



DOCTORAL THESIS

Journeys Into The Void

Reformulations of Eroticism in Contemporary Fictions

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Journeys Into The Void: Reformulations of Eroticism in Contemporary Fictions

by

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Abstract

This collection of short stories and the accompanying critical exegesis interrogates whether eroticism, as defined by Georges Bataille, is possible in contemporary erotic writing. The project employs a Lacanian lens through which to examine the notions of transgression, selfhood, transcendence and language as aspects of Bataillean eroticism. It argues that works in the erotica genre such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* rely on nostalgia for the transgression of prohibitions that no longer hold moral authority. This project argues, theoretically and creatively, that we must discover and define what constitutes contemporary taboos and prohibitions in mainstream society if we are to formulate new erotic works that explore their transgression.

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Introduction

The Project and its Goals

Journeys Into the Void is a research by practice project comprised of two parts: a collection of twenty-one pieces of short fiction and a critical exegesis. The pieces of short fiction comply with the conventions of the erotic fiction genre and, while care has been taken to produce creative writing of the highest standard, it is genre fiction, aimed at genre fiction readership, not at readers of literary or experimental fiction. The project also sets out to question whether it is possible to produce writings of eroticism, as Bataille defined it, in contemporary culture and within the erotica genre. The project sets out to examine the concept of eroticism: how it's been defined historically, how it's been represented in the past, and how it manifests itself contemporarily in the form of erotic fiction. If eroticism requires transgression, and transgression is dependent on crossing over lines of social normativity, then what does transgression look like today? Taken together, the creative and critical portions set out to propose reformulations of eroticism, interrupting the current practice of presenting erotic writings as commodities of unproblematic enjoyment, escapist, nostalgic artefacts or didactic 'how to' guides for shaping the erotic self. In this way, the project's ultimate aim is to re-establish accessible erotic fiction as a site of cultural resistance.

Context of the Project

If we consider erotic fiction to be a genre of literature, and literature to be art, then Alva Noë argues that pornography can't be art: "Pornography is an instrument with a certain function in mind. People use pornography to get sexual pleasure. Frankly it's for masturbating to. That's what it's for. On my theory, works of art are

not instruments. They don't have functions. They're not tools. Works of art subvert functions. They disrupt functions. They interrupt functions. And they do that because the disruption, interruption can be revelatory" (Noë).

Creative Thesis

Stone Blind

Once upon a time there was a girl whose mother had died soon after her seventh birthday. Her father, a reasonably successful merchant, was driven almost mad with grief. He commissioned a stonemason to make a magnificent, life-sized effigy of his wife, recumbent and slumbering, to cover her stone coffin. It was an almost perfect likeness. So much so that, for a few years, the merchant would visit the tomb in the church and sit for hours, reading aloud, just as he had read to his wife in bed while they were married.

“See?” he’d say to his little daughter, as he wiped the tears from his eyes, “She’s still with us. She’s only sleeping.”

As the child began, more and more, to resemble her beautiful, dead mother, it might have been expected that her father would have been gladdened by his daughter’s growing resemblance to his late wife, but that is not what happened. Instead, he looked at her with increasing disgust. He drank more and more, and when he came home, the rosy glow of drunkenness would turn to rage. He would spit at her and hit her and call her an interloper and a whore.

His rages became so common and so violent, that his neighbors in the town noticed it. And they noticed his daughter frequently came to the market with cuts on her lips, or bruises on her cheeks, or blackened eyes. And it seems that someone, at least, was brave enough to take the matter up with him, because the merchant abruptly decided his daughter should be married and, before she had any say in the matter, he’d promised her to one of the other members of his Guild.

For her part, Adela—for that was her name—had borne her father's rages with some understanding. It could not be, she reasoned, anything but painful for her father to be reminded, day after day, of one's lost love. But the man her father had chosen for her to marry was a revolting old lecher and, as much as she loved and pitied her father, she simply could not be obedient to his wishes. She couldn't marry the man he'd chosen.

A week before the wedding was due to take place, one night after her father had fallen into a drunken stupor, Adela folded up her newly embroidered and gold-threaded wedding dress, crept out of the house and went to visit a witch who lived on the edge of the town.

The witch's house, a crumbling hovel built of pilfered stones and rotting planks of wood was at the end of a damp and muddy lane. But for all its humbleness, it was a frequently visited place. There wasn't a woman in the town who had not, at some time, been to visit the witch—either to purchase a bottle of cough syrup for a child with the croup, a draught to ease stomach cramps, a salve to sooth swollen ankles or a potion to bring about a miscarriage. It's not that the people in the town feared the witch but they were often in her debt—which caused them to resent her. She knew things they didn't know and, over the years, had accumulated a store of many secrets that, if ever revealed, might have led to scandal and humiliation. In addition, the witch often charged people almost more than they could afford. People grumbled that she took advantage of them in their time of need.

Precisely for this reason, Adela carried with her the only thing she possessed that she knew was of considerable value. For what she wanted to ask of the witch, she suspected, would cost a very great deal.

By the light of a full moon, Adela picked her way down the churned up, muddy path and knocked politely at the door of the shack. At first there was no answer, so she knocked again.

“Alright, alright,” called a gravelly voice from behind the door. “An old body can’t even have a fucking wank in peace anymore.”

There was rustling and shuffling and the door finally opened.

“What the bloody hell do you want?” asked a wizened, diminutive stick insect of a woman.

“I’m sorry to bother you...” began Adela.

“No you’re not,” said the woman, and turned her back on Adela. “Come in. It’s fucking freezing out there.”

Adela hesitated at the threshold. For now, it seemed to her, she had been unforgivably foolish. The thing for which she’d come to this woman was, surely, impossible anyway, or if possible, then far more expensive than she could afford. The rumours about the witch’s avarice and temper were obviously true.

“Don’t stand there gawking, you stupid cow! Get in here and shut the door. My rheumatism’s acting up again.”

The one-roomed hovel was very dimly lit, and there was a dying fire in the rude, stone hearth. It smelled of damp oregano and unwashed body. Adela stood in the middle of the room, clutching the parcel to her newly formed breasts.

“Whatcha want?” asked the crone, settling herself into a pile of rags close to the fire.

“My name is Adela,” she said, “and I’ve come to...”

“I know what you’ve come for,” croaked the witch. She held an old bone pipe between her teeth and was lighting it with an ember from the fire. “It’s all over the town.”

“You do?” Adela was confused. Even she wasn’t exactly sure what she’d come for. She just knew it was going to be almost impossible and very costly.

“You don’t want to marry that disgusting bucket of piss your father’s betrothed you to. Can’t say I blame you, girl. I can do you some arsenic, cheap.”

“Oh!” said Adela. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“No? Jesus, woman! You really are stupid.”

Tears welled up in Adela’s eyes and she clutched her parcel tighter.

The old woman pulled on the pipe, coughed and then looked at her. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, don’t start blubbing. Come sit down by the fire and tell me what you do want.”

Despite the coarse language, Adela felt there was something tender and understanding in the witch’s voice. She moved towards the fire, and settled to her knees on a second pile of rags.

“I don’t know if you can help me, really.”

“Tell me what it is and I’ll tell you if it can be done,” the crone muttered. She leaned towards Adela and in something like an encouraging whisper said: “I helped your mother on a few occasions, you know. Dryness. Not an uncommon problem.”

Adela was confused.

The crone shrugged. “Of the skin. Go on. Tell me.”

“I don’t want to live with my father anymore. And I don’t want to marry either. I want to escape, but I don’t know how or where to go. I just don’t know what to do!”

The last words blurred into a series of hiccups and sobs.

“Well, you don’t need me for that. That’s simple. You can be a whore.”

Adela’s jaw dropped. “You horrible old woman!” she cried. “Is that your only solution?”

“It’s not such a bad life. Admittedly, some women take to it better than others.”

“Filthy! You filthy, decrepit witch! How is that any better than marrying a disgusting old man?”

It was obvious the crone didn’t like being insulted. She smiled, exposing her mostly rotten teeth. “Variety?” she said, and cackled.

“I want to be like my mother,” Adela demanded. “Beautiful and pure and perfect. Everyone loved and was kind to my mother. That’s the life I want to have!”

The witch rolled her eyes. “Oh, like your mother now?”

“Yes!”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that!” Adela shouted. “Just like her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!”

The witch shrugged and, with a couple of grunts, hanging onto the stone mantelpiece, pulled herself upright. “Well, that’s not going to be cheap.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Adela. “You’re just as bad as everyone says. You’re mean and miserly and nasty.”

A phlegmy cackle rumbled in the old woman’s chest. “Show me what you got, then, girl.”

Adela stood also and handed over the package. The witch took it over to an herb and pot cluttered table and undid the wrapping, revealing the beautifully worked and bejeweled wedding gown. The silken threads and tiny stones in the fabric’s design glinted in the weak light.

“Nice. Very nice.”

“Can you do it?”

“Course I can do it,” the witch snapped. “Take off your clothes.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Off! Everything!”

“But...”

“I’m not a fucking magician, you know. I can do what you want, but not with you all covered up that way. Flesh. I need flesh to work with!”

Reluctantly, Adela took off her cloak, and her shoes, and then unlaced her tunic, shrugged it off and stepped out of it. She shivered in the damp chill of the hovel. Even in her white cambric undersmock and her woolen hose.

“All of it. Come on, I ain’t got all night!”

“But I’m cold.”

“Runs in the family,” the witch muttered. Looking sternly at Adela, she said, “Believe me, little girl, this is the last time in your life you’ll ever feel the cold.”

Off came the hose and, a little shyly, Adela undid the ties on her smock and pulled it over her head. She stood, teeth chattering in the dark, dank hovel. The witch

shuffled around her, viewing her from every angle and began to chant in a low, broken voice, in a language Adela had never heard. Reaching a large, fat pouch, high on the wall, the witch took it down, worked it open, reached inside and pulled out a fistful of white powder. Without any warning, she threw the handful at Adela. Then another, and another, and another.

It stung her eyes, and went up her nose. The bitter dust covered her lips, and felt like sand between her teeth. She coughed as it made its way into her lungs. But the witch kept chanting, louder now, while she showered Adela with clouds and clouds of the fine white dust.

Panic seized her, but even as it did, a strange numbness also took its hold. She tried to speak, but her lips wouldn't budge. She tried to bring her hands up to her face, to shield it from the snowy storm, but her arms wouldn't budge. She couldn't breathe, couldn't see, couldn't yell, couldn't escape, and then, quite abruptly, the world went dark.

* * * * *

“There we go. It's done.”

At first, Adela only heard the voice at a distance.

“Not bad, if I do say so myself. Quite a likeness. Quite a likeness!”

It was the witch. The milk-white haze that had enveloped Adela cleared, and she could see the witch, brushing the chalky powder off her own clothes and out of her grey, scraggly hair.

“It is?” asked Adela.

“I have to say, you're the spitting image.”

Adela tried to look down at herself. At first, she wasn't sure she could move at all. Just the effort of lowering her chin felt odd, but when she did, she could see that the witch had turned her milky white.

"What have you done?" cried Adela. "I'm a statue!"

"Well, not exactly. But bloody close."

"I can't... Oh, God... I can't move."

"Yes you can. You just move... different. Takes a little practice. That's all."

And indeed the witch was right. Moving didn't feel normal. She couldn't feel her muscles. She didn't notice her limbs move, but something like a puppet, she was first in one position and then another. As if time froze in slices and held her trapped there until, having willed herself to be in another position, she'd moved there without moving.

"I can't speak. Can you hear me?"

"Well, I can't hear you exactly but I know what you're sayin'. I got the gift for that, you know."

"So, I'm mute, and crippled!"

"Right then, that's you sorted," said the witch, yawning and shooing her towards the door of the hovel. "Bugger off now. I'm tired."

Even as she made her way back down the muddy path, she could hear the old witch laughing.

"And don't bother coming back," called the crone. "What's done is done for good."

So strange and new was her body, that it wasn't until Adela had reached the centre of the old town that she noticed two things. Dawn was coming, and she was absolutely naked. She was terrified. Where could she go? What could she do? For

what seemed like a long time, she stood paralyzed in the square, wanting to weep and being, somehow, unable to even do that. The first shafts of autumn light shot over the tiled roofs of the houses.

The church. That's where she'd go. And in that strange, halting, stuttered motion, she made her way to the church. When she reached the porch, the door was already open. She could see, through the gloom, that the old priest was inside, lighting the candles in the large, iron candelabras. He was talking to himself, maybe praying. She couldn't go in there.

The churchyard was old. There were many graves so worn that the writing on them could not be discerned. An enormous yew tree, almost strangled in ivy stood to one side of the church, and that is where Adela took sanctuary. Among the crosses and stone angels, she lay down in a tangle of ivy. The leaves tickled at her skin, and its creeping branches bit into the notches of her spine.

Why didn't she feel cold? What had she done? And what, Adela wondered, was to become of her? She pulled the dew-drenched tendrils of ivy over her, not for warmth, but for comfort, and wept, and slept.

* * * * *

It was full dark when Adela awoke. The moon was high in the slate sky and the stars were out. All around her frost rimed and glittered on the leaves and stone. Once again, Adela was taken aback at the way her new body moved. She went from horizontal in the ivy to upright, and standing by the church doors in the blink of an eye. And odder still, she could not feel herself blink at all.

The church was dark and empty now. It smelled of moss and bitter incense. She made her way to her mother's tomb, tucked along the side, surrounded by a latticework of iron, with the other prosperous tombs.

There she lay: her beautiful mother, not naked like Adela, but milky white like her. Hard like her. Dead like her. Not sleeping. No. Gone from the world. Again Adela wept, although she knew she shed no tears. There was no comfort for her here. How could she have ever wished for this?

Before, when she had been a girl of flesh and blood, she had a home. Not a happy one, but a home nonetheless. And she had had a future. Not a happy one either, but something known. Something she could understand. But where did she belong now?

As Adela moved around the old church, she realized there were many things like her. St. Sebastian with his staff in one hand and the Christ child on his shoulder, readying himself to take a step. The Virgin with her dry, hollow eyes and her flowing veil frozen in a breeze that had died long ago. Little imps and deformed creatures perched on the tops of the columns. And up at the altar, Christ, stopped in his middle agonies, drooping off the cross. There was no one here like her. No one real. Where could she go?

A memory came to Adela. A warm summer's day, long ago when she was a child. A feast day, she thought, when the whole town had been alive with garlands and music, and people milling in the square. She remembered that her father and mother had taken her up to the enormous manor house just a mile or so beyond the town. There were games, and dancing. Music and people in funny clothes, and meat grilling on open fires. There, just beside the huge stone house, was a garden they'd walked through. It had high, clipped hedges, and spiny red roses. There were benches and a fountain and row upon row of white, stone statues. Just like her.

Her father had never taken her there again. Perhaps the Manor Lord never invited the townspeople back, or perhaps, once her mother died, her father had not

wanted to revisit the place. But that night, moving in her strange, flitting way, Adela took the east road out of the town and headed for the garden full of statues.

She passed two drunken cooper's boys on the street leading out of the town, but it was as if she wasn't there at all. How could they not see her, she wondered, gleaming white in the moonlight? Then, a little further on, a cart came by and, had she been like she was before, she would have asked for a ride, but she didn't feel tired or cold. Besides, both the horses and the driver overtook her, without even slowing down, as if she weren't there at all.

The road to the manor curved around a copse of trees, but when the huge house came into view, it was just as Adela remembered it. She could see a dim light glowing through one of the tall, arched and curtained windows on the ground floor. There were sheep, bleating in a field to her left.

Yes. There was the garden, with its high hedges. The roses were gone, and one of the benches had cracked and collapsed into the weeds. But there, in the garden were the statues. Beautiful girls, posed and naked, one with an urn in her arm, another caught in the moment of a turn, a third's eyes were downcast, as if she had noticed the slow tickle of the little snail making its moist way up her leg. There were boys, too. Some bashful, some brazen. A pair of lads, bare as the day they were born, clasped in each other's arms, engaged in a wrestling match that would last forever. The fountain was dry. In its centre, stone fish stood cleverly and forever on their fins in a fishy dance around a frightening giant with a big beard, and a pitchfork and a curled and scaled tail.

Adela flitted amongst the statues, learning each of them by heart. Noting each position of their limbs and each expression on their faces. This, she decided, was where she belonged.

She struck a pose, one leg straight, and the other bent, and demurely set ahead of the other. Tucking one arm behind her back, she raised the other into the air as if she were just about to catch a leaf wafted by on the wind. She froze, and slept again.

* * * * *

Time passed in the strangest way. It was the sound of footsteps on stones that brought Adela to alertness. Not that she had been unaware of the world around her before, but it had receded, through the starry night, into a muffled jumble of owl hoots and scurrying claws, and layers of darkness as clouds crossed the face of the moon on its way behind the hedges.

An old man pushed a barrow over the frozen ground. He was bent, and almost bald and wrapped up against the cold in a ragged woolen cloak. He picked up some of the few fallen branches, gave the broken bench a grumpy kick, and pushed his wheelbarrow on. He didn't even give Adela or any other of the statues a second glance.

A little later in the morning, a tight, giggling knot of girls came past. All huddled together, with their plain shawls pulled tight around their shoulders. They were talking and laughing. Servants, thought Adela. None of them noticed her either.

A bank of grey clouds boiled across the sky in the early afternoon, and the wind picked up, whipping dead leaves around her bare feet, twirling and dancing them between the statues, fluttering into rustling clumps at the bottom of the empty fountain. A crow landed on the top of the bearded man's head. It sat there and cried out its displeasure at the wind.

A man, young and richly dressed in a fine burgundy cloak trimmed with rabbit strolled into the garden. He wore no hood or cap, and his straw-coloured hair danced around his head in the breeze. At first, he didn't look at the statues, either. He was

talking to himself and looking up at the sky. But then he sat on the unbroken stone bench and looked straight at Adela.

He saw her, she was sure of it. Not only could he see her, but she could feel his gaze as it roamed over her body in a way that would have made Adela blush if she'd been flesh. She could feel his eyes moving from her hip to her breast, up her arm, then down again. Over her face, along her neck, and around the curve of her shoulder.

She wanted, more than anything, to move, to cover herself. And yet she knew that if she did, he would know her secret. Perhaps he realized she didn't belong there. Would he say something to someone? Would they make her leave? She should hide. Now. Now before it was too late. Before someone made her go.

Just when Adela thought she could bare his eyes no longer, he muttered something to himself, reached inside his cloak and pulled out a small book. It was covered in calfskin, the same colour as his cloak. There were fine scrolls picked out in gold. He opened it, turning its thin, delicate pages, until he settled on one, and began to read.

*Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That hills and valleys, dales and field,
Or woods or steepy mountain yields.*

*And we will sit upon the rocks
And see the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.**

His voice enthralled her. He stood and began to pace as he read, through the open spaces between the statues.

*And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroider'd all with leaves of myrtle.*

*A gown made of the finest wool,
Which from our pretty lambs we pull,
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold. .**

Knowing his back was to her, for she could hear his voice dying out as he moved away, she turned to watch him walk and read. Every so often, he'd stop beside a statue, raise a hand, and touch it. A shoulder, a breast, a hip, a buttock. Once he leaned close to a marble head and whispered the line into its ear.

Now she could make her escape, before he reached the end of the row and turned around. Adela spotted an area beyond the fountain, where a holly bush broke the line of the hedge. With a crackling of branches she could only pray he didn't hear, she pressed her white form deep into the tree's thick, green embrace.

She listened to the cadence of his voice, but could no longer hear the words. As he turned and strolled back towards the unbroken bench, he took the same liberties with each of the statues in that row. A caress here, a little pat there. He stopped in front of the beautiful girl with the urn and trailed a forefinger over her enigmatic smile.

“Hello, my lovely,” he said, loud enough for Adela to hear. “Did you miss me?” Then he paused, waited, as if he was sure the statue would answer him. In truth, Adela thought the lady with the urn might indeed answer him, or move to swat his hand away from where it had settled on her bottom. But of course, the statue did not speak. Did not move.

“No, you have plenty of finer friends to amuse you. Don’t you?” he said, and moved on.

When he reached the spot where Adela had been standing, he stopped and looked puzzled. He glanced around, as if searching for her. Then closed his book, tucked it back beneath his cloak, and turned a full circle, as if he’d lost his way in his wandering.

“John?” called a woman’s voice from somewhere behind the hedge, closer to the walls of the house. “John?”

“Here, Mother! I’m in the garden.”

A proud, mature woman in a black gown and cape, wearing a fur-lined hood stopped at the entrance, in the gap between the hedges. “There you are! Silly boy. It’s too cold to be strolling. Especially here, in this Godless, sinful bower.”

The woman cast her eyes over the statues with distaste. “Your father was such an odd man. I do hope he’s in heaven. But only the Good Lord knows for certain.”

“They’re just statues, Mother. I’ve read that there are thousands of them in Rome.”

“Rome. Ha!” his mother huffed. “Come along. Your uncle’s arrived, full of boasts and ready to eat our larders empty. Let’s not keep him waiting.”

The young man joined his mother at the garden’s entrance, took her arm in a gentle way, and they were gone.

* * * * *

The following morning at, from what Adela could tell, exactly the same time, John came to the garden again. He sat in the same bench and let his eyes roam over the statues, but today Adela had been careful and positioned herself towards the back of the garden. She reasoned that if she did not place herself somewhere too obvious, he would never be able to tell her apart from the other statues.

Like the previous morning, he took out his book and read aloud while pacing through the frozen effigies. A line of poetry made him laugh aloud, and slapped one of the wrestlers on the back as if he were a childhood friend.

As he made his way up the row, he had a word to say for almost all of them and, when he reached Adela, he smiled.

“Ah, there you are. What beauty. How is it that I never saw you until yesterday? How could I have been so blind as to overlook your lovely form? I wonder where my father found you? Venice perhaps? That’s where all the most wanton wenches come from.”

Without hesitation or even a blush, he reached up and covered her left breast with the palm of his hand, gave it a mock squeeze, and moved on down the row.

* * * * *

When the rains came, he did not come to the garden. When the snow covered the statues, he did not read, but walked past the hedged garden to take his exercise elsewhere.

But each morning without fail, Adela took her place amongst the statues, just in case he should come. Worried now that, if he noted her absence, something dreadful would happen. On the mornings he did come to visit, sometimes he’d notice her and speak to her or touch her, and sometimes he’d pass her by.

She found, on the mornings he would speak tenderly to one of the other statues, it annoyed her. She'd grown to like his attentions, to anticipate them. When he showed some special affection to another, Adela became jealous.

Early in the spring, he was absent from the garden for two whole weeks. Adela took her place each morning, but John did not visit. When he finally did return, he stopped at the girl with the urn and repeated the words she'd first heard him address to her.

"Hello, my lovely. Did you miss me?"

"She didn't," Adela wanted to shout. "But I did! I'm the only one who did."

The next day John returned and, feeling desperate and yearning for his affection, Adela moved her position and posed just before the stone bench he always took as his seat at the beginning of his visit.

At first he looked confounded, then a smile spread across his lips. "Tricky old rogue," he muttered. He laughed, as aiming it towards the heavens and shouted. "You can't fool me, Fenton. I know you're moving them about!"

"I beg your pardon, sir?" answered the old gardener, turning the corner of the hedge with a shovel in his hand.

"You're a sly old bastard."

"If you say so, sir."

"Be off with you. Leave me to my madness."

"Right you are, sir," mumbled the old man, confused, and shuffled away.

John stepped right up to Adela and cocked his head, his lips right next to her ear. "I bet you're his favourite. Aren't you? Lusty old beggar, he is. Spawned more

than a dozen brats,” he whispered. “I’ll wager he’d make a dozen more with you, if he could.”

Adela fumed. First her father had tried to marry her off to a degenerate, poxy merchant and now this man was trying to marry her off to his is decrepit, half-witted gardener.

“Not that I blame him, you understand.” John slid his hand down the smooth nakedness of her back and over the high, plump globes of her arse. “Does he touch you when no one’s looking? Like I do?”

It took all the strength she had not to move. Not to turn into his touch. Not change the position of her head to face him.

“Ah, well.” He sighed, patted her rump and moved down the row.

His habitual progression was slower today, as if his belief that Fenton was moving the statues around prompted him to take more notice of them. He stopped at the girl with the urn and read her a few lines of bawdy verse and then spoke to her in a voice so low that Adela couldn’t hear.

She burned with jealousy and anger. Didn’t he notice she was different? How could he treat her just like all the others? Why did he not see that she was real and all the others just lifeless statues?

* * * * *

That night, as spring rains fell and the thunder rolled through the heavens. As the frogs sang in the filling fountain and the warm wind whipped and whistled through the hedges, Adela’s anger grew.

She could not bear for him to show affection to the others. She wanted him to herself. She cursed the day she’d gone to see the witch. Cursed the witch for the cruel

gift she'd bestowed on her. As the lightning lit the heavens and the garden, Adela moved from pose to pose, from place to place, in frantic slices of illumination.

A flash glazed the wrestlers' rain slicked muscles, the tips of Neptune's trident, the plump knee of a bashful nymph, the graceful shoulder of the urn girl. Damn you, Adela thought. You he loves. You he remembers. Just because of your urn. He doesn't see you, you stupid fool. He only sees the urn.

In a moment of rage, she moved into the space where the urn girl stood upon her pedestal, feeling the wet stone grind against her own. She did it again, and again and the statue began to rock. Lightning streaked the garden with light. Adela watched the delicate stone form pitch sideways. Decapitating itself as it struck another statue on the hip. The head broke away with a soft crunch and rolled across the grass to settle under the lip of the fountain's basin.

* * * * *

"The wind must've pushed it over, Master John," said Fenton, the following morning as John followed the old man through the storm-strewn garden. He stooped and picked up the marble head. "Sad, though. Your father liked this one very much. It was the first one he brought back."

John nodded, and surveyed the rows of statuary. "Yes, it's a pity. Can't she be fixed?"

"Well, if it were just the head, I reckon we could probably find a stonemason 'round these parts to put it back on, but," the old man said, stepping through the high grass over to where the broken body lay, "but one arm's broke clean away and there's a big chunk come off the leg, also."

"Alright, Fenton. Well, see what can be done, won't you?"

"Indeed I will, sir."

“And, if she can’t be fixed...” John stood for a moment and closed his eyes.

“Give her a decent burial, won’t you?”

“Burial? I’m not sure that’s proper Christian.”

“No? Maybe not. Well... just I don’t want to find bits of her filling gaps in one of the stone outhouse walls. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

That day, John didn’t read aloud in the garden, nor did he stroll down the rows, speaking to the statues. It shamed Adela. Not that she felt bad for having broken the girl with the urn, but because it had caused John pain to see her broken.

* * * * *

But he came back. All through the summer, John spent his mornings in the garden. Sometimes he’d read aloud and sometimes he’d stroll in silence. Once Adela listened to him sing a song, in French, she thought, as he walked the rows and caressed the stones. It was sad. That’s all she knew. So sad.

When he came to her, he smiled. With a single finger, he stroked the flat plane of her brow. “Like it? It’s a song about a broken hearted courtier who lost his lover to a richer man.”

The melody had so moved Adela, she was weeping tearlessly. Not for the words, because she didn’t understand them, but because the sound of a heart breaking was there in the sad sweetness of his voice. And before she even knew what she had done, she’d moved.

John pulled his hand away, as if something had bitten it. “Good Lord!”

He shook his head, leaned closer to Adela’s face and peered at it with a combination of curiosity and fear. “No,” he muttered quietly to himself, withdrawing. “That’s what I get for drinking soured sack.”

“No more bad wine! Not good for the wits.” He moved on down the row.

* * * * *

The first time Adela had moved in his presence, it had frightened her. Not just the slip of her composure, but the awful consequences she imagined it could have wrought. But then she realized that it was also the only way she could show John that she wasn't like the other statues in the garden.

So the next time he stopped to caress her, she moved again. He had spoken some line of verse, so close that she could feel his breath on the surface of her cheek. He settled an affectionate hand upon her belly and, instead of playing the part of the frozen woman, she'd simply shifted her weight from one hip to another.

Again, he'd pulled his hand away in horror. In fact, he'd stepped back so abruptly that he'd tumbled onto the grass. From that position, he glared up at her whiteness and, after pushing what Adela suspected were some darker thoughts from his mind, laughed aloud. “Oh, cunning Venus!” he said, squinting in the bright sunlight. “Thou hast unmanned me with thy charms!”

To Adela's growing frustration, no matter how she moved in his presence, or even under his hand, John would simply shake his head, and brush it off as some flaw in his own balance or perception.

She moved places, moved her limbs into new positions, turned her head, raised her foot. It made no difference. He quipped that he might be suffering from fever, impending madness, or that he'd read too much love poetry for his own good. One morning, he pressed his lips to her cheek, even after she'd changed the cant of her head, and told her it was time he found himself a wife.

Gradually, Adela came to understand that there was no way she would ever be able to persuade him of who or what she was, because he was not inclined to know. There were nights when, Adela, the only living statue in John's garden, considered leaving it, so terrible was the grief of knowing he would never see her for the living thing she was. But each morning, he'd return, reading his poetry in his sweet, low voice, and offering her the fleeting touch of his warm desire.

If she could not make him see her for what she really was, then at least she had the comfort of knowing he saw her at all.

*N.B. The poem quoted in this story is Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love".

Eversharp

The steel lives on the tip of my tongue. A strange synesthesia that bridges outer and inner worlds. Its edge hums in my veins. The cut it will make, the blood it will spill, the pain it will cause all force my heart up into my throat until my pulse deafens me and my mouth floods with saliva. It is a metal-flavoured anticipation.

I'm standing in no-mans-land with this razor in my hand. It's not a civilized thing I crave. Nice women don't fuck themselves to fractured images of parting their lover's skin. Perhaps for some it's about marking, claiming territory. Not for me. Fuck territory, fuck conquest.

I hear the tight, shallow breaths he's taking. The brittle shield of a laugh he uses to obscure his fear. I know there's a war inside him. The good part of him wants to back out, wonders what on earth he was thinking when he agreed to this. But the other part of him wants to give me this as an act of love. It wants to stay the course, to know he's brave enough, mad enough to take it. He wants to trust me not to turn monstrous and casually pull this fine blade across his throat. But he'll never know for sure until it's over.

"So, here?" I say. "Yes, right here." I slide over him, straddling his hips, trailing my fingers over his excellent, fragile flesh. The dusting of hair, the flat, taupe nipple that quells at my touch, the hilly landscape of his ribs. My Adam. My lovely meat man. My sacrificial lamb. "Where Christ took the Roman spear. This is where I want to cut you."

He laughs again, but, beneath my fingers, his muscles tense. "Okay. Don't go all religious on me, now."

It's too late. He is an altar between my thighs. An altar and an offering united. Flesh and more, a human animal. And here, in this moment, I am the god and the priest who serves. With my thirsty mind and greedy blade, I'll take the senseless fruit of his fear. There. Right there.

That's the spot I press my lips to, burnish with my breath. Beneath me, despite his fear, his reluctant cock is swelling. My cunt ticks like a clock. His eyes flit between my face and the blade. Meat metronomes, both of us, marking the time I'm losing all sense of. Perhaps seconds pass between his anticipatory flinch and the breath he's caught. Perhaps an hour. Will I notice if he turns blue? He'd be such a beautiful blue.

I know he wants it to be fast and over, but I want it slow. Silver and gleaming, mirroring the pores on his skin as it travels, I tease the blunt edge of the razor down the center of his chest—a parodied autopsy—and watch the wings of panic flutter across his face, listen to him swallow, over and over, against a dry throat. But most of all, it is his eyes. They're still flitting between the razor and my face, until I'm certain we have blurred together. How ever did he let this sick little woman into his bed?

I have not offered any rewards. No bargains or barter. No 'if you let me do this, then I will do that.' He must give me this because I want it. Because he tells me he loves me as I am and I am this thing that wants this.

Bending to the task, I hold his skin taut with my fingers and, angling the blade, let it rest there, anticipating its path. Then I draw, slow and shallow, across the living fabric of him. The slow, eversharp tug into the sacred softness. His breath is a high, soft hiss as his nerves inform him of the little crime that's been played out upon his flesh.

Such a little cut, really. My eyes flood at the sight of the perfect red beads born in the wound, that grow as his lungs heave, that slither like flatworms over the lips of the cut and down his side. So dreadful, so beautiful. A nothing, a something, an everything, fleeting and trapped forever in the timelessness of my gorgeous sorrow. What have I done? What has he let me do? I'm tumbling through the high atmosphere, falling from grace, suffocating in the airless joy of the moment.

I lay the razor down, still trying to breathe, close my eyes, and slide the round hill of my cheek the sin I've made in his skin. It smells of sharp, anxious sweat, raw and coppery, too. He shifts beneath me, his fingers bury themselves into my hair. They cup my head and my face to his chest, rubbing my face in my work. I drag my parted lips through the bloody smear, taste it, and feel him ejaculate into the void between us.

Machines

The toy was pink. Sticky pink in that way only a boiled sweet mistakenly left in the sun on the dashboard of your car can be. Hard, molded, Chinese factory pink. The cockhead-shaped tip was only translucent, but beneath it, the plastic was transparent; the metal capsule of the motor and the brutalist ball-bearings showed through as if to counteract the coyness of the pink. There to remind her that, as pink as this thing was, it had a job to do and was capable of doing it. Nestled against the shaft like a parasite was the clit stimulator. A fat, pink cockroach with bunny ears, slightly splayed, designed to nestle on either side of the mad node of nerves while the toy was inside her. Sandra brought it up to her face, smeared the smooth, seamless plastic over her lips. Inhaled the acrid ghost of hot, taffy-soft, extruded petrochemical. The nostalgic scent of almost instant orgasm.

There must be, Sandra thought, a perfect woman, who lies on a gynecological examination couch, legs spread and braced in stirrups, in a design lab somewhere. White-coated and disinterested technicians measure the distance between her clitoris and her vaginal passage, and construct the toy according to her perfect golden-meant cunt. Once they make their prototype, which is probably not pink, they call her back in. Once again she drapes her perfect body on the table, raises and rests her legs on stirrups, padded for her comfort, and they try the toy out on her. Or, perhaps, in order to more closely approximate use case, they ask her to use the toy, to test the design.

Sandra wonders whether they dim the lights and withdraw to a polite distance before the woman uses the toy. She wonders whether the woman is completely naked, or just pulls her underwear off and bunches her skirt around her waist. The latter, she figures. After all, this isn't romance. This is technology. This is science. What if the

prototype-testing woman doesn't get off on the toy, but orgasms because of the sterility of the environment she's masturbating in? Wouldn't that make the whole process invalid? Or do they interview prospective testers to screen for that kind of perversion?

No, she thinks, it's probably not like that at all. There are probably five Eastern European women, none of whom are undressed or beautiful, and they are paid to try out the prototypes on grungy, second-hand waiting room furniture in a second floor office with marked up drywall, with a laminate coffee table and a vase full of dusty, artificial chrysanthemums. If three of them reach orgasm before the battery runs out, that's chalked up as a design success and the toy goes into mass production in Zhejiang Province.

Little do the designers know that the three women who come are getting off on watching and hearing each other plunge ugly, unwieldy prototypes into their variously shaped vaginas. The other two have done this longer. They know they'll get paid whether they orgasm or not, so they don't put much effort into it.

The thought is both depressing and vaguely arousing. Sandra puts the new pink toy back into its exuberantly designed box and places it in the closet along with the other countless sex toys she keeps there.

Her friend Marissa calls it her 'cupboard of love'. It's a testament to something, for sure. Sandra's not sure to what anymore. When her collection first began to grow and she had fitted the space with clever organizer structures to accommodate the toys, it made her feel brazen and proud. When her female friends came to visit, she'd pull the doors wide open, and say, 'behold!' They were impressed. They were jealous. For a while, it felt like a statement of feminist rebellion

and sexual independence. That was back when the toys still possessed the capacity to bring her any pleasure.

Now the cupboard seemed larger, like a stern, cream-coloured, semi-gloss maternal admonition. Opening it made her feel worse. The slick boxes were so countable. Now each one was an enumeration of her failure to achieve what the devices had been designed to offer her.

Sandra could clearly remember her first experience with a vibrator. The toy, carefully preserved in the box it had come in, sat in a place of pride in the top left pigeonhole in the cupboard. Long dead, its battery no longer capable of holding a charge, it was a small, tastefully designed oblong covered in white and purple soft-touch silicone.

The first time she'd used it, she had treated it like a lover. After bringing it home from the shop in a discreet carrier bag, on a bright Saturday morning, she'd removed all her clothes, pulled the curtains of her bedroom closed, and slipped into bed with it.

For all its built-in innocuousness, it had intimidated her when she pressed the button and turned it on. Sandra had expected it would probably require charging, but the manufacturer had been thoughtful and pre-charged it before packaging. The vibrations, even on the lowest setting, seemed disturbingly strong, so that it was with some trepidation, lying on her back, entirely naked, with her legs bent and parted, she directed the buzzing little object to the cleft of her labia and pressed it there.

The sensation had made her entire body jerk. She fumbled with the smooth, unlabelled controls, trying to dial down the strength of the vibrations, only to discover it was already on the lowest setting.

After a lifetime of using nothing but her fingers to masturbate, the device seemed sinister. It sat in the palm of her hand, purring with a monstrous efficiency. It took her ten minutes to persuade herself that there was nothing to be frightened of, and less than twenty seconds to come.

Although she knew she'd had an orgasm, it was unlike anything she'd had before. Sandra had always been fairly orgasmic, but getting herself off with her fingers took a little time and a mind full of fantasy scenarios. Sequences of lovingly nourished and embellished images, sensations, scents and sounds partially constructed of real sexual experience and things she'd seen or on the Internet. Sometimes she'd just turn a perfectly good movie dirty, inserting unwritten, unfilmed scenes where the actors finally fulfilled the erotic promises they had made in the commercial release. Sometimes it was just one tiny lived moment, replayed over and over again until her fingers found the charm of orientation and rhythm and persuaded her body to pleasure.

Always there was a slow, concerted labour of mind and body that had to be done to achieve orgasm. Always there were early minutes of mental unreadiness, where she coaxed herself to relax and then feel. Her cunt moistened and she'd reach a place where the sensations were pleasant and almost aimless in which something akin to comfort wandered through her core and traipsed over her skin. Depending on how much time she had apportioned to the task, she might stay in that zone for as little as a few minutes or as long as an hour. Like a shower, taken in haste or enjoyed in slow luxury. At some point, though, she'd remind herself of the goal to be achieved. She'd concentrate on the fantasies, create them, slide into them, drink them back into herself recursively, converting the images into a language her body could consume, converting the idea into motion and sensation with the dexterity of her fingers,

pushing each primed package down her spinal column and into her pelvis. There was always a moment when suddenly she knew that her orgasm was inevitable. Like the grooved lines on a ziplock bag, there was a silent snapping into place of rightness, a smooth, linear passage towards completion. All the fantasies fragmented into nonsense, melted into moment, and her fingers would work, undirected but for muscle-memory, toward the nameless, formless abyss.

That first little toy had made all of that unnecessary. The first orgasm it afforded had felt like a curious, electrified theft of her body's responses. It took her a while to get over the shock. Sandra lay there trembling, panting, and feeling the dying spasms of a hijacked climax, holding the little oblong machine, still buzzing away in her humid, trembling hand.

But it wasn't long before she was curious as to whether the little device could do the trick twice. And a third time. And a fourth. Each time it took a little longer, but not much. That fateful Saturday, she'd spent the entire afternoon in bed with her new, amazing friend. The masturbatory marathon had only ended when, to her disappointment, the complimentary bonus charge had run out.

Reluctantly, she'd showered, dressed and read the manual. After setting up the induction charger, she'd perched the vibe in the correct position and slept while it charged. Sunday, she hadn't bothered to get out of bed, but reached for the toy, switched it on, and spent the day producing more orgasms than she could have possibly counted.

How was it, she had wondered, that she'd ever lived without this? This tiny little thing, costing less than \$50, was the answer to all her erotic prayers. Who needed a lover if you had this? What was the point in all the social stress, all the angst, all the tamping down of raging insecurities that congress with another human

being involved? There was all that dreaded crap, and then there was her little toy. Her life had been changed forever.

It hadn't been long before Sandra became curious as to what other sex toys in other shapes and sizes and with other functions could do for her. That was the birth of her collection. Each one had promised something a little different. Some did what they said on the package, and others fell short of their marketing hype. She could not remember when she had decided to dedicate the cupboard in her hallway to them, but the collection grew. Some items enjoyed a long sojourn on her bedside table before being exiled to the cupboard. Others ended up there almost immediately. These days, Sandra rarely bothered to liberate them from their increasingly alluring packaging. She bought them, mostly over the Internet, disposed of the wrapping they'd been shipped in, and placed them in the cupboard.

She'd opened the box on the pink rabbit vibrator just to look at the strange, outlandish design. It was not rechargeable and, although it had shipped with two complimentary double A batteries, she didn't bother loading them into the device. Sandra had long since learned that it was unwise to store sex toys with the batteries in them. Inevitably they'd burst and leak and cause all sorts of mischief.

Hours of pleasure, it said on the box. Lie of lies. It wasn't that the toys no longer brought her to orgasm—they still made her come, although it took significantly longer and the lowest setting no longer registered.

Sandra had discovered something most of the world, if one were to believe all the advertising, the romance novels and the porn on offer, seemed completely unaware of: pleasure and an orgasm were, in fact, not precisely the same thing.

She'd reluctantly resigned herself to masturbating only with her fingers. It hadn't been easy to resist the addictive lure of the instant, and she'd disappointed

herself by relapsing a few times. Harder still had been learning how to generate fantasies again. It was, apparently, a muscle that required exercise. These days her orgasms were infrequent, and hard-won.

The Desire Artist

You know what it's like. You're only reading this because you think that maybe you're different from everyone else. Maybe you aren't seeing things, feeling things right, but you are.

But I'm going to write this anyway. Just so you know. So you can think: well, at least there's someone else out there who thinks about sex all the time but is simultaneously scared to death of it. Not the sex. Not the mechanics. If all we ever had to experience were the mechanics, we'd all be fine. It's all the shit that goes along with it. And it only gets worse.

When you're young and your hormones are screaming in your veins like four-year olds having a tantrum at the supermarket, you'll drag your genitals through a garden full of broken glass just to have someone slide their fingers into your pussy. When you get older, and the cacophony of urge grows quiet, every goddamned surface becomes reflective, and you're the idiot in one of those awful hospital gowns with their ass peeking out. And it's not as great an ass as it used to be, either.

I know there are people for whom sex isn't enormous. They do it like they eat breakfast. They do it when they're hungry and need it. They consume pleasure and sometimes they've happened upon a fairly good restaurant but sometimes it's just McDonald's. Memorable or forgettable, they walk away sated, intact and occasionally a little queasy. But that passes

I never wanted sex to be that way. When it got that way, I decided to give it up for a while, hoping to reclaim something momentous in the act, perhaps at a later date. Perhaps with someone who wanted it to be momentous too.

The saddest thing about giving up sex is how easy it is. To this day it still stuns me how the dry years slid so easily over each other, like pages in a book. The ache I thought would surely drive me crazy became an easily ignored tenderness at the back of my mouth. It came, it went, I prodded it with my tongue from time to time, but it didn't require fixing.

That scared me. It reminded me of that story, *A Hunger Artist*, by Kafka, about the guy who starves himself for a living and people come to see him get thinner and thinner, they're amazed at his discipline, his ability to deny himself. That's why they came to look. But all the time he felt guilty for cheating them; he knew he was a fraud because not eating was the easiest thing in the world; he just couldn't find anything he actually wanted to eat.

That's what it was like for me. The hardest thing in the world was finding anyone I wanted to fuck. Not because my world was full of unattractive people, but because none of them were attractive enough to compete with the blissful lethargy of going without. I felt, somehow, like that was a sin—the not wanting.

So I made up for it. Instead of forcing myself out of that lethargy and visiting the gym of the flesh, I fell in love with a man who would not have me.

As procrastinations went, it was—if I may say so myself—pretty damn baroque. I'm not sure when I started to want him, but in retrospect I think it was conveniently after I knew he didn't want me.

To his credit, it wasn't an outright rejection. There were just so many elaborate reasons why it wouldn't work out, why he couldn't face the idea of becoming that close, why it would just signal the beginning of the end of something beautiful. Stop rolling your eyes. Those kinds of excuses serve a purpose, you know.

Like any good piece of fiction, they allow you to suspend your disbelief, maintain a modicum of self-respect and invite you to indulge in years of what-if daydreams. As a writer, I had to admire its potential as an engine of creative sublimation.

Unrequited sexual desire can eat up your life, your attention like nothing else. You get to feel all the thrill and angst and urge of a new relationship without ever having to get undressed or consider contraception. You can spend years hatching amazing narratives that jump back and forth in time: if I'd only met him sooner, or, once we're old we can meet and laugh at how badly it would have all turned out, and everything in between. But never once do you have to really consider the reality of changing your life or the dreary prospect of inevitable boredom. You can live in a comfortable state of perpetual, poignant, delusional hope.

Then one day, something monumental happened. Something awful but revealing. It blew through all the baroque excuses like a hurricane through cheap curtains. All the spindly glass columns that supported that suspension of disbelief shattered. I really did attempt to take up the thread of my fabricated, hopeless romance, but I surveyed the wreckage and realized it was beyond repair. All the love in the world couldn't blind me to how badly I'd built that fiction of perhaps.

I was left thinking... fuck, I'm going to die without getting laid, again. I was back to being haunted by how acutely unnatural my life had become. How selfish, how miserly with my time and my affections I'd grown. How cleverly I'd kept potential lovers at a distance.

And still there was something holding me back. That dismal, romantic yearning for sex to be important, something worth the effort of all the space I'd have to give up to get it. Something more than the consumption of the adequate.

No, I told myself. You're just making up reasons not to get laid. Just go do it.

Filthy Wound

The first nick came with what Blanche thought was a sincere apology. She was amenable to accepting it because she was enjoying the view: him kneeling between her spread legs, with nothing on but a pair of underwear. It mitigated her discomfort at being so exposed and the ache where the rim of the bathtub bit into her buttocks. Her ass was, apparently, not as fat as she feared.

The careful attention he was paying to the task of shaving her pussy was also a salve to her bruised pride.

“Don’t you like my pubic hair?” she had asked, after his suggestion that she shave it off.

She was ready to be wounded in that very female way a woman can be. Over a careless remark about some minor aspect of the area between her thighs. As if that nether valley were a permanent wound forever waiting to split open and bleed at even the mildest criticism. All it took was one tiny gesture of disregard, one misinflected word.

“Some days I like it,” he said. “But not today. Haven’t you ever wondered what it feels like bare?”

Blanche pondered that, reaching back into the pre-pubescent past. She had childhood memories, of course, but none of them involved her sexual organs.

Perhaps one. An abstract tangle of images and feelings, of sliding herself instinctually but shamefully over an old piece of carved furniture, feeling the ridges and even the grain of the wood against her bare, plump cunt. As much as her rational mind told her that all children are sensual creatures, she recoiled in unforgiving disgust at the memory.

“Ow! Careful!” she snapped. She flinched at the second nick, unsure of whether the flare of her temper came from the cut or at the queasy shame of her remembered self.

“Sorry, sorry,” he muttered, thumbing the welling bead of blood away, along with a smear of pinkening shaving foam and a clump of dark curls like a small, broken spider dragging its fractured legs behind it.

The tendons of her inner thighs ached for being so widely spread, and now, for the tension of fear that tightened them further. The muscles twitched and trembled.

He looked up from his labours, straight razor in one hand, towel thrown over his shoulder. “Don’t you trust me?”

Blanche tried to relax. “Yes?” she said, with a rising tone that meant no.

Trust? Trust, with his face so close to her viscera? Not in bed, like a lover with a clever tongue and lascivious intentions, but like a judge of aesthetics, efficient and clinical and far too close. Didn’t one need a degree or a license to be there, like that?

Most women were accustomed to seeing blood in the region but this was something else. He shaved himself with a straight razor each morning; it wasn’t that he lacked experience with its use. But a vulva, she thought, was a different matter: squidgier, with fewer flat planes, more complex even than the little ridged dip between his nose and his upper lip, or the bony part of his chin. She wondered how many cunts he’d shaved and decided she didn’t want to know the answer.

Holding the flesh of her left labia taut between his thumb and index finger, he shaved away another clump of shrubbery, leaving the skin pink and velvety in its wake. Then he nicked her, again, in almost exactly the same spot, except on the opposite side. There, where the skin transforms from dry, pored epidermis into shiny,

moist flesh, the absent cusp—the indistinct delineation between outside and insiderness.

“Hey! Fuck! Watch it!” She launched each syllable onto a higher shelf.

“Jesus, sorry.”

“You’re not sorry!”

“Don’t be silly,” he said, pinching the cut to stop the bleeding. The gesture distorted her labia, pulled it sideways until it looked detachable—an alien appendage.

In fact, her whole denuded crotch looked unfamiliar. The pinch hurt more than the cut. She looked up from her groin to his face.

“Ow,” she breathed.

He met her gaze and smiled. “Ow,” he whispered back.

* * * * *

“So, what do you think?”

He released the plump lip, leaving a curiously white mark in the flesh where the pressure had constricted the blood vessels.

Blanche looked down again, doubtfully. “It stings.”

“Touch it. Feel it.”

“Of all the ways of getting me to wank in front of you, this is the lamest.”

“Have I ever had to trick you into doing that?” He nodded at her crotch.

“Come on, feel it.”

She reached down, tentatively, the way one hesitates to touch an unfamiliar thing.

“Oh.”

He smiled and cocked an eyebrow. “Smooth, huh?”

Blanche didn't answer. She was too busy marveling at how any part of her own body could feel so foreign to her, and so unaccountably perverse.

He rose on his knees, wrapped an arm around her waist, and kissed her.

* * * * *

It was in the midst of that kiss—once it had turned from casual affection to something more intentional and driven, once she had put aside any unwillingness to indulge in the strange delight of stroking her own denuded cunt—that she felt the first tiny pricks of pain. At first it was just a clutch of itches, but as she grew wet and her wetness spread out over the area, the itch became a maddening sting. She squirmed in his embrace, then struggled, and then pulled her hand from between their bodies in alarm.

“It stings! It fucking burns!”

He smiled against her mouth.

“I need to rinse it. Move,” she said, trying to push him away.

But instead of acquiescing, he cupped her bare ass cheeks in his hands and pulled her against him, burying his face into the curve of her neck. She could feel the cotton of his underwear against her mound, not soft at all, but coarse and mean, and his cock, thickening by degrees beneath it.

In that one quotidian moment, he had pushed her past being a sentient human who took care of her own requirements with any semblance of dignity. The scratch of the cotton felt good; his erection was in just the right place so that, if she moved her hips strategically, she could relieve herself of the infuriating sting and grind herself to orgasm at the same time.

* * * * *

Just before she reached it, he stopped her and picked her up off the edge of the tub, her legs still wrapped around his hips.

“What? What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Don’t you want to fuck?”

“I do. We could have done it right there.”

“True, but this is better,” he said, and dropped her onto the unmade bed.

She looked up at him, with the veiled sullenness of someone who’s just been cheated of something. It wouldn’t be the first time. He had a nasty habit of teasing her to the point where she got aggressive and then would, either figuratively or literally, walk off whistling. But she sensed he was not in that kind of a mood today. There was a dark wet spot and faint red streaks on his underwear where she’d rubbed herself against him. He was still hard. She elbowed her way up the bed to make room for him as he peeled them off.

