer. I would have gone from a size 8 to a size 4. I would have eagerly learned to hail a taxi, write an email, and balance a gourmet birthday cake in one hand without crushing any of its fondant flowers. I would do all this while looking fresh and fabulous to boot.

If I was going to step foot into the offices of *Emma Magazine* this morning and prove that I am worth the leather on the soles of my designer booties, I would have to duck into the lobby level bathroom of the Madison avenue office building and discreetly open my package of brush-ups, without seeming too frazzled or envious of anyone. The noise of the plastic bag would embarrass me. I would find it necessary to go into the last stall and sit there on the toilet without pulling my slacks down. I would open the product as quietly and invisibly as possible, my heart racing, my hair perfect, and it would feel like I was secretly using drugs, though I would have never touched the stuff. I would have never poisoned my brain with whippets out of boredom. I would have never felt my pulse pretending to quicken because I thought someone could tell that I was high. I would have never found traces of vomit in the bathroom sink and stood there bracing myself against the agony of my headache wondering if I had eaten squash yesterday, or if it had been a friend. I would have never woken up next to somebody I don't know, low balance alerts blinging up the banking app on my phone. I would have never spent all day sleeping and trying to recall. All of that would be alien to me.

Then two women would come into the bathroom talking loudly; it would be a classic early-summer Friday, the ice cream vendors in the park ringing their bells incessantly. Their excitement would remind me of my own, and for a moment I would have the impulse to blow off work, call up Sadie and have a New York day in the sun. But

no, I would be dedicated, I would be ready to present my ideas for the new advertorial spreads, my leather portfolio cinched under my arm, choking to death. I would pull my feet up and hug my knees to my chest as I ran one of the tiny pre-pasted toothbrushes over all of the offensive elements of my mouth. The women would be able to feel my presence hovering wrongly behind them, but I wouldn't be there. They would go on talking: Do you have any bronzer? one would say. No I left it in my gym bag, the other would say. Did you have your interview yet? one would say. No it's tomorrow the other would say. My back hurts, one would say. Yeah my shoulders are killing me, the other would say.

No one should have to hurt all the time.

Can I have an adderall? one would say, and I would hear the other tenderly reach into her giant cluttered bag and pull out a rattling bottle. I would wonder if they worked on the 8th floor and I would sink deeper into my nothingness on the toilet. Those two women are lawyers I would think jealously, and here I would be, only good at remembering the names of the powerful fashion elite and whispering them discreetly into my boss' ear during cocktail parties. That was all that was written about me. It's moments like this that would make me sometimes wish that I could go back to my ignorance when I thought that all women in suits were the same.

I can't exactly describe what would be going through my head because the vision isn't that clear, but for some reason I would experience a fierce sharpness of breath, a cinching around the middle, as if there, in the last stall of the lobby level bathroom of my new office building, two vast eliminating hands had reached through the subway tiles and were closing around me in punishment for something only they had seen me do. They were going to be going me and as much as I asked them to disclose to me my

crime the grip only grew down the length of my body and every instant I thought that I knew something I could apologize for but in the next it would be dark again, as if I was going in circles, the leash wrapping tighter and tighter around my neck. I would be hyperventilating in a panic attack, an inconvenient affliction I had been suffering from since my first week at the magazine.

Are you ok? I would hear one of the women asking, the twin points of her pumps pressing together apprehensively as if she stood with her ear resting against the door of my stall. Elaine I gotta get back to the office the other woman would say, and I would hear her assertive gait diminishing into the more public area of the atrium.

I'm fine I would throttle out. My portfolio would have fallen to the floor and some of my professionally printed layouts would be soaking up the mysterious moisture that collects on the bottom of a women's room floor. That's not pee I would say to myself, that's just moisture. I would begin gathering my papers, taking in little sips of air at a time, though I wanted to heave and press my hands to the floor, let my hair fall out of its chignon, sweat and shake, open my mouth wide and let out the deep diaphragm moan I had been buckling into my shapewear all this time. Ok, are you sure? the woman would say as she backed away towards the sinks, do you need anything? I would know that she meant something from her purse full of pills, and for a moment I would want to reach my hand under the door for a xanax or two. But no, I would say, I'm fine, just a bit nervous, you can go, and she would slip away quietly.

