

Helene
&
Writing Abuse, Shame, and Death: A Poetics of Spirit within the Failing Body

Tracy Jane Gregory

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Amaranth Borsuk

Sarah Dowling

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Abstract

Helene

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Writing Abuse, Shame, and Death: A Poetics of Spirit within the Failing Body

Tracy Jane Gregory

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Assistant Professor Amaranth Borsuk

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

Helene is a cross-genre text through the lens of a young female woman, Helene, that both ruminates on the grief caused by having a female body, specifically one that fails to meet the expectations of others, and pays homage to the possibility of life without a body. The title character, grappling with the death of her grandfather and its impact on her sense of self and body, processes her grief through various forms: letters written to her grandfather's spirit, fragmented prose and poetry, an episode of an imaginary television sitcom of Helene's life where well-known figures stand in for her family members, and magazine articles, advertisements, and self-guided exercise that execute Helene's desire to exist in the spiritual realm. *Writing Abuse, Shame, and Death: A Poetics of Spirit within the Failing Body* studies the creation of Helene as writing in spite of body through the practice of mediumship. It discusses the text as a response to the death of the author's

own grandfather, a death that helped her realize the acts of repression in her life and her writing. *Helene and Writing Abuse, Shame, and Death: A Poetics of Spirit within the Failing Body* are thus a process, not product, of grieving that moves through the internal conflict the author has felt as a woman mourning both the loss of a loved one and the temporary loss of identity and agency as a result of abuse.

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Helene

by Tracy Jane Gregory

Dedicated to my family

In thanks of Amaranth Borsuk,
Sarah Dowling, and Danielle Vogel

In memory of Jan Crouch

Dear Reader:

Thank you for subscribing to *Possessive Spirit Magazine*. We are the official magazine of Possessive Spiritualism (PS), a practice of communal spiritual wellbeing. While our current physical forms prohibit our spirits from wandering, we prepare followers of the faith for life in the spiritual realm. For many, this practice begins by accepting that you're not alone. Your body may be your temple, but that doesn't mean it can't house more than one spirit!

Possessive Spirit Magazine strives to educate readers on this path toward collaborative spiritualism. Within each issue, you will find articles from experts in the field as well as celebrities who share their real lived experiences as Possessive Spiritualists. You will also find quizzes, tips, and exercises that can guide you with your daily PS rituals and success stories from fellow subscribers who have benefited from the PS practice.

In order to assist you with a successful transition to a Possessive Spiritualist, we have sent our very first issue, which will help you identify your spirit and take the appropriate steps to communicating and collaborating with the spirits beyond.

We appreciate your contribution to our collective spirit and look forward to meeting you in the ether.

Yours,

The Editors

The sun rises. I
walk inside
your trailer.
My aunt, so
thin her shirt
hangs like a
ghost. *Go
ahead, touch
him.* I stay
behind the
counter. Your
lips part as if
gasping. A
yellow stain on
your chin.

Driving down I-5, Jenny attempts to cheer me up. She shouts nonsense at the sun.

You look like my ex-lover!

I want to stroke you!

Let me snuggle your rays inside of me!

Jenny grabs my hand, signaling that I should join in, but my words lack her sexually comedic undertones. Instead, I sound like Aunt Jan whenever she finds Christ in natural landscapes.

Oh, wonder sunrays! You're just like little bits of Heaven shining down on us!

Jenny's laugh slowly fades into silence until she turns on the radio. Alice Cooper's *Hallowed Be My Name* comes through the speakers, and Jenny sings along.

Cursing the lovers,

Cursing the bible.

I shift my attention to the gang of motorcyclists ahead. They wear red leather vests with matching cross patches. I stick my forehead against the window and ask Jenny to drive closer. The words "The Chosen Few" are stitched in thin yellow letters across the men's backs. Another reminder of Aunt Jan. She used to say that Christians are the true chosen few. *It's the Jews that got it all wrong.*

Jenny rolls down her window and hollers at the motorcyclists. They glance over and we make the universal sign for licking pussy. The gang collectively revs their engines and, one by one, they speed off toward the horizon.

London, England, 1964

A fine, gloomy day, and Rosemary Brown sits at the piano. It's been twelve years since she's played, but she feels a dead man moving through her. This man is Franz Liszt. Together, they compose a 40-page sonata.

It was like I got to breathe again, through the keys, through the music.

Franz invites his pianist friends, Brahms; Bach; Rachmaninoff. They too move through Rosemary's fingers, while other spirits dictate from outside her body. Chopin pushes Rosemary's hands to the right keys. Schubert tries to sing as she follows.

They all feel like immortals at my elbow.

Critics doubt Rosemary's compositions as dictations from the spirits. She's merely copying similar attributes of the prolific pianists. In interviews, she contradicts her musical background.

Rosemary continues to play. She can't be burdened.

I wake up from
a guttural
noise. I
remember
body. A steady
rumbling. The
smell of rot.
No longer
grand, just a
daughter. Sil-
ent smoke
rising. I won't
forget.

Dear Grandpa,

I woke up drunk to the sound of rain. It reminded me of your saying: *what we need is a little sun to hang this cure-over.*

Missing you like Vitamin D,

Helene

Cue Helene Intro:

It is 1998. Camera scans a skyline of Los Angeles. Theme Song Jesus is Just Alright by the Doobie Brothers begins:

Doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo.
Doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo.

Camera scans the Hollywood sign and cuts to a neighborhood of one-story houses.

Doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo.
Doo doo doo doo doo doo

Shot of nine-year-old HELENE and her family about to eat dinner. HELENE spoons potatoes into her mouth, but JAN CROUCH wags her finger. HELENE spits the potatoes back onto her plate. JAN CROUCH does the sign of the cross, and the family says a prayer before eating.

Jesus is just alright with me.
Jesus is just alright whoa yeah.

Shot of HELENE'S MOTHER smoking a joint in the backyard. She hears JAN CROUCH coming and quickly stubs the joint under her Birkenstock before JAN CROUCH walks in the shot from around the corner.

Jesus is just alright with me.
Jesus is just alright.

Shot of GRANDPA watching a Western on television and JAN CROUCH entering the room. She grabs the remote from GRANDPA'S hands and changes the channel to her television show, Praise the Lord.

I don't care where they may go. I don't care what they may know.

Shot of the entire family leaving church, laughing, smiling and holding hands.

Jesus is just alright. Oh yeeeeeeeeeah.

I look up "The Chosen Few" on Wikipedia. The gang isn't a religious one at all, but a group of misfits and outlaws. The cross on their vests is not a crucifix but one made up of human bones, and "The Chosen Few" alludes to the small number of black motorcyclists at the time of the gang's origin (1959). The gang has never discriminated membership based on race and considers itself to be the first multiracial motorcycle gang in North America.

The pews I
remember. A
dark oak with
lacquer so
smooth to the
touch. I want to
bite through it,
so my teeth can
meet wood.
Instead, I rub
my palms on
the seat and
count the bulbs
above me. 96.

I run into "The Holy Ghost" on my way home from the bus stop. The words are written in yellow chalk on the sidewalk, and I track it inside the apartment.

The Holy Ghost followed you in here? asks Jenny.

I tilt my head the way I do when my mother asks if I'm a believer.

I'm just fucking with you. I saw it too.

I put my body next to hers, *Oh, really?* and pull her pants down.

Feel like someone's following you?

It's because someone is following you!

Find out who, or what, by joining Antioch's School of
Collective Spirit Crusaders.



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\$699 *

*per month

Dear Grandpa,

I fell asleep to *Bonanza* last night. If I was wearing flannel pajamas, I could have sworn I was you for a moment! I like the show so far, but I find Hoss's dimwittedness a bit irritating. Maybe soon I'll grow to love him like you did.

Love,
Helene

Last week on Helene:

Cut to HELENE'S MOTHER and GRANDPA sitting in a kitchen. HELENE'S MOTHER has just hung up her landline.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Guess who just called.

GRANDPA
Who?

HELENE'S MOTHER
Your sister.

GRANDPA
I haven't seen that Jan in over a decade! Not since she joined that wacko church of hers and started making a fool of herself on TV.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Well, you'll get to see her real soon. She's coming to town, and I said she could stay with us.

Cut to HELENE'S MOTHER leading JAN CROUCH into the family's living room. HELENE, and GRANDPA are waiting for her on the couch.

JAN CROUCH
Why, hello, strangers!

Only HELENE stands up.

And this beautiful young girl must be Helene!

Cut to scene of HELENE'S MOTHER and GRANDPA discussing JAN CROUCH'S arrival in GRANDPA'S bedroom. HELENE'S MOTHER and GRANDPA pass a glass bong back and forth.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Jan has gone too far this time. She's trying to drive a wedge between me and my own daughter!

