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"The Birth" and Other Flights of Fancy

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“THE BIRTH” AND OTHER FLIGHTS OF FANCY

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A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

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May 2019

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By Abigail Adent

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented in Partial
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This thesis is a collection of ten fictions, poems, and things in between that play with a variety of forms, ranging from the choose-your-own-adventure story to Oulipian constraints like the lipogram and Mathew’s Algorithm. I attempt to convey narratives of my own felt experience in the world, dressed in elaborate metaphor and strange images. In this thesis you will see: severed hands, a short severed tongue, eyes on moss, too many teeth, attached very long tongues, dripping earlobes, a tentacle, etc.

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WHERE YOU'LL FIND ME: AN INTRODUCTION

Nothing any longer can be taken for granted; every word has become a banana peel.

Harry Mathews

What I learned from the Oulipo: the only rules that matter are the ones you choose.¹

All writing is constraint writing. In the introduction to *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, Warren F. Motte identifies three levels of constraint that writers encounter: “first, a minimal level, constraints of the language in which the text is written; second, an intermediate level, including constraints of genre and certain literary norms; third, a maximal level, that of consciously preelaborated and voluntarily imposed systems of artifice” (11). Constraint writing in the sense that it’s primed for most people refers to this third sense, the most obvious one. But I think the reason why it’s most obvious is because the constraints of language, genre, and “certain literary norms” have become normalized to the extent that they seem like common sense rather than constructions. They aren’t rules, they’re just...the way things are. The way you’re supposed to write. I see this in some of my students’ attempts to shake off certain conventions of the five paragraph essay, and I see it in my own (fairly conservative, even at this point) primings for what

¹ Which is not to say that you can do (or write) whatever you want. The “choosing” happens within a limited field of options, and can happen in degrees as well as complete acceptance or rejection. In “Legends of the Center: System, Self, and Linguistic Consciousness,” Giltrow writes that “While rules might seem the most likely opportunity for centralizing motives to unify consciousness, rules seem instead to incur themselves and position speakers to produce diverse conditions,” indicating that a rule provides an opportunity to take a stance on that rule. In my case, I’m using constraint as a way to emphasize to myself the things that I would like to focus on in a particular text. More specifically, I use constraints to focus my attention to the way that I’m using language in a particular piece, and remove some attention from other conventions that may be distracting in context.

fiction is and can do. The reading I did for this thesis was instrumental in reshaping how I saw fiction in my head. I think this is where my lack of English degree shows—much of the reading I did on my own was fantasy and sci-fi, wonderful to be sure, but not usually forerunners in pushing the boundaries of genre and form. Writers like Sabrina Orah Mark and the weird, tiny, fever dream stories of *Wild Milk* were instrumental in re-priming fiction as a genre that can look like whatever I want it to look like. Perhaps the best example of this is “Pool,” which is written in line breaks and features an ambiguous, shifting environment: “Jump into the pool, says Brother. / I do not wish it jump into the pool. There is a tree in the pool. / That is not a tree. That is Grandmother. / Grandmother, is that you? / No answer” (Mark 76-77). I am truly uncertain if Grandmother was ever in the pool.

From a perspective that normalized constraints of genre and style, deliberate constraints like lipograms (excluding a specific letter) and rhopalisms (following a pattern of increasing or decreasing syllables) might seem like imposing rules for no reason rather than devices to disrupt existing constraints with newer ones. I find the nebulous idea of writing a story or a poem to be impossibly intimidating—much more intimidating than say, for example, writing a text about looking through windows without using the letter w.

And that brings us to my work, dear reader.

“Tues, Sept 4” is a lipogram about performance, about the ways that we use our bodies to indicate our places in the world. About how sometimes it’s hard to have faith in one’s own

performance.

The exigence for this text was, like most of my texts, a desire to do something with a form. I wanted to write a lipogram—I wanted to use a “real” constraint. And I wanted the constraint to be directly involved in the story, so I chose “w” as my letter to exclude in a text about looking through windows. I couldn’t use the word “window” in the story. I couldn’t describe light as “yellow” or “white” when it came out of the windows, and I couldn’t indicate what someone “would” do, or who they would do it “with.” I could ask no questions, make no inquiries about “how, who, what, when, where.” None of those things are especially relevant to the story, but focusing my attention on the things I couldn’t do rather than what I was trying to write had the effect that constraints are supposed to: “it forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal hidden resources” (Benabou 41). “Reveal hidden resources” is perhaps an overly mysterious way to say “keep going.” That was the note I got for the first draft of this text, which was another versions of the first section: keep going. It needs to do more. It needs a point. Why is this...person?...looking through these windows?

So I thought about why I try to catch glimpses into open windows while driving on dark nights. I’m curious about what those moments can reveal about how people perform “person” when no one is looking. I think this comes from a deep-seated conviction that I’m somehow doing it wrong (especially the performance of gender), an anxiety fixation that comes up a few times throughout this thesis because its primary effect (the anxiety, not the thesis) is to make me feel deeply and profoundly alone. And I throw these things into the void with the hope that the void

will throw back a note that says, “You aren’t really that fucked up.”

I think of Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* here—he calls the fronts that we maintain while performing “stable” as they work with other environmental factors to construct our perception of a situation. I think it would be more accurate to call those fronts ostensibly stable. I think we’re all licking a second row of teeth somewhere in our minds.

“Corps Analysis,” the other constraint piece in this thesis, is a poem that makes use of Mathew’s algorithm, a constraint that provides rearranged segments of an existing text to be used as a starting point for a new text, most often a poem. “Corps Analysis” works on the sentence level—I rearranged clauses, as opposed to individual words. I initially tried the algorithm with Shakespeare sonnets, because that’s what Mathews uses and Shakespeare is the sort of old baroque thing that Oulipians like to play with and make new. It didn’t go well with the sonnets, I think because I had a really hard time picking up using the ornate, cumbersome style of writing that resulted from rearranged Shakespeare. And the syllables...just didn’t work. I’m bad at counting syllables, apparently. So I picked up the Michael Stubbs chapter I’d been reading earlier that afternoon, and picked a few sentences that I thought were beautiful in addition to contextually important. There’s something of poetry in how Stubbs writes about data: “We cannot eliminate subjective factors in observation, but we can make explicit how observations are always constrained by what is possible and/or convenient, and how different aspects of reality are therefore emphasized by available data and observational methods” (131).

This poem is an example of using a constraint to learn more about the text, or more specifically, about my relationship to the text. And I cut it up into little unrecognizable pieces because I love it. Because I wanted to reassemble it with little pieces of me stuck in the cracks. Because I wanted to paste it all over my body. Like “The Birth,” this poem is in some ways about my embodied relationship with the research that I do and the things that I read. I think a lot about the fact that all of those things coexist in the physical space of my brain, and I picture them floating around, bumping into each other. Rubbing off on each other.

What I want to say through Giltrow: I dare and beg you to comprehend me.

I don’t have many characters in my texts besides the unnamed narrators. Even in the one text with named characters, “Checking In,” the form prevents a real dialogue from taking place—it’s a letter to someone who is presumed dead by local authorities. So Janet Giltrow’s statement in “The Pragmatics of Fiction” that “In fiction genres (and in non-fiction genres with novelistic designs) a narrator arranges for us to overhear voices of strangers; the narrator’s arrangements are expression of our perceived subjectivity vis-a-vis that of the narrator” (74) applies to my writing somewhat indirectly. There aren’t many strangers to overhear—just the narrator. And because I don’t usually write omniscient narrators, all the reader has access to is the narrator’s subjective experience of the world.

This is the case for all narrators, we’re always beholden to a subjectivity, but I think what’s particular to my narrators is a relationship to the world that’s strained by anxiety brought on by

an over-awareness (or perhaps persisting over-thinking) of their felt failure to perform “normal.” I’m trying to convey an anxiety similar to the narrators in Joanna Ruocco’s *The Week*, especially the story “Foxholes,” where the narrator attempts to track the movements of people (or not) through her peephole: “Looking through the peephole, I know the shapes are people, because the peephole is people height, at the midway height of middle-sized people. I see shapes of people, but even then I’m often wrong. There are no people. It’s the grease on the peephole. When you stare at grease for too long it makes shapes” (Ruocco 114). The peephole here is an object that frames the narrator’s relationship to the world; the story is about the narrator and the peephole and the perception of people. (I delight in the people/peephole sound similarity throughout this very short story.) You’ll find my narrators similarly bound to material things as a way to situate themselves: looking through windows or holding oozes up to the light.

