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## Eyes Open in the Dark

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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## Abstract

An unusual dissertation that presents a science fiction autobiographical narrative, following a trial of trauma and identity dysphoria. Through a trans-queer biological female lens, the vulnerable tone of the author invites the reader into wording that describes matters they will care for on a human level. This study probes the question of *what lives within the silence of our perceptions* by appraising reverberations between interactions that coerce the human condition. Interrogating memory is inevitable when questioning how *defense mechanisms* interrelate and adapt to human needs. This study penetrates the complexities of perception fabrications, power dynamics, sensory perceptions, systemic moralities, and passivity. The following is a written account of human absurdity that considers *abjection* as applied to the metaphysical and parapsychical pathways of gender and sexual reclamation. The objective is to guide vulnerable self-acknowledgments and activate purposeful settlement.

### Key Words

abject, absurd, attachment theory, autobiography, autonomy, blanket of silence, body language, bystander, conscious, culture performance, childhood maladaptive daydreaming, defense mechanism, denial, displacement, dispositional guilt, dissociation, dysphoria, emotional abandonment, eremophobia, free association, frisson, gender, gut-brain connection, hyperesthesia, hypnagogia, identification with the aggressor, imagination, imprinting, imprisonment of love, internalization behavior in children, introjection, intuition, marginalized, memory, obscure, otherwise, ouroboros, overtness, parentification, passivity, parent-child lying, percipitancy, perfectionism, phantasm, power dynamics, projection, queerness, rationalization, repression, science fiction, sexualizing menstruation, separation anxiety, startle response, stress acceleration hypothesis, subconscious, suppression, suicide, trauma, and undoing.

## Summary for Lay Audience

This unusual monographic dissertation *Eyes Open in the Dark* affectionately sinks you into an autobiographical science fiction that goes beyond words. It explores the tension between trauma and identity. This dissertation invites the viewer into a vulnerable tone, buoyantly activating purposeful settlement within the psyche. We must expose ourselves to the fears that obstruct vulnerability. Vulnerable literature creates connections and validates both the reader and writer to establish self-awareness within the human condition. When words penetrate vulnerabilities, they intrusively create reactions and responses. When the information is rejected, a seed is planted and remains buried. When conditions become appropriate, they grow into something unexpected.

The central question *What lives within the silence of our perception*, traverse levels of consciousness to find awareness within our defense interactions, interrelations, and adaptation. The shifting nature of perception, and how our memories and amnesia play a role in this movement, highlights assertion and self-doubt within the terrain of understanding oneself. This challenges the flawed nature of autobiography, especially when rooted in emotional memory.

The manipulating nature of systemic morality clouds the authenticity of the self. *Eyes Open in the Dark* probe's identity dysphoria and the prominent question that agitates, has an identity ever developed, or was it just smothered and forgotten? The answers to these questions self-praise us with autonomy. This practice at hand alleviates the toxicity that breeds social issues. It solidifies these ideas into poignant entities that cling to objects from the past.

Objects act as anchors within our memories. They bear witness to trauma and grant escape within the moment of trauma. The recipe of trauma is made up of the residue of defense mechanisms colliding. Objects also hold warmth within the memories of a time you wish to hold you, as memories behave as a time machine.

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Thank you to my cohort, Anne Watson, Alyssa Sweeney, Eric Allan Cameron, Danielle Petti, Hannah West, Jessica Joyce, Masha Kouznetsova, Rylee Rumble, Steve DeBruyn, and Tia Bates, for your continuous support penetrating the discomfort that cloaks my artwork. Teasing out observations and theories, your generous engagement has largely contributed to each creative decision and has guided me through any broken terrain.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Summary for Lay Audience</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>vi</b>
Chapter One: The Hypnagogic State	1
Chapter Two: Dispositional Guilt	4
Chapter Three: “Silence is the memory of the echo of something that has been said”	8
Chapter Four: Tower in the Air	12
Chapter Five: Red Persian Rug	15
Chapter Six: The Apogee	17
Chapter Seven: The Wayward Vigil	20
Chapter Eight: Washing the Walls in My Dream	23
Chapter Nine: This is how you shave your legs	27
Chapter Ten: Putrefaction	31
Chapter Eleven: I am pleasing but my pleasing is weary	33
Chapter Twelve: Parentified	35

Chapter Thirteen: The Void	37
Chapter Fourteen: De-Girling	40
Chapter Fifteen: “These are objects I seem to live through more than view”	43
<b>Preface</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>44</b>

## Preface

*Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.* - bell hooks (1991), *Theory as Liberatory Practice*<sup>1</sup>

A true autobiography doesn't exist due to the inaccuracies in our memories.<sup>2</sup> This is even more prevalent when elevated emotions are present.<sup>3</sup> It only makes sense to use an autobiographical narrative to deconstruct<sup>4</sup> the parasitic behavior of psychological *defense mechanisms*, as they are perceptual-based, and unfold how one becomes deprived of their once-forgotten identity.<sup>5</sup> The unknown is what maddens us with self-

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, "Theory as liberatory practice," *Yale JL & Feminism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robyn Fivush and Azriel Gryzman, "Accuracy and Reconstruction in Autobiographical Memory: (Re)Consolidating Neuroscience and Sociocultural Developmental Approaches," abstract, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews, Cognitive Science* 14, no. 3 (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023), 1. accessed June 13, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1620>. Fivush and Gryzman describe autobiographical memory as "a process of both accuracy and error, an intricate weaving of specific episodic details, inferences, and confusions among similar experiences; it incorporates post-event information through reminiscing and conversations, in the service of creating more meaningful coherent memories that define self."

<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, Translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), 10. Camus hints at the boundaries of our emotional awareness when he says, "Like great works, deep feelings always mean more than they are conscious of saying."

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 6. Eagleton explains how deconstructing solicits "outbreaks, slippages, contradictions, [and] vertiginous moments within ideological discourses..." These findings permit theory to evolve.

<sup>5</sup> Frederic C. Bartlett, and Walter Kintsch, "Meaning," In *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 227. Bartlett and Kintsch believe that memory is a tool to organize information by constructing and reconstructing, allowing memory to take on new functions of cognitive processing. They further say that "all the cognitive processes which have been considered, from perceiving to thinking, are ways in which some fundamental *effort after meaning* seeks expression."



doubt—plunged into compulsive lucidity, cognizance of the parallel reality of the vulnerable and invasive human condition.<sup>6</sup>

These written accounts actualize the comprehensive terrain that is identity, to activate autonomy. This is deliberated through a study that penetrates the complexities of dysphoria, perception fabrications, power dynamics, physical perspectives, and sensory perceptions. Stimulated by vulnerable literature<sup>7</sup> that transports the personal into ambiguous theoretics about the human condition, such as *The Perfect Mango* by Erin Manning. Translating her body into perceptual words, Manning offers it to the viewer as the affecting residue of intrusions. Through these wordings I evaluate mnemonic memory correlations of comfort and discomfort, to reveal new understandings of psychology, sociology, and philosophy. This writing evaluates the bearing on human absurdities, including paradoxes. To consider absurdity, communicating the abjection of object relation, will force meaning into the meaningless and the meaningless into the meaning. Guiding vulnerable self-acknowledgments, placing weight on the imagination to highlight collective inner contention, and activating purposeful settlement is the objective. This work subsists in considering the Kristevian *abject* applied to the

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 54. Eagleton's understanding of deconstruction is affiliated with the Marxist notion of *ideology*, defined as "a set... of values, representations, and beliefs which, realized in certain material apparatuses... guarantee other misperceptions of the *real* which contribute to the reproduction of the dominant social relations." This hypothecates the *real* varying between perceptions, but the realness of these conflicting perceptions consolidates into a singular *affect* of the corporeal experience.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1981), 98. "[Revolutionary literary criticism] would dismantle the ruling concepts of *literature*, reinserting *literary* texts into the whole field of cultural practices. It would strive to relate such *cultural* practices to other forms of social activity and to transform the cultural apparatuses themselves. It would articulate its cultural analyses with a consistent political intervention. It would deconstruct the received hierarchies of literature and transvaluate received judgments and assumptions; engage with the language and unconscious of literary tests, to reveal their role in the ideological construction of the subject; and mobilize such texts... in a struggle to transform those subjects within a wider political context."

metaphysical and parapsychical pathways of gender and sexual reclamation, for instance nearing Matthew Barney's representations of identity agitations. Influenced by the history of gothic literature, as well as Cronenbergian Biological Horror cinema, I seek to dismantle representations of abjection to uncover expressionist views on identity conflicts. Identity is tightly knitted to the imagination, exposing queerness as the uninterrupted imagination.

When I discovered my shadow, art began. Observing the dualities of the vulnerable and the invasive, the comfortable and the grotesque. Brought forward in destabilizing family dysfunction, and later estranged, my discernment of the self was fermented, and all peculiarities have been tapered into my environment. Layers of sound and soundless trauma-coated impressions were left as refuse. These incidents were pivotal contributors to my faulty inner compass that arrested and commanded my autonomy towards security, first, and belonging, second. Through desolation, disturbances persisted. This repetition fortified my alienation which enhanced my exigency to consider the experiences of others to find interrelation and resolve despondency. This disorientation led me to uphold variegated connection as the solution. This compound propagates a level of awareness that could alleviate the toxicity that breeds social issues within a contemporary context. This reflection on trauma has connections to many deeply troubling human conditions. The intimacy of alienation correlates, the perceptions may vary but the disturbance of one's identity for soundness is shared. Often seen within the conduct of psychological defense mechanisms, the vulnerable conscious and the preserving facet of the subconscious mind are both at play.

It is within the duality of these points of entry and the autonomy of our imagination that change can dwell.