GRANDPA
That's Jan for yah!

Two women approach me with a tablet. They speak in memorized lines and fragmented English. *We are from World Mission Society Church of God. You need the Holy Mother.* They scroll through their screen of bible verses and hand me the tablet. *You hurt. Please read aloud.*

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." Let anyone who hears this say, "Come." Let anyone who desires, drink freely from the water of life. Revelations 22:17

The women ask me to join them. *You thirst, friend.* My mouth sewn shut with thick, black thread. I am silent.

The women retreat back to their street corner. I call my mother.

Helene, we're all suffering. Just say a damn prayer.

Dear Grandpa,

Are you in good with God yet? Please tell him to buy me a ticket to Los Angeles. My mom wants me back, but I don't have the money.

Love,
Helene

I walk inside
your trailer,
remain behind
the counter.
Your lips part
like a ghost. So
thin a yellow
stain hangs. *Go
ahead, touch
him.* The sun
rises on your
chin as if
gasping.

The TV in my dentist's waiting room is on FOX News. Megyn Kelly interviews two of the Duggar daughters. The girls were molested by their brother, Josh, at the age of nine and twelve-years-old. Megyn Kelly wants to know if they feel like victims of sexual assault. *It happened in our sleep, says one, a quick feel, whatever.* The other nods her head and smiles. *We didn't even know until our parents told us. Josh confessed the morning after. We forgave him right away.*

Megyn Kelly asks again if the girls identify as victims. Instead, they congratulate their parents. *Aren't they handling this scandal so well?*

In the dentist's chair, I receive shots in my gums and a small dose of nitrous. In and out of consciousness, I imagine hands pulling on parts. Spit drips down my chin and neck and I feel nothing.

At home, I watch *19 Kids and Counting*. My lips still numb, I count how often Josh is told he is loved.

24. Reincarnation exists. What form will you take in your next life?

- A. Rosie the Riveter paperweight
- B. Switchblade
- C. Rock along the shore, slowly wearing down into a grain of sand
- D. Gust of wind

Core Spirit Identity Quiz Results!

Instructions: add up the number of A, B, C, and D answers.

If you answered A to more than 12 questions, your core spirit identity is 'Humble Spirit':

Your will is very strong but open, as you give other spirits the space to express themselves in your presence. Other spirits may take your openness as a sign of weakness, particularly the Badass Spirit, but you have no problem reminding them of your strong will when it counts. Humble spirits make great mentor or parental possessor spirits, so the best possessor/possessee pairs for you will be Mentor or Kinship Relationships.¹

You have the same core spirit as the following celebrity figures and characters: Michelle Obama, Emma Watson, and Laverne Cox. Your calming presence attracts other spirits often, so if you are not interested in social spirit interaction, conduct a simple banishment² of the spaces you commonly visit.

¹ Please perform Exercise 5: Possessor/Possessee Relationship Flowchart on p. 74 to confirm your ideal Possessor/Possessee Relationship.

² For a definition of banishment, please see the INDEX in the back of this issue.

Scene 1:

HELENE enters the living room. AUDIENCE laughs and cheers. She is wearing a white dress with a pink tulle skirt that flips up when she sits down on the couch. She kicks up her pink velour Mary Janes onto the coffee table and cautiously looks left to right. When she sees that the coast is clear, she pulls out a magazine from underneath the couch cushion. Camera pulls in tight on the cover: Special Bettie Page Anniversary Edition. The girl on the cover is wearing Bettie Page bangs and a leopard print bikini, while petting a tiger that sits in her lap.

HELENE

Wow.

HELENE turns a few pages and looks from the magazine to her chest back to the magazine. She turns a few more pages and tilts the magazine vertically. She looks concerned and bends down, placing her head between her legs.

HELENE

How is that even possible?

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

From around the corner

How is what even possible?

HELENE quickly places the magazine back underneath the couch cushion. JAN CROUCH enters the room, wearing a baby blue A-line dress that shows off her cleavage. As usual, her coral pink lipstick matches her coral pink hair. JAN CROUCH walks up to HELENE and sits down next to her, grabbing a handful of pink tulle.

HELENE

Uhhh... How is it even possible that this dress is so pretty?

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

I bet your mother has never bought you a dress this pretty before.
I'm so glad you both got dressed up for Mass today.

HELENE

It's not like we had a choice. You told us if we didn't wear these clothes that God would send us straight to Hell!

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

I did not. Just that he wouldn't let you into his house of worship. But none of that matters now, because we all had a great time in his house, didn't we?

HELENE
I guess so.

JAN CROUCH

You guess so? Well, I know so. I could feel His spirit communicating with me, and I think your mother could feel Him too.

HELENE
Are you sure that wasn't just the dope she was feeling?

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

What? NO! Your mother doesn't smoke marijuana.

HELENE
My mom always keeps a baggy of it in her purse.

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

Now, that is just a flat out lie, Helene! Where did you learn to lie like that?

HELENE
I'm not lying.

JAN CROUCH

Oh goodness, the Devil is moving through you, young lady.

AUDIENCE laughs.

Come here, child, and kneel.

HELENE sits on her knees in front of Jan. Her back turned to the audience so that only her head and a pile of pink tulle can be seen. JAN CROUCH places one open palm on HELENE'S forehead and raises her other hand towards the sky.

Please, Lord, bless this child and all that surrounds her. Keep her from any evil spirits and banish the ones that already exist inside her.

Just as JAN CROUCH takes HELENE'S shoulders and starts to shake her, HELENE'S MOTHER enters the room. She is wearing ripped blue jeans, Birkenstocks, and a Grateful Dead t-shirt. Her hair is up in a ponytail.

HELENE'S MOTHER

What kind of party we got going on in here?

AUDIENCE laughs and cheers.

JAN CROUCH

I see it didn't take you very long to change back into scummy attire...

JAN CROUCH releases HELENE, who seems a little dizzy but happy nonetheless.

...and this isn't a party. I was exorcising your child. The evil spirit that possesses her seems to believe you smoked marijuana before church this morning.

AUDIENCE laughs.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Jan, you know you don't have to do that bullshit here. We aren't on your woo woo show right now.

HELENE

Ooooh! You've got a TV show, Aunt Jan?

JAN CROUCH appears shocked, more so than when she believed HELENE was possessed.

JAN CROUCH

Have you not shown her *Praise the Lord*?

HELENE

What's *Praise the Lord*?

JAN CROUCH gasps.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Just some show where your Auntie charms snakes and raises chickens from the dead.

HELENE

Zombie chickens?! That's so cool!

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

I am *not* pretending! I very much had a chicken that died.

JAN CROUCH kneels down to meet HELENE at eye level.

I was just a little girl when it got hit by a car.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Not this story again...

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

My girlfriend and I ran to the chicken and carried him inside onto the dining room table.
We said one prayer: *God if your eye is on the sparrow, then you will heal this little chicken.* And my chicken came back to life!

HELENE
Wow! Do you have magical powers?

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

No, honey, magic is the Devil's work. I just have God on my side. Want to watch *Praise the Lord* with me? I can show you the episode where I talk about my little chicken!

HELENE
Yeah!

JAN CROUCH and HELENE sit down in front of the television. HELENE'S MOTHER waits for the two to be distracted by the show and then pulls a joint and a lighter out of her pocket. Camera closes in on HELENE'S MOTHER lighting the joint in the backyard.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Praise the Lord.

AUDIENCE laughs. Cue outro music:

Doo doo doo doo doo doo do doo.

I binge watch all of *19 Kids and Counting*, stuck to a sweat drenched couch and the aches of an adrenaline come down. My manager from Home Depot leaves a voicemail. *Another no call, no show?*

My limbs are just to limp to function.

I wake up from
a body. Forget
rising. Guttural
rot. No longer
grand, just
silent.

Jan Crouch was in the news today. I hadn't seen her since my aunt's *Praise the Lord* phase. She and 39 other televangelists met with Donald Trump to ask God for his guidance over the campaign. The video on CNN showed Jan just for a brief moment, dabbing her wet eyes with a tissue.

I find the segment on Youtube and make a five second clip of Jan wiping tears from her face. I send it to my mother.

Remind you of anyone?

Dear Grandpa,

When would you say your life ended? Not as in soul leaving body, but a readiness for departure.

Was it when you realized you were bed ridden for the rest of your life? Or was it when you lost your family, separated to all sides of the country? Was it when you moved into your trailer and you had no women left to take care of you? Were you ever ready?