Because the perspective is so limited, I think what I’m doing is a little more direct than what Giltrow describes when she writes that the “fundamental architecture of fiction genres” is that “the writer has estimated that (some) readers will find (technically) relevant this presentation of a narrator-with-’attitude’ arranging for the overhearing of voices” (Giltrow 77). My texts do not estimate what you will find relevant. My texts show you nothing that is not relevant. The close first person narratives instead ask you to consider the narrator’s relationship to the world around them, which the narrator often finds foreign or incomprehensible or full of strangeness.

“The Howling Oh-Oh” came about because I wanted to try writing a fake Wikipedia page, and I wanted to keep thinking about narrators who were almost-but-not-quite human. Most people are

probably primed to read “almost-but-not-quite human” as a sort of pejorative, equating “almost” with “less than.” That’s not the case for the howling oh-oh, at least not how I see it. The howling oh-oh makes no effort to hide its tongue. The howling oh-oh isn’t shy about defending itself. The howling oh-oh has a sharp limit on how much time it can spend around other people. The howling oh-oh is aware of its difference.

“The Birth” also involves a narrator who feels only tangentially a part of the world. I knew that I wanted to write something that looked vaguely like an IMRD article, or at least something that was trying to look like an article. It’s hard to write about this process without relying on conduit metaphor driven language about “filling a space” and “capacious forms” because a lot of the thinking I did before I started drafting this piece revolved around finding smaller forms and languaging practices that I could slide into (see, there is it, conduit metaphor) the sections.

For example, I started with the John Swales “Create a Research Space” model for writing an introduction (which is what I always actually use because I feel very bad at intros), and started to write an introduction that was drawing on the rhetorical moves described there. As I played in the space (forms are not spaces I can’t fill them with anything I hate this pervasive metaphor) an actual project started to suggest itself, but I was more interested in writing something abstractly about the experience of research than I was in constructing a facsimile of an article. That interest manifested in a Results & Discussion section that I tried to turn inwards on the narrator, prioritizing their relationship to the research over a faithful recording of whatever data the project generated. There’s a lot of vulnerability hidden in this one, like much of my writing. The

changes that the narrator undergoes loosely mirror the symptoms of rapidly increasing anxiety that I've been experiencing over the course of the semester: when I stay anxious enough for long enough I will say sentences in garbled orders, and having a panic attack in public feels very much like uncontrollably slapping people with tentacles while they for some incomprehensible reason say nothing. This is difficult to write about, which is why I dressed it in a form and narrator that encourage distance. There are nights when I too would like nothing more than to sit in a puddle like a toad and be mistaken for slime and rotting clothes.

"Next time you see me" also takes up my felt relationship to the world around me. The narrator is undeniably female, and that's not something I can say about myself—I'm a nonbinary person in a constant struggle with my female body. This too is difficult to write about.² Maybe that's why the poem is so short. I started from the image of Victorian dresses that had been dyed green with arsenic or embroidered with beetle wings—both real practices for a time. I have twin secret obsessions with fashion history and the Victorian and Edwardian eras, neither of which often make it into my writing, so I'm glad they could appear a little here. I also really wanted to play

² But it deserves some unpacking, and speaks to the "dare" and "beg" that begin this section. I struggle with my gender identity in relation to my physical body because, due to body type, it's very difficult for me to appear androgynous. That's made apparent in how I talk about my pronouns: "I prefer they/them, but she/her is fine, I know I look like a girl." I spend a lot of time on Tumblr which is fairly full of rhetoric about "my truth" and "you are valid" regarding gender identity, but it's hard to shake the feeling that that sort of assertion is only valid on the internet. Even if my felt sense is that I'm neither male or female, but I experience the world as a woman, how valid is my claim to this non-binary identity? At the same time, androgyny as an aesthetic goal is less ambiguous than it is boy-like. Playing into a conception of androgyny that only reinforces current gender binaries doesn't do anything to push back against the hierarchy that we're in, but I wonder if it's the only option that I have. Even so, I have to wonder where a non-binary person is to look for a model of what it means to be non-binary in this society that's so invested in sorting people by their gender. When gender norms are so embedded in daily life and any action can be coded as the performance or rejection of masculine or feminine traits, how do non-binary people carve out a third space?

with enjambement, a device I really enjoy reading but hadn't tried to write myself.

I've talked a few times about narrators who feel somewhat at odds with the world around them, and I want to take a moment to clarify that the sensation I experience that I'm trying to convey is less a feeling of total separation and more a continuous wondering, "Am I doing it right?" This is an embodied struggle that sometimes compounds with dysphoria, but I think it also has roots in the fact that I was socialized female for most of my life, and women and girls are taught to hate their bodies and doubt their performances of femininity. As Jen George writes in "Guidance/The Party," a story in the collection *The Babysitter at Rest*, "You must now claim to enjoy things, learn a lot, and know yourself—this will heavily influence others' assessment of your objective beauty and worth. ... Your life may fall apart around you while you're putting on the act of radiating positivity, but you will not realize it for some time" (George 17). She sees right the hell through me. "Guidance/The Party" is about a woman being directed through both aging and throwing an very adult party by a male Guide that instructs and berates her in equal parts. While the literal experiences in much of the story are not always relatable for reasons of age and gender, the doubt and anxiety that come from time with the Guide speak to a similar anxiety of performance as my narrators in "Tues, Sept 4" and "The Birth."

Perhaps the most experimental attempt at poetry my thesis is "After 'The Uninhabitable,'" which at time of writing is the text that I know the least about. I have a weird obsession with abandoned, desolate places like some of the kind that Georges Perec mentions in "The Uninhabitable," a sub-section of "Species of Spaces," and beyond that I'm interested in what

he's doing with sets of places and images that work collectively. My text is about obsolescence and accretion, which is what I settled on when I was trying to figure out what I find "uninhabitable" that's a little less literal than "the vainglorious mediocrity of tower blocks" (Perec 89). What I find to be uninhabitable pretty often is the inside of my own head, and the pieces here are representations of how things collect there.

"How to Preserve a Girl" had similar origins in that I knew I wanted to do something with an already existing text, in this case a .pdf of instructions for pinning and preserving insects.

Revising this piece was a practice in "weirding" language and making decisions about whether something is going to be "like" a story or "like" a poem, and then executing that decision in the revisions. I think this text could have gone two directions: there could have been an actual story embedded in the steps, told by a narrator who kept diverging into tangents, probably about their experiences performing those steps. I tried to make that happen, I really did, I wanted this one to be a story. But it was a fight to inject narrative, or more suggestion of narrative than I already had, so I leaned the other direction: make it shorter, make it denser, make it stranger, the inverse of revising "Checking In." I started from form with "Checking In," but didn't end up in the form I started with. This text started out as a list of things that the narrator wasn't allowed to talk about on first dates, and it revolved around the cat. More story was added when I revised it from a list to a letter, and I added fictional Tarot cards read in a past-present-future order to give myself some scaffolding. I still want to write a list—it's kicking around in my head in search of a concept to connect with again.

I feel less exposed in other parts of my thesis, particularly the texts that look more like stories. “Bump in the Night” was the text I think I knew least about when I started it, in that I spent the least amount of time trying to pair a form with a concept in my brain before I started actually drafting. The form was helpful for keeping the story moving, since when I felt like a scene wasn’t going anywhere it was very easy to move to a new thing. I had watched *Bandersnatch*, a choose your own adventure movie on Netflix, recently before starting this project, and what I found really interesting was the main character’s relationship to the story he was trying to write. It revolved around his control, specifically his ability to manage the hundreds of storylines that his game was rapidly spawning. I’ve never had that problem with my texts—I feel like I can barely manage to keep one suggestion of plot moving. I don’t mind much what the characters do, I just want to spend time in the place where they are. So this text was a way for me to make an attempt at constructing a narrative by breaking it into pieces I found manageable, without exerting complete control over how the reader experiences the text. This, in some ways, still avoiding committing to a plot.

The text that looms largest in my mind and still feels most incomplete is “Pottsfield.” I have worked on “Pottsfield” for longer than I’ve worked on any other text. I’ve been visiting Pottsfield in my head for almost a year, picking images to string together. It started with the image of the erlking, in his cave, eating hands. I wasn’t sure what else to do with that scene, so I went somewhere else, and spent time in the town. Moving between scenes was my effort to keep the story (and I use that term loosely) moving, by putting the erlking and the narrator in motion towards each other. They may someday meet.