Figure 1. *Weaning Residue* (Emotional Abandonment), 2023, 28" x 15" x 27".

These ideas that understand *we* within humanity are solidified into entities within my art practice. My creatures stage a narrative that activates the imagination—the vibrancy of the fantastical and grimness of the autobiographical speak to the alienating elements within queerness. This writing operates as an appendage of intimate memory interventions that inform the development of my artwork. It is within moments of distilled pressure, in relation to bodies and between bodies, that these entities are birthed. These beings represent their assigned psychological defense mechanisms and appear within the narration of this dissertation. Whether through wording or visuals, the work

will function as a stream of conscious and subconscious thought that ranges from overt to obscure. I regard and develop the interaction between defense mechanisms and creatures based on the dynamic of my findings. I breed creatures out of the relationship of two defense mechanisms. The afterbirth is the site of *percipitancy*, a term I conceived, deriving from *perception* and *hesitancy* to encompass the concept of reactions within the context of social apprehension. For instance, *percipitancy* has been actualized in the artwork *Weaning Residue* (2023).<sup>8</sup> This piece represents the byproduct of mirroring defense mechanisms, specifically *emotional abandonment*.<sup>9</sup> By depicting the *percipitancy* between mother and child, the soundlessness of the obviate armors the last drops of milk with the crustation of mold. As mold consumes time, it contracts space for dissolving agitation. If we were to consume mold, we would be conflicted by the Freudian life drive which opposes the death drive. The contradicting duality seizes mother and child. This clutch is an example of *percipitancy*, the lingering reaction between two reactions.

My artmaking begins with the delicacy of a mechanical pen that persuades the ink mark-making that follows. This preliminary drawing phase accesses dreams, memories, the imagination, and the many layers of consciousness. I've adopted the concept of free association during lead-use, to access dreams, memories, the imagination, and the subconscious. Relatable to the approaches of Susan Morris' *Drawing in the Dark*, whose involuntary drawings conform with Lacanian ideas of the dark space framing objectivity,

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<sup>8</sup> See *Figure 1*.

<sup>9</sup> Jay Frankel, "Treating the Sequelae of Chronic Childhood Emotional Abandonment," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 80, no. 4 (New York: Wiley Periodicals Inc., 2024), 810. "A dependent child's most basic emotional need is for a dependable, responsive caregiver. When a parent continually violates this need through chronic misattunement and unresponsiveness—what I am calling *emotional abandonment*—her child is likely to become insecure or even disorganized in his attachments and to show signs of disturbance in interpersonal relations and capacity to regulate his emotions and self-esteem—core effects of childhood trauma... Such parents' emotional abandonment is driven by their own open psychic wounds; overwhelmed managing their own pain, they are unavailable to respond to their child's needs."

convulsive blindness provoked by André Breton, and Reimann-Christoffel's hyperspace where one is dissolved into "dark space into which things cannot be put."<sup>10</sup> Morris believes her work "needs to evolve as a kind of incompatible series, made up of interchangeable outputs: a set of comparable impossibilities that reflect the invisible and insistent presence of a homeless, unlocatable, body."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, I deliberately disorient my viewer through thematic, visual, and poetic compositions, to highlight the competing nature of obscurity, overtness, and absurdity. I am carrying forward these techniques to embellish and evolve Dali's intention and persist in Freud's observational curiosity to draw out contemporary meanings and mechanisms that interpret the mind through human exchange while reframing the relevance of their findings to reassociate them to a queer non-misogynistic platform.

The two-dimensional drawings are then translated into three-dimensional manifestations with oil-based clay and found objects. I devise idiosyncratic processes of mold-making that encourage impromptu and confrontational outcomes. At times I give my materials agency to present the seemingly unmoored subconscious. These organic markings on the contours of the form reflect evidence of mutiny concerning the conformities witnessed within the arresting behavior of traditions, that extend beyond the formalities of artmaking. The material selection, typically consisting of silicone, cement, plastic, metal, and wool, employs various concepts pertaining to the theoretical perspective of my practice. Some matters are compatible, and others are repellant. By

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Morris, "Drawing in the Dark: Involuntary Drawing," *Tate Papers*, no.18, 2012. Accessed June 7, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/18/drawing-in-the-dark>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

investigating the functions, associations, and interactions between materials, I am essentially psychoanalyzing the medium to propose the body as animate and inanimate.<sup>12</sup>

Following this, typically, the written composition is orchestrated. A merging of ambiguous elegy and free verse poetry is determined. A relationship has fused between my writing and my art. This connection is in flux. Its malleability is directed by the interpretation of the reader. My writings link independently to the abstract forms of my sculptures and drawings. As breadcrumbs are dispersed, the viewer begins to understand the story behind the artist. A level of ambiguity is sustained that generates a situation that mirrors that artist's dysphoria. Through a trans-queer biological female lens, the vulnerable tone of the author invites the reader into the wording that describes matters they will care for on a human level. This encapsulates warily selected words that embody the perspective-focused fossilization of trauma and respective defense reverberations.

My study probes the question of *what lives within the silence of our perceptions?* by appraising reverberations between interactions that coerce the human condition. I excavate systemic moralities, authorities, passivity, and the marginalized. I question how defense mechanisms interrelate and adapt to the disruption of human needs—for instance, feeling a sense of belonging, security, esteem, and self-actualization. Furthermore, this work decompresses dream behavior, memories, the bystanders of trauma, and attachment

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 25-26. Deleuze and Guattari explain the *essence of lack* is replaced with objects that are extensions of our bodies, "... if desire is the lack of the real object, its very nature as a real entity depends upon *an essence of lack* that produces the fantasized object. Desire thus conceived of as production, though merely the production of fantasies, has been explained perfectly by psychoanalysis. On the very lowest level of interpretation, this means that the real object that desire lacks is related to an extrinsic natural or social production, whereas desire intrinsically produces an imaginary object that functions as a double of reality, as though there were a *dreamed-of object behind every real object*, or a mental production behind all real productions... an *incurable insufficiency of being, an inability-to-be that is life itself.*"

theory. Identity intertwines. Who we are is determined by how we psychologically interact with ourselves in the environments stored in our memories.

Our memory shortage leads us to beg the question *why read this phenomenon that may not be real?*<sup>13</sup> The following rendering is demanding. You will abide by each chosen word, slinked from memory to metaphor through the trajectory of your imagination. Your thoughts will wander through perception ciphering, seeking purpose. Caught between illusion and absurdity, the wording will guide you through vulnerable gravity. The composed will transpire the rumination of the conscious mind, the protective volume of the subconscious, and the otherwise. It is within the triangulation of these entry points and the autonomy of our imaginations that change will dwell. Find your own denouement.

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<sup>13</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 115.

Borges contemplates a universe independent of memory when he says, "I thought of a world without memory, without time; I considered the possibility of a language without nouns, a language of impersonal verbs or indeclinable epithets." In doing so, he proposes a conflict between memory and the inauthenticity of time.

## Chapter One

*Human beings project their bodily powers and frailties into external objects such as telephones, chairs, gods, poems, medicine, institutions, and political forms, and then those objects in turn become the object of perceptions that are taken back into the interior of human consciousness where they now reside as part of the mind or soul.* - Elaine Scarry (1985), *The Body in Pain*<sup>14</sup>

### *The Hypnagogic State*<sup>15</sup>

The callus on the tip of my baby toe releases the fibers of my balmy wool blanket. The sun penetrates the aluminum blinds in a rhythm of warm residue. Pronounced rows of white sunlight hold the sustenance of several splitting hues on my faded teddy bear sheets. This is the *tick* that doesn't hold a *tock*.

A long breath absorbs the band of shifting pigments that hold the four walls up around me. I breathe between the ornamental wooden encumbrance at the ruffles of ruffled tulle, elevating flocculent brown bears onto the tip of their ballerina toes. Me, unable to lift, turn, or curl. Bound, as I will always be anew. Trembling insensitivity fastening me to the theatrics of the surgical desk, breathing life into life... then not.

I succumb to the crib feet recessed into the carpet threads; I can feel this. Silence holds me and rocks me back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. This reticence of the meaningless and shallow absence shares space with the return.<sup>16</sup> This inheritance of

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<sup>14</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The making and unmaking of the world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 256.

<sup>15</sup> Mina Caraccio and Meir H. Kryger, "Salvador Dalí: Hypnagogic Hallucinations in Art," *Sleep Health* 9, no. 1 (New Haven: Yale University, 2023), 1. Accessed June 13, 2024, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352721823000141?via%3Dihub>.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Luc Nancy, *Listening*, Translated by C. Mandell (New York: Fordham, 2007), 46.



silence<sup>17</sup> translates the wordless.<sup>18</sup> The mute is imperceptible. My tiny finger graces the bar. The morning dove swells my ears, and a cold gust caresses my cheek. If I cry, will she remember to hear me? Or is this lull my purgatory?

The door violently opens, permitting an echoing thud. The silent horror amalgamates into an entity ingested by shadow. Traceless movements unfold around me. The tepid ambiance of his leg stretches over me. *Creak*, my diminutive form softly jolts and reverberates with the inner springs of the mattress.

He grasps the guardrails, submerging his torso into outer space, and silently screams guttural heaves. His knuckles release purple and his nipples curl white. He retreats down abruptly, and just as suddenly wraps his sweltering blubber around me without touch.<sup>19</sup> His mouth unravels brash whispers, meaningless and meaningful, senseless and nonsensical. The sheet below me was once snug and pale, now frigid and dark. *Pick, pick, pick*, he plucks my bed with his loose nail left unbitten. The petrification reversed my tears into me, swallowed before they could drop. This upset my tummy.