Helene

Exercise 3: Practice being selective with the proprietors of your will

Supplies needed: basket of fruits that range in size, such as pineapple; pear; blueberry; and cantaloupe, table, comfortable chair

There is a common misconception that possession is a case of unwarranted admittance on the part of the possessor, but this is rarely the case. Possessor spirits need permission from you, the potential possessee, in order to mount³ your body. However, permission isn't a simple case of saying yes or no to the possessor; it is a trying and lengthy process of using your freewill to welcome or banish the spirit. In order for a possessor to enter a body, the individual needs to have a weak freewill or the ability to release control. To banish a possessor and keep them from entering, you need to have a strong freewill with the ability to harness control. In both welcoming and banishing possession, it is necessary to have a continual practice of accessing and strengthening freewill.

--

Preparation

Begin by taking a deep breath. Calmness allows you to easily alternate between states of spirit vulnerability. Next, place the basket of fruits on a table and sit in a comfortable chair in front of the fruits.

Part 1

Take another deep breath and locate your spirit.⁴ Focus your attention on the cantaloupe. Imagine the cantaloupe accessing your spirit: controlling your thoughts, actions, and desires. Ask yourself, "What would a cantaloupe do if it had access to a functioning body?" Maybe it would stand on your balcony and use its newly attributed nostrils to smell the fresh, clean air, or maybe it would curl up into a ball and barrel roll on your yoga mat. Give in to the desires of the cantaloupe and act them out. After fifteen minutes, return to your previous seat in front of the fruit and release the cantaloupe from your spirit.

Part 2

Focus on the pineapple, pear, and blueberry. Locate your spirit and build an imaginary force field around it. Conjure memories you believe represent your spirit in its truest form. Send small increments of energy through these spiritful memories toward the fruits, as if your spirit were pushing the fruits forcefully away from your body. After fifteen minutes, pull back your energy, but keep your force field up.

Decompression

Notice a dip in cognitive power and positive emotion. This is a mere fraction of the effect a possessor spirit will have on you when they attempt to mount. Eat a piece of dark

³ For a quick list of possession stages and their definitions, see INDEX

⁴ For exercises on locating, releasing, and relaxing your spirit, see pg. 104

chocolate or take a brisk walk to get your power and emotion back to a more neutral level. By practicing this freewill exercise often, the dip in power and energy will lessen with time.

Once you have conquered fruit, feel free to move on to other objects.

Jan Crouch was the model woman for my aunt: feminine, strong, and married to the Lord. I'd dance around the TV, *Praise the Lord* on repeat, as my aunt learned from the couch how to be a holy roller. Pink lips repenting sin, blue velour, big wig: all tactics to reveal a true Christian heart. Audiences of wildly moving mouths, I'd shake my chubby cheeks in mimicry. *The Holy Spirit is nothing to gawk at, my dear.* It took me years to realize they were speaking in tongues.

Her scent a
cherry blossom
from Bath and
Body Works.
A cake pop or
Dubble Bubble
stuck in my
hair. She cuts
the strand,
kisses my
hand. I am
stained
coral pink for a
week.

Scene 2:

HELENE and JAN CROUCH are sitting back on the couch. They have just finished watching a few episodes of Praise the Lord. JAN CROUCH is still in her A-Line dress, but her shoes have been flung onto the floor. HELENE has taken off her pink tulle skirt and has wrapped it around her head.

HELENE

Aunt Jannie, how come we never get to see you anymore?

JAN CROUCH

Well, Helene, your mother and I just aren't that close, and your grandfather refuses to speak to me.

HELENE

Were you ever close with Mom?

JAN CROUCH

Yes, in fact I was the one that drove her out to California.

HELENE

Really?? Mom never told me that!

JAN CROUCH

It's true. It was in 1979. I remember because it was right after Bob Dylan came out with his album, *Slow Train Coming*.

HELENE

Mom says that's when he started turning shit.

Audience laughs.

JAN CROUCH

Mind your demons, Helene! Your mother may say that now, but she used to have a big crush on Dylan. He's actually the reason we drove out to California!

HELENE

Really??

JAN CROUCH

Yes! He had just converted, thank the Lord, and we heard he had been baptized at this friendly little church in Los Angeles called the Valley Vineyard.

HELENE

Isn't that the church you used to go to?

JAN CROUCH

Why, yes it is!

Flashback begins. Cut to a 1979 Los Angeles skyline. Camera closes in with an aerial shot of a white Cadillac Deville driving down Sunset BLVD. Cut to second camera

showing a side view of the car. HELENE'S MOTHER, in her mid-twenties and wearing aviators, is driving the car. JAN CROUCH is in the passenger seat, in her forties and wearing her hair up in a white handkerchief. The Cadillac pulls into the Valley Vineyard Church parking lot and turns off.

HELENE'S MOTHER
This place looks like a dump.

AUDIENCE laughs

JAN CROUCH
Nonsense! You don't need a fancy estate to worship the Lord.

JAN CROUCH exits the passenger seat of the Cadillac and takes out a vial of Holy Water. She sprinkles a dash on the hood. AUDIENCE laughs

Thank you, Angels, for protecting us.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Quit that shit out, Jan. Let's go inside.

JAN CROUCH and HELENE'S MOTHER walk up the steps to the front doors of the church. There is a sign that reads, "Long haired freaky people are welcome here." Jan opens the door.

JAN CROUCH
Oh, that man in the jeans looks like he can help us.

They walk over to PASTOR IN JEANS.

Excuse me, mister! Is this where Bob Dylan was baptized?

PASTOR IN JEANS
Well, this is where his first attempt was.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Attempt?

PASTOR IN JEANS
Yes, sadly it didn't take, but they tried baptizing him again in the ocean a week later. It seems like that one is working.

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH
I'd just love to meet him!

PASTOR IN JEANS

I'm sorry, miss. Unfortunately, he doesn't come to open services. One of the pastors visits him at his house.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Well, can you tell us anything about him? What's he wear every day?

PASTOR IN JEANS

Hmm. I'm not sure about every day, but I do know they let Bob wear his sunglasses in Bible study. Normally, there are no hats or glasses allowed.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Why?

JAN CROUCH

Because there are no disguises in the face of the Lord!

AUDIENCE laughs.

PASTOR IN JEANS

Yes, we accept the Lord into our hearts when we are at our most open and pure. Hats and glasses can block our receptors to God.

PASTOR IN JEANS hands HELENE'S MOTHER a pamphlet.

PASTOR IN JEANS

Have you accepted Jesus Christ into your heart yet?

HELENE'S MOTHER does not accept the pamphlet and puts her hands in her pockets.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Sorry, man. I don't believe in magic.

AUDIENCE laughs. Flashback ends and we see HELENE, lying on the floor. Her tulle skirt is now off her head and in the corner.

HELENE

You both used to be so cool!

JAN CROUCH

We still are, honey!

From the couch, JAN CROUCH reaches out with her hand to grab HELENE'S when she feels something poke her from underneath the couch cushion.

JAN CROUCH

What's this?

JAN CROUCH pulls out the magazine and sees the Bettie Page cover.

JAN CROUCH

A porno magazine?! Am I living in a house of perversion? Whose is this?!

Close up on HELENE'S face, looking down at the floor.

HELENE

It's not mine!

JAN CROUCH

Oh Lord, I am thoroughly disgusted!

HELENE'S MOTHER runs back inside the living room. Her eyes are red and she is coughing.

HELENE'S MOTHER

What's going on in here?

JAN CROUCH

I found this dirty magazine under the couch! Is it yours?

HELENE'S MOTHER

No! I've never seen that magazine before in my life. And what would I be looking at naked girls for? I'm not a lesbian.

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH

Well, you'd never know it with those Birkenstocks.

AUDIENCE laughs.

If it's not yours, it must be my brother's. I'm going to have a talk with him when he gets home.

HELENE

You mean Grandpa's going to get in trouble?

JAN CROUCH

Yes, with the Lord. Porn is a sin!

Cue outro music.

Jesuuuuuuuus is myyyyyyy friend.

It's 3am. I sit cross-legged on the floor, searching online for the body of Christ. Mostly bloody crucifixes and articles by Rick Warren. Again, I feel nothing. I find a website that sells communion wafers. White. Whole Wheat. Gluten Free. I click on the wafer with a lamb and a cross. I enter my credit card information, but the site won't let me order less than 2000. I click purchase and receive a text: confirmation that wafers will arrive in three days and an Emoji of Jesus rising from the grave.

Hydesville, New York, 1848

Katherine and Margaret Fox hear the knockings of a murdered man, Charles B. Rosna, in their bedroom walls. The sisters develop a Morse like system of communication with the spirit: one rap means “yes,” two raps means “no.” News of the knockings travel great lengths and modern day Spiritualism is born. With the help of their older sister Leah, Kat and Maggie hold massive public séances and answer audiences' questions about love and wealth.