What Prior told me: we approach approximate understanding with eyes and arms wide.

I know that whatever I write here, in this introduction, has limited power. My efforts to frame my writing are efforts to compensate for how we experience language differently, how I can't possibly make you see or feel exactly what I saw or felt as I was writing. I can't even get close. But I hope I've given you some clues for how to find me, or how to look. In *Writing/Disciplinarity*, Paul Prior writes, "Communication is, therefore [sic], understood not as the transmission of fixed meaning objects, but as a complex, sociohistorically situated working out of dynamic meanings, the end result of which is some imperfect approximation of mutual understanding..." (Prior 20). Prior's theorizing might not fully accommodate the weird, dense, prosey poemy mass of language that sits before you, but I think the idea of imperfect approximation is important here. The texts ahead of you are imperfect in that several of them are unfinished and all of them are approximations. But I hope I've given you enough to approach even a little bit of mutual understanding.

CORPS ANALYSIS

In any area of study

what is possible and/or convenient—

the ontology

(what you think the essence of language is)

which was previously

inconceivable.

The nature of being—even a

divided thing, even a

thing, divided, especially a

thing, divided—

rippled with incoherencies—

cognizant in fragments—

is a deep distrust

rooted in you, you are

the thing you distrust,

a thing that lives in two halves that you feel as a slowly widening split between
your eyes.

Corpus methods can therefore demonstrate how

data must meet different criteria and how

different aspects of reality are emphasized by

(how you think we can uncover this essence).

I write in second person so one half

can reach out a luminous tendril to tell

the others how we feel—

it is essential

to order where previously only

randomness or idiosyncrasy were visible—

they must be: accurate

available

data and

observational methods.

On a good day you can
approximate a jagged outline of—

on a good day you can
paint by numbers towards—

on a good day you can
crab step in a circle seven feet wide observing
in your periphery
what might be
a single glass eye
a severed racoon paw
a citrine serene statue or bowl—
this is all you know.

We can make explicit how
observations are always constrained by—
distinguish between—
and therefore open up research topics
concrete and clearly presented,
accessible and searchable.

S i m p l e.

POTTSFIELD

The erlking sits patiently. This implies waiting.

He sits on a rock amidst walls and curved ceiling of rock at the base of a cathedral of rock deep in holy and awful mountains.

There is lots of moss. More, in fact, than you would expect.

You personally. Sitting somewhere. Expect less moss than there is currently in the erlking's cave.

It watches the erlking.

The moss.

It has grown eyes in varying shades of blue and brown that slip from visibility now and then beneath inexplicably leathery lids with small, wet pops.

Moist skin parting. Returning.

Observe the grey-greenness of the skin that is not unlike the rocks and the moss present in greater density than you personally would expect.

Streaking down the walls. His arms. Cheekbones.

Wet.

The erlking eats steadily. This implies hunger.

Fingertips tap the floor making small splashes.

They come from palms from wrists from shells not unlike but certainly not similar to the more conventional hermit crabs that you personally may have encountered.

Several of the hands—the erlking notices—are not in good shape.

Not unlike the hands attached to you personally, they cannot see.

The fingers from palms from wrists from spiral and probably-pink-under-all-the-grime shells drag themselves blindly across the stone floor.

They experience varying degrees of success.

Repeated contact with the environment

(rocks amidst walls and curved ceiling of rock at the base of a cathedral of rock deep in holy and awful mountains)

has frayed the delicate points of flesh until their most common state is open.

Bones emerge shyly from sheaths that are red and purple and blue and the very palest of penicillin greens.

The erlking eats them raw.

He takes the single discolored hand still in its shell

(can it be called a hand without a relationship to a body)

in his two.

Tears out the hand where it emerges, snapping the equivalent of a wrist.

A few pops that ascend in pitch.

And while the fingers wriggle not unlike the tail of a lizard you personally may have seen pinned
beneath the paws of a cat,

he twists them apart

joint

by

joint.

Pop.

—

I will now tell of my time in Pottsfield.

Pottsfield is in the woods and so if I got there I must also have been in the woods. The woods are in the mountains, so if we were to nest the locations, I was simultaneously in the woods and in the mountains while approaching Pottsfield. There aren't really paths in the woods, not in the true sense, but there are game trails. Some give more of a sense of security than others. I was on one of these, a trail that I perceived to be at least neutral about my presence in the woods in the mountains. Approaching Pottsfield. Approaching Pottsfield on foot, because my horse had been swept up in a recent flood of unionizing amongst larger livestock.

Fur below the shoulders, above the feathers. The little house cat bodies were a size that made sense to me; that is, they were approximately the size and shape of typical house cats, and this fact was not lessened by the smooth transition into feathers that occurred above the shoulders. Also above the shoulders were a round beak and dusty gold eyes. All of them had gold eyes regardless of the colors of the feathers or fur; in fact, this was the flock's single uniting visual feature, apart from being cats with owl heads.

They followed. Closely. And they ate my bootlaces.

Paper lanterns like tulip bulbs and fists and globes and children's heads drifted untethered through the streets of Pottsfield. They bumbled against posts and walls and as I watched this led them to bunch into schools of gentle crinkling that moved like a jellyfish collective.

Pottsfield was not especially well lit.

Children affixed strings to the lanterns and tugged them like balloons behind them into the woods where they hunted for mushrooms that emitted a similar pastel glow to the one that encapsulated them.

—

From a distance they looked like dogs, and it seemed plausible to me that dogs might gather around a waist high sugar cube. Most dogs however, I know from past experience, lack a probiscus.

Pottsfield was unfinished and so many of its residents lived in yellow and red striped tents with little flags on top around the periphery of the clustered dry goods store, pharmacy, telegraph office, bar, and butcher. I never went inside of one, in fact I never saw even one of the tent flaps open. I knew there were people in them though, or at least parts of people, because every now

and then something with fingers or talons spurts out from under the edges of the tent to scabble at the grass and leave dark furrows in the earth.

I realized that I was there to watch the revival.

—

The tent was familiar. It didn't *look* familiar, I had never seen this specific tent before, but it *was* familiar in the sense that given the chairs and platform and handful of people in button down shirts and suspenders, I knew what to expect. Singing. Stamping. Shouting. Maybe somebody passes out with the spirit.

The last one I went to as a kid even had some snake handling. People spoke in tongues and a preacher pushed me over backward. Someone blew a ram's horn.

—

This church wasn't in a tent but it might as well have been. Two men with waist-length beards stood on opposite corners of the altar holding hollowed out rams horns, nearly three feet long and curling in a stretched out spiral.

The lighting was dim and purple, I thought a lot about the purple lights and the shafts they cut

through the hazy room around more bearded men laying hands on the ecstatic faithful that wandered to the altar with raised eyes. They drop money in envelopes or handfuls into a white plastic five gallon bucket before drifting to palms on their shoulders, forehead, arms. I watched grown adults fall back serene until the floor was littered with supine bodies.

I was in a chair. As I've said I don't touch people and by extension I don't let them touch me. And as I've said I don't remember what exactly what my mother told me in the car that morning but the way she grabbed my arm suggested the third one. She dragged me toward Preacher and what could I do, what could a twelve year old do in a sham church with a vulnerable parent on the edge of Somewhere but be pulled into the center of a hazy lavender column of light with a sharp edged bulbous cut out. What could I do but feel hands and hear horns and ululating and meet the floor.

But I was talking about Pottsville.

And people were arriving.

They came in long floral dresses and coiffed hair, they came in boots and carrying canes. They did not bring the children but as you would expect the children were there, in the bushes and nestled into the moss on tree branches. I joined them because we were both voyeurs, in a shrub

whose roots gave us just enough light to see each others' outlines behind our shield of leaves.

It took a while to get interesting—I'll spare you the preaching. When worship started the congregation praised with increasing percussion, increasing volume, until the faithful were lathered into a single arm waving mass that speckled its members with communal sweat and spittle.

I knew from past experiences that mobs are quick to pick a victim and so I was unsurprised by how little time it took to shove forth someone who looked exactly like them when the preacher asked who among them had become a slave to their flesh. Who among them needed to be unburdened. And then, several minutes of rope and scream later, who to wants to cut first.

The faithful shoved a few more forward, chanting something I couldn't make out. Their selected victim was gagged and stripped and spread into a large X. On a small table to his left was a bucket and a knife. The blade changed hands and the bucket filled with one hand at a time, followed by the tongue.