A soggy mucus seeps from his sunken eyes and ingurgitates my infancy, like a vanishing twin. Fixed in an ouroboros state.<sup>20</sup> *Slurping* me. Just before he reaches my pinky toe, I blow. I blow just as I would blow bubbles through a plastic wand in my

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<sup>17</sup> Theodor Itten and Ruth Martin, *The Art of Silence and Human Behaviour: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, translated by Ruth Martin (Abingdon, Oxon: New York, 2021), 39. “Secrecy goes hand in hand with repression, and the necessary act of forgetting that I have repressed something.” Generationally we exist under a “blanket of silence” without cognitive awareness.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Paige L. Sweet, “The Sociology of Gaslighting,” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5 (2009), 851.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Clarke, *Earth, Life, and System: Evolution and Ecology on a Gaian Planet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 131. The *Ouroboros* is a well-known symbol representing a snake eating its own tail. C.H. Waddington explains it as *the one, the all*, “a phrase which implies that any one entity incorporates into itself in some sense all the other entities in the universe.”

babysitter's backyard. *Whist, whist, whist*, the glob emancipates from my form and confronts my acoustic ceiling. It erupts.<sup>21</sup>

I've grown.<sup>22</sup> I shed the bedsheet from my moist skin by sitting upright. I twist my body onto my hands and feet, waiting for a stable moment to emerge. By exerting my leg over the bar, splitting my groin, this epitomizes the mandate of my dance teacher many times moving forward. I swiftly shift my belly over the top bar but lose my balance. Time suspends as I tumble down, elongating this great fall. Defined by the impending encounter, the carpet swallows me whole and drains me into darkness. *Tock*.

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<sup>21</sup> Roy F Baumeister, Karen Dale, and Kristin L Sommer, "Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial," *Journal of Personality* 66, no. 6 (Boston; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1998), 1096. Accessed June 16, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.00043>. *Undoing* is a defense mechanism defined as "the literal attempt to alter the past, undoing is impossible and hence pathological. One may, however, see a more normal less extreme version of the same response among people who experience uncontrolled ruminations about past events, especially if these ruminations are characterized by strong or vivid counterfactual thoughts about how things might have gone differently."

<sup>22</sup> Bridget L. Callaghan and Nim Tottenham, "The Stress Acceleration Hypothesis: Effects of Early-Life Adversity on Emotion Circuits and Behavior," *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 7 (New York: Columbia University, February 2016), 79. Accessed June 16, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2015.11.018>. *The Stress Acceleration Hypothesis* "strongly suggests that accelerated development of emotional behaviors and circuits is a core outcome following the experience of rearing adversity. We suggest that such accelerated development may have implications for the integrity of emotion circuits and emotion regulation later in life. It remains possible that these neural adaptations are in fact indicators of longer-term mental health resilience — a solid understanding of these adaptations continues to be investigated. However, findings from several literatures suggest that anxiety is a common long-term outcome associated with 'growing up' quickly."

## Chapter Two

*I never knew that I loved drains...As a connoisseur of portals, orifices, and pores, I should have known that drains and the waste they imply, hidden beneath their sterile exteriors, would be in my pleasure zone...I came across [artist] Tishan Hsu at a similar remove...The vents, screens, intakes, fantasy architectures, and fleshy degradations that pervade his work “clogged” me from my first impression...[including] feelings of confinement, abandonment, and disease. - Matthew Ronay, Body Horror<sup>23</sup>*

### *Dispositional Guilt<sup>24</sup>*

A time of weightlessness rushes through my innards. The swarm of blackness and roaring fever adulterates the self. Lanes of luster haltingly emerge below me. The hairs on the back of my scruff float me down. Just before my tiny toe reaches the landing, the sound of tin begins to *cry* and searing walls fold in on me. This sarcophagus levitates and marks my bareness.

A thud obstructs, arrests, and boils the fluids inside my cochlea organs. Rolling thunder rushes towards me. I urge to whimper ‘Mommy I’m scared’ but swallow it, like siphoning a hiccup. I’m convinced of the threat if I shed a peep. My noiseless weep gives space for the grand crescendo, the unraveling of candor. Cognizant of the dismantling of my existence, I dauntlessly listen.

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Ronay and Lane Relyea, Review of “Body Horror,” *Artforum*, May 2020, accessed June 13, 2024, <https://www.artforum.com/features/matthew-ronay-and-lane-relyea-on-the-art-of-tishan-hsu-247371/>.

<sup>24</sup> John Carroll, *On Guilt: The Force Shaping Character, History, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 10. Accessed June 20, 2024, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/reader.action?docID=6109508>. *Dispositional Guilt* is defined as an “anxiety that is deeply embedded in character. It is as if individuals were born with it. As inseparable from their nature as the colour of eyes, it infuses who they are, and everything they do. It has no specific cause, a fact that in no way inhibits the need of someone suffering from it to find one – believing that the anxiety will not ease until its source has been discovered, and in some manner appeased.”

Her voice wails “Answer me this Steve, who were you on the phone with? Why did you refuse to take it in the kitchen?” Mommy then mumbles in shame, “I was listening behind this door. Who is she?”

The ‘she’ monster is born.

Daddy possesses a temper of fury; his unconscious is certain this will conceal his possessions. Confronted by the dismay of losing his three girls, the pressure within him becomes his ransom. Coerced by his outrage, I hear the *pin* release from the shell of the grenade, which we were confined within. Daddy’s feet talk to me, *Stomp, Stomp, Stomp* turns into a trudge. An eolian sound thrusts past the clash of a *crack*. This moment held the obliteration of Daddy’s car-shaped phone that sat on his bedside table. Frisson<sup>25</sup> ascends.

A dim swinging voice chimes in, “They never shouted like this before you were born.”<sup>26</sup> With a heavy chest and a squint of timid wonder, I think ‘You’re not Mommy, You’re not Daddy.’ Who was this familiar, yet presumptuous, divulger?

I notice above me an opening releasing a faint trembling light. My reach falls short. The moment holds the suspense of silence. The quietude is so loud that I hear the subtle movements of the inaudible snail coming towards me. I’m deluged by the guilty silence. I think about how Daddy and I walked into an inflated balloon one day to meet

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<sup>25</sup> Takuya Koumura, Masashi Nakatani, Hsin-I Liao, and Hirohito M Kondo, “Dark, Loud, and Compact Sounds Induce Frisson,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 6 (2021), 1141.

<sup>26</sup> J. Liu, X. Chen, and G. Lewis, “Childhood Internalizing Behaviour: Analysis and Implications,” *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 18, no. 10 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), 2. “The concept of ‘internalizing behavior [in children]’ reflects a child’s emotional or psychological state and typically includes depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and teenage suicide. Genetic and environmental causes have been largely implicated, although research continues to explore social etiological factors... internalizing disorders are directed inward and are indicative of a child’s psychological and emotional state.”

his lover. I remember him telling me not to tell Mommy.<sup>27</sup> I was trepid. Her bra lays on the floor, and I couldn't stop staring at its pearly white sheer. An ambient creature disrupts this memory, peering over the side of the opening above me.

This lifeform soundlessly mouths, "You are unworthy of the front seat", "you don't know the meaning of the words you use", and "You are an impersonator, stop looking at me." It stares at me.

Each singular breath that I release fertilizes the indignation that burdens my sister, humiliating my viability, and, in turn, deflating her own. She chooses to live in my peripherals and is a parasite that ravages my subconscious.<sup>28</sup> We are not twins, but many think we are. This makes my sister cringe. This shudder is a passenger that hauls my affliction through the reverberation of her sentiment. She arbitrarily thrives on impairing me, withholding so much power in those infinitesimal arms. Is it too heavy?

My sister penetrates my thoughts, a prominent symptom of phenomenal guilt. The twisting grip of her little hands around my little wrist debones my vertebral column, she clutches the destiny of my autonomy. Little did I know how sexually aroused I would get

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<sup>27</sup> Kate Roberts, "When Parents Lie," *Psychology Today*, New York: Sussex Publishers, LLC, 2024, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/savvy-parenting/201406/when-parents-lie>. "When a child knows the truth but his parents contradict this knowledge, the child ends up doubting himself... when a child is told that their truth is a lie, their self-doubt generalizes to the point where they distrust the outside world."

<sup>28</sup> Susan Sherwin-White, "Freud on Brothers and Sisters: a neglected topic" *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* 33, no. 1 (2007), 8. Freud summarizes, in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1932), the impact of a new sibling at the termination of breastfeeding. He says, "What the child begrudges the unwanted intruder and rival is not only the suckling but all the other signs of maternal care. It feels that it has been dethroned, despoiled, prejudiced in its rights; it casts a jealous hatred upon the new baby and develops a grievance against the faithless mother which often finds expression in a disagreeable change in its behavior."

later, reflecting on the intensity of her spite.<sup>29</sup> “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>30</sup>

Abruptly I grow, and the physical clasp releases me. The screech of mommy curls the screws on the ventilation register I stand; I fall into my closed eyes.

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Sherwin-White, “Freud on Brothers and Sisters: a neglected topic: Siblings,” *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2007): 10. Freud explains that “anyone who is to be really free and happy in love must have overcome his apprehension for women and have come to terms with the idea of incest with his mother or sister.”

<sup>30</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (England: Taylor & Francis Group, 1962), 3. Accessed June 16, 2024, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/reader.action?docID=5292634>.

## Chapter Three

*Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as "natural", and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. - Terry Eagleton (1990), *The Significance of Theory*<sup>31</sup>*

*"Silence is the memory of the echo of something that has been said"*<sup>32</sup>

"Turn around and face the wall," she discreetly bellows. With my eyes closed, I feel the fibers of the carpet perforating the soles of my bare feet. The discharge of water waste billows the room, exuding from my grandma's bathroom sink. She proceeds, "Ok, now look." I stammer, "I don't want to look." She shreds my animation with her worn words: "If you don't look, you are not my sister anymore." Flushed with embarrassment, "Please no" I plead. She chokes my wrist and yanks. She quietly roars "Look!" Like blinds snapping open, I inspect quickly. I respond with a shudder, "I don't see any worms."