Being Watched

In order to detect an electron, a photon must interact with it in some way. “I like your hair today electron,” “I never would have thought of you as a cat person, electron,” setting the electron off in new a direction, it’s potential morphing wildly with every meeting.

As some believe, it is not actually the act of observing the electron that makes it shiver and crowd away, but the setting of instruments to it. You could watch an electron bounce around its cage forever, but if you never smiled or not-smiled at it, if it didn’t know the history of smiling, it couldn’t feel you on it. It might wake up in the morning and go to Electron Work wearing its pajamas.

Similarly, if you put an Ellen Donnelly inside a box with a deadly radioactive substance with a 50/50 chance of activating at random, and you sealed the box so that it was absolutely soundproof to her shrill screams and strong enough to withstand both the nuclear blast and her inhuman strength in a crisis, you would not know if she was alive or dead. *Therefore* Ellen Donnelly would be both alive and dead at the same time. This condition is not to be confused with the condition of being both living and dying simultaneously. To be both alive and dead at the same time is to be unseen; living and dying: just livin’.

10 Things Only Spies Will Understand

For a little while, I had trouble finding peace with the espionage missions I was pulling off with Steve. He had been a spy for much longer, sort of a grandfather figure in the spy world, and I was just coming up, a beautiful femme fatale that wore a shade of lipstick called “Interrogator.”

It’s clear now that all the lines I crossed for my career had the effect of scrambling the inner yolk I thought I had. My essence had gone a little gothic. Dogs were the first to suspect me, I think because my spirit was confusing. I had the appearance of a puppet who’d learned to operate itself.

These troubles, you understand them only through their ambiguous presentations. The persistent head cold, the lethargy, the itchy scalp—I could have chalked these up to food sensitivities just as easily as disorientation caused by crossing time zones as a spy. I doubled up on anti-inflammatory remedies, pretending that it was just the travel that didn’t sit with me, not the multiple disguises. How embarrassing to be allergic to your job.

Even so, Steve and I were great partners, and I operated under the belief that he respected me, as much as a guy in his position could. I was faithful to him, I admired his seeming peace, his ability, through it all, to just walk into a room and be him, no fooling. It was as if all of the assassinations, the pen knives to the throats, the silent snaps of necks, had been nothing more than natural extensions of his persona. He was grounded in a way that I could never be, positioned exactly at the center of his own mandala, able to return there every night. His universe was Steveocentric; I skirted it,

never sure if I constituted my own planet, or was a just a scrap of detritus floating through his space.

Now, forget everything you know about being a spy. I might still be in the game if I hadn't been so poorly informed from the beginning. I thought, for instance, that I could be featureless. I thought that to be disguised meant to be without detail, that to be without detail would help me go invisible. You need to put that out of your mind, that's not how it is. Instead, whenever I applied the latex facial features of another identity, I would retain my own in a sort of murky paradox, neither me nor them, no one for the moment. Even afterwards, as I sat in the steaming bath of a rundown Paris hotel room, a chair propped under the door handle because I was afraid that at any moment an assassin with a silencer would burst in and shoot me in the direct center of the head, the fear could never overpower the feeling that I had got lost somewhere. That I was crawling on my hands and knees towards some reference point that hadn't been identified. *That's* how it is to be a spy.

Eventually, my ailments began to wear me down. The inflammation in my joints began to feel arthritic. I could no longer do the acrobatics I'd been hired for. I caught diabetes and struggled with insomnia. I could never sleep at night because it hurt to keep my body still. My appetite was ravenous and disgusting and I quelled it by smoking Parliaments. I littered black ringed butts everywhere I went, my calling card.

"I'm not depressed Steve," I would say. He would look into my face and notice how loose the skin under my eyes had become with my inhuman circadian rhythms.

"Well you don't look good, kid. I hate to see you like this." He was so fatherly and qualitative sometimes, I forgot that we were independent agents.

“I’m just a little disrupted right now,” I would tell him, and I would try to imagine a time when I had thought of myself as a contiguous being. First grade? I may have been what I appeared to be when I was 6 or 7, but since then...not really. Certainly not since I’d started dressing up in wigs and walking out into the night to find the cocktail party where the secret elite were gathering, wired and toting a tiny pistol in my garter.