I threw up in the bush. Small outlines snickered at me and slinked away. I knew what I needed to do next.

I needed to steal the bucket.

The erlking travels by palanquin. This implies destination.

To protect his eyes he travels at night through the woods when bioluminescent roots provide just enough guidance, give the mind just enough permission to indulge your fear of the dark.

You're headed towards each other now.

On a trajectory that weaves from your chest with gelatinous but uncompromising certainty your paths begin to converge.

He travels without hurry.

His bearers are unconcerned with speed.

Instead they focus on lifting each of their spindly, avian legs over roots and pebbles with mechanical precision.

Seventy-four clawed feet distributed unevenly between two large, upright bodies that depending on the angle appeared humanoid, lupine, empty.

They carry the palanquin in their jaws.

Only the center head's eyes have not been sewn shut.

The left and right head grip the wood in their teeth while the center stares in wide eyed terror at this dark perpetually two-thirds unknown.

Observe the still fleshy nubs of bone that fall from the palanquin as the erlking nibbles without hunger.

Bloody knuckles and wrist bones rest delicately in dirt freshly churned by two hundred and twenty-two tiny claws.

A single, turnip sized lantern drifts across their path.

—

And that, reader, is the end of my time in Pottsfild. I remember not if other events transpired—all is haze and ambiguity and I'm certain of very little other than the bloody contents of the bucket I am now carrying. I'm in the woods but I suppose I was always in the woods because Pottsfild is in the woods and so perhaps it's more accurate to say that I never left.

It's getting darker. That's all I know.

HOW TO PRESERVE A GIRL

If it has been more than a few days since your specimens were collected, they will be hard, brittle, and almost impossible to pin without breaking or damaging them. To relax your girl specimens, you will need a plastic container with an airtight lid large enough to hold all of the girls you want to soften plus several layers of wet ferret pelts. The moisture from the wet pelts will soften the bodies of the girls without harming or discoloring them. Follow the instructions below carefully to soften girls before attempting to pin and spread them.

Step 1: Relax Girls Before Pinning

1. Moisten a few ferret pelts with moon water (they should be wet all over but not dripping water) and lay them flat 2-3 layers deep at the bottom of the container. The water should be from a waning moon, although dew rolled off of roadkill has similar preservative effects. If you can't skin the ferrets yourself due to squeamishness or bans from local pet selling establishments, furs may be purchased on Etsy.
2. Set the most stubborn and hardest girls on top of this layer (i.e. large beetles). Cover these girls with several more ferret pelts (again, wet all over but not dripping water) and place another layer of girls on top. Continue until all of the girls you need to relax are nested between layers of damp fur, ending with 2-3 layers of moist pelts on top. Make sure that their faces are covered to avoid the mouths drying into screams. Note: Sometimes this happens anyway.

3. Close the lid tightly and move the container to a place where the girls will not be found. Most butterflies and smaller girls should be softened in 2-3 days. Larger beetles and other girls may take 5-6 days or longer to soften enough to be pinned without breaking. If you've used regular water in place of moon water, they are covered in mold by this point and the reanimation process will begin soon. Burn the bodies. Fetch your nets and return to the fields.

4. Check the girls for flexibility by gently moving the legs after two large stray cats have avoided making eye contact with you. Check also the joint that brings together the wings and shoulders. Refresh any ferret pelts that may have dried out by sprinkling them with moon water. If you switch to tap water, holy water, or even crystal charged water, the preservative effects will wear off and the girls will begin to reanimate. They will regain strength quickly and you will find them hissing and crawling, wet wings dragging and covered in mold, hunting for implements to slip beneath your toenails.

5. When a girl's legs and antennae can be easily moved and her body does not feel brittle, the girl is ready to be pinned. Remove any girls that are sufficiently softened and proceed to the instructions for pinning and spreading.

Step 2: Pin Beetles and Large Girls

1. After relaxing a girl, loosen her legs, antennae, and other movable parts by gently wiggling them and then stretching them out. Use a toothpick, cat claw, or shard of your own baby tooth (see Step 3 for butterflies and other winged girls).

2. Insert a girl pin through the middle of the thorax (the middle section between the head and abdomen), slightly off center to the right. This avoids both hearts. Push the pin all the way through the girl's body, then about ½ inch into the spreading board or another piece of styrofoam board. The girl should typically be about half way up the pin or far enough above the spreading board that you can freely position the segmented legs. Clean any blood that has slid from the body and onto the pin with a damp q-tip.

3. Gently move the legs and antennae into the positions desired using a probe or forceps. This takes some patience. It may take several tries before you are able to get a leg or antenna into the position you want. If your salt circle is broken or too irregular, mischievous girl-spirits will frequently remain near their bodies to interfere with the positioning. While they cannot fully move the bodies, single limbs (or segments of limbs) are quite within their ability to control and they can ruin a display pose with one sharp movement.

4. How you position the legs and antennae is up to you—some people like to pin their girls in natural stances while other prefer a more creative stance. Let the girls dry for 1-2 days, or until the legs stay in position when the pins are removed.

5. Very carefully remove all pins except for the one through the girl's thorax. This requires great care as the girl is now very brittle and fragile again. Removing a pin by pulling the wrong

direction can break a leg or antennae, which is light enough for the girl-spirit to steal away. You will not see it again. Check your coffee for the tell-tale citrus scent of their toxic broken plating.

6. Transfer the girl to the display case. Use the pin through the thorax to pin the girl into the display case. On larger, heavier girls you may want to use additional pins to keep the girl's body from pivoting. You may find yourself looking for the source of the light that seems to create shimmers across their skin and armored plating.

Step 3: Spread Butterfly and Other Girls' Wings

1. After a butterfly or other winged girl is relaxed, carefully hold the specimen under her thorax between your thumb and forefinger. Gently squeeze the thorax; the wings should separate slightly and release a dark blue powder. The mask you wove from cobwebs and let solidify near running water will protect you from the effects, but if you begin to feel tremors in your eyes and tongue, resist the urge to lock them in place with pins.

2. Gently insert a sharp pin between the veins on the front edge of the left forewing and pull the forewing into place. Place a thin strip of seaweed over the left wing and insert pins to hold the forewing in place. Make sure you place the pins around the wing and not through it. Repeat with the right forewing and hind wings.

3. Cross two pins over each other to set the antennae in a V position that no longer vibrates or pulses. Also insert two crossed pins to hold the end of the girl's body up in its natural position if

necessary. Feel free to reference the photos you took as you observed the girls in order to determine which ones you could make the most beautiful.

4. Allow the specimen to dry for 1-2 days, or until the wings will stay flat when the pins are removed. At this point the body is too stiff for the girl-spirit to manipulate, though no reliable methods are known for removing spirits from the workspace. Once the girl is completely dry, very carefully remove the damsel pins and seaweed strips and transfer the specimen into the display case. The girl will be very fragile as she has already begun to harden again.

TUES, SEPT. 4

An apartment complex

Mid-century modern

Early evening

1C, 5:17

A blue quilt in an Amish style of long spiraling triangles. It's not quite the right size—curves around the edges, carving slices of flat light that flutter at their limits.

2E, 5:20

A girl in a grey t-shirt takes a long hit from a glass bong. Liquid in the base erupts—violently temporary, shuddering. She exhales a plume of greenish haze through a screen, joined in her cream-and-butter backlight frame by a cat blinking dusty golden eyes at the coming night.

click

1A, 5:24

Blue rubber unrolls and falls to the carpeted floor. The mat curls up at the edges and so she takes a moment to stand on them, reaches up, takes a deep breath (presumably). She's a mountain, a triangle, a crane, a lizard, a happy baby, a goddess, then finally a corpse.

click

3F, 6:03

Airy movements of grey on eggshell. No bodies in the frame but regularity and repetition imply dancing in the kitchen. Any sound that might validate this observation and perhaps conjure an image of feet skimming tight circles across linoleum or of an arm pulling close a tapered middle, any sonic indicator that might lend this speculation truth, tumbles to the ground exhausted after pushing past the glass barricade.

Parking lot, 6:10

A young deer drifts cautiously through a nearby bed of greenery and blooms. Munches on the perennials.

1D, 6:15

In profile: high socks, oversized shirt, bottle of something amber-colored tipping into a glass. A pot on the stove. Stir. Taste. She tries to step away but her headphones catch on a cabinet handle and she flails sharply like a sheep caught in a crook, almost falls, recovers.

click

3H, 6:22

Figurines on a bookshelf that outnumber the books. Pastels brush rounded tops and edges but at this distance the details of their tiny forms are indistinguishable. They could be moving. They could be anything.