Critics doubt the sisters' medium abilities, and scientists run tests by attaching listening devices to their bodies. Scientists debunk the sisters on many occasion, but still, their fame remains. Until 1888, when Margaret and Kat take \$1500 to publicly expose their mysterious rapping methods. To a crowd of 2,000, Margaret reveals that these rappings are made with her knee and toe joints, a skill she and Kat learned as young children. After the appearance, a written confession runs in *New York World*.

Having money troubles, Margaret rescinds their confession one year later, but the public does not believe her. The sisters die in poverty shortly after.

Dear Grandpa,

I have arrived in Los Angeles. Thanks again. When I walked in the door, my mom was watching TV with your ashes. She still has you in the same zip-lock bag the cremators put you in, and you're just sitting on her TV dinner stand. I don't know how she can stand it, because you look like the sand janitors throw on children's puke. Maybe, I'll try convincing her to come with me to buy an urn, or at least some sort of vase.

So, let me know what you want your eternal resting place to look like.

Love,
Helene

The prince and
power of the
air swarming
like asteroids
like ticks on
cattle juices the
unknown
appears and
asks to tie my
wrists behind
me. *It's just
metaphorical.*
*We won't leave
a mark.*

Don't let 'em leave a mark

...on your spirit!

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-Jackie, Class of 2038

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My wafers arrive. I guess they meant three business days. I soak them in wine and they dissolve into a bloody mush. I make the sign of the cross with the side of my palm as if I'm a priest blessing Eucharist and drink the chunky blood and body until I'm drunk and bloated.

I text my mom, *I just had the puke of life*, and she gets it.

Puke be with you.

And also with you.

Dear Grandpa,

Did you have doubts in death?

If you doubted the path you took in life, drop the temperature in the room so the heat turns on. If you doubted your convictions about the afterlife, make the neighbor lose his temper again. If you're resting in peace, do nothing.

Love,
Helene

A man approaches me at a bus stop and dangles necklaces at my nose. They smell of body odor and tobacco. He asks me what I like and I say *nothing*. He holds out a backpack filled with jewelry. At the top of the pile is Virgin Mary, shooting sunrays from her palms. She is surrounded by French words about birth and sin and loss.

The Miraculous Medal, the man tells me. I remember catechism. Devoted Marians wear her in hopes of receiving good graces. I pay the man ten dollars, and he drapes the medal around my neck. *Never take her off and your ailments will be cured*. I promise.

Too far. I am
asleep. I dream
of lilacs until
three figures
come, all
black: one ash,
one glowing
eyes. The first I
do not see. My
neck, hot
breath of a
dragon. The
second, an arm,
burnt by her
sibling. I wake,
"Who are
you?" Silence
until the third,
with yellowing
eyes. A curl
and I see the
man behind the
beast. *Go
ahead, touch
me.*

France, 1830

Sister Catherine Lebouré envisions the Marian Medal. While deep in prayer, the Virgin Mary appears to Sister Catherine and asks that her exact image be immortalized in the shape of a medallion. The next morning, Sister Catherine shares her vision with a priest and requests that the medallion be made. The priest, wary of her so-called vision, does not tell anyone of Sister Catherine's request. Instead, he observes her every day to determine her level of Holy integrity. After two years of observance, the priest trusts that Sister Catherine's vision was divine and informs an archbishop of the medallion design, leaving Sister Catherine's identity anonymous. The archbishop approves the project and commissions goldsmith Adrien Vachette to create the medals.

To this day, Catholics believe that if they wear the Marian Medal in devotion, the Virgin Mary will impart them with good graces.

Are you harboring a loved one's spirit?

We all know that the rituals surrounding death are healthy for the living. They create spaces and places to mourn so that humans can move on freely with their lives, less ridden with grief. What most of you may not know is that ceremonial mourning is also an important step in the process of dying for the dead; human closure frees the spirit to wander into the ether, un-tethering their earthly commitments.

Depending on what type of relationship you would like with your dead, complete closure may not be desirable because it cuts off all communication ties. If you would like to keep the line open, live and let live, as they say, but don't forget. However, remaining completely open creates the possibility of harm for all parties involved, both the living and dead. The dead are forced to haunt the living if they cannot move past the stage of denial.⁵ This unwanted haunting creates a negative energy around the living that can call attention to spirits of a more evil flavor, resulting in an entire horde of spirits circling the living. For even the strongest of wills, it is next to impossible to banish a horde of spirits.

To figure out if you're harboring any loved ones' spirits, try the following automatic writing exercise.

Exercise 4: Automatic Writing

Supplies needed: pen, paper, strong yet relaxed will

Automatic writing is a form of mediumship that is directed to a specific spirit. Instead of allowing the spirit to orally speak through you, like in séance, you use the method of writing to uncover their voice. It is important to be very directive in your address to said spirit to prevent unwanted spirits from interacting with you. A good way to do this is to use the methods learned in Exercise 3 to will the specific spirit into your presence.

Step 1

Develop a method of communication with the spirit. You can either ask the spirit to completely write through you, leaving your voice out of the writing, or you can write in conversation with the spirit. If this is the first time you are reaching out to this spirit, it is probably best to do the latter, since you have not yet developed a comfortable and collaborative relationship. One example is creating signifiers for the spirit that mean specific answers, such as drawing a line: if the pen veers to the right, the spirit's answer is "yes," if the pen veers to the left, the answer is "no," and if the pen remains in the middle, "I don't know."

Step 2

Usually, in practices of automatic writing, you will write down the name of the spirit you wish to address. Because this is an attempt to figure out if you are harboring a spirit and

⁵ The stages of grief affect the spirit of the dead as well. For a list of grief stages, see INDEX.

who that spirit may be, instead start by writing “Hello, Spirit I Harbor,” at the top of your paper.

Step 2

Ask the spirit identifying questions. Think of it like a game of twenty questions only guessing the correct person will assist in a restful spiritual existence. If you have any ideas of who you might be harboring, now is a good time to specifically ask the question: “Are you [Insert Name Here]?” Or you can ask about specific signifying traits, “Harboring Spirit, do you have a tattoo of a dagger piercing a blue skull on your right forearm?” If your pen remains still, it might be possible that your will is too strong and is overpowering the voice of the spirit. Relax your core spirit and try again.⁶

**At this point of writing this exercise, the author’s possessor spirit was overcome with ennui and forbid the author from finishing this instruction. See Issue #2 for the remaining steps.*

⁶ For exercises on locating, releasing, and relaxing your spirit, see pg. 104

Inside your
trailer. Shirts
hang *touch*
behind the
counter. Lips
stain chin and
thin the yellow
gasping.

Jenny asks me to write her something. *A poem will make you feel better*, but I slump, defunct at my desk. Minutes pass and I write of the Fox Sisters.

Seventh grade, I learn of Spiritualism in the margins of a U.S. History textbook. Below the section title "Women's Suffrage," a portrait of the three sisters, braids longer than the frame of the picture. I give a presentation as Margaret Fox, the beginnings of my feminism, and lead a séance for the class. I crack my toes in secret, skirt down to the floor, as she did, as if spirits are communicating through the classroom walls.

A boy points at my skirt, interrupts me. *Whatchya hiding in there? Your coochie?*

I push my knuckles into my eyelids. Desks blur and flurries of light—what if spirits did travel through bones? Would a spinal tap reveal my haunting? Would a graft lighten my spiritual load?

Dear Grandpa,

I walked in on my mom today, holding a lighter to your remains. She held the flame just below the zip-lock bag, and we watched as your bone fragments fell through the melting plastic. We sat together in silence, staring at what was left of you strewn about her lap.

With a sweeping motion, my mother picked up her coffee mug and wiped all of you into her cup. She swirled the coffee as if she were a sommelier and said we should drink you up like Metamucil. You'd finally become the little shit you always deserved to be.

I think my mom's improving, so thank you for that, Grandpa.

Until next time,
Helene

Scene 3

HELENE is drinking lemonade in the backyard with the next-door neighbor, BILLY GRAHAM. JAN CROUCH has retired to bed for a nap as she waits for GRANDPA to return home. It is 90-degree weather, so HELENE'S MOTHER is in the garage, in search of a fan. BILLY GRAHAM, usually a man of composure, has the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to his elbows with noticeable sweat marks under his armpits.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Yelling from the garage

Sorry again about the heat, Billy! I just can't find this damn fan.

BILLY GRAHAM

Softly to HELENE

Excuse your mother's language.