In the dark, I scurry to the basement pull-out couch and drew the sheets above my head on the double. Enforced to slumber with one another, my sister stipulated I sleep on the floor or at her feet. This makes my head droop and susceptible to bloaters. This is the second drawn-out cycle of sleepovers.

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<sup>31</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 34.

<sup>32</sup> Theodor Itten and Ruth Martin, *The Art of Silence and Human Behaviour: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2021), 13.

The first time was when Mommy and Daddy called the landline to talk to us. This was strange, they never called us. They explained that they were going to “take some time apart.” Disoriented and overindulged with questions, I blurted “If daddy isn’t living with us, then who will feed him?”

I lay awake under the nude-colored sheets, feeling the warmth of my sister. So soft and comforting, imprisoned by love.<sup>33</sup> A temperamental bond maker that I submit to. An entity that feasts from the barren placenta that scarcely sustains us. Does it ever feel the fear of being cold? Can it endure the threat of cold? Am I, its amniotic sac? It grants me an impotent kiss, just as our mother did once.

When my father left, I began to sleep in my mother’s bed with her. She had haunting anxiety misshaping her, but she didn’t know what anxiety was. She would twitch as if she was having an orgasm, but I didn’t know what an orgasm was. It gave me a purpose to sleep next to her, although I don’t know if my purpose was needed. My reach would make her quiver.

I saw my father twice during the separation. Once, at a truck stop without my sister. Then Christmas morning. I remember avoiding the presents he brought for me, as though they weren’t really from him. It was abnormal for him to give me a gift, my mother would always take care of that. This present was bigger than my sister’s because I was “daddy’s little girl”, which alarmed me.

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<sup>33</sup> Clarice Lispector, *The Complete Stories*, translated Katrina Dodson (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2015), 46. The *imprisonment of love* was a concept devised by Clarice Lispector. Reserved in her collection of short stories titled *Family Ties*, she questions “Just when does a mother, holding a child tight, impart to him the prison of love that would forever fall heavily on the future man?”



Gramma's house has a swimming pool. I dive off the board and feel the hydrostatic pressure at the bottom. My thoughts swell about home. I lay on the toasty grey polypropylene carpet by the backyard sliding door, staring at the illuminating coral behind my eyelids. The refulgent expands so bright that I must roll away. I begin to drag my lower extremities with my forearms, across the floor to the stairs, for no reason. Thoughtlessly I continue to lug my body up the stairs, with relief on the first landing. I get to the top and bounce onto my feet from my shins. I turn to the left and then make another left. I sit on the steps to my laundry room to fasten the Velcro on my sneakers. I open the side door and jump down, with both feet, onto the concrete steps that had lines of bumps. I jump down two steps, landing in a crouch. I push my body with exhaustion up and run to the front of the house. This was where the most illustrious maple tree resided. Its lowest hanging branch was the perfect height to pull my body up and climb to the top. This was where a trifurcation acted as a seat, allowing me to peer over the world. As far as I could see, there was still a blur behind me.<sup>34</sup>

This is our second set of sleepovers. Mother said it was for just a couple of nights, but it ended up being months. *Ring*, the phone startles me. My mother is quiet, and

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<sup>34</sup> Eli Somer, Hisham M. Abu-Rayya, and Reut Brenner, "Childhood Trauma and Maladaptive Daydreaming: Fantasy functions and themes in a multi-country sample," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 22, no. 3 (2021), 288–303. "*Maladaptive daydreaming* (MD) is a clinical condition characterized by a time-consuming, compulsive mental habit involving vividly absorptive use of fanciful imagination... The intense fantasy activity in MD usually involves complex scenarios that impede important areas of functioning, such as learning, work, and relationships... MD is a disordered form of dissociative inner absorption characterized by daily fantasy activity that can last for hours, frequently consuming more than half of the individual's waking time... children with innate dissociative capacities would activate their innate capabilities to create numbing, forgetting, identity alteration, or dissociative absorption experiences involving daydreaming about imaginary companions or alternate realities."

although rehearsed, very little is said. I understand that I will never see my home again, this foreshadows my nemesis. The moment slows down and the gut-brain<sup>35</sup> devours me.

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<sup>35</sup> Anne Trafton, "Gut-brain connection signals worms to alter behavior while eating," *MIT News Office*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, December 20, 2018, accessed June 16, 2024, <https://news.mit.edu/2018/gut-signals-worm-brain-behavior-1220>. The *gut-brain connection* prompts worms to modify behavior while eating. "When a hungry worm encounters a rich food source, it immediately slows down so it can devour the feast. Once the worm is full, or the food runs out, it will begin roaming again."

## Chapter Four

*Noise is the background of information, the material of that form.*

- Michel Serres (1998), *Genesis*<sup>36</sup>

### *Tower in the Air*

The peristalsis pushes me through the terrestrial annulus. The metastasizing pauses, and I feel my feet being ingested by soggy plaster. The meaty odor of mold suffocates the receptors in my olfactory epithelium. My weight pushes through the final thread of dry plaster and I fall into my bed.

I stare at the gaping hole that remains and wonder what happened to my ballerina bears. Maybe they came to life and took over our home. Maybe they weren't as friendly as they appeared.

It was time to pack my dance bag, grandma was on her way.<sup>37</sup>

The sightline from between the curtains pronounces a black rubber pathway and the curse of an apprehensive urocyt. Demi-pointe walks, pausing in a standing front over-split.<sup>38</sup> The pantyhose gusset is unable to reach my pubis, despite the leotard pulling

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, Translated by Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>37</sup> Lindsay Schofield and Cassie Herschel-Shorland, *Our House: Making Sense of Dissociative Identity Disorder* (London: Routledge, 2020), 3. Children can *dissociate* from feelings by compartmentalizing. Without a developed sense of self, they may separate difficult memories away to carry on their normal life. Although still being held by it, they can hide it away from conscious thought.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (London: Routledge, 2006), 9. The body dissociates from its sincerity and autonomy. Author Peter Stoneley states that "ballet is *deforming*." He further explains, "To some extent it requires its practitioners to give up on having a normal body, and the pain involved in this transformation is a part of ballet's mythology."

it in place. No less perfectly tucked. The architecture turns in towards me.<sup>39</sup> The mirrors are replaced by hollow air.

One entity in the audience applauds with a muffled ovation. Perforating white conspicuously along the red velvet seats in the front row, beyond the blazing spotlight. With ocular divergence, I notice pacifiers protruding from the pores of its skin and a dark organism slink out of its toe. I began to long for the ashes of my home to smother me, to bring forward the darkness behind the curtain.<sup>40</sup> My mind is struck by roaring oblivion, my step is unclear. My face folds inward.<sup>41</sup> I question, what happened to my docile femininity? What happened to the repetition of my rehearsals?<sup>4243</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 6. The classical ballet theatre design has a fantastical and indulgent architecture. “The layout is one that deliberately sets out to stimulate the voyeuristic impulse even before the performance has begun. It does this by having shapes beyond shapes, and enclosures within enclosures.”

<sup>40</sup> Laia Jorba-Galdos, “Creativity and Dissociation. Dance/Movement Therapy Interventions for the Treatment of Compartmentalized Dissociation,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 41, no. 5 (Amsterdam: Elsevier Ltd., 2014), 467–8. accessed June 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2014.09.003>. *Dissociation* is a phenomenon that disrupts the standard development of the self and is a defense mechanism against pain. It can alter your consciousness, memory, identity, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior. Dissociation is considered a “creative defense that over time evolves into an automated, nonvolitional and context-dependent response, maximizing survival instead of adaptability, even in the absence of threat; what was an asset becomes a liability later in life.”

<sup>41</sup> Emina Zoletic and Elvira Durakovic-Belko, “Body Image Distortion, Perfectionism and Eating Disorder Symptoms in Risk Group of Female Ballet Dancers and Models and in Control Group of Female Students,” *Journal of Dance Medicine & Science* 15, no. 2 (Easton: J. Michael Ryan Publishing Co, 2011), 307. Accessed June 13, 2024, <https://link-gale-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/apps/doc/A348216083/AONE?u=lond95336&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=b3847b37>.

“...ballet dancers possess traits of neurotic perfectionism. This may be due to the nature of these professions, which expects an absolute perfectionism. Ballet dancers are required and expected to be strong, their movements are expected to be technically and artistically gracious, they are expected to do every performance with perfection, and to gain the ideal of low body weight.”

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179. The dancing body submits to *culture performance*, production and reproduction that Judith Butler explains is not innate but socially inbred. She explains it is a role that we assimilate to as we grow up. Butler argues that “gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.”

<sup>43</sup> Carolee Schneemann, “On Intuition,” *Technologies of Intuition* (Toronto: YYZBOOKS, 2011), 92. “Transformation comes through recognition of the body -- the body is a bridge to equivalencies, connections -- an alter.”

The mnemonic music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky conducts my form. Standing position, pli , genuflecting half-kneel, relev , holy wet signum crucis, tendu, profound bow, pass , composed walk to the eucharist, tour en l'air, tour en l'air, tour en l'air.

## Chapter Five

*With a half-unconscious turn and not without a slight shame he scurried under the couch, where, in spite of the fact that his back was a little cramped and he could no longer lift up his head, he felt very comfortable and was sorry only that his body was too wide to fit completely under it.*

- Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*<sup>44</sup>

### *Red Persian Rug*

I tumbled onto the large red Persian rug; the one my granny's black Labrador wasn't permitted to lay on. I fall back. I feel the soft fibers fold and the crackling of the fireplace. "Would you like some tea dear?" Granny asked.