2B, 6:32

She stares intently at a foldable blue rectangle. Moves a sheet. Another.

click

—

Order ID: 65400002872095i

Date: 9/4/2019 19:44

4x6 (\$0.29/each) x4

Total: \$1.16

—

I perform my routine to the best of my abilities.

8:01

I add an image to the collage of bodies posed over brightly colored rectangles.

8:05

I am not a mountain, a triangle, a crane, a lizard, a happy baby, a goddess, or even a corpse—I am instead a jug, a basket, a crumpled shirt, a small bean, a sheath. A hum runs through me. I moisten my eyeballs with a lick.

8:25

I add an image to the cluster near the cabinets and dump ingredients into a pot.

8:28

Slick spotted lettuce, old film, an assortment of mushrooms, cobwebs, kelp, personals from a local paper. Stir. Pour into something else. Stare at it. Lick both of lines of teeth, the ones in front, and the sharper ones behind.

9:00

I continue adding images throughout my home in this manner. I smoke crushed rose petals. I almost pass out.

10:04

My voyeurism makes me hope for voyeurs. I remove all the blinds.

1:24

I put a hand between my legs, get on my knees, and slowly insert my head into the television screen.

NEXT TIME YOU SEE ME

I will appear in your bedroom in a gown of arsenic and beetles and you
will adore the many shades of complicit you will see in
the radioactive glow of my collarbones an open throated horror
waits to admit you to the damp ward in my chest of
wonders what your fingers would feel like deep in my slick
heart rattles with teeth and sweet eel fragments
I arrange so nicely on the apples of your plump cheeks

BUMP IN THE NIGHT

An Illusion of Choice Story

1.

You're in bed alone, not because you're unable to attract physical affection but because you're apartment sitting and have too much anxiety to invite a Tinder date over to your aunt's apartment for a tipsy evening amongst the Jim Henson memorabilia and tropical fish. Your aunt is at a Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) conference, not her first. It's night three of four of sprinkling flakes into neon-lit tanks and heating up some taquitos and watching public access tv until you fall asleep by the glow of a televangelist's infomercial, cradled by a fraying afghan. You usually wake up around 4am and stumble to the bed, but tonight you're jerked out of sleep.

Hear:

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEE

EEEEEEEEEEEEEECH

Thump

Thump

Thump

You clutch the afghan around your shoulders.

Do you investigate?

If yes, prepare for high adventure and go to 3.

If no, tuck your sensible, cowardly tail between your legs and to 2.

2.

Still clutching the afghan, surprisingly warm and smelling slightly of taquitos, you tiptoe to the bedroom and swan dive beneath the covers. They are cozy and you feel safe.

Hear:

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEE EEEEE EEEE EEECH

Thump

Thu-thump

What do you do now?

Remain in the safety of your blanket home, and go to 5.

Decide you'd rather not be caught hiding, and go to 3.

3.

The screech could be coming from the office or the stairwell. You understand that this is less a choice between a place for working and a place for going down to the arcade, and more a choice between a room completely full of Henson puppet replicas hanging from the ceiling and the very real possibility of stepping through a floorboard.

What sounds like your vibe?

Grab some scissors and head for the puppets, go to 4.

Risk a tumble and take the stairs, go to 6.

4.

You gently push on the door to the office and let it swing open in front of you.

See:

Drawn curtains

Orange slivers filtering through puppet strings

Cloth forms swaying gently

The swaying strikes you as odd but you're willing to believe that the puppets have some kind of collective life force that causes them to dream in unison. As you're wondering what the puppets dream about, if they remember their past roles like actors looking back at a season, you notice a figure by the bookshelf standing deadly still. Its back is against the wall and you think you can see a jagged profile.

What do you do? □ Turn on the overhead light, and go to 7.

Approach with your phone light, and go to 8.

5.

You think back to your childhood certainty that no murderer or monster or demon could get you if you were but covered by the blankets. As a ritual you would take stock of your extremities one by one, counting fingers and toes and making sure that they were all protected by the warm barrier. You checked the points of your elbows and knees and even made sure that your hair was contained. Between the all natural detergent scented sheets of your aunt's guest room, you begin this ritual now.

Right hand, fingers one two three four five, warm.

Left hand, fingers one two three four five, warm.

Bring in your knees.

Count the toes.

But the blanket is a little too small for you and while you're checking on the state of your little piggies, an icy finger lays itself on the back of your exposed neck. Then another. Two more follow and your head is pulled back by long thin fleshy rods that wrapped around your neck through the opening in the blanket. No sound comes out when you try to scream.

Above your face is a semi-solid grimace, a toothy almost grin stretched beyond the limits of a spectral face. Its corporeal edges shivered like they were restraints. You try to scream again and this time, a set of four fingers goes down your throat. They don't stop at the wrist but keep sliding past the elbow into your stomach—you don't start to lose consciousness until you feel a

hand stirring in your torso.

The end.

Go back to the beginning and try again, you coward.

6.

The stairwell is pretty spooky, spookier than the office you think.

See:

Purple fingers of light from the arcade

The outline of stairs

No handrail

More fucking puppets

You flip the switch and the light flickers, pops, goes out—did something just slip under the door? As you peer down the stairs trying to decide if you just saw something or if it's indigestion, the lights come back on. Of course they do, this isn't a ghost story, you think as you walk down the stairs.

How do you open the door?

Like a normal person, go to 10.

Kick it. Kick it good. And still go to 10.

7.

Without taking your eyes off of what might be something not really bothering to hide beside the bookshelf, something definitely solid and too large to be a puppet, you try to flip the light switch on the wall next to you. Your hand slaps against the paint, too high or too low or too far to feel the switch. Rather than look away from what might be something slowly turning its head-part towards you, you continue to slap the wall, increasingly frantic, until finally you find the damn light switch and your fingers scabble to flip it. The light flickers once before really committing. In that flash you see the the angled profile melt or dissolve and flow to the floor, past you, down the hall, and under the door to the stairs.

Submit to the story and go to 6.

8.

You turn on your phone light and flash it around the room once, careful not to linger on any one of the puppets. There are less than than it looks like in the dark, but you still have to repress the urge to whisper “sorry” and “excuse me” as you make your way through the silent crowd. The thing doing a bad job of hiding beside the bookshelf hasn’t moved. You start to wonder if it’s actually trying to hide. As you pause between a replica from The Dark Crystal and something yellow dressed like jester you notice, now that you’re really looking, how it seems to be further from the wall than it was when you started walking towards it. About a foot further.

You don't steps backwards, just shift your weight from the foot in front to the foot in back. That was all the permission it needed. The figure melts onto the floor and rematerializes in front of you—before you drop your phone you see four-fingered hands like claws, one reaching towards you, one hooked into the corner of a yellow toothed maw, yanking it upwards.

When they find you, your phone is full of what seems to be selfies of something that doesn't quite show up on camera, crouched on your Star Wars pajama clad body.

The end.

10.

The door opens into a neon 80s Stranger Things arcade fantasy. Your aunt's real nostalgic like that. The pattern on the carpet alone is enough to make you vaguely nauseous from the associated memory of roller rink corn dogs.

Smell:

Something that reminds you of that time when you brought a whole roll of quarters specifically to kick ass at Galaga and then lost every damn one to a kid who could fit more jawbreakers in her mouth than you.

Feel:

A slight sting at the memory.

All the windows are covered to keep the lights from the machines from being too visible.

Nothing is obviously wrong, apart from maybe the fact that you've completely lost track of what you were following. If you're following anything, you tell yourself.

What do you do?

Try to turn off the machines so you can look around in relative peace, and go to 12.

Take a minute to relive your glory days as sixth grade ski ball champion, and go to 11.

11.

As you expected, your skills have withstood the test of time. You unseat the jerk on the leaderboard, then use the rest of the top 10 spots to write a little poem to the nerds who will come after you. The central metaphor revolves around ski balls and genitalia. You are very clever. You do a little victory dance, and as you're waving your hands above your head and tossing your hair, you notice that the ski ball machine is unplugged.

Head to 12 to see what's up.

12.