Yelling to HELENE'S MOTHER

That's quite all right! No one to thank but God for this lovely sunshine we've been having!

BILLY GRAHAM takes a sip of his lemonade and holds the glass up to his brow.

HELENE

Hey Billy, how do you know when you have sinned?

BILLY GRAHAM

Well, you have sinned my dear, the Original Sin. It happened the moment you were born!

AUDIENCE laughs

HELENE

Does that mean I'm going to Hell??

BILLY GRAHAM

No, no my dear. Perhaps you are too young for this. Why do you ask?

HELENE

Ummm. A friend did something they didn't think was bad, but then someone made them think what they did was a sin. Now, they're not sure what to believe.

BILLY GRAHAM

Well, let me ask you this, Helene: is your friend a Christian?

HELENE
I think so.

BILLY GRAHAM
Well, then that means they have made a conscious decision to accept Jesus Christ into their heart. If they listen to their heart, they'll know what to do.

HELENE
But how do I listen to my heart?

BILLY GRAHAM chuckles

I mean, how does my friend listen to her heart?

HELENE'S MOTHER walks into the backyard, holding a dusty, metal fan and a bright orange extension cord.

HELENE'S MOTHER
I found one! Time to cool our butts down.

AUDIENCE laughs. HELENE'S MOTHER plugs the fan into the extension cord. The air blows HELENE's auburn hair behind her head, revealing tears on her face.

Did I miss something serious?

HELENE wipes her tears. BILLY GRAHAM winks at HELENE.

BILLY GRAHAM
Not a thing!

HELENE'S MOTHER
Good! Because I also found this!

HELENE'S MOTHER runs off camera and comes back with a boom box. She plugs it into the orange extension cord and Lenny Kravitz' Fly Away comes on the stereo. HELENE'S MOTHER grabs the hands of HELENE and BILLY GRAHAM and pulls them out of their chairs. HELENE'S MOTHER, HELENE, and BILLY GRAHAM dance and sing along to the radio.

HELENE'S MOTHER, HELENE, and BILLY GRAHAM
I want to get away.
I want to fly away.
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

AUDIENCE claps and cheers. Fade to black.

At first, I
thought you
were the voice
of God. I
thought *all my*
prayers. What
is it that you do
to lose all
sense of
myself? Relie-
ved of all my
shame.

It's the first day of wearing the Miraculous Medal. I sit in the back of a bus as an androgynous girl approaches me. She is wearing an inverted cross, and I press Mary's face into my palms. *Are you trying to tell me something?*

I text Jenny about it.

Yes, stop fucking girls or you're going to Hell.

I guess good graces have contingencies.

A body rising.
Grand rot and
silent gut.
Forget
daughter, I
wake.

Dear Grandpa,

I didn't think it could, but the emptiness is growing. The desire to breathe has even left me, as if a set of hands were holding tight on my lungs, pulling themselves up from a deep hole within my stomach.

And when my mom told me about Jan, how she took back the trailer, I remembered my childhood. How you two shared a love for the heat and took me riding in Death Valley. How you planned to buy land in Mexico and raise your horses on a farm. When she left us for that pastor in Utah, did you feel this tightening of lungs?

I ask because my desire to escape has also left me, and after Jan's fallout, you parked your trailer in our backyard. But what I don't get is why you also left me, why communication is so hard.

Helene

Lisieux, France, 1882

At the age of nine, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux suffers from nervous tremors. She chatters so incessantly she cannot speak. For a year, she lies in a room with a statue of the Virgin Mary, blankets piled on top of her to keep from shaking. Doctors come and go, but she does not heal until the Virgin statue smiles back at her. It is a warm, spring day.

Our Blessed Lady has come to me. How happy I am.

Upon recovery, Thérèse joins the Carmelite convent at the age of fifteen. She proudly speaks of her Marian vision, but the nuns question its validity. Sick children are prone to hallucinations. Self-doubt turns to grief and, for years, Thérèse suffers sweetly.

I must remain little. I must become still less.

Thérèse dies of Tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four.

It's the third day of the Miraculous Medal. I forget I am wearing it until Jenny takes off my shirt.

I feel weird having sex with you while you're wearing that thing.

I take off Mary with the plan to put her back on later. I've searched for an hour. Apparently, she's lost.

Exposed muscle. When was it that my skin first ripped? People suggest exorcism like it's exercise. To cure this ailing body, I need to purge. But your added weight, I like it.

Dear Grandpa,

My memory is fading, and all that's left is insignificance. Me pulling your boots off, your white ribbed socks. You reading *True Grit*, whistling through your teeth. My mother popping your zits, a thin red handkerchief. No words exchanged. I can't make up for that.

But all of this, it's of no use really. I know I'm writing to heat vents. I know I'm praying to dirt.

Helene

Thin gasping
and *touch*.
Yellow hang
stain in the
trailer.

Scene 4

Cue Intro music:

Jesus is just alright with meeeeeeeee!

HELENE'S MOTHER, HELENE, GRANDPA, and BILLY GRAHAM sit in the backyard in front of an electric fan. Their shirts are now soaked in sweat. BILLY GRAHAM and HELENE'S MOTHER drink glasses of lemonade while GRANDPA rolls a cold can of beer across his forehead. HELENE's head is down, looking solemnly at her feet.

HELENE'S MOTHER

If the temperature keeps rising, we're gonna need more than this lousy fan.

BILLY GRAHAM

Yeah, this kind of heat seems like the Devil's work to me.

AUDIENCE laughs

GRANDPA

By Devil, do you mean my sister Jan?

AUDIENCE laughs.

HELENE

Cut it out, you guys!

GRANDPA

What's the matter, Helene? Something's got yah down?

HELENE'S MOTHER

Oh, she just doesn't want to see her grandpa get yelled at. Jan found something of yours that upset her.

GRANDPA

Something of mine? What'd she find?

HELENE'S MOTHER

Oh, I'll tell you later. We don't need to talk about it in front of guests!

AUNT JAN slams open the door to the backyard.

GRANDPA

Too late now!

AUDIENCE laughs

JAN CROUCH

There you are you dirty bastard! I've been waiting for you.

BILLY GRAHAM
Watch the language!

JAN CROUCH
Oh, so my brother can leave nudey mags lying around, but I can't say one bad word?

GRANDPA
Nudey mag? What are you talking about?

HELENE
Oh no!

HELENE'S MOTHER
Jesus, Jan! Not in front of Billy!

JAN CROUCH hands the porn magazine to GRANDPA. HELENE's eyes widen and bites down on her fingers.

GRANDPA
Bettie Page special anniversary edition? This ain't mine, but I'd like it to be!

AUDIENCE laughs.

JAN CROUCH
Now you're lying too? This family just falls apart when I'm not around.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Yeah, well you're the one that left.

JAN CROUCH
I had to leave! Your immorality was corrupting my pure soul!

AUDIENCE laughs.

HELENE'S MOTHER
Your pure soul? So it wasn't you that slept with Mr. Patacky?

GRANDPA
Who's Mr. Patacky?

HELENE'S MOTHER
My first grade teacher!

JAN CROUCH
How many times do I have to tell you?

Through her teeth

He needed my help teaching Bible Study.

BILLY GRAHAM

I don't know why I keep coming over here...

AUDIENCE laughs. HELENE, shaking in fear, stands on top of her chair.

HELENE

HEY EVERYONE! LISTEN TO ME!

HELENE'S MOTHER

Helene, not now. We're trying to have an adult conversation.

HELENE

No! You have to listen to me! I think I've sinned!

BILLY GRAHAM

Oh no, honey, it's your grandpa who has sinned.

HELENE

No, it was me. The magazine is mine!

JAN CROUCH gasps. GRANDPA laughs.

HELENE'S MOTHER

You mean, the porn magazine is yours? But where did you get it?

HELENE

I took it from a friend's house. I was just curious that's all.

JAN CROUCH

Curious? About women's bodies?! That's perverted, Helene!

HELENE'S MOTHER

No, Jan, that's perfectly...

JAN CROUCH

No child willingly looks at porn. Oh, this is worse than I thought! You've got a demon inside you, Helene, and it's turning you into a gay!

AUDIENCE laughs. JAN CROUCH pulls a vial of Holy Water out of her pocket and splashes it onto HELENE's forehead. She then grabs HELENE'S shoulders and shakes them violently.

JAN CROUCH

Get out, get out, get out you demon!

HELENE'S MOTHER

Jan, no! What did I tell you about exorcising my child?

JAN CROUCH

Not before sundown, but this one's a queer!

AUDIENCE laughs.

HELENE'S MOTHER

Quit acting crazy, Jan!