“Does it still sting?” He pushed her legs apart, knelt between them and cupped her cunt. The salt from his palm made nonsense of the question. Then he gave her a savage squeeze.

Her hips arched upward, of their own volition. “Motherfucker!”

“Bitch.” His hand was hot and cruel; he almost made a fist, gripping the pink flesh of her.

Caught between arousal and horror, she felt the recently clotted cuts break open, watched a tiny rivulet of blood seeped between his fingers. “I don’t want to. I’ve...I’ve changed my mind.”

“Yes, you do,” he said, taking his hand away, gabbing her by the back of the thighs and pulling her to up to him. “Don’t go all coy on me.”

“I’m bleeding. Can’t you see I’m bleeding?”

“Yeah, you are.” He brushed the back of his fingers over her cunt, smearing the blood that wept from the cuts, then pressed his thumb between the lips and trailed the flat of it over her clit. “And you still want to fuck.”

Blanche turned her head away, wondering why her eyes were filling with tears, why the blood scared her, and why, despite it or because of it, she wanted to fuck.

As he pushed into her, it wasn't the thrust that hurt. It was the way filling her pulled the cuts apart. It wasn't a sting any more; now it was worse. As if all the little nicks had decided to merge and become one generalized ache.

“Look,” he said. And, when she wouldn't turn back, he bent forward, cradling her head in his hand and made her look.

Between their bodies, across the expanse of bare skin, between her raised knees, he penetrated her. Even and unhurried, he fed himself into the mess of her new cunt, marred, swollen, seeping, streaking his cock with blood each time he pulled out of her.

It didn't stop. The more aroused she became, the more she bled and the less she cared—or part of her, anyway—because she was crying. She knew she was crying. She heard her own breath, hitching on the sobs that couldn't quite decide if they were moans or something else.

She wanted to see his face, to get some sense of what was going through his mind, but she couldn't tear her eyes from the frightening spectacle of copulation turned into artful butchery, and her own body and his made into meat, into their constituent parts. Just blood and skin and sweat and meat.

Then she knew why it frightened her, as he repeatedly pushed the trickles of red back into her body: all the risk it carried; all the untouchability of it; all the mad

commitment of covering himself in her blood; all the agonizing desire that anathema could offer.

“Oh, Christ,” she whispered.

The shock of the orgasm took her like a thief, as if it didn't belong to her, as if she'd had her body snatched and put to a purpose she hadn't agreed to. Before she'd stopped twitching, he covered her with his body, dispensing with all his earlier restraint, and fucked her with all the driven ruthlessness of a man who has been somewhere wicked and wants to forget it. He stopped after one last, harsh thrust, rested his forehead on her collarbone, and came, shuddering.

It was hard to know how long they lay like that—long enough that, when he moved off her, the gore had clotted. She hissed as he pulled away from her skin. He gave an uncertain little laugh as if, perhaps, this time he'd gone too far.

It wasn't a desire to assuage his doubts that made her roll onto her side, nestle up against him and fall asleep. It was the need of an animal for shelter after a storm, and the deep, dreamless sleep of a creature that has come to know what it's made of.

The Slow Act of Love

Just as the monsoon rains hit Hue, I visited the secret garden of Doctor Minh Khanh Nguyen. I'd heard about it from a couple of students snarfing *cao lao* by the canal and getting smashed on cheap rice vodka.

"Oh," said the girl, "I can't describe it. It's just too obscene."

Her student boyfriend elbowed her. "Don't be coy. It's horticultural art."

"It's pornography!" She giggled, then pouted theatrically and slapped him on the cheek, rather hard, I thought.

"Where is it? I must see this garden."

"It's over the old Japanese bridge, down the second alley on the left. Then there's a sub alley off that one. It's very hidden."

It was very hidden, and I got lost several times, which meant I had to drink several iced coffees at street stalls. You can't very well ask for directions and not buy something.

By the time I reached the walled villa, the rain clouds were roiling, the wind had picked up, making the thickets of TV aerials rattle on the roofs of the surrounding houses. I was also suffering from a kind of tunnel vision brought on by an excess of caffeine.

The gate was a chipped, sick-green piece of metal set in a high, whitewashed wall. There was no bell, so I knocked on the gate. It reverberated like thunder. I waited. Nothing.

The first fat drops of rain spattered onto the dusty tiles on the street. I knocked again. Nothing. The air smelled chalky and sour from the dust and the build-up of pressure. The overdose of caffeine in my blood made my temples throb.

Fuck this, I thought, which is pretty much what everyone feels like about everything just before the rain starts. I contemplated the sweaty, wet walk to my room, back over the old Japanese bridge that would now be packed with everyone and their dead fish trying to get out of the rain. My stomach rebelled at the thought of the smell. Fuck this, I thought, and pounded at the gate again.

“Doctor Nguyen?” I hollered.

“Patience, patience!” a voice beyond the gate yelled back. It was reedy and emphatic.

Metal grated and squealed and the steel door shifted a little. A face like a dried up apple peered out at me. Its bald head was splotted with melasma. Small eyes like gleaming lychee seeds looked me over.

“What?”

“Doctor Nguyen?”

“Everyone here is called Nguyen.”

“Are you the Doctor Nguyen with the famous garden?”

“Go away. I don’t want any more problems with the Ministry of Culture.”

The rain had started to plummet down in earnest now. I could feel it trickling over my scalp, running down the back of my neck.

“I’m not from the Ministry of Culture. How could I be? I’m a foreigner.”

“Those bastards turn up in all sorts of disguises these days. And I’ve told them: it’s foliage. How can foliage be pornographic?”

“I promise, I’m not from the Ministry of Culture.”

“Well, maybe not. What do you want?”

“I came to see the garden.”

“Come back when it’s not raining,” he said, and the door began to grind closed on its rusty metal runners.

“Please. I don’t live in Hue. I’m just visiting!” I hooked my fingers into the opening, to stop the gate from closing, but it had a momentum of its own. The pain shot through my hand, down my arm, and I screamed. Then suddenly the pressure was gone.

“Stupid woman,” he said. “Obviously not from the Ministry of Culture.”

“No,” I said, cradling my fingers against my chest. “Ow.”

“Let me see. Let me see!” he said, grabbing my wrist and pulling me through the gate and into the small tiled area that fronted the house.

“Don’t. It hurts!” I tried to pull my hand back, but his bony, tiny frame was misleading. He had a strong grip.

“I’m a doctor. Let me see.”

“Oh, I’m bleeding,” I muttered, feeling slightly woozy. It was hard to see through the downpour, but my fingers were dripping blood onto the puddle forming on the tiles.

“Crazy foreigners. It’s lucky you aren’t missing any fingers. Yes, they’re all still attached,” he said, holding my hand out in the rain and inspecting it.

I heard the skittering rip of lightning tear the sky above our heads, and then a deafening clap of thunder. Fuck this, I thought, and fainted.

* * * * *

I woke up on a broken lawn chair, tilting sideways. The sun was out, gleaming on every wet surface, throwing up reflections, off the leaves, off the white-tiled walkway. I shut my eyes against the glare and felt the throb in my hand.

“Ow.”

“Lucky. No broken fingers. I had to put a few stitches in one, but you’ll be fine.”

I cracked my eyes open again, squinting through the tears. Dr. Nguyen was squatting next to me with a stained, chipped cup in his hand.

“Drink this.” The cup rattled on its mismatched saucer and I watched a raindrop from the roof plop into the pale yellow tea. “Come on.”

I took the cup with my good hand and sipped it. It was lukewarm and smelled of chrysanthemum and honey. “Thank you.”

“Take these, too,” he said, rummaging in the pocket of his oversized, grubby shorts and pulling out some pills. He presented them on his outstretched palm. It was calloused and brown. The creases stained darker with ingrained dirt.

“Uh, no thanks. The tea is fine. Thanks for taking care of my fingers.”

What I was really thinking was that I needed to start a course of heavy-duty antibiotics fast. I closed my eyes and tried to remember when I’d had my last tetanus shot. If he was a doctor, I was mistress of the universe. But when I looked down at my throbbing hand, it was neatly bandaged in blindingly white gauze.

“Still want to see my garden?”

“Yes.” I knocked back the last of the tea and put the cup back onto the saucer he was still holding.

He stepped aside and turned, like a tiny half-naked magician. “Take a look.”

Two rows of huge, ornate pots. Growing from each of them, were the strangest, most tortured bonsai trees I’d ever seen. I struggled to get out of the lopsided chair and he caught my arm, and led me down the walkway that bisected his garden.

Each tree had been coaxed, clipped, wired and bent into the shape of couples. It wasn't just the leaves that had been clipped into shape, but the thick, gnarled trunks and branches too.

A woman with her legs around a man's waist, her arms around his neck, her head thrown back into a burst of emerald green, his bent forward, as if nuzzling her neck.

The second, also a scene of ecstasy, but here there were three trunks, three bodies, intertwined, hips joined together, the roots of the miniature figs their tangled legs. Some branches as arms flung out, some curled around the trunk of the other, clinging, on the verge of something.

"This is my favourite," he said, pointing. "It was hard to get the trunks to grow sideways, they kept wanting to spring upwards, but I said, no, no! You're not finished yet."

The two stunted trunks, lay almost horizontal, but bowed. One hunched over the other, growing over her, the arms wrapped around her waist, tiny knots above them, hanging like breasts. Soft green leaves and tiny white flowers clipped into a ball for her head. His arched back, elongated, also flowering.

"How did you begin this?" I asked.

The doctor chuckled. "It wasn't my idea. I wanted to learn the art of bonsai when I retired, and the first pot I got had two figs in it. They just began to grow this way."

"Like this?" I said, astonished, pointing at yet another erotic tableau in bark and leaves.

“Not exactly. But it didn’t seem to matter how much I tried to train them apart, they just wanted to be together, intimately. I couldn’t stop them, so I decided to help them.”

“And then?”

“Well,” he said, shrugging. “You know what it’s like. Desire is like the measles. It spreads. The next plant I got saw what the first one was up to, and that was it.”

“It’s incredible. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Do you think it’s pornography? That’s what the bastards from Ministry of Culture say it is. They’re coming back next week to take them all away.”

I looked around the garden at all the little pots with their tangled, enraptured trees, each growing into an aching slow act of love.

“I don’t know. What will you do after they take them away?”

He tilted his stained head towards the sky and set his jaw. “I’ll just grow some more.”

The Perfect Foreigner

We are all trapped.

Someone, somewhere—it doesn't matter who, tarnished or bright as the sun—stands like a beacon in our memories for the time we got close. Close to what? Just close. That's all I know. Close. Very close.

You might remember it as endless nights of the best sex you ever had. or the only time you wore your own skin comfortably. Or it lingers like immanence, a sense of falling and falling and believing for that one time, that you would be caught.

I remember it like drowning, of being unable to take a breath and not caring. The weight of him, the vastness of him, and his everywhere-ness. Like there was no part of the world that did not bear his fingerprint. All I saw, all I felt, all I knew waited for him to give it sense.

He is dead now, says the email from his wife. She says she found my email address amongst his things and felt she should notify me of his suicide. I don't reply. I can't reply.

What is there to say? Sorry for your loss? I gave him back to you and you lost him? Twice? I offered him up, like Abraham offering Isaac, back to his source, and it could not contain him? I did what I thought was the right thing, but I was wrong? No. I left him the way I found him. Floating between worlds. Angry that they weren't bigger and bolder and on fire.

He taught me the beauty of a compromised existence. The saintliness of shadow. He taught me that hypocrisy was a Western concept and that walking the walk was how selfish people journeyed. He taught me, early on, how to leave him.

He had square hands, nimble hands, like colts ready to bolt. And skin that always smelled like the sea. It was, he said, because his father had been a fisherman, with balls full of saltwater. That he would never be free of the stench of tuna blood. And perhaps that was true. He was the colour of a sun dying on a calm sea.

I met him outside, on the windswept concrete of the Southbank. Smoking in the rain even though, in those days, he could have smoked in the lobby. He said he was enjoying the cool, wet air. The BFI was running a Japanese film series. I never asked, but I assumed he was there being a good representative for the home team.

He was always a good foreigner. Always ready to be charmed and impressed and grateful for the threadbare hospitality of the English, always particular about his suits being neat and quiet and pressed to perfection. The same with his shoes: shiny and tight, squeaking down drab hallways. His hair, clipped into a cap, half an inch from his skull. Its contours trapped light in the evenly distributed steel grey that never changed.

Kaito also taught me to endure a good, hard bite. Halfway between my neck and the slope of my shoulder, where the muscle tightens to stress. He would sit behind me, arms around my waist, press his teeth into my skin and listen to me breathe out the pain. Like a kitten learns to endure its mother's grip, he said. Go limp. I have you and I will not let you go.

He taught me all about pain: its edge, its ache, and its pulsing, insistent voice that speaks into flesh. About how skin parted and knitted back together, how bruises painted the skin, how sweat stained the air. He taught me that a body wasn't an object, it was an act. A ferocious act of being. He taught me to love fear, to lean into its curve, to let it dilate my pupils and make me breathless and wet. He taught me to desire desire. To close my eyes, tilt my head and listen to it sing through the fibres of

the flesh. To eat it like a snake tries to swallow its own tail. Never quite the circle you imagine it to be; always a spiral.

He taught me the dignity of indignity, of the exultant power of facing it down, and the hundred and one inappropriate things with which I might be penetrated. A tube of multivitamins, a pocket watch—he laid his head on my pelvic bone and listened to its tick, the bud of a red tulip. There was nothing, he said, that wasn't worth fucking.

Except for his cock. That, he insisted, was for making children. Once I whined about it, he tied me to the bed and asked me if I wanted a half-breed child. I said I didn't want any child, so he fucked me with the case of his reading glasses.

“See?” he said, afterwards, perching the lenses smeared with my fluids on the tip of his nose. “Stop asking for things you don't really want.”

But I did want him. I thought it mattered. I thought perhaps he saved his cock for his wife, back in Japan. Maybe that was how he managed to make his way through the twilight between my world and his. Keeping to rules he'd never explain to me.

When Kaito got drunk, he would talk about never going back to Japan. About getting divorced and becoming English like Kazuo Ishiguro. As time went by, he did get drunk more often, until I thought that all I needed to say was, “Do it. Be with me.”

That's when I left and went so far I was sure he'd never find me, sure that I had escaped the trap of saying those words. The allure of altering the course of history. Because he'd taught me about duty. Because he'd taught me how to leave him.

Now he's dead, and I'm still trapped. By the memory of being in the skin of that woman who knew him, who learned how to be what I was with him. And I can't get out.

On A Very Dry Afternoon in Early Summer

It was easy to want her, to picture himself pinning her with the weight of his body, feeling her struggle beneath him, spreading her unwilling thighs, forcing his cock into her, trespassing where she no longer wanted him and not caring that she didn't. That part was easy.

All it took was imagining her betrayal; the casual, quotidian emotional butchery people did to each other all the time. No matter how open he'd made himself to her, or how much she'd shown herself to him, or how he'd forced himself to trust her, to risk letting her all the way in, all it took was a change of her heart. Someone she cared for more than she cared for him. She could do it.

It was just as easy to imagine ways to hurt her. Words and acts that would wound her, frighten her, make her feel like she was nothing. Make her regret even contemplating the act of destroying him.

She'd cry and try to reason with him, but he could shut his ears to all that. After all, wasn't this the same woman, the same voice that promised to love him always? The one who swore she'd always belong to him?

As the clock ticked down to the zero hour, he fed the cynic, the bitter, misused monster he kept in the closet.

The hard part was having any confidence that he could translate fantasy into fact. In his fantasy, she was a shell. She looked the same, sounded the same, felt the same, but somehow all attenuated. It would be different, he knew in the flesh.

Harder still was convincing himself that she would ever forgive him, no matter how many assurances she gave him. How could she know herself that well? How

could anyone? If he was to be honest with himself and step into her shoes, he could not say with certainty that he could do the same.

The hardest part of all was believing that he would deserve to be forgiven.

* * * * *

“What percentage of men fantasize about raping a woman?” I had asked.

“Men who rape, or just fantasize about it? There’s a big difference.”

“Men who just fantasize about it.”

He was silent as he thought. “I don’t have a clue. More than anyone’s comfortable admitting, I’d guess.”

“Wild guess?”

He looked up from his desk and shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“Do you fantasize about it?”

“That’s not a fair question.”

I pulled out the chair in front of his desk and sat down. “Why? Because someone raped me?”

“Well, yes. That, and you’re asking in the specific. Do you really want to know the answer?” He moved a neat pile of papers from one side of his desk to the other, uselessly, to do something. “Don’t set a trap for me.”

I pulled up my knees, wrapped my arms around them, and rested my chin.

“It’s not a trap. I swear.”

“Really want an answer? Think. Please, think fucking carefully.”

I did think—a long time. Then I came around his desk, slid into his lap and leaned my head on his shoulder. “I do want to know. Although your reluctance is pretty damn eloquent.”

“Then you’ve got your answer.”

I had my answer. And I felt him loosen his arms, as if waiting for me to get up and leave, but I didn't.

"It's what I keep the tightest leash on. I'd never do it. But I've fantasized about it," he offered.

"Often?"

"Not often, but when I do, it's hot."

"Why's it so hot?"

He jostled me as he shrugged again. "Because it's so wrong."

"Is she some abstract woman or someone you know?"

"Either. Both. Depends on my mood."

I turned in his lap and eyed him. "Me?" He met my gaze but said nothing.

"Don't tell me what you think I want to hear."

He gave me a pained, irritated look and pulled me back against him, but it was gentle, tentative. "Why are you asking this?"

I thought about trying to explain and knew it would make no sense to him. It hardly made sense to me. "Please, just tell me."

He stroked my hair off my forehead. Something I'd only ever seen parents do to children. "Yes."

"Is it violent?"

"A little. Sometimes. Sometimes it's not."

"Do you kill me?"

"What the fuck?" He stiffened, pulled back and stared at me. "Jesus, no."

"Sorry. I just..." I grinned, embarrassed. "I fantasize about all sorts of awful stuff. I assumed everyone does."

Brows furrowed, he looked at me as if I were a disappointingly slow child.
“You wouldn’t be nearly as much fun dead.”

It was an attempt to turn the conversation, to get me to say something silly back. I considered a quip about zombie sex, but resolved to stick my course. “Do I fight?”

He did his best to keep a straight face, but the smile won. “Oh yeah. You fight. You fight hard.”

* * * * *

People describe memory as one long, detailed film, but it’s nothing like that. Sometimes it’s a fairy tale you tell yourself just to knock the past into some kind of shape that will fit in a box so you can store it away. Sometimes, it’s as if you’re telling the story of someone else: an earlier version of you, almost unrecognizable now; a stranger with your face and your name, but alien and broken. Mostly, it’s just a series of tiny moving clips, with sound and colour and smell and feeling. With chunks missing in between, as if someone forgot to hit the record button.

We were sitting at the bottom of the garden at my house, on a very dry afternoon in early summer, just before school let out. I had bruises on my shins from field hockey and was ashamed of them. The faded purples and blues marked the skin of my shins, and I was worried that he’d see them too and think them ugly.

He was so handsome, I kept telling myself to look ahead, look ahead over the terrace wall to the burned bristle of the slopes beyond, so he wouldn’t catch me staring. I felt so lucky. Lucky that he’d noticed me. Lucky that he’d talked to me. Lucky that he’d held my hand and kissed me in the hallway at school. Lucky that he’d offered me a ride home on his bike.

We sat on the stone garden wall, looking down the hillside, drinking iced tea I'd made myself because my parents were out and I wanted to impress him, until he finished his and reached for my hand. None of the boys I'd known had been confident the way he was. On the way home, with the hot, dry, salty air streaming through my hair, he'd reached back and pulled my arm around his waist. And this gesture was just like that one. As if all the limbs in the world belonged to him.

Then we were kissing beside the pool on a pile of faded blue lounge cushions covered in dry eucalyptus leaves, breaking up and prickling under my shoulders and my thighs. He was on top of me, his hips pressing into mine, kneeling my legs apart and it hurt. Like his fingers digging into the nothing swell of my non-existent breast. That's when he kept on kissing me, after I'd stopped. I could smell his spit on my mouth, and his ragged breaths.

He was hurting me, pressing the air out of me, bruising my bony hips with his, yanking the hem of my dress up my body. I didn't feel lucky anymore. And he had ceased to be handsome.

"No. Stop that. It hurts."

"Don't be stupid. You'll like it."

I was crying and trying to push him off, or squirm out from under him. Both at the same time. He was laughing and pushing my legs open with his hand, his fingers in my crotch, nails scratching me as he tried to pull my panties out of the way. The cotton stretched and burned my skin.

I remember sobbing, saying, "I thought you liked me," and knowing then how pathetically immature it sounded, and that he had never liked me. He'd just pretended so he could hurt me, like this.

That—the dreadful sense of my own stupidity, the recognition of my inane hopefulness—that’s what broke me. That’s when I stopped fighting.

I don’t remember how he got his cock inside me. As if some all-powerful deity edited that bit out. All I remember is that I turned my head and looked at the long leaves, like curved, silvery daggers, floating on the surface of the pool’s blue water, and thinking this hurts. It shouldn’t hurt like this. I remember my fistled hands aching. I remember he finished and pulled out of me and tugged my dress down over my hips.

Now all I want to know is that I could not be broken with such appalling ease. I want to know that I would find myself of greater worth. I want to know I’d fight.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, she brought it up at dinner. “Remember what we talked about a while ago? About rape?”

Christ, not this again. What was going on with her? He swallowed and put his fork down carefully. “Fantasy. Rape fantasy.”

“Yes.”

He leaned his elbows on the table, interlaced his fingers, and propped his chin on them. In the years they’d been together, they’d had all sorts of conversations and all sorts of sex. She wasn’t inhibited or unadventurous. There were times when she wanted it rough and he’d been happy to oblige. Then she went through phases of almost unworldly tenderness. He’d always been fairly open about what turned him on, but he knew about her past. And, with that in mind, he’d stayed well away from anything that even hinted at non-consent. He had no idea how to handle her fixation on this particular subject, and it felt like a set up. Like she was looking for something to be upset about. “And you’ve decided I’m a psychopath?”

“You’re not a psychopath,” she said dismissively.

“How do you know?”

“Psychopaths don’t have ethics or empathy.”

“They’re pretty good at faking it, though.”

“So are a lot of politicians. Are they all psychopaths?”

“Possibly,” he said, but he smiled and felt his shoulders unlock. “Look, the fantasies are fantasies. I’m not particularly proud of them, but you asked and I answered truthfully. And you... well, you’ve got some personal history there, so I get that it’s a minefield for you. But everyone has fantasies they’d never act on and...” He stopped, tasting his own defensiveness. “Wait a minute. Why are you bringing this up again?”

She prodded the fish on her plate with her fork, took a sip of wine and swallowed. “I need to know that I’d fight if I got raped again.”

“Are you expecting that to happen anytime soon?” An irrational anger tightened his chest.

“No. But it could. I just want to know. That’s all.”

“You would fight. Take my word for it.”

“I wish I could. But I can’t. I didn’t. You know? I didn’t and, well, it’s bothered me for a long time. He could have done anything. He could have killed me and I would have just let it happen.”

He fought down the hair-trigger rage that flamed up whenever he was forced to confront the fact that some prick had done this to her. He forced himself to speak calmly. “You were young. And frightened. And traumatized.”

She shook her head. “No. You don’t understand. Maybe you can’t. Maybe men just can’t.”

“Don’t...” he almost lost it. This ‘men don’t understand shit’ made him livid. Women didn’t understand either. She had no idea how badly he wanted, if it were remotely possible, to track the cocksucking asswipe down and beat him to death with a blunt object. He took another deep breath, reached for the bottle of wine and refilled her glass. “Look, I’m certainly not going to understand if you don’t explain it.”

“Oh, and this is lubricant?” she said, taking another swig.

He inclined his head and shrugged. “It can’t hurt.”

“Okay.”

“No, wait.” Standing up, he grabbed the wine, and held out his hand. “Come sit with me.”

Nestled up next to him on the sofa, he wrapped an arm around her small shoulders, and resolved to listen without losing his temper. “Now, explain it.”

“It’s not the rape. It’s not really about what he did to me anymore. It hasn’t been for a long, long time.”

“Then?”

“It’s about what I didn’t do. That’s what eats away at me. It does. You have no idea how it does. Every time I think I’m strong, that I won’t take shit, that I take the measure of myself, it comes back to haunt me. It’s robbing me of something important.”

“So, what can I do?”

“I want to know that I’m not that person now,” she muttered.

“Wait a minute.” He moved and cupped her chin in his hand, forcing her to face him. “What are you asking me?”

He noticed then that she hadn’t been sleeping. There were faintly bruised half moons beneath her eyes. Maybe she was about to cry. She didn’t do it often, but when

she did, it distracted him. Part of him felt her pain and the other part licked his lips. She thought this was all about her, but it wasn't. And, if he were honest, he knew what she wanted. It just scared the fuck out of him.

“Ah, you can't say it, can you?” he asked.

“No.”

“Because if you say it, then that changes everything, doesn't it? Then...” he pursed his lips and nodded. “If you ask me to, then it's not rape.”

“Right.”

Her mistake, although he wasn't going to tell her, was sophistry. Consent was more and less than words. She was trying to find logic to fit her needs. This was a game of words, and she'd realize it soon enough. But it was a selfish game.

“Assuming what you are not asking was even possible, has it occurred to you that this might affect me?”

She had the grace to look like the floor had dropped out from under her. She pulled her chin from his grasp and leaned her forehead his shoulder. “Oh.”

“Yeah, I thought so.” He gave her a while to think that one through.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“Accepted. But just to be crystal clear: what happens if I do? If I agree to go down this road with you, if I do what you won't ask me to do, what will that make me? How real is real? Where's the safe word? Where are your limits? Where the fuck are mine?” He could feel the anger, the unfairness of the situation gnaw at his innards. Breathing deep, he went on: “Because, honestly, I have no idea. What if I can't stand what I find out about myself while you're busy finding how empowered you are?”

She groaned against his shirt. “Jesus, okay. Forget it.”

What he couldn't find a way to tell her was that she'd unwittingly stuck her finger into a huge, festering wound. Part of him did indeed want to know just how cruel he had the capacity to be, where he would draw the line and whether what he fantasized about would exile him, irredeemably, from his own sense of humanity. But he'd lived with that puzzle for years. He'd settled into a bearable truce with his uglier urges. There were things you just didn't bring into the light. And answers you could forgo. For all his darkness, one doubt burned. Not as containable as any of others.

"Here's what worries me most: after you've found out what a courageous, fighting, spitting, biting little firebrand you are, after you put up a brave but ultimately useless defense, because—make no mistake—no matter how hard you fight me I will have you, how are we going to find our way back from that?"

For a long time, she didn't answer him. Finally, she pulled herself apart from him and sat forward, nodding as if she'd settled on something in her own mind. "And those things, they're all things you'd rather not know."

"I didn't say that."

* * * * *

Torn between fear and determination, her glances are furtive, hyper-vigilant. Her control slips. Her smile fails as the muscles draw it out in uneven little jerks. It's a stuttered petition of a smile. A slightly manic, are-we-really-going-to-jump-off-this-cliff smile.

It's so easy to see her mind's gears churning, gripping, catching, and slipping. Her pulse is a moth trapped beneath the skin under her jaw, caged in taut tendon. But she's here, despite her misgivings. And jumping off this particular cliff was more her idea as his.

"It's today, right?" she asks.

“Yes. Today.”

“Has it started yet?”

“Not yet.” He lies, watching the tension leave her posture.

In a way, it started the moment she began to talk about it. The moment he understood exactly what she was asking. He’s been chewing on time for days.

She wants it neat and clean. The uncertainty disorients her, refuses her a sense of order, a notion of what to expect and how to plan for it. This is a part of her she rarely shows: her equilibrium askew, her capacity to analyze and rationalize—so much a part of how she makes sense of the world—temporarily disabled.

They have agreed to suspend disbelief and enter into a fiction. They’ve given each other formal assurances of unconditional forgiveness. But he can’t, for all her promises, truly trust her. In a way, that’s part of the thrill—the not being sure. The risk of everything they have. If it blows up, it will blow up big.

“Then I’m going to sit down outside and do a bit of editing.”

“You do that. I’ve got some things to finish up here.”

With the tips of her fingers, she combs through the hair at his temple and kisses his forehead. Her skin gives off the scent of the soap she uses. He allows the gesture—that familiar act of affection—to curdle into patronizing condescension. He takes umbrage and it tastes sharp and sweet.

Still, he forces himself to respond as he always does, with a playful slap on her ass. Perhaps not quite as gentle as usual but, if she feels the sting of it, she doesn’t let on.

He swivels his study chair to watch her pace back down the shadowed hallway on bare feet. Her shoulder blades tenting the white ribbed tank top, her dark grey

jogging pants loose on her hips, her hair plaited into a careless braid. It sways, a counterpoint.

“Whore.” He forms the word without speaking it.

He’s not going to give her the comfort of choosing the time or the place. Nor the dignity of what state she’s in when he takes her. He’s going to rob her of all of that and more.

* * * * *

The day promises to be hot, but the air still holds the cool tang of earlier, verdant shadows. As hard as I try to concentrate on the manuscript in front of me, the words squirm and slip like flatworms in silt. I make inane notations, cross them out, rewrite, recross them, and glance up at the house for the fifth time.

There are questions I haven’t had the courage to ask him for dread of the answers. For fear he will read me too well and give me the answers he believes I want. There is a continuum of cruelty, from the petty to the murderous. I don’t know his limits. Or my own.

Everyone has ghosts. He has many. I only a few, but they are debilitating things. They gnaw at the stuff I think I’m made of. They despoil all the triumph of my dreams and poison my victories.

Fear fascinates me. Once terror locked me, turned me into an absence, like Lot’s Wife, into a pillar of salt. And for years, each time I have glanced over the shoulder of memory, it did the same. Where had the animal inside me gone? The instinct to protect myself evaporated in a moment. My ability to think with clarity, to understand what was unfolding, to strategize, all gone. Even the most basic impulse to push, to bite, to kick, to fight, to curse deserted me. I’d been a victim and, ever since, I’ve lived with the specter that I could be one again, in the blink of an eye.

I've spent my life seeking out fear before it found me and rode it like a horse on a tight rein. Down dark alleys, in the bad parts of town, in cholera camps and street riots and the close, sweat-scented bedrooms of strangers. In the harness of a parachute and at the end of a bungee cord. Whatever it was, if it scared me, I set my jaw and walked straight towards it. Sometimes stupidly, sometimes with calculated appraisal of the risks, I gauged the risks, set out the parameters, and walked into the arms of lovers who would press the edge of a blade to my cheek, who would tie me down and show me what scary looked like.

Perhaps because of all that, I never again ran into a man who breached the boundaries I laid down. Never met anyone who did not screech to a dead halt at the utterance of the word no.

I glance up at the house again; the windows of his study are open. There's music coming from them. Something I don't recognize.

Although he has never crossed my lines, he pushed at them in as many ways as there were opportunities. He's cajoled, persuaded and manipulated me right to the edge of them. Maybe on him I smelled the capacity to hear the word and not to heed it. Maybe that's why I chose him, and why I have stayed.

* * * * *

The sharp tug on my braid snaps my neck back. My hands, soapy from the water in the sink, grasp, scabble and slip at the edge of the counter. The floor is damp in places and my bare feet slide on the tiles.

The forearm that bars my neck seems thicker than his. It cuts off my cry midstream and pulls me back against his body. The force of it almost lifts me off the ground. I try to prise his arm away but only end up scratching at the skin of my own neck. Had I been firmly on my feet, I could connect my heel to his shin, but I've got

no balance, no leverage, and I hit nothing. It feels just like before, even if it's entirely different. I'm a doll. I'm dumb, helpless meat.

"Come on," he says, moving his arm off my windpipe, until the air I don't even realize I've been trying to gulp down enters my lungs. "Say it."

Say what? The words don't register. What is it he wants me to say? But I know. Of course, I know. Fingers dig into the hollows at my cheeks, squeezing until the pain brings tears to my eyes. "Say it and let's get to it."

"No." The word's just a whisper but it doesn't matter. There, I've said it.

"Again."

"No!" I say louder, trying to shake my head loose of the awful pressure.

"Once more, just for the record."

"No."

He releases my jaw, only to plant a stinging slap on the side of my cheek.

"That's my girl."

The slap isn't hard, but it staggers me. I want to turn around and tell him that it wasn't like this at all, that I need to explain how it was so he'll understand. But he's lowers me back onto my feet and, before I have a chance, he's got my hair again, right by the roots, and he's dragging me through the kitchen and down the hall. I have to stumble-run to keep up, to stop him from pulling it out.

Pure fear. Bright, white, blinding, muscle priming fear. This is a familiar feeling. I know how to ride this.

Bracing for the pull and the pain, feet wide apart, hands flat to the wall, I stop. Even so, it takes him a pace or two to notice. He rears on me, and I can hardly recognize him. The anger I'm expecting to see isn't there. Instead, it's disdain—cold and hard and something else—perhaps contempt.

“You want it here?” he says, planting a palm on my chest and slamming me to the wall with a single hard shove. I crane my neck to look at him. He smirks. “Think I’m going to let you dictate anything to me? Think you can just turn me on and off with a switch? Who the fuck do you think I am?”

With careful deliberation, I edge my hands between our chests and shove hard with all my might, but the angle’s not good. I can’t put any muscle into it. He doesn’t budge an inch.

“Jesus Christ. That’s pathetic. That’s so fucking pathetic it’s almost endearing.”

“Fuck you,” I say, bringing up my knee between his legs. But he twists and it doesn’t connect with his balls. He just grunts as I hit his thigh.

“That... is not endearing. And now you’ve pissed me off.” His hand closes around my upper arm so tight I hiss. “Either you’re going to move or I’m going to move you. That much is up to you. The rest is not.”

But I’m not really listening now. I swing at his face with my one free hand. And miss.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, slapping my fist away. He stoops, grabs me around the waist with one arm, and hefts me onto his shoulder.

“Motherfucker.” It comes out as a wheeze, because I’m upside down and can’t breathe properly with his shoulder in my gut. I feel the blood draining into my face, the jolt of every step he takes. And, inanely, notice a worn patch on the back pocket of his jeans.

“Please, put me down,” I croak.

“Please put me down,” he echoes back in a falsetto.

Even as I try to kick my legs I know how cartoonish it looks. He's got one arm around my thighs and the kicks do nothing.

"Really, I mean it. I can't breathe. Put me the fuck down."

"Really, I mean it. I really, really mean it!" He uses a ridiculous, high-pitched whine as sarcasm.

The fear has ebbed and anger has replaced it. I can tell he's got no destination in mind; he's carrying me around like this because he knows I'll hate it. Balling my fist, I take careful aim, and slam it down as hard as my position will allow, on his left kidney. There is no immediate reaction. Then he gasps and for a moment, I think he's going to drop me.

"You fucking cunt."

* * * * *

As the pain lanced through him, he thought he might drop her. But he breathed into the pain and felt it ebb. Fuck this shit. He needed to get her off his back and onto hers. Just as he felt her move on his shoulder to take another swing at him, he flipped her off him, and slammed her down on their bed.

He hadn't intended to use the bedroom. Something in the back of his mind warned him to do it elsewhere, to leave that particular room untainted by this. Fuck it. She wanted to play? He'd play. He'd play just as hard and mean as she wanted. Harder, meaner. And then she'd know what it meant to see everything crash and burn.

The adrenalin streamed through his veins, cut through his muscles like blades, hum in his chest. He straddled her thighs and caught her flailing arms by the wrists. First one, then the other, and pulled them to her chest. She had little bones, little wrists. They fit so perfectly in one hand as he held them down between her breasts.

Her face had been red, but the colour was draining from it now. She was talking to him, swearing at him, bucking her hips beneath him, but all of that was just so much noise. He was looking at the tears at the corners of her eyes, just threatening to spill, the tight tendons on her slender neck, the swell and jiggle of her breasts as she took another breath to fire more invective at him. He was looking at one perfect, rounded curve of her shoulder. Then down at where her shirt had worked its way up one side of her torso. The exposed skin unmarked and bare, soft there, in the shallow valley between her hipbone and the swell of her belly. Through all the noise, the screeching and jostling and kicking and crying, that's all he wanted. That place. To sink his teeth into it and never unlock his jaw again.

His skin. His, no matter what she said, no matter how she felt. His skin and he would push inside it and own it. He would teach her that it belonged to him; that her mouth and her eyes and her tears and her voice and her hands and her cunt and every fucking breath she took was his.

His cock throbbed. His balls tightened. As if all he had to do to own the whole fucking world was to push through the maddening, crooked, ugly veil of it, groin first. And there would be rest for his soul on the other side. But first, he had to get there.

“I hate it when you wear pants. Skirts are so much easier. You wear this shit just to piss me off.”

* * * * *

It would be so easy to give in, to go limp and pliant and get it over with. I look up at him, and wonder why I'm doing this? I love him. How could I ever have imagined he could be a stranger to me? What is all this pretending going to prove? That he can wear a mask? That I can convince myself, for five minutes, that I don't want to have sex with him?

When he hooks the fingers of his free hand into the waistband of my track pants, and starts tugging them down, I have to stop myself from raising my hips. Looking down his body to his crotch, I can see he's hard. I can't help myself, I smile.

He stops trying to work my pants down and backhands me so hard that, for a moment, my vision goes dark. Then the phosphenes invade it and sparkles interrupt the lines of everything I can see. It's not the pain I feel first, it's the taste of metal in my mouth. Blood from where my teeth have cut into my cheek.

"Fuck." It's all I can get out, because my throat has closed up and I have to work to take a breath.

"Don't you fucking look at me that way. Don't you fucking dare." His face is inches from mine and his hand's around my throat. "Don't you eye my junk and laugh, bitch."

He's let go of my wrists, but they're trapped between us, and the hand that's jerking my pants down my thighs is fighting the elastic, doggedly, taking my underwear with it.

"You're just like every other loser whore who thinks there's not a man on earth who can't be led around by his dick," he growls, "Don't you? Don't you?" The hand around my throat shakes it, slamming my head back into the mattress.

"I..."

"Shut the fuck up, you lying piece of shit. You manipulative little cunt." His grip tightens until I feel the blood thudding against my eardrums. "That's what you think and I know it. I've always known it."

"No," I rasp, worming my hands free, clutching at his arm. "That's not true. Stop it."

“Don’t even bother, bitch.” He spits the word and his saliva showers my face.

“You know what I think?”

Full, flaming panic hits me. I can’t get a proper breath and I can’t think of how to get one. I just claw at his arm, at his wrist, trying to get some air. And I can feel his other hand between us, working the buttons of his jeans.

“I think the simplest way to get some is just to wait until you black out. Then I don’t have to put up with any more of your poisonous bullshit. What do you think?”

My lungs are burning, my chest heaving and heaving to take in nothing, and just as my vision starts to darken at the edges and I’m positive I’m going to die, he lets go.

“Jesus Christ,” I splutter, wheezing and sobbing. “Jesus fucking Christ, stop it.”

“Aw, come on baby,” he says, tapping my face, then trapping my jaw. “Aren’t you going to show me any love at all? Kiss me like you mean it.”

He presses his mouth against mine. Wet against my closed lips. He’s gotten his jeans off his hips and down his thighs because his skin is burning hot against mine, legs between mine, spreading them as far as the rucked down track pants will allow.

I can’t let him do this. I squirm sideways, trying to roll, but he’s got almost one hundred pounds on me. And all I can think is, I can’t let him fuck me like this. I’m not that person he thinks he’s going to fuck. I can’t let him into me with that vision of me in his head.

Parting my lips, as if I’m going to kiss him back, I catch his bottom lip between my teeth, and I bite down, hard. He jerks back his head, and I feel his lip tear before it slips free.

“Fuck. You bitch.”

His hand is between us, trying to guide his cock into me. He misses and jabs himself into the crook of my leg. But now I hardly care. I’m screaming in his face and tearing at his hair, clawing at his shoulder. I can taste his blood in my mouth and I just want more.

I’m fighting and yelling and it doesn’t stop until I feel him finally angle his hips and try to thrust into me.

It’s as if all my memory’s edits are gone. In that moment, I remember exactly what it felt like all those years ago. Those first two or three sharp, impossible thrusts when I was sure he was going to rip my cunt to shreds and then, as if my body decides to save me from my own best intentions, it floods itself, opens and he penetrates me.

It hurts, just like it did then, and, just like then, I turn my head to the side and stare at the chest of drawers below the window, then up, out at the sky beyond. The cartoon puffy clouds comic against the bluest of skies. And I cry.

* * * * *

He felt it, when she gave in. It was like a blind being drawn down. It leached the adrenalin from his body, and shattered every insane bit of triumph he’d felt the second before. She’d turned her face aside. She was staring into nothing.

He cupped her face and pulled it towards him. “You fought.”

Face slick with tears, she stared at him. He moved inside her and pressed his lips to her cheek, feeling the salt sting the cut on his lip. It left a bloody smear on her skin. “You fought damn hard.”

“Did I?” she said vacantly.

“Yeah. Yeah, you did.”

Part of him wanted to stop. To pull out of her and wrap her in his arms because she'd found out what she needed to know, and it was over. But part of him couldn't bear the thought of not being inside her. All the bitterness and contempt was gone, but not the raw imperative to feel her wrapped around his cock.

"Did you mean it?"

"What?" he panted, sliding his arms under her; one across her back and the other at the base of her spine, feeling her hips shift as he hilted himself.

"That I'm manipulative and a whore, all those things. As if you didn't even know who I was."

He wasn't fucking her hard, but it didn't seem to matter. He was so close to coming he could hardly think in words. "I know who you are, love."

"Promise?" She slid her arms around his waist, over his lower back, palms flattened over the top of his ass cheeks.

He felt her arch her hips in that way that made it just so much sweeter, so much easier to fill her, and felt her inner muscles close around him. Lowering his head, burying it in the crook of her neck, he promised. And came.

* * * * *

After, he pulls the covers up over us, and lies on his side with me pulled tight against him. I sob and he lets me. Silent the whole time, as if he thinks it's something I need to purge, and perhaps he's right.

"Want me to leave you alone for a while?" he offers.

"No. Please. No," I say, twining my arms through his and anchoring them around me. He expels a breath so long and deep I think he's been holding it forever.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think I am."

“Will you look at me?”

“Yes, of course,” I say, and roll in his arms to face him. The truth is I’m scared to see any hint of the contempt and disgust I saw in his face earlier, but I meet his eyes, because I’m me, and I have to know. “Are you okay?”

He blinks and then frowns. “I’m not sure.”

“Why?”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Yes.” But perhaps I say it too fast, because he’s still searching my face, still trying to find something—I’m not sure what—in my eyes. And it’s that searching that makes me think that, at least most of the time, he doesn’t really think those awful things he accused me of. “I forgive you. Do you forgive me?”

“For what?”

“For all this. And for your lip. It looks nasty.”

He runs the tip of his tongue across in and chuckles. “I’ve had worse. Kiss me.”

“Ow, are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

So I do. Despite all the crying, and the screaming and the fear, it’s that kiss that tells me that everything is going to be okay.

Different, perhaps, but okay.

Not One Before The Other *

Emily let the tiny, clothbound book fall open in her hands. Like a woman spreading her legs, it offered up its unique scent. Beneath the musty, sweet smell that all old books have, this one surrendered hints of pine resin, tobacco and the tart creaminess of baby's milk. Eyes closed, she brought the open tome up to her face and inhaled it again, more deeply, then looked at the title page.

On the left was an ornate engraving, a portrait of Sir Francis Bacon. On the right, legible through a gossamer thin sheet of onionskin, which whispered a rustle as she drew it aside with one moist fingertip, was the name of the work: *The Comedy of Errors*, Cambridge, At the University Press, 1922.

A suitable offering. Not the best she'd ever found, but not the worst either. Better than the bag of Haribo jelly worms and the tattered retro paperback copy of Dr. No. That was before she'd become adept at reading Gabriel's understated reactions. He threw a lot of her offerings out the minute she left his shop, she knew.

* * * * *

On the bus, two seats ahead of Emily, a couple bickered. The tall handsome Asian man had grown a mustache for Movember, and his girlfriend or wife with hair dyed a gorgeous cherry red—girlfriend, she guessed—didn't like the feel of it when he kissed her. It made her nostalgic. She'd had those kind of fights. Too long ago to remember what they'd been about. Silly things. The things you fight about when you know someone loves you.

Emily had made this journey once a week for ten years. As the bus rounded Hyde Park corner, the dread came on as it always did. Perhaps he wouldn't be there? Sometimes he closed his small framing shop and went home early. She could never

know if her journey would be a wasted one. She'd never had a phone number for him, and he never called her. Then the next week, he'd be there and it was as if nothing had happened.

“Why can't you just call me and let me know you won't be there?”

“Life gets in the way, love. I get busy and forget. My ADD is terrible, you know,” said Gabriel with a charming smirk.

He didn't have ADD. Emily had no choice but to accept the lie. He didn't like having to answer to her, or to anyone. It was just the way he was. And, if she didn't like it, she could always stop coming to see him.

He hadn't always been that way. Early in their relationship, he'd been eager to see her. She'd walk into his little shop, and he'd look up from his work and beam. He'd pull her to him and his kisses always tasted of desire and pain and rage. The churning chaos of him was hot and bitter on her tongue. She had learned who he was by the taste of his saliva. As if he had been angry that he wanted her, but wanted her all the same.

In those days, they talked for hours and hours. He'd told her how broken he was: by his recently failed love affair, by his terrible, dark childhood. As he touched her, as he kissed her, those things seeped into her skin, then under it into her bloodstream. And she swore to herself, to him, that she'd never hurt him like any of the other people in his life had done. He had been cruel at times, back then.

Dismissive and curt.

“You're just like all the other women I've known. Selfish, grasping bitches, all of you.”

“No. That's not me,” she protested through the sting of his words. “I'm a lot of things, but I'm not that. I'm me. You know me.”

“I’ve had a fuck of a week, Emily. I’m mean and I’m cold right now. You should go.”

But she hadn’t gone. Because she understood. She loved him and being with him, even in his darkest moods, seemed better than being without him. Time and a consistency of affection, Emily reasoned, were what it would take to make him feel safe with her.

“If you’re not going to leave, then I will,” he said. And he did, walking out of his own shop, slamming the door behind him. She had sat there for an hour after he’d left, like a particularly stupid bulldog, trying to decide if she had done the right thing and puzzling over how to lock the shop up when she left so it wouldn’t get robbed. Eventually she found a set of keys, locked up and slipped them through the letterbox.

Raindrops chased each other down the bus window, splaying the taillights of the traffic ahead. Safety was not what he had wanted or needed. Perhaps, in some part of his mind, he knew she was good for him, but who ever really wants what’s good for them? As the years went by, nothing progressed. After she got the courage to ask him out and he’d deflected her invitations over and over, or simply ignored them, she came to understand that she’d made a terrible mistake. Gabriel might feel affection for her, but her inability to be the selfish, grasping bitch he had accused her of being guaranteed that he would never be with her. Not really.

She should have stopped then. When it was clear what he needed and what she could not be. Still, she made pathetic excuses for herself. Rationalized and forged absurd and impossible futures in which he tired of fucking women he mistrusted and didn’t even like. But it never happened. Emily wondered if, perhaps, Gabriel needed to fuck women and break their hearts fast, like a series of revenge attacks to punish

the whole gender for having the same sex organs as the few true monsters who'd hurt him so early and so profoundly.

As the years went by, it seemed as if she had figured right. The friendlier and more unguarded he became with her, the less he touched her, the less they kissed, the more lighthearted the flirting grew. These days, they talked about cooking and cats.

The traffic was terrible along Oxford Street. Emily checked her mobile for the message she knew he had not sent. Gabriel might not be the mentally healthiest person on earth, but she was far worse. Because she kept making the journey. She kept checking her phone. She kept turning up knowing, with blinding certainty, that he was never going to love her the way she loved him. She romanticized her feelings, framing them as some act of sacrificial chivalry; then she spent the rest of the day despising herself for being delusional.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to stay away. It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to reorient her feelings and place them firmly in the realm of friendship. The year before, with some encouragement from a girlfriend, she had attempted to convince herself that all she needed was to meet someone else. There were lots of wonderful men out there. Men who would want her—really want her. And it turned out there were. Emily ended up in a hotel room with a perfectly nice, perfectly attractive man named Geoff. She'd let him fuck her six ways from Sunday. But no matter how hard she tried, she felt absolutely nothing. It took all her self-control to wait until she heard his breath slow into sleep before she dressed quietly, slipped out of the room, called the elevator and vomited heartily into the ceramic planter to the left of it.

Most of the time, she blithely lied to herself. When she didn't have the energy for that, she admitted her addiction and slid into days of numbed depression. Days when it seemed it was not possible to sleep enough to assuage the terrible need for

him or heal the appalling rawness she felt. As if she were walking around the city with her skin reversed; with the meat and the nerves and the tendons facing outwards.

The bus stopped and the doors gasped open at Holborn. It was only two in the afternoon, but already the time of year and the rain had turned the light to a pale, aqueous mauve and the air was heavy with a cold, diesel-scented mist. Emily plunged her hand into her purse in a frantic and unnecessary effort to assure herself she hadn't forgotten her offering at home. The slim, oilskin covered book was there, as she knew it would be.

Her mobile rang as she stood waiting at the lights. For a moment her stomach clenched and adrenalin surged through her veins, but even before she looked at the caller ID, she knew it wasn't Gabriel. It was never Gabriel.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Emily? Emily is it?"

"Yes."

"I got your name from a colleague of mine. He said you design wonderful websites. We'd very much like to talk to you about designing one for us."

"Oh," she said, flustered, eyes firmly fixed on the blinking green man on the crosswalk lamppost. She turned right and picked up her pace. "Um, that would be great. Can I call you back in a about an hour? I'm just on my way to meet..." she hesitated, "a client."

"Sure. That would be fine. We need some print work done, too," said the man on the phone. "You can do that as well, can't you?"

"Yes, of course. I'll call you back."

"Great. My number is..."

She was less than a block from Gabriel's shop, straining through the gloom to see if the lights were on inside. Scared he'd closed up early and, at the same time, dreading the tinny ring of the bell above the door. The more she heard that little tinkle, the more she was sure it was a chime of derision. Absently, she switched off her mobile, dropped it back into her purse and stepped off the curb of the small street.

* * * * *

The car was one of those four-wheel drives designed for country roads. It caught her at the hips, lifting her into the air until she came down on the bonnet, crushing her ribs. It wasn't like the way they show it in films. It was faster than that.

As she lay on the rough road surface, unable to move, Emily looked up at a sky the colour of sleep and hoped the book hadn't gotten wet. Even as the thought took her, she knew it was pathetic. A crushing pressure bore down on her chest, and it bubbled as she tried to breathe. She coughed. Something broke and sent a shower of bloody saliva up into the cold air and spattered back down onto her face. There were voices around her. Panicked voices—she could hear them—but they were just so many vowels and consonants strung together. All she could think of was Gabriel, who was never going to change the way he felt. Never going to love her in the way men are supposed to love women. Never going to wake with his arms around her. Never fuck her to sleep. Never let her taste his sweat. Never feel her erect nipples pressing against his back. People weren't supposed to think about sex when they were dying. She was never going to taste the first few drops of precum on his cock. Never bite into the tendons at his neck. Never feel the roughness of his stubble on her inner thighs. Never wrap her legs around his hips and thrust upwards. Never smell the salt on the palm of his hand. How odd that now those were the things that hurt. More than the legs she could not move, more than the breath she could not take, more than the

dark sky getting darker. She closed her eyes and tried, instead, to feel the pain in her body.