I stand up and twirl again, but this time much faster. This maneuver activates colour mutation, and my receivers propagate. Orifices emerge and ears grow out, folding in on one another. Pivoting on my tiny toes, I depart. Medicine cascades from each canal, pooling beneath me.<sup>45</sup>

The backyard sliding door opens and my irritated sister says, "Are you coming?" I submissively say "Yes". I immediately run towards her despite the fact every hair follicle on my body is leaning in a deviated direction. An imperceptible force hurls me across the space, and I get a blow to the head. "Let me get the bag of frozen peas," says Granny.

Holding the peas to my head I look out the sliding door at the blizzard and wonder where my sister went. I open the backyard entry and the wind presses my nightgown between my legs. I step out in my bare feet, *crunch* the snow submit to my impression

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<sup>44</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, translated by Ian Johnston (Nanaimo: Malaspina University College, 1999), 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ryan Bailey and Jose Pico, "Defense Mechanisms," *StatPearls* (Treasure Island: StatPearls Publishing, 2023). Accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559106/>.

with slight resistance. The water in the cells on my soles freeze and blister, this causes complete horripilation up my spine. The venom of frost choreographs spastic nerves. Just as the pain becomes too much to support, it dematerializes. I drop the bag of peas, they sink into the snow, and I press on.

Acting as a lighthouse warning me of dangerous shallows, past the dense snow across the meadow was a boy with copper red hair, a stubby nose, and impenetrable freckles on his cheeks mimicking the snowstorm surrounding us. A reflecting fishing lure anchors me in this whiteout. We meet and he says, do you want to play hairdressers behind the potting shed?

Forthwith the snow evaporates back into the sky, and the warmth of the sun curls my chest. My chest is lured to his bosom. Impetuously my body flows behind him as he pulls me like a scarf in the wind. We arrive. He dusts off the chair with his soggy mitten, leaving streaks of wetness. He guides me to sit. He removes his gloves and grazes his fingers through my hair. I tilt my head with my eyes closed shut presenting my scalenus anterior, and say, "This is when you kiss my neck." His fingers abruptly stretch open, releasing my hair. He shouts, "Yuck, gross!" I persuade, "But this is how you play hairdressers." His plump wet lips press in, and my eyes clench.

## Chapter Six

*Mother I can feel the soil falling over my head.*

- The Smiths (1986), *I know it's over*<sup>46</sup>

### *The Apogee*

The songs of the birds go silent, as though they all spontaneously fell from their trees. I feel Velcro rip off my neck, shriveling my sensuality, and my eyes unclench. The air is inky and thick. My face is incised, and my lungs are climbing to unknown altitudes. I stretch my eyes open and search for an anchor but only feel bulbous forms around me, some are chalky, leaving fine residue on my hands, and others are pliant. I transpose my body and the sound of *I love you* falls out from below me, from which it was confined. Without notice, my trachea pushes my larynx to the roof of my mouth -- as if it were a jack-in-the-box.<sup>47</sup> Just as suddenly, the Velcro wraps around my lips fastening to the final whisps of lanugo. Black frost, from within, outwardly penetrates through my pores and whorls up my dorsal. I do one's best to cover my eyes at the scary parts, but the latitude is already black. He whispers, "And now we wait until you bleed."<sup>48</sup>

A sliver in the abyss withers my autonomy. I scratch for the frigid metal slit and

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<sup>46</sup> The Smiths, "I know it's over," by Morrissey and Johnny Marr, recorded June 16, 1986, track 3 on *The Queen is Dead*, Rhino, Cassette.

<sup>47</sup> Keith T. Sillar, Laurence D. Picton, and William J. Heitler, "The Mammalian Startle Response", *The Neuroethology of Predation and Escape* (England: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 248. Accessed June 13, 2024, <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1002/9781118527061.ch9>. Auditory amplitude impacts the intensity of the mammal *startle response*. While the human's "emotional state affects the level of the acoustic startle reflex."

<sup>48</sup> Lacey Bobier, "The Sexualization of Menstruation: On Rape, Tampons, and 'Prostitutes'," *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 303-17. During the Menarche phase, pubertal development becomes central; breasts grow, awareness of increased attention to their body happens, as well as adaptation and discomfort with their behavior occur. During this vulnerable phase, the menstruator is sexually marked. Meaning their bodies become the object of the male gaze. Studies show this causes internal disempowerment, self-objectification, self-judgment, and fear of being raped.



press the tips of my trembling fingers through. My legs are jammed in this protuberant landscape, and my arms are too feeble to pry myself unfettered. I pull on pendulous garments above me to upheave and an ear-splitting *thud* below me destabilizes my footing. My body slithers through the light and I fall onto my bedroom carpet flooring staring up at my once ghosting ceiling, which is now infiltrating swampy mold seeping out around the contours of the gaping cavity. The air is overflowing, and I can breathe fully for the last time.

*Clatter* discharges from the strangulating closet that I was just rebirthed from. I look up and give ground for an ominous vital force cloaked in the barbed side of Velcro. It unearths and staggers out of my white, broken, toy box.

“Suppers ready” my sister calls out from the landing at the bottom of the staircase.

“Coming,” it says in a sarcastic, yet nevertheless charming, tone.

Aghast, I lift myself in a plight of hyperesthesia.<sup>49</sup> The buoyancy of my blood swells to my thoughts, wringing my palpitating ticker. I move one foot in front of the other, just as I always have.

The sippy, straggly threaded, loveseat, that sits in front of our coffee table end, escorts me. A plate of food, that stares at me, has been prepared for me. The television

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<sup>49</sup> Rachel Ann Tee-Melegrito, “Hyperesthesia: Definition, Causes and Symptoms,” reviewed by William C. Lloyd III, *Medical News Today*, last reviewed October 21, 2022, accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/hyperesthesia>. *Hyperesthesia* is a response that heightens sensory sensitivity to one or all of your senses.

luster, emitting our rented 1999 *Cruel Intentions* film, shifts and shapeshifts his face before me. He, who appears to have taken human form, sits between my sister and me.

My sister inquires, “What were you guys doing up there?”<sup>50</sup> I quickly lift my glass of water and hide behind the stable base, clasp my tongue to the rim.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Preston Ni, “Do People Choose Romantic Partners Similar to Their Parent?” reviewed by Jessica Schrader, *Psychology Today*, New York: Sussex Publishers, LLC, March 10, 2019, Accessed June 13, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/communication-success/201903/do-people-choose-romantic-partners-similar-their-parent>. “Mate attraction and selection may be [...] a phenomenon known as *imprinting*. This theory suggests that we can become psychologically conditioned to being attracted to a distinct parental personality type, with the accompanying need for love, by the time we’re 18 months old. This “imprinting” is the result of a combination of factors, including, perhaps most importantly, how we received (or were deprived of) love, intimacy, and security from our parent(s) or primary guardian.”

<sup>51</sup> Adrienne Harris and Steven Kuchuck, *The Legacy of Sandor Ferenczi: From Ghost to Ancestor* (Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2015), 25, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743998>. “Identification with the aggressor—that became widely known after forty years as Stockholm syndrome—represents a complete forfeiting of the ego, which may lead to destruction in extreme cases. In *The Clinical Diary*, Ferenczi says, “In the absence of alloplastic physical and mental tools of aggression, nothing remains but to perish for lack of love, or to adapt by autoplasic adaptation to the wishes (even the most hidden wishes) of the attacker, in order to calm him down. Identification in place of hatred and defense...”

## Chapter Seven

*The first judgment of the ego distinguishes between edible and nonedible objects:*

*the first acceptance is swallowing; the first rejection is spitting out.*

- Otto Fenichel (1945), *The psychoanalytic theory of neurosis*<sup>52</sup>

### *The Wayward Vigil*

The guise spectated through the perversion of the lens evolves into darkness. My sister's idiosyncrasies blur to facelessness. I quaffed the hindmost drop and set my glass on my bedside table. I fold into myself and swaddle my eremophobia.<sup>53</sup> The hush in the room invades my precariousness.<sup>54</sup>

*Clink.* The doorknob turns. *Cling.* His belt unfastens like clockwork. He worms through the attenuated blackness. The moon voyeurs through a splinter in the shutters, just enough to unveil the long barbs that dangle between his thighs. My covering begins to pull, then yanks.

My corpse betrays me with an involuntarily quiver.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company inc., 1945), 146.

<sup>53</sup> *Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary*, s.v. "Eremophobia," accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/eremophobia>. *Eremophobia* is characterized as a pathological dread of being abandoned.

<sup>54</sup> Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father* (Surrey: OneWorld Classics Ltd., 2008), 91. "I sit in my room, surrounded by the clamour of the entire flat. I hear all the doors slamming, at least their racket spares me the footsteps going between them..."

<sup>55</sup> Lea Liz, "Body Language: Using Your Body to Communicate," reviewed by Jessica Schrader, *Psychology Today*, New York: Sussex Publishers, LLC, March 23, 2021, accessed June 14, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-shameless-psychiatrist/202103/body-language-using-your-body-communicate>. "Body language is an essential part of communication and can be just as important as our verbal exchanges. Often, it's the nonverbal messages we send in our gestures, facial expressions, or posture that can cement or invalidate our words. Body language can be both conscious or subconscious actions..." I propose that body language responds to environmental stimuli quicker than the conscious mind, on a subconscious or preconscious level.

“You don’t want me?” he says with a jolt. Like a quill-less porcupine in the headlights, I respond “I have to go to work soon, and I haven’t slept.” He then seizes my innards, while the spotlight turns red.<sup>56</sup>

I lay on my side, overthrown. I discern the trudging trickle slink down my back, corrupting my sheets. I am indifferent.