JAN CROUCH

Crazy? Your daughter's the one acting crazy! Have the LA transvestites finally gotten to you?

AUDIENCE laughs. GRANDPA assists HELENE'S MOTHER and together they pull JAN CROUCH off of HELENE. HELENE falls from the chair to the ground, convulsing. Cue outro music.

Doo doo doo do do do do doo doo!

Doo doo doo do do do doo doo!

You tell others
my hideous
secrets. You
speak foul
when I'm
lonely. You
pump my
shallow lungs
until I heave.
You gnash my
teeth. When I
ask if my
sorrow will
repair, you eat
the edges of
my holes to
make them
bigger. I can't
remember life
without your
beating spirit.

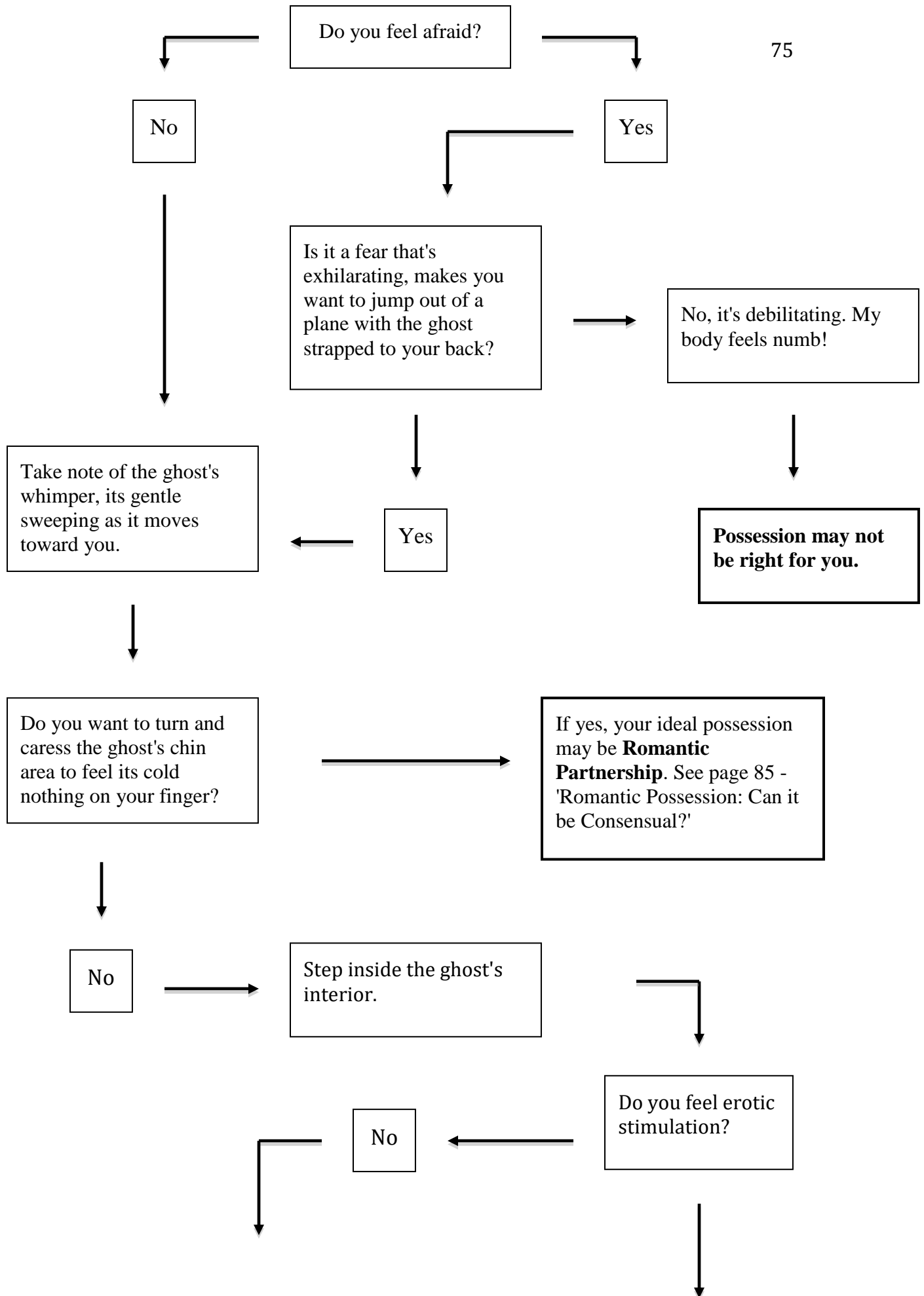
What kind of possession is right for you?

It is best to determine the preferred relationship with your possessor in advance to ensure a beneficial experience for both parties. Possessors tend to have dominant personality traits, so it is common for the possessee to be coerced into a relationship they do not desire. Being aware of your desires beforehand will encourage communication between you and your potential possessor, which increases the chances an optimal possession. To help determine your preferred relationship, try the following exercise.

Exercise 5- Possessor-Possessee Relationship Flowchart

Before examining the flow chart, place yourself in this scene:

You are brushing your teeth in the bathroom. When you look up, you see a ghost in the mirror.



Casually bring up a life-altering dilemma and ask the ghost for advice. How does the ghost's response make you feel?

If yes, your ideal possession may be a **Spectrophiliac Partnership**. See page 86 - 'Seeking a Succubus and/or Incubus'

Inspired! I have so many more questions. Please, tell me your whole previous life story, ghost!

So comforted. I would like the ghost to swaddle me until I fall asleep.

Your ideal possession may be **Familial Kinship**. See page 87 - 'Summoning Ancestral Spirits'

Appalled! That ghost is pretty demented.

Your ideal possession may be **Mentorship**. See page 88 - 'So you want Foucault's spirit to possess you...'

Try high-fiving the ghost (or briskly moving your flattened palm to the spot where a hand should be and stopping as if you could actually be in physical contact with a ghost).

Does this satisfy you in a platonic manner? Maybe you would like to go get a beer and hear some more fucked up stories.

No

If yes, the ideal possession may be **Friendship**. See page 89 - 'Becoming B.P.Fs: Best Possessors Forever'

Your needs may be too specific to identify in this flowchart exercise. Try the 'Locating Your Spirit' Exercise and call your local medium.

Dear Grandpa,

Do you remember the morning?

I arrived at dawn to find Aunt Jan already in your trailer, blowing smoke in your direction, in her words, "to cover the smell." We both watched your chest lie perfectly still. I told Jan it looked like you were about to say something. She said nothing.

In fact, she said nothing most of the trip. Until the last night, when we ate pizza on your hospice bed and Jan asked for the TV remote. My mom looked at her in shock and Jan began to plead, "Can't I just laugh? I just need to fucking laugh." We turned on TV Land and Three's Company was playing. Between drags on her cigarette Jan snorted, "He always did like that blonde bimbo." We started howling.

It felt like you were watching us. Not in approval or disapproval or any emotional response at all. I just felt a solid force against my chest, a sudden wholeness. But, maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was seeing my mom and Jan together again. Maybe it was just happiness.

I can't seem to get back to that.

Helene

Wake up rot
body
rising

Scene 5

We return to the backyard, and everyone is where we left them. HELENE is still on the ground convulsing, and BILLY GRAHAM is sitting at her side. HELENE'S MOTHER and JAN CROUCH are still bickering while GRANDPA watches in amusement, drinking his beer.

HELENE'S MOTHER

I can't believe you think my daughter's possessed by a lesbian devil!

AUDIENCE laughs.

You have tried to drive a wedge between us long enough.

JAN CROUCH

Oh, it's not me who's driving the wedge.

GRANDPA places his beer down on the table next to his chair.

GRANDPA

You know, this woman on the cover looks nothing like the Bettie Page I know.

JAN CROUCH

Not now, old man!

HELENE'S MOTHER

What do you mean the Bettie you know?

GRANDPA

We were married! Back in 1958. It was after she quit modeling and moved back to Florida. But all we had in common was movies, sex, and hamburgers, so the marriage didn't last very long.

AUDIENCE laughs. HELENE stops convulsing, opens her eyes, and sits up.

JAN CROUCH

C'mon, now. Quit with your stories.

HELENE

Wait! I would like to hear this one!

JAN CROUCH and HELENE'S MOTHER look at each other and silently agree to stop arguing. They turn towards GRANDPA and join BILLY GRAHAM and HELENE on the ground.

GRANDPA

Well, it ended one New Year's Eve. She wanted to go out dancing, but I wanted to see some friends.

JAN CROUCH
You mean gamble.

AUDIENCE laughs.

GRANDPA
Needless to say, we never saw each other again... until a few years ago.