As you bend down to check out the nearest cable you notice that it's unplugged. In fact, all of the fully operational machines seem to be unplugged. Ms Pac-Man even seems to be noisier than usual. At the same time that you notice she's a little louder and more brightly colored than you

remembered her being—not like years ago when this place was a twelve year old’s wonderland, but like a few minutes ago when you came downstairs—there’s a rustle behind the prize counter.

What do you do?

Check out Ms Pac-Man, go to 13.

Investigate the prize counter, go to 14.

13.

She looks normal, apart from maybe being a bit more...noticeable than usual? Like she got a haircut or a new bra she wants you to notice? You watch the figures on the screen for a few minutes, following Ms Pac-Man and then...Inky? Pinky? Blinky? Clyde? The ghosts are nowhere to be seen. Instead, as you lean in for a closer look, you see shaky edged blobs with yellow grins moving in erratic patterns around the board. You lean slowly closer until your nose is almost touching the thick plastic, and before you can lurch back, a four-fingered hand bursts out of the machine and wraps itself around your face.

What do you do?

Brace for a pixelated adventure, go to 15.

Try to remove the hand, go to 17.

14.

You rummage around the prize counter, getting small shocks from most of the toys you pick up

whether they contain metal or not. Some of the smaller varieties of cars and sundry seem to be moving out of your line of sight, like roaches that scatter when the lights come on. You whip around like a maniac trying to keep them all in sight. You're dizzy by the time they hoard together, lumping themselves into feet and building up into an eight foot tall made-in-China monster.

Choose your weapon.

A red whiffle ball bat, go to 16.

A blue foam finger, still go to 16 because there are no good choices to be made here.

15.

After some reflexive jerking backwards, you decide to see where this is going and relax into the slightly electric grip on your face. It pulls you forward but your body doesn't enter into the machine—as you pass through the plastic you dissolve with a dense fizzing sensation similar to what you thought it might be like to disassociate into a soda can. You reform in the same sensation.

See:

Pixelated blue brick walls

16-bit cobble stones

Your shoes, somehow both too round and too square

Hear:

Running steps

Shrieking

Getting louder

You fling yourself against the wall just in time to avoid a yellow and pink blur pursued by three grayish toothy blurs. When they reach an intersection Ms Pac-Man pauses for a split second too long and the fourth toothy blur collides with her from the side, knocking them both out of your sight. The others follow and you can hear their carnage from where you stand, shaking in horror at your new life in a violent Windows background.

The end.

16.

Get hype. Jump up and down a little. Swing your arms.

How do you feel about your odds?

Shaking in my boots, go to 18.

I'm the eye of the tiger, still go to 18 because your hubris does you no favors.

17.

You throw yourself away from the hand and machine with the force of your full body weight,

and for a second you think it might be enough. You briefly feel the staticky skin leave your face before grabbing you again and dragging you to the machine. You brace your feet against the base of the game and go to work on the long fingers with your hands, prying them back despite growing numbness in your own fingers. You're completely certain that you're about to lose motor control when you're released and fall backwards onto the graphic patterned carpet. Just a few scratches.

No more of that shit, go to 14.

18.

The prize monster is still packing a few erasers and sticky hands into its available spaces. What do you do with your very effective weapon and growing adrenaline?

Attack because you're here to party, go to 20.

Run because you're not an idiot, 19.

19.

You take off in a blur of Star Wars pajamas to capitalize on your small head start. After sprinting to hide behind a Galaga machine, what do you do?

Continue running blindly because it's worked so far, go to 21.

Take a minute to consider some options, go to 22.

20.

You take an ambitious swing with your very effective plastic weapon and manage to knock a few toy cars off the monster. Sticky hands dangle menacingly from several places on its arms. You and the monster are evenly matched in that neither of you seem to be carefully aiming but you're definitely trying to hit each other, so you scuffle around making wild arcs and knocking small prizes flying. In the midst of the erratic dance, you notice something glowing in its torso or core area.

What do you do?

Go for the torso, go to 23.

See what this thing wants, go to 25.

21.

Want to make any effort to pick a direction at all?

You obviously can't, I should check my narratorial privilege, go to 24.

22.

See:

Tiny sticky hands whirling like the worst kind of mace

No clear path to a door

You're cool as a cucumber and you figure that you have about two options. Well, exactly two options. You can:

Make a break for the stairs, go to 30.

Try to lose it in the machines, go to 24.

23.

Before you can strike what surely would have been a devastating blow, the prize monster flings its arsenal of sticky hands at you, encasing your arms and hands in unpleasantly cool, mushy plastic. Through their sheer amount they have enough strength to not break as you're dragged towards the multicolored plastic horror. You've forgotten any interest in what the thing might want as it begins to shake and change before you, a rumbling laughter building in the glowing torso and radiating out.

Are you panicking?

Fuckfuckfuck, go to 25.

Shitshitshit, go to 25 because you're stuck.

24.

In your directionless panic you lunge madly from behind the Galaga machine. A probable line of escape starts to form before your eyes, but you trip on a toy car and eat an unexpected mouthful

of carpet. The closest shelter is the ski ball machine—you scramble towards it.

How do you make use of this hiding space?

Pelt the prize monster with balls, go to 26.

Be sensible and hide, go to 27.

25.

The cluster of toys and stuffed animals bursts, throwing you to the ground, and above you is a giant yellow toothed mouth that rasps, “Corndogs.” Four-fingered hands come down on your shoulders and you notice that their edges aren’t quite solid, like it’s struggling to hold together. It gives off slight static electricity. The face leans closer and says again, raspier, “Cooooorndogssss.”

What do you do? □ Try to escape, go to 29.

Make the dogs, go to 28.

26.

You take a deep breath in, holding a ski ball in the palm of your hand. Several more are at the ready. You summon your prowess and mentally project the ski ball layout onto the prize monster. In rapid succession you fire five ski balls into the monster’s torso, close enough to the glowing core that even the most miserly of dungeon masters would have to admit that you caused some damage points.

Before you can tell if you've damaged the thing at all, the balls start coming back with an even deadlier accuracy than yours when throwing them. One hits you in the shoulder.

The gut.

And the last thing you remember is a scuffed ski ball filling your vision entirely.

The end.

27.

You attempt to wedge yourself into the nacho-scented space in between the ski ball machine and an inferior but admittedly similar basketball game. It goes better than you expect but you definitely don't get all your extremities in there—your toes and the top of your head can feel a draft. Behind the machine you can see the power cords on the ground start to bind together and writhe, then raise its bundle of plugs like a snake's head.

It makes the following motions:

look right (colder)

look left (warmer)

waggle slightly (sort of cute?)

left again (warmer again)

waggle (a little cute)

(then, unexpectedly)

dart forward

The cables wrap around your ankles and several insert themselves into your calf with a sharp jab. You cry out. You try to scramble away, but other cable snakes find your other limbs and you feel plugs stab into your wrists, thighs, neck. Paralyzing static strolls from the points of entry towards your heart. You struggle. Your vision goes white.

The end.

28.

You stagger to the arcade's small kitchen to make corn dogs for the semi-corporeal chaos entity bouncing along behind you.

In the kitchen, see: □ 1 deep fryer you don't know how to use

1 microwave you can figure out probably

2 ovens that have only ever made pizza

2 freezers of frozen wonders

Hear:

Your own heartbeat

The hum of old kitchen appliances

You guess correctly on where the dogs will be, but the deep fryer just isn't an option unless you want the fire department here (maybe you do, you think frantically, can they do something about this?), so you dump a couple of frozen cornbread sheaths out of the bag and hope the microwave will do it.

It watches you as it moves around the periphery of the room. Every fifteen seconds or so it aggressively giggles but stifles the sounds with coughs that wouldn't fool anyone. You don't try to talk and are mostly glad it's staying...over there.

The microwave dings and it's as you feared. The corn dogs, so clearly meant for the deep fryer, were a hot and soggy mess with a chewy outside. The thing cackles in delight and soars over to you.

"Dooooogs!" It cries triumphantly before consuming the corn dog and stick in one go. "For you," it says, picking up the other corn dog and holding it to your mouth with a sinister grin.

You take a bite. This is your life now.

The end.

29.

You burst through your sticky restraints and take off. They peel away from your arms, cold and reluctant.

Hear:

Something like a roar behind you

Yourself yelp

See:

Two paths out of the arcade

Where do you go?

Back upstairs, go to 30.

Out the kitchen door into the alley, go to 31.

30.

Let's be real, you weren't fast enough to make it through all those games to the stairs. You weren't going to flail up them in time. You realize that as you feel a hand catch the waistband of your fuzzy pajama pants. The pants stop but you don't—you keep flying forward and land three stairs up with your pants around your ankles.