*Click.* A harsh light pours out from his face, casting a delineation on the wall in front of me. Albeit this shadow is an imposter. Instead, it is rutted and transpiciously charging a haze. Abruptly I sit up and my eyes are perplexed. This pretender begins to consume its own form, of its own volition.<sup>57</sup>

A cloudburst of loud whispers descends above me.

*Clink. Bang.* The walls judder. *Clink.* Charged impetus enters my bedroom. My father howls, “I have work in the morning.”

“We are talking, if you don’t mind.” My monster violently responds.

“This is my house!” Bellows my father while his back rolls up and hits the ceiling.

“Can we just talk?” My monster growls with condescension.

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<sup>56</sup> “Red Sky at Night and Other Weather Lore,” *Met Office*, accessed August 7, 2023, [https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/how-weather-works/red-sky-at-night#:~:text=A%20red%20sky%20appears%20when,usually%20be%20dry%20and%20pleasant. When “dust particles are trapped in the atmosphere by high pressure,” blue light is dispersed leaving only red in the sky.](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/how-weather-works/red-sky-at-night#:~:text=A%20red%20sky%20appears%20when,usually%20be%20dry%20and%20pleasant. When%20dust%20particles%20are%20trapped%20in%20the%20atmosphere%20by%20high%20pressure,)

<sup>57</sup> Phebe Cramer, *Protecting the Self: Defense Mechanisms in Action* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2006), 23. “[*Projection* may be] defined as attributing one’s own unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or intentions to others, so as to avoid the anxiety associated with harboring them.” While distorting reality it demands one to differentiate between their own emotions and how they are impacting their environment, as it is competing with a standard of what is acceptable. Projection protects from disturbing anxiety by attributing their own behavior to someone else.

My father hurls himself onto my monster. I watch them perform a choreography. They levitate with objects that hold me. They twirl along the fibers of the carpet that ground me. They bear the weight of each other's engrossment, this appalls me. Even the blood dripping down my father's nose is cliché.

My mother floats in with her bombastic tone, "Steve, get back to bed!" It was as though she was correcting a dog who just peed on the rug. Then her despondency veers to me. "You should be asleep," she castigates.<sup>58</sup> She has spoken away my voice.<sup>59</sup>

*Clink.* The pores in the wood on the door secrete and hurl towards my face. The wet decaying smell of my monster's expectorate bastes my eyes, nose, and cheek. Within the blur of his spit, I see him bow in contentment. I am residue. Exeunt.

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<sup>58</sup> Ryan Bailey and Jose Pico, "Defense mechanisms," *StatPearls* (Treasure Island, FL: StatPearls Publishing, May 22, 2023), accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559106/>. "Denial [is defined as] dismissing external reality and instead focusing on internal explanations or fallacies and thereby avoiding the uncomfortable reality of a situation. This defense mechanism may be present in someone who continues to shop for expensive designer clothes despite being in serious financial debt."

<sup>59</sup> Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2019), 78, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.21983/P3.0245.1.00>. "Sometimes I long to confide in you to tell you about the food that rots inside me the food I swallow without tasting the food that tries to fill the gaps."

## Chapter Eight

*...A delirium that literally prevents one from going mad, for it postpones the senseless abyss that threatens the passing...*

- Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*<sup>60</sup>

### *Washing the Walls in My Dream*

I grab the bedsheet, to rub my eyes, but they rub away. The darkness inhales my presence. I reach for the dangling lift cord. *Screech*, I draw the blinds. A coral light ingests my vision. I press into the vibrancy, but the stinging throbs my thoughts.

The force of a tidal wave thunders up the stairs. *Clink*. A rumbling black mass obstructs the light. Hot musk paints my face. Stunned with numbing fear, I'm pressed into the back wall of my closet. Words begin to wriggle up the back of my tongue. I'm concerned they will fall out. My mouth spastically dilates. I exhale, "I don't want you."

A soundless pause swells the room.

*Gasp*, a sharp inhale follows the hither and tither of his stark black raging disposition. Lost and erratic, I hear my monster strip the window leaving a bare frame. My spine chills as he begins to whimper. The residue of my heart pounds on my chest. It musters with childlike innocence, "If you don't love me, I will jump."<sup>61</sup> It rests my palm on its soggy cheek and says, "This is my undying love for you. It is only I who truly

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<sup>60</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Translated by Louis-Ferdinand Celine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 137.

<sup>61</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal", translated by Julian Palley, *Labyrinths Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 118. Borges explains the vulnerable core that conducts our human condition when he says, "Death (or its allusion) makes men precious and pathetic. They are moving because of their phantom condition; every act they execute may be their last; there is not a face that is not on the verge of dissolving like a face in a dream."

loves you.”<sup>62</sup> He shifts his weight toward the burrow and my hand snaps on his arm like a mouse trap.<sup>63</sup>

“Please don’t”, I submit. “I have to go,” I stammer. I feel around the room for anchors.

“You are in no state to drive. I will drive you to work,” he demands.

I frantically move down the stairway, as if running up the basement stairs with horror of monsters snatching me. Feeling the warmth of a grab missing my ankle. *Cling*, I clutch my car keys and desperately move towards my car door handle. His growl swiftly shifts towards me. *Clink*. The door opens and I madly shift my weight into the driver’s seat. I can’t see. Despairingly, I slide the key into the ignition. The door swings open with blinding darkness.

It shoves me into the passenger seat, and I impulsively reach for the door handle. Just before contact, it locks.

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<sup>62</sup> Mariagrazia Di Giuseppe and J. Christopher Perry, “The Hierarchy of Defense Mechanisms: Assessing Defensive Functioning with the Defense Mechanisms Rating Scales Q-Sort,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (Pisa; Montreal: University of Pisa; McGill University, October 15, 2021), 11, accessed June 15, 2024, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.718440. *Rationalization* is when “the individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by devising reassuring or self-serving but incorrect explanations for his or her own or others’ behavior[...] The subject is usually thought to be unaware or minimally aware of his true underlying motive; instead, he or she sees only the substituted, more socially acceptable reason for the action.”

<sup>63</sup> Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father* (Surrey: OneWorld Classics Ltd., 2008), 96. “My father says: “Something like this has to be seen while one is capable of it,” and swings himself (in Felix’s brown nightgown, his figure becoming an amalgamation of both) up onto the window and, with outstretched arms, splays his legs out on the very wide, steeply slanting window ledge. I grab him and hold on to him by the two small loops meant for the cord of his nightgown. To be perverse he stretches out even further, it takes all my strength to hold him. I think of how good it would be if I could rope my feet to some fixed object, so as not to be pulled down with Father. This, however, would require letting go of Father, at least momentarily, which I cannot do.”

It quickly shifts gears into reverse and revs emphatically down the quiet residential streets. The wind bellows through the window, and it smells like the farmland that surrounds our small town. I beg, "Please let me out."

He eggs me on, "Why? Are you scared when I do this?" He swerves the car back and forth, nearly descending into the ditch. *Snap*, the car takes over and flips us into the wet muddy trenches.

I can feel the door above me. I push it open with my feet and slip out with it slamming behind me. I open the door for it and it climbs out. It leaps on me. My head just misses the asphalt, near the pumping exhaust pipe. His fury pins me down with his forearm. "You are not going anywhere!" it says. I plead for him to stop but it only fuels his temper. It grabs my shoulders and yanks me back and forth, beseeching "Why can't you fucking love me?" His quivering shakes smack my thoughts against the road. I scream as loud as I can "Stop!"

"What? Are you afraid of me? Do you think I rape you? I'll fucking show you how I'd rape you," it says while pulling off my pants. It shoves its hard barbed tentacles into me while covering my mouth. I can't even cry because I don't have eyes. I stare into oblivion as the exhaust smoke fills my lungs.

The sun closes its eyes. It is crying in the road, begging to be hit. When a bright light emerges in front of his dark silhouette. My sister's voice faintly chimes. "Get in the fucking car!" she shouts at me.



Defeated, I walk into my bedroom. I pick a paintbrush from the murky jar of water sitting on my desk. I sit in front of a blank canvas, and my eyes begin to focus. I mumble to myself, "I'd paint a self-portrait, but it'll look like you sister."

## Chapter Nine

*The last brick! I forgot a brick! I let you in you saw that brick the one I didn't fasten the one I set on top waiting for a rainy day waiting for a sad time to pin it down on top of all of the other bricks the one that would have safeguarded me. My wall was not yet finished. And you saw.*

– Erin Manning (2019), *The Perfect Mango*<sup>64</sup>

*This is how you shave your legs.*

I paint a bowl of cereal, then listen to the puffs hug the milk. As I watch them turn soggy, they come to be mold. Its shadow weighs on me like a brewing storm. It whispers, “That’s excessive. You will never lose your blubber.”<sup>65</sup> I pull the needles from my face and press on.

I undress with submissive numbness. *Squeak*, I turn the shower faucet on. I stare at the grim threshold. I peer into an echoing burrow. I am in awe of the inside-out rainbow reaching around my neck, but when I turn around it's gone.

Arching my toes into the tub, it growls through the keyhole “Little pig, little pig. Let me in, let me in!” The walls of the room unfold. “I’m shaving those hairs on your chinny-chin-chin,” he exclaims. My back curls over and breaks my ribs. Bone fragments press into my outer film of skin about to rupture.<sup>66</sup> It holds a camera up and says, “Now everyone will know you are unhinged.”

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<sup>64</sup> Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2019), 111, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.21983/P3.0245.1.00>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 103. “Christmas once again my body thin I will not eat my starvation entices you keeps you away. You still walk on my body try to hand me pieces of myself try to come back. You push yourself into my nightmare. I run from you I starve myself I am making myself invisible soon you will not see me.”