The international stuff was exciting, but our spy ring had been hired for several industrial espionage cases in and around Baltimore. I’d been enjoying the slower pace of this recent spell, rarely traveling further than Vienna, Virginia to track down an insider and pry information out of them using my feminine wiles. I got to spend most of my days off at home and was able to fall into an easier routine, didn’t feel like a vampire drawing the shades against the violence of the afternoon sun just so I could sleep.

I had just gotten back from a midday run in Druid Hill Park when Roger slipped one of those postcards underneath my door, the kind that instructs you to meet at a certain street corner at a certain time wearing sunglasses, the rendezvous where you and the go-between can pace around each other in circles by the trashcan. I hated when jobs started like this, walking away I always felt like I’d forgotten to ask an important question about my mission. *Who’s brother is he again? How much had they embezzled?*

I reached the corner of Light Street and Lombard at exactly thirteen hundred hours wearing my bob wig, sunglasses, fedora and trench coat. ‘P,’ as he was known, took one look at me and said “god L, could you look more *incognito*?” He had chosen a hiding-in-plain-sight disguise: pleated khaki’s and an oversized blue checked button up. He looked like a Customer Service Representative on his lunch break.

“Oh, nobody cares P, I’m just having fun.” I had been doing this 7 years, and it was just starting to dawn on me that when people look at you, they don’t really care what they see.

By twenty three hundred hours that same night, there I was, my black catsuit with a rip in the thigh exposing part of my broken flesh, crouching among the darkened cubicles on the 6th floor of an office building overlooking Market Street in Baltimore. I’d neutralized the security detail and was now searching for the desk that my mark had been occupying for the last couple of weeks. I’d gained entry by posing as a late night janitor and taking the elevator up to the 5th floor with a forged ID badge.

There were a few people still working, entering data and sending it to their correspondents in Mumbai. The sad irony of the fact that they were precariously employed independent contractors, without a health benefits plan, working for a multinational pharmaceuticals company, had slipped over them like a piece of plastic sheeting poised to suffocate them should they take too big a breath. I abandoned my janitor’s jumpsuit and crawled through a heating duct in the bathroom ceiling, finding my way to the elevator shaft and scurrying up the cables like an industrious rat. The rip in my catsuit was incidental, but leant a sort of immediacy to my project. I was never squeamish at the sight of blood; I sometimes thought of myself as a bag of flesh ready to come apart at the seams.

The job itself was amateur, the kind of stuff I pulled off when I was first starting out and no one trusted me. As P and I circled each other on the sidewalk outside of H&M, I told myself that this would be my last job, that I had no reason to keep putting my body through this process of elimination, week after week growing further and further from wholeness. I would take the money I earned from this heist (which was to

retrieve a manilla file folder from the desk of some lower level coordinator in accounts management) and move in with my mom for a few months. There were plenty of jobs I could have that didn't involve entrapment, that didn't involve dangling myself over the abyss of inward isolation, every day a new person, never anyone at all. I would find one of those jobs, and I would meditate in the spare bedroom for a while.

Creeping among the rented rolling chairs on the puke colored carpet, the smell of hot sheets feeding out of a laser printer mixed with the smell of impermanence, of insecure sweat, I imagined myself sitting at one of the desks. I imagined my hair grown out and flung into a messy ponytail, my outfit a vague nonattempt at business casual, my mind fixating on the problem of lunch while I solved tedious programming glitches. I imagined myself simultaneously bored and anxietized, simultaneously grounded and panicking, and I pulled myself into one of the chairs and placed my hand on the stranger's mouse, trying to feel what it would feel like to have low-back trouble, to be watching the clock.

I turned on the PC in front of me and guessed the login password in one go. I launched the stranger's browser and opened their history, scrolled down to the beginning of their day.