Ten years, she thought, is enough.

A Little Prick

I sat up amid the swaddle of bedding in the berth and rolled up the sleeve of my cotton nightdress, waiting in a tangle of fear and anticipation, hating the idea of having a piece of metal stuck in my arm and yet bearing the pathetic hope that the medicine would make me feel instantly better. As the minutes ticked by and the ship continued to roll, always it seemed in the opposite direction to both my head and my stomach, the idea of the needle changed from frightening to benevolent and then to a mythical instrument of deliverance. My desire to feel its prick, to see it slide beneath the surface of my skin grew in proportion to the misery of my nausea.

To my twelve-year old eyes, the ship's doctor was a god. Austere and handsome and uniformed in a crisp white shirt with gold on the epaulettes, he had watery blue eyes and sandy blond hair that was going grey just in front of his ears. He entered the cabin, requisite stethoscope dangling from his neck, carrying the sort of bag borne by doctors in really old films. He was so perfectly doctorish and he was going to cure me.

"I hear there's a very sick little girl in this cabin," he said, closing the door behind him.

For a moment, I thought the seasickness had gone. "I'm not a little girl," I said. "I'm almost thirteen."

"Oh, pardon me," he said, putting his bag down and unlatching it. He glanced back at me and smiled. "A very sick young lady."

The nausea came back just in time to swish and break against the wave that was tilting the ship in the other direction. I just nodded, worried that if I opened my mouth, there'd be vomit instead of words.

The wrapped syringe he took out of his bag looked small and well meaning. So did the little bottle of clear liquid he placed on the lipped dressing table. It shifted slightly as the ship rolled again.

“I can confidently guarantee that you're going to feel much better in less than ten minutes.” The doctor tore the wrapper off the syringe and uncapped it. Standing with his feet apart, he held it up to the light as he pushed the little needle into the soft pink rubber top of the bottle and drew out the clear liquid.

Ten minutes. I pushed up my sleeve. How long is ten minutes? I could die in ten minutes. Ten minutes seemed ten years too long.

A tiny spurt of liquid erupted from the tip of the needle and he placed it, with a plink, into a little metal tray. Back in his black bag, he rummaged around and pulled out a little foil square, which he ripped open. I could smell the sharp sting of alcohol, like a soothing promise, and yanked my sleeve up higher, over my shoulder.

The ship's doctor tilted his head and gave me a consolatory smile. “No, I’m afraid this one doesn't go in your arm. Please lie down on your side and face the wall.”

Maybe I wouldn't have been struck dumb in horror had he been uglier, or a lot older, or wearing a white coat, or if I'd been in a doctor's office, or if I'd had the foresight to wear undies under my nightgown.

“Go on, lie down,” he prompted.

Heart racing and my stomach knotting, I slid back down into the berth, rolled on my side, and stared at the mute, semi-gloss bulkhead.

“That’s a good girl.”

He pulled the covers down with what I imagine now was utter dispassion. But trapped in a slow, stately ritual of monstrous humiliation, I lay frozen, unbreathing as he drew up the hem of my nightgown with embroidered strawberries on it. I felt his hand on my thigh, warm as took the fabric with it, baring me in a terrible unhurriedness. Up over my hip. The coolness of the air against my butt was my only measure of exactly how horribly naked I was under that nightie.

In fairness to the doctor, he was probably doing all of this with as much efficient speed as possible in consideration of the 300 other upchucking passengers he had yet to see, but to me, stars were born, exploded, and became red dwarfs over the course of my modesty’s total annihilation.

“Now,” he said, swabbing the upper part of my left butt cheek with the chill alcohol swab, “You’re going to feel a little prick. Just a little one.”

It was the faceless voice, bored and cold and topped with the cherry of superficial optimism, which would, in later years, send my thigh muscles into clenched quivers. It was the admonition to lie-completely-still-please that would bring the blood to my chest and cheeks and turn my nipples into hard little beads of need. But, most of all, it was that moment when the needle dimpled my flesh, just before it breached skin, that would forever remain the faithful source of my most productive masturbatory fantasy.

In that creaking, rolling room, blinded by a vista of plain white wall, still as a corpse, I felt the needle push into my flesh and, even before I felt the chill liquid seep into my body, I gasped, pressed my balled fists between my legs, and shuddered

through my first and most titanic orgasm. I twitched, gasped again, and felt the stinging slide of needle sinking into the meat of me. I shook and spasmed with a violence that obliterated the needle's ache.

The doctor said nothing. I said nothing. He withdrew the needle, drew my nightgown down over my nakedness and pulled the up the bedclothes.

I was still staring at the white wall when I heard the cabin door close gently. The nausea was gone.

The next day, even though the sea had calmed, and the ship had stopped rolling, and even though I had plowed through an adult-sized breakfast, I told my grandmother how sick I felt again. And again, she called the ship's doctor, but an elderly nurse came instead.

Veiled Girl With Lute

Standing at her door in the grey-green evening light, he smells of ozone and sweat. Rain has plastered his hair to his face, his t-shirt and his pants to his body. He blinks the drops from his eyelashes.

Nathaniel arrives burdened with rage and desire in equal measure. The combustible mixture plays in iridescent patterns across his rain-slicked face.

How many miles has he run in an effort to expend the need that is consuming him? She knows the torturous route he's taken in a conscious effort not to end up here, at her door.

Were she a truly good woman she'd send him home to blaze in a solitary conflagration. Because, no matter how unbearable he believes it to be in this moment, it will burn itself out in his airless solitude. If she lets him in he will, despite her complicity, leave convinced he has added to the mountain of trespasses he already carries.

She steps aside and motions him in, feels the heat coming off his skin as he brushes past her. This is no measured thing, no barbarous pastime made harmless by consent.

His hand flashes out to seize the hair at the nape of her neck with uncanny precision. He drags her to him. Kisses her with a deliberate brutality. Her lip splits on the corner of his tooth. Livid and instinctual fear pumps billows of adrenalin into her bloodstream. The most primitive part of her brain urges her to either fight or fly but the gravity well of his desire makes flight unthinkable, and experience has taught her that fighting leads to darker places.

None of those things, however, are the reasons she lets him in or allows him do the things he does to her. To her shame and incomprehension, it is the ugly ache between her legs. The rush squeezes her throat closed. She cannot bring herself to ask him to come to her, but when he does, she cannot turn him away.

* * * * *

The first time they'd met it was here, at her door. He arrived as an expert in something quite different.

The small porcelain figure of a veiled woman playing a lute stood on her deep windowsill; it seemed the safest place to keep the arcane and, to her eyes, gaudy piece of antique frippery. Bequeathed to her by a recently deceased and not particularly beloved uncle, the solicitor representing the executors had suggested that, should she not care to keep it, they could arrange for someone to come and give her a valuation for auction. Having no tolerance at all for knickknacks, she accepted their offer.

She had expected someone small and delicate in a hand knitted sweater with wire-rimmed glasses. The man who arrived three days later was much bigger, dark, and suited.

"Nathaniel Bennett. I'm here on behalf of Taylor and Lyons," he said. He had a worn sort of grammar school accent, with a hint of Belfast in it.

When she led him into the living room and showed him the figure, he picked it up confidently but with focused care in one enormous hand. These weren't the hands of a porcelain expert. They would have looked more at home on a builder or a gardener. He upended the piece, and examined the blue marks on the base: a pair of crossed swords and single blurred dot. He ran his thumbnail over the rough outer edge of the base and made a soft noise in his throat.

"You have a very nice piece of porcelain here, Ms..."

“Gennie.”

He turned the figure upright and, stepping a little closer to the recessed window, examined the form in the natural light. Made another small noise, and put the piece back on the sill but did not release it.

“You don’t have any pets, do you?”

“A cat, why?”

“Then I wouldn’t leave it here in the open,” he said, withdrawing his hand and stepping back in a manner that seemed curiously formal.

She eyed the figure again and shrugged.

“Can we sit?” he asked.

“Sure. Of course,” she said, shoving a pile of books off the sofa and onto the floor.

Despite his size, he was fastidious in the way he sat down, pinching the thighs of his suit trousers and hitching them a fraction to save the crease at the knee. The armchair was similarly piled with books so Gennie took a seat on the floor. Then, suddenly remembering her manners, offered him some tea.

“That’s not necessary.” He regarded her in silence for a while.

“Okay, so... give me the news,” she said, unaccountably nervous.

“It’s a piece of Meissen. Very fine. Modeled by Kandler. In about 1743, I believe.”

“That means very little to me, Mr. Bennett.”

“So I see. Don’t leave it where your cat can knock it over. That would be a great pity.”

She looked up at the figure and then around the room, thinking of somewhere else she could store it for the present. In a drawer, somewhere, perhaps. The sideboard cabinet?

“Alright. So... Do you think anyone would want it?”

He sat back, interlaced his hands in his lap and peered up at the ceiling. “I imagine there would be many people who want it. It’s rare. In perfect condition. Museum quality. German 18th Century porcelain is not fetching as much as it used to at auction these days, but there’s always a market for the best pieces.”

“Oh,” she said, unable to think of what else to say.

“I think it would fetch about £5,000 at auction. But if you were to keep it, I’d insure it for a good deal more than that.”

Gennie was stunned. “£5,000?” That was no small sum to her. She wasn’t impoverished. Her work at the institute paid her some and the odd editing job brought in a little more, but this was an unexpected windfall. “I had no idea.”

“There are, of course, private collectors. That would save you the auction fees.” He hesitated for a moment. “I could ask around, if you like.”

“Would it make much of a difference?”

He shrugged. It was a tense, irritable gesture and showed up the tendons that stretched from his jaw down his neck. Handsome man, thought Gennie. Too bad he’s such an asshole.

“Perhaps.”

“Look, as I said, I know nothing about stuff like this. So, what do you suggest?”

“It’s not ‘stuff’, Ms...”

“Gennie.”

“Ms. Gennie.”

“Just Gennie, actually.” Meeting his gaze, there was irritation and weariness in his eyes. She stared back, willing him to thaw a little. What a shame he was so patronizing. He had wonderful eyes. In the slanting light of the afternoon, they were a rich olive colour—not like the usual watery green. The dark hair at his temples was receding and he had beautifully sharp, high cheekbones. There was a thin, pale scar that joined his upper lip to his nostril—a well repaired cleft palate—and another, more recent one just above his right eyebrow that dented the skin and interrupted the developing worry lines on his forehead.

He gave her a curt, dismissive shake of the head and stood up. It was like a dismissal. His great frame loomed over her in the small room. Gennie scrambled to her feet, and then felt vaguely annoyed at herself for letting the prat intimidate her in her own house.

“If you’re not in a hurry, I will see what I can do.”

Standing up didn’t help. “I’m not in a hurry,” she said, more defensively than she intended. “Just let me know.”

At the door, she watched him walk back up the path to his car. It was an immaculately preserved e-type Jaguar. She watched him fold his massive body into the low-slung car and drive away.

* * * * *

A week later, as she was rushing to get out the door and catch the train into London, he phoned her.

“It’s Nathaniel Bennett.”

No hello, no how are you. Prat.

“Hi, what’s up Nathaniel?”

“I’ve found a buyer for your beautiful little lute player.”

The last of the sentence was said with such affection that Gennie realised she was speaking to a man who hated people but loved porcelain. Again, it struck her as ironic that he had been, in his physical presence, and most especially in his manner, the perfect bull in a china shop.

“That’s wonderful. Thank you.”

“May I come ’round?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just headed out to work. But I’ll be back around five, if that suits you.”

“It does.”

* * * * *

He was waiting for her under the overhang of her porch when she let herself in at her gate, soaked from the rain, at five fifteen.

“I’m sorry I’m late. Fucking trains,” she said, hurrying up the path. But she wasn’t truly sorry. She was angry for being late and looking like a flake. She was irritated that he was perfectly dry; his massive black umbrella leaned up against the porch trellis. She was especially irked with herself for giving a shit, even as she made an attempt to push the rat-tails of wet hair off her face.

Gennie looked back over the gate, at the lane. “Where’s your lovely Jag?”

“I walked.”

She fumbled in her purse until she found her keys, slid the right one in the lock and then struggled a bit with the old, warped door. She gave it a tug and an unnecessarily sharp kick to open it.

“Come in,” she muttered, without looking back as she let her satchel slide off her shoulder and shrugged out of her sodden coat, draping it over the banister in the hall. “Want some tea?”

“No.”

Walking into her decrepit kitchen, she glanced back at him and flicked on the kettle. “Wine?”

He stood in the doorway, plastic bag dangling from his meaty fingers. “No.”

Clearly, he just wanted to get on with this and leave. “You’re busy. Of course,” she said, snatching the dishtowel from its hook. She rubbed it through her sodden hair, trying to squeeze out the excess. “Let’s go through to the living room and we’ll get this sorted.”

She paused at the kitchen threshold, waited for him to move, unable to get by him. “Shall we?”

“I’m not busy,” he said, in a soft, absent way. But he didn’t move.

It brought her up short, physically close to him, and she stepped back. The body rush came on so fast and so acutely, it shocked her. She smelled something on him: an acrid, chemical scent, like the smoke after fireworks. Her nipples, already peaked from the rain and the chill of the under-heated house, seized and stung. Suddenly, she couldn’t look him in the eye. Gennie was inexplicably convinced he was going to touch her, kiss her, and for a fraction of a second, she saw it vividly in her head.

“You’re the torture woman, aren’t you?” he said, and stepped back into the hall to let her through.

It was over. Just like that.

She took her a moment to process the question, and laughed. “That’s not a very flattering way to put it,” she said, leading him into the living room.

“You write about it. I saw an article in the paper.”

She raised her eyebrow and grimaced. “The piece on Jordan in the FT? Not the nicest of topics, is it?”

Unlatching the cabinet door on her second-hand sideboard, she reached in and took out the figurine. It felt poignantly delicate in her hand. She set it down on the stone mantel of her fireplace.

“No.” He didn’t move to pick it up. Instead, he set the bulging shopping bag down on the sofa and pulled out a roll of bubble wrap, a roll of sticky tape, and a sturdy cardboard box.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

“I’ve found a buyer in Germany. The Germans tend to pay the best prices for Meissen. Although there are a few very dedicated Japanese collectors. He’s willing to pay £5,500 for the piece. Is that acceptable to you?”

“Absolutely. That’s wonderful.”

He reached into the inner breast pocket of his overcoat and pulled out an envelope. Opening it, he drew out the contents. “I have a bill of sale here, which will require your signature on one copy, and a bank draft for the amount.”

“Oh, that’s... that’s just great,” she said, taking the proffered papers. It was indeed two copies of a private bill of sale, with her named as seller, and the buyer identified as a Markus G. Verner, and a stern-looking draft from the London branch of Deutsche Bank.

Picking out a pen from the bristling cup on the sideboard, she signed one copy in the space provided and dated below it. When she turned back to hand him the

letter, he was carefully rolling the piece of porcelain in what seemed like a bizarre amount of bubble wrap. She watched him secure the padding with tape and nestle the bundle into the open box. It fit perfectly. When he was satisfied, he put the box back into the shopping bag, set in on the sofa and turned to her.

“What drew you to that field?” He asked, taking the letter, folding it, and slipping it into his coat pocket.

“Sorry?”

“Torture. Why torture?”

“Oh, I just sort of drifted into it, really,” she said, trying to sound casual. “I took a degree in international law. Human rights issues.”

“Really?” He said it as if he didn’t believe her.

She shivered, felt cold again and remembered the kettle she’d set to boil in the kitchen. Suddenly she just wanted him out of her house. “No. Actually it was prurient fascination,” she snapped.

He was on her in a fraction of a second. She felt the back of her head hit the plaster wall and slide upwards as he hitched his hands under the curve of her buttocks and lifted her off her feet. But the kiss frightened her more. It was nothing like the kiss she had imagined earlier. Not passionate or feral like the rest of his body, it had the eerie quality of a surgeon’s knife. Careful, measured, he kissed her as if he were opening up her brain and tasting what lay inside.

It was manipulative and expert. He didn’t thrust his tongue into her mouth, or devour her face. It was a stepped, concerted pressure on her senses. He sucked at her lips, pressed into them softly, trailed the tip of his tongue across them until she was kissing him back without having ever made the decision to do so. Her body had

decided on its own to wrap an arm around his neck, to hook a leg around his hip. The wiser, rational part of her witnessed this with utter disgust.

“Thank you,” he said, pulling away from her mouth.

“For what?”

“For telling the truth.”

Gennie blinked. “What truth?”

“Don’t do that.” He wore the hint of a smile and beneath it a hum of a threat, despite the good humour in his voice.

“Put me down.” She used as calm and firm a tone as she could manage, letting her arm slip from his shoulder. “Now, please.”

“Aw, don’t take it back.” The grip on the back of her thighs tightened. He leaned into her, intentionally crushing her against the wall.

“Take what back?”

“The prurient fascination. That...” he said, grinding his hips into hers, making his arousal plain, “interests me. Tell me about it.”

“What?” Gennie glared at him. Wedging her hands between their chests, she pushed. “Get off me.”

“Shush.” Nathaniel rolled his hips again, and then again, and again. Even through his clothes and hers, the motion was obscene, bruising, arousing. “Don’t lie to me, darlin’,” he said, pressing his lips to her temple. The Irish in his accent leaked through the grammar school veneer. “I fucking hate lies.”

It didn’t matter that the wetness at her crotch made the fabric slip as he dry fucked her against the wall, or that every bruising grind only intensified the arousal, or that the acrid, gunpowder scent of him, now that he was so close, made her salivate. He was sick: sick like the people she’d spent so much of her life studying

from a distance. She knew it in her bones. So why wasn't she kicking and screaming her fucking head off?

"Look," she said in a studied, steady voice. "I mean it. Stop."

"Haven't you ever wondered what it feels like?"

"What *what* feels like?"

"To be tortured? To be the one who tortures?"

Images, phrases, trial transcripts, military manuals, first person accounts all crowded her brain. How long had she lived with this mental archive of atrocities? Disgusted, Gennie shook her head to push the thoughts away. "God, no."

Quite abruptly, Nathaniel released his grip on her legs and stepped back, easing her to the floor. His tie was askew. The immaculately crisp shirt now creased. "Another expert who has no idea what they're talking about. Well, that's not news, is it?"

She was cold again, her pelvic bone ached and unexpectedly very, very angry. "What the fuck would you know about it? You're a... Porcelain expert?" she sneered.

"Among other things." His accent was now full on Northern Ireland.

"Let's wrap this up, shall we? What kind of commission do I owe you?" she asked, turning and stalking towards the kitchen to get the chequebook in her purse. Behind her she heard the rustle as he picked up the shopping bag and heard his steps behind her in the hall.

"You don't owe me anything."

She was cool now—in control of herself and itching to be rid of him. A glass of wine and a hot bath was what she needed. "No. I don't want to owe you any favours. Ten percent? Fifteen? Twenty?"

Fishing out her chequebook and a pen, she clicked it efficiently and dated a blank cheque on her kitchen island.

“Really, I’m not a dealer. I’m just a consultant. The love of porcelain goes back in my family a long way. I’m glad I could find a good home for it.”

Gennie sighed and looked up at him. It was as if she were talking to an entirely different person. “You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

She was about to see him to the door, but her curiosity got the better of her. “‘Among other things’. That’s what you said.”

“Yes.”

“What other things?”

He lowered the box in the shopping bag on the floor and leant his large frame on the worn wood top of the island. Then he leveled his gaze at her. “I think you know.”

A curious sensation crept up her spine—hot and cold at the same time. She inclined her head. “Do I?”

“Oh, yes. I think you do.” He reached across the surface and slid his large hand over hers. “But the question is, do you want to know that you know?”

She should have pulled her hand away, but she couldn’t. She should have pulled her eyes away from his, but she didn’t. “I’m not sure.”

“Well, if you ever get sure, phone me.” Nathaniel nodded and stood up, withdrawing his hand. He used it to fish in his coat pocket and pull out a card, which he laid on the table. “And I’m sorry about... before.” Then, without another word, he picked up the package and saw himself out.

It was dark outside and still raining.

* * * * *

The white linen business card remained where he'd left it for three weeks.

Gennie wasn't much of a cook, but each morning she crawled into the kitchen in search of coffee and, on the numerous occasions she made tea or poured herself a glass of wine, it sat there, disturbing the disorder of her countertop .

By the end of a fortnight, it had acquired a red wine stain on its corner and she was compelled to ask herself why she hadn't chucked it out or at least shoved it in a drawer somewhere.

Nathaniel H. Bennett

International Security Services

Beneath that was a mobile number and an email address set in smaller type, but the focus of her disquiet lay in the innocuous language under his name.

There had always been something wrong with the original picture. The incongruity of Nathaniel cradling the delicate china figure in the massive meat hook of his hand kept troubling her. There were, she imagined, a few passionate porcelain experts built like brick shit houses in the world but if there was a stereotypical porcelain collector, he didn't fit the bill. In fact, he didn't fit at all. Something was missing. It took her a little longer to realise it was the absence of a rank—a retired rank. That's what it was, she decided; he smelled of military. So, where was the rank? Only a few possible reasons not to include it: either he was reluctant to state—up front—what his rank had been, or he'd been in a part of the service whose members didn't reveal their rank, or he'd been stripped of it.

At first she told herself her reluctance to be rid of the card was simply that she loved a mystery. True as that was, there was more to it. By the end of the third week, she had to admit to a less morally defensible motivation.

In all the years she'd spent awash in a sea of information of man's inhumanity to man, of war criminals and the silent, sociopathic men employed by governments to maintain their power by less than fastidious means, she had never come face to face with one.

Her database on governments, individuals and victims of torture was extensive and information rich, but her knowledge of the men—very occasionally women—who perpetrated those atrocities was sterile and impersonal. When she'd finally, tentatively asked herself the question Nathaniel had posed as he ground his cock against her crotch, she had to admit, however unwillingly, to a fascination with the men who did this.

Did they tell themselves comforting patriotic lies? Did they find ways to inure themselves to the screams and the pain of their victims? How did they distance themselves from the humans they were destroying? Or perhaps they didn't? Perhaps that was the most frightening prospect of all: that they enjoyed doing what they did—took pleasure in their work. These men who did unspeakable things, not in the red rage of battle or from the cockpit of long-range bombers, but in such personal, intimate settings lived with the stench of urine and faeces and blood and the agonies of their subjects so close at hand.

Nathaniel Bennett was not on any list of human rights' violators, that much Gennie knew. There were thousands who never made those lists, who flew below the radar of international authorities: the lesser demons of the torture world, the officially sanctioned, if usually unacknowledged, executors of state will.

She didn't consider her interest in the psychological dynamics of these people to be prurient. Understanding why people gave themselves permission to do this was important to finding ways to stop them.

What frightened her, when she finally forced herself to confront her feelings, was that she found Nathaniel Bennett excruciatingly attractive.

It was not his physical beauty, although he was a very handsome man; that had never been the mechanism of her attraction. She could appreciate aesthetic male beauty when she saw it and walk right by without regret. Nor was it his charm, which—on the rare occasions he'd turned it on—was considerable.

There was something at a level far deeper than the visual or the social that called to her in him. Something chemical. Something visceral. Something that both pulled her in and scared the living shit out of her.

After three large glasses of Merlot, on a cold Thursday evening, she went into the kitchen, picked up the card, and dialled his number.

* * * * *

He answered on the second ring. "Good evening, Gennie."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I'm organized."

She paused for a moment, then pushed on. "Is everything okay with the figurine? Did the buyer get it?"

"I'm thinking that's not why you've called."

"No. Not really." Come on, she thought to herself. Don't be such a fucking coward. But her mind was racing and she couldn't think how to formulate what she wanted to say. "I... um..."

"I'd rather not talk on the phone. Are you free now?"

The old kitchen clock stood at ten thirty, but she decided that she'd given him enough mixed messages already. "Yes, I am."

“Good. Then I’ll be with you in about...let’s see.... five miles...thirty minutes? If you’ll excuse the sweat.”

“Sure. If you’ll excuse the mess.”

* * * * *

Nathaniel was nothing if not punctual; the bell rang at exactly eleven. Gennie had spent the preceding thirty minutes fighting the desire to fix her hair, put on make-up and tidy her living room. She had done none of these, but expended her energy trying to restrain herself from doing it. He was dressed in a black hoodie, white t-shirt and jogging pants and was, as promised, very sweaty. When she motioned him in, he walked past her smelling of musk, bonfires and damp autumn leaves.

“Would you like some wine?”

“I’d prefer water, if you don’t mind.”

“And a towel?”

He grimaced, skin flushed, dark hair plastered to his forehead. “A towel would be good.”

“Go through,” she said. “I’ll be along.”

In the kitchen she fished the pitcher of filtered water out of the fridge and found the one tall glass she knew didn’t have a chip in it. She poured herself another glass of wine and then, rummaging in her drier, pulled out the only towel she was absolutely sure was clean and wedged it under her arm.

Nathaniel sat on the floor, legs bent, arms balanced on his knees, and back propped up against the book and file strewn sofa.

“I’m sorry. Let me make some room there,” Gennie said, dropping the towel beside him and then handing him the jug and the glass.

“No, I’m good here.”

She settled on the floor opposite him, realising with dismay that she was still wearing a ridiculous pair of orange fuzzy socks. Taking them off would look—something, something not good—so she knelt and sat on them instead. She took another deep swig of her Merlot and watched him chug water.

The longer the silence grew, the more unsure she became about how to start the conversation. When he'd finished half the jug of water, he began to towel his hair.

“You're ex-military, aren't you?”

“I served in Iraq and Afghanistan,” he muttered, rubbing his head vigorously, “I did some freelance work in Africa and Thailand with the Yanks. I did some of the stuff you've written about. Is that what you wanted to know?”

Gennie swallowed. “Yes.”

“Well, that's sorted then. Is that it?”

“No. I'm curious.” Gennie hesitated. “Call it a professional interest.”

“You want to know how, why? That sort of thing?”

“Something like that.”

He gave a bark of a laugh. “Ah, then. You want to know if I liked it.”

She took another sip of the wine and then put it down. Was she sober enough to be having this discussion? “Yes, I guess I do.”

He folded the towel and draped it on one of his knees. Beneath his rolled up pants, his legs were tanned, dark haired, muscled. There was an ugly scar stretching from just below the hem to the top of his sock. When Gennie looked up, he was staring at her.

“That has a more complicated answer. One that would require you getting to know me better,” he said, his smile broadening. “And you aren't sure you want to do that, are yeh?”

“I...No, I...”

“Don’t lie, Gennie. I fuckin’ hate lies. They bring out the bastard in me.”

“I’m not sure. No,” she said, rushed and definite.

He nodded. “That’s understandable. But here’s the thing. I like you. I like that you know at least a bit of who I am. I’m tired of fucking women I have to lie to. I don’t like the man I am, but trying to be someone else is worse.”

She opened her mouth to speak but he cut her off. “And you could say that those are just the wages of sin,” he went on, “and that might be true enough. But I figure I’d have a go anyway. So, whatever it is I can do to change your mind, I’m gonna do it. Understood?”

There was a tingling, an eerie surge that started at her top of her thighs, just where they met her arse. It crept up her buttocks, then up the sides of her back. Only when it reached her shoulders did she realise her cheeks were flaming. She nodded.

“I’m not going to change your mind with words. So, are you going to come over here and kiss me, or do I have to come to you?”

“No,” she said quickly, laughing, embarrassed. “No. It’s not like that at all.”

He smiled and lay the towel aside. Carefully he moved the glass and the pitcher aside and pulled off his hoodie. “Yeah, darlin’. It is like that.” He said it soft and low. “It is.”

On his hands and knees he moved slowly towards her. It felt like a strange, electric paralysis; she couldn’t move—just watched him close the gap between them.

“Because I can smell you, Gennie. It is exactly like that.”

He kissed her the way he had before. A studied, careful kiss. It pried at her, pulled all her focus down to the inexorable sensation of his mouth on hers. While he

kissed her, his hands rounded her hips and covered her ass, pulling her up onto his lap until she was straddling him. And just like before, her body cared nothing for her mind's hesitations. It would be so easy to just surrender. It frightened her, this strange and unfamiliar war.

When he broke the kiss, cocked his head and engaged her eyes. "Let me offer you the first piece of goodwill."

His hands slid beneath her jumper and sit it upward, following the contours of her body. Pulling it over her head. He stroked her bare back and curled his fingers around her shoulders, then pushed her down until she could feel the hardness of his cock against her.

"It's not about pain, Gennie. It's about fear."

* * * * *

He kissed her again, and as he did, his hands travelled from her shoulders to enclose her neck. His thumbs edged under her jaw. Not hard but there. Gennie stiffened.

"Hush," he whispered, and pressed his cheek against hers. "Feel it? Can you feel it?"

"Yes, I can."

"You've such a pretty neck, pretty Gennie. And there," he said, easing his thumbs until they were poised above her carotid arteries, pressing just enough so she could feel the throb against them, "right there is your pulse. Feel that?"

All the rush of arousal began to knot into fear. Her thoughts were racing. Jesus fucking christ, was she out of her mind? How had she fantasised that she would ever be in control of this? He was twice her size, he could snap her neck with a single hand. She'd be some obit in the papers.

“Yes. Please, stop,” she said softly. Her voice trembled. “I don't think... I don't think I can do this.”

“Course you can, girl.” The thumbs rubbed at her skin, ribbed over the tunnels of blood beneath the surface. “Because you want to know, don't you?”

“Oh... um... fuck,” she stuttered. “God, I...I...”

“Sh-shush.” It was a soporific sound, hypnotising, which only frightened her more. Nathaniel pushed his hips up, not rough, sinuously. “I could end your life in three minutes. I know it. You know it. And it frightens you. Doesn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Because I like it when you're frightened.” He pulled back his head, looked straight into her eyes, and gave her a chilling, charming grin. “You can feel that, too.”

His eyes were not the olive of before, but black holes. It wasn't that he was detached or unengaged, but horrifyingly, monstrosly there. He had killed people like this. In that moment, she was sure of it. Her body shivered violently, and although she tensed her muscles to quell it, it wouldn't stop.

“It's a good way to die,” said Nathaniel, tilting his head, putting the tiniest bit more pressure on her throat. “A peaceful way. Painless. Would you like to go, Gennie?”

“No!” Her breathing was choppy, snagging on the tremors that shook her frame. “No, no. Please.”

“Well, that's good. Because you're no use to me dead.” The grin grew into a wide smile. “So touch me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Show me you're of use to me.” Again, he pressed his thumbs a little deeper. “Reach inside and stroke my cock.”

“But... Christ.” The smile was gone. She began to feel slightly dizzy. Her pulse hammered against her inner ears.

“Do it!” His voice was low, brittle, cold.

Gennie scrabbled with the hem of his damp t-shirt. The waistband beneath was soaked with perspiration. It felt wretched as she tugged at the elastic webbing and burrowed her hand inside his hot, humid sweats and curled her fingers around his cock. It was circumcised, viscous with precum, difficult to fully grasp.

“Stroke me. Slowly.”

She did, the roll of his hips setting her pace.

He gave her the smallest of nods, and his eyelids fluttered. “Now this... this is going to keep you alive.”

* * * * *

“Will it?” She asked.

His lips parted, he raised his jaw in a small gesture of arousal. On his breath, which was coming slightly faster now, she detected the tang of cloves below the now familiar smell of spent fireworks. Between her legs, her hand made slick, obscene sounds with each stroke of his cock. It would have turned her on had she not been so aware of the pressure at her neck.

“Your hand is trembling, Gennie.” He smirked.

She gave him a stricken look. “I’m ... I’m sorry.”

“So you should be,” he said. There was a dry, bored tone to his voice, completely at odds with the cock swelling and sliding in her hand. “You’re not really very good at this, are you?”

Before she could answer, he changed the angle of his hands. His thumbs dug into the underside of her jaw, forcing her head up. She made a miserable sound, one she'd never heard herself make before.

“Is this how you've touched your boyfriends, Gennie? Is this why you don't have one? I'd rather have your cunt. It's got to be better than your manual efforts. You don't need a brain to use your cunt, do you Gennie?”

“For god's sake. That hurts,” she whimpered, trying to pull away from his bruising hands. The fear was bad enough, but there was something about the words—no matter how ridiculous—that cut. It didn't matter that he was throbbing in her hand and obviously aroused. It didn't matter that she didn't pride herself on delivering quality hand-jobs while being threatened with strangulation. He had managed to make her feel like nothing. A terrified, wretched loser.

“Come on. Don't make me wait.”

Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes. “What the fuck do you want?” she whined.

“You know exactly what I want.”

“I can't.”

Nathaniel adjusted his grip on her. One hand encircled her throat almost completely. The other fisted the hair at the back of her head. He gave her a short, sharp jerk and forced her to look at him. “Say that again and I'll snap your neck, you stupid cunt.”

Gennie opened her mouth but there was nothing.

“I want you on my cock. Do I have to explain how?”

“No,” she whispered. She was crying silently, her breath hitching in her chest as she inhaled.

“Good. Don’t make me wait.”

All she could think was how lucky it was she’d worn a skirt. Had she been in trousers, in this position, the logistics would have been harder.

She didn’t realise she’d stopped stroking him, but she released him now and fumbled with her skirt. It was a faded cotton thing—too full to be fashionable—she wore around the house, and she fought to pull it up enough to get the fabric out of the way to reach her panties. Having hooked her thumbs under the hips, she tried to squirm her way out of them with only partial success. She finally got one leg free and heard a seam rip in the process.

Only when she began to tug at the waist of his sweats again did it strike her that, not once, had it occurred to her to refuse him, to tell him she didn’t want to fuck. The fear had completely eclipsed any arousal she had felt at first. As she struggled to get the wadded fabric over his hips without being able to look down and see what she was doing, she started to panic. Not because she was about to have intercourse with someone who was terrifying her, but because he was so obviously amused at her inept attempts to get his pants down.

His face changed. Nathaniel relinquished his grip on her neck and her hair. “Okay. Okay,” he whispered, as if to a child. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and, bending forward, lowered her onto the floor.

Perhaps it was his tone, or the change of position, but suddenly Gennie was drowning in sorrow and a choking sense of relief. She turned her head to the side and cried.

“Oh, Gennie, Gennie,” he soothed, pressing his mouth to her salt-wet cheek. “It’s over. Done. Finished.”

She fought for breath between monstrous sobs and, for a while, he simply made hushing sounds and stroked her hair. Cupping her face, he kissed her with all the terrible gentleness of a total stranger. Then he entered her.

Her first disembodied thought was that it shouldn't have been so easy. How could she be wet? Even as she canted her hips in response to that first delicious violation, even as she spread her legs wider, and bent her knees, even as she groaned at the meaty, visceral sensation of his cock head hitting the end of her passage, a drone of self-disgust settled into her spinal column.

He fucked her with the slow deliberation of restrained violence. His sinews were taut, his mouth was open, at her throat his teeth rasped against her skin. And she knew these weren't two different men. Just one that could switch modes with an ease born of years of practice.

Pausing for a moment, he reached back, tugged his damp t-shirt over his head, and groaned at the meeting of skin as he lowered himself onto her.

“Tell me to fuck you, Gennie.”

That's when the sense of relief obliterated everything else. When the muscles of her cunt spasmed around him, and she began to come, she begged him to fuck her.

* * * * *

After he'd finished, in the awkward stillness that followed, Gennie felt the bizarre disorientation that comes with having done something she'd never thought herself capable of doing. With it came a swell of revulsion. At herself. At him.

On her back, on the floor, the light from the floor lamp above her burned a painful hole into her brain. The two painful spots under her jaw acted as a mnemonic. She had never been in any danger of dying at all. Now she was sure of that. How had she so thoroughly convinced herself otherwise? She had slipped so easily, so willingly

into the mindset of a victim. The shame of it knotted her stomach and she felt the first cramp.

“Off. Get off me,” she said, panicked, pushing him as the first wave of nausea hit her.

Gennie scrambled out from beneath his lethargic body, got to her feet and, clamping one hand to her mouth and an arm across her bare breasts, rushed down the hall. In the small, old-fashioned bathroom, she sank to her knees and retched into the toilet.

It seemed as if there were no end to what she could bring up and, in the weak moonlight through the high window, the regurgitated wine was dark against the white porcelain. Like a monumental act of refusal—one she seemed incapable of only minutes before—her body convulsed and attempted to expel all the fear, the arousal, the sense of self-disgust, the weakness of the previous hour. Between her bare legs, the same convulsions forced the blood-warm sperm out of her and down her inner thighs.

The hand on her head made her flinch.

“No! Don't,” she croaked into the echo of the toilet bowl.

But Nathaniel did not retreat. He caught a curtain of hair and smoothed it away from her face. “Shush, darlin'. Get it all out. It's normal.”

He crouched next to her, his t-shirt back on, his face in deep shadow.

Reaching above her, he pulled the towel off the rail next to the sink and draped it over her bare shoulders as another volley of retching overtook her.

When she thought it was over, when she was panting into the void and assuring herself that her legs would hold her if she tried to stand, she sat back on her heels and wiped her mouth with a corner of the towel. She couldn't look at him.

“I think you need to go now.” Her tone was flat.

“That's the one thing I'm afraid I cannot do, sweet Gennie.”

“Why?” she asked the darkness.

“Because if I go now, you're going to remember only that other man, and not this one.”

His knees cricked in the shadows as he got to his feet. She felt him slip his hands beneath her arms and pull her upright. “You want it to be simple, but it's more complicated than that. I assume you have a bathroom with an actual bath somewhere?”

“At the end of the hall, through my bedroom.”

He lifted her easily, as if she were something entirely portable. And that was, in a way, what she felt like: something that had been taken to atrocious places, into unsolvable mazes, and then been carried back.

She expected him to simply plop her down on the bed, but he carried her through it and into her bathroom instead. He lowered her onto the side of her tub and switched on the light.

“I just want to sleep,” she said miserably.

But he was already turning the creaky taps on, playing his fingers beneath the flow until the old boiler grudgingly gave him a stream of hot water. Satisfied with the temperature, he tugged the little stopper and rerouted the water through to the showerhead.

“Come on. Get in,” he said, stripping off his shirt and stepping out of his sweats.

When she hesitated, he pulled her to her feet again and reached around her waist, hunting for the closure on her skirt. “I can do it,” she said waspishly.

He stepped away from her. "Then do it, Gennie."

He stood naked, his arms crossed over his chest. There was, she thought, a flurry of tangled things simmering beneath the kindness in his voice. The tendons of his neck were rigid, his shoulders tense. It didn't show on his face, but she was almost sure, as she stepped out of her skirt and kicked it aside, that he was, perhaps, nervous. She felt pleasure at the thought.

He looked down her legs to the obnoxious, fuzzy orange socks that puddled sadly around her ankles. "Now that... is very sexy."

"They're warm." she snapped, tugging at them furiously to get them off.

Without waiting, he picked her up and stepped over the lip of the tub, lifting her into the shower. The water was far too hot. She yelped and tried to pull away, but he had her.

"I thought you said it was over!" she sobbed, suddenly frantic again.

"It is. It is."

She was beyond the point of control. There was nothing left to be rational with. "Fuck off. Get out, you bastard." She was yelling, struggling, her hands skidded over his chest as she tried to push away from him.

Still, he wouldn't let her go. He locked his arms behind her back and let her rage. When, after several minutes of panicked frenzy, she'd exhausted herself, the water didn't seem quite so unbearable, and she resorted to weeping against him.

"Stuff like this, Gennie, you have to wash it off. You can't sleep with all that fear stinking up your dreams. Trust me about this. I really do know. It's like a ritual." Nathaniel pressed a kiss to the top of her wet. "Now, if I let you go and reach for the soap, do I have to worry about you kicking me in the balls?"

* * * * *

Gennie was sure she would not sleep with him lying beside her, but exhaustion took her nonetheless. Despite the shower, she dreamed of suffocating and woke up gasping, flailing blindly in the darkness. A large arm surrounded her waist and pulled her tight into the bowed warmth of Nathaniel's body, and she slept again. When she awoke, it was to an insistent tap on her shoulder.

"I have a day full of shite, and I need to talk to you before I go." He was crouched by the side of the bed, holding a blurry cup of something in front of her face.

Gennie struggled to sit up and took the mug. It was tea. Insanely strong tea. "I'm not sure I'm conscious enough for this," she muttered, pulling the sheet around herself. "But, okay."

Nathaniel prodded her a little to give him room, and sat on the side of the bed. He was wearing the same clothes. The smell of rank, stale sweat. In her hazy morning mental state, all she could think was how disgusting they must have felt to get back into. But, having been in the military, he was probably used to it. He sat with his elbows on his knees, looking away from her, a cracked china cup cradled in his hands.

Those hands. She tensed her jaw, felt the two spots of dull, bruised ache beneath it.

"I know it's likely you'll decide you never want to see me again. Fuck all I can do about that. But I'm tired of hiding who I am from almost everyone. I have a few mates, from the old days, who know me well." He gave a bitter laugh. "It would be easier if I were gay."

The silence stretched on into the dull light that filtered through the curtains, and Gennie let it. The clock beside her bed blinked 6:40. She pushed the mass of tangled hair off her face.

“Of all the women in the world you could have chosen to...” she hunted for the right word, “reveal yourself to, why me?”

He inhaled and let it out slowly. “After coming to take a look at the Meissen figure, I found out who you are and what you do. It seemed ironic that our paths should cross. I guess I took it for a sign.”

Gennie cocked her head. “But didn’t you think that I, more than most people, would be unsympathetic?”

He turned and looked at her. There was a frightening vulnerability in his face. All of a sudden she realised what he was looking for, and she had no idea if it was possible to give it to him.

“Intelligent, educated people usually get to choose the world they immerse themselves in, Gennie. I think you did.”

It was a cryptic answer but before she could say so he went on.

“I’m sure there is a large part of you that is full of condemnation, and rightly so. But I think there’s a part of you that is fascinated by it, too. That’s usually the way of it. Maybe you just don’t want to admit it.”

He was right. She didn’t. Two sides of the same coin. Two edges of the same knife. But this was an invitation to cut herself on one of them. She’d left objective interest behind last night. Perhaps she’d never get it back.

“I’m willing to be honest about it if you are,” she began, shocked at what she knew was coming out of her mouth. “I’ll admit to an unhealthy interest in torture if you’ll admit to a desire for absolution.”

Nathaniel stroked her cheek with a finger. “I will. But I’ll not get it. And you can’t give it to me.”

“No,” she whispered.

When he kissed her, it was the way she had imagined it might be that first time. There was no precision to it. It was a raw, feral, desperate kiss. All hunger and taking and it tasted of sadness. He pushed her back into the pillows and fed on her.

She let him, not because she was scared, but because it made her blood sing. Because he tasted like everything she'd ever wanted a man to taste like. And for a moment, she didn't want to think about anything else.

He left her hungry, wet, her cunt aching. When she'd heard her front door close, she curled onto her side, slid her hand between her thighs and masturbated. The images that took her to orgasm were horrific.

* * * * *

In the early afternoon, Gennie worked on tagging the summaries of testimony in the Khmer Rouge tribunals dragging on in Phnom Penh. This was the second co-prosecutor to resign from the post, and it meant that the hearings would stretch on past the end of the year. Her mobile chimed to alert her to a message.

Did you have a wank after I left, sweet Gennie?

Witty? Snarky? Truthful? It took her a minute to decide how to respond.

Yes.

Tell me what you thought about.

She stood up, deliberately putting distance between herself and material at the desk. It was not possible for her to be truthful about that.

*I just did it. *

You're a filthy liar. Tell me.

Mind your own business! She tapped it out with a spurt of anger, then relented. *I can't put that in a text.*

That's better. Thank you. How are you fixed for Saturday night?

She put down her phone on the counter, switched on the kettle, and filled the teapot. All the images flooded back. They made her queasy. Queasy and aroused.

Finally, thirty minutes later, she texted him back.

Saturday night is fine.

* * * * *

Nathaniel arrived looking like a man who'd never perspired in his life: in a charcoal suit, demure silk tie, and his date-smile. Gennie struggled into her only pair of high heels and walked down to the gate with him. The waiting car wasn't his: a sleek, black sedan with tinted windows.

"What happened to your lovely old jag?" she asked, as she watched a massive man with close-cropped blond hair get out of the driver's seat and open the rear door.

"This is my mate, Karol. He's playing chauffeur for us."

Gennie cocked her head at the neat, over-muscled man. "Hello, Karol."

"Good evening, Madam," the man replied, smirking, words sludgy with an Eastern European accent. Polish, she thought.

She threw Nathaniel an inquisitive look.

"He's been practicing that all day," said Nathaniel, helping her into the car. When he slid in beside her, he grinned. "Took him a while to say 'madam' without laughing."

"This isn't his usual job, I gather."

"Not buying the driver persona?"

"Not really, no."

"You've been blown, Karol," he said, addressing himself to the back of the other man's round, close-shaved head. The driver shrugged his massive shoulders, grunted and started the car. "What gave him away?"

“Most chauffeurs don't look like they can bench press the car they're driving.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “Fair enough.”

* * * * *

She'd never been to the restaurant although it was in the small, rather quaint village of Bray, less than twenty minutes from her house. They ate and drank and talked of things in the news. Looking around at the other guests, Gennie felt underdressed in her plain black silk shift, but it was the only evening wear she had, purchased in an emergency from a store in Kowloon on a trip for the Institute.

Nathaniel noticed and furrowed his brow. “You look very sexy,” he said, swirling burgundy in an oversized wine glass. “Elegant.”

“Thank you for the lie.” She tucked inately at a stray wisp of hair. “Kind of you.”

His smile was bland. “I'm not a kind man, Gennie. Believe me.”

Sitting back as the waiter took away her plate, she considered for a moment. “Yes, strange as it sounds, I think you are.”

He turned his head, as if easing the muscles in his neck. “And that's hard to process?”

“No, not really.”

“Ah, I forgot. You have files on people like me.” He reached across the table and wound another stray strand of her hair around his finger. “They're nice to their children. Faithful to their wives. Attached to their pets.”

To the restaurant's guests, it looked like an affectionate gesture, but Gennie could feel just how firmly he had the curl anchored around his digit. There was no sitting back without a painful tug of war.

“That's not what I said,” she hissed.

“Yes, essentially it was.” He offered her his most boyish, winning smile. “I forgive you, since it's true.”

“Then let go of my hair.”

Nathaniel leaned in closer and whispered: “Beg me. Quietly.”

At first she thought he was joking, but she saw his pupils dilate in the subdued lighting and reconsidered.

“Don't be ridiculous.”

He licked his lips, quickly, unconsciously. The smile went from open to teasing. “Beg me, darlin'.”

“I'm not going to beg you.”

“Oh, you will. Now, later, but you will.”

Gennie glanced around the restaurant, exhaled, swallowed and muttered, “Please let go of my hair.”

“Mmm. Again. Try sayin' it like you mean it.”

Then it struck her—the sheer simplicity of it. All it took was her reluctance to make a fuss in a public place to have control over her. How pathetic. And yet she still couldn't pull herself to even raise her voice.

“Please,” she said and took another breath, “Please let go of my hair.”

The smile, far more of a threat than an expression of benevolence, disappeared. “You're so easy, Gennie,” he replied, unwinding the tendril on his finger. “You make me hard.”

She sat back and took an unladylike gulp of her wine. “You're an evil bastard.”

“Undeniably. But I do believe your knickers are wet anyway.”

They were. As if him saying it made it true. “Fuck you.” she mouthed silently.

* * * * *

Karol was leaning against the car, smoking, when they walked out into the parking court. He rushed around to open her side door, but not, Gennie thought with quite the efficiency he'd managed earlier. In the darkness of the car, the smell of new leather was intense. The chill made Gennie shiver and she pulled her velvet wrap tighter.

Nathaniel settled in next to her and snaked an arm around her shoulders.

“Cold?”

“I'm fine.”

As the car began to move, and without ceremony, Nathaniel slid his free hand between her wrap and her dress and palmed her right breast. Gennie stiffened.

“Don't,” she whispered, clutching his wrist and pushing his hand off her. The idea of having a stranger glance in the rear view mirror and see her like this didn't feature in any of her sexual fantasies.

Nathaniel curled his arm tighter, pulling her ear to his mouth. “If you make a fuss, he'll look and he'll see. I'm guessing you don't want that. So don't make a fuss.”

There was a cruel humour in his voice, and the touch that followed, on her thigh, sliding the hem of her dress up her thighs. In that moment, Gennie pledged to never, ever wear stockings again. She felt the warmth of his fingers on the bare skin above the stocking top and squirmed. And this time, when she tried to push his hand away, he simply didn't respond.

It was the same strange, trapped feeling she'd had in the restaurant. Only worse. When she turned her head to whisper a plea to him to stop, he cupped the back of her head and kissed her.

She had come to understand that he gave two kinds of kisses. This was the deliberate, manipulative type. It was controlling, muting. So that when his fingers curled around the leg of her knickers and pushed between the wet folds of her cunt, all she could do was stifle on the whimper.

God, she was wet. Why was she so wet? Something inside her broke as she heard the slick, liquid noises his moistened fingers made as they moved between the lips of her cunt. All of a sudden, she was complicit. He'd made her complicit because she was wet and he wouldn't stop, and he was using her shame, her fear, and her arousal against her. His tongue was just like his fingers, probing and prying and forcing her open. Until she had to clench her fists to stop herself from arching her hips and hold her breath to stop herself from moaning. But he was in her: in her mouth, and her cunt and her head. Her muscles fluttered and convulsed. The sounds were loud and lewd and now it didn't matter anymore who heard them, because she was coming. Her thighs drenched in her fluids, trapping his hand. Having forgotten how to kiss or even whom she was kissing. Her body twitched and arched as if plugged in to a live outlet.

When she thought it was over, and the violence of her spasms had died, he withdrew his fingers, fumbled in his pocket, and, with a kiss on her forehead, pulled a hood over her head.

* * * * *

He let her scream for what seemed like a very long time. In the darkness it was easy to scream. Now Gennie knew why the need for a driver, why not Nathaniel's car. There was no offer of comfort, physical or otherwise; just the crushing pressure of a single hand around her wrists. Through the fabric of hood, she could smell her spent

arousal—a choking, cloying scent. Trapped in the dark with the reek of her own stupidity and a thousand fragmented images she stored in her head.

Two stood out more than all the others: an old black and white photograph taken in Buenos Aires during Argentina’s Dirty War. The precise date was never identified, nor was the hooded woman under a street lamp being pushed into a car. The other was a more recent colour picture of shackled and hooded Afghan prisoners in the back of a cargo plane, bound for Guantanamo Bay.

When she finally quieted down, Nathaniel spoke.

“I figured you'd want to know what this feels like. Taking someone off a battlefield is a hit or miss proposition; their blood's up, they were all set on dyin' for the cause. But take them in the middle of the night, from the place they feel the safest—especially if you can get their family screaming, too—and you've got a far better chance of success. Disorientation is useful.”

“Don't you quote from some fucking HUMINT interrogation manual to me!” she roared from inside her darkness. “How fucking could you? You needed to scare me to death to show me this? Why the fuck didn't you just tell me?”

He laughed. “Oh, you already knew all the facts, Gennie. You're just a filing cabinet full of facts. But that tells you nothing, really. You've got to feel it.”

“Right. I've felt it now. So, take the hood off.”

Something pushed against the left side of her head. She flinched. “Not yet, darlin'. The ride's not over,” he whispered, and pressed a kiss to the side of her covered face.