HELENE'S MOTHER
You ran into Bettie Page a few years ago? I thought she was dead!

GRANDPA
No, no.

GRANDPA
(pointing to Billy Graham) She actually converted to one of your kind. Turns out that new years she walked into a chapel. She said she just had to go in, like somebody led her by the hand. Stood in the back and cried about her sins and how God must have disapproved of her... doing nudes and all. But the pastor came over and asked her if she had ever done anything as bad as... Oh, I forget. Some Paul guy.

BILLY GRAHAM
Apostle Paul?

GRANDPA
Yeah, that's the one. Bettie didn't know the bible or nothing, but when the pastor explained it to her, she responded, "No, of course I ain't murdered any Christians," and he said, "Well, God forgave Paul and made him..."

BILLY GRAHAM
...the greatest missionary of all time!

GRANDPA
Yeah, and if God could forgive Paul, he could certainly forgive poor ol' Bettie for posing in the nude.

All the characters laugh along with AUDIENCE.

HELENE
I see what you're saying, Grandpa, and I'm sorry, everyone, for looking at that porno mag. Can you forgive me?

HELENE'S MOTHER
Of course, sweetheart, and, Jan, I'm sorry for lashing out at you. Can you forgive me?

JAN CROUCH
I forgive you both.

EVERYONE gives JAN CROUCH a stern look.

...and I'm sorry for assuming Helene was possessed by a homo succubus.

HELENE'S MOTHER, GRANDPA, HELENE, AND BILLY GRAHAM
Oh, Jan, we forgive you.

AUDIENCE claps and cheers. Cheers fade. Credits roll as theme song plays.

Jesus is just alright with me.

Jesus is just alright whoa yeah.

Jesus is just alright with me.

Jesus is just alright.

I walk on a bridge. River water passes below me. An older woman next to me. On her wrist, a Rosary.

You're not supposed to wear those. She flips the bottom of the cross to the top.

We both lean over the railing, water rushing in our ears.

Such an atmosphere, she says, and we're dancing.

She points to the river. Rot body rising.

Go ahead, touch him.

I'll never forget.

I am willing;
*can you say yes
to my fervor?*
Chin tucked
and giggling
we float down
skirt around
me. You are a
fluttering *I
have never felt
before.*

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Poetics Statement:

Writing Abuse, Shame, and Death: A Poetics of Spirit within the Failing Body

Foreword:

I have re-written from scratch the following poetics statement twelve different times due to the difficulty I have found in balancing a proper discussion of the creative work, critical theory, and personal history that has influenced the creation of *Helene*, a cross-genre text and performance that addresses the process of grieving both identity and body. Some versions focused too heavily on the creative work and critical analysis of other writers and theorists, resulting in the loss of my own voice and work. Other versions had so much expository information that the statement felt more like a memoir or creative non-fiction piece. No versions explicitly addressed why I write the way I write. Why I wrote the way I wrote *Helene*.

In order to push myself to address my writing and relationship to language, I needed to write a draft of this statement that only included words of my own. The following statement is a revised version of this draft that still primarily focuses on my own practice and creation of *Helene*, but includes the words of three women who I felt absolutely necessary to include. To find a full list of works that have influenced both my poetics and creative work, please see the “Works of Influence” page at the end of this document.

Spirit: the essence or active principle of a substance

I've been writing in attempt to leave my body, to create a space not latent with fear. Within this body, I am not yet a survivor. I am still a victim of past sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse. Maybe one day, I will feel physically liberated, but as of now, to create, I must write in spite of my body, and I must write to those who no longer have one.

My creative process has often fallen victim to the grief that comes from having a body, a female body to be exact. The way I see it, my female body is a slave. It is a spectacle. It is sex. It is meat waiting to be pounded. This female body drags me down. It is both heavy and a container that allows for physical trespass. When I am pervaded by the awareness of my grief-ridden body, the only words I can formulate are variations of "no." Nothing flows out of me but fear.

My fear from physicality exists on a spectrum. The times I feel most trapped by my body are when I am pressured to conform to certain behaviors and appearances, which most often manifests in expectations of gender and sexuality. The freer I am to express my identity without expectation, the less constricted I feel by my grief.

But, even using the word "identity" feels constricting. My "identity" is a way for outsiders to understand my body. According to Helene Cixous in her book *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, it is an act of naming that "asserts the simplified and clear-cut images of conjugality... [An act so] destructive, so destabilizing that those who are conscious of what is at stake are often pushed toward a form of interdict" (51-52). To identify is to name and to name is to simplify, to marry ourselves to expectation. To name myself as a victim of sexual assault, to name my body as female, marries myself to

specific expectations from society, ones that have historically repressed these identities. Cixous' non-direct answer to this destruction is to find ways in our writing to "unearth" our "truths," or aspects of ourselves that have been repressed in this act of naming, for "writing... is the attempt to... find the primitive picture again, ours, the one that frightens us" (9). But what if I do not know my "truths" or even what a "truth" is? I would rather shed my skin, abandon what has been repressed, and leave what has frightened me behind. In my writing, I want a shedding that instills a sense of weightlessness both in language and being. I want my words to be unfamiliar. Sentences, disjunctive and fragmented. Form, chaotic and unknown. But as I attempt to shift my relationship to victimhood through my writing, I realize the impossibility of moving past pain. Even as I try to escape my body, the grief is too large to bear and, as Cixous notes, I am pushed to a form of interdict. My writing fails in its attempt to be weightless.

This failure is what drives my thesis project, *Helene*, a cross-genre text through the lens of a young female woman, Helene, that both ruminates on the grief caused by having a female body, specifically one that fails to meet the expectations of others, and pays homage to the possibility of life without a body. The title character, grappling with the death of her grandfather and its impact on her sense of self and body, processes her grief through various forms: letters written to her grandfather's spirit, fragmented prose and poetry, an episode of an imaginary television sitcom of Helene's life where well-known figures stand in for her family members, and magazine articles, advertisements, and self-guided exercise that execute Helene's desire to exist in the spiritual realm. Personally, the text is a response to the death of my own grandfather, a death that helped me realize these acts of repression in my life and my writing. *Helene* is thus a process,

not product, of grieving that moves through the internal conflict I have felt as a woman mourning both the loss of a loved one and the temporary loss of identity and agency as a result of abuse.

Spirit: the principle of conscious life; the vital principle in humans, animating the body or mediating between body and soul

As a woman who has been repeatedly taught that it is better to remain silent than to open my mouth and reveal my stupidity, I often feel shame when I express myself honestly, even in private. Theoretically, I understand that my sex has nothing to do with my intelligence or ability to express myself and I try to push myself to behave in ways that respond to my own desires and not expectations of womanhood. Because these learned ideologies about my sex and behavior are so deeply engrained, it is difficult to distinguish between my own intuition and what has been shamed into me. Experiencing abuse has only deepened this shame, spreading my anxiety about expression to the physical, causing me to wonder if I should just hide my body. The less I exist in the physical realm, the more I reduce the possibility of harm, right?

This desire to hide infiltrated my writing rather quickly. My creative process was not a process but a constant battle to overcome a belief that my voice and body have no value. A battle with disvalue creates great difficulty when trying to locate and trust one's intuition, something integral to the practice of an artist. I stopped using first person. The humor and wit in my voice escaped me. I started appropriating the work of others, transcribing interviews with Bettie Page and stand up specials by George Carlin, mixing them together and calling it poetry. I convinced myself I was writing communally as a radical feminist, honoring my influences and sharing knowledge, rather than hoarding it.

Kathy Acker was an idol. Roland Barthe's idea of a text as a "tissue of citations" became a mantra. While I still find value in this appropriative practice, I now understand that this method of writing was enabling my fear of expression.

As I started to realize that *Helene* was a result of my grief as a woman, I wanted to include a similar internal conflict for the character Helene, a distrust of voice both represented in the language and narrative. I leaned heavily on ambiguity, particularly around the identity of voices. It eased my anxieties about resolving a narrative that is so heavily concerned with pain (pain never leaves us, no matter how hard we try) and gave me a way to represent the uncertainty I felt within my own voice. Throughout the text, primarily in the column shaped poems, dialogue is italicized but the person (or spirit) speaking is rarely identified. How readers identify these voices may determine their interpretation of the narrative. There are also many moments within the content that women are placed in situations of perceived powerlessness. Their legitimacy, whether it be their word, vision, or ideology, is questioned, and they must decide whether or not to trust themselves or the people doubting their power. The biographical prose pieces in particular address specific points in the lives of various female mediums and saints when their divine or spiritual communications are perceived as hoaxy, invaluable, or manipulative. These moments of uncertainty are turning points in these women's lives that eventually shape their relationship to their power and intuition as a medium or saint, a turning point that I too am experiencing through the creation of this project.