I watched them open their email and their facebook, follow a few links to articles like *43 Photos That Prove Everything In Your Life is a Lie* and *10 Things You Will Only Understand If You Went to NYU*. I watched them do a few hours of work in the middle of the day, occasionally googling questions about array-entering INDEX/MATCH formulas in Microsoft Excel and refreshing their facebook every 45 minutes. I watched them take their lunch break. When they got back, they opened craigslist and scanned the job listings in admin/office, marketing/pr/ad, sales/biz dev, and tv/film/video, just for

fun. They searched through the missed connections to see if they could find themselves. Their supervisor walked by, they redirected to a map of Mumbai, thinking that being curious about where your company was located was a good excuse. Then they did a few minutes of work and noticed that it was 3:30. They looked up a recipe that used ground turkey, they had some in the fridge that needed to be eaten. They got up and went to the bathroom for 20 minutes and then started on the report that they were required to fill out at the end of every day, a bullet pointed list of tasks they had accomplished and things that should be troubleshot. They finished entering the last set of figures into their spreadsheet and went home.

Blood seeped slowly from my wound and darkened the sharkskin of my pantleg. In all my years of spying I had never felt so guilty, watching someone else's every private movement, even privater than private because they had never thought to hide it. I was an errant snoop, indiscriminately penetrating. I dropped down to my knees and closed my eyes, trying to practice the yogic breathing exercises I'd been using to relax. My mind's eye filled with images of the person whose life I had just possessed: their cat, their bus pass, their late night trips to the grocery store. I crawled along the window bank, hoping that I would remember what I'd come here for, some file, some stack of papers detailing the illegal activities of a secret double agent, some irreproachable proof of a whistleblower. When you are on a job like this, when everything is quiet and dark and raindrops silhouetted on the window form a sloppy pattern on your skin, you are less inclined to personal ego. The woman on a mission is your life's imago, and in these silent, crawling moments you become her.

My spy watch lit up with a message alert from P. He wanted to know if I'd found the files. He said that he had located a sting op moving in on the radar and that I needed

to get out ASAP, or become a fly in the spider's web. I thought of the people working the night shift below me being picked off one by one by fatigue and disunion. I tried not to smear blood from my thigh on the window.

Using the voice-recognition software on my earpiece I messaged P. They were in hand, I said, I would be repelling down the south face of the building in approx 4 minutes, meet me with the car. On my hands and knees I crawled between the rolling chairs towards the breakroom, the smell of stale coffee and the possibility of roaches growing stronger as I neared. My fingerless gloves pressed against the seamless tiles. I thought how all this time that I believed I was born to be a spy, all these years of being Steve's mentee, unbothered by the broken ribs and shrapnel in my flesh, I could have been here, some other type of woman. I could have thought of my head as an expression of my own personality, not just a material to attach new selves to. And then you know, I stood up. Full upright. Like the first bipedal human emerging from the ocean floor. I filled the electric kettle and popped it on. I tore the corner of an instant coffee packet and poured it into a styrofoam cup. I helped myself to a stale donut, leaning against the counter and gazing across the office onto the twinkling lights of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. P messaged me that he was in position, and I stood licking glaze from the tips of my fingers while my water boiled. As I stirred the dissolving granules with scrapes against the bottom of the cup, I heard the bing bong of the elevator doors opening onto my floor. My spy watch vibrated persistently as I poured in a healthy scoop of nondairy creamer powder. It was P messaging me that I was hot, that the job was hot and I needed to get out. Yeah yeah yeah I said to myself, you'll get your report when I'm good and ready, a line I think I'd snatched from a lonely scene in a movie about subordination.

Of course, you can probably guess that the ops found me, drinking coffee in the breakroom, seriously considering a second donut. It wasn't difficult to neutralize them, a couple of death jabs, a round house, and they were down. Stultified again. I launched over them and grabbed a cardigan hanging on the back of someone's chair. As I pulled it on I wondered if in my new life I would smoke cigarettes, or if I would be one of those health people who listen to their bodies' truths.

Author's Afterword

The images in “Deed Thief” were screengrabbed from a Google search for “help with foreclosure,” artist unknown. “Aack” utilizes the title character from the comic strip *Cathy*, written by Cathy Guisewhite and syndicated in 1,400 newspapers internationally between 1976 and 2010. In “Being’s Believing,” the narrator’s patient reenacts parts of the 1983 movie *Flashdance* starring Jennifer Beals. “Thought Disorder” borrows excerpts from the grand jury testimony of police officer Darren Wilson, who fired 12 bullets at unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. “What You Have To Look Forward To” is a tribute to astrologer Susan Miller. The title of “Thirty, Flirty, and Thriving” is a quote from the movie *Thirteen Going on Thirty*, and the main character of that story lives partially inside the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*.