She heard the high hissing sound of material being drawn out, and felt her wrists released only to have them bound together. Then a clink, and another, softer

hiss, and she felt something tighten around her neck, over the hood. It was—she was almost certain—his belt.

* * * * *

Although there are many instructional documents on how to treat and interrogate prisoners, there are very few on how to resist it. The US has put a number of its officers through mock capture and torture scenarios, believing that forewarned is forearmed, but Gennie knew that, to a certain extent, resistance was futile. Eventually, a tortured prisoner will not only tell you everything you want to know, but a great deal of crap, as well. One of the many problems with non-humane interrogation techniques was that it took considerable human resources just sorting out the wheat from the chaff. The civil authorities—police and national intelligence organizations like the FBI—who interrogated people on a daily basis came to this conclusion long ago. Torture is a very poor way of producing actionable intelligence, but it's an excellent way to terrorize a larger population into meek acquiescence.

Thinking this way calmed Gennie. It was the subject in the abstract. So when the car finally drew to a stop and hands reached in and pulled her from the back of the car and onto her feet on a gravel surface, she did not resist. Nathaniel was right, fear of small things—embarrassment in a public place, sexual exposure—served the purpose of the controller. Fear, in essence, made her complicit.

Not that she wasn't scared. She was. So as the large hand curled around her upper arm and led her, feet crunching on stone, across an expanse and up the stairs to what she assumed was the entrance to some sort of building, she decided that hiding her fear was the best defence she had. Not because it would enable her to resist anything, but because it would simply make her harder to read.

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When he pulled the hood off her head, it was in a plain, bare concrete basement. He'd seated her on a chair, re-secured her hands behind her back and tied her ankles to the chair legs. In some very clear, very analytical part of her brain, she noted that he hadn't taken her heels off. Men, she thought bitterly, it's all about the visuals.

“You're quiet, Gennie. What's going on in that pretty little head of yours, I wonder?”

The chair-back dug into her spine when she tried to move her arms. “I'm all screamed out,” she said quietly, eyeing him through the strands of her dishevelled hair.

He looked older and tired in the harsh light of the ceiling's bare fluorescent strip. Stepping towards her, looking down at her, she was shielded from its glare, but it set his expression in shadow. He touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers. “So you've decided not to play, have you?”

Gennie's first instinct was to pull away from the caress, but she resisted the temptation and, instead, leaned her cheek into it. “Is this a game?”

Nathaniel exhaled. “In a way, Gennie, love.” He traced his fingers over her lips, pinching the bottom one with a curious gentleness. “You can learn a lot from games.”

He drew his hand away and, so fast she had no time to see it coming, backhanded her across the face with a force that snapped her head sideways and robbed her of breath and, for a moment, sight.

She saw stars. Until that moment, she'd always thought the expression a bad cliché. But now she knew it was entirely accurate. Her cheek throbbed as the blood

rushed into it and she tasted copper in her mouth from where her teeth had cut against the inside of her cheek.

“The danger in not playing the game, sweet Gennie, is that it forces me to up the ante until I have you convinced that I will, without much hesitation, hurt you very badly.”

It took her time to order her thoughts enough to say anything. She tried to remember if she'd ever been hit like this before. Spanked as a child, certainly but, no, no one had ever done this to her. The cut inside her mouth was stinging; the side of her face, hot and swelling.

This time, when he extended his hand to touch her lips, she flinched and pulled her head back. He smiled and reached, instead for the loose end of the belt that dangled from the loop around her neck. The smile remained as he slowly wound the leather around his fist.

Gennie gave a high, terrified whine. Even as it escaped, she hated herself for it. She hated her heart for trying to hammer its way out of her chest, hated her muscles for twitching and jerking with fear and the tears that erupted and spilled over her face—all the bastard parts of her that her intellect failed to override. There was no calming herself or controlling instinctive responses as he pulled the strap tighter and tighter.

“Look at me,” Nathaniel said, pulling the shorted end of the belt upwards. “Up, look up!” As if he spoke to some wayward puppy.

In the angle of the light, his eyes were two black holes. His free hand cradled the back of her head, then pulled it to his suited groin, pressing her face into it, against the erection beneath the fabric.

“This,” he said softly, “is truth. Feel it?”

Gennie sobbed once into the wool of his trousers.

“I’m so hard for you now, I could unzip, shove my cock down your throat and come in under a minute.” His hips rolled once, and she felt it twitch against her face.

“There, I’ve just told you something absolutely true.” Threading his fingers into her hair, caressing her head, he went on: “And I want you to tell me something absolutely true. Do you understand?”

The stuff of his trousers felt coarse against her bruised skin. It smelled of steam ironing and the acrid scent of dry cleaning solution, as if the thing she had her faced pressed to was not human. “I... I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Something true. Like this: when I was Thailand, I attached electrodes to the testicles of some poor bastard from Yemen and sent thousands of volts through him. Not much amperage but it feels like dying.”

“Oh, god,” she gulped air. “I’ve never... never,” she shook her head to stave off panic. “Never done anything like that. No. Never.”

She’d begun to babble, to sob. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t take in enough air. And still the hand cupping her head stroked her hair, pressed her cheek to his groin, rubbed himself against her.

“He screamed like a woman. Screamed and screamed. At first, it made me sick to do it. Then I felt cold, nothing. But after a while...” he paused for a moment, took a breath, “After a while it got me hard. Just like this. And I hated that.”

“Stop it,” she cried. “I don’t want to hear this. Fuck.”

“I hated it, but I did it. Because... that was my job. And good men—real men—do their jobs. Don’t they, Gennie?”

“Shut up!” she yelped. “Fuck, shut up!”

Suddenly, he stepped away and jerked the belt back. The loop slid taut against her throat and cut off her sobs. He bent over her until his face was inches from hers.

“Now it's your turn. Tell me something true.”

* * * * *

“Oh, Jesus... I... don't know what you want.” The words came out like staggered steps. The need to breathe freely and a thousand petty transgressions battled for brainspace.

“Think, Gennie. Think.” He gave her sore face a hard tap for every word.

She remembered a dim hallway, the sensation of fraying carpet under her bare knees, and the rank taste of an unwashed cock that made her gag.

“I... I paid my rent in sex. As a student,” the words rushed out, “a long time ago. I couldn't come up with the money and he...”

The slap cut her off. Sharp, not as hard as the first, but it still took her breath away.

“Really, Gennie? You tellin' me you're a whore?” He crouched in front of her, one huge hand on her stockinged knee. “Cos I already know that. I could have fucked you the first time I met you. I did you on your living room floor, remember? You came so fuckin' hard. So hard. I felt you.”

The knee beneath his hand began to tremble and she couldn't stop it. It made her strangely angry with herself. “Not my finest moment,” she muttered.

“Don't insult the millions of women on this planet who sell their bodies to feed their babies by feeling guilty for sucking off your landlord. It's a waste of time. We're all whores, darlin', one way or another.”

“Then... Then I don't know what to tell you.”

Nathaniel tilted his head, as if in sympathy, and wrapped another few inches of belt around his fist. The leather slid, the buckle clinked and pinched her skin painfully, the choke tightened again.

“I stole,” she gasped, nodded frantically. “I stole something.”

The belt loosened, the smile widened. “Really? What did ya take?”

“A ring. His dead mother's ring.”

“Whose?”

“A lover. I took it. Took it.”

A dark eyebrow rose. “Really,” he whispered in mock awe, sliding his hand further up her thigh, pulling the silk with it. “I hadn't pegged you as a girl who's overly fond of jewellery.”

“I'm... I'm not. No.” Her leg was shaking so badly now the trembling spread to the other. The heels forced her feet at such an angle to make controlling her muscles almost impossible. “He fucked... he fucked around on me. He hurt me. So...” Gennie's breath hitched in her chest. “I took the thing I knew would hurt him. It was all he had left of his mother.”

“And it did warm you, your revenge?” His hand gripped the meatiest part of her thigh and began to dig his fingers into the muscle of it.

“It did!” she sobbed. “It fucking did.”

“You bitch,” he whispered. “More.”

“There is no more!” Gennie rasped at him. “There's no bloody more.”

It was the most curious sensation. Just pressure. Then, in the blink of an eye, she was screaming, trying to lift her body out of the chair to get away from the pain. And then it was gone. Her stomach cramped at the nausea that rose once the pain had stopped.

“Christ, I'm going to be sick.” But she wasn't. Instead she felt her bladder let go, and the awful warmth of her urine pooled around her ass.

“Breathe, Gennie. Breathe through it.” He was up on his feet, loosening the belt from around her neck. He clasped her face in both hands and looked into her eyes. “Come on, big breath! You can do it.”

She took a huge, wheezing gulp through a throat constricted in panic. She took another, then another.

“Please, Nathaniel. Stop. It's enough. Please.”

His thumbs caressed her cheeks, wiping away the tears. “But you haven't told me what I want to know.”

It was in the softest, kindest voice. As if it were breaking his heart to do this to her. As if she needed to be reasonable and understand that all this was only for her own good. He nodded again and kissed her once, gently, on the lips. In that moment, scared as she was, ashamed as she was, she would have given him anything. All she wanted in the world was for him to release her and gather her up in his arms and tell her she was forgiven, and that everything would be all right.

“Tell me, darlin'. Because you know you're going to tell me anyway. And you'll feel so much better when you get it out, won't you?”

She caught her lips between her teeth and clamped down on a sob. Tears streamed down her cheeks and mucous chilled on her upper lip. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

Shaking, weeping, she lowered her eyes and nodded. “Yes.”

He took his hands away from her face and affectionately tucked a tangled lock of hair behind her ear, his eyes locked on hers. “Then get it out and shame the devil, Gennie.”

“I was ten. My sister was—oh, god, maybe eight?—I can't remember. She had this lovely little Siamese kitten named Annie. What a stupid name for a cat, isn't it?”

Nathaniel nodded. “Stupid.”

“She got it as a present. Not me. Just her. But I played with it anyway, just to make her angry. And one day... I was playing with it and it scratched me. Hard. It made me bleed. So I grabbed it roughly and shook it. I shook it to teach it, you know?”

His eyes willed her to go on.

“It bit me. With its awful little needle teeth. It bit and it wouldn't let go. So I hit it. Really hit it. To make it let go. I didn't mean to hit it so hard. But I did. And I heard something snap, like a twig or a toothpick breaking.”

“You're doing fine.”

She wasn't sobbing anymore, but the tears were blinding her. “It just lay limp for a moment. Then it started quivering. Its back legs were moving and it was making the most horrible sound. And I watched it for a while. I thought: serve you right, you nasty little beastly cat. But it didn't stop, and I got scared that someone would come and hear it, and see it, and know what I'd done.”

There was a terrible, tender warmth in Nathaniel's eyes. And a hunger there, too. “What did you do?” he whispered.

“I... I put my hand around its little throat. It was warm, I could feel the noises it was making through the skin. So I squeezed.” Gennie was shaking again, as if she were frozen and never thaw. “And I squeezed. And I squeezed. It felt so good to do it; to stop its dreadful noises. Until it stopped making the sound.”

“What happened?”

“I took it to the bottom of the garden, and I hid it. Under a huge pile of leaves. Two days later, they burned the leaves. No one ever found out.”

“And your sister?”

“She thought it had run away. She cried for days.”

“But?”

“But I was glad. We were even again.”

* * * * *

Gennie sat in a docile haze, watching as Nathaniel undid the straps around her ankles. When he untied her wrists, he had to pry her interlaced fingers apart. All she could think about was that evil, demonic little girl she had been. And that that little girl was still inside her somewhere. She'd never be rid of her, because she'd never been punished, and she'd grown into the fabric of who she was like one of those terrible parasites that slowly devours a tree from the inside.

Nathaniel helped her up the stairs from the basement and down a dimly lit hallway. He led her into a very neat, masculine living room, with an old fashion oxblood leather sofa, in front of a large, fireplace. The fire crackled, and the flames licked upwards as he sat down, and pulled her into his lap.

She couldn't take her eyes off the fire, although she felt his fingers trace the raw abrasion the belt had made around her neck and winced as he drew his hand over the bruise on her cheek.

He made shushing sounds and kissed her, at first gently and then with more and more hunger. Until, at last, he pressed her back into the sofa, pushed up her dress, and fucked her.

As she strained beneath him, arching her hips up to meet his thrusts, every time his cock filled her, it felt like forgiveness. And when it felt like she'd had enough

of it, she bowed her back, cried out, and came. Then, with one hard plunge that made her cervix ache, he flooded her.

It wasn't until she was lying still, feeling his weight on top of her, that she turned her head back to the fire and saw, on the mantelpiece, the figure. The little veiled girl with the lute.

* * * * *

She came awake in a strange bed and could not remember how she got there. Beside her, Nathaniel was still sleeping, on his side with a proprietary arm flung across her chest. Light filtered through a trio of slatted wooden blinds. The room was very plain, as if it were only ever used to sleep in.

Her cheek was tender, the inside of her mouth sore. It tasted of stale blood. When she went to move her legs, her right thigh ached and, edging it out from beneath the neutral coloured sheets, it was banded in a livid, dark red bruise on the cusp of going purple.

Sliding carefully out of bed, she limped to the equally sparse en-suite bathroom. She switched on the light and gasped at her reflection in the mirror above the sink counter. The side of her face was darkened and swollen, as was her bottom lip. Around her neck, a lighter red abrasion and a darker, broader bruise around one upper arm.

She looked, for all the world, like a battered woman. Someone she didn't recognize—frightening. Not because any of the marks were disfiguring, but because of what each of them meant. Sane women didn't let people do this to them. A sane woman would be angry. And in her heart, she could find absolutely no anger towards him for the bruises. No, that wasn't why she was angry. She was angry because she'd told him the truth—her truths, all her terrible truths. But he had lied to her.

“Morning,” said Nathaniel.

Gennie startled and froze. “Where are my clothes?”

He glanced back into the room. “On the chair, over there,” he said, indicating with a toss of his dishevelled head. “Counting your war wounds, were you?”

She gave him a tight, slightly painful smile and pushed passed him into the bedroom, fighting the urge to cover herself. The clothes were draped over the chair. Facing away from him, she grabbed her panties and pulled them on, grimacing at the sensation of the wetness that had dried stiff at the crotch. She did the same with her bra and then pulled the black shift dress over her head.

“Gennie?”

Wadding up her stockings into a ball, she stuffed them into her purse and stepped into her shoes.

“Where's my wrap?”

“It's downstairs.”

“Can you call me a taxi?”

“No need. I'll drive you.”

She turned to look at him. He'd pulled on a pair of soft grey sweats while she'd been dressing. “Just call me a taxi, okay?”

“Is it the bruises?” he asked, in a soft voice.

Shooting him another tight smile, one that hurt considerably more than the last one, she strode past him, heels clicking on the polished wooden floor.

There was a set of stairs off the corridor, and now she thought she remembered coming up this way. Behind her, the wood creaked under the weight of his bare feet as he followed.

He caught her halfway down the stairs, a hand on her shoulder. “Gennie, come on. Stop.”

“I want to go home. Please call me a taxi or I'll walk until I find something.”

“Have some tea. Then I'll call you a taxi. Promise.”

She was right on the edge of losing it, not certain whether she was going to scream or break down and cry again. It didn't matter; it was the same feeling inside. Like lava setting fire to her insides. Like those people they discover three days later in a chair, totally incinerated with pair of perfectly unblemished feet.

“I don't drink tea for breakfast! I hate tea for breakfast!”

It came out like a proclamation of war.

“Fine. I've got some coffee somewhere. Maybe,” he said, stepping a head of her and trotting down the stairs to the hall below. He stood at the bottom with his hand out. “Come on.”

The tragedy of high heels is that, no matter how fast you can race upstairs in them, you have to descend with a certain amount of fanfare, whether you want to or not. When she reached the last step, she ignored the hand and glared at him. “Promise you will call me a taxi? Fucking promise.”

The kitchen was at the back of the house. It was, like the bedroom, very neat and clean. Terribly modern. Not much in it, though. “So this is what you get paid for doing your country's dirty work,” she said, knowing just how cruel it was to say so. But she needed to be cruel then.

He had his broad, naked back to her, scooping coffee out of a tin into a french press. The kettle beside it was coming to the boil, and she felt the same. Nowhere to put all the lava that filled her. He poured the scalding liquid into the beaker.

“Are you angry about the bruises, Gennie?” The question was offered in that measured voice used to obscure pain.

“At you? No. I knew what you'd do.”

Silence filled the room as he pushed the filter down through the dark brown liquid, then took two cups from hooks and filled them with the brew.

“Sugar? Milk?”

“No.” He slid her coffee across the central counter. She put down the purse she'd been clutching onto like grim death, and picked up the cup.

“So what is it?”

Gennie took a sip of the coffee, holding it with both hands, letting it warm her fingers. She waited until he looked up to get his answer.

“I fucking hate lies,” she spat, in a fair imitation of his unpolished accent.

“Isn't that what you said? Remember? Do you?”

“Yes,” he answered quietly.

“The truth, Gennie, you said. That's what you said. The truth, the whole fucking ugly, sick unforgiveable truth.” She cut herself off, her cheeks flaming, waiting for a reaction from him.

But he said nothing, simply took a sip of his own coffee and stared at her.

It was as if once she opened her mouth, she'd never be able to stop and there was no violence she would not do with her words. “Nathaniel. Honourable, damaged, loyal Nathaniel. The man who did his job, who let it turn him to shit, who did the things that no one else would do. Poor suffering, tortured Nathaniel the fucking torturer, with his guts all knotted up with rage and his head full of pain.”

She stood back and pitched the cup at him with all the force she had. It hit him full in the chest, the hot liquid splattering all over him. The vessel didn't break but bounced off and onto the counter, breaking into shards.

He swore as the liquid scalded him, jumping back to dodge the splinters.

“You're a fucking liar. I trusted you. I trusted you with my life, I trusted you with things I've never told anyone. I let you hurt me, humiliate me. I let you terrify me. And you, you twisted cunt, you lied to me!”

Nathaniel stared at her, open mouthed, horrified. He shook the coffee off his arms and with it, shards of pottery tinkled to the stone floor. In several places the shrapnel had ricocheted. There were white flecks and small cuts in his stomach and chest, just starting to bleed.

“What the hell are you talking about,” he demanded.

“The girl!”

“What fucking girl? There is no girl.”

“The piece of Meissen, you prick. The one on your mantelpiece.”

He shut his mouth, flinched as if he'd been struck.

“You didn't sell it to some German. You bought it for yourself.” Gennie let out her breath and picked up her purse. “Now, call me a taxi.”

His teeth worried at his lower lip for a second, then he straightened. “Sure,” he said, put his own cup down and felt in the pockets of his splattered sweat pants. “My phone's in the sitting room. Let me get it.”

As he passed her, Gennie closed her eyes, not wanting to look at him, not wanting, if she had to admit it, say goodbye.

The tug at her hair almost pulled her off her feet. She whipped around, despite the pain but he was already in motion, dragging her behind him as he stalked down

the hallway towards the front of the house and into the darkened sitting room. It had the charcoal smell of a long-dead fire and leather and polish.

“This,” he said, yanking her in front of him and wrapping his arms around her body so tight she could hardly expand her chest, “this is a beautiful thing. It has survived three hundred years, in perfect condition. It was modelled by a master, painted with loving hands, made to do nothing more than delight the eyes. She's a pure, pure thing, Gennie. Not like us. Not like any of us. Not corrupted with age, not cracked. Flawless.”

Nathaniel pressed his lips against Gennie's bruised cheek. “She was stuff to you. You'd have happily chucked her out. But I wanted her. I wanted her, like I wanted you.”

Quiet for a moment, there was only the sound of his agitated breathing. He pressed his cheek against hers and rubbed. She felt the stubble of his unshaven face against her skin.

“So, yes. I lied to you. And I don't regret it.”

“Why?” It was all she could get out at first. “Why couldn't you just tell me it was you buying it?”

Gennie heard his swallow, felt it. Then his heart thundering against her back. The arms around her moved, and his hand slid up her stomach, closing over a breast. He cupped it through her dress, squeezed it, caught the nipple between two fingers and pressed. “Let's play the truth game. All right? You know the rules.”

She knew them now, even as she felt the pressure of the pinch, her eyes began to water before the pinch became the pain that streaked through her breast and up the side of her neck. “Okay,” she gasped.

“Would you have kept my card, would you have phoned me if I had bought it?”

“No.” It was a bleat. A whimper.

And then the pressure was gone. “That's my girl,” he cooed, rocking her, stroking her breast. He buried his face into the side of her neck and kissed her, speaking against her skin. “That's my girl.”

“There was something in you, Gennie. That very first time we met.” With one arm, still firmly around her waist, Nathaniel grabbed a handful of her dress, lifting it, sliding his hand over the bare thigh he'd exposed. “Something wrong, deep inside you. They say you can smell your own kind, I know. But I think it's in the eyes.” Cupping her mound, he squeezed hard once and released, then wedged his fingers beneath her panties.

They slipped into the swollen, wet valley of her cunt so easily, it made her weep. Or perhaps it was something else. He shuffled back, still holding her, still with his hands between her legs, and pulled her down onto the couch with him.

She felt him beneath her, hard and pressing between the cheeks of her ass, through the silk. It was impossible not to move, not to spread her legs, not to grind her ass against him, not to raise her arms and reach back, grasping his head and straining upwards to kiss him. She thrashed and fed on his lips, on his tongue, until he pushed two fingers deep into her cunt and she came, sobbing into his mouth.

Even before her spasms had died, before he pulled his fingers out of her, cupped her jaw and forced her to look at him. “Do you want me to call you a taxi?”

“No.”

“Good, because I can't send you home like this. You're filthy.”

* * * * *

The hot water drenched her the moment she entered the shower, and yet she shivered as he stepped in behind her. Gennie didn't want to analyze what had made her stay, why she had let him touch her. She wanted to believe she'd had no choice, but knew that wasn't true at all. That she could have told him to stop, then, in front of the little porcelain figurine, and he would have.

It didn't seem to matter now. He was pulling her to him, bending to kiss her under the flow, and it felt like whatever terrible thing she carried inside her, he could make it better. Perhaps because he carried something so much worse. She knew then, that he would never stop hurting her, and she didn't want him to, because it was a cycle of light and dark that obscured everything else.

The tile was hot against her back as he lifted her and pinned her to the wall. Wrapping her legs around his waist, he paused, trapping her in that moment of strange breathless possibility before he entered her. Like the wait before the jump, like a hanged man before the drop, like the time you can never take back.

He entered her in one brutal thrust. It made her keen and throw her head back against the wall. The water streamed over her, into her eyes, her mouth, her nose. When she tried to move her head, she felt him bury his face in the crook of her neck. His hand encircled her throat, forcing her to fight for air in the plummeting torrent, struggling in his grip, as he thrust into her again and again until he pressed his teeth into the meat of her shoulder. She screamed as he came.

“Oh, Gennie,” he panted, pushing her wet hair out of her face. “It's never going to be over.”

He lowered them both to the floor of the shower, and began to weep.

* * * * *

This is what it would always be like for them. Always the terrible rage followed by even more frightening tendernesses. That is why, when he stood at her door and rang her bell, she answered.

Three Little Letters

“What’s the R for?” I asked her, in an offhand way I hoped sounded like I didn’t care all that much.

“Oh, that,” she drawled, pulling out the a and flattening it like a ribbon. She glanced over her shoulder and gave a soft, low laugh, like she’d forgotten it was there. “Dumb stuff you do when you’re young.”

Amalia sprawled on her stomach, naked but for the white sheet that had wrapped itself around one beautiful, tanned calf. Her dark, gleaming hair slid like oil over the crest of her shoulder and covered the raised, ridged scar of a letter, and it was gone.

I wanted to ask her what the initial stood for, but she gazed at me with half-closed eyes, and with a testy smile pulling at the corners of her lips. As if she wanted it again. As if I hadn’t just fucked her into the mattress. My dick told my brain to shut up and stop using up so much blood so I could get hard again. Amalia wasn’t one of those women who would hang around long if you didn’t give her what she wanted. I was pretty sure of that.

* * * * *

I’d met beautiful women before. Fucked a lot of them, too. Some were sweet and some were walking train-wrecks. But there’s a scale of beauty when it comes to women, and it’s unique to every man. Some are so far out of your league you can look away without a second thought. You are, after all, what you believe you deserve and I didn’t, in a million fucking light years, deserve Amalia.

I first laid eyes on her at a fundraiser for a worthy cause—damned if I can remember for what. Every other heterosexual male in the room saw her too. Tall, lithe, dressed in a black sheath dress that plunged at the back to show a golden-skinned path all the way down to the swell of her ass. Her hair was pinned up, dark tendrils trailed down the nape of her long, slender neck, but every one of us was mentally pulling out the pins and watching it cascade over her shoulders. High, perfectly proportioned breasts. Hips like a woman—not too narrow, not too wide—and an ass that could curve into the palms of your hands like glory.

If the body was stunning, her face was flawless. God—her mouth, her lips were hypnotic—made to surround the base of your cock. But it was her eyes that trapped me. Big, dark almond-shaped with a little slant. Her mouth was all sex but her eyes were all innocence. That insidious combination forced me to overcome that sense of ‘out of my league’ and introduce myself.

When I did, and she responded with a slow smile and a languid handshake, I became the sort of asshole I can’t stand. I would have this woman. She was mine and she just didn’t know it yet. I’d do anything—utterly anything—to possess her. It was a strength of will thing, an absolute single-mindedness that should have frightened the fuck out of any sane, civilized adult. But the moment she didn’t turn her back and walk away, I was none of those things.

I held her hand too long. She gave me another half-smile and retrieved it. No wedding band. It wouldn’t have stopped me. Nothing would have stopped me.

“What brings you to this worthy gathering?” she asked, tease-heavy drawl in her words. She turned her head to scan the room grown crowded before I answered.

“I think I made a donation.”

Her laugh was moonlight on skin. “Good for you.”

“And you?”

“I designed the invitations. The organizers are friends.”

They'd taken my invitation at the door, so I couldn't pull it out, look at it, and ply her with compliments about it. Fuck it, I thought. “Do you have dinner plans?”

That's all it took. It turned out I didn't have to do anything. Just a donation to some charity and an invitation to dinner.

* * * * *

I watched her eat, neat little forkfuls of the starter. When the crab arrived, she picked up one shattered claw in her fingers and sucked the meat out with noisy, uninhibited relish. The sound of it made my eyes water. Her cheeks hollowed and my cock ached. Thank Christ for tablecloths.

I'm not an idiot. When women do this, they know exactly what kind of game they're playing. She did. I know she did. I just didn't fucking care. I'd play any game she wanted.

After the exchange of pleasantries and the requisite bits of personal information, halfway through the main course, I regained enough common sense to think strategically. I didn't want to blow it with this woman. Sure, I wanted to fuck her, but I wanted more. More of what? No idea. Just more. I wasn't going to screw it up by asking her up to my place. Instead, I drove her home like a gentleman, and she asked me up to hers.

* * * * *

She fucked like she ate. All that golden skin was just pretty wrapping for a carnivore. Like she was born to be in porn, but the really high-end, arty stuff. The reality of her lips wrapped around my shaft blew what I'd imagined away. On her

knees, looking up at me with those big brown doll eyes, leaving lipstick smears as she sucked. It took everything I had not to lose it down her throat.

It was after I'd fucked her from behind that I found it. After she'd spread her thighs wide and groaned over the meaty thuds of my hips meeting her flesh. After she'd arched her back and come, squeezing my cock until I was sure I'd go blind. After I'd emptied every drop of cum inside her.

I bent over to kiss her shoulder and felt the ridges of it against my lips.

An R. A fucking R. With my half dead cock buried in her pussy and my muscles still twitching, I knew better than to ask. I just couldn't help myself.

She moved away. The conditioned air chilled the fluids on my dick as if to remind me that, like everything else, pussy passes. Sprawled on top of the rumpled sheets, her skin dark against their whiteness, her hair a tousled mess, my fingers twitched with a need to clutch at it and demand a response.

The answer was lame. So I fucked her again just to stop myself from asking another question.

* * * * *

It was fear that stopped me from phoning her the following day, or the day after. I didn't want to listen to her turn me down or consider the possibility that I'd never have her again. Had I been a disappointing one-night stand? Finally, I used the number she'd given me.

"Hey there. It's David."

"Hey there yourself," she said in a bored, neutral tone.

"I apologize for not calling sooner," I said, and meant it. "Crazy week."

"Sure."

“No, I mean it. I’m sorry.” I tried to dial down the desperation. “I was hoping, maybe...”

“You could fuck me again?” The voice was still bone dry.

“Well, that, too. But maybe dinner? Or something else?”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Are you gonna make me beg?”

There was a pause on the line, then her laugh, high, glossy and wicked. “No. When?”

* * * * *

It took the advice of a friend to remind me of what I’d almost thrown away. I was up at the Skyline bar, having a few drinks after work with a buddy of mine, Chris. I’d just finished telling him about Amalia when she walk in with three other women. They headed towards the far end of the room.

“That’s her,” I said, putting down my drink and nodding towards her.

“Holy shit. You fucked her?”

“Yeah.” I followed her progress to a table by the big glass windows that overlooked the city. Her girlfriends were cute, but nothing compared to her.

“And you didn’t call her for two whole days? What’s wrong with you, buddy?” Chris snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Hey, over here. Are you shittin’ me?”

Then I was back. Wondering if I should go over and say hello.

Chris read my mind. “Don’t do it. If you go over there now, you’ll look like a desperate asshole.”

“I am a desperate asshole.” She was haloed in the deep orange of the setting sun.

“Sure. You don't have to wear a sign, though.”

* * * * *

I found the second one in the shadow of her right breast. I felt it with my fingertips as I was sucking on her nipple.

She was squirming beneath me, grinding her hips up against mine. I knew what it was before I saw it and my mouth went dry. I propped myself up on one elbow and looked.

Like the first, it was a raised scar. Not a burn, but cut into the skin. It was just as ornate, with a little curl at the leg of the R. Fancy. It had taken time to do. It must have been cut deep.

“What does the R stand for?”

Amalia threaded her fingers through my hair and tried to tug me back down to her tits, but I resisted.

She sighed and stretched on the bed. “Why do you want to know? Why does it matter?”

“I'm just curious. Two of them? It's got to stand for something.”

She tisked like she was humoring a child. Her hand skittered over my bare chest, over my stomach, and went to work on the button on my pants.

“If I tell you...” she said, tease oozing over her tongue, fingers tugging down my zipper. “Will you stop asking silly questions and fuck me?”

Warm skin curled around my cock. It throbbed in her hand, and she laughed.

“Yeah.”

I was almost deaf by the time she spoke again. Sure, even strokes. My dick leaked precum and she used it like lube to stroke me faster.

“It stands for Robert. Old boyfriend. Satisfied?”

I didn't answer her because I made a choice not to come in her hand. I got my pants past my hips, pushed the crotch of her panties aside and slammed into her. But the immanent orgasm faded. All I could think about was the name I didn't know and the fact that she'd let him cut his initial into her. Not just once, but twice. All I could think about was how much she must have loved him, how much she had trusted him, how much passion they must have had. Passion that she'd never have with me, because she'd already spent it on him.

I had to fuck it out of her. Fuck that image away. Of that fucking letter, and her lying there, letting him carve it into her. If I could thrust hard enough, I could obliterate it.

"Fuck!" she sobbed, and pushed at my chest. "You're hurting me."

"Not like he hurt you, I bet," I panted.

"Stop it. Fucking stop it."

I did. I apologized. I kissed her. I made her come and I fell asleep with my arms around her because I didn't know what else to do.

* * * * *

I found the third one as I was teasing her, kissing my way down her stomach. We'd been playing around a little bit with bondage; I'd tied her wrists and ankles to the bed frame with my best Ferragamo and Brioni ties. I smelled the musk of her, working my way down to her cunt. And there, just above her mound was another one. I stopped. This time, I didn't have to ask. Same carefully formed letter cut into the skin. Same curl at the foot of the R. It must have hurt like a bitch.

"For god's sake. Did you think I was a virgin when we met?" Her voice curdled with impatience.

"No." I hilted two fingers inside her wet, hot cunt, hard, just to make the point.

Her muscles tensed and tightened around them. “Then what?”

“What’s his name?” I asked, pressing the pad of my thumb against her clit and circling it, watching her hips rise and fall as I fingered her.

“Why does it matter so much?” she panted.

“What’s his name again?”

“Rick.”

“Really?”

“Not this way,” she groaned. “Let me come on your cock.”

“I thought his name was Robert.”

“Jesus. Just let it go. Fuck me.” She was looking down at me, legs splayed, hips grinding. She pushed herself onto my fingers with a wet, sucking sound. “Just fuck me.”

The smell of her pussy was overwhelming, cloying, woody and rich. It didn’t matter that I was hard. It didn’t matter that I wanted to sink in that flooded, tight hole. I had to know.

“Rick? Robert? Which is it?”

Suddenly she stopped moving. Her body froze. I felt her muscles trying to push my fingers out of her. “Untie me.”

“I need to know. Amalia.”

“Un-fucking-tie me. Now.” Her voice was flat as a steel autopsy table. Her eyes were glassy, on the edge of tears.

“Why did you let him do it?”

“Let him?” The laugh was bitter and edged. “Let him? You'd never understand. Let him doesn't come into it.”

I sat back on my heels and looked down at her. “Three times? Bullshit.”

She shook her head. It jarred the tears loose. “You couldn't begin to understand.”

That's all she'd say. One by one, I undid the ties. Amalia curled up into a ball and cried. Not loud, but in a way that shamed me. I lay beside her, wrapped my arms around her, and told her I was sorry. That it was fine. Everything would be all right.

* * * * *

I tried to tell myself it didn't matter. Everyone has a past. I'd been in love before, with a girl in college. Why shouldn't it have been the same for Amalia? Of course, it was. But it didn't matter how many times I tried to reason with myself, I couldn't get those Rs out of my head. Every time we made love and I touched one of them or kissed one of them. I tried to push it down but it just kept coming back up.

Six months into our relationship, lying in bed on a lazy Sunday morning, I trailed a fingertip over the curve of her shoulder.

“God damn, I love you,” I whispered.

She turned onto her side, sliding an arm over my chest and hooking a leg between mine. “I love you too, baby.”

“Then tell me.”

Amalia giggled. “I just did.”

“No. Tell me about R. What's his name again?”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Riley.”

“Bullshit.”

“Then don't keep asking.” She turned onto her back and sat up.

I grabbed her wrist, pulled her down, and rolled on top of her. “I need to know. I just fucking need to know.”

Her body went limp beneath me and she looked up at me with the coldest eyes I've ever seen. "The next time you ask, I'll leave you. I'll walk out and I'll never come back. Understand?"

* * * * *

Amalia is the most beautiful, hottest woman I've ever known. When we walk into a place, people change. Women look at her with envy and wish they were her. Men look at her with lust and wish they were me. I tell myself I'm the luckiest man alive to have her. That's why I'm going to marry her.

If I tell myself that enough, I forget to wonder who R is, or what they had, or why she let him carve his initial into her skin. Three fucking times.

Prosthetic

Blair had never kissed anyone, ever. And, of course, no one had ever kissed him. That seems obvious, but when people kiss, it's never really clear who is doing the kissing and who is being kissed once their lips meet.

I met him at a craft fair in Camden. He watched me weld the edges of a copper sculpture together. That wasn't odd in itself—lots of men like to watch girls weld. Something about the goggles and the gloves and stuff. They stand there and fantasize about what's beneath it. Or maybe it's the torch. Kind of like girls with guns. Fantasy crap. Sometimes I get guys who want to talk shop, discuss the relative merits of different rods, but that stuff doesn't interest me. I only taught myself to weld because I wanted to make the sculptures. I'm not fetishistic about it. It's just a means to an end.

But Blair wasn't one of those guys either. I could tell he didn't really care about the process. He was antsy and impatient for me to finish, shifting his weight from foot to foot, crossing and recrossing his arms over his bleach-stained black t-shirt. The first thing I noticed when I took my goggles off and looked up was that he was sporting a lot of ink, everywhere.

“Hi,” he said. “Is this your art?”

If I couldn't tell that he wasn't in the market for an art piece by the tone of his voice, one look at his face clinched it for me. It sounds awful to say he was hideously ugly, but that was the truth. Underneath all the ink and the piercings and shit, he might have once been a handsome man. I could have overlooked the Christmas tree worth of stuff hanging from his ears and jammed through his lips and eyebrows, but the swastika on his cheek did it for me. It was impossible to ignore and impossible to look at. My very first thought was ‘asshole’.

“Yup,” I said tightly, turning back to the work.

“I like what you do,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Can I buy you a coffee, or a pint?”

I kept my eyes down. “Nope.”

“Why not?”

I found the next piece of copper to join to the structure and shook my head.

Blunt is always best, I figured. “I don’t like your face.”

“I don’t like yours much either.”

“Good, then we’re done.” I said, pulling my goggles back on and reigniting the propane torch.

I started on the next join. The goggles cut peripheral vision and I figured that if I just ignored him long enough, he’d move on. But when I’d finished and pulled off my goggles again to inspect the weld, he was still there, still shifting from foot to foot.

“Don’t you take commissions?”

I sighed and looked up at him. “You’re kidding.”

“No. I’m not.”

“You can’t afford me.”

“Yes, I can.”

It was impossible to see beyond the mess on his face, the patchwork of symbols and icons. Some of it was clichéd and almost funny - the spider web covering his left temple and his cheek, barbed wire motif across his forehead, the Frankenstein bolts at his neck, the tear-streak - as if some emo twelve-year-old had had a go at him. But the swastika on his other cheek, the bullet piercing through his eyebrow... that wasn't funny. It was revolting. It was a challenge. It was a big 'fuck

you' to anyone who looked at him, and I got the sense that he was perfectly aware of it. "Look, I'm really not interested."

"I wouldn't ask you to make anything you'd find offensive."

I sat on my haunches and put the torch down. I was broke. It wasn't like I was overburdened with commissions from rich collectors. The last one I'd had was for a primary school south of the river, six months before. I'd only sold two pieces since then. My money was running out and I didn't want to suffer the humiliation of signing on for the dole again.

"What exactly do you want?"

"I'd rather not discuss it here."

"I thought you said you didn't want anything offensive? I'm not bloody making you an eight-foot Nazi sculpture for your living room. I've got ethics, you know."

He looked dismayed. At least I thought it was dismayed. It was hard to tell with all that junk on his face. "It's nothing like that. I just..." He glanced around. People jostled him as they brushed past. "I just don't want to talk about it in a public place."

* * * * *

It wasn't really the prospect of a commission that made me relent. It should have been—I needed the work—but it wasn't. What finally prompted me to pack up my gear, store it in the locker beside the stall and walk up to the pub on the corner with him was his ugliness, the handsomeness it was hiding, and curiosity about what a man like him could want. I have always loved a good puzzle.

That's what I was thinking as I sat at the pub table and watched him order our drinks. People allowed the man his space. Up at the bar, bustling with punters, they

gave him a foot's clearance on either side. The bartender kept his eyes on his work and barely looked at him when he handed Blair his change. What would it be like, I thought, to go through life with a face that pushed people away? There were situations in which it might be very convenient, but in the end, I thought, it would be fucking lonely. Why would anyone in their right mind consign themselves to that kind of exile?

I'm no great beauty myself. There was a time when I'd been angry about that. I saw just how much easier it was for pretty girls to have the things they wanted given to them. But then I saw that being given things had its downside. I watched the pretty women I knew make so many compromises, get snarled up in webs of expectation and obligation. And it turned out that being pretty was never enough in itself. People wanted to possess that beauty, to say they owned it, to consume it, to wear it, to employ it to enhance themselves. At worst, beauty made you a public spectacle. At best, someone always expected a blowjob as well.

I came to the conclusion that getting what you wanted for yourself was less complicated, and you didn't owe anyone anything. I only had to suck dick when I felt like it, and I still got laid as often as I felt the itch.

Blair sat down and slid my pint across at me. For a while we just drank in silence, and I looked at his face. Really looked at it. And the more I did, the more the swastika and the bullet piercing his eyebrow and the inked noose around his neck and the kitschy tear-streak of a scar down from the corner of his eye to his jawline stopped offending me. The spider-web at his temple, the enigmatic numbers on his upper lip, the badly inked Frankenstein bolt on his neck. It was like sifting through the contents of a charity shop.

“Most people don't look as long as you.”

The movement of his face was a bit of a shock. I'd been lost in my scrutiny. "I bet. They look away, don't they?"

"Usually. Or they end up bleeding and unconscious."

I put my pint down. "Is that a threat?"

"No. Just a fact."

It's not like I was actually worried he'd hit me. "Were you as angry before you got all that crap done?"

He met my eyes and worried the ring in his lip with his teeth for a moment, then settled his mouth into a thin smile. "I got the crap done because I was angry."

"It didn't help, did it?"

He shrugged. "Can we talk about the commission?"

"Sure," I said, rousing myself and pulling my notebook and a pencil out of my rucksack. "What were you thinking of?"

"I need a pair of lips."

I smiled. "You already have some, underneath there, somewhere."

"A pair of metal lips."

"Like the bloody Rolling Stones thing? With the tongue lolling out?"

"No. Just a pair of lips."

"Do you want it flat or in three dimensions? Like, plumped out lips, or more like a cartoon?"

He thought for a while. Closed his eyes, recalling, I guessed. I waited. Around us the pub felt damp and boisterous, sour and yeasty with the smell of spilled pints.

"I want..." He hesitated, then opened his eyes. That was the first time I noticed his eyes. In seeing them, all the markings receded a little. They were coppery brown, with little flecks of gold and green in them. Gilded foliage, like an autumn

garden trapped in his head behind that graffiti-covered wall. Although he had those thick, dark lashes that men always seem to have and women would kill for, the moist skin that rimmed them was red, as if he didn't sleep much. But they were sad, warm eyes, the kind that make your own tear up a little, in sympathy. Sexy eyes. "I want a kiss."

"A kiss?" I repeated, mechanically, because I was unable to look away. Once I'd noticed them, amidst all the other distractions, I couldn't stop. It was a shock to realize I did want to kiss him. To close my eyes and feel the warmth of that flesh surrounded with all the detritus. To feel the cold bits of metal interrupting contact with flesh. There was something so chaotic about all that anger. I thought I'd be able to taste it on his mouth.

"Yes, a kiss."

I gnawed at my own lip, feeling its plumpness. "Well, lips aren't really a kiss. But, I guess you want pursed lips, yeah? A kissy mouth?"

Glancing down at my notepad, I sketched furiously, quickly drawing a series of lip outlines, pursed for a kiss.

"It needs to be very simply done. Just enough lines of metal to make it obvious that it's a kiss."

"Stylised?" I muttered, continuing to draw all sorts of kissy mouth shapes. Plump ones, thin ones, mouth open, closed.

He moved closer along the bench and looked down at the pad. "Yes. Not too plump. Not stupid. Just... real. As close to real as you can."

Then, he put his index fingertip down on the notepad on top of one of the sketches. "That one."

“Okay.” I glanced up at him, back into those coppery eyes. His skin smelled coppery, also. Of pennies clutched in a damp hand, too hard and too long. .

He moved away skittishly along the banquette and then over onto the stool across the table. “Yes. Exactly like that,” he said, taking a pull of his pint and turning his head towards the crowded bar.

I guessed that whatever momentary bonding we’d just done was over. “What kind of metal?”

“Stainless steel.”

Puzzled, I shook my head. “I don’t work small. I don’t make jewelry for piercings. But I’m sure you could just go out and buy something like that.”

“No,” he said. “I want it big. Not for a piercing.”

“Then what?”

“I want to mount it on a wall.”

“How big?”

Blair thought. Raised his hands to his chest. Thought again. Did odd things with the shape of his open hands. “About that big,” he said, showing me a distance of about six inches between his palms.

“That’s still a bit small for mounting on a wall. Wouldn’t you like something bigger? And aluminum would be a fuck of a lot cheaper than stainless steel. I can polish it and varnish it so it doesn’t haze over, you know.”

“No. It needs to be stainless steel.”

I shrugged. “Okay. You’re the client. Anything else?”

“Can you mount it?”

“Of course.”

“On ceramic or stone or something?”

“Yes, of course. Which would you like? Granite might look good.”

“Granite then.”

* * * * *

I did do all the due diligence and took down his contact details and told him I'd get back to him with an estimate, but I needn't have bothered, because on the way down to catch the tube he pushed his hand into mine, and I ended up taking him back to my loft.

All the way there, the other passengers stole glances at him, looking away when they thought they were in danger of being caught. They left the momentary contact with scowls on their faces, or a shake of the head, or pursed lips, but not the kissy sort. Part of me kept wondering why I was taking this man back to my place. Then I'd glance at him - I did it three or four times - and feel the unexpected tug of him. Half lust, half vertigo: it was all that mad energy, I think, that made me feel that way. The prospect of fucking a whirlwind, like the peculiar fascination of staring up at a funnel cloud. A strange natural phenomenon that was both frightening and thrilling.

* * * * *

I let him through the door and into my mess of a loft. Bits of metal everywhere, and my workbench. It still stank of hot copper from the work I'd done in the morning before I'd left for the craft show.

“I'm sorry about the mess,” I said, not really meaning it.

“Don't be.”

I tried to kiss him then, but he turned his head and wouldn't let me. When I tried again, he pushed my face away with the palm of his hand.

Standing back, I glared at him. “I didn’t ask you up here to see my etchings, you know.”

“I know.”

“So what are we doing, then?”

He was silent for a while, walking around the space, eyeing my bench, and my unmade bed, and the cobbled together kitchen in the corner, until he stepped up behind me and circled my waist with his arm. He pulled me back against him and he was hard.

“I don’t kiss,” he said, smearing his cheek against mine.

“You don’t...” but I never managed to finish the sentence. He’d popped the button on my jeans and slid his hand down the front of my knickers. A man with really good fingering technique can make me forget almost anything.

The ink and the piercings and the purposeful scars didn’t stop at his face. I wish I could remember most of them, but time and other things have faded my memory. I do remember sucking his cock, if only because it was also pierced and I worried my teeth might catch on the ring and do him damage. But it didn’t worry him at all. He simply grabbed a handful of my hair and came down my throat.

It was the fucking I remember. After he’d rolled on the requisite latex, pushed my legs apart, and seated his cockhead between the lips of my cunt, our eyes met. And there it was again, that trapped garden glistening behind the scarred-up wall, but with the black holes of his pupils sucking in the surrounding colour. It was an odd sensation to be so horny, so aching to be fucked, and yet stunned into immobility. As if I’d forgotten what we were doing.

“Don’t look at me,” he said, clipped and angry. “Turn your head or I’ll fuck your ass.”

“Make me,” I said, feeling defiant and scared all at once. Feeling my teeth meet. Feeling their sharpness.

With one big hand, he cupped my face and turned it aside. That’s the way he fucked me. Holding my head so I could not see him. At first, I was so angry, I felt the first thrusts, but it was as if I was out of my body, looking at these two mismatched people go at it. Slowly, as he kept thrusting into me and twisting his hips as he seated his cock, something changed.

There was, I realized, no obligation to look at him. No need to make sure my expression was appreciative or benevolent or approving enough. It didn’t matter who he was. Only that I was being fucked and it felt good. For a while, that sense of being outside and beyond seemed erotic in itself. The sheer vacancy of it almost made me come. In a single note of breath, of quiet moan, it changed. I heard it in his sounds first, but then I felt it in his muscles, smelled it coming off his skin with his sweat. His hand shifted from my face and fisted into my hair. It might have been the normal climb towards pleasure that happens every time, but I didn’t think so. It was an awful, inexorable wounded rage. And there was no maintaining that sense of disconnection any more. I was pulled, bodily, into that wound, with its jagged, scabbed edges and its inflamed, unhealed interior. I came just seconds before he did.

Later, after he fell asleep, I sat cross-legged in bed and rolled the one cigarette I allowed myself each day. Asleep, he was beautiful. Without a conscious mind to animate all the signifiers, imbue them with intention or volition, they lost their power. All the wreckage on his surface just floated there, so much litter on a pond, which doesn’t stop the pond from being beautiful.

I thought about leaning over and kissing his cheek while he slept, but I didn't. It occurred to me that there was something unethical about that. Like robbery. I lit my fag instead.

* * * * *

I completed my commission for Blair the following week. A cut and incised steel form of a pair of lips in the act of a kiss, mounted on a lovely slab of black granite that contrasted nicely with the work itself, and I'd worked the mounting bolts into the design. I was pleased with it. Not exactly crazy about the symbolism, but I'd been a perfectionist about the finishing. It would look nice mounted on a wall, even if it was a little small. But I'd raised the lips enough from the stone to allow it to cast a neat, clean shadow in angled light. It would look just as good sitting on a table, with the lips floating above it. I wouldn't have called it a work of art, conceptually, but it was a very satisfactory piece of design. We'd spoken during the week, but he'd never mentioned anything but the sculpture and, taking my cue from him, I'd kept it strictly business.

"Would you like to come and pick it up at my loft?" I asked, when I rang him. I admit to being hopeful of another evening in bed.

"I was hoping you could bring it over to my place and help me mount it on the wall and..." His voice trailed off.

"And other things?" I said. I've never really believed in beating around the bush with someone I wanted to fuck.

"Yes, other things."

"Sure. What's your address?" He gave it to me and I agreed to meet him there at seven in the evening.

"Alicia?"

“Yes.”

“Bring your propane torch?”

“I don’t need it. I’ll bring a drill and some brackets to mount it.”

“Bring the torch.”

“But...”

“Please.”

* * * * *

Lugging my tools, on top of the sculpture on its base, on public transport seemed almost impossible. So, after a bit of begging and the promise of a pair of custom-made drawer handles, I talked my downstairs neighbor, the carpenter, into lending me his car.

The address surprised me. I guess I had expected him to live in a squat somewhere, but he lived on a thoroughly middle-class street of the quiet Victorian variety. The sort of place where housemaids used to get knocked up and kicked out, and now people run wife-swapping soirées that eventually end in divorce. I pulled into the gravelled forecourt in front of red brick house with lovely pseudo-Gothic arches on the windows. Blair met me at the door and helped me carry my things inside.

Inside, the place was eerily empty. No carpet on the floors, no furniture, no pictures. Nothing. It was all painted a prim, glossy cream, but that was the extent of the decor.

“I thought you lived here,” I said.

“I do. I just don’t use it. I have a room upstairs. I mostly just live in there.”

“Are you trying to rent it out?”

“No.”

“So where would you like the sculpture?”

“Upstairs. In my room,” he said. He caught my eye, briefly, then stared over my left shoulder. He jutted out his chin, working his jaw, chewing on some invisible future prospect.

“You don’t want it here in the living room? It would look very nice on that wall, above the fireplace,” I suggested.

“No. Upstairs. I’ll show you,” he said, picking up my duffle bag of tools and starting up a winding, wooden staircase. “Bring it.”

His room on the floor above was at the front. It was big and high-ceilinged and almost as bare as the rooms on the ground floor. There was a mattress on the floor, and I was pleased to see he was just as domestically challenged as I was. Against the back wall he had a desk with a laptop on it, and a small bookshelf full to the brim with tattered novels. There was one large photograph on the wall opposite his bed. It was framed like an art photo. The subject was a smiling young girl, standing on a pebble beach with the sea churning in the background. Even though the photograph was in black and white, it was obvious by the light that it had been a grey day. The girl had struck a rather glamorous pose and her cotton dress and long dark hair were both caught up in the wind coming off the sea. There was something familiar about her.

“It’s a marvelous picture,” I said, setting the sculpture down on the floor and moving closer. It was an old photograph. It had that ‘70s grain to it, and the dress was a-line, with a Peter Pan collar. “Did you take it?”