Last memory:

Swinging upside down

Head hits the stairs

crack

The end.

31.

You throw yourself against the back door a couple times before noticing that it's locked from the inside. The corn dog craving chaos being is behind you but you're doing your best not to look as you burst from the building into an ankle-deep puddle of alley water and fling the door shut behind you. It rattles and light shoots from around the cracks but it holds—or at least it's still holding when you turn your back to the door and stagger towards the street.

The end.

THE HOWLING OH-OH

Appearance

The howling oh-oh has a six foot tongue that it wraps around its neck twice because chokers are couture. Otherwise it seems human. And femme.

Characteristic Behaviors

The howling oh-oh uses its tongue to defend itself and keep its eyeballs moist. Its watery eyes blacken when it's been touched and the tongue—whiplike—worms into the assailant's ear to incapacitate them with a prod to the motor cortex. Victims regain motor function but not sight.

The howling oh-oh wears a lot of sweaters.

The howling oh-oh is named for the sound it makes in bus stations, libraries, crosswalks, or anywhere it can taste the human gaze for too long. If it is unable to evade quickly it becomes erratic, shifting from foot to foot quickly while rotating in a tight circle. The noise builds gradually. At low volumes it has been known to produce visions of imminent failure and ruin, while at peak volumes it causes all paper to spontaneously shred.

Preferred Habitat

The howling oh-oh dwells in blanket piles, animal shelters, craft stores, freezer sections, and boxes of packing peanuts.

See Also

The way smoke behaves between 3 and 4 a.m., slightly moldy carrots, girlhood trauma

AFTER “THE UNINHABITABLE”

The uninhabitable:

The pile rattles. Tapes and VCRs and rabbit ear antennas and cassettes and radios. Some records. They've been collecting here for weeks. They attract each other. Spew their filmy insides and shimmer together. They crack through the windows and skitter across the concrete floor to the pile. Traces of collisions: some blood, hair, a partial eyelid. With absolutely no one to see it, the mass of plastic rises, shuddering. Coils of film reach to the ground like locks of hair. It continues to rise.

The uninhabitable:



The uninhabitable: a bathtub full of doll shoes,
rotting orchids,
candy bar wrappers,
cell phone chargers,
acrylic nails,
subway tile fragments,
lipstick bullets,
sourdough starter,
a manhole cover,
empty paint tubes,
rubber gloves,
spools of thread,
tulip bulbs,
bottle caps,
baby teeth,
a pair of forceps,
roaches (both kinds), and
water.

CHECKING IN

Dear Treat,

I read cards for you today, past present future spread. No specific question, just wanted to see how you were doing and beat myself up a little. This deck isn't really talking to me right now so was I afraid to get too specific, maybe I should have used runes, I dunno. You were (are) the only one who could (can) get a straight answer out of runes.

But anyway I lit a candle and laid out the cloth and got my amethyst and here we go. Shuffle shuffle cut.

I don't know if I've told you, but I have a cat that I think about frequently. This started out consensually, I would find myself bored and think of my cat, but over time the habit has solidified in my brain and my thoughts turn to my cat whenever they do not have another task immediately in front of them. I think of my thoughts as little Dutch men banging on pipes in my brain. It's not important that they be Dutch; that bit is a pretty deep reference to a show I saw once and hope you have seen as well. If you haven't, you should watch it. You would like it.

One of the things that the pipe workers circle back to frequently is that while I think I have a good relationship with my cat, it's hard to tell. She's a muted calico, which means that most of her is that watery grey-blue haze that belongs exclusively to cats, with orange and darker orange and white in broken patches.

Her nose is very pink most of the time, but recently when she sees something she finds particularly distasteful it takes on a whitish blue.

Neither of these things affect our relationship to my knowledge.

The first card (the past) was The Cube. I'd like to think that you'd roll your eyes and say that it's just like my deck to state the obvious: illusion, dreams, crisis. A dimensionless box with silvery edges, on a damp street corner with neon collection in the puddles. It's raining, not properly raining but misting in a way that gives the Cube an orange hazy cone of spotlight. I stared at the card on my desk and the Cube hinged open at the top and began to suck in objects one by one: a window, an awning, the water in the street, and as they went faster and faster the Cube started to spin and grow and then swallowed itself. The edges of the card curled up. Every corner is the one that you disappeared from now.

Cats find it intimidating to be stared at, I read somewhere. This is problematic because my cat is, it probably goes without saying, fucking adorable.

I call my cat Goat but her real name, like the one that would kill her if you used it in magic, is Ruderalis.

Sometimes I get high (you'd be shocked I'm sure) and at stare at things while experiencing

involuntary memories of Proustian intensity that spirit me away to what in that moment seem to be the most poignant but incomprehensible happenings in my younger life, rendered vivid and crystalline before me as though we all moved through stained glass, and in the absence of a madeleine the things that simultaneously anchor me to my current location and assure my thorough exploration of wherever this blue diesel is taking me are the extraordinarily round, widening green eyes of my cat.

Please don't kill Goat with magic. I never got over the hamster when we were kids.

Given what I wrote earlier, I suspect that the staring affects our relationship. Goat and mine, I mean. From an outside perspective it seems pretty terrifying given our size difference.

I frequently construct hypotheticals in which I regale a now faceless you with a relatable yet unique and certainly true happening that does not advance the conversation but rather hangs like a bauble between us, slowly rotating.

People have called me conceited. I suspect they are right, but I suspect with an equal strength that this acknowledgement does not make me less conceited. Please let me know your thoughts.

The next card, the "present" card, was the five of ears. Rest. Five bloody ears strewn across the keys of an upright piano, the freshest falling from the hand that reaches in from outside the boundaries of the card. I watched it drop with a small red splash. I don't know whether this refers

to you or me, I don't know if "rest" is an observation or a command, I frankly don't know how to make sense of any of this anymore and most days it's a fight to hide the disassociation that's come to characterize the majority of my interactions with the waking world. I observe myself from behind a gauzy cloth.

Empathy doesn't happen when I want it to, when it would be helpful, when someone I care about is hurting and I can't (won't) remove the diaphane between us for either of our sakes. Instead, I experience empathy while watching television.

For example, I was just recently watching a BBC show from the mid 2000s that I had to use a torrent client to download from an underseeded magnet link because literally no one else gives a shit about this show anymore, despite a fairly successful seven seasons. Or series, because it's British. I know you'd correct me on that.

Anyway, the show is about a sloppy pot dealer and the rotating cast of disreputable but usually lovable or at least familiar characters that come and go from this apartment. In the episode I was watching, the dealer (sloppy, like I said, unshaven but not in a way that works for him, because scruff is something that needs to be seen in the correct context if it's going to be sexy, and this wasn't it) was trying pretty desperately to keep a girl that was both too young for him and too hot for him in the apartment. She was of a type you'd expect, with styled crispy hair and lipgloss and a pastel tank top over a denim skirt. It was, as I said, the mid 2000s. He's putting on records and rolling blunts and that's what she's there for so she stays for a bit, but the evening drags on and

they both know that she's too attractive to linger much longer. There are real parties out there, and a guy in a cartoon mouse mask is waiting to show her a good time.

And so as they do the "I really should go in a minute" dance around the apartment, I slowly filled with the realization that I have been both of these people.

I have been that kind of slutty free spirit that smoked other people's weed and left a long trail of blue balls and "IOU \$20 ;)" notes but I have also been the absolute shithead that thought a girl might sleep with me if I smoked her out.

At the time this realization seemed very profound.

And as I thought about it, the times I had been first one person and then the other, I began to find the contradiction more and more paralyzing until it all slowly turned to something kind of like guilt, something so unfamiliar that I supposed it had to be empathy. For this guy in the show.

And then I realized that using these two characters to interrogate my past actions as a thinly veiled excuse for self-flagellation was, in fact, a very nuanced kind of narcissism.

Sorry this is how I came out to you. If that matters.

The reason, well one of the reasons, why I find it hard to tell if I have a good relationship with

my cat is that while she spends a good bit of time near me, I'm not sure if that's quite the same as spending time with me. I once consulted Pinterest about this. I find the mommy bloggers that make up a not insignificant part of their user base to be somewhat disdainful, but regularly mine them for easy weeknight recipes for one and figured they might offer some advice here as well. Cats, I reasoned, are not unlike children. I was incorrect. And most mommy bloggers are dog people.