<sup>66</sup> Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, *Thinking through the Skin* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2001), 19-21, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203165706>. Ahmed and Stacey explain that skin is a border that feels but does not behave like a mirror that reflects inner truths. They state, “Skin is fetishized as a boundary-object”.

I scream, “Go away!” and hide my face. I push through its brooding rays. My foot sinks into the floor which has turned into yellow goo. Strings of glue follow me as I fall right through.

“I am your father, brother, lover, and only friend! I am your open sesame!” It roared from above.

The strands restrain me, pinching my flesh as I press forward to the front door.<sup>67</sup> I push through heavy wind with nothing on the horizon. I slide my key into my car door, but the car isn’t there.<sup>68</sup> The climate changes impulsively. The birds are tweeting at the sun above and my parents pull up next to me. Stunned, I look down at my once-naked body with a sigh of relief.

“It’s time to go!” Mom says.

“Where?” I ask.

“We need to beat traffic heading towards the city.” She explained.

I get into the far back seat, while my sister cuts the air with “he will be out soon, don’t rush him!”

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<sup>67</sup> Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father* (Surrey: OneWorld Classics Ltd., 2008), 62. “Here I had in fact gained a little independent distance from you, even if in doing so I slightly resembled a worm, its tail pinned to the ground under somebody's foot, tearing loose from the front and wriggling away to the side.”

<sup>68</sup> Philip J. Corr, *The Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory of Personality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10. “The Fight–Flight–Freeze System (FFFS) is responsible for mediating reactions to all aversive stimuli, conditioned and unconditioned. A hierarchical array of modules comprises the FFFS, responsible for avoidance and escape behaviors. Importantly, the FFFS mediates the ‘get me out of this place’ emotion of fear, not anxiety. The FFFS is an example of a negative feedback system, designed to reduce the discrepancy between the immediate threat and the desired state (i.e., safety).”

The humming sound of the van blistered in the heat. I laid down on the back seat with my head awkwardly resting on the rubber armrest. My eyes become idle.

It walks out of the house and locks the door in human skin. It sits in the bucket seat in front of me. I pretend to be asleep. He adjusts his seat back and says “The show can’t start without me” in a cocky human voice. “Put it on track nine!” he demands from my father while leaning forward to pass my mother a compact disk.

*I hear Two to one. Static to the sound of you and I, undone for the last time. And there this was, hiding at the bottom of your swimming pool some September. And don't you think, I wish that I could stay? Your lips give you away. I can hear it, a jet engine through the center of the storm. And I'm thinking I'd prefer not to be rescued.*<sup>69</sup>

It rests its human arm behind the seat. Its fingers stretch outward and squirm up my leg. I wish I wasn’t wearing a skirt, I thought. It snatches my groin while telling my father to stop at the local café to get him a green tea. I try to shove him away with my legs and he slides his searing ring finger between my lips. My voice is missing, I can’t find it. I mouth the soundless words – Stop!

My body submits to this coffin.

We walk into a crowded bar where the bouncer smirks at me and asks me for my identification. He looks up and down, as though he can’t believe it's me in the photo. He says, “What happened to you?” I hesitate for my next breath. He takes a large black marker and writes an X on the back of my hand while shouting, “We’ve got another

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<sup>69</sup> Jack’s Mannequin, “Rescued,” Everything in Transit, Sound City, 2005, compact disk.

under-ager.” While the crowd behind me pushes me through. I sit with my parents in a booth.

The crowd begins to chant his name while raising their fists in solidarity. The room begins to throb. It strums its acoustic guitar and husks his voice into the microphone. The crowd applauds. It sings, *This darkness tears at me and swallows me whole again*. He stares at me through the spotlights, squinting his eyes with glistening sincerity.

The vessels in my heart are shrieking. I stand up and the crowd parts. I fearlessly walk towards it, and take the microphone off the stand. I release shout-less words and throw the microphone over the beam above me. Caught, I wrap it around my rainbow and step off the stage without thought. The cord holds me, while the crowd gasps. It screeches feedback and I slowly unplug. I’m impotent.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father* (Surrey: OneWorld Classics Ltd., 2008), 104. “The most immediate escape, perhaps from childhood onwards, was not suicide, but the thought of it.”

## Chapter Ten

*There are sets of arguments about sexuality and identity ... but no absolute meanings. There are tons of meanings, and all of these meanings collide. Meaning shifts.*

- Kathy Acker (1995), *Paragraphs*<sup>71</sup>

### *Putrefaction*

*Stop copying me! Stop copying me!* says the voice of my sister ringing in my ear. I stand under hissing fluorescent lights hanging above my thoughts. *Beep. Attention shoppers, the store will be closing in 5 minutes. Please make your way to the closest exit* says the nasally PA system.

“Don’t even think about it,” my sister hisses louder than the lights. Jaw clenched, she squeezes my arm and I watch it turn purple.

“You just need to figure out who you are,” my monster says charmingly while wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

At times, my sister and I had overlapping aesthetic preferences usually relating to apparel. If detected by my sister, which it often was more than not, she would practice parasitic dominance that would leave me bone dry.

I let them walk ahead of me and my father catches up. He firmly tells me, “He is not your boyfriend.” All the sounds become speechless, but the reverbing echoes of my lungs consciously breathe in and out at short intervals. Dazed, I begin to melt into a

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<sup>71</sup> Kathy Acker, “Paragraphs,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 28, no. 1 (Chicago: Midwest Modern Language Association, 1995), 92. Accessed June 16, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1315245.92>.

puddle of sludge. I fall to the speckle flooring and lean towards the nearest drain to escape. The metal drain cover splits me into fragments, some pieces become displaced. I suffocate, turning into Jello. Plopping down on the couch in the basement in front of my monster and sister.

“I think I may be gay,” I say unfastened.

“No, you aren’t,” my sister says with confidence.<sup>72</sup>

“But, how do you know?” I dispute while leaking on the floor.

“I’m telling you,” She always says before exposing her thin skin. “If mom or dad or the whole family knew you were gay, do you think they would accept you?”

“No,” I said with uncertainty.

I subside into the fibers of the carpet.

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Clark, “Projection,” *The Literary Encyclopedia*, last revised November 11, 2009, October 24, 2005, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=902>.

“[*Projection*] is a means of ego-defence in which the subject attributes its own unconscious motives and ideas to objects outside of itself. The individual thus disavows what it does not want to admit about itself and discovers in the external world feelings, qualities or objects which originate in its own unconscious.”

## Chapter Eleven

*If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary.*

– Judith Butler (2004), *Undoing*<sup>73</sup>

*I am pleasing but my pleasing is weary.*

Tamed. The loop piles tickle my nose and tangle my toes. I contract each coil, as I find my bearings in this labyrinth. Time is sedated and yet fear loudens at this scale. The quivering echoes undulate, and my entire body processes the frequencies charged from above. Each movement longs for the next, fragmenting unforeseeably.

I see transformation along the horizon and wonder if there are others. As I move closer, they repel. I begin to chase them, but they only recede into nothing. Moments to despair, the ambit germinates a speck swelling. As I approach, the disillusion exposes itself. I am a reflection of myself, in a parted mirror<sup>74</sup>, in the corner of this universe.

“Hello?” I whisper.

“It’s nice to meet you,” my reflection speaks.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask.

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<sup>73</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203499627>.

<sup>74</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, translated by John M. Fein, *Labyrinths Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 21. Borges employs the mirror to represent the boundless and the phantasm. “From the remote depths of the corridor, the mirror spied upon us. We discovered (such a discovery is inevitable in the late hours of the night) that mirrors have something monstrous about them...because they increase the number of men.”



“You are I,” they respond.

“But who are you?” I wonder in a whisper.

“I am whatever you want me to be,” it explains.

“Will you come with me?” I ask while holding out my hand. They seize my hand and pull their form out of the reflection. “This way,” I say while jolting them in an apprehensive direction. I felt confident holding their hand but only pretended to know where I was going. The lights flicker and a melodramatic, yet trembling, thundering sound crashes from above. A backward wind restricts us from moving forward. We grab onto the loop fibrils as our bodies begin to levitate. Our fingers begin to slip, and we are both abducted into a whirlwind by a behemoth in high heels and a skirt with lingerie underneath tucking themselves into place.

## Chapter Twelve

*I am little I am big I am twenty-five and a thousand and they ask if it true did it happen that way how was it can you repeat it are you sure it was really that way? I am little I am big I am two and a thousand and they ask is it true did it happen that way how was it can you repeat it are you sure it was really that way? I don't know I am screaming the words caught in my throat. Memory doesn't exist I exist as I create myself the creation is hurting stop it hurts please stop stop!*  
- Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango*<sup>75</sup>

### *Parentified*<sup>76</sup>

*Pop!* The darkness becomes darker. I lose grip of my reflection. They didn't tell me their name; I think while grieving. A crinkling *swish* surrounds me. A round opening from above appears with the exerting ambiance of a finger pressing into plastic. A lustrous baby blue eye appears from above. The subtle light illuminates the space I now inhabit. My reflection's hand dimly appears before me. I clasp them to pull them in close. I kiss them. The fullness of each kiss fills my cavities. Abruptly, yet insistent, moaning muffles through the walls that live in the obscure nightness that breathes in and out with every blink of the overlooker.

"I thought I lost you," I said with few words. Each breath down here is shorter than the last.

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<sup>75</sup> Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2019), 44, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.21983/P3.0245.1.00>.