“No. My mother did.”

“Who’s the girl in the picture?”

“My sister Emily.”

“Oh, yes. She looks a lot like you. I can see it in the cheekbones and the forehead. And the mouth.”

“We’re twins.”

“What about you? Where are you?” Because it struck me in that moment that when people had twins, they were mad about taking pictures of them together. As if they wanted to capture the phenomenon of sameness over and over again.

“I’m over to the right,” he answered. “Not in the picture.”

“Why not?”

“She didn’t want me in it.”

I laughed, looking at the little girl's glamour pose. “Your sister?”

Blair said nothing. It made me feel unaccountably guilty, as if my question had bruised the silence before it had even filled the room.

“No,” he said, finally, in a low, flat tone. “My mother.”

* * * * *

Blair wanted the sculpture on the opposite wall, above his bed, so we pushed the mattress away from the wall and I got out my drill and the brackets to hold the granite. He was very sure of exactly where he wanted it placed. Rather too low on the wall, as far as I was concerned. I explained to him that it would look better just below eye-level, but he didn’t seem to care.

I used a spirit level, marked the corners, and after sinking the bottom brackets into the plaster, got him to help me hold the piece in place as I installed the top and side brackets.

“What do you think?” I asked, stepping back and looking at the piece from a distance.

He smiled and pushed a fold of fifty-pound notes into the back pocket of my jeans. "Thank you. I think it's perfect."

I felt the sting of regret. It was done. I looked over at him. "I guess that's it, then?"

"No. I need you to do one more thing for me," he said, pulling his cotton long-sleeved t-shirt over his head.

I grinned and laughed. "Oh, I think I can do that."

Blair tilted his head in an apology. "Not that, actually. I need you to heat it up."

"You what?"

"Heat it up with your blow torch."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

I folded my arms over my chest and stared at him. "No, I need to know why I would ruin the finish on a perfectly good piece of my sculpture."

"It's not a piece of sculpture."

"Fuck you. If you didn't like it, why didn't you just have the balls to say so?"

"I do like it," he said, sliding his arm around my shoulders. I shrugged it off but he pulled me into his chest. "I just meant that, to me, it's not a piece of sculpture."

"What is it then? A fucking door knob?" I said angrily.

"No. It's a brand."

"A what?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything to me. Just heat it up."

I opened my mouth to ask him for an explanation, a clarification. Half convinced I could make him say something else if I played dumb enough. I could

pretend not to know what he meant, and he would forget the whole idea, and we could fuck instead. But I shut it when I saw his expression. He had a triumphant sort of look on his face. Like, what did I expect? How stupid was I?

He'd used me. He'd lured me and used me. He'd flattered me and fucked me. My eyes pricked, flooded and then I got angry with myself for being so unbelievably thick.

“Why?” I bleated pathetically.

“I can't explain it. It's way beyond words. It's just something I need. I have to have it.”

“I don't understand.” But I did, of course. All the scars and the tattoos and the piercings. He wanted one more big, angry mark on his body and he'd manipulated me to get it. And still those beautiful brown eyes, peering out from all that ugly, self-righteous anger. “No, I can't do it. I won't do it.”

“Then I'll just buy a torch and do it myself,” he said coldly.

“It's fucking big. It's going to hurt like hell.”

“I know.”

“Then why? Let's just fuck and forget it. I'll take the sculpture back. You don't have to pay for it.” I reached for his hand and he let me take it, curled his fingers into mine.

“It's not enough.”

“Why?”

He shook his head. “I...” and his jaw worked, trying to pry out words that he obviously couldn't find. “Please,” he said.

I sat there looking at him in that blank room, with the smug, happy little twin on the wall. And opposite, the thing I'd made. As if there were teeth just beneath

those metal lips. What if I let him do it on his own, and he fainted and burned the house down, or hit his head and bled to death?

“Okay.”

He smiled and looked relieved. “I’ll pay you for the extra time.”

“Fuck you. This,” I said, trying to put it into words, “can’t be a transaction.”

“No. I guess not.”

* * * * *

As small as the piece was, it took some time to eat the heat. Still, I worried that it wasn't holding the heat evenly. It had to be tangerine hot, Blair said, to brand just right, so the skin seared but didn't split or come away with the metal. My hand shook as I played the torch across the metal surface. I spoke patience to myself and to the steel, sweeping the torch across it with long, fluid strokes from below, coaxing the metal into taking the heat upward to the top of the piece.

“What about after?” I said out loud. “What happens after? Do you have bandages?”

“No. It’s best to leave it open to the air for a while.”

“What if you faint?”

“Then I faint. Just don’t let me fall on you. I’m heavy.”

“Shut up. Fuck. I don’t know why I’m doing this.”

“Is it ready?”

I stood back from the metal, glowing even and pale red, and shut off the torch.

“God, I don’t know. I think so.”

He stood beside me and looked at it. “I think we’re good.”

Without warning, he wrapped his arms around me, pivoted, and pressed his back flat against the searing steel.

I knew, as I heard the hiss, as he began to shake, that, in part, he was using my weight to keep himself there. Making me even more complicit than I already was. Sharing out the burden of this small act of self-immolation. Like a kiss. The way - once you've started - you can't remember who initiated it or whose lips are whose. It ceases to be anyone's fault.

Remapped

“Let me call you Daddy,” I said.

There was nothing but hiss of a bad digital connection. The screen’s cold glow cast harsh shadows across the rumpled landscape of my bedclothes. I was glad, now, that Blue* had refused to use the camera on Skype. Glad he couldn’t see me because, as the hiss stretched on, I began to cry. Out of shame, maybe. Out of fear that I’d disgusted him.

* * * * *

SLIP32: Don’t you ever get tired of typing?

BLUE*: Sometimes. You?

SLIP32: Wanna Skype?

BLUE*: Cam, you mean?

SLIP32: Yes.

BLUE*: I want to hear your voice. But no video.

SLIP32: All or nothing.

BLUE*: Just text then.

What if I didn’t like his voice? What if it was squeaky or nasal and a complete turn off? What if he didn’t like my voice?

All or nothing, I’d insisted, for a while. I was mindful of how annoying a voice could be. Sometimes I felt like I spent my life being passed around from one phone voice to another—the bank, the school, the mobile company. The minute there was a problem and I had to talk to someone directly, it was like a voyage into the underworld.

“You’ve reached the offices of...”

“Just hold while I redirect your call.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have access to that information, let me pass you on to our service department.”

“Would you like that in blue or green?”

“Your transaction has been denied due to insufficient funds.”

“I’m sorry, there’s an error in our records.”

“Could you spell your surname again?”

I could develop a fast hate-on for the person at the other end of the line if I didn’t like their voice. More frightening still, I could almost fall in love with someone if they had the right voice. I had long suspected that the Apple Helpdesk hired their staff based on the sexiness of their voice. I once developed a terrible crush on a tech who had stepped me through the process of debugging a hardware problem. It had taken almost four hours. All the way through the steps, he stayed on the line with me. Finally I asked him if he was single. He said he wasn’t.

So, for a long time, Blue* and I stuck to text. For a while it didn’t matter. It wasn’t just his vocabulary or the fact that he didn’t indulge in passion-killing abbreviations. He was a good at it. A teller of hot stories. Enough detail in the right places. And he’d pace his responses just right, as if he could tell exactly how horny he’d made me. At first his posts were slow and long, full of lush descriptions. I’d do my best to match him. As the stories went on, we’d get more explicit, and the lines would get shorter, harsher, raunchier. As if the words themselves were pressing, pushing, demanding, stroking, penetrating. He knew. I knew he knew. He knew I knew he knew. I’d never met anyone who could textfuck the way Blue* could.

BLUE*: Tired of typing yet?

SLIP32: I am. But it’s okay.

BLUE*: Don’t you want to hear my voice?

SLIP32: Yeah, but I want to see you too. Don't you want to see me?

BLUE*: No. Not really. I like it this way. No visuals.

SLIP32: Scared I'm going to be disappointing to look at?

BLUE*: I'm sure you're not. But maybe I am.

SLIP32: I don't care. Anyway, I thought men were supposed to be visual?

BLUE*: How do you know I'm a man? <Arches eyebrow>

SLIP32: Syntax. <Smirk>

BLUE*: Busted.

In the end I gave in. Mostly because the allure of a two-handed wank was tempting. I'll admit I was scared, though. We'd been texting for more than a year. I'd grown very fond of Blue*. He wasn't the only person I was netfucking, but he was my favourite by far. Sometimes I thought I played with other people to keep my feelings for him in perspective.

The first time I heard that creepy ring on Skype—the alert sounds like a submarine in distress—my adrenal glands went into overdrive. There he was. Blue* calling.

“Hi.”

“Hello there,” he drawled.

“You're... You've got an accent!”

“Most people do.”

“Scottish? Jesus, you're Scottish.”

“I am indeed. And you're American.”

“Canadian.”

“My apologies.”

“Don't. I'm not one of those Canadians.”

“Those Canadians?”

“The kind that get offended when people think they’re American.”

“Excellent. So...”

“So?” I was a little disconcerted. The transition from text to anything else was always awkward.

“Are you put off by the voice?”

I smiled. “No, not at all. You’ve got a very sexy voice.”

“So do you. What should I call you?”

“I’m not sure. What should I call you?”

“Blue.”

I laughed. I heard him breathe. “Okay, Blue. Be that way. I’m Slip.”

“Oh, you’re going numberless.”

“And you’ve dropped your asterisk.”

“True enough.”

“Hey, Blue?”

“Yes?”

“How do we start this?”

He hummed. It was a lovely, rumbling cogitation of a hum. “Close your eyes. Put your hands between your legs. I’m going to tell you a story.”

Sometimes Blue would start the story, sometimes I would. We’d always set it somewhere strange: in a deserted laboratory in Antarctica, in the bombed out ruins of Berlin, in the middle of a coup somewhere in South America, or a tea plantation in Assam. We’d always be somewhere other than where we were. Always other people. For a while, we played in the past, like we used to when we texted, but we started running out of historical events.

“New game,” he said, one day. “Are you up for it?”

“Of course.”

“Open up Google Maps,”

“Okay. Done.”

Coordinates popped up in the message pane. He took me to Japan and he went down on me right outside the Yasukuni Shrine, in the dark, with my hand clamped over my mouth so I didn't make a noise while I came.

We worked through a list of natural disasters, great battles, and famous palaces. For a while, we did a global tour of graveyards and were ghosts, vampires, the undead, lovers in mourning. Then we downloaded usermaps and went to places where UFOs had been sighted. Sometimes I'd be the alien. Sometimes it would be him. Sometimes it would be fast and rough, sometimes it would be ridiculously romantic.

“Tonight, I want you to come to me in my sleep,” I said.

“Am I a rapacious alien, hell bent on impregnating a human?”

“Mmmm.”

“Do I bend over you while you're dreaming, and rest my long, grey fingers on either side of your temples and push lewd images into your brain to make you wet?”

“You do.”

“Good.”

Blue wasn't a prude; he had a boundless imagination and would take it almost anywhere.

“I'm a dragon,” he whispered, one night. “With a long, forked tongue. And I'm going to trail it up the smooth, pearlescent scales of your belly until your dragon cunt weeps bioluminescence. Then...”

“Then what?”

“I’m going to devour you, head first.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Maybe a lot!”

“Not once I’ve swallowed your brain. After that, it’s all mindless ecstasy.”

And it was.

Slowly it got more personal. I showed him on Google Earth where I almost drowned off the coast of Cancun, in Mexico, and he swam out and saved me, and then fucked me slowly on the beach in the wet sand until all the fear was gone.

We got lost. Lost somehow in the maps, and in the pictures of the streets, and the stories. I really think we did. Because after he saved me from drowning, I felt safer. I went swimming few days later, and that old, panicked feeling like I was floating into an abyss was gone. It was as if he’d wormed his way into my memory of that event and fixed it. Made it turn out right.

I didn’t tell him. I didn’t want him to think I was crazy.

He took me to the town where he’d grown up and fucked me from behind against the brick wall of his primary school until my cheek was marked from the roughness of the brick and the soot came off on my hands. We went there a few times. I think, maybe, fucking there did something for him, too, because he was quiet afterwards. We lay there, listening to each other breathe. I thought I heard him trying to hide the fact that he was crying.

“Blue?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“I am. Thank you, love.”

“For what?”

“Just... thank you.”

Over that year, we took each other to every place we'd been wounded, or rejected, or humiliated somehow, and wrote new memories on top of the old ones. Fucked with the timeline. Fucked with our own heads. We never talked about what we were doing; I never told him exactly what the old memory was, and he never told me. It was the sort of magic that only worked in silence. Had I told him the memory—had I put it into words—it would have given the thing too much power, been too strong, too solid to change. In the quiet of knowing, not speaking, the wounds were vulnerable to the forces exerted by our pleasure. They'd re-knit in a different, softer pattern.

* * * * *

“Are you there?” I asked, after more than a minute of empty hiss.

“I'm still here, Slip.”

“Can I call you Daddy?”

“No.”

The pop-up message informed me that he'd ended the connection. I tried to reconnect but he didn't answer. An hour later, Blue's account disappeared.

Back To Nature

The girl's hair is short and of no particular colour. That mid-brown so many American girls have and dye to something more interesting. Elizabeth suspects she cuts it herself, in despair, in front of the bathroom mirror on Friday nights when her loneliness threatens to choke her. The girl—because she is just a girl, really—is called Caroline. Not beautiful. Not ugly. Just plain. Her jaw too wide, her eyes too small. Her arms plump and untuned, exposed in her cheap, brightly patterned sun dress. She's long-bodied and inelegant.

Caroline sits at the bar in the Caravelle Hotel, her chubby elbows propped on the chrome rail. A loose sandal dangles from her left foot and her toes are bright with chipped cherry polish.

Wine glass in hand, standing in the open doors out onto the terrace, Emile whispers into Elizabeth's hair. "Pick someone else..."

Elizabeth forces herself to release the smile. "No. Her."

"Jesus." He breathes into the curve of her neck. His hand molds into the curve of her back, then slides onto her hip. Desire unsteadies his fingers. "Jesus Christ."

"Can't you do her?"

"Of course I can do her. I can do anything. She's just..."

He can do anything. It's an ability she finds alien but enviable, disgusting and fascinating in equal measure. "Yeah, she's sweet. She's painful. She's a saint."

"Exactly."

"Then her. I pick her."

"You're an evil bitch. I fucking adore you."

There's too much saliva in Elizabeth's mouth. No matter how often she swallows, it feels like it will leak out of the corners at any moment and expose her. She takes the stool next to Caroline and flips on the warm charm.

"We met last month, didn't we? At that seminar on governance?"

"Yes! I remember you. It was good, wasn't it?"

Caroline is so earnest it makes Elizabeth's gums itch. So well meaning, so sure that good old American know-how can salve the wounds of this crumbling, impoverished city. That obscene and cheerful arrogance is the plump, ripe sin that Elizabeth has decided merits punishment.

Emile doesn't know this. That's part of the game. He must trust her to choose a worthy victim.

* * * * *

Caroline sits between them on the cracked oxblood leather of the ancient Mercedes as it crawls through Saigon's night traffic. The street is thick with insanely expensive SUVs on one side and over-burdened motorbikes and rusty bicycles on the other. Beyond Elizabeth's window, a thin, bow-legged grandmother wrestles her soup cart over broken paving stones. She wears the expression of someone resigned to the fact that life is just going to keep serving up shit forever. The instant rage dries out her mouth. Its violence never ceases to shock her. After all these years, she keeps expecting to find that she's grown a thicker skin, but it never happens. You can't save everyone, she used to tell herself. Now she knows she can't save anyone. In the dark, noisy chill of the air-conditioned car, Emile strokes Caroline's thigh with the back of his hand.

Elizabeth feels her flinch, reads the girl's distress through her clammy shoulder, and turns to her.

“Sh-hh. It’s alright. It’s what you want, isn’t it?” Her eyes slide past Caroline’s worried face and settle on Emile. “He’s handsome, isn’t he? You want him, don’t you?”

Emile’s fingers have drifted up the bare left thigh. They’re pushing into the crevasse of compressed flesh, moist with sweat and perturbed arousal.

“Well, I…”

Elizabeth cups her head and kisses her, wet against Caroline’s nervous, parted lips. “Don’t you want to be his little toy for the night? I want it. He wants it. Don’t you?”

And that’s all it takes. The girl’s reluctance is a scoop of vanilla ice cream in the noonday sun. Her thigh muscles relax and Emile slides his fingers into her. He worries her clit to orgasm just as they turn the corner onto August Revolution Street.

In the front seat, the driver laughs at Caroline’s choked sounds of pleasure. She stiffens.

Elizabeth strokes the girl’s cheek. “Oh, I haven’t introduced you. I do apologize. Trung, this is Caroline. Caroline, Trung.”

Trung glances into the rear-view mirror. “Chao, Em Caroline. Be careful with these two. They’re the strangest foreigners I’ve ever worked for.”

“We love you too, Trung,” says Elizabeth. Beside her, Caroline is mute, her body rigid, distress has soured the scent of her sweat. “You’re welcome to stay and watch.”

Trung makes a sound of disgust. “White girls aren’t sexy. They have breasts like cows udders.”

“Fuck you too,” quips Elizabeth, as they pull into the driveway of the crumbling villa.

“Don’t you approve of fucking the natives?” coos Emile. “Is that,” he pulls Caroline’s head back against the seat, licking her neck, “too politically incorrect for you?”

Caroline’s response is an unintelligible blend of anguish and arousal.

“Go on, get out of my car, you perverts,” says Trung. “My wife’s got dinner waiting for me.”

* * * * *

The house smells of stale afternoon heat, of damp clay tiles, of soft, decaying plaster and, now, of the girl. Her odor rises up to him as he kneels between her spread legs. Her dress wadded around her waist and unbuttoned to her navel. Her panties now a striped lilac garter around one thigh. Her hips are arching up off the sofa cushions to accommodate the three fingers he has inside her grasping, sopping cunt. Emile caresses the memory of her distress, sucking its bones. Each flinch of fear, each flush of anxiety is a chunk of sweet, meaty marrow. It makes his cock throb. It makes him want to hurt her and roll her pain around his brain like a gobstopper, but he knows she wouldn’t be willing.

“Not a kinky bone in her body,” he says to Elizabeth, nested on a nearby armchair, feet tucked beneath her, sipping cheap rice vodka from a cracked bowl. It’s leaking. A rivulet has run down her forearm. The tang of the alcohol mixes with the smell of cunt.

“I’ll take your word for it. Can she suck cock?”

“I don’t know.” Emile gazes down at rumpled, half naked Caroline. “Can you suck cock?”

“Yes,” says Caroline, in an almost whisper.

“Good, because you want me to fuck you, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re not exactly a beauty. It’s going to take that to get me hard enough to do it.” This is a lie. Mussed and aroused like this, she’s really quite sexy, but Emile knows she doesn’t know it. He stands, unzips his pants and fishes out his cock, which is as hard as it ever gets.

“You cruel bastard,” says Elizabeth. “You awful prick.” Her voice snags on the vowels.

He grins at her and, cupping the back of Caroline’s head, slides into her mouth. The girl sucks with poignant and eager ineptitude. She gags as he pushes her head down, feeling the tip of his cock breach her throat. Her hands fly to his hips, her mouth loses its suck. She doesn’t like this. Pleasure and self-disgust coil around the base of his spine.

He could come like this, feeling her fingers grappling at his hips, consuming her paradox, her desire to please and her discomfort at gagging. But he won’t. Elizabeth wants to watch him fuck this girl. He knows this. She likes the sin of it—of being cruel together. And she loves imagining herself the discarded wife, the illusion of martyrdom. She wants him to be guilty.

God damn it, he’s about to come. Emile pulls his cock out of Caroline’s mouth, only to notice her face is tear-streaked. That almost pushes him over the edge.

“She’s crying,” Emile says.

“That’s so sweet. Fuck her, then.”

“Hey!” says Caroline. “Stop that. Stop...”

Emile smiles down at her and strokes her wet cheek. “Stop talking to my wife?”

“No. I didn’t mean that. Just stop acting like I’m not here.”

Elizabeth's laugh worms through the penumbra of the room. "Good for you, Caroline. Assert yourself."

Emile lays Caroline back onto the sofa, pressing kisses onto her teary cheeks, her hot, damp neck. "Of course you're here. And I'm going to fuck you. When was the last time that pussy of yours was well and truly fucked?"

Caroline opens her mouth, but Emile doesn't let her finish. His fingers are back between her legs, inside her while his thumb circles her clit. Then, spreading her thighs wider with his other hand, he replaces his fingers with his cock and shoves into her.

Women's bodies, thinks Emile, are so easy. He has never understood why some men find them such a mystery. Caroline has forgotten what she was going to say. She's straining beneath him, canting her hips as he thrusts, pushing her pelvis upwards to meet the pleasure of the thumb he has pinned to her clit. She's making almost no sound, just soft squeaks that cut off as he hilt himself.

Across the room, Elizabeth is crying quietly. Like she always does. Emile has held her while she cries. He knows the jerky heaves of her shoulders, the sound her closed throat makes as she gulps air through the spasms, the way she unconsciously balls her fists, the creases at the corners of her eyes that channel the tears onto her cheekbones. The way they nestle into the folds of her nostrils, the crook of her mouth.

Beneath him, the girl is coming again, making it just that much harder to withdraw, before he shoves himself into her one last time and ejaculates.

* * * * *

The bedside lamp flickers. There's a break somewhere in its wire and air from the ceiling fan buffets it, causing it to short out. Caroline has been dispatched by taxi,

back to her hotel, with a minimum of awkwardness. The afterwards is always the tricky bit.

Elizabeth rolls on her side to look at Emile who is staring back at her over a field of worn, white cotton.

“Absolve me,” she says.

Emile smiles and pulls a strand of hair away from her lips. “Of course I do. Tell me the same.”

“You know I do,” she says. Rolling onto her back, she takes his hand and pulls it over her face. “We did a bad thing. Again,” she whispers against his salty palm.

“We always do, love.”

Flesh Composed of Suns

The boxroom smelled like her cunt. Naya was unsure if the room had always smelled this way and her cunt had taken on its scent, or whether these sagging towers of paper had absorbed, had inhaled and held onto, the tang of her sex. She'd had so much sex there, it was impossible to know.

Naya surveyed the collapsing towers of cardboard containers, overflowing with curling, yellowing documents. The small, grated window, set high in the back wall, allowed in a grid of greasy, golden light. Each small shaft captured its share of floating motes of disintegrating paper. Wills, deeds, pre-nuptial agreements, divorce proceedings, partnerships, dissolutions, contracts, all quietly turning to dust. It would take, she estimated, another five hundred years for time to do its work completely.

The box room had always been Taylor, Graham and McBride's guilty secret. Clients imagined their legal documents were stored with auspicious care in gleaming metal filing cabinets. And for a while—while they were still active—they were. But after a few years of dormancy, the files would be dumped into sturdy boxes and transferred here, to the box room. In the thirty-six years that Naya had worked at the firm, she'd never had to retrieve a file from this place. This was where the affairs of men came to die.

She settled her rump on a chipped typing stool. Her knee joints cracked. She took a sip of tea from her mug.

“What a mess. I didn't even know this room existed,” said Evaline, the young, pretty paralegal who had only started working at the firm a year ago.

Evaline had high, shining cheekbones, enormous amber eyes, walnut brown skin and a penchant for expensive shoes. She was intelligent and ambitious, Naya

thought—wasted as a paralegal. Should be studying law herself instead of doing the grunt work for men with mediocre minds.

“Was this your office once?” The young woman leant a shoulder against the open door frame, long arms crossed over her chest. It was obvious she was attempting to be kind and supportive, but Naya sensed she was uncomfortable and bored.

“It was always full of rubbish—just like this,” said Naya. “Run along. Let me sit here quietly for a while.”

Evaline looked relieved and glanced at her mobile phone. “Well, I do have some work to finish. But don’t be too long. We’re popping the champagne at five. You can’t miss your own retirement party.”

Listening to the woman’s heels retreat down the painted wooden stairs, Naya closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

* * * * *

Naya was seventeen, she’d finished a Pittman’s typing and shorthand course, and had just been hired as a junior typist at Taylor & McBride’s—Mr. Graham having not appeared on the scene at that time.

It was summer and Joseph, a lanky runner of nineteen, had just come back to the office a little tipsy from a pub lunch. The sweetness of the sun seeped from his wool jacket, the hair at the back of his neck was damp with sweat. He shone. Under his skin, there was an emanation itching to be trapped between her legs. She took him up the back stairs, his moist and eager hand silently caught in hers, to the secret boxroom.

“What if someone hears us?” he whispered, even as he reached beneath her full skirt and tugged at her plain Marks and Sparks underwear.

“Don’t make a noise and they won’t,” she whispered back, amazed that she could string two words together for craving him.

Inside her. That’s all she could think about. To feel him filling her and have her face pressed to the shoulder of his shirt. It smelled of starch and a hot iron, and the cider that leaked from his pores. Wanting him so badly, she felt her cunt was a vortex that would suck everything in, and turn her inside out.

They fucked. With her perched on the old, battered desk and he between her knees, his trousers around his ankles. Grinding each other to dust. In the silence of the room. Their fragments joining the many floating in the beams of light from the latticed air vent.

Naya remembered his hands, splayed on her buttocks, his fingers dimpling the flesh so hard that, next morning, there were four little bruises on each of her arse cheeks. The glorious hiccup of his hips as he sank into her at the end of each plunge, as if his body was assuring itself it had truly reached the end of her passage.

For two years, she’d catch his eye, passing him in the main office corridor. Or he’d let the back of his hand brush against her arm in the mailroom, and that was it. She’d finish whatever she’d been tasked with, and then slip up to the boxroom to take him into her again.

He’d asked her out once, in a shy and formal way. “Why spoil things?” she’d replied. “Why ruin something so lovely?”

Joe went to apprentice as a clerk at a barrister’s chambers closer to the city. She told him she’d miss him.

* * * * *

But then came Hugo, who was a toff. A junior solicitor who was following in his father’s footsteps and smelled faintly of cats. Hugo shone, too. It was a different

shine to Joe's, but a shine all the same. The first time she took him up to the boxroom, he was embarrassed and didn't know what to do. Naya unbuckled his belt, unzipped his fly and squirmed her hand down the front of his trousers. She stroked him until it became obvious what should come next.

Hugo loved breasts. It didn't matter whom they belonged to. Whenever he had to speak to a female member of staff, he invariably addressed himself to their chests. In the boxroom, he'd unbutton her blouse and push up her bra, just to look at them, to touch them, to nibble her nipples.

It felt strange and dangerous to be exposed like that, which only made Naya wetter. Hugo would push her back onto the desk and watch the thrust of his hips set her breasts a-jiggle as they fucked. Then he'd bend forward and press his face between them when he came.

* * * * *

Simon shone. He shone for ages. He'd leave notes under her blotter and in her pencil holder. Rude notes in his beautiful, looping handwriting. "Your pussy needs petting." and "Guess what I want?" and "I'm going to shred your knickers."

He knew better than to speak, and he wasn't in the least bit shy. He had fucked her from behind with her face pressed to the closed door, he would kneel between her legs, with his head under her skirt, and lick and suck her until she left half-moon gouges in the wooden lip of the old desk with her fingernails. He took a manic pride in not coming until she was gasping and jerking and strangling his buried cock with her cunt muscles.

He died one weekend in a car accident and Naya stuffed all the filthy notes he'd written her down the front of her knickers and went up to the boxroom on her own, to remember him.

She lay on the floor of the boxroom, her skirt up around her hips, and ground all the words he'd written into her pussy until the ink stained her labia and made blue blotches on her crotch of her underwear.

For almost a year after Simon, Naya couldn't see a shine on anyone. But it passed eventually.

* * * * *

There were many others. Not so many that Naya couldn't picture each one of them, or put a name to them now. And it wasn't that she felt nothing for them. They all shone in their way.

When she became office manager, a man called Reg, who owned the News Agents in the tube station near where she lived, proposed to her.

"That's very nice of you, but I don't really want to get married," she said with what she hoped he'd understand was regret.

"You're not getting any younger, you know. Don't you want kids?"

"I just love where I work. I don't want that to change," she said. "And it would, wouldn't it?"

"You modern career women," Reg muttered. "There's no pleasing you lot."

Naya had never thought of herself as a modern career woman. She was just happy the way things were. And, she thought, she was very easy to please. But she didn't tell Reg that.

* * * * *

The dust motes had disappeared and the light was waning in the boxroom. Naya stood, smoothed the back of her skirt and picked up the mug of cold tea. Once again, she closed her eyes and inhaled the soul of the room.

From the bottom of the back stairs, Mr. Graham called up in his reedy voice.

“Naya? Are you coming down, or do we have to start this party without you?”

“I’m coming,” she said, as she started down.

“Saying goodbye?” whispered Mr. Graham as she reached the bottom step. He had a glint in his eye that winked like the silver on the watch-chain on his waistcoat.

Naya nodded her head, and smiled. He slipped a hand around her forearm and led her along the corridor toward the boardroom. “You can always come back for a visit.”

“I don’t think you’re up to it, Sir.”

“No, probably not. More’s the pity. You?”

“Nah, my boxroom days are over.”

“Retirement plans?”

“I’ve signed up for a course to learn Mandarin Chinese. Maybe I’ll try my hand at gardening. Who knows?”

The Laughing Man

Men don't cry like women. I've always thought that most of the ways in which people say that men and women are different was bullshit. We're not from Venus, they're not from Mars, and all that gender stuff. That layer's not as thick as everyone wants to believe it is. Maybe it's just that I'm not all that womanly, but other than the dangling genitalia, I think we're pretty similar. Not when it comes to crying, though.

The first time I saw a man cry I was thirteen. It was my aged, alcoholic godfather. A friend of my father's and a writer of some repute, he was sitting on the linoleum floor in our kitchen, with his head tilted back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. He didn't make any noise. The tears streamed down the sides of his haggard face as if his eyes were organs whose only purpose was to produce tears. The shoulders of his dusty black suit jacket rose and fell in uneven jerky shrugs. I thought at the time that I should have at least been able to hear the breaths he was taking as his chest moved, but his body was utterly silent. The woman he'd been paying for sex, week in and week out for twenty-seven years had died.

Since then, I've seen hundreds of men cry. It's what I do for a living—a profession that I just sort of fell into. In a way, I'm a lot like the woman my godfather wept over. Men pay me to watch them cry. Some want me to hold them. Some sit rigid in the worn, comfortable couch under the window in my office and prefer me to keep my distance. Some talk and some say nothing. I'm not a shrink; I don't give them any advice. I just watch them cry.

It usually takes a while. Sometimes hours. But I've always charged a flat fee; that way, they don't feel rushed. It would be indiscrete to mention a figure, but let's just say it's sufficient. And it's a curious thing: it costs most men a lot to cry. If I

didn't charge something that felt vaguely like the monetary equivalent of their resistance to the act, they just wouldn't feel they'd had their money's worth. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but this isn't about sense.

Of course, the flexible session length can make scheduling a little difficult, but they all seem to understand that it takes however long it takes. And god knows, men know how to hold it. If I need to postpone an appointment, it's not usually too much of a problem.

Men come to me to cry for all sorts of reasons. Bereavement—that's an obvious one. Failed relationships—more common than most women think. Professional meltdowns are another big one. But you'd be surprised at the variety. And sometimes they cry just to cry. Just for the sheer pleasure of being able to cry in front of a stranger who won't judge them for it.

Very few of my clients want to acknowledge why they've come to me. It's like they need to pretend that they're there for some other reason. They want to believe I'm the accountant of their feelings, or the tax consultant of their heart or, if they're semi-honest, they'll treat me like a therapist. But that's not what my card says. They know that's not what I am. They just need to pretend. I've got one client who tells his secretary that I'm his mistress. As if that's somehow more acceptable than what he's really doing with me. Yet, in a way, what we do together is just as intimate as sex, just as physical, just as exposing, just as unguarded and freeing. Sometimes, for me, it's much more exciting.

I remember the first time a client asked me to slap his face, just to get him started. That was hard for me, but it was a good lesson. Some men need something to jolt them out of their everyday way of being. I'm torn over whether it's the pain or the shock that makes the trick work. And I know what you're thinking, maybe I have a

client who's just a masochist that can't admit it to himself. Hey, maybe. But he's a good crier, and a good client. I've been seeing him once a month for a few years now.

Watching men cry, I've come to understand how hard it is to be a man. Sure, I know. You're going to say that men don't have it half as hard as women. And historically, they've had it a lot worse. But this isn't really about whose had the hardest time. I just know now—it's hard for men to be men. You think they'd just grow up knowing how to do it, but it's not true.

My favourite client—I'll call him John—is an interesting guy. I'd guess he's about forty-five, maybe a little older. He's one of my oldest criers. I have to factor in extra time for his appointments because he needs to work himself up into something close to a blind rage before he can open the floodgates. Not that he's uncivilized, or abusive or anything. When he first came to me, he'd try to build up steam in my office, but that didn't work for him. He said I was just too nice. So, with a bit of trial and error, we figured it out. He needs to walk up and down the street in front of my building for about thirty minutes, working himself up into something close to a mute fury. When he's ready, he comes upstairs, takes a seat on the couch and I ask him what's wrong.

Then John starts to laugh. At first, he's like a guy watching football on TV. Big, bright guffaws. Then it turns to belly laughs, as if he's at a comedy club. But the laughing curdles, growing glassy and thin. The tendons on his neck get tight, until the laughter has died down to nothing but a long rumbling chuckle. That's when he begins to sob and, once he gets going, he's a phenomenal crier. Loud and long, full-bodied howls, so physical and intense, it is as if his misery is a pleasure that transports him beyond the everyday world. Watching, listening, feeling his slow climb towards open crying, I'm also transported to a state of raw, vertiginous bliss. It's a terrible and

wonderful thing to see him obliterate himself through weeping, like sharing in his unmaking. John lets it all out, and there must be a lot in there to let out because it takes him a while to get through it.

I make a rule never to ask my clients what they're crying about. Often they want to tell me, but sometimes they don't. I leave it up to them to share if they want to.

But my laughing man? Never says a word. I've got a real sweet spot for him and, I'll admit it, my desire to know what's causing him his pain is almost too much to bear. But I know he'll never tell me; he's just not the type. It's bad though. I know that much.

Sometimes, after he leaves, I need to take a break and have a good hard cry myself, on his behalf.

Lucy the Scholar

People joke about love at first sight because they know love has nothing to do with it. It's uglier than that.

I met Lucy at a conference up at York the day before nature wrapped the whole of the country in the white blanket of winter. In front of a long table piled with labeled sandwiches with fillings that sounded good but probably tasted like crap. Each little triangle nestled in artisanal bread that was curling at the edges.

"May contain nuts." She read the label out loud and then looked at me. "May? How could they not know?"

"Covering their asses?" I suggested. I glanced at the nametag on her lanyard. She'd presented one of the morning papers on something to do with colonialism in science fiction. I hadn't gone to it; I'd been delivering my own atrocity on gender-fluid aliens.

"They should stop dissembling and make up labels that say 'We don't give a fuck.'" "

The way she said the word 'fuck' snagged my attention, pronouncing it with a long, yawning 'u', as if the word had a moist hole in the middle, braced by two brutal consonants. Not the way people say it when they toss out the word in casual conversation. The way they say it in bed, when they've had one already but are craving another.

That was what made me look at her. She wasn't beautiful, although I would come to think she was the most beautiful woman in the world. But just then, there, at that dismal lunch table, I only saw a pleasant looking woman, approaching middle age, wearing a black pullover and a beige skirt and sensible heels. Her dark brown

hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Too tight, as if to stress just how serious she was about her subject.

She was an imposter. That's what I thought. Not a grave imposter—not a mergers and acquisitions manager masquerading as an academic—but something subtler, more enigmatic, and it drew me to her.

“How did your talk go?” I asked, following her over to one of the round, empty tables beneath an imposing window with a Gothic arch.

It was sleeting under an aluminium sky in the courtyard beyond. There was an absurd bronze cow in the middle of the quad—a gift, apparently, from a rich, 18th Century farmer who wanted to remind the high and mighty academics where their funding actually came from.

“Oh, you know,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I got a few good questions at the end.”

“I'm sorry I missed it.”

I wasn't at all sorry I'd missed it, but I was sorry I'd missed watching her deliver it. Sorry that I'd missed the opportunity to spot all the other ways in which she might have given her secret self away.

“Don't be. I bored myself.”

“That's a shame,” I said, and held out my hand. “I'm...”

But she looked down at my name-tag as she took my hand. “Francis.” Her fingers were cool and damp, but strong—almost too strong—as they curled around my hand. “Yes, there are no surprises here.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. There are always surprises.” I arched my eyebrow and smiled.

“Really? Like what?” And even though her response was light, I knew I’d launched my arrow in the right place because, just below her eyes, at the top of her cheeks, she flushed.

“People in the lunch line who say the word ‘fuck’ like they need one.”

At first she said nothing. I readied myself for a firm rebuff.

The flush grew and spread. “Did I?” she asked. Not with any coyness but like someone who genuinely didn’t know.

“Yes, you did.” That was the moment. Part of me realized the room was now full of other attendees, and several of them had brought their plates to our table and had availed themselves of the seats. But it just didn’t matter. “Do you?”

“Yes, I think I probably do.”

* * * * *

That evening, the snow began to fall. We were cocooned in a drab room at the conference hotel, where time had stopped and everything but Lucy had ceased to exist.

I tugged her jumper over her head and caught the sharp, fermented scent of nervous sweat. It plummeted down my spinal column and forced its way down. Way down. And with the unzipping of her skirt, up rose the thick, cloying smell of her cunt. More than a smell, it was a command that made me drop to my knees, cup her panty-covered buttocks with my hands, and press my face to her crotch. My nose, my lips, my chin pushing into the saturated cotton, into the dense nest beneath, pushing the lips of her cunt apart. They were firm, engorged, ready to be split. And under all of it, against my tongue tip, the shameless, mindless little appendage that wanted, despite all her best efforts, to run her life.

Even on that winter's night, on my knees, nudging her backwards with my face in her crotch, until her legs met the edge of the bed, until I grasped her hips and pushed her onto her back, I knew that I'd met my abettor. That nodule of nerves and I would conspire to have her all to ourselves.

Reclined, bra still in place, her body scored by the shadows of the paned window, she arched her hips for me when I dragged her panties down her thighs. The soaked gusset left a trail of effluvia along her inner thighs. I felt the cooling slipperiness as I pushed her legs apart to get back to her dark furred cleft. Its pink interior gleamed insolently in the poor light. Her hips canted up to meet my open mouth.

Greedy. She was so greedy. Above me, Lucy made curled, barbed noises the moment my pursed lips surrounded her demanding little sentinel. And something far less domesticated when I screwed two digits inside her. Buttery and smooth against the backs of my fingers, complex and cat's-tongue rough against the front. I drew her clit into my mouth, snug against my tongue, and felt her muscles cinch my fingers together, drag them deeper into her voracious hollow, as if she'd take my whole arm if I let her.

I would have given her more than my arm. In that moment, and for many months after, I would have pushed, my head, my torso, my hips, my legs, into her. I would have fucked my entire body inside of her and looked out at the world from behind Lucy's eyes. And perhaps, in a way, I did.

When she came, I pinned her to its agony, to teach her that no bucking or writhing or flailing on her part would free her from me. I brought her, trapped and thrashing against the barricade of my body, forcing her to come through me instead of beside me. The only thing that could escape me was the shredded, formless sounds

she made as sinews locked, muscles jerked, and every orifice other than her mouth lensed shut in those long, jerking moments of her pleasure.

After, I bathed her in the dark bathroom, where only dim shafts of light found resting places on the ripples of the black water in the tub, or on the plane of her clavicle, or the hard curve of her knee. To cleanse her of her musk and her fluids. Not to be rid of them but to ensure that the next time they emerged I would be wholly responsible for their arrival.

She cooed, sensate and wordless, as I dragged the wet, soapy washcloth over her skin. She mewed when I kissed her: my mouth still briny with the taste of cunt. Her kisses lazy and sloppy at first—then hungry again, sucking my tongue onto hers. All it took was a soapy set of fingers under the waterline. Her legs spread, thigh skin squeaking against the porcelain tub. And there was my new best friend, hiding in her folds, demanding more stroking. More petting and more pinching, more thumbing and rubbing. Her hips pushed urgently upwards.

“What do you want, pretty Lucy?” I grazed the pad of my thumb against her swollen, sunken clit.

“You know. You know!” she hissed, reaching one hand beneath the water’s surface, clutching at my wrist, pushing my hand against her.

I dragged her arm out of the water and onto the side of the tub. “No interfering. Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“You know what. Fuck me.”

And there it was again. That lovely word with its brutal, violent edges and abyssal centre. The vowel as empty as her cunt.

I pushed a teasing index finger into her opening. “Like that?”

“Yes, no. More”

Adding another, and forcing them past all the fluttering muscles, I asked, “More like this?”

She groaned. Her hips bucked, making the water lap at the edges. The tendons of her thighs were rigid, pressing wide against the confining sides of the bathtub.

“More. More.”

My fingers stilled inside her. My thumb stopped circling. “You have a greedy cunt, Lucy. You *are* a greedy cunt. That’s your little secret, isn’t it?”

Her panting echoed against the dark tiles. “Yes,” she said. It was so quiet. An assent lost in a breath.

I knelt beside the tub, and cupped my free hand around the back of her damp neck. I squeezed it tight. Damp tendrils of hair curled and tangled between my fingers. Nestling my lips close to her ear, I felt a droplet of her sweat on my lips, the salt stinging until I licked it away. “Show me what a greedy cunt you really are,” I hissed, and pushed a third finger up into her.

“Fuck me.” Her voice was sulky, needling. The walls of her cunt tightened like a prompt.

“No. Show me how much you want it.”

Lucy made a sound that began deep and closed in her throat, until need pried it out of her. Her hips bucked once in the water, then again. Her arms tensed as her hands gripped the sides of the tub, and she began to move her body, to slide herself onto my fingers. She was hesitant at first, almost gentle.

I strengthened my grip on the back of her neck. “That’s not exactly what you want, is it?”

“Uh. No.”

“Show me how you want to fuck, Lucy.”

She was embattled. I felt it through her skin, heard it in her sounds, calling to what was possessive in me, to what delighted in her stubborn reluctance to lose herself in my hands. I wasn't going to let her be some serviced rose. I would make her shed her petals, see them churned under in her convulsions and brew a perfumed soup of her flesh.

Each roll of her hips became more urgent, until she was using all her strength to drive herself onto me. Her movements and her noises lost every vestige of pride, of intellect, of decorum. She fucked herself with my fingers and I held her neck, forcing her to contort her body into a headless thing, that drove and plunged and gorged itself full to bursting.

* * * * *

The next morning, the world was mute and white. Our feet squeaked like mice in the pristine snow as we walked through the grounds of the Minster, York's old gates, and ancient battlements conquered by weather. Lucy, pink-cheeked and wool-wrapped, her hand in mine; I thought I'd conquered her, too.

I thought if I could keep her hungry to be what she had been that night with me, I would have her forever. That nothing could take her away from me.

But after the morning tea, when Lucy the scholar stood up and took her place at the podium, and began to speak, I knew I was wrong.

If In Some Distant Place

“The irony was, I’d imagined the Revolution would be exciting and romantic,” said Madam Dai, fiddling with the gaudy jade ring on her fat middle finger, “But it turned out to be drab and incredibly boring.”

Robert pursed his lips to stifle his smile. He couldn’t recall a time in his life when irony hadn’t tasted sweet on his tongue. It was, he thought, chiefly a journalist’s disease, this delight in witnessing the miserable consequences of ill-considered decisions. And far from making him dislike Madam Dai for her embittered confession, it made her all the more likeable. So few people saw their mistakes with such honesty or clarity.

“I was a spy, you know,” she said with a giggle. Yes, it was exactly a giggle, kittenish and flirtatious. Incongruous in an 80-year old woman.

But everything about Madam Dai was incongruous, from her considerable bulk—elderly Vietnamese ladies tended, usually, to be tiny and birdlike—to her startlingly jet-black hair. At first, Robert had assumed it was the result of a home dye job, but realized, after she tugged it sideways in a moment of pique, it was a poorly made wig.

The ‘Thư Viện’ restaurant had been, she explained, her law library in earlier days, before the fall—or the liberation, depending on your political affiliation—of Saigon. The shelves were no longer filled with books. Instead they bowed under the burden of dozens of massive jars containing the corpses of poisonous snakes floating in clear rice-brandy. But every so often, the rows of glass were interrupted with dusty photographs in ornate and tarnished silver frames: the Madam with Mitterand, the Madam with Breshnev, the Madam with Pierre Trudeau.

“I see you like my drinks cabinet,” she purred. “Snake wine is very beneficial for men, you know. Men like you, of a certain age. It helps with...” she trailed off and, raising her eyes to the high, water stained ceiling, shrugged mutely. As if erectile dysfunction were a matter of which she knew much, but was reluctant to say.

“I’ve heard that,” said Robert.

Without asking, Madam Dai motioned the thinner of her two elderly helpers over. What emerged from Madam Dai’s mouth was a scalding stream of verbal urine. Ten years of covering the war in Indochina had not accustomed Robert to the way in which the Vietnamese spoke to those they considered their inferiors. Clearly, Communism hadn’t cured them of the habit. For her part, the ancient, skeletal maid was not to be bullied. She responded with an equal measure of screeching venom. And this time, he did catch enough of the words to understand them.

“We’re trying to run a business here, you stupid old bitch.”

This time Robert couldn’t help the smile. The maid relented, hefted one of the enormous jars off the shelf and thumped it down onto their table, seemingly unconcerned with breaking the thing. Inside the glass, the violence both physical and verbal brought the entangled mass of dead cobras momentarily to life. They gyred lazily in the jar. Their opaque eyes bleached white in the alcohol, their scales sloughing off into the liquid as they slid over each other like sinuous, reptilian zombies.

The old maid came back with three small, thick glasses, so old and scratched they had lost their transparency. She banged each of them onto the table so hard it sounded like gunshots in the small, high-vaulted, bare walled room.

Madam Dai smiled serenely, revealing dental work that accessorized her jewelry, and unscrewed the large, rusted metal lid. “Have a drink with me, Mister Robert. We shall toast the old days.”

Only then did Robert recall the third member of their party. He turned to the quiet woman who sat at a little distance from the table, chain-smoking. The woman who had caught his eye at the Caravelle’s rooftop bar. The one who had brought him here, promising him amusement. At first, he’d thought she was one of the younger cadre of reporters here to cover the Anniversary celebrations. Then he’d guessed a Russian bar girl on a night off. But now he wasn’t sure. Too young for him, of course, but a visually pleasing enigma nonetheless.

“Are you up for drinking some of this?” he asked.

Nuria stubbed out her cigarette and pulled her chair back to the table. She spread her hands, palms down on the sticky plastic tablecloth. “Of course I’m up for it. I’ve always wanted an erection.”

* * * * *

The food Madam Dai had ordered without consultation arrived. On the table cluttered with greasy glasses, snake specimen jars and overflowing ashtrays, there were small plastic plates, each with a shoddy sample of Vietnamese cuisine. Wise enough not to partake herself, she replenished her glass in the murky jar.

Like a portentous Greek chorus, Robert thought he heard the dead snakes in the jar whisper: “Don’t eat the springrolls.”

“I was the first woman to sit in the senate,” said the old woman. “Back in the old days, when we were pretending to be a democracy. Me, with my law degree from Paris, and my beautiful stylish shoes.”

Her black eyes glinted, the liner around them had run into the creases of her skin and her false eyelashes sat curled and dusty black on her heavy lids, like dead spiders on cupboard shelves.

“Those men,” she said. “Those fucking men. They just couldn’t help themselves. And the Americans only made them worse. The corruption was...” she shook her head and her wig, after a short delay, agreed. “The corruption was so thick. So thick. I can’t even find words for it. It was like the whole of Saigon had lost its mind. It was something past greed, you know? Ridiculous cherry red Cadillac’s being flown in on a moments notice. Whole crates of refrigerated lobsters left to rot on the dock in the sun. No one did their job. Everyone was too busy squirreling away what they could skim off the Americans. No, skim is the wrong word. I was a spoiled woman, you know? I had been born into a rich family, brought up in a big French house, sent to the Lycée. I thought I’d seen corruption all my life. But it was nothing to this. Nothing. I couldn’t stand the sight of the excess. Perhaps you can’t even comprehend it.”

She looked at Robert, blinking. A black trail of moisture had wormed its way into the puffy hollow under her eye.

“I think I do,” he said.

“Maybe I have something to thank the Americans for.” Her old eyes settled back down on the half-empty glass on the sticky plastic tablecloth. “Maybe they made me patriotic. Maybe they turned Saigon into a bathtub full of money and all the shits floated to the top. That’s when I met my Colonel. That’s when I fell in love.”

“He was Viet Cong?”

“Viet Cong?” she cackled. “You Westerners, you have labels for everything. You think once you put names to things you can control the world. Like Adam in the Garden of Eden.”

Robert decided to ignore the snakes and bit into a spring roll. Without something to soak up the rice alcohol, he wasn't sure he'd make it through the evening. It was a tough, greasy little thing. Like a fishy tootsie roll.

“So, what was he like, this Colonel of yours?”

Madam Dai closed her eyes and her stained, wrinkled lips spread smooth across her mouth, and displaced all her sags and lines onto the sides of her face. “He was so handsome. He was a teacher, you know? Or that's what he was pretending to be. I met him on a tour out to see one of the newly invented strategic hamlets out near the Cambodian border.”

“Near Tay Ninh?”

“That's right. God that place was poor. Poor and filthy.” She shook her head again. “He showed me the school they'd built for the village children. And there was a little clinic. Oh, he was so soft-spoken. He was from Central Vietnam, you know. The peasants there are almost unintelligible. But he was from Hue. I could tell. He was courtly. I knew right away he wasn't a teacher.”

“But you didn't say anything?”

“I didn't care. That slim young man, in his neat, belted trousers and his bright white shirt. You should have seen his hands. He had elegant hands. After all the greedy, fat pigs in Saigon, he seemed to me like a god of the rice fields. With his soft voice and his ravenous eyes.” She grinned again and took a sip from her glass.

“So, how did you two get together? I mean, in those days, it couldn't have been easy.”

“About three months later, he came to my office in Saigon. Ostensibly to organize funds for some pre-natal program the Americans were using to try and win ‘hearts and minds’ with.”

Madam Dai put down her glass and looked at Robert. “I have always been a clever woman. Believe me, I knew exactly what he was doing, trying to recruit me. At first, I’m sure it was all about doing his duty. I knew that. I just didn’t care. I knew what he was, and I was willing—no, no, I was hungry—to be swept up with his cause. And I wanted those elegant hands on me. I wanted them to lead me to something else, somewhere else.”

“So what did he want you to do?”

“Oh, he didn’t tell me any of that at first. That first visit to Saigon, I took him back to my house and let him fuck me in my marriage bed. It was the best sex I ever had.” She chuckled and looked over to the dusty shelves and the stained plaster. “Not that he was such a great lover. No. The pleasure came from knowing that, with every thrust, I was letting go of all that filth and all that corruption. We screwed until all the French in me came off on the sheets. Until there was nothing left but a Vietnamese girl. He purified me. He fucked me red. Literally.”

* * * * *

Robert and Nuria walked back towards Lam Son Square, down the night-time chaos of Dong Khoi street.