For example, as I write this at my desk, she is sitting in the doorway with her back to me. Her ears swivel like little satellites as I read these sentences aloud, flaunting their full 360 degrees of rotation, and every now and then she looks over her shoulder with a placid confidence that yes, I am still there, and no, I have not moved.

Goat is a cat but I think she also might be a dove. She gets my attention with low burbles and frequently attempts to lick my toast.

The last card I drew was the Fairy Circle. Luck. So, you know, be on the lookout for that. Be on the lookout for me.

It must have been close to a decade now but your mom still posts in the Facebook group she started after your memorial service. She talks about you like you're dead and because of that I stopped reading the posts after about three years. The police closed your case but I was there and I know better.

Still yours,

Trick

The Birth

Introduction

Hi hello yes thank you for being here with me now, that is with this text, that is wherever you are with this text, that is whenever it was convenient for you to be where you are with me this text.

Welcome. Recently there has been an increase in mumbles, an increase in shuffles, an increase in the disheveled huddling around teapots wondering how the hell anything gets written at all.

Knowledge of how to put a thought onto paper (but what is a thought, what are its bounds, is the concept of “thought” just another metaphor so embedded in our language that it’s become invisible? How does something become embedded in language? Where is the bed, and what is the thread count of the sheets?) is elusive, favoring hiding places like between the gills of a mushroom, under the cap of a water bottle, in corners of libraries never visited by students. It’s properties and prosperities are not completely understood. Recent studies have attempted to trick a piece of writing out into the open so that they might entice it into doing a little dance during which scraps of paper are said to fall from its bountiful skirts. Researchers have pressed these pieces of paper to their eyelids and the soles of their feet, hoping to absorb metacognition through osmosis, receiving only a vague tingling sensation. Existing studies have clearly established that the ones who dance can eventually be tricked into giving up their secrets, but the field at large as so far ignored the ones that ooze. Samples of the slime are urgently needed. In this article I present my attempts to observe and create and survive during my time amongst those that ooze. You will find within an account of how I lured the oozes into the open, how I buried my fingers in them, how they were malleable and toxic and willing and painful. You will

find within an account of how they slowly changed my body chemistry from the fingertips inward. You will find within an account of how I became ooze.

Methods

I typically attracted the oozes with uncontrollable sobs. Mild sniffles also worked, they came in through the corners of the room hesitantly and edged their way to me, but really the thing that makes them come flopping so fast it can be heard outside the door is sobs. Once the oozes arrived I ignored them for the appropriate amount of time, following the standard protocol of cleaning everything in reach and making elaborate tea. The tea served an additional purpose of making the oozes feel at home. I used the following recipe to set my oozes at ease:

Dandelion root, 2 tea bags (This is the best base for work with wishes and summoning spirits, even low level ones like oozes)

Crushed eggshells (I never attempt to attract oozes without setting up wards)

Tangerine juice (Improves sociability)

Cat whiskers (Naturally shed, otherwise they don't work. I asked permission before removing whiskers from Goat's living area to ensure the full strength of her blessing.)

Cocktail sword for garnish (To help with assertiveness)

I simmered these ingredients in cleansed water and burned a bay leaf above the pot, allowing the ashes to fall in.

Once the oozes were comfortable and I had avoided them for a respectful amount of time, I held them individually and carefully counted the numbers of eyes, legs, beaks, and/or tentacles displayed by each ooze. Counted amounts were compared to expected amounts, and the results were recorded by shouting numbers downstairs to my assistant. Oozes find the obvious presence of pens or other recording devices very frightening.

If the oozes could be caught, they were cleaned carefully with hands and squirt guns. The sneaky buggers that evaded capture were photographed extensively in a matrix of mirrors that tricked them into showing up on film. These photos were then edited into my best guess at what the ooze looks like under the, well, ooze.

Results & Discussion

Forgive me if I dwell on the ~~constantly growing eldritch horror~~ many-faceted complexities of learning to co-exist with the varieties of ooze that began appearing in my apartment. The first resulting problem was that of identification. Most of my efforts went something like this:

I stared at the ooze, holding it at eye level between my two pale hands. It gazed at me through an odd number of eyes, some puzzled. It blinked wetly at me. One of its beaks clicked. Another released a small gurgle, bubbles forming where the two pieces of keratin came together. I shouted this data to my assistant, who shouted back a confirmation that I usually heard. This method of correspondence began out of necessity because of the oozes' aversion to writing utensils, but I came to be grateful for it when the ooze residue became more resistant to its

removal from my fingertips and hands. Even after a thorough scrub I found clothing and bits of lint catching against my palms, which had taken on a slight green tint. Around this time I began to notice puddles forming on my shoulders—my earlobes had begun a steady drip of fluid that collected in the hollows of my throat and collarbones. See figure 1 below for a list of parts observed on oozes, and their amounts.

Part	Amount (total)	Avg. per ooze
Teeth, no lips	17	4
Beaks	42	16
Feet, clawed	56	9
Feet, unclawed	0	0
Tentacles	37	5
Eyes, various colors	80	21

Fig. 1, observed features of oozes. Disclaimer: These calculations are based in part on the record keeping of an initially reliable but increasingly distant and possibly malicious assistant. Add a margin of +/- 4 to all figures to compensate for her ill will.

Shortly after the earlobe drip began (I won't speculate about causation as I think that's a bit overzealous but there is certainly a chronological and correlative relationship) I began to lose control over the order in which words leave my mind. It is only through the efforts of several kind revisions from one long-suffering copy editor that the paper before you is comprehensible. The phenomenon occurred not only in written language but in speech as well, perhaps more so in speech, and no amount of correction on my part would assemble the words into something resembling a sentence again. If I continued to try, to fling words into the ether like a fortune teller dropping runes, black slime began to well up from underneath my tongue and escaped from

the corners of my mouth. It is thick and tastes of coffee grounds, cake batter, and fresh snow. I am not yet certain of all its properties, but it is slightly chewable.

Worse than this is the growth that began deep in the corner of my right cheek. Almost overnight it went from a gently moving nubbin to a full tentacle complete with suction cups that left sores on my gums. Apparently activated by the black slime or conversation, the tentacle is compelled to make itself known to my interlocutors in one of two ways: a sharp slap across the mouth or a gentle caress of the ear. Lately it also has begun to fix stray hairs and rumpled collars. At other times it simply lolls out of my mouth and refuses to be rolled back to its usual hiding place. The last project I took on with my assistant before she handed in her notice (making ridiculous claims like “reduced [her] position to meal-fetcher” and “constant shouting” and “no effort to contain [my] fluids”) was an attempt to remove the tentacle at the base. It had regenerated by the morning.

Preferring not to foist my condition on the general public, and having lost my assistant, I took to frequenting all-night establishments and running my errands in the wee hours of the morning. Even in the city the light is best during these hours, raising like fog off of the wet sidewalks. Drifting like mist from the streetlights. I often stared upwards from the puddle of water where I sat like a toad, happy to be mistaken for slime and rotting clothes.

The colors of the ooze resemble nothing so much as the dark swirling complexity that one only sees in places like storm drains or half ant-eaten squirrel corpses. Perhaps the most frustrating

result of my time with the oozes has been that I now find myself drawn towards these things with a troublesome strength. Have you ever pulled over on the highway to entice the secrets out of a hollow turtle shell by licking it? Have you ever pressed your cheek to the slick moss of an underground tunnel, cherishing its coolness? Have you ever felt yourself slide in slices past the bars of a storm drain? These are the results of time with the oozes.

Conclusion

Despite some some methodological redesigns and a strained relationship with institutional regulating bodies, this experiment has productively complicated contemporary ideas about postmodern theories of oozes by demonstrating that current conversations do not account for the problems that occur when your assistant leaves without provocation. Additionally, I have provided a useful extension of theories that suggest that oozes are more resistant to study than their relatives that dance in sunshine and shed their wisdoms like feathers. More specific than simple resistance, I suggest that oozes are aware of their status as object of study and seek to insert themselves into the research process, creating a dialogic relationship that caused me to reconsider my assumptions regarding not only the uses of pond scum as a cleaning agent but also the joys of cultivating mushrooms between one's toes. This reciprocal process draws attention to the urgent need for a theoretical framework that includes potential explanations for not only the process by which oozes collect and spawn but also the process by which they engulf.

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Abigail Adent is a writer of fiction and poetry, but more often something in between.

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