<sup>76</sup> Nancy D. Chase, "Parentification: An Overview of Theory, Research, and Societal Issues," in the section "Theoretical Constructs for Understanding Parentification," in *Burdened Children: Theory, Research, and Treatment of Parentification* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1999), 5, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452220604>. "*Parentification*[,] in the family[,] entails a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance ... to accommodate and care for logistical or emotional needs of the parent... In its worst sense... such "responsiveness" from one's children may be gravely exploitive of them. In extreme cases when a parent's dependency is too great... the parentified child may learn in this process that her needs are of less importance than those of others..."

They touch my lower abdomen and say, "We are here." Then as their hand pulls away, my navel reaches, and we swoon.

## Chapter Thirteen

*What sort of "self" is presented in popular de-politicized culture - a glamourized, commodified, conforming persona - the very opposite to that of the self subsumed by a rigorous exploration.*

*Issues of the process are occluded, suppressed.*

- Carole Schneemann, *On Intuition*<sup>77</sup>

### *The Void*

I open my eyes to my body trembling, engulfed by masks and shields, on a surgical table. A wailing cry penetrates a hollow bubbling resonance. A helplessly needy gaze punctures the chalky white residue and fluorescent lights above me.<sup>78</sup> They hold her with one hand behind the neck and one under her bottom and say, “We need to take her for further observations.” My limp arm tries to reach her purple toes and my nipples begin to cry.<sup>79</sup> “Dad, you come with us,” they say. I see my reflection walk away and my bosom clenches.

The colors and noises around me blur in motion. “Mom, we are taking you back to the recovery room.”

“When can I hold my baby?” I demand more than I ask.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Carolee Schneemann. “On Intuition,” *Technologies of Intuition* (Toronto: YYZBOOKS, 2011) 92.

<sup>78</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 42. “If the baby could speak to the mother, says Winnicott, here is what it might say: I need you; You survive what I do to you as I come to recognize you as not me; I use you; I forget you; But you remember me; I keep forgetting you; I lose you; I am sad.”

<sup>79</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 206. “It’s easy enough to stand on the outside and say, “You just have to let go and let the baby out.” But to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces.”

<sup>80</sup> Courtney E. Ackerman, “What Is Attachment Theory? Bowlby’s 4 Stages Explained,” in section “What is Attachment Theory? A Definition,” scientifically reviewed by Christina R. Wilson, *Positive Psychology*, February 27, 2024, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://positivepsychology.com/attachment-theory/>. First described by John Bowlby, *attachment theory* is “the extreme behaviors infants engage in to avoid separation from a parent or when reconnecting with a physically separated parent—like crying, screaming,

“It will take time for you to regain strength,” they say exclaiming an unacceptable answer. “In the meantime, we will set you up with a pump,” they explain.

I stare at the whiteboard situated at the end of my bed, which says “Nurse:” in confident bubbly cursive writing.<sup>81</sup> Trying to wiggle my toes, while thoughts absorb me out-of-body. I’m taken to a place where I’m covered in blood, slipping on the toilet seat. I can feel something lodged in my penis and I start to scream for my reflection. They tell me to try and pull it out with my fingers, but the blood glides my fingers away. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do. I want my mommy?” I howl with pounding numbness governing my limbs. My reflection tells me to keep trying. I slide my finger in deep, stretching my skin to find a grip. I pull it out and hysterically cry as I process the weight of my baby in the palm of my hand, not breathing.<sup>82</sup>

*Knock, Knock.* The nurse walks in with a yellow monster hungry for my nipples. “Where is my baby? I want my baby!” I pronounce.<sup>83</sup>

“Your baby is too weak to breastfeed,” they explain while passing me the flange and pressing a *beep*. “Do 20-30 minutes on each nipple,” she demands while leaving the room.

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and clinging—were evolutionary mechanisms. Bowlby thought these behaviors had possibly been reinforced through natural selection and enhanced the child’s chances of survival.”

<sup>81</sup> Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2019), 57, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.21983/P3.0245.1.00>. “You cannot name me I watch you grow we are growing apart you search for my name among the rubble of our detachment.”

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. “The test is negative I am not pregnant you were never my child I did not conceive you. My breasts are sore still full of milk you never drank from me I am still waiting.”

<sup>83</sup> Joe Kossowsky, Monique C. Pfaltz, Silvia Schneider, Jan Taeymans, Cosima Locher, and Jens Gaab, “The Separation Anxiety Hypothesis of Panic Disorder Revisited: A Meta-Analysis,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 170, no. 7 (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, July 2013): 768, accessed June 15, 2024, doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2012.12070893. “*Separation anxiety* disorder is characterized by persistent, excessive, and developmentally inappropriate fear of separation from major attachment figures, usually parents.”

The monster begins to flutter and *screech* as it sucks my nipple back down its throat. It locks on and begins to tear the ducts inside my breast. I stand up to flush the blood-tainted drop of milk from the bottle down the toilet. *Flush*. I watch it circulate down, carrying my baby. I reach my arm down the neck of the beast, and it slips away.

I lay in bed and drift to sleep, to have my drift wake me up. The night falls. I can hear a mother behind the curtain tending to her newborn baby. I do everything to siphon my tears. I ask my reflection, “Why did they take my baby? Why are they doing this to me?” My sobbing drifts me back into slumber.

I wake up floating to the ceiling of my hospital room, my breasts throbbing to *pop*.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Our last night at the Sheraton, we have dinner at the astoundingly overpriced “casual Mexican” restaurant on the premises, Dos Caminos. You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant. Our waiter cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours. On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more “male,” mine, more and more “female.” But that’s not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging.*

- Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*<sup>84</sup>

### *De-girling*

Deflated. Black bristly hairs sway above me, searching for a place to land. I curve my arms to catch what I can, shielding my face from onlookers. *Click clack*, I hear the nurse returning. I rush to sweep what I can under the bed but am pulled beneath the floor. Darkness shields me.

Muffled, I hear my reflection talking to a nurse. “We are concerned about the amount of blood she is losing from her uterine walls. She will need surgery,” the nurse explains.

I whisper, “But you won’t love me if I’m not a girl.”<sup>85</sup>

My amygdala descends into a memory of a drawing. To figures on a porch sitting in separate rocking chairs. My monster is on the left and I’m on the right. The self-

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<sup>84</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 168.

<sup>85</sup> Bert Garssen, “Repression: Finding Our Way in the Maze of Concepts,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 30, no. 6 (Berlin: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, July 25, 2007), 471. “*Repression* is the general term that is used to describe the tendency to inhibit the experience and the expression of negative feelings or unpleasant cognitions in order to prevent one’s positive self-image from being threatened.”

portrait depicts me with saggy fat droopy flesh hanging over the sides of the chair. My clothing doesn't fit. Large text is overlaid that says, "Will you still love me?" The o in love is shaped like a heart.<sup>86</sup>

This memory took me to the day I needed fat to fortify me. A soft piano plays classical music, and the aroma of the pervasive flower garden fills my lungs. My monster taps me on the shoulder, holding his arms out for a hug. Muscles tightening, he pulls me in close smothering me with his pungent cologne. He goes down on one knee and says, "Today I will be marrying you too. Everything I say to her, I'm saying to you too."<sup>87</sup> He turns around and begins to wave to his guests – my family--, and then positions himself front and center down the aisle.

I begin to use my bitten nails to dig a way out below me. The soil is soft and moist from the rainfall, and I descend into the darkness. Uncertainty destabilizes my mind like the thunder crumbling the walls of the burrow that surrounds me. Not sure which way is up, I begin to dig in another direction. The slimy blood from my fingertips mixes into the soggy soil. I begin to feel the warmth of the surface above. What I think is the sun breaking through the soil, is the lights in the operating room.

"Lay on the table with your gown open," one doctor says shifting to the anesthesiologist demanding I count down from 10.

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<sup>86</sup> This is a satirical self-portrait, illustrating the battle to repel. I question, would I become abject if I gain weight?

<sup>87</sup> Andrea Mathews, "Identity and Introjection: Who are you, separate from your introjections?" reviewed by Ekua Hagan, *Psychology Today*, New York: Sussex Publishers, LLC, June 17, 2013, accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/traversing-the-inner-terrain/201306/identity-and-introjection>. "*Introjection* is that amazing ability we have to take in the expectations and projections of others, communicated to us either nonverbally or verbally, either covertly or overtly."



“10, 9, 8...,” I wean off.

I pull my body out of the black rubber flooring on center stage. I can not bring myself to my feet. The silence of an auditorium, full of held breaths, is broken by a loud *Screech* of my sweaty palms finding a grip to move forward. Clenching my eyes closed tight, I scream with final strength “Help!” The audience applauds with a standing ovation. My head falls forward in defeat, and my face drowns in the black rubber.

## Chapter Fifteen

*I feel your eyes on me I feel your questions and I know there are no answers.*

*I have let you touch my body I have let you see me I have let you feel the memories*

*as they appeared on the page. Fractured and ravaged I have lent you my body.*

– Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango*<sup>88</sup>

*“These are objects I seem to live through more than view.”*<sup>89</sup>

Gutted and mounted to the wall, like a trophy.<sup>90</sup> I self-objectify my psychology.

Your lingering eyes see right past me. You tease me with your black attire, your depth.

You pretend to look, but why pretend?

My daughter appears in the distance and says, “Daddy, Daddy, I need my yellow step stool.”

“Why?” my reflection responds.

My daughter looks up with her teary baby blue eyes and says, “I need my mommy. I’m too little to see her.”

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<sup>88</sup> Erin Manning, *The Perfect Mango* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2019), 149, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.21983/P3.0245.1.00>.

<sup>89</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, translated by Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>90</sup> “Displacement,” reviewed by Psychology Today staff, *Psychology Today*, New York: Sussex Publishers, LLC, 2024, accessed June 9, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/displacement>.

“*Displacement* is a defense mechanism in which a person redirects an emotional reaction from the rightful recipient onto another person or object.”

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