“Thanks for that,” Robert said, after a considerable silence. “Madam Dai is one hell of a character. If she were ten years younger, I would have been tempted to seduce her.”

“I’m pretty sure she’d still be interested.”

“I don’t think I could get past the dusty wig. I don’t even want to imagine what those breasts look like.”

Robert was doing exactly that, Nuria suspected. There was a small, private cinema in his head, with a reel of silent film featuring Madam Dai: wig askew and ancient breasts swaying, seamed lips frozen in an ecstatic o, grey-haired cunt plundered by a headless cock in some jerky clip of impossible pornography.

Nuria shrugged. Forty years from now, perhaps she’d be one of those women. Women who retained some sad ghost of desirability. Women who time had placed beyond the reach of casual objectification. A woman who would hold allure only for someone with a penchant for the eroticism of disgust.

Eppur si muove.

That was the true horror, wasn’t it? That a woman might yearn to be desired once desire was impossible? Exiled to some imaginary table in the always-open restaurant of well-past-their-due-date women who were once beautiful, once desirable, once fuckable, but now not. Waiting at a table, cluttered with organic snake-wine viagra, for someone to overlook, or forgive, or even take delight in what time had done to them.

Is anyone aroused by what time does? Nuria suspected there were. Maybe there was a secret society of them who occasionally got together and partied with the small but fanatic amputee fetish club. Perhaps they traded photographs: I’ll trade you two wattles for a thigh stump?

“Can you take me to that club I’ve heard about? Apocalypse Now?” he asked.

“So now I’m your city guide?”

Robert smirked. “My dear young lady,” he quoted, “we’ve already established what you are, now...”

“We’re establishing your price. Yeah, very funny. Sure I’ll take you. But it doesn’t open until 11. Want a coffee?”

“Sure. Coffee on the terrace at the Continental? That’d bring back memories.”

“Long gone, I’m afraid. The Saigon Tourist took over the hotel and enclosed the terrace. It’s a sub-standard Italian trattoria now.”

He nodded like a man grown used to the disappointment of the irretrievable.

Instead, Nuria chose Brodard’s—a cafe overlooking the same square. They sat by windows open wide to the scant night breeze, the petrol fumes, and the cacophony of the evening traffic. Overloaded motorcycles, three and even four astride crossed the square, avoiding collisions in strange, looping trajectories. At the Opera House, a localized version of Macbeth was over and primly dressed members of Saigon’s self-identified intelligentsia poured out onto its broad, colonial steps. Bicycle-based enterprises, selling balloons and dried squid had strategically staked their territories, with the expectation of custom.

Their iced coffees arrived in tall, sweating glasses with long-handled ice-cream spoons and garish neon straws. For a while, they sipped and watched the mayhem.

“Oh, look. It’s my favourite man,” said Nuria. “We’re about to catch his eight o’clock show.”

In the middle of square, amidst the milling bikes, a man of about fifty was starting to dance. Terribly thin and barefoot, he had a close-cropped brush of dark hair. His clothes were torn, stained and faded khaki. The shirt came off first. He swung it over his head in a stripper’s parody, revealing a hollow chest, burnt almost chocolate by the sun. Then, after a little fiddling at the waist, off came his ragged, oil-

soaked pants, slipping down over the swell of his pale and boyish buttocks and puddling around his shuffling feet.

“Holy shit. What’s he doing?” whispered Robert. “I have an urge to cover your eyes and tell you not to look.”

Nuria glanced at Robert. “I’ve seen it before.”

Motorcycles swerved around the naked man, giving him a wider and wider berth as he reached for his groin, clasped his semi-tumescent cock at its hair-thatched base and began masturbating.

“He does this often?” asked Robert. “Right in the center of the square?”

“Usually on Friday or Saturday nights. But sometimes on weekdays.” Nuria didn’t take her eyes off the small figure.

His sun-striped skin was an obscene contrast to the human-driven, metal and rubber machines that wove around him. He turned in slow, full circles as he wanked, like one of those plastic ballerinas in a jewelry box. Instead of a quaint and tinny music, he revolved to the experimental song of many beeping horns. Some like quacking ducks, broken-throated from overuse, some like tuneful gunshots.

“Don’t the police come?”

“Eventually.”

The figure in the centre of the square had stopped gyrating his hips. Intent now on completion, he stroked himself violently, ass-cheeks flexing as he delivered his cock into the cave of his fist. It was a race, but one in which the runner was fully aware of the spectators.

“He’s insane.”

“I think it’s kind of a game for him. To see if he can make himself come before the cops arrive and bundle him off.”

On the steps of the Opera house, faces painted with disgust, parents firmly turned their children away from the spectacle. Pedestrians shouted curses. Young women giggled, their doll-like, perfectly manicured hands screening their mouths. But everyone who could look did look. Like Nuria, fingers on both hands crossed, silently willing the public masturbator to reach orgasm soon.

In the distance, above the song of the traffic, came the nee-naw-nee-naw of a police siren.

“They’re coming,” said Robert. But his eyes were also glued to the wanking man.

But the figure’s thrusts were tighter, more precise; his fist was pumping with the even automation of an assured and incipient outcome.

“They’ll be too late,” said Nuria with a smile. “He’s going to make it this time.”

Before the last words had left her lips, the naked man in the middle of the square, bronzed with the blush of the sodium street lamps and lashed with the headlamps of passing motorcycles, stiffened like an upright corpse and ejaculated.

A few people on the sidewalks clapped. More shouted obscenities. The spry, naked figure bent down to pick up his discarded clothes and bolted in the direction of gardens that ran alongside the Opera House.

Nuria released her held breath and beamed. “Bravo,” she whispered. “Bravo.”

Leaning back in his rattan seat, Robert shook his head in wonder. “I feel...I feel dirty.”

“You are. We are,” she said, still unable to dislodge the grin.

“Like I just had sex.”

“I think we did.”

Nathalie's Tailor

It starts like a low, slow rip of paper, just audible over the hiss of shower water on the slate tiles. A slow exhalation of sharp-edged things that tear at her throat on the way up, making a larger hole for the louder sound that follows. Until she's crouched in the corner of the glass stall, ragged curtains of wet dark hair covering her face, screaming into the steam.

It's not grief or fear or even pain in the way most people understand it.

No one ever says it, but I know they think it. They look at Nathalie and wonder why she's with a man like me. She's beautiful and clever. She dresses well and has a laugh like golden syrup. She's got a good job. They see her, and then me, and can't fathom it.

But they don't see her like I do. They don't see her like this.

Sometimes—rarely—it passes on its own. But not this time. I can tell, because the misshapen cries are now punctuated by the rhythmic thud of her head as she slams it back against the thick wet glass. Thud. Keen. Thud. Keen. As if she needs to soften up her skull enough to turn herself liquid, and slip out of whatever it is that's holding her insides in.

When I come for her, towel in hand, she screeches like a wild thing caught in a trap. Don't be fooled by her size. When she's like this she's strong. I have the scars down my arms, across my chest and back as proof. The towel isn't there to wrap her warm or comfort her. It's to pin her arms flat to her chest, so she doesn't claw her own breasts to a bloody mess.

They're very beautiful breasts, soft, lazy dollops just ready to drop. White as parchment, they're mapped with fine blue veins when you see them in a certain light. And scarred. A tracery of pale pink ley lines of despair. Done in a moment of

madness. Done in the presence, I suspect, of better men, richer men, more handsome men who watched her change and panicked. Grasp their expensive clothes and fled.

Nathalie is trapped in her skin in the world.

In lucid moments—of which there are many—she says that the world grows too thick. That she gets stuck in its suck. That it will pull her back into its smothering, bloody womb and digest her in stages. The world is a starving mother who will devour her children rather than give birth to them. It reeks of perfume staled with time, of dead birds and the awful things that are caught between its teeth. If Nathalie could just slip her skin, she'd be free of its dreadful gravity.

With all the handsome, rich, clever men gone, I'm the only one left to make the space, to ease the seams of her skin. Once I've carried her to the bed and tied her arms and legs with the cords she owned before I met her, she's calmer. She still weeps, still arches her back and pushes rich sobs out her lungs, still whimpers beneath the tangle of wet hair.

"Not long now," I tell her.

I take out the lovely, tooled scalpel I bought at an antique shop off the Bayswater road. Its red Morocco leather case is scuffed and torn in places. Made before my grandfather was born. Inside, nestled in cream velvet pressed flat with time, the knife glints, as if new. Lovingly sharpened on the small oval whetstone the texture of silk that sits above it.

It's like drawing on her skin. I do it where it won't show. On her thigh, or her upper arm, on her hip, on the convex sides of her belly. I cut and she watches the blood well up through the carefully parted skin.

"Breathe, love," I say.

And she does. As if she's snatching it away from someone who has more of it than they deserve. Greedy and quick. The crying quiets into stuttered whimpers.

I cut the little easels into her knowledgeable skin. Each rivulet of blood takes its own eccentric path over the nearest curve, sometimes interrupted in its course by a previous seam of scar. But they're neat little scars, the ones I've made.

I'm a tailor, not a butcher. I take pleasure in my work.

I make my careful cuts, and when I'm done, I cover her with my body, slide my cock into her moist, fluttering cunt, and fuck her free of the world's pernicious grasp.

What You Want

“This is what you want, isn’t it?” she said, tugging my hand down the front of her skirt and pressing it home into the hollow of her crotch. The material was thin; there was nothing beneath her linen skirt.

The sound of drunken conversation leaked out into the humid air. The shadows lay heavy across her face, turning her features to monochromatic stone, but the erosion was there, at the corner of her eye, where the light lay like a brand over her left cheek.

“How pissed are you?”

I shrugged. “Not very. Not at all, really.”

“Is that going to be a problem then? Will you get squeamish and develop a conscience?”

It was a challenge I didn’t bother to answer. Instead, I slipped my hand out from under hers, crooked a finger, and brought it up to brush along the line of illuminated skin. She had a light sheen of sweat on her upper lip. “What’s the hurry?”

“I misread you. My mistake.” she said. The words were clipped, angry. Shouldering her purse, she turned to go.

I caught her by the wrist. “You didn’t misread me.”

It was the truth. In the bar, I’d been interested. When she knocked back the shooter of tequila, I’d been interested. As she gathered her hair up off her sweat-damp neck while talking, and pulled it crossly into a ponytail. There was a tension to almost everything she did. As if every word and act were ejected with disdain. Now, as she responded to what she thought was a rejection, there was a barely contained violence

to her. I liked it. And very few men are totally immune to a woman who wears no panties.

She tried to tug free—not with any determination—but I held on to her arm. When she turned to speak, I could see, even in the dim light of the streetlamp, she was crying.

“Then you misread me,” she muttered. “I’m not after a date. Just a fuck.”

“This is a strange place to be after a simple fuck. They’re so cheap to buy here, and far less complicated. For one thing, a bought fuck doesn’t cry.”

I wanted to make my point with clarity. In a city where you can get a whore for a night for under twenty dollars, the zipless fuck loses its attraction.

Unable to pull the caught hand out of my grasp, she swung the other one at me, fisted. It missed my face, landing on my shoulder with a thud that would eventually, I was sure, make a handsome bruise.

“Fuck you,” she hissed.

“As I already explained, I’m interested, but could we calm down a bit first?”

“Let go of my arm.”

“Only if you promise not to hit me again. Not that I mind a bit of anger. Personally, I’m into it.”

She glared, her eyes black in the gloom. The streetlamp caught on the tears like shards. I can’t say the sniffing was attractive, but my mind was still stalled on her state of unpantiedness, which overrode the nasal congestion. Lust is like that.

I felt her arm relax in my grasp, and I released it. But as soon as I did, she swung at me again, open handed. Her palm landed on my face with a force that both hurt and shocked me.

I'd had enough. "The next time you hit me, I'm going to hit you back. You realize that, don't you?" I said this as calmly as I could. The slap had left a faint hum in my right ear and I couldn't be sure of my delivery.

Instead of offering me more violence, she leaned her forehead against the wall beside me and began bawling in a way I hadn't heard since primary school. It was full throated, stuttered with hiccups and there was, from the sound of it, a great deal of fluid of one sort or another being produced and expelled.

I looked around—certain someone passing by would think I was doing something awful to this woman. Then, not sure what else to do, I gave her a few tentative pats on the back.

Either she hid drunkenness extremely well, or this woman was out of her fucking mind. Most probably it was the later. And, yes, I should have given her one last friendly pat, and gone home, but there was still the maddeningly delicious fact that she was absolutely bare beneath that skirt.

The combination of wanton slut, strident bitch and blubbing lunatic had an unaccountable charm for me. I'm not particularly normal myself. I invited her back to my house.

She looked up, flicking a mess of damp, dark wisps off her face with an angry shake of her head. Then wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"Sure. Okay."

* * * * *

There was no way to read her acceptance. I puzzled it as we walked along the wide, silent boulevard. The pride of the French who had colonized the place, Le Duan was deserted at midnight. Only the occasional passing motorcycle shot through the thick, humid silence.

We didn't talk and, every so often, I glanced to my side to be sure she was still walking beside me. Her feet made no sound on the pavement and it was then I noticed she'd taken off her shoes and was barefoot. Her sandals dangled by from a single hooked finger.

That would make anyone who knows how filthy the streets of Saigon are shudder. It gave me a sense of her intense vulnerability—not an unpleasant feeling—and I reached down to her free hand, clasping it in mine. But the minute I did, she shook it away.

“Don't you at least want to pretend we're lovers?”

“No. Why?”

I shrugged. “I don't know. It's just humane.”

“Fuck humane.” She said it with a quiet brutality.

“Okay.”

What else could I say? But her remark, so casually tossed at me, turned me cold. Who gave a shit if she was not wearing underwear? Did I really need to get laid that badly? No.

Call me squeamish, but the idea of fucking her had lost its allure.

We walked the rest of the way in silence and, as we turned down the alley leading to my house, I was formulating polite ways to make some excuse and send her home. I've always found it hard to admit I've changed my mind and, after a few moments, I realized I had to say it anyway. We'd reached the gate of my house; my keys were in my hand.

“Look,” I said, feeling like a shit, although I couldn't explain why, “this isn't going to work for me. Let me call you a taxi.”

She didn't respond.

I waited until the silence became almost unbearable, then I unlocked my gate and pushed it open. “Come on. I’ll give you some coffee so you can sober up, then we can get you a cab.”

Again, she said nothing. For a moment, she stood glaring at me with the kind of hatred you only see in the eyes of religious fanatics.

“Fine.” She spat the word and stepped into the tiled courtyard. “What a fucking asshole,” she muttered as she passed me.

I’ve been told that, when I get really angry, I develop a rather alarming smile. I could feel it stretching the skin on my face as I pulled the gate closed, crossed the courtyard and climbed the steps to my front door. It was dark in the yard, but I could sense her behind me as I bent down to take my shoes off before letting myself in.

“You’re not coming in,” I said. “Not after walking all the way in bare feet. They’re filthy.”

“They’re not.” She slumped down onto the stair and pulled up a foot to look at the sole.

I opened the front door, glancing down. “They are. God knows what you’ve caught walking around like that.”

“How the fuck are you going to give me coffee if you don’t let me in?”

Frankly, I was hoping she’d forgotten the offer of coffee.

“I’ll wash them,” she said, abruptly. “Where’s your hose?”

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath of the moist night air. Suddenly I felt worn out, and a mild metallic pain was gnawing at my brain, behind my eyes. Bad red wine.

“It’s over there.” I pointed vaguely toward a rusty spigot in the corner of the terrace. “Suit yourself.”

As I walked into my living room, I heard her turn the water on. The house was dark and I switched on a few lamps on my way into the kitchen.

Only when I'd filled the kettle and put it on to boil did I admit it wasn't her feet I didn't want in my house; it was her mind. Well, this is something close to the edge of the world, I reminded myself. The foreigners who end up here were, for the most part, misers, misfits or losers. I knew which one I was and I was pretty sure about what she was, too.

When I brought the coffee tray into the living room, she was lounging on my couch—absolutely naked—with her legs open as wide as it was humanly possible to spread them.

* * * * *

It took me a moment to work up an appropriate reaction. My cock twitched to life, like the predicable, mindless moron it was. I took in the display: the petulant expression beneath the tangle of curls; her nipples, small and nearly black against the skin of her small breasts; her hips canted, pushing out the bones to make a well of her lower stomach. The sharp tendons of her thighs stood out from the bandage-white skin. They quivered with the tension of her spread. Between them, her cunt was bare and splayed: her inner lips brutally crimson.

A lit cigarette dangled between her fingers. She took a drag and exhaled a stream of smoke up at the ceiling, leaving her gaze to settle there. "Fuck me," she said in a small, absent voice.

I put down the tray so as not to drop it and tried desperately to will away my erection, only to acknowledge the futility of the effort. I had also forgotten to breathe.

"You..." I swallowed against a dry throat. "You can't smoke in my house."

I kicked myself mentally for the complete inanity of my response, but the cliché of blood-flow is truer than anyone cares to admit.

She took another deep drag and then casually let the burning cigarette drop onto the tiled floor, as if she were at an outdoor coffee stall. “Fuck me.”

“No.”

“It’s what you want.”

“No!” I barked, stooping to retrieve the burning cigarette and stubbing it out with vehemence on one of the saucers on the coffee tray. “You need to get dressed and go. Now!”

When I looked up it was to watch her languidly slide a hand, fingers splayed, between her legs. Even from that distance, the flesh sounded wet as her fingers skated over it. The tip of her finger worried her clit for a moment, and then she reached down, pushing it into her opening.

I hated this woman. I wanted her out of my house and my life just as fast as I could manage to eject her. I also wanted my cock buried in that tight, hot cunt with a ferocity that brought tears to my eyes. Conflicted didn’t begin to describe my state of mind.

Paralyzed, I watched her slump further down the sofa. She paused for a beat, then joined her first finger to a second and plunged the pair deep inside herself. Her hips rose up to meet her hand and she began to fuck herself almost viciously, raking her thumb across her clit with every inward thrust.

This wasn’t someone masturbating luxuriantly; it was like being a witness to self-inflicted violation. It told in her face. There was no pleasure in there, just manic desperation. And, oddly enough, that made me harder. If she had gasped and moaned and writhed, I could have focused on her selfishness and maintained some sense of

distance. But it was so visually clear that she was only performing this act as an illustrated set of instructions, I couldn't stop myself from falling into the vortex of it.

Even as I unbuckled my belt and unzipped my chinos, I damned myself for being weak. A black tide of self-hatred climbed my spine as I stepped around the coffee table and between her legs, freeing my erection from the confines of my boxers.

“Let's get this straight. This is what you want,” I growled, tugging her hand away from her crotch.

She looked up at me with a sickening sort of triumph. One hand under her ass, I raised her hips. I angled my cock and shoved myself into her with all the rage I had inside me. The lizard part of my brain was determined to fuck that obscene expression off her face.

* * * * *

That first thrust felt so fucking good. Everything I had imagined it would be. Fiercely hot, impossibly tight—she had the angriest cunt I'd ever been in. It was monstrous, delicious. I ploughed into her over and over, bracing myself against the back of the sofa, lifting her until the blood rushed to her head, giving her pale skin a deep rose flush.

Her muscles seized me until it felt like I would never be able to pull out of her. I knew I wasn't going to last, but it was a ghost of a thought; I didn't care. My pulse was thundering in my ears, pushing me on, goading me to fuck her harder, faster, until my thrusts matched its rhythm.

Suddenly her back arched, her muscles went rigid and her heels dug into the back of my thighs. That initial spasm was a door swinging open. I plunged in, through her orgasm and came as hard as I've ever come in my life.

The vertigo was overwhelming. My knees almost gave in. It felt like minutes went by and still I could not stop erupting into that dark, angry cave. And with every spurt, I could feel my own rage abating.

When my vision cleared, she was staring up at me. The triumph had gone, her features had softened. She nodded, trying to catch her breath.

“Yup. That did the trick,” she said.

I pulled out, let her hips drop onto the couch and collapsed into the cushions beside her. I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. It felt like my soul was full of gaping cavities and she’d put them there.

“Admit it, it’s what you wanted.”

I stared at her mutely.

She sat up and gathered up the mess of her hair, pulling it back and tying it with a rubber band that had been on her wrist the whole time. “Admit it!”

Never in my life had I felt so completely manipulated. The self-hatred came flooding back, settling heavily into the pit of my stomach. And I had no doubt that she knew exactly what I was feeling. She’d orchestrated it all.

“You’re like a disease,” I said finally. “You know that?”

This isn’t normally what I say to women I’ve just had sex with—usually we kiss, and fall asleep and eat breakfast together—but the words tumbled out before I could stop them.

They didn’t faze her. She fished her cigarettes out of her purse, lodged one between her lips and stood up. “I know,” she said, with a small snort that I assumed was a laugh.

She walked out of my living room, naked as the day she was born, and onto the darkened terrace. I assumed she’d left her clothes out there.

Of course, I should have relented and been polite. I should have gotten up and seen her out. But I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I sprawled on the sofa until I heard the outer gate slam shut and then fell asleep.

I spent the next week trying to mentally paper over that evening. Every time I thought of her, it was like a nail rusting away in my brain. The harder I attempted to forget about the whole debacle, the more vivid and present the memories became. I had no idea what she'd done to me; only that I craved it with suffocating intensity. By the following Saturday, I found myself back at bar where we'd met, looking for her, like a junkie jonesing for a fix.

Critical Thesis

1. Eroticism

Definition and History

Difficulties arise almost immediately when one seeks a concise definition of eroticism. The OED offers two: “erotic spirit or character; also, the use of erotic or sexually arousing imagery in literature or art,” and a medical/psychological definition: “a condition or state of sexual excitement or desire; a tendency to become sexually aroused, usu. by some specified stimulus” (“eroticism” OED). The Merriam Webster offers three entries: “1. An erotic theme or quality; 2. A state of sexual arousal; 3. Insistent sexual impulse or desire” (“eroticism” Merriam). Etymologically, a noun formed by the adjective 'erotic' taken from the French '*érotique*': “*Relatif à l’amour ; qui traite de l’amour : Poésies érotiques; qui évoque l’amour sensuel, les plaisirs sexuels et incite au désir sexuel ; voluptueux, licencieux : Rêve érotique.*” (“eroticque” Larrouse). (My translation: Relating to love; dealing with love: erotic poeties; evoking sensual love, sexual pleasures and inciting sexual desire; voluptuousness, licentiousness: An erotic dream.) However, what I intend to examine in this project is the darker and more ambiguous eroticism as described by Georges Bataille in his 1957 book *L'erotisme*.

The Social Construction of Eroticism

Ancient Greece possessed a number of words describing different types of love, based primarily on the relationship between the loving parties. The four main types include *agápe*, *éros*, *philia*, and *storgē* (“ἔρως”). Although the definition of *éros* is that of sexual love, Plato's *Symposium* managed to de-sex it by proclaiming that sexual desire was best put to loftier uses:

“...being not like a servant in love with the beauty of one youth or man or institution, himself a slave mean and narrow-minded, but drawing towards and contemplating the vast sea of beauty, he will create many fair and noble thoughts and notions in boundless love of wisdom” (Plato).

From the very beginning of the European philosophical discourse on sex, we are urged to redirect our sexual desires to less physical, loftier and more intellectual or spiritual ends. This process of sublimating, reconceptualising and metaphorising the human sex drive is central to the notion of eroticism. Inherent in its definition is a resistance to our biological reality. In *An Erotic Beyond*, Octavio Paz describes it as “a form of the social domination of instinct” (11).

It appears that the human sexual urge has always troubled us: it doesn't resemble the sexual drives of other animals in that it's not limited to seasonality or reproductive possibility. There are many biological, anthropological and behavioral theories as to why we evolved to have the urge to have sex even when reproduction cannot be effected (Shackelford & Hansen 104). Of more salience, however, is that we don't conceive of our sexual drive as animal, unless we are referring to it negatively. We have, from prehistoric times, sought to impose control on this drive through limits and taboos (against masturbation, incest, rape, homosexuality, transvestitism, bestiality, paedophilia) and ritual structures (coming of age, courtship, marriage, religious celibacy, etc.) and the proscriptive and performative modelling of gender roles. These controls have acted upon the way our sexuality is played out, not only socially and publically, but also privately and in relation to the self (Davies 1032).

In his essay, *A History of Erotic Philosophy*, Alan Soble offers a packed, concise summary of how the canon of western philosophy has dealt with the human sexual urge. With very few exceptions—notably, Marcuse—the overwhelming majority of historical philosophers and theorists, no matter how radical their ideological differences, are almost unanimous on the issue of our sexual drive: it needs to be controlled, civilized and sublimated (116). What is consistently lacking is

any robust and consistent rationale as to why it requires such regulation. Certainly many philosophers, Aristotle, the Scholastics and Kant among them, warn of the dehumanizing aspects of using humans as sexual objects, but it must be said that this objectification has always occurred regardless, and not primarily as a consequence of allowing our sexual urges free rein, but of economic predation. We've been using each other as beasts of burden since civilization began. Furthermore, it IS doubtful whether the controls we have imposed to avoid this sexual objectification have succeeded in achieving their goals. There are compelling arguments from Marx (Lee 35) to Beauvoir (Kruks 55) and Foucault (*History of Sexuality* 7) to suggest that the controls set in place have simply institutionalized this objectification rather than prevented it. Moreover, within the field of psychoanalysis, it is questionable as to whether humans possess the capacity to desire without objectifying what is desired (Bersani 644).

Although the existence of sexual taboos has been theorized to serve to “establish and defend strong ethnic, religious, or institutional boundaries” (Davies 1060), the further perils of unfettered human sexuality to systems of labour control and productivity have been extensively examined by Burrell in *Sex and Organizational Analysis*. In this survey of the historic control of sexuality, Burrell concludes that, although the motivations for this control have varied throughout history, “under capitalism, desexualization is encouraged because both time and the human body become commodified and therefore exploitable. Sexuality and labour power are not compatible. Indeed, they may well be antithetical. Sexual relations are wasteful, in terms of commodity production” (Burrell 113). Foucault is in agreement: “if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative” (*History of Sexuality* 6).

What would society look like today had we not believed our sexual drive to be a threat to social stability? Had we not inherited and internalized the by-products of those fears? Had it not been for the ways in which we have complicated the issue of our sexual drive, we would surely not have what we have come to call eroticism.

Bauman and Paz are in agreement: eroticism is a collective social response to the excessive nature of the human sex drive. It “protects society from onslaughts of sexuality but it also negates the reproductive function” says Paz (*Double Flame* 20). “All 'history of sex',” says Bauman, “is therefore the history of the cultural manipulation of sex. It began with the birth of eroticism—through the cultural trick of separating sexual experience (in the sense of *Erlebnis*, not *Erfahrung*), and especially the pleasure associated with that experience”(19). Over time, it has accreted layers of meaning and complicated sex so completely that its function as a way to perpetuate the species is almost lost beneath the mountain of cultural clutter. Žižek, addressing Hegel's exploration of human sexuality, goes even further, claiming that:

What Hegel misses is how, once we are within the human condition, sexuality is not only transformed/civilized, but, much more radically, changed in its very substance: it is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that gets thwarted as to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical, passion. The becoming-cultural of sexuality is thus not the becoming-cultural of nature, but the attempt to domesticate a properly un-natural excess of the meta-physical sexual passion. THIS is the properly dialectical reversal of substance: the moment when the immediate substantial (“natural”) starting point is not only acted-upon, transformed, mediated/cultivated, but changed in its very substance (Žižek “Ideology III”).

Žižek's claim of total substantive change might be somewhat exaggerated, and perhaps bear the traces of human-centric and Western conceit. Many humans still have sex for the specific purpose of procreating, to which any couple undergoing infertility treatment will attest. Nonetheless, what is undeniably true is that the whys and hows of sex have become a matter of conscious choice, not simply instinct. As a

species, we are capable of—and often do—override our biological drive. We have come to invest a great deal of thought and energy into setting our sexuality apart from that of most other animals and seeking rewards beyond the procreative.

We have mythologized our nature. As with our mortality, dreams, happiness, love and pain, erotic desire continues to resist explanation, not because we can't explain their biological mechanisms, but because language resists our attempts to confront our emotional responses to those experiences (Bebergal).

In the West, for almost two thousand years, Christianity—through the language of theology—offered us a vocabulary with which to discuss the less concrete aspects of our nature. Offering us images of reward and punishment, heaven and hell, revelations and ecstasies, sacred sacrifice and base profanities through which to understand our humanity and most especially our sexual desires. The Enlightenment's valorisation of intellectual reason over mysticism forced a return to Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, warning us that “[t]he pleasures are a hindrance to thought, and the more so the more one delights in them, e.g. in sexual pleasure; for no one could think of anything while absorbed in this” (*Book 7 11*). Man, we were cautioned, is incapable of rational thought under the influence of the erotic urge. Empiricism supplied us with the languages of biology, chemistry, medicine and the technologies by which to frame our relationship with sex. It also evolved the tools by which we could do it, through the discourse of science (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 64).

Although it was Nietzsche who is generally credited with proclaiming the death of God (108) and man's obligation to draft his own laws (188), it may be argued, that the Marquis De Sade killed God first in giving us a vision of what our sexual urges, unmitigated by taboo, or law, or religion, might look like:

...let them boldly fling aside and spurn the shameful irons wherewith others presume to keep them subjugated; they will rapidly conquer custom and opinion; man become wiser, because he will be freer, will sense the injustice that would exist in scorning whoever acts thus, and will sense too that the act of yielding to Nature's promptings, beheld as a crime by a captive people, can be so no longer amongst a free people (Sade 45).

Sade may have believed he was offering us a glimpse of how 'captive' individuals, free of the constraints of the Church and the law, might act upon 'Nature's promptings' but he did not succeed. Having inherited and internalized all the controls imposed on sexuality in his day, Sade's gratuitous fantasies of their decimation serves to underscore the authority he accords them. The regimen of his transgressive fantasies bear the same mark of rigid authoritarianism as the mores he seeks to reject. His imaginary eroticism with no limits uses, as Deleuze observes, the same language of institutional power (*Masochism* 76-77). Sadeian eroticism will always be distorted by the power-knowledge that has helped to construct and shape it, according to Foucault (*History of Sexuality* 23). It is a sexual 'freedom' deformed by the specific configurations of its historic restrictions.

Nonetheless, what cannot be denied about Sade is his temerity to ask the question: what does sex look like past the constraints of religious prohibition and the rules of social order? That Sadean eroticism looks less like something pleasurable and more like a nightmare might be attributed to his seething, underlying rage at the rather despicable hypocrisy of world he lived in, for it is, Michelson insists, "the gearwheel of social action in Sade's vision" (131). The novelist Angela Carter defends the excess, the violence, and the cruelty in Sade's work because it makes explicit the hidden consequences the social and historical hypocrisies that constituted the world Sade was living in. She reminds us that "our flesh arrives to us out of history" and that sexual relationships are "the most self-conscious of all human relationships, a

direct confrontation of two beings whose actions in bed are wholly determined by their acts when they are out of it”(9).

It appears, on closer inspection, that the writer's individual rebellions against the mainstream values of his or her society are often reflected in works of eroticism. It might seem redundant to say that we take our social grievances to bed with us since all narratives are culturally contextual, but it seems to me that their anger, disappointments and feelings of alienation are particularly present, often boldly embodied, in their sexually explicit texts. And that this is just as true in the contemporary writings of Kathy Acker, Jonathan Kemp, Chuck Palahniuk, Brett Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq as it was in Sade's works (Abecasis 814).

Bataille's Eroticism

This critical examination of eroticism in the context of contemporary culture limits itself to four particular aspects of eroticism identified and described in detail by Georges Bataille in his seminal work on the subject: *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957): transgression, transcendence, the dissolution of the self, and the failure of language.

This phenomenon of eroticism emerges, according to Bataille's theory of general economy, from the organised social rituals formulated to account for and expend the surplus sexual energies humans have, lacking the kind of biologically regulating mechanisms present in animals (Sorensen 176; Taussig 359). But on a more metaphysical level, Bataille also theorised eroticism as a paradoxical yearning for and terror of the final unmaking of the individual that awaits us in death (Messier 128) or, as Downing & Grillett put it, “in Bataille’s system, eroticism is a traumatic, unnerving experience via which notions of the fixed self, the fiction of the personality, are (temporarily) destroyed” (98).

Although Zygmunt Bauman encapsulates eroticism as the 'cultural processing' of sex (24), Bataille argues that, like religion, to attempt to examine eroticism objectively is to make of it a monstrosity (Bataille 37). To understand it fully, he says, it must be examined subjectively, like a religious faith, because it is a wholly “inner experience” (31). It is through this association with religion that Bataille deconstructs the experience of eroticism.

Vartan Messier notes that “Bataille articulates thought-provoking concepts by investigating the affinity between language and experience, *jouissance* (or bliss) and *savoir* (or knowledge), and unleashing the dialectical possibilities of the erotic power of violence and the violent power of the erotic”(125). However, as Daniel Fuchs points out, “[t]ranscendence for Bataille is a negative transcendence, involving eroticism in a context of dirt, excrement, violence, delirium, and crime” (198), and in his fixation on violence and death, his “erotic doctrine assumes a contempt for the lives we live” (200). Fuchs holds Bataille to account for his untimely publication of his vision of eroticism—just before the outbreak of WWII (194), but this simply underscores the imperative that social context brings to our interpretation of the four core aspects of eroticism identified by Bataille.

According to Downing & Grillett, “the trademark Bataillean reversal of values whereby something laden with negative connotations becomes a rallying cry for a new way of looking at things”(92) is a potent tool for challenging normative structures of sociality. Lee Edelman follows a similar reversal of values in *No Future* by urging “queers to affirm their affiliation to ‘the place of the social order’s death drive’, a place ‘outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism’.” (91). However, Downing & Grillett note that both Bataille and Edelman frame their resistances through conservative social structures:

Bataille through prevailing Christian dogma and Edelman through “Lacanian dogma” (101). Moreover their lack of acknowledgment of feminist resistance “effectively makes female transgression, female eroticism, a female experience of the abyss the most negated of all possibilities” (102).

Fuch's critique of Bataillean eroticism is well-founded, but his dismissal forecloses the fertile potential offered by that excrement and delirium—that contempt for the lives we live. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, this push towards *jouissance* and the Lacanian Real, so present in Bataille's definition of eroticism, is a site that offers possibilities for the interruption of current, commoditized concepts of eroticism. Meanwhile, Downing & Grillett's insistence that Bataille's masculinist definition of eroticism precludes any formulation of a female eroticism demands an impossible historical prescience. Many a male-centric structure has been later employed to good use in a more egalitarian reformulation of resistance.

Taboo and Transgression

...the essence of eroticism is to be found in the inextricable confusion of sexual pleasure and taboo (Bataille 108).

Bataille puts enormous emphasis on the part taboo and its transgression play in eroticism. Established as a way in which to constrain violence, animalistic urges, and the spectre of death, taboos delineate the lines between our natural state and a social order (36). However, there is no profane without the sacred and no life without finality. “Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance” (37). Moreover, the ultimate taboos, violence and death are ever-present in the experience of eroticism.

But what of our contemporary society, in which few religious or social taboos remain? Bataille foresaw this as the end of eroticism: “In an entirely profane world

nothing would be left but the animal mechanism” (128). In Foucault's response to Bataille's ideas on eroticism, the essay *A Preface to Transgression* (1963), Foucault examines this paradox in depth. He reiterates the importance of the line delineating the transgression: “transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (34) but he also examines the possibility of transgression specifically in a modern society with little regard for the sacred: “In that zone which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating” (30). However, Brian McNair notes for every form of transgression that has been lost along the way in the development of our cultures, “[e]ach generation discovers and transcends its own taboos, as well as inventing some new ones” (McNair 42).

Dylan Evans notes that Lacan's latter definition of *jouissance* bears a striking resemblance to Bataille's notion of transgressive eroticism: “Not only is the deadly character of *jouissance* strongly reminiscent of Bataille's view of the erotic as a realm of violence which borders on death itself, but Bataille also characterises erotic joy (*joie*) as necessarily excessive in character, and compares it to an incommunicable mystical experience (as does Lacan)” (4-5).

Ecstasy

Pleasure would be a poor enough thing without this aberrant transcendency, not confined to sexual ecstasy and experienced in the same way by mystics of various religions, the Christian religion foremost (Bataille 268).

Although transgression does involve relocation, a stepping beyond the rules of social order and Bataille associates it with erotic and religious ecstasy, it doesn't

follow that all transgressions are transcendent in the mystical or religious sense. This passage into an unspecified beyond is, says Bataille, a consequence and a prize of transgression because it achieves a form of metaphysical knowing, a union that the ordered, taboo-restricted world denies us access to: “those unbearable instants where we seem to be dying because the being within us is only there through excess, when the fullness of horror and joy coincide” (268).

But how is this transcendence possible if all our traditional veils have been pulled aside? For Lacan, this state where “the fullness of horror and joy coincide” is *jouissance*—most specifically feminine *jouissance* (Fink *Knowledge* 42).

The Inner Experience and the Dissolution of the Self

In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being into question (Bataille 29).

Bataille refers repeatedly to a destabilization of the sense of self that occurs in the experience of eroticism and that this loss of self is a deliberate (31) and self-inflicted tearing (39). Describing this concept of the self as a discontinuous being, apart from others and the world and only merged in moments of trauma or ecstasy, in the face of death or the erotic experience (96-99), it is possible to see a considerable correspondence between these ideas and two Lacanian concepts: that of the subject's passage through the Mirror Stage into the Symbolic order (Lacan *Ecrits* 75), and the traumatic experience of *jouissance* and its relation to the Real (Eyers 75). From the perspective of a writer of the erotic, it is compelling to consider how the very contemporary practice of actively constructing the erotic self (Attwood 178) plays out in connection with this loss of self in the erotic moment.

Where Language Fails

...the man who speaks is always the civilised man (Bataille 186).

A curious hallmark of Bataille's erotic, ecstatic state is how language, especially descriptive language, becomes useless in that place. It “becomes meaningless at the decisive instant when the stirrings of transgression itself take over” (275). This limit of language described by Bataille was especially of interest to Foucault: “since it traces that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence” (Foucault *Preface* 30). For Foucault, “the death of God shifts the location of infinity from an experience of exteriority [...] to one of interiority,” according to Shannon Winnubst (460). But in this turn from God to language, “the discourse of sexuality takes on the play of infinity that the discourse of religion once carried” (461). However, for Barthes and Lacan this experience of bliss or *jouissance* resists language almost completely and “cannot be spoken except between the lines” (Barthes *Pleasure of the Text* 21).

Transgression, ecstasy, the dissolution of the self and the instability of language are the four aspects of eroticism that form the framework of the rest of the chapters in my critical thesis. Bataille offers a rich, fertile understanding of eroticism from a creative perspective but, as Fuchs points out, it is not an unproblematic one. However, for the purposes of establishing a foundation from which to push against contemporary consumerist exhortations to 'enjoy' (Žižek *Parallax* 304), Bataille's eroticism provides a robust and challenging substructure upon which to build complex, contextual and nuanced erotic narratives.

2. Lacanian Psychoanalytical Theory, Bataille and Writing Eroticism

Why Lacan

...who understands the unconscious best, the poet or the clinician? Or, to put it another way, do the aesthetic and the clinical have to speak in entirely different languages or does the poetic enter both? (Wright 1)

To use any Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic criticism as a methodological tool for a creative and critical research project on contemporary erotic fiction might seem cliché, but in the process of gathering reference materials and exemplars for this project, I found the use of Feminist Studies, Queer Theory, discourse analysis and ethnography far more prevalent. Contemporary erotica—as distinct from pornography—has not been widely studied and, as far as I can ascertain, there has been only one research by practice creative writing doctoral thesis focusing on the genre of erotica (Gillespie).

This project aims to explore the possibilities for new eroticisms, so it seemed imperative to choose a methodology that would offer three things: a schema of human experience that distinguished between inner and outer—social—experience and some form of metaphysical *beyond* towards which eroticism aims itself; a theory of how sexual desire is structured and functions as a part of the human experience; and a theory of the function and limitations of language. Not only does Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism offer all of those things, but also it provides critical tools with which to examine, question and challenge our assumptions about eroticism in literature on many levels. Erotica is primarily a character rather than plot- or event-driven narrative genre and Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism places the individual inner experience at the centre of its inquiries. Therefore, it invites us to interrogate the practice of the writer, the experience and agency of the reader, and even how the fictional subject is socially constituted. Erotica is a genre mainly concerned with

representations of erotic desire and its consequences and Lacanian theory compels us to ask whose desire is being addressed, what fantasmatic projections are at play and how do these desires conform to or resist hegemonic power. Indeed, the Lacanian concept of desire is so rich and complex, it might be said to offer a poetics of desire to a writer for whom this theme is central to their work. Finally, Lacan offers a compelling explanation for why eroticism is so difficult to write well and why language becomes fragile, unreliable or fails completely in moments of limit experience.

It would be easy to defend this methodological approach following the example of Lacan's own examinations of literary works—Antigone, Hamlet, The Purloined Letter, to name a few—or for how the practice of writing might be used to position the author as analysand (James Joyce)¹. However, to employ Lacan's ideas in this way would be either an attempt at auto-psychoanalysis or auto-criticism, both of which lack clinical or literary merit or integrity for me. I am not using Lacanian theory to analyse myself as a writer or to subject my creative writing to literary psychoanalysis. In the critical portion of this project, I've used it as a tool of inquiry, a way to organise and deconstruct some of our common assumptions about eroticism and erotic fiction. In the creative portion of the project, I've used it impressionistically, as a challenge to create more complexity and depth in the characters, conflicts and approach to using language when it comes to writing about

¹ Lacan offered close psychoanalytical readings of various works of literature to illustrate some of his most important concepts. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he reads Antigone as way of revealing “the line of sight that defines desire” (Lacan *Ethics* 247). In *Seminar VI: Desire and its Interpretation*, he uses both Alice in Wonderland and Hamlet to illustrate the structure of desire. He employed a reading of Poe's *The Purloined Letter* to explore Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the desire of the Other (Lacan *Purloined* 38). His last seminar, *The Sinthome*, is a symposium on Joyce, the man and his relationship to language, examining the limits of the Symbolic Order, *jouissance*, the structure of the psychotic mind and the ethically untreatable symptom.

the erotic experience. The very nature of Lacan's work—the evolution of his theories and the many ways in which others have interpreted and applied his ideas—affords a rich, multifaceted approach to examining the four elements of Bataille eroticism I have set out above to consider both critically and creatively.

Nevertheless, Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism has a number of drawbacks. The first is a general disdain for the value of psychoanalysis in contemporary society, especially in North America (Bailly 264). The second is that Lacan delivered many of his most important ideas orally, in French, in thirty years of seminars from 1952 until 1980 in Paris. The difficulty, density and cross-disciplinary nature of his lectures has resulted in Lacan being characterized as “a thinker whose productions are sometimes irritatingly obscure” with an “impenetrable style” (Bailly 17). Paul Verhaeghe reminds us that “Lacan’s seminars are 'works in progress'—belonging to an oral tradition of teaching and thinking at the same time—which cannot be adequately rendered by any written transcription” (Verhaeghe *Lacan's Answer* 109). As [film footage of Lacan's speech delivered to a conference in Louvain in 1976](#) powerfully illustrates, he was a careful, clever and dramatic speaker who used language, silence, tone and gesture to great effect (dir. Françoise Wolff, “Jacques Lacan Parle”). While Lacan's seminars have been transcribed and translated (some formally published and others informally distributed), even in their native French, these transcriptions lack the emphasis, gestures and pauses that convey additional meaning, emphasis or clarity to the spoken word. Those gestures and silences formed an important part of Lacan's pedagogical and clinical approach (244) inasmuch as they prompted a frustration in the student or analysand which Lacan thought necessary to progress. For Lacan, frustration sustained the desire of analysand for either understanding or a cure and neither information nor clinical engagement could be effectively received or have

lasting impact unless the subject was forced to tease out kernels of meaning for themselves (245). Consequently, the same qualities that render a Lacanian approach confusing, frustrating and lacking in closure, also make it uniquely fertile for me as a critical enquirer and a creative writer of erotic fiction. It engages and sustains *my* desire to explore how eroticism is currently represented in contemporary culture, how it might be subverted or evolved. While any application of Lacanian theory outside the discipline of psychoanalysis requires the taking of interpretive liberties, as Mari Ruti puts it in *The Singularity of Being*, Lacanian theory encourages us to “creatively intervene in symbolic systems of signification” (8). I have been encouraged.

Key Terms and Concepts

Unlike other critical approaches such as Marxism or Feminism, Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism may be less familiar to many readers. For this reason, it seems sensible to offer summaries of some of the key terms and concepts I use in the development of my arguments. Many Lacanian terms and concepts are nuanced, interdependent and open to diverse interpretations. While I’ve made an effort to take the major streams of Lacanian critical theory onboard, I have often settled on definitions and interpretations that address issues of erotic agency, fantasy, language and experience as they pertain to contemporary culture. This means that I tend to preference the interpretations of Slavoj Žižek, Lee Edelman and Mari Ruti who bring Lacanian ideas to bear on the personal, social and political, rather than the practical and clinical approach of psychoanalytical theorists and practitioners such as Bruce Fink. However, the Lacanian clinical landscape offers tremendous scope with which to examine the ways individual experience is narrativised, sublimated or metonymised and has informed my work, particularly in the area of character development. What I offer can by no means be taken as a comprehensive survey of Lacanian concepts; the

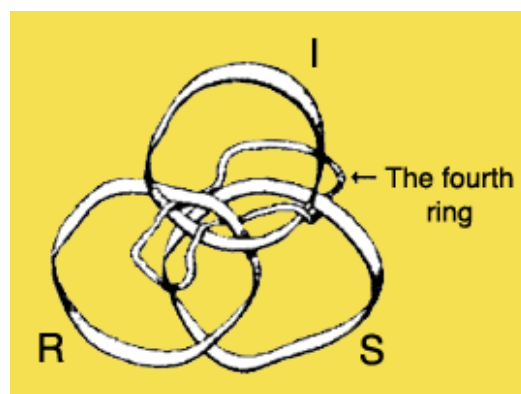
scope and nature of this project doesn't allow for that and, hopefully, doesn't require it. What follows is the most basic of summaries to enable readers to follow my arguments, or to act as a mnemonic for those who are more familiar with a Lacanian critical approach.

Lacanian Terminology

While many of the psychoanalytical terms Lacan uses originate with Freud, he expanded and radically redefined many of them. Terms such as castration, the phallus, the Name of the Father, feminine, etc. are used metaphorically. For example, when Lacan speaks of the phallus and castration he is not referring to a real, physical penis or the severing of that organ but rather to an abstract object of desire and the gaining or loss of the imaginary power inherent in possessing it. Indeed, he emphasised that he used these terms free of their gendered origins. While I use Lacanian terminology where necessary for the sake of precision, I find that they can evoke confusion and unhelpful resonances. This is even more the case when it comes to discussing eroticism and erotic writing, where real penises and real castration might be at issue. Amalia Ziv observes that “the overdetermined relation of the phallus, as the signifier of subjectivity, to male anatomy presents a further difficulty” (Ziv 16). This is especially difficult and confusing when discussing erotic fiction where actual penises and castration might be referred to in the text. It seems to me that perhaps Lacan's continued use of terms such as 'phallus' and 'castration' was a reflection of the great intellectual debt he felt he owed to Freud. I consider that debt better addressed in the active application of ideas rather than in the perpetuation of sexist terminology. Consequently, I make a conscious effort, where possible, to opt for more accessible, less obviously gendered language.

Lacan's Three (or Four) Orders

Lacan proposed a topology of the human psyche—a way of explaining the different modes by which we experience our existence. These modes are described as “the three quite distinct registers that are essential registers of human reality: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real” (Lacan Names 4). Later in his work, he added a fourth register: the Sinthome (Bailly 123). Often referred to in Lacanian circles as the RSI (Real, Symbolic and Imaginary), Lacan chose to illustrate these orders and their interactions with each other using the image of a Borromean knot.



(Image used with permission of Luke Thurston)

While it is easiest to describe these orders in relation to human development, Lacan believed that, once humans acquire language, we function in all these registers simultaneously although we are seldom conscious of doing so.

The Real

According to Lacan, we seldom experience raw reality. The moment we enter into the world of images and language, fantasy and signification mediate our experience of it. The Real is a state of undifferentiated and unmediated reality where no ordering or meaning making is possible. There is no language, no inside or outside, no self or other. In the womb and as a very new infant, there is only need and only the entity that experiences need. Beyond early infancy, the Real is only “encountered at

the points where language and the grids we use to symbolize the world break down” (Fink xiii), at moments of extreme experience—trauma, shock, bliss, revelation, sublimity. According to Bruce Fink, “[t]he real is essentially that which resists symbolization and thus resists the dialectization characteristic of the symbolic order, in which one thing can be substituted for another” (Fink 92). Nonetheless, even as we develop into thinking, differentiating, speaking beings, the Real is always there, under the surface, hosting the throb of our aimless, relentless drives and powering the engine of *jouissance* (Ruti 2).

Lacan's concept of the Real is important to this project for a number of reasons. The ecstasy or transcendent experience George Bataille describes in his work *Eroticism* is an experience beyond sensual pleasure, beyond language, beyond meaning, beyond a sense of the self or other. I would posit that this is synonymous with Lacan's later formulation of *jouissance* and its association with the register of the Real. Eroticism aims itself at this state of raw experience. The Lacanian Real is associated with the death drive, which I will return to in more depth later. The Lacanian Real is also where, according to Mari Ruti, we experience our 'singularity': an individuality beyond the narcissistic personality of the Imaginary or the subjecthood of the Symbolic (Ruti 1-3), which seems to me to correspond with Bataille's concept of 'continuity' (Bataille 15) as a self that, through transgression, loses its socio-symbolic coherence in ecstatic, traumatic transcendence.

The Imaginary

The Imaginary is the register of sensory perception and differentiation—images, sounds, and sensations all processed through a narcissistic lens. It's where our ability to conceive of binaries originates: inside/outside, hot/cold, nice/horrible. This is the register children operate in before they fully acquire language and as they form

their sense of self as an ideal 'I'. It is in the imaginary that we go through the mirror stage, forming a sense of self that is both 'me' and yet not 'me' (Bailly 54). While the acquisition of language opens up the world of the Symbolic for us, we never leave the Imaginary behind. This has special relevance to the topic of eroticism, since so much of what is commonly represented as erotic experience involves an immersion into the sensory and the visual. And while eroticism depends heavily on symbolization, the affects that accompany and colour it have their origin in our earliest relationships, with love, need, pleasure, demand and desire, or rejection and denial. The erotic fantasies we project onto ourselves and others as the objects of desire all have their birth in the Imaginary register, as do the erotic fantasies that are commoditised and marketed to us as enviable states of erotic being. If eroticism depends on having a 'self' to lose, it is in the Imaginary that this fantasy of a whole self that can be lost or fragmented is first forged.

The Symbolic

The Symbolic is the order marked by our entrance into language, society and the law. It is not simply our ability to use words but to grasp that their meanings are externally imposed and determined by others—by society, by history, by law. This is where we become subjects—selves in relation to others, relinquishing our prerogative to total self-definition in what Lacan describes as castration (Bailly 132). Moreover, entrance into the Symbolic order marks our transition from need to demand and desire. This is important to the discussion of eroticism and any examination of desire—a central theme in erotic writing.