Through this study of internal conflict, I attempt to create an experience for the reader where they too exist in uncertainty. Each form draws on a degree of familiarity in hopes to complicate the reader's expectations of these forms as they are failed to be met.

Cecilia Corrigan discusses the effect of this failure of expectation in an interview with Felix Bernstein. She believes that "when we engage with a familiar or intuitively relatable set of narrative and syntactic expectations, there is a greater capacity for surprise or disorientation..." (BOMB). Expectation of what we have previously experienced or what we believe to be intuitive often causes the largest impact of disappointment, disheartenment, and shame. I purposefully use familiar forms within *Helene*, such as letters, magazine articles and advertisements, and scenes from a television sitcom, to draw on the reader's expectations of these forms with the intent to provide unexpected content in order to replicate a feeling of failure and confusion within the reader. The letter is commonly associated with intimacy, so I use this expectation of revealing the personal to inspire an intimate and trustworthy relationship between the reader and Helene as she shares her raw experiences of suffering. However, as the piece develops and Helene starts communicating with more spirits and doubting her own intuition as a woman and medium, the ambiguity in voice and narrative grows. The reader may question their initial trust of this narrator as they realize the lines between the real and imaginary have been blurred throughout the text. They may feel doubt and shame as their expectations are not met. The sitcom, a very calculated form that depends on cliché tropes and plot devices, is a fabricated representation of human experience, often minimizing human suffering through comic relief and oversimplification of character and relationships. I use these common tropes and character types to explicitly address the hatred within Helene's family that has influenced her sense of self. My intention is that the hateful dialogue and action will appear more jarring because it is delivered through tropes that are primarily used to express the humor and innocence we expect from sitcoms. By presenting the

familial and ideological influences on Helene in such simplified and explicit ways, I intend for the reader to recognize the possible detriment to one's sense of self from our immediate environments while still enjoying the sitcom's humor and entertainment as a way to temporarily repress the pain. Similar to internalized feelings of shame and disappointment when one's expectations of body and behavior are not met, *Helene* simulates the varying levels and forms of grief one experiences when their body has failed to meet expectation.

Spirit: a supernatural, incorporeal being, especially one inhabiting a place, object, etc., or having a particular character

What ultimately pushed me to find my voice again and channel my anger from physical abuse into my art was the death of my grandfather. Not only did he make me aware of my life long refusal to define death on my own terms, he also opened up the possibility for me to connect with the spiritual realm both in my life and writing. The night after he died, I went back to my dark hotel room and wrote letters to him until my ink ran out. The result was short, fragmented sentences paired with heavy questions about the value of physicality:

i want to pray to something so bad. pray to my chest. pray to my feet...
 what good is the body after it can't speak? after it can't heave? what good
 is the body after it undoes itself? too close. not close enough. want to
 touch. want to not touch. want to say something aloud. feel it's selfish. you
 can't hear. it's obviously for myself.

A letter, a direct address to a loved one I assumed it impossible for him to be listening while still imagining my words reaching his spirit, gave me the freedom to write prose and first person again. As seen in the last three lines of my writing, I still felt shame about expressing my own desires, but I was able to write this shame down.

Through these letters, I accumulated a writing practice of communicating with spirits, reaching out to those who have evaded the pains of physicality through death, an evasion Cora L.V. Richmond and her spirit guides talk about in her book *My experiences while out of my body and my return after many days*:

[After leaving my body,] I became more and more aware that the whole of me, released from the fetters of the bodily senses, could perceive and receive more perfectly the answer to every question, even before its formulation in thought... (13)

Richmond believed it was her body that held her back from a complete awareness and understanding of her surroundings. In her experiences as spirit, she could truly perceive: there was no judgment or thought, merely existence. While I am not interested in creating art that “perfectly...answer[s]...every question” or even evades the pains of existing in the physical world, I am attempting to enter this space of spiritual perception when I create so that I can alleviate myself from the pains that prevent me from creating. By communicating to spirits through my writing, I am better able to leave the fear and shame I associate with my body and womanhood in order to tap into my creative intuition.

The practice of writing in mediumship also felt genealogically significant as I was reminded of my grandfather and immediate family’s history with spirits, particularly ghosts. My childhood home, the house my parents still live in, was haunted by the ghost

of a teenage boy until recently. While visiting, my grandfather discovered the ghost in 1995. It was the middle of the night, and as he walked through the hallway, he noticed a dark shadow in the shape of a boy blocking his entrance to the restroom. My grandfather approached the figure, but couldn't bring himself to walk through it. "Who are you?" he asked, but the ghost didn't answer. He vanished.

The appearances of the teenage ghost continued for the next twenty years, so often that my family started calling it "the ghost," "the boy," and "the man." The last time he was seen was right before my grandpa died. My mother saw him in the living room, the ghost's back turned toward her. Mistaking him for my brother, my mother called out his name. With no response, she moved closer and saw that he wore his hair slicked back and a tight leather jacket. That was when she realized it was the ghost, but, as always, he vanished before she got too close.

Shortly after this encounter, my grandfather died, and my family met in Arizona to say goodbye to his body. When my father returned home from this trip, he believed that my grandfather's spirit had been in the house as he could no longer feel the presence of the ghost. He quickly called my mother, still in Arizona, with the news:

"Guess what."

"What?"

"The ghost is gone."

"What do you mean?"

"I think your father chased him away."

While my family so easily accepted the existence of the ghost and my grandfather as spirit, I was always doubtful and afraid of the possibility of a spiritual realm. As a

child, I walked quickly through my parents' house, trying to deny any glimpses of ghost feet or shoulders in my peripheral vision. With my grandfather gone and the persistence of my family's ghost stories, I started to question the ways I had been perceiving life, my refusal to define death, and my obsession with physicality, specifically others' perceptions of my body.

Like appropriative writing practices, mediumship is another form that uses language and voice outside the author's, and, again, it is easy to hide behind these voices. However, I use methods of mediumship as a way of addressment, conversation, rather than allowing a spirit to entirely take over my body. Similarly to the way mediumship provided an avenue for female agency in the Victorian Era, this method of writing has allowed me to reveal myself in a more honest way, possibly "unearthing" some of the truths I was previously too fearful to write through.

One of the methods of writing I used for *Helene* to utilize mediumship was automatic writing, a channeling method popular among spiritualists and surrealists that allows the spirit to speak through the living in the act of writing. The few occasions I used this method, I, again, had difficulty trusting my intuition. Whose voice was actually speaking? Mine or a spirits? To temporarily assuage these doubts, I developed a method of communication inspired by the Fox Sisters' Morse like rappings, through the movement of the pen used to write. I would write down my question for the spirit at the top of the page and place the pen in the center just below the question. My hand would go limp momentarily and then the pen would start moving downward. If the line veered to the right, that meant the spirit's answer was "yes," if the line veered to the left, the answer was "no."

The writing from these sessions and my general study of mediumship inspired the *Possessive Spiritualism Magazine* articles, advertisements, and exercises within *Helene*. Automatic writing was a way for me to develop a ritualistic practice to process my grandfather's death in a more holistic way, while also honoring my value of collaboration. The exercises are almost direct transcriptions of the rituals and instructions I wrote for myself within these sessions. Within *Helene*, the articles and exercises guide the reader to process their own forms of grief, possibly caused by the narrative of the book, and these sections work to balance the uncertainty and shame throughout the rest of the book by assisting the reader in their development of a strong will. Similar to the scenes from the television sitcom, these pieces also play with the reader's notion of the women's magazine format through an intimate yet authoritative tone and interactive exercises such as quizzes, diagrams, and flowcharts. This provides a kitschy and sensationalized understanding of death and the spiritual realm as it uses humor and commercialization as a way to address grief.

Spirit: the soul regarded as separating from the body at death

When I create in spite of my body, I feel lifted. I leave the encasement of "no" and the fury within me, which has always existed, is released. Maybe I am not truly leaving my body, and maybe I am not in communication with any spirits. Maybe all that remains of my grandfather really is just a box of bone fragments in my mother's closet, but, when I feel as if I am leaving my body, whether it be through a writing practice of mediumship or instilling a sense of weightlessness to my language, I can imagine and replicate a space for my grandfather's spirit. I can work towards creating an environment that both he and I

can exist in, even with my physical limitations. I can identify my intuition and temporarily remove myself from the pain of abuse. When I leave my body for a moment, I can let my grandfather's spirit guide me to a state of pervaded perception, to know with my whole being, preventing the need to identify myself and body through the lens of others and to question my value ever again.

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