Lacan contends that there is an erotic pleasure in the use of language itself. In speaking, in making meaning, in metaphorising. In his book *The Lacanian Subject*, Fink notes that “[a] certain *jouissance* that is 'squeezed' out of the body is refound in

speech” and points us to James Joyce's use of it: “When one reads *Finnegans Wake*, one has the sense of the *jouissance* packed in the signifier, in the Other as language” (99). Symbolisation and metaphor play an essential role in the practice of kink, where pleasure is taken in deliberately subverting normative chains of signification. This intentional subversion is not just a means to an end, but a transgressive pleasure in its own right, in its very process; there is an undeniable libidinal and defiant joy in taking signifiers such as slavery, pain, humiliation, etc. and turning them into sites of erotic pleasure. It could be argued that a great deal of BDSM practice is an attempt to transcend the Symbolic by overemphasising, subverting, caricaturising and inverting its most rigid rules.

The Sinthome

The Sinthome—an archaic spelling of the word *symptom*—is a later addition to this topographical structure of the RSI. Lacan, following Freud, theorised that psychopathological symptoms are manifestations of unresolved issues or repressed traumas that bubble up between the cracks in the unconscious through dreams, slips of the tongue, and jokes. More problematically, they manifest themselves as compulsive repetitions of behaviours that are seemingly nonsensical and often self-destructive. Symptoms needed to be interpreted or decoded in order to identify the underlying wound and address it. But Lacan noted that some behaviours, while seeming to be symptomatic of underlying psychopathology, were so central to individual's psyche as to constitute a significant part of their identity. Some major symptoms do not simply cause the subject pain, but also functioned as a central motivating factor, a reason for being, an engine of their creativity. These sinthomes are powered by a *jouissance* that, while perhaps anti-social, legally problematic, or even dangerous to the individual's wellbeing also made his or her life worth living.

Žižek notes that the “sinthome is a psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (as symptom) nor 'traversed' (as fantasy)” (*Looking Awry* 137). Lacan questioned whether it was possible or ethical to attempt to relieve an analysand of their Sinthome.

According to Žižek, “Lacan's answer (and at the same time the last Lacanian definition of the final moment of the psychoanalytic process) is to identify with the sinthome” (137).

How might fictional prose be framed in terms of Lacan's three (or four) orders? The simple communication of ideas through language and how the meaning of that text is constructed through the Symbolic order is obvious, as is formalized narrative structure and the constraints of genre. The text itself is situated within literary and cultural entertainment economies. Similarly, the writer, reader and even the publisher have their respective roles to play as producers, purveyors and consumers of the text.

The Imaginary determines much of how both the writer and the reader visualise and internalise the narrative, relating narcissistically, emotionally to the characters and their experiences of the fictional events. Kris Pint notes that “fantasy forms a shield against the pure, unmediated enjoyment of the libidinal being, and at the same time it is a construction intended to recuperate something of that enjoyment” (Pint 37).

I would argue that the Real also plays a part in the process of engagement with a fictional text in terms of mutually acknowledged and understood absences. If sublime or limit experiences resist language in real life, the same holds true for fictional narrative accounts. The clichéd fantasy memes so common in erotic fiction might serve not only as shield, but also as universally recognized placeholders for what *cannot be said*. The formulaic fantasies and overused metaphors so often found

in erotic fiction might function as *'points the capiton'*², pinning the cringe-worthy signifier to an experience of *jouissance* that both the writer and reader mutually acknowledge cannot be encapsulated in language in any accurate or satisfactory way. Even something as physically concrete as an orgasm is only poorly represented in language, and has been rendered—as critics have so often pointed out—in some of the worst examples of purple prose. But for writers and readers, sharing that lived experience and understanding of the physical and affective aspects of it, the clichéd language or the threadbare metaphor acts as an invisible ellipsis present but unprinted in an account of a climax.

While I struggle to conceive of the Sinthome as an 'order' like the other registers of the Lacanian RSI, as a creator of fictional characters, it becomes a very useful tool. Most compelling literary characters are possessed of—one might even say by—a Sinthome. More than just a symptom that causes a character to behave in intriguing or predictable ways, the possessor of a Sinthome will always be a tragic hero—a kind of saint, according to Lacan (Rabaté 161), pursuing an 'idiotic' *jouissance* (Žižek 128). Whether reaching back to a less psychoanalytical and more literary reading of *Oedipus Rex* or forward to Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, Faulkner's Joe Christmas, or Patrick Süskind's murderous protagonist in the novel *Perfume*, characters possessed of a Sinthome are often deeply erotic—fascinating and

² Employing the term for the stitch in upholstery that pins the covering to the base and stops the formless mass of stuffing from shifting around, Lacan used the phrase 'point de capiton' to describe the relationship between words (signifiers) and the concepts they refer to (signifieds) whereby the usual shifting, tenuous relationship between them is tethered or 'stitched into place' to provide the illusion of stability. In *Seminar III: The Psychoses*, Lacan offers the example in Racine's *Athalie* in Jehoiada's line: "I fear God, dear Abner, and have no other fear". Here fear is the point de capiton and "everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier" (Lacan *Psychoses* 268). Žižek offers another example of the workings of a point de capiton: Jew becomes the master signifier, the powerful symbolic metaphor for Germany's fear of powerlessness, economic catastrophe, moral degradation, etc. (Žižek *Parallax* 37).

horrific in equal measure. Not for their deeds or their desires, but for the awful relentlessness of their trajectories.

The Mirror Stage: The Ego, the Subject, and the Other

Lacan proposed the concept of the Mirror Stage to describe the evolution of the individual's concept of self. Lionel Bailly quotes Lacan and then elaborates:

The function of the Mirror Stage ... is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality'; this intellectual relationship of the Subject's internal world and the external world is the beginning of consciousness of self as an object, and because of the mental process of translating the image into a concept of 'self', it is also the beginning of the submission of the subjective self to processes of symbolisation (Bailly 55).

Presenting this concept as a dramatic event during which the baby sees its reflection in a mirror and recognises that image as both 'me and yet not me' is useful in understanding the momentous schism taking place. We take the idea of seeing ourselves as others see us for granted, but this moment is one of paradox—of self-embrace *and* alienation. Until that moment of recognition, we're a disorganized collection of sensations, needs, and fragmentary glimpses of our own body parts. After, we are in possession of a fantasy image of ourselves as a whole, singular being. This is as much a constructed mirage as the reflection in the mirror. This act of identification is the start of a life-long process of self-objectification and self-assessment in relation to others.

From a writing perspective, it is also the beginning of our ability to tell the story of ourselves as if we were a character in a story told by someone else. Lacan insists that this must necessarily result in a fictional representation, because we are usually incapable of recognizing ourselves as subjects: "the ego is what a person says of him/herself; the Subject is the unrecognised self that is speaking" (59). What

implications might this have for the writers, the narrators, the characters and the readers of fictional works?

Bailly explains the difference between ego and subject:

[a]t the Mirror Stage, one may think of the Subject as the part that ‘invents’ the stories about its image-self or ego, affixing to it signifiers as it acquires language: girl, blonde, pretty, likes chocolate, hates pink, good at drawing, etc.; but it also represses as many signifiers as it selects, and in doing so, tries to hide something of itself. Indeed, the Subject can only come into being when it is not thinking, because the very act of any thinking that involves its ego creates a smokescreen behind which it disappears (60).

According to Lacan, the stories we write about ourselves can never be truthful reportage, but always fictions about an idealised image of ourselves, burying or sublimating what might be destabilizing to our ego. We cannot tell the story of the person telling the story; all narrators are somewhat unreliable. If thinking interferes with one's sense of subjecthood and a goal of psychoanalysis is to acquaint the patient with the truth of his or her subject, then I'd like to argue that one of the possible experiences of creating art, in the form of writing or immersing oneself in a destabilising fictional universe in reading might offer an imperfect, but somewhat similar environment in which to stumble upon one's own Lacanian subject.

Frédéric Declercq observes that “Lacan does not stop emphasizing that the real of the body, for example, the somatic source of the drive, is something fundamentally alien to us subjects of the symbolic” (Declercq 238). This challenges contemporary beliefs about the way in which we 'own' our bodies and how our relationships with them are played out. It most specifically challenges contemporary erotic narratives of the body which focus on emancipation, agency, consent and self-definition. Are we really writing about our physical erotic experiences or are we presenting idealised experiences of what we wish they were?

The Lacanian concepts of ego, subject and Other encourage the reconsideration of common notions of individuality, agency, private vs. public, and how we orient ourselves in relation to others and the Other, with a capital O (Lacan *The Ego in Freud's Theory* 243). This Lacanian distinction between an individual other vs. the hegemonic Other (embodied in the language, law, cultural norms, and power structures of the Symbolic order) constitutes an invitation for me as a writer to seek more complexity in the interactions between characters: to whom do they address themselves when they interact with others? I will explore this further in subsequent chapters. Suffice it to say that in a contemporary culture where sexual exhibitionism—sex-blogging, erotic self-portraiture, published personal narratives of erotic experience—is encouraged as an act of emancipation and self-realization, the concept of the erotic self has weighty implications.

Accepting the fact of this limitation means, I believe, that we can go looking for ways in which the truth of the writer, the narrator, the character and the reader might seep through the seams of our telling and reading of fictional stories, much like the psychoanalytical patient's subconscious leaks through the cracks of his discourse with an analyst: in slips of the tongue and fingers, in dreams, in repetitions, in the choice of focus and point of view, in deliberate misrepresentations and misreadings, and disproportions of emphasis.

Ways of Wanting: Instinct, Drive, Need, Desire, Fantasy and *Jouissance*

Lacan's theories of human wanting are complex and fertile territory for any writer of erotic fiction interested in exploring human desire. While sexual desire is often equated in mainstream discourse as a basic human instinct that *must* be addressed, Lacan, like Freud, draws a clear distinction between instinct and drive. According to Lacan, instincts pertain to biological demands—hunger, thirst, sleep,

evacuation, etc.—that *can* and *must* be satisfied to ensure the survival of the *individual* (Homer 75). Unlike instinct's call which *can* be satisfied, the “drive always circles around its object but never achieves the satisfaction of reaching it” (76).

Although Freud believed there were two drives—the eros and thanatos, the libidinal drive and the death drive —Lacan considered that all drives were ultimately the death drive (Ruti 22). I have found it constructive to think of the drive as propulsion or compulsion itself—the French term '*pulsion*' being much more intuitively understood, in my view. Energy can propel or compel us in the direction of libidinal pleasure, or beyond it. It can be harnessed and directed, through fantasy and symbolisation, to many purposes: sex, work, art, or even religious ecstasy. In this way, like all energy, it can be either life-affirming or death-seeking, constructive or dangerous and often both. Like energy, it can change states—from energy to matter and back again, but it never stops being. Because what the drive and desire have in common, claimed Lacan, is that they are breeder reactors; their aim is self-perpetuation. Moreover, the purpose of the drive, as Sean Homer notes, “is simply to maintain its own repetitive compulsive movement, just as the purpose of desire is to desire” (Homer 76). Bruce Fink emphasises that desire “has no object. In its essence, desire is a constant search for something else, and there is no specifiable object that is capable of satisfying it, in other words, extinguishing it” (Fink 90). But it is fair to say that, as individuals, we have an uneasy relationship with our drive; “the real of the drives are experienced as something alien by the subject” (Declerq 238). It is in the Imaginary and the Symbolic that we begin to clothe that compulsion in narrative, where we give it a face and a name, where we invent elaborate rationales for why we follow where it leads—this is desire.

Need pertains to instinct; it is primal, aimed at the things we cannot survive without. In the womb our needs are met before we have the capacity to express them and, in developed countries, most of us have our needs quickly and fully met; rarely do we have to demand them. Primary caregivers either anticipate the need for food, drink, warmth, changing, etc. or interpret a cry of need and quickly address it. As we grow, we begin to want things that are not necessary to our survival. These demands are often a mystery to the caregiver and may very likely be a mystery to the infant as well. Bailly illustrates this nicely:

Anyone can observe the frustration of the toddler as it finds that whatever it asks for just isn't doing the trick: milk, banana, bear, train, and even mama get rejected with increasing impatience until finally, the child gives up and settles for one of these substitutes, whimpering with unsatisfied desire (Bailly 151).

For Lacan, humans enter the social world of the Symbolic register with existential deficits: lacks that can never be addressed or healed or fulfilled. It is not entirely clear as to whether Lacan felt there were three distinct lacks, or whether they are really all the same thing, but the existential loss of the perfect state we experience in the womb; the *phallus* (the imaginary thing which, in infancy, pulls our mother or primary caregiver away from being constantly with us), and the *objet petit a* (what is lost in the translation of reality into language). Indeed it might be said that our strategies in trying to address those lacks are what constitute us as speaking, thinking, desiring beings. Desire, according to Lacan, is what we do to distract ourselves from the realization that we will never fill those primal lacks. This is why, he says, the attainment of the things, people or circumstances we desire never completely satisfies; because all our desires are a) aimed at the possible (when what we really want is impossible) b) forged in the crucible of Symbolic (in language and laws and external models of what we should want and, therefore, never truly ours) and c)

always a fantasy in that they are never aimed at what is really out there, but what suits and enhances the story we tell ourselves of who we are, formulated in the mirror stage.

Lacan famously and controversially said, “man's desire is the desire of the Other” (Lacan *Four Fundamental Concepts* 235). While Lacan uses this statement many times in this and other seminars, applying it to a number of scenarios, he never offers a clear explanation of what he means. Lacan's interpreters have also disagreed in regard to exactly what it means (Fink 59, Ruti 50, Braunstein 103). What is constant is that for Lacan, desire is complex, paradoxical, unfulfillable, misaimed, and often represents what we *think* we ought to desire rather than any authentic desire on our part.

Indeed, part of the price for entering into the Symbolic order is in relinquishing the determination of our own desires. Fink underscores this: “Our very fantasies can be foreign to us, for they are structured by a language which is only tangentially or asymptotically our own, and they may even be someone else's fantasies at the outset” (Fink 13). Very often what we think of as erotic is culturally determined for us—the glimpse of stocking, the oral sex, the three-way, the spanking—even if only by their questionably false but nostalgic designation as illicit and forbidden. While we continuously affirm that our erotic desires are intimately self-defining, the irony is that we are taught to want what we want as part of the baggage of our culturally determined subjecthood through culturally shared fantasies: *real* men want blow-jobs, *real* women want a gentle and attentive lover, etc. So when it comes to the narratives of our sexual fantasies and the ones portrayed in many forms of pornography, erotic fiction and sexually explicit romance, far from being the titillating, transgressive obscenities we tell ourselves they are, they are often the

implicitly sanctioned erotic desires designated as appropriate to our gender, our sexual orientation, our age, etc.

In attempting an intersection between Lacan and erotic writing, fantasy presents us with a challenge. The mainstream use of the term as unreal and escapist is often spoken of negatively. For Lacan fantasy is an important mechanism for how we keep our sanity in the face of obvious dissonance between how things are and how our societies say they should be. In a sense fantasy teaches us how to desire and what we should desire. As Žižek explains it, “fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way. Its function is rather that of a Kantian 'transcendental schematism.' A fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates, i.e. it literally 'teaches us how to desire'“ (Žižek 191). Moreover, while fantasy seems to act to spare us from the depressing spectre of mundane reality or shield us from traumas we seek to avoid, it often does quite the opposite. Žižek insists that “fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal” (190). Horror fiction is a perfect example of this; isn't the proposition of Lovecraft's monstrous Cthulhu more horrific than the things we experience in everyday life? And yet aren't there aspects of it that reveal what we really dread? And doesn't it serve as an apt metaphor for real things that both fascinate and terrify us? Fantasy allows us to confront what we fear in manageable ways. This is especially true, I think, in extreme sexual fantasies that are often seen as puzzling and self-destructive. One example—which I address in the story “On A Very Dry Afternoon in Early Summer”—of this is the puzzling prevalence of rape fantasies among women (Bivona & Critelli 10). Another is the kink practice of 'race play', where people transform their very real horrors of being the object of racial prejudice into erotic roleplay (Plaid).

Jouissance, concluded Lacan in his later Seminars, is something quite different from desire. Somewhat misleadingly translated as 'enjoyment', *jouissance* is a pursuit of pleasure beyond the Freudian Pleasure Principle (Rabate 27) and into a state where pleasure and pain, distress, or even danger, become a blended experience. Bruce Fink describes *jouissance* as “a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination” (Fink xii). While we may take genuine, if ephemeral, pleasure in the pursuit of our desires, the pleasure of *jouissance* is always at least partly painful. It is what we want beyond reason, beyond limit, beyond the boundaries of social norms, beyond our physical or mental health, beyond our sense of ourselves as socially intelligible beings, beyond law and beyond language. While desire is firmly situated within the Symbolic order, Mari Ruti notes that *jouissance* is often how we experience intimations of the Real, as it “intrudes into our lives as an unruly vortex of bodily *jouissance* and unintelligibility that disturbs the reassuring (yet ever-fragile) coherence of our symbolic and imaginary configurations alike” (Ruti I). While we can say what we desire and why we desire it (even if the object of our desire and our reasons for wanting it are fictional), *jouissance* is where language fails us. While I will address this more fully in subsequent chapters, it merits mentioning here that when someone compulsively pursues, for example, sex with multiple anonymous partners or a relationship with someone who is clearly sadistic, it is not the act one is pursuing, but some unnameable state of being attained via the experience. The specific act or behaviour—which *can* be spoken of—is the vehicle for 'getting there', but the 'there' itself is a state with no signifier.

The *Jouissance* of the Body

Of special relevance to erotic writing are Freud's and Lacan's theories on our strange relationship with our bodies and particularly our sexual organs. From Little Han's 'widdler' (Declercq 238) to Portnoy's 'complaint', the experience of raw physical arousal, of bodily *jouissance*, is deeply problematic for us. So problematic that we often conceive of the various organs —the sites of that arousal —as outside ourselves, having separate agency, not belonging to us or even transposed onto inanimate objects. We see it even in the most casual of remarks and erotic memes: the description, for instance, of a man being “led around by his dick”, or the stiletto shoe which does duty as a less problematic vagina. While for Freud and, later, Lacan, this schismatic phenomena is of immense psychoanalytical interest, for a writer of eroticism, it furnishes the kernel of narrative conflict that acts as the fundamental engine in many stories of eroticism. The body's *jouissance* has no intelligible meaning for us. Yet we are compelled to make meaning, to invent meaning where none exists, in the face of this quotidian and yet always shocking manifestation of the Real. Although eroticism doesn't always require concrete embodiment, our problematic relationship with our corporeality is often at the heart of the narrative of eroticism. While positivists weave puzzling analogies between women's red lipstick and the inflamed buttocks of female bonobo monkeys, the world of erotic fiction clothes this unintelligible experience of *jouissance* in rococo tales of fetish and romantic obsession. It is not our comfort with our bodies that spurs on our most elaborate and stirring stories of eroticism, but the opposite. Our inability to reconcile ourselves to the ownership of that unspeakable, meaningless bodily *jouissance* can fire most imaginative storytelling impulses. Often this is how the symptom becomes the Sinthome, both for writers and for the characters they create.

Sublimity, Identity and the Death Drive

“Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death” is one of Bataille's most often quoted statements. He repeatedly refers to the intersection between eroticism, violence and death in a number of his works—especially in relation to experiences of ecstasy and the sublime and in contrast to the existential loneliness and discontinuity of human reproductive existence.³ Similarly, while Freud formulated the concept of the Death Drive to explain the often self-destructive compulsion to push past the limits of the Pleasure/Reality Principles that moderate our pleasure-seeking natures, he warned that this is not

a question of an antithesis between an optimistic and a pessimistic theory of life. Only by the concurrent or mutually opposing action of the two primal instincts—Eros and the death instinct -, never by one or the other alone, can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life (Strachey & Freud 243).

In his seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan essentially accuses Freud of *fudging* when it comes to the death drive, calling it “a creationist sublimation” (Lacan *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 212), framing the drive negatively as a way of refusing to engage with the utter alterity of our demise. Subsequently, the Queer theorist Lee Edelman, has argued that the Death Drive is something to embrace, liberating the LGBT community from heterosexual hegemony, and echoing Bataille's view of the reproducing human as trapped in the discontinuity of a state of reproductive futurism (Edelman 39), denying non-heterosexuals an identity beyond “what we do with our genitals” (47). For me and for my writing, this compulsion to go past the limits, while anti-social and even dangerous, is also life affirming. Ruth Stein concurs, noting that “this recognition of death makes eroticism the vehicle for a

³ As Mansfield notes, “Death exceeds— becoming the beyond of—the pleasure principle and the neat subjectivity that could be imagined as its structure. As we have seen in Derrida’s discussion of the relationship between Bataille and Hegel, it is in the heroic orientation toward an irrecoverable death that the idea of the sovereign arises” (Mansfield 53).

vibrant, even frenzied, affirmation of life [...] the erotic awareness of limits and transience, an awareness that renders life and its beauty poignant and most intense” (Stein 56). This thing called the Death Drive doesn't aim itself *at death*, although that might be an unfortunate result. This compulsion might be more helpfully conceived of as an existential defiance, a transgression and transcendence of our biological imperatives, social constrictions, and an intrinsic part of the experience of eroticism.

3. Writing Erotic Fiction

This research project sets out to explore the possibilities of formulating new sites of eroticism through critical and creative writing. The creative portion of the project consists of a collection of fictional short stories that, if published and offered commercially, would most appropriately be situated in the erotica genre. However, much of the scholarship on this form of writing classifies it as pornography. While it was not my intention to engage in the seemingly never-ending pornography vs. erotica debate, the arguments behind it reveal nuances which are relevant to a Bataille concept of eroticism—specifically the necessity for transgression and the instability of language. As the volume of easily accessed pornographic material has grown, as it is increasingly accepted as a mainstream topic of discourse, and as it has become a commercially legitimized commodity, its status as a transgressive form of expression needs to be interrogated.

Pornography vs. Erotica

Until fairly recently, our cultural reticence to give sexually explicit material serious consideration has led us to ignore or dismiss glaring differences in medium, genre, content and tone, lumping it all under the single classification of pornography. This leads to a situation in which anything and/or nothing of substance might be said about it.

In their introduction to *The Encyclopaedia of Erotic Literature (2003)*, Gaetan Brulotte and John Phillips note, “when consulting existing reference works and dictionaries on the subject, and the very few specialized histories of the genre, one is struck by the difficulty scholars have encountered in differentiating erotic literature from pornography or from love stories containing sexually explicit passages”

(Brulotte & Phillips x). They go on to highlight the difficulties of making distinctions based on ethics and psychology (subjectivity and the presupposing of a sexual norm), sociology (high vs. low culture), gender (male vs. female authorship), and legal (standards of obscenity) viewpoints and find them all lacking.

The everyday use of the term 'pornography' or 'porn' tends to be fairly precise, referring to explicitly sexual visual media (either still or moving images) made, marketed and used as an aid to achieving sexual arousal. However the academy still persists in referring to all non-medical, explicit representations of sex as pornography. Most scholarship on the subject does not distinguish between different types of sexually explicit content or between visual and textual works. Similarly, there's little distinction made between documentary, biographical and fictional narratives. This is inadequate for a number of reasons.

First, it ignores the fact that what is produced and commonly called 'porn' today might be more properly conceived of as a form of documentation. In the past, still and filmic porn was sometimes theatrically simulated sex acts, embedded in a noticeably contrived fictional narrative; this has not been the case for decades. These are not fictional characters pretending to have sex as a narrative plot point. While there may still be some token attempt at a fictional premise for the sex to occur and there is still a great deal of artifice in porn, it is not entirely fictional. While the participation of professional porn actors and the presence of cameras and a script follow a theatrical model, the result is still the video documentation of real people having real sex. And, while intention to distribute and monetize the resulting documentation transforms the act from one of private experience to a commoditized public performance, it cannot be said to be wholly a work of theatre or fiction. I would argue that fictionality more easily affords the possibility of symbolization and

of metaphor that the remediation of real events resists. In erotic fiction, an erotic act can stand for itself as an arousing event and simultaneously function, for the reader, as a metaphor for more general truths lending the eroticism of one to the other.

Secondly, video or photographic documentation of staged sex does not require the viewer to create his or her own mental images in the way text—fiction or non-fiction—does. The textual paradigm forces the reader to actively participate in creative meaning-making. My point, in Lacanian terms, is that there is far less 'play' at the *point de capiton* in a visual representation. Lacan's own use of diagrams and mathemes supports my argument; it was his concern that his words might be misinterpreted that led him to offer these images and formulae (Bailly 49). I think this is why Žižek uses film as an illustration of how the Lacanian *point de capiton* functions in relation to ideology (Žižek 153), because, in some sense, *seeing is believing*, while the abstraction of text—especially expressly fictional text—offers more scope for interpretation, for re-symbolisation, for reader re-formulation.

Thirdly, the blanket use of the term pornography does not take intention, expectation or intended usage into account. While pornography—whether visual or textual—is produced specifically and chiefly as an aid to achieving sexual satisfaction, many of the texts included in the canon of 20th Century erotic fiction clearly have more ambiguous goals. I will address what these might be later in this thesis. Furthermore, the content of most pornography, while marketing itself as transgressive, conforms to widely agreed-upon understandings of what is 'properly' sexually arousing, thus perpetuating normative, hegemonic models of the erotic. In contrast, many of the works in the canon of 20th Century erotic fiction propose far more truly transgressive, socially problematic sites of eroticism.

For all these reasons, I do not classify my creative work as pornography. Not because I feel pornography is morally wrong, lacking in artistic skill, or less worthy of intellectual attention, but simply because to call my creative writing porn would be to give false expectations to a reader. The stories I have included in this thesis are entirely fictional. They were not written to be passively consumed, but demand active reader participation and, while parts of them are most decidedly written with the intention of arousing the reader, I am not aiming for the uncomplicated type of erotic arousal that facilitates orgasm. My aim is to make an affective link between eroticism and the human condition. These are works of fiction situated—though not unproblematically—within the erotica genre.

The Erotica Genre

The current term used by writers, publishers and booksellers to describe the genre of written works containing narratives that depend heavily on the erotic experiences of the characters is erotica. In her book *Explicit Utopias* (2015), Amalia Ziv highlights many of the difficulties of perception and definition, calling attention to oft-cited definitions of the genre that bear little resemblance to contemporary erotic fiction:

Marcus's characterizations apply best to the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pornographic novels he had in mind, and they do not fit contemporary women's or queer erotica as well. While there certainly are contemporary pornographic texts that lean on the genres of fantasy (e.g., Anne Rice's fairytale porn that is discussed in chapter 2), or science fiction (e.g., some of Pat Califia's science-fiction porn stories located in a dystopic future), more often contemporary women's erotica situates its narratives in everyday reality and, as Susie Bright notes, tends to integrate details of daily life and, furthermore, takes account of the limitations and risks that beset the erotic lives of its protagonists (xii). [...] However, even such more realistically grounded fiction, and even fiction that explores the more complicated feelings associated with the experience of sexuality, retains the basic wish-fulfilment quality of pornography: sex does take place, even in unlikely circumstances and in the face of obstacles, and is always satisfying (Ziv 9).

Ziv still uses the terms pornography and erotica interchangeably, erasing the distinction between works that feature explicit sex chiefly for the purposes of helping the reader to achieve orgasm, and works that (while perhaps helping a reader to reach orgasm) aim to say something more about the human condition and often use a reader's arousal as a way to complicate what is being said. I propose that, instead of distinguishing pornography from erotica based on a reader's response which, as Brulotte and Phillips point out, will always be subjective and based on an individual's sexual template (Brulotte & Phillips x), it is more helpful to meditate on the quandary that, while the aim of pornography is solely to aid the reader in achieving arousal and orgasm, a traditional story structure requires a credible and compelling conflict. Few people want conflict in their porn.

Looking back at what are commonly considered the canonical texts of erotica in the 20th Century, it's clear that erotica has not always been 'utopian' or escapist literature: D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Nin's *The Delta of Venus*, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, Duras's *The Lover*, Miller's *Nexus/Sexus* all refuse this description of a Utopian escape into wish-fulfilment. All use description and language in a way that may sexually arouse a reader, and yet all complicate that arousal with some form of narrative conflict, lending the vicissitudes of the world an erotic aura and, at the same time, refusing a reader a completely fanstasmatic escape from the Real. What makes them not only erotic but important works in the genre is that they use erotic arousal as a mode of discourse through which to examine the human condition. Michelson describes these sorts of texts as “complex pornography” (Michelson 41).

Like other literary genres, erotica contains a number of sub-genres. The one that most closely resembles pornography is often referred to as 'stroke fiction'. Stroke fiction is text specifically crafted, like visual porn, to be used as an adjunct to an individual's sexual fantasy, as an aid to masturbation, or as a tool to heighten a couple's sexual arousal with an aim to enhancing their sex. Although textual and superficially narrative in structure, it never contains a level of conflict that would classify it as a story in the literary sense. Stroke fiction relies heavily on common sexual memes or clichés, which are anticipated to be familiar to the reader. This use of erotic cliché is, much like the 'money shot' in video porn, effective erotic shorthand, functioning as erotic triggers to help the reader achieve arousal as efficiently as possible. This form of writing eschews any ambiguity of erotic imagery with which the reader might engage in metaphorising the story. For this reason, stroke fiction is effective both as a masturbatory aid and a tool for the reinforcement of hegemonic ideology; it works by reigniting what is already normative and standardised, not by inviting reader creativity. Stroke fiction often sets its narrative in a story-world with no context or a context that is so cliché as to be easily ignored. The sexual content is all that matters; everything else is set design. Like porn, by excluding everything *but* the sex from the story-world, elevating it to an absurd level and delegating the rest of the universe to unimportance, it is implicitly but firmly and safely diminished to the rank of fantasy.

Another sub-genre that conforms to Ziv's wish-fulfilment criteria is erotic romance. In the past, the romance genre avoided graphic or prolonged descriptions of sex. While sex always featured strongly as an element in romance novels, it was often abstracted or stylised. Acts and body parts were referred to briefly and euphemistically. Romantic love, not sexual desire, serves as the prime motivator for

moving the plot forward. Most significantly, romance requires closure; the conventions of the genre demand that all stories conclude with a 'happily ever after' (or at least a 'happily for now') ending. With the increase in mainstream tolerance for sexual explicitness, romances began to feature more explicit sex, described in more detail and with more realism. Notably, sexual pleasure and compatibility became a legitimate reason for love's evolution. In the last ten years, this genre-crossover has become so successful that many erotica publishers now only accept works that conform to erotic romance conventions: a strong central love story, explicit and arousing sex scenes, and a happy ending. Erotic works that do not include a 'happily ever after' ending are now difficult to place with publishers.

The Poetics of Erotica

In his book *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity* (1993), Michelson proposes that “obscenity is not simply a cultural aberration but a complex expression of human imagination, humanistically vital enough to have its own poetics” (39). Like many scholars on the subject, he classifies all sexually explicit texts as pornography, but he identifies three distinct types: hard-core, soft-core and complex pornography. Under this schema, hard-core pornography addresses the human fascination with the “myth of animality” inviting the reader to indulge in the fantasy that, freed from the constraints of the social order, we would indulge our sexual urges with the mindless abandon of animals mating (41). Stroke fiction erotica sits comfortably within this classification. Michelson identifies soft-core pornography as a text that “titillates its audience with animality, but seeks to socialize that myth by sublimating its physically egocentric energies into a materialistic culture's analogue of spirit, the myth of sentimentality” (41). Erotic romance fits neatly into this category.

Although complex pornography may use the conventions of both hard- and soft-core pornography, Michelson notes, it differs from both in that it is not “exclusively committed to the myth of animality and its explicit sexual imagery,” nor does it offer the “ethical encouragement to the sentiments of the status quo” but instead “explores the moral recognition that necessarily precedes and informs true ethical perception” and synthesizes “the myths of animality with those of love” (55). Michelson situates complex pornography firmly in the Age of Anxiety, preoccupying itself with “a neurotic interpretation of love” (41), deriving “from that psychic state where consciousness mediates sexual energy” (58).

It is precisely at this nexus that I think the reflective writer and reader of erotic fiction may be found. These complex pornographies, then, might correspond with what Barthes called “writerly texts” (Barthes *S/Z* 4) and Eco called “open texts” (Eco 50). They don't constrain or circumvent the meaning-making capacity of the reader. They don't offer closure but allow space for the reader, writer and text to come together in an agreement that we are all contemplating the same unwritable space. With these kinds of texts, the reader is invited—sometimes compelled—to engage actively as writers, interrogators, examiners of what the gap in the text points towards. Indeed, the reading may feel incomplete unless the reader fills in gaps, elaborates, extrapolates or even provides their own satisfactory ending when the one that is offered doesn't provide the emotional closure they desire.

There is an opportunity, in the experience of these sorts of writerly, open texts, for a reader to examine and interrogate the desires they have brought to the text. The text becomes one voice in a two-way conversation where the writing and the reader merge, diverge, clash and produce a very private form of discourse about desire.

I try to explore this possibility in my practice as a writer of erotic fiction. Readers come to erotic fiction with a desire to be aroused and yet most readers know that, unlike what is commonly called porn, erotic fiction doesn't always promise a reader closure in the form of sexual satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is a genre that demands an admission of a frank, libidinal interest on the part of the reader even before the text is engaged with. So, from the outset, the relationship between the reader and the text begins in an somewhat intimate and vulnerable place.

The *Jouissance* of Words

While most of this thesis focuses on the ideas conveyed in erotic writing, I'd like to focus for a moment on the base currency of erotic writing —words. The erotica genre often uses stark sexual slang. Both culturally conservative and progressive literary critics have criticized it; one side accuses erotic writers of shocking and offending the public morality and the other side accuses us of laziness. We have a curious relationship with obscene words: a significant proportion of the population uses them on a daily basis, and yet we still balk when we hear them spoken by figures in authority. I might say 'fuck' all the time, but our Prime Minister can't say it without scandal. It is perfectly acceptable for a doctor to discuss 'coitus' in detail but, if he uses the word 'fuck', suddenly his authority as a holder of power-knowledge disappears. This dichotomy suggests a magic at play in obscene language. Slang terms can be erotically exciting not just because of the signifieds they point to, but exactly because they are prohibited or problematic. The use of the word 'cunt' can be erotically effective for the very reason that some women find the term so demeaning and offensive: in one single word I have confronted my reader not only with the idea of a vulva viewed in a specifically sexual way, but I have dragged the whole historic spectre of the shame, the fear, the ambivalence that we have loaded onto that sexual

organ with it. In a way, the use of sexual obscenity is a kind of cultural parapraxis—leaking not what is sexual, but what is perverse about our attitudes towards the sexual.

While obscene words are often used as short cuts in erotic writing, I would like to propose the idea that they also act as universal markers for open-textedness, serving as a signifiers not just for the act or the body part, but for experience and meaning that is beyond language. Sylvia Lippi elaborates on the Lacanian perspective on why certain words are transgressive beyond the signifieds they gesture towards, but because of the very absence of a material object. I am quoting the passage here in its translated entirety because there is no official English translation of this paper, and Lippi gets to the very core of the matter:

Thanks to their resonance, words become seductive like bodies, they attain a physical beauty. Invested with instinctual value, they become erotic 'objects.' In opposition, the 'prohibition of jouissance' becomes the 'jouissance of prohibition': language as an extreme point, 'at the limit,' can become the focal point around which desire and jouissance revolve. There is no material object in the jouissance of words, only a signifier, a signifier that takes the place of the drive's object. The excitement is *produced by the material absence* of the object, which nevertheless is there, underlying the signifier, in the infinite meaning of each word. Some signifiers can touch the sexual real, or better yet the tips of the real, the tips of jouissance can enter into the signifier, when this signifier doesn't have the task of giving, in collaboration with other signifiers in the chain of discourse, (univocal) meaning to a sentence. Delight in words represents, without the subject's knowledge, delight in the impossible real, but in a way that's transverse, impure, incomplete. For this reason, the *jouissance* of words always shows itself to be transgressive (Lippi. Emphasis mine. Translation by Rob MacIsaac).

While the use of sexual slang and bell words may be laziness, repetitive, or apparently meaningless, it may also function effectively as an erotic meta-signifier, a tacit compact between the writer and the reader that what is being referred to is a limit experience known to both but beyond words.

4. The Erotic Self

Erotica is primarily a character-driven genre; narratives usually focus on the inner experience of characters to offer the reader an immersive encounter with the story. In this chapter, I reflect on Bataille's concept of a decentred self, able to transcend the discontinuity of the socially intelligible subject and emerge as a continuous being in the context of the erotic experience. I interrogate this concept via Lacan's theories of how language and desire constitute the subject within the Symbolic Order, and how *jouissance* and the Real can disrupt that sense of wholeness, individuality or social intelligibility. I examine contemporary notions of the erotic self, how our culture informs it, and how this is echoed or resisted in erotic fiction. Finally, I discuss how these understandings of the erotic self are reflected in some of the writing that forms the creative writing part of this project.

Bataille's Continuous Self

According to Bataille, we are on a trajectory towards death and continuity as we die, decompose and join with the matter around us. But the possibility of reproduction interrupts this continuity, forcing an individuation and separation; we must be *a separate entity* in order to join with *another separate entity* and then make offspring that, in some sense, defeats mortality (Bataille *Erotism* 12-14). He proposes that “the transitions from this continuity to continuity in eroticism are what they are because of the knowledge of death that from the word go connects the rupture of discontinuity and the consequent glide towards a potential continuity with death” (104). For Bataille, one of the functions of eroticism “is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. The transition from the normal state to

that of erotic desire pre-supposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity” (17). We are able to fleetingly achieve transition between these states through physical, emotional or religious eroticism (15). This experience enables a temporary destruction of “self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (16), and necessitates the “breaking down of established patterns [...] of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals” (18). So, via the act of negating our mortality through reproduction, or in contemplation of the abjection of our own finitude, “we can experience its dizziness together” (13). This disruption of the discontinuous state takes us, via transgression, to a languageless ecstasy where “[b]odies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality” (18).

Bataille's eroticism, as mentioned elsewhere, is not limited to the specifically sexual; continuity can be achieved through various subsets of eroticism: sensuality, love or religious transcendence (15). Extremes of pain or pleasure force us to confront the limits of our bodies, as do rapturous mystical experiences, but extreme emotion—most notably love—also evokes this transitory sense of continuity by the “full and limitless being unconfined within the trammels of separate personalities, continuity of being, glimpsed as a deliverance through the person of the beloved” since “the beloved being is indeed equated for the lover [...] with the truth of existence” (21). Or, as Žižek explains, “[b]eing loved makes me feel directly the gap between what I am as a determinate being and the unfathomable X in me which causes love” (Žižek

Psychoanalysis 217). This continuous erotic self challenges normative images of comfortable or commodified enjoyment.

Lacan's Brittle Subject

Lacanian theory also challenges the widely held notion of the inviolate, totalised individual. It proposes that our self-perception begins as a fragmented body, undifferentiated from the world surrounding us (Evans 67). However, according to Lacan, our passage through the mirror stage:

...manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development (Lacan *Ecrits* 3).

Far from growing into any fundamentally 'true' self, our passage through the Mirror Stage enables us to develop a *fantasy* of ourselves as whole and separate from others. This phantasmatic but socially intelligible concept of the self, which Lacan calls The Subject, is neither native nor particularly robust, but entered into fully via the Symbolic Order and constantly negotiated through language, laws, social structure and our interaction with others. This 'rigid structure' is brittle, and can be destabilized by trauma and, as Žižek points out, “the name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is of course enjoyment” (Žižek *Enjoy* 26). In other words, *jouissance*.

Amy Hollywood observes that, in Bataille's creative writing, he “...continually attempts to elicit the real through the shattering of subjectivity, both literally and psychically” (Hollywood 14). Indeed all of Bataille's various modes for attaining this state of continuity might be conceived of as traumatising experiences of *jouissance* that Mari Ruti determines to be irruptions of the Lacanian Real, creating tears “in the fabric of the symbolic [...] through which the sublime enters the domain of everyday

life in ways that engender intimations of immortality” and can dissolve “the coordinates of our socially intelligible identity” (Ruti 26). Framed this way, many popular contemporary portrayals of characters experiencing eroticism might be said to lack verisimilitude, nuance or depth. In his review of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Andrew O'Hagan acknowledges this lack, noting that “there’s no mess on the carpet and there are hot showers afterwards. Everybody is comfortable and everybody is clean: they travel first-class, the rich give presents, the man uses condoms, and everything dark is resolved in a miasma of cuddles” (O'Hagan).

The Commodified Erotic Self

Humans have often been encouraged to present themselves as erotic entities with a view to attracting someone to be erotic with. This is especially true for women who, for centuries, have been encouraged to see and present themselves as sexual commodities. However, contemporary society has placed an even greater emphasis on conceiving of and situating oneself as a product to be marketed to employers, friends, and lovers. Simultaneously, the evolution of the internet into a multi-media publishing platform for the masses has opened up ways for humans to express many things, including their identities as erotic beings. Social media—blogs, image and video archives and ebooks—depend on user-generated content and we are encouraged to expose ourselves as objects of desire. On the positive side, Elizabeth Wood proposes the explosion of women's sex-blogs constitutes a feminist emancipation of sexual discourse, which makes information accessible to women (Wood 480). In his rather prescient essay on Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised*, Jack Abecassis summarises what he sees as the more negative impact of postmodernity on the erotic individual. He calls it the *érotico-publicitaire*:

The individual self, which in modernity has always been distinct from the collective, becomes here generic and serial, oscillating exclusively between eroticism and money. No longer in opposition to the world, it is continuous with it since the dialectic between the interior and the exterior, between the individual and the collective, slowly disappears. As if dialed into the ruthless digital economy, to the *érotico-publicitaire* machine which devours him, the self has once and for all lost the tension between being and appearance. The fate of the subject in the *érotico-publicitaire* society is to identify with the ideal that devours him. Once capitalism and globalization have done away with religion, family and nation, there no longer remains a space where counter-practices could successfully survive. (Abecassis 812-813)

Beckmann agrees, noting that “[t]he ‘consuming self’ of contemporary society is a representational being, permanently engaged in the ‘body/self’-project”

(Beckmann 21). So, while Wood views this freedom to speak of female sexuality as emancipatory, what has emerged, Benhabib argues, is a demand to speak where “the act of objectification in which desire is transformed into a product is not an act of self-actualization, but an act of fear which leads to control of the nature within oneself. Objectification is not self-actualization but self-denial disguised as self-affirmation” (Benhabib 77). Dymock describes this as an economy: “[t]he possibility of self-transformation is marketed to women as the foundation upon which this process of empowerment takes place, and nowhere is this more effective than in the marketing of sexuality” (Dymock 890).

Concurrently, the collapse of boundaries between interior and exterior achieved through technology, and the pressure to construct and observe oneself as a desirable and enjoying product, is, I would suggest, antithetical to eroticism as Bataille described it. Boodakian concurs, noting that, “[i]n the case of auto-surveillance it becomes more complex since there is an insistence on discontinuity while the Other either remains irrelevant, or rather treats oneself as the Other; the end result is that continuity is still not possible, thereby reducing chances for the erotic” (Boodakian 69).

The Continuous Self in Contemporary Erotica

While erotica narratives often seek to convey characters immersed in fleeting states of continuity, the nature of Bataille's experience of continuity or the Lacanian subject, fractured and rendered socially unintelligible with its encounter with the Real, poses a tremendous challenge for writers. It is a state that resists language utterly, so any attempt to represent it will always necessarily fall short. As with the textual representation of the ecstatic experience, describing the continuous or the fragmented self at the edge of the Real depends on an acknowledgement between the writer, the text, and the reader that an attempt at the impossible is being made. Very often the writer simply makes no attempt at it. For those who do, this state must be gestured to in a variety of ways. A common method is blatant romantic cliché: “I can’t help myself when I lean in and kiss him, giving him every piece of my heart for this gift he’s giving me. My fairytale, rescuing me from the evil monster that lurks in the dungeon” (Blair 170). Here romantic love and the signifier of 'fairytale' stand in for what resists description.

Another approach frames the continuous self as a cohesive, alternate personality: “Do it! my inner goddess pleads with me. My subconscious is as paralyzed as I am” (James 273), or takes up Michelson's hard-core 'myth of animality' (Michelson 41): “I lost my mind somewhere along the way, primitive instinct taking over” (Day 93).

A more surreal approach, hints at the Bataillean spectre of death: “I collapsed on my elbows, too blissed out to move. The grass could eat me alive and I wouldn’t care” (Halle 153).

Yet others underscore the character's sense of temporal and spatial unmooring: “Maybe she was stuck here in what would seem like forever, the last firing of a

neuron an event that set a soul loose from time and space, a prisoner of whatever the last thought or fragment of a thought was. Maybe you couldn't control what those last thoughts were, or maybe she had chosen poorly" (Harlen 2013).

More effective, in my estimation, is Paula Bomer's almost heterodiegetic approach, signalling continuity from a distance:

He had the girl no one else could have and no one wanted because she was such used trash but he had her in a way no one had ever had her. He broke her shell and what was inside was so pink and so vulnerable it scared him at first. Then he liked it. Then he loved it. Then he knew what it was he had. He had her (Bomer 176).

Jonathan Kemp's approach is equally effective and perhaps more immersive, triangulating what defies description between the surreal, the cliché, and the concrete: "I hang like a cage between heaven and earth, inside which, perched on a swing, my big red heart is singing. The taste of twenty men bruises my lips" (Kemp 93).

Failures in the Text

A survey of my own accompanying creative writing reveals that I tend to avoid direct attempts to write about the continuity of self in my characters, and focus, instead on the consequences of that experience. However, what I have attempted to keep in mind while bringing new characters to textual life is to imbue them with a yearning for and a sense of the possibility of experiencing Bataille's state of continuity or Ruti's singularity. I have tried to apply Lacanian concepts of the phantasmatic ego and the subject's self-obliviousness to afford my characters more complexity. Plot-wise, I've allowed *jouissance* and the Real to inform the fictional circumstances in which that might occur. A passage like "[w]hat have I done? What has he let me do? I'm tumbling through the high atmosphere, falling from grace, suffocating in the airless joy of the moment" in the short story "Eversharp" serves to

capture this approach of the affective fallout of the experience. In “Filthy Wound” I take that more distanced approach of framing *jouissance* from the POV of another: “In that one quotidian moment, he had pushed her past being a sentient human who took care of her own requirements with any semblance of dignity.” In other stories, such as “The Perfect Foreigner”, I use memory in a fictional autobiographical context, situating the continuity of self in the deep past, where time and reflection have made some form of encapsulation of experience possible. “He taught me the beauty of a compromised existence. The saintliness of shadow.”

5. Transgression

À la *jouissance*, on n'accède pas par un mouvement direct : il faut un franchissement, une action violente qui casse la chaîne continue, horizontale, uniforme du désir pris dans le langage. Le désir a besoin d'une effraction, d'un forçage, d'un saut dans l'impossible. Le désir a besoin de la transgression. (Lippi 17)⁴

The subject of transgression has been the focused study of many scholars across a wide range of disciplines and, as Tim Dean notes, “[f]ar from pushing the envelope, the critical discourse on transgression has become blandly predictable” (66). Part of this is because transgression can be employed so broadly to describe everything from a curious mode of dress to the ritualized murder of a child, the breaking of a contemporary law governing socially acceptable sexual practice, to perfume marketing ad copy. Dean points out that we should distinguish between “the intuitive idea of transgression and its significance as a philosophical concept” (66). While this chapter concerns itself with both understandings of the word, it focuses primarily on the latter as an essential aspect of eroticism and on the part it plays in writing fictions of eroticism.

A comprehensive survey of the philosophical topic of transgression is beyond the scope of this thesis and, therefore, I confine myself to the religious and psychological rather than legalistic aspects as this most aptly addresses Bataille's use of the concept in his theory of eroticism as an inner experience. These aspects also address the quotidian use of the word as a means of repackaging and selling the narratives of old, hegemonic ideologies as something new, forbidden and exciting. I propose a framework for identifying contemporary taboos and new sites of

⁴ *Jouissance* cannot be accessed directly; there must be a crossing of a threshold, a violent action to break the continuous, horizontal, uniform chain that desire takes through language. Desire demands a trespass, a forced entry, a jump into the impossible. Desire requires transgression. (Lippi 17; own translation)

transgression. Finally, I examine the creative writing that accompanies this exegesis for examples of how I have tried to apply this framework in my work.

Transgression and the Sacred

In his chapter on transgression in *Critical Terms For Religious Studies*, Michael Taussig remarks that, despite the fact that transgression is “a key component” of religion, “mainstream religions in our time seem more concerned with controlling and eliminating” it (349). Taussig credits anthropological, psychological and sociological studies of taboo and the sacred in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries with greatly influencing subsequent study of the topic, as well as intellectual movements such as structuralism and semiotics which sought to examine the structural function and complexities of negation and opposition (350). At the same time, Taussig calls our attention to the curious general aversion to grappling with transgression's complex nature, pointing out that many of the 20th Century's studies on the topic, such as Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and carnival, situate it safely in a distant history or account for a licensed transgression as a mechanism for maintaining existing power structures (351). Taussig attributes this avoidance to “the influence of taste and morality in modern times simply closing down massive areas of human experience” (352). Against this general avoidance, he highlights the work of the surrealists—specifically Georges Bataille—in their attempt to bring transgression into the present, engage with its embodied experience, and come to terms with its central paradox.

Across many cultures, the body is often the vehicle of sacred transgressions; its radical states, its betrayals, mutilations and tribulations are used as portals for bringing the otherworldly into the present. While these acts are violations of bodily integrity, they are also invocations of the sacred (353-4). Secrecy plays an important

role in transgression. Taussig notes that secrecy's negation is an essential part of its power. It is not enough for access to the sacred to be bound up in mystery and secrecy; secrets of the sacred must always stand in perpetual danger of being revealed and are often 'open secrets' known by all, yet still proclaimed to be a mystery (355-7). Paradoxically, there may be no power to the mystery unless its secrecy is an almost universally acknowledged fiction. Finally, death has a major role to play in the sacred. In Christianity, Christ's crucifixion—the murder of God—is the greatest transgression of all. Yet without this ritual sacrifice, there it is no 'new life' in Christ for his followers. Transgression enables Christ's passion, death and resurrection (361).

Taussig's chapter challenges our conventional understanding of transgression as a destructive antithesis to the sacred. The sacred and the profane, prohibition and transgression are profoundly interdependent; there can be no experience of the sacred without it. As we shall see, Bataille argues that, like the sacred (and perhaps as a form of sacredness) there can be no eroticism without transgression either.

Bataille's Sacred Transgression

In his three-volume work *The Accursed Share* (1949), Bataille proposes a general economic theory focused on the concept of excess and the cultural practices of its expenditure, for, “if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (Vol I 21) through warfare, acts of squander and wasteful luxury, or ritual sacrifice, in order to maintain the system's equilibrium. Sacrifices transform common excess into something sacred, says Bataille. “Servile use has made a thing (an object) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the subject, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject” (Vol I 55). In other words, Bataille believed that quotidian interaction with a

thing or person led to objectification, whereas ritual and sacrifice demanded a mindfulness of interaction, which maintained the dignity of the thing or person.

In Volume II of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille describes a metaphysical structure that Taussig discusses, in which the sacred and the forbidden are not oppositional forces but facets of a single spiritual edifice: “what is sacred is precisely what is prohibited” (Vol II 92). While transgressive acts are commonly portrayed by the mainstream and mythologized in hard-core pornography (Michelson 51) as man devolving into state of 'animality', Bataille situates transgression firmly in the realm of human sociality. Animals don't have taboos or moral laws and don't break them; thus the conscious breaking of a taboo “makes of that violence something that animality did not know: the transgression of the rule” (Accursed Share Vol II 57).

Bataille confronts incomprehensibly transgressive eroticism: the twin horror and fascination engendered by the murder of a king and contemplation of his corpse.⁵ For Bataille, it is this “combination of abhorrence and desire that gives the sacred world a paradoxical character” (Vol II 95). Thus our desire to transgress is both a spiritual and erotic yearning, rendering it simultaneously terrifying and alluring. If transgression into sacred, prohibited spaces is so abhorrent, why are we so drawn to it?

...it often seems that, by overcoming a resistance, desire becomes more meaningful; resistance is the test that assures us of desire's authenticity and thus gives it a force that comes of the certainty of its dominion. If our desire had not had so much difficulty overcoming our undeniable repugnance we would not have thought it so strong, we would not have seen in its object that which was capable of inciting desire to such a degree (Vol II 95).

⁵ Bataille's attempt to explain this kind of eroticism, while not entirely convincing, is interesting: “sexual desire - responsive to the pull of a movement that unceasingly casts a part of humanity into the grave - is stirred, as it were, by the horror we nonetheless have of this movement. Just as the crime, which horrifies her, secretly raises and fuels Phaedra's ardor, sexuality's fragrance of death ensures all its power” (Accursed Share Vol.II . 100).

It is worth noting that Bataille's explication is highly Lacanian; the resistance or repugnance thrown up by taboo lends a gravity of meaning to the desire to transgress. It also gives us a sense that, because it is a tribulation and demands overcoming our own resistance, *this* desire might be authentically ours and not, in Lacanian terms, the desire of the *Other*. The struggle also suggests it is something metaphysical. Dean underscores this point in his essay on “The Erotics of Transgression”:

Bataille insists on this point when he remarks that ‘the object of desire is the universe’ or, more abstractly, ‘the concrete totality of the real’. By this Bataille designates not a desire to sexually possess the entire world but the opposite – a desire to lose oneself in the universe through erotic intensity (Dean 68).

Notable here is that transgression doesn't simply help define the qualities of the object of desire, but contorts the very nature of desire itself. I will return to this point later in the chapter when I discuss the distinction between desire and *jouissance*.

Later, in *L'erotisme*, Bataille delves further into the importance of transgression as a central aspect of eroticism, taking pains to differentiate between the conscious and deliberate transgression of a prohibition or taboo and the rejection of the authority or validity of those boundaries. “A transgression is not the same as a back-to-nature movement; it suspends a taboo without suppressing it” (*Erotism* 36). He goes on to note that “[u]nless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance” (37). It is the very *possibility* of their transgression that lend those prohibitions and taboos weight and authority. This aspect of Bataille's understanding of transgression stands in contrast to sexual liberation movements that reject the legitimacy of social mores. Lacan goes on to note that “[t]he naturalist liberation of desire has failed historically. We do not find ourselves in the presence of a man less weighed down with laws and duties than

before the great critical experience of so-called libertine thought” (Lacan *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 4). This is perhaps because transgression, as Dean points out, “does not concern the juridical” but requires the crossing of boundaries that “radiate a genuinely aversive power” (Dean 70). Michel Foucault underscores and complicates this paradox in his essay “A Preface to Transgression” in response to Bataille's work: “[t]he limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (Foucault 34)

In respect to the centrality of transgression at the heart of eroticism, both Bataille and Foucault recognize its sacred dimensions. But sacred in what sense? According to Bataille, the impetus to transgress can't be grounded in reason; “[t]he inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish” (*Eroticism* 39). But how does this religious sensibility survive the 'death of God' in the Nietzschean sense? If the authority to determine limits and taboos originates with the sacred, then where does that authority reside now? I will go on, later in this chapter, to examine how the commodification of erotic desire, and the marketisation of transgression as a titillating lure with no moral or concrete consequence, has turned the concept of transgression into the 'illusions and shadows' of which Foucault wrote.

In contrast to the marketing hype employed to sell pornography, erotica and romance (among many other things), eroticism is not just glorious, uninhibited pleasure. Far from being a pleasurable and inconsequential act of sexual satisfaction

or narcissistic self-realization, “[t]he whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (*Erotism* 17). Dean reminds us that “[o]ne might prefer to conserve one’s safety, dignity or integrity—all of which transgression puts at risk” (Dean 69-70), and for this reason, it is perilous and infrequent.

Transgression and *Jouissance*

It strikes me that what drives one to seek out psychic self-immolation, or to forge meaning from acts of transgressive eroticism, is not desire but more aptly referred to and described by Lacan, in his later work, as *jouissance*. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, “[i]n *The Ethics* you have a layout of *jouissance*'s massiveness as though positioned in a place normally out of reach. It calls for transgression, for a forcing, in an abyssal place, transgression being the only way to access it” (Miller). In this seventh seminar, Lacan claims his thesis “involves the idea that the moral law affirms itself in opposition to pleasure” (Lacan *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 20), so while desire finds a way to pleasure by negotiating that tension between the moral law and satisfaction within the safety of the Symbolic Order, *jouissance* does not, and indeed uses transgression as transport beyond the Symbolic:

[W]ithout a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*, and, to return to Saint Paul, that that is precisely the function of the Law. Transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law. If the paths to *jouissance* have something in them that dies out, that tends to make them impassable, prohibition, if I may say so, becomes its all-terrain vehicle, its half-track truck, that gets it out of the circuitous routes that lead man back in a roundabout way toward the rut of a short and well-trodden satisfaction (Lacan *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 177).

In other words, according to Lacan, *jouissance* and the Law are mutually constitutive. There must be laws to break for *jouissance* to be possible. Conversely, there must be the possibility of transgression in order for law to have meaning.

Moreover, prohibition makes the escape from the predictable trap of failed desire possible because it allows for a detour into *jouissance*. Bataille's eroticism *is* Lacan's *jouissance* and without transgression, it cannot be accessed.

Transgression's Allure

Why does the prohibited hold such erotic allure? As we have seen above, Bataille claims that transgression lends erotic desire meaning and offers the participants an ecstatic self-dissolution (Dean 69), but what is the mechanism of that meaning making? The fear and violence that is so often a part of Bataille's description of eroticism is brought about through the transgressive act or thought: “[i]t is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement” (Bataille *Erotism* 48). However, Stoekl notes that while “[d]ecency, the rules against sexual expression, incest, and intense pleasure that characterize human society are fundamental to an organized society,” the cost of maintaining that order is a measure of self-alienation, therefore the “ultimate self-consciousness is derived through the ecstatic transgression of that interdiction” (Stoekl 48). Bataille conceives of this self-consciousness as “the rupture of the discontinuous individualities” (*Erotism* 17). David Wood summarises this trade-off in a more intimate context:

Erotic love just has to be the celebration of the danger and pleasures of the transgression of boundaries—being-held in a letting-go—that can only be temporary, that affirms as much as it breaches these boundaries, and that plays with the fact that there is no one boundary of the flesh, but many laminated layers (Wood 178).

These 'laminated layers' Wood refers to underscore the complex web of boundaries we maintain as Bataillean 'discontinuous' beings: limits of physical space, bodily integrity, emotional barriers, as well as socially constructed definitions of

gender, orientation, race, ethnicity and class. In moments of eroticism these boundaries may not only be transgressed, but also acknowledged and celebrated—even eroticised—in the very act of breaching them.

Lacan poses the question very directly: “What is the goal *jouissance* seeks if it has to find support in transgression to reach it?” (Lacan *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 195). He presents us with Kant's scenario of the man who is given the choice of a night's sexual pleasure followed by his execution or the opportunity to live without that pleasure (Lacan *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 188-189). Kant claims that no sane man would choose the former. This choice of self-preservation accords with Freud's Pleasure/Reality Principle, which theorises that humans will seek pleasure until the discomfort or pain of pursuing pleasure outweighs the pleasurable sensations. Lacan reminds us that the Pleasure/Reality Principle doesn't always hold true; some, faced with the choice, *do* choose pleasure and death. Indeed the threat of danger or death may actually heighten the pleasure. Unpacking the sadistic fantasies in Sade's writing in the light of Kant's categorical imperative, Lacan argues that, just as Kant insists that doing one's moral duty, ethically, demands a rational choice, Sade's cruel characters constantly use reason, in the service of rebellion, to justify their atrocities. According to Žižek, Lacan's juxtaposition of Kant and Sade reveals how, “with the emergence of bourgeois Enlightenment, pleasure itself loses its sacred, transgressive character and is reduced to a rationalised instrumental activity” (Žižek 94).

My reading of Lacan's *Kant avec Sade* leads me to understand that transgression functions as a kind of transport. Its violence, whether mental or physical, helps to break the chain of signification, affording a little glimpse beyond the Symbolic Order, unmooring our socially constituted selves and enabling passage into the state Bataille described as continuity—a self stripped of the envelope of

individuality, of identifying labels, of the armour of language, but also of the super-ego's injunction to 'enjoy' in a socially intelligible way. This state forces us to absorb the horror, the violence, the complete alterity of the other, without the muting, ordering effect of language. This disruption of the chain of signification denies us the ability to look away or project some more comfortable fantasy of the other, while offering us the opportunity to connect in an 'impossible' way that is beyond language. In *The Singularity of Being*, Ruti points out that this state affords us “the vitality of our own process of becoming; our courageous brush against the other’s alterity guarantees our own ongoing evolution” (Ruti 177). This *jouissance* is both sublime and destructive, liberating and dangerous, life-altering but also ephemeral and transitory. From a societal perspective, our choice to pursue it can look dark and self-destructive. Indeed, it often is. It is referred to, in psychoanalysis, as the death drive.

The Death Drive

Evans underscores that, “for Lacan, all drives are sexual drives, and every drive is a DEATH DRIVE since every drive is excessive, repetitive, and ultimately destructive” (Evans 49; emphasis his). As stated in the chapter on Lacanian psychoanalytical method, I find the term 'death drive' unhelpful because tragedy (abjection, destruction, death) is seldom the aim, but rather the consequence or a necessary by-product of the pursuit of *jouissance*. Lacan says that “desire is a defence, a defence against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*” (Lacan *Ecrits* 309) so, while both desire and *jouissance* seek the satisfaction of the drive, desire operates within the Symbolic Order where the call of the drive can be adorned and misdirected, sublimated, ameliorated and managed safely. Much of pornography or erotic fiction represents the unproblematic pursuit of pleasure via desire and is what Michelson terms hard- or soft-core pornography (Michelson 36); it seldom represents *jouissance*.

The transgressive nature of *jouissance* ensures that it will always cut the Pleasure/Reality Principle's safety harness. Always dangerous, destructive (or at least self-destructive) and socially objectionable, this explains why so many creative works that portray eroticism contain physical, emotional or social violence and often contain an element of tragedy. In my estimation, this is what Michelson is referring to as artistic or complex pornography. Characters in pursuit of *jouissance* often seem masochistic or sadistic, ferocious or unfathomable, seeking damage, abjection or even death, creating narratives with far more complexity and conflict. When that pursuit becomes fundamentally constitutive of who they are, it might be said to be their *sinthomes*.

A number of the characters in the stories in this project, I argue, are wrestling with *sinthomes*. The protagonist in my story “Stone Blind” turns into a stone statue to more closely resemble the dead mother her father mourns. In “Veiled Girl With Lute”, the male character is an ex-torturer whose work has become a constitutive part of who he is. “The Slow Act of Love” features a gardener who creates pornographic bonsai trees, patiently recreating them each time the government censors come and destroy his work.

Writing Transgression

When considering transgression in erotic writing, I am often reminded of Lacan's words: “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the *objet petit a*—I mutilate you” (Lacan S11 268). Although Lacan is discussing transference and the analysand/analyst relationship here, the passage has relevance to an interaction between any two characters on a transgressive, *jouissance*-driven trajectory. Stories of transgressive eroticism—as opposed to utilitarian pornography—offer the character/subject as mutilated. The object of desire always

has at least a tiny element of disgust. It breaks the spell of total fantasy; there is always an eerie surplus something that disrupts the purely masturbatory function of the story. For example, in my story “What You Want” the fantasy of a casual sexual encounter is complicated when the protagonist cannot ignore the rage motivating the woman who is offering it or his own sense of shame in accepting it. Perhaps it refuses closure, as in my story “Lucy the Scholar,” which begins as a romance and ends with its impossibility. Sometimes, as in my story “If In Some Distant Place”, the sequence of events in the story breaks the rhythm of the narration and turns it into a richer but more ambiguous erotic narrative. These kinds of refusals to 'deliver' are, in themselves, a form of transgression—particularly in today's landscape of commoditized sexual and romantic escapism where the customer should always get what they want (especially when the market informs the customer of what they *should* want and then helpfully delivers it).

The 'impossibility' to write the glimpse of Lacan's Real, revealed in the pursuit of *jouissance*, results in a ready-made narrative conflict. The alterity encountered in the other, in the consummation of that truth-event, that state of continuity, in the thin air of the transgressive moment, cannot survive full symbolisation. We mutilate the truth of the other as lover, and the experience of eroticism, the moment we attempt to make sense of the event, or make a memory of it, the moment we open our mouths to recount it. We most definitely mutilate it when we attempt to write about it. Abigail Bray notes,

The experimental text transgresses discursive norms, calls into question the limits of the Law, of meaning, of the sayable. In other words, this aesthetics of transgression depends upon a concept of the radically libidinal body, a body which disrupts conservative representational economies: the raw creativity of the libidinal body bursts through the limits of representation in moments of orgasmic *jouissance*, or sublime excess (Bray 87).

So, if we have succeeded in writing the experience of transgression well, that mutilation should be present in the text, something that stands in for the impossibility. There should be some scar on the landscape of the narrative, either in the language itself, or in the unintelligibility in the characters, in the jaggedness of the story structure, or the strangeness or surrealism of the story world.

Looking at texts that have become part of the canon of erotic literature in the 20th century, those metaphorical scars reside in many places: certainly in the mutilation of language itself from writers as diverse as James Joyce and Cathy Acker. But sometimes this “disruption of representational economies” happens in less obvious ways, as narrative impossibilities: in the uncanny situation, the improbable timeline, the unaccountable behaviour of characters or the hyperbole of sexuality. Whether in Sade's far-too-numerous atrocities, Humbert Humbert's inexplicable and self-destructive obsession, Angela Carter's richly obscene fairy-tale worlds, or Marguerite Duras' eerie portrayal of time, there is often something essentially surreal in many erotic narratives.

Transgression in 21st Century Fictions

After all the barriers of sublimation, of cultural transformation of sexual activity, are abolished, what we get is not raw, brutal, passionate satisfying animal sex, but, on the contrary, a fully-regimented, intellectualised activity comparable to a well-planned sporting match (Žižek *New Formations* 94).

In the afterward of her book *Resisting Nudities* (2008), Boodakian warns that “[w]hen cerebral, corporal and socio-political revolts become impossible, there is a stasis and deadening that spills into all dimensions of life in a free society[...] Perhaps it seems counter-productive to work through a theory of eroticism to ultimately declare its apparent extinction.” (Boodakian 89-90). If there are no longer any taboos

to transgress, if the excess of *jouissance* has become a commoditized norm, then how can transgression—and therefore eroticism—exist? Certainly it cannot be found in the places where our culture insists it resides. As Žižek notes, we live in a culture that is constantly misselling us *jouissance* (A Cup of Decaf Realty).

Few prohibitions are completely independent of cultural context. *The Heptameron's* account of copulating nuns is now comic rather than transgressive. Humbert Humbert's obsession with *Lolita* isn't transgressive in societies where girls are routinely married off at the age of twelve (Unicef 36), though his romanticism might be. The class difference between Lady Chatterley and her lover are hardly of much moment to us now, but the question of female agency in the text might raise some eyebrows. The historic taboos and prohibitions that made earlier erotic writings transgressive and made the accounts of those transgressions erotic, no longer hold much real power to shock us. What we are left with, for the most part, is material that depends on a suspension of disbelief and an erotic nostalgia for transgressions that no longer exist.

Scholars such as Alex Dymock have taken issue with novels like *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), sold as transgressive erotic literature because it uses the glitter of transgressive sexuality to reinforce heteronormativity and bolster “the disciplinary regimes of social power” (Dymock 892), but Lisa Downing counters that, “we can use the trilogy to mount a criticism of the idea that romantic love, marriage and the family, as the habitually unquestioned, privileged institutions of heterosexuality, are unambiguously benevolent” (Downing 100). We often make the mistake of misidentifying sex as eroticism. While *Fifty Shades of Grey* might fail as a liberationist text according to Dymock, or as a responsible guide to the ethical practice of BDSM according to Connolly (“Fifty Shades is Bad for Bondage”), or

even as a decent piece of pornography (O'Hagan), it does contain transgressive eroticism in its obscene valorisations of non-consent and consumerism and in its spectacle of a woman walking so willingly into the confines of an archaic gender dynamic just for a little wild sex. It depends, as Downing argues, on how you read it.

Charlotte Roche's *Wetlands* offers us another example of a contemporary, popular and controversial novel containing explicit depictions of female eroticism. Helen Hester's exploration of *Wetlands* finds that, due to the "hyper-visibility of sex as transgression" (Hester 250), many critics focused on the sexual content in the novel as the site of transgression (241) rather than on "moments depicting the ingestion of abject bodily substances" (243)⁶. But for a reader in pursuit of a representation of *jouissance* (as opposed to sexual desire), the eroticism of the novel lies precisely in the latter. Hester reminds readers that "[it] is crucial to acknowledge that transgression is not always or necessarily radical or progressive, but can be experienced as political or apolitical depending on the system being transgressed; exceeded, opened, or challenged" (249). So, whereas the eroticised rape scenes in the bodice-rippers of the mid-20th Century might have once been sexually titillating to the reader, they are now viewed as offensive examples of archaic, ignorant anti-feminist rape apology and are, therefore, transgressive and a site of potential eroticism in a way they never used to be. I have explored this in my story "On A Very Dry Afternoon in Early Summer" where I acknowledge the paradox between the fictionalised erotic allure of force, helplessness and peril of rape fantasy while never allowing the reader to entirely dismiss the stark atrocity of rape in reality.

Meanwhile, this hypervisibility of sexual transgression, even in its least normative forms, has also been, Dymock notes, flagrantly commodified:

⁶ *Wetlands* describes the protagonist's consumption of vaginal fluids and medical waste, among other things.

Rather than streamlining energies of resistance against this culture, the incorporation of the spirit of rebellion into consumer outlets placates those energies and successfully divides and individualizes them. While a modish desire for rebellion is almost always deployed in the marketing of sexual commodities, the integration of the signifiers of BDSM as alternative sexual subculture into these circuits of consumption reduces any subversive elements of its practices or ethics to no more than ‘stylings’ fully assimilated into mainstream culture (Dymock 890).

Bray echoes Dymock's point: “the range of pornography on the internet demonstrates, within the world of cyber-desire there is no repression. However, this lack of repression has less to do with the liberation of the subject from the repressive constraints of Enlightenment rationality and more to do with a cynical commodification of sexual desire” (Bray 161). But while this lack of repression and commodification effectively renders explicit sexuality—even non-normative sexuality—inert and untransgressive, I would argue that we must simply seek our textual transgressions elsewhere.

If we expect written eroticism (and its attendant transgression) to fall in our laps or to be there waiting on the appropriately-labeled digital shelf, we are likely to end up with a cup of Žižek's decaf. It certainly will not, and never has, come in a form that is politically or socially comfortable for us; it will truly offend, outrage, and discomfort us. More eerily, it may also be increasingly hard to find. In the past, readers learned of transgressive literature because the state banned it, but this is seldom the case now in Western democracies. Neoliberalism has made this imposition of state power unnecessary. Most writers, publishers and booksellers can be relied upon to regulate themselves out of public relations and, ultimately, economic self-interest and a prevailing belief that market success is the only success. However, there are few barriers to publishing authentically transgressive works. Between the derision lavished on all erotic fiction by literary critics and lack of commercial profitability in anything that truly discomforts the reader, writers of transgressive eroticism can

reasonably expect them to be lost amidst the glut of digital flotsam and jetsam on the Internet.

Neoliberal Values as New Sites of Transgression

While erotica publishers market the delights of their 'transgressive erotic fiction', it is the list of acts and scenarios they warn writers not to submit that presents us with a fairly good, if skeletal, guide to what *is*, in fact, transgressive (eXcessica, Xcite). These are old taboos (underage, incest, rape, bestiality, necrophilia, urine and scat play) that still hold some power to discomfort us. But on a broader level, it would be foolish to assume our culture is devoid of new taboos, however most are so embedded and unquestioned that we don't recognize them as such. Neoliberalism imposes just as many, if not more, constraints as the ideological systems that preceded it but, rather than applied from above, they are, as Paul Verhaeghe notes, largely self-invigilated and imposed to ensure efficiency and profitability: "the world is turned into a generalized panopticon [...] an infernal spiral, because the system creates its own transgressions" (Verhaeghe, "If They Don't Make You Happy"). However, the internalisation of restrictions makes them hard to spot. How does one transgress a taboo one can't identify? What might be considered sacred in a Neoliberal culture? Or, to phrase the question differently, if transgression is dependent on crossing cultural, moral or aesthetic limits, then either we are faced with scraping the bottom of the archaic taboo barrel or we must discover new ones to transgress.

"The economy, stupid," a phrase formulated by James Carville for the 1992 Bill Clinton election campaign, might stand as the proclamation of Neoliberalism's almost global victory over all other systems. As Verhaeghe concludes, "there is only one dominant discourse still standing, namely the economic" (Verhaeghe "Capitalism and Psychology" 57) where "everything is permitted so long as it is not explicitly

forbidden by contract” (59). Subsequently, any act motivated by something other than the pursuit of profit becomes suspect, a potential transgression. Similarly, wealth has become a central virtue of our Neo-liberal society. Historically, individuals belonging to ascetic religious orders were seen as virtuous and accrued a certain social approbation for embracing a life of poverty as an imitation of Christ; contemporary society views those who consciously *choose* poverty as socially suspect at the very least and often as proof of mental illness. Here too is a potential site for transgression.

We are under enormous pressure to self-commodify. Joseph Davis notes that this imperative “is well illustrated by the recent practice of 'personal branding,' a strategy of cultivating a name and image of ourselves that we manipulate for economic gain” (Davis 41). The production of the self as a brand to be offered for consumption by institutions, employers, lovers or social groupings is constantly encouraged. Roderick notes that “as young people prepare to transition from undergraduate study they are under enormous pressure, pressure to transform themselves into marketable products capable of high levels of economic productivity and the acquisition of social status and material goods” (Roderick). So another site of transgressive possibility might lay in the refusal or subversion of the process of self-commodification. Related to this idea, is the concept of the perfection of the body as an ongoing project. Resistance against the valorisation of good health and beauty are areas that are ripe for reversal and transgression. This is a theme I take up in my story “Prosthetic” (about a man who has made a life-project out of marking and scarring himself) and in the story “Nathalie's Tailor” in which turns an erotic lens onto trauma and self-harm. The subversion of wildly popular narrative structures, with their neat and categorisable closures, might be yet another transgressive strategy.

Of special interest to me is the contemporary focus on self-actualization and consent. Verhaeghe quotes Zigmunt Bauman: “never have we known so much freedom and never have we been so powerless” (Verhaeghe 57). In contemporary public sexual discourse and in 'sex-positive' erotic fiction, two issues continuously come to the fore as opportunities to reclaim power: the self-actualising power of sexual fulfilment and the agentic power of consent. Lacan recognized that the exhortation to 'Enjoy!' was becoming a commandment (60). Here political correctness and neoliberal economics cohabit happily: one can dutifully consume the products that will ensure we achieve that sexually satisfied self-actualization we are commanded to want *while* commodifying our own consent. This is ripe for subversion in the service of transgressive eroticism, and I explore this quite literally in my story “Machines”, about a woman who cannot stop buying vibrators until she finds herself unable to orgasm without them.

Another site of possibility lies in the crossing of internalized and reformulated boundaries that might bear little relation to contemporary neoliberal taboos. While these idiosyncratic, highly individualised rules may be related to previously-observed and enforced sites of prohibition—such as religious precepts not in common practice today or historic traditions related to earlier cultural practices—they can also arise from internally formulated laws specific to an individual's previous lived experiences. If a writer is able to craft a believable fictional paradigm for these idiosyncratic areas of transgression, engaging narratives of eroticism might be forged of them. I have attempted to incorporate this idea in a number of my stories. “The Desire Artist” features a narrator who struggles with a peculiar *sinthome*; she has an addiction to unrequited sexual desire.

While I have not provided a complete list of all possible contemporary taboos, I hope I have offered some idea of the mechanism by which new transgressions might be formulated from contemporary sites of 'sacredness'.

Transgression in the Work

While not all the stories in the creative portion of this thesis aim themselves directly at newly formulated transgressions, many do. In some cases the transgression is obvious; in others it is as subtle as denying the reader the erotic progression or closure they have been acclimatised to expect.

“Prosthetic”, “Nathalie's Tailor”, and “If In Some Distant Place” are stories which, each in their own way, explore the erotic attractions of imperfection, illness and age:

“Thanks for that,” Robert said, after a considerable silence. “Madam Dai is one hell of a character. If she were ten years younger, I would have been tempted to seduce her.”

“I’m pretty sure she’d still be interested.”

“I don’t think I could get past the dusty wig. I don’t even want to imagine what those breasts look like.”

Robert was doing exactly that, Nuria suspected. There was a small, private cinema in his head, with a reel of silent film featuring Madam Dai: wig askew and ancient breasts swaying, seamed lips frozen in an ecstatic o, grey-haired cunt plundered by a headless cock in some jerky clip of impossible pornography. (“If In Some Distant Place”)

Like “On A Very Dry Afternoon In Early Summer”, “Veiled Girl With Lute” also problematises and eroticises questions of consent and violence in overt ways, whereas “Three Little Letters”, “Prosthetic” and “The Filthy Wound” each focus on some form of self-destructive mutilation of the body as a site of *jouissance*.

“Don’t go all coy on me.”

“I’m bleeding. Can’t you see I’m bleeding?”

“Yeah, you are.” He brushed the back of his fingers over her cunt, smearing the blood that wept from the cuts, then pressed his thumb between the lips and trailed the flat of it over her clit. “And you still want to fuck.”

Blanche turned her head away, wondering why her eyes were filling with tears, why the blood scared her, and why, despite it or because of it, she wanted to fuck. (“The Filthy Wound”)

A number of the stories explore the eroticism of non-normative sexualities. In “Little Prick” I set out to explore the quirks of psycho-sexual development in a perverse coming of age story and push against our contemporary unwillingness to recognize that not only does our sexuality develop long before the age of permission, but sometimes forms, through a confluence of circumstances, in non-normative ways. While, in “The Laughing Man” I use the contemporary cliché that ‘real men don’t cry’ to examine weeping as a transgressive erotic act, with as much capacity to transport, expose and transfigure the participants as any sexual act.

Several of the stories, but most notably “Back To Nature” grapple with the paradoxical nature of transgression itself. Initially a Sadean narrative which invites the reader to take pleasure in a couple’s sexual dehumanization of a woman they pick up, I fold the transgression back on itself as it becomes apparent that their jouissance arises, not from the sadistic treatment of another, but the masochistic pleasure of carrying the guilt of it.

6. Ecstasy: Transcendence, Feminine *Jouissance* and the Lacanian Real

If transgression is a crossing of a boundary, then what lies beyond it? Bataille's answer is ecstasy. While in everyday contemporary parlance we understand ecstasy as a wholly positive experience often associated with intense physical pleasure, the origin of the word reveals more complex and ambivalent connotations of insanity, dislocation, fragmentation, or a “feeling which engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought; rapture, transport” (“Ecstasy” OED). In this chapter, I set out to examine how erotic writing might represent the experience of ecstasy or transcendence as an aspect of Bataillean eroticism, taking note of the religious exemplars, language and associations employed to discuss it by both Bataille and Lacan. I consider Lacan's concept of feminine *jouissance* and the Real as a mode by which to understand post-theistic notions of transcendence and make some suggestions for contemporary sites where these kinds of experiences might occur. I offer examples of the use and, I argue, the abuse, of transcendent or ecstatic experiences in contemporary erotic fiction and point out places where I employ it in the creative portion of this project.

Of the four aspects of eroticism I examine in this project, transcendence is perhaps the most challenging; to address it in a contemporary erotic context is to try to squeeze in the gap between religious practitioners who often limit access to transcendence to a purely spiritual, unphysical path and science, which views it as neurological phenomena or a dissociative state. McGowan points out that, within the field of analytic philosophy, “since no moments of transcendence exist within the structure of language (or logic), philosophy must be practical and devote itself to concerns immanent to language” (McGowan 83). Thinkers as diverse as Georges

Bataille (*Erotism* 31) and Abraham Maslow (6) emphasized how difficult any positivist, objective study of the phenomenon of transcendence remains. The plethora of terms we have for this experience—mystical experience, ecstasy, trance, sublimity, bliss, rapture, hysteria, fugue state, peak or limit experience, just to name a few—might be a reflection of how tenaciously it resists definition.

Bataille's Ecstasy

Bataille equates mystical transcendence with erotic ecstasy (Bataille *Inner* 3), noting that “[t]here are staggering similarities and even corresponding or interchangeable characteristics in the two systems, erotic and mystical” (Bataille *Erotism* 226).

He argues that many of the distinctions made between the two don't survive close scrutiny. The primary distinction—the presence or absence of erotic arousal—can be discounted, he claims. Despite the Catholic Church's emphasis on the chaste nature of the mystical experience, Bataille quotes the priest and psychoanalyst Louis Beirnaert: “mystics are perfectly aware of the physical sensations accompanying their experience” (225), not only finding themselves “sullied with the liquid of the carnal flux” often, but also noting that this may be “intrinsic to their experience” (247).

While many examples of Christian mystical experience occur to those practicing celibacy, Bataille points out that they happen just as often in religious traditions, like Hinduism and Sufism, where celibacy is neither required nor even encouraged.

Images of obscenity associated with erotic ecstasy are also responsible for the distinction between religious and erotic transcendence (247) despite the fact that there are visual representations of ecstatic experience in both Eastern and Western traditions that combine the two. Bataille emphasises the evidence of eroticism in the accounts of religious ecstasy from both St. Theresa and St. John (225), and chooses a

photograph of Bernini's *L'Estasi di Santa Teresa d'Avila* as one of the illustrations that accompanies his text on the subject.

For Bataille the traumatic experience of transcendence, how it unmoors us from the everyday world by producing feelings of “non-attachment to ordinary life, indifference to its needs, anguish felt in the midst of this until the being reels, and the way left open to a spontaneous surge of life” (247) is exactly the limit experience of eroticism. However, this is a *surge of life* in all senses, including the trajectory towards death. Bataille quotes Saint Theresa of Avila's description of her own experience of transcendence: “I die because I cannot die”:

But the death of not dying is precisely not death; it is the ultimate stage of life; if I die because I cannot die it is on condition that I live on; because of the death I feel though still alive and still live on. St. Theresa's being reeled, but did not actually die of her desire actually to experience that sensation. She lost her footing but all she did was to live more violently, so violently that she could say she was on the threshold of dying, but such a death as tried her to the utmost though it did not make her cease to live. (240).

Saint Theresa's 'loss of footing' (240) and 'dying to oneself' (227) is what Bataille elsewhere calls 'continuity'—his term for ego-death or the temporary destruction of the socially intelligible subject—which he also identifies as a “dominant element in eroticism” (13). I explore this particular feature in greater depth in my chapter on identity. Nonetheless, this ecstatic experience has its darker, violent elements: a point of emergence between life and death, a temporary disavowal of the social order which demands some level subjective self-annihilation as an integral part of the ecstatic experience. In *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel*, Christopher Gemberchak expands on this, underscoring the currency of sacrifice and violence (whether physical or metaphorical) that must be paid for the passage to a transcendent state:

Bataille affirms that beings communicate with their beyond through wounds alone, that they communicate with one another through the

ruptures inflicted upon individual integrity. This is the path to (divine) intimacy, the annulment of the type of transcendence conceived as the separation between merely opposed—and thus reconcilable—individual/things, and the expansion of transcendence into a mutual absence where God is experienced (Gemerchak 165).

What is striking is how powerfully this aligns with notions of the Death Drive, formulated by Freud and much expanded upon by Lacan. Bataille's attempt to associate this kind of ecstasy with the relentlessness of the drone's "fatal impulse that drives him through the light towards the queen" (*Erotism* 234) has resonance with Lacan's *lamella* and the "ambivalent status of *jouissance* as what at once animates the subject's being and carries the destructive momentum of the death drive (Ruti 22).

Lacanian Transcendence: Feminine *Jouissance* and the Real

Lacan seldom uses the word transcendence but I argue that his notion of *feminine jouissance*—most fully explained in Seminar XX—is a description of Bataillean ecstasy reframed. In *Antigone, in her Unbearable Splendor*, Charles Freeland encapsulates the experience of feminine *jouissance*:

Lacan evoked another love, another domain, and another possibility of love. He called it a limitless love, a love that has renounced its object, a love outside the limits of the law. A love linked to *jouissance*, but not the *jouissance* of the sexual body, where *jouissance* is limited to being one's own, but to a pure *jouissance* at the limit of both the ego and the imaginary as well the subject and the symbolic, a *jouissance*—a "love"—that arises from the limit-experience, from the very impasse of the impossibility of the sexual relation, a *jouissance* that surges from the "impenetrable void," "the kernel" of "our being" (S8: 13), a love that begins as an encounter with the ab-sens of the real, and that surges in this place of non-relation as an address to the other, a *jouissance*, a love that, beyond all narcissism, addresses the other not in a fantasmatic and narcissistic search for unity with the other, but that addresses the being of the other in its inviolable difference and from the ab-sens of the real (Freeland 278).

I quote this in full because in it, Freeland not only highlights the poetic imagery Lacan employs to discuss the relationship between feminine *jouissance* and

the Real, but because it contains familiar echoes of Bataille's description of erotic transcendence detailed above. Freeland underscores how feminine *jouissance* reformulates Lacan's understanding of *jouissance* and the Real: "Feminine *jouissance*, through the masquerade, is a newly articulated 'encounter with the real.' But this encounter is no longer carried on the back of transgression" (Freeland 217). However, I would question Freeland's definition of transgression, because it does not seem to take into account the interdependent relationship between the sacred and the profane, or the departure from the social order that occurs in any transcendent experience—including religious or erotic ecstasy (Bataille 36). Additionally, Freeland's claim that feminine *jouissance* is not of the sexual body deserves closer examination. My understanding is that since, according to Lacan, sexuation is always a function of the Symbolic Order and feminine *jouissance* is an experience "outside the limits of the law" and "at the limit of both the ego and the imaginary as well the subject and the symbolic" (Freeland 278), then we are brought back to making a distinction between normative sexuality and Bataille's eroticism. For this reason, I argue that while it might be said that feminine *jouissance* is not 'of the *sexual* body' it is of the *erotic* one.

When Lacan finds need of a concrete, visual example of feminine *jouissance*, he, like Bataille, directs our attention to Bernini's statue of the ecstasy of Saint Theresa (Lacan, *Encore* 76-77). Dylan Evans expands on this:

The ineffable nature of feminine *jouissance* leads Lacan to characterise it in terms of mystical experience, of which ineffability has always been one of the hallmarks. The image which he points to in his discussion is that of Bernini's Saint Theresa, about to be pierced by the golden spear of the angel. As is clear from Saint Theresa's own description of the event, this moment of mystical ecstasy is strongly suggestive of orgasmic enjoyment, and Lacan remarks in Seminar XX that one has only to look at the statue to realise that Saint Theresa is coming... (Evans 10)

Most men, Lacan contends, don't have access to this form of *jouissance* because their enjoyment is so completely bound up with the phallus: "There are men

who are just as good as women. It happens. And who also feel just fine about it. Despite—I won't say their phallus—despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics” (*Encore* 76). It is important to note that he does not suggest that possession of a *penis* is the problem but rather that the socio-symbolic phallus—the imaginary object of desire possessed by the father and, later, by anyone who has the power to steal the beloved's affection—makes it very hard to imagine any alternate configuration of love.

“I believe,” says Lacan, “in the *jouissance* of woman insofar as it is extra (en plus), as long as you put a screen in front of this 'extra' until I have been able to properly explain it,” (Lacan *Encore* 77). I feel it is reasonable to claim he never does. Not only does he exile it to the place where nothing may be said about it but “[i]t is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it” (76). I am struck by the curious closure of this statement; transcendent experiences are *known* inasmuch as the experience is remembered and life altering and, whilst they are clearly a challenge to speak or write about, creditable attempts have been made. Elizabeth Grosz, elaborating on Irigaray, argues the case:

If Lacan 's interrogation is directed to a man's stone representation of a woman, i.e., to Bernini's representation of St Teresa, it is not surprising 'she' has nothing to say! But if Lacan had looked at her own words (she was a prolific diarist and writer), he may have heard something quite different- the 'corporeal' language of hysteria, not the jouissant experience of unspeakable intensity (Grosz 146).

While attempts to write the ecstatic experience may always be imperfect and incomplete, what purpose is served by these declarations that the ecstatic experience is unknowable and impossible to say or write? Are writers to be warned off, or put on

notice of their inevitable failure? Why does Lacan chose to highlight the impossibility of saying anything about feminine *jouissance* but not other experiences that also fall beyond the realms of social intelligibility, like dying? While an examination of this issue falls beyond the scope of this thesis, these determinations of what is impossible to say or write and the motives and agendas that underpin them deserve further interrogation.

The Real and Ecstasy

As a way of understanding the Real, Lacan offers the idea of the *lamella*: “[i]t is the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life” (Lacan *Four Fundamental Concepts* 198). This idea resonates profoundly with Bataille's image of the drone bee: mindless, relentless, driven towards death, and yet at the same time glorying in the full, unmediated, scorching fire of life. In describing the Lacanian Real, Lionel Bailly offers: “[t]he character of the Real, being unsymbolisable, is that of absolute terror or absolute enjoyment – both impossible states. Its existence can be postulated by its manifestations. It appears in hallucinations and delusions, when the stitch-points between signifiers and signifieds come apart” (Bailly 135). As one can see, Bataille's account of ecstasy, where “[t]here is no longer any difference between one thing and another in any respect; no distances can be located; the subject lost in the indistinct and illimitable presence of the universe and himself ceases to belong to the passing of time. He is absorbed in the everlasting instant, irrevocably as it seems, with no roots in the past or hopes in the future, and the instant itself is eternity” (Bataille *Erotism* 249), is startlingly similar.

In *The Singularity of Being*, Ruti describes transcendence as an experience of the irruption of the Lacanian Real through which “the sublime enters the domain of

everyday life in ways that engender intimations of immortality” (26). This understanding of transcendence or ecstasy brings it out of the historic realm of religious mystics and Bataille's brothels and into the present. Far from being an escape from the world, Ruti argues that these experiences are “a way to enter more completely into its folds” and make it possible for us to be “open to moments of sublimity that punctuate our daily existence” (27-28). She offers the Heideggerian argument that the quotidian and the mundane don't ground us in reality, but distance us from it, and she further suggests that these ecstatic moments are enlivening rebellions against the quotidian and the mundane. Not practical, or even always wholly positive, nevertheless they “summon us to what is 'immortal' within our being” (28). This 'immortality,' Ruti takes pains to point out, is not literal; “the real, like the unconscious, does not register time” (25).

Echoing Lacan's exemplar of Antigone and Bataille's association of the limit experience of ecstasy with violence and death, Ruti cautions us that this experience of *jouissance* and irruption of the Real “at once animates the subject's being and carries the destructive momentum of the death drive; in the same way that *jouissance* breathes life into the subject even as it contorts and torments its being” (22). Ellie Ragland concurs, noting that, diverging from “Freud about the nature of the death drive, Lacan said that humans are not driven toward death as entropy. Rather, we are driven by 'death' in the form of excesses in *jouissance*” (59).

Writing Ecstasy in Erotica

In contemplating erotic transcendence as a writer, in attempting to incorporate it into contemporary erotic fiction, it must be acknowledged that the genre has long been ridiculed for exaggerating a simple orgasm into a meeting with the divine. The genre has often been criticized for its purple prose and nowhere so much as when it

offers up descriptions of the female orgasm. If some male erotica writers can be accused of exaggerating the size and robustness of their character's penises, many female erotica writers might be similarly accused of turning every female character's climax into a face-to-face meeting with the secrets of the universe. What most of these passages have in common is that, unlike Bataillean ecstasy or the experience of Lacanian *jouissance* where “pleasure and pain are presented as a single packet” (Lacan *Ethics* 189), these idealized portraits of the orgasm-as-transcendent-experiences are wholly pleasurable, life-affirming and ego-enhancing. Far from offering a site in which the Real breaks through to disrupt the Symbolic order and offer an opportunity for respite or rebellion, these idealized moments of transcendent pleasure serve, much like the promise of heaven, to reinforce prevailing cultural norms and conservative role models of female enjoyment. They often perpetuate normative values: of how only the presence of romantic love can elevate base physical pleasure onto a spiritual plane; or how 'good women' only lose their critical faculties when they encounter the 'right' partner; or how wealth provides the appropriate setting for ecstasy. Examples of this sort of representation of pseudo-transcendent eroticism are ubiquitous in works within the erotic romance genre. Most notably and contemporaneously in E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

He moves his finger in a wide circle, stretching me, pulling at me, his tongue mirroring his actions, round and round, I groan. It is too much... My body begs for relief, and I can no longer deny it. I let go, losing all cogent thought as my orgasm seizes me, wringing my insides again and again. Holy fuck. I cry out, and the world dips and disappears from view as the force of my climax renders everything null and void (James 142).

This is a passage describing a woman being brought to orgasm. While momentary disorientation is common during climax, this description suggests an ecstatic, life-altering, pseudo-religious experience that might reverberate beyond the

end of the orgasm. And yet this experience that renders everything 'null and void' seems to have no lasting psychic consequence at all. In this sense, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is typical of the erotica genre. Even when this portrait of unproblematic erotic ecstasy is intended as emancipatory celebrations of female pleasure, commended by feminist critics as examples of sex-positive sites of resistance against the patriarchy, their hyperbole suggests something more troubling. For if these texts serve as didactic examples of the emancipation of female pleasure, is the quality of those fictional orgasms not also didactic? Will they not leave the reader feeling like their own orgasms don't measure up? Might this sort of passage act as an inducement to seek, through the purchase of aids, self-help guides, sex toys or courses, an orgasm that more closely resembles that of the fictional protagonist? This textual practice of raising every orgasm to the status of unproblematic, consequentless transcendent experience serves as an illustration of what Žižek has described as “the superego injunction 'Enjoy!'” (Žižek 304) where the values of a consumerist society become internalised and enjoyment becomes proscribed and compulsory.

In contrast, the practice of incorporating the dislocation, alienation, pain, horror and sublimity of the ecstatic moment in fiction opens the text up for singular, writerly readings of experiences that resist language and which invite the reader's reflection of their own lived transcendences, bringing a remediation of that experience into a far closer alignment with a Batailleian notion of eroticism and a Lacanian irruption of the Real. Kij Johnson's short story “Spar” offers an example of this approach. The space-bound protagonist, adrift in an alien lifeboat, finds herself in the company of a creature so utterly alien that no communication is possible. They can only interact physically, sexually, but with no notion of what the acts mean to the other. Johnson offers up a glimpse of the ecstatic Real:

After a time, the taste of bread becomes “the taste of bread” and then the words become mere sounds and stop meaning anything. On the off-chance that this will change things, she drives her tongue though its cilia, pulls them into her mouth and sucks them clean. She has no idea whether it makes a difference. She has lived forever in the endless reeking fucking now (Johnson 225).

Jonathan Kemp's *Twenty-Six* offers numerous examples of ecstatic experiences of dislocation, timelessness, and abjection that resist language. From “M”:

The present no longer has any meaning. I am merely a sensation suspended between them, an excuse for a commonality each, perhaps, in his own silent way, craves – but could never, except now, with my flesh shared like a meal between them, even begin to articulate. These visions of excess burn brightest (Kemp).

Contemporary Sites of Ecstasy

With a solid understanding of transcendence in the context of Bataillean eroticism, and the sense of it offered by Ruti's formulation of singularity as both immanent and accessible, it is possible to identify more immediate possibilities for ecstatic experiences in the present. The fictional imagination has often presented us with transcendent possibilities, from Sade's transgressive excesses, to Burrough's drug-fuelled *Naked Lunch* and the ecstatic and dystopic violence of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. If we eschew contemporary, consumerist notions of ecstasy as limited to the sexual and purely pleasurable, we can expand the possibilities for transcendent eroticism to accounts of experiences that, while temporary, traumatic and disorienting, can also challenge the stifling hegemony of the social order.

Virtual digital worlds offer ways to transport us beyond our everyday mode of being, suspending our sense of space, time, and disrupting our socially constructed identities. Jeffrey Fisher contends, “the postmodern will to virtuality parallels the medieval religious will to transcendence. The individual leaves behind history with

the body because transcendence in cyberspace is essentially the transcendence of memory. In this sense, the will to virtuality and the will to immortality or incorruptibility or ahistoricity, is fundamentally a will to oblivion” (Fisher 122).

Although I would argue, from a Lacanian viewpoint, that this social construction of a virtual paradise is as much a phantasmatic desire firmly rooted in the Symbolic world as any other, the ability to cognitively immerse so completely and, moreover, to experience a complete loss of control, does offer the possibility of transcendent experiences.

On perhaps a more subtle level, our refusal to acquiesce to contemporary social pressures to present ourselves as marketable products, or to tolerate the almost ubiquitous presence of mass surveillance can also transport us to what, essentially, are other planes of consciousness. To revel in nameless anonymity, to intentionally drop off the radar of the world, embrace abjection or seek out beauty in what our culture finds abhorrent can all be framed as opportunities for ecstatic experience.

In my own writing practice, I have attempted to represent the transcendence of limit experiences and examine intersection between violence and the erotic. The advantage of fictional representation over philosophical writing is the ability to narrativise the simultaneous experience of both. I have attempted to depict the experience of female *jouissance*, with its transformative brushes with the Lacanian Real in the certain knowledge that any efforts will be imperfect and attenuated. The Death Drive is always there, haunting the moment. Not as a threat, or a presentiment, but as a reminder of what must be resisted and defied. In the transcendent moment, death is the enemy we must love and know intimately enough to resist with something other than our intellect. And so in the transcendent erotic moment, there is always a voluptuous violence and rupture. I cannot take the view, as some do, that the

jouissance and the undeadness of the drive is a wholly negative influence upon us, or that our proximity to the Lacanian Real is always a headlong and permanent leap to a state of subjective destitution. For me, within the narrative space, they represent vitality, a possibility for chaotic creativity, an engine beyond our subjective selves that powers our occasional brush with the Real.

Not all the stories in the creative writing portion of this project include attempts to represent ecstatic experiences. I have, on the whole, avoided conflating orgasm with intimations of transcendence except in cases where the moment is weighted with ambivalence. But, on the whole, I situate my fictional moments of transcendence at the intersection between trauma and intimacy and often, following the tradition religious mystics, as muted, distant recollections. “Eversharp” and “Nathalie's Tailor” are both stories in this mode. “Eversharp” employs blatantly religious imagery—sacrifice, martyrdom, and sacred ritual—to frame the climb towards transgression and transcendence of cutting:

The dusting of hair, the flat, taupe nipple that quells at my touch, the hilly landscape of his ribs. My Adam. My lovely meat man. My sacrificial lamb. “Where Christ took the Roman spear. This is where I want to cut you.”

He laughs again, but, beneath my fingers, his muscles tense. “Okay. Don't go all religious on me, now.”

It's too late. He is an altar between my thighs. An altar and an offering united. Flesh and more, a human animal. And here, in this moment, I am the god and the priest who serves. (“Eversharp”)

In contrast, “Nathalie's Tailor” frames the same practice—of BDSM cutting—as a temporary escape from the Symbolic Order of “the world's pernicious grasp”, allowing the Real in via physical cuts in the flesh:

I'm a tailor, not a butcher. I take pleasure in my work.

I make my careful cuts, and when I'm done, I cover her with my body, slide my cock into her moist, fluttering cunt, and fuck her free of the world's pernicious grasp (“Nathalie's Tailor”).

“Prosthetic” and “If In Some Distant Place” portray a transcendence not shared, but witnessed by the narrator. In “Prosthetic” a sculptress witnesses as her art is used as transport in her lover's transcendent moment:

“Without warning, he wrapped his arms around me, pivoted, and pressed his back flat against the searing steel.

I knew, as I heard the hiss, as he began to shake, that, in part, he was using my weight to keep himself there. Making me even more complicit than I already was. Sharing out the burden of this small act of self-immolation.” (“Prosthetic”).

Whereas, in my story, “If In Some Distant Place” the two main characters, and the reader, are situated at a questionably safe distance, as voyeurs while a man masturbates on a busy street intersection.

“Remapped” situates ecstasy in a virtual world, where a couple use Google Maps to escape their everyday worlds and engage in extreme fantasies until the narratives of the fantasies become too personal for comfort. Finally, as I go on to discuss in much greater depth in the chapter of resistance to language as an aspect of eroticism, the experience of transcendence is often not written at all, but evidenced in the way a character has been changed by the experience. For example, in my story “A Little Prick”, the medicalised moment with its unequal power dynamic, contributes to an orgasm triggered by an injection, which forms the protagonist's erotic inner life.

7. The Edge of Language

“Erotic experience will commit us to silence” (Bataille *Erotism* 252)

In his essay “A Preface to Transgression” on Bataille's *L'Erotisme*, Foucault writes that, in all our attempts to liberate sexuality by speaking and writing about it, we have not failed, but done something worse: we've described its limits (Foucault 30). Now that science has laid bare its anatomy and pornography has shown us, at the click of a mouse, that everything is possible for one human body to do to another, what more is left? But Bataille makes a distinction since “eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal” (Bataille II), and Foucault acknowledges this. The quandary for a writer who sets out to write the erotic, not the sexual, is that, while it is possible to write about the yearning the erotic engenders, all the theatre that surrounds it, the physical (which may be explicitly sexual) that accompanies it, the core of the experience is resistant to language. What lies past the boundaries of taboo or prohibition—in the experience of the ecstatic or transcendent, and the being we become in that place—is a languageless being. We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that “to speak of this experience and in making it speak from the depths where its language fails, from precisely the place where words escape it, where the subject who speaks has just vanished” (Foucault 40), we can only write “that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence” (30).

One of the most uncomfortable aspects of Bataille's treatise on eroticism is the extent to which he associates it with violence and this is significant in terms of how it resists language:

...since language is by definition the expression of civilised man, violence is silent. Many consequences result from that bias of language. Not only does

“civilised” usually mean “us”, and barbarous “them”, but also civilisation and language grew as though violence was something outside, foreign not only to civilisation but also to man, man being the same thing as language. [...] If language is to be extricated from this impasse, we must declare that violence belongs to humanity as a whole and is speechless, and that thus humanity as a whole lies by omission and language itself is founded upon this lie (Bataille 186).

The violence of eroticism is, I think, not Bataille's alone to define. While violence is indisputably part of eroticism, it does not need to be physical. It can take many forms: dislocation, sorrow, absurdity, delirium, perfection, cruelty, courage. All that is needed is that the violence shocks us into silence. The challenge of writing eroticism is not only that the experience resists language but that our own propensity for finding the intersection of sex and violence erotic may well disturb us into self-censorship. While many sexual taboos have gone by the wayside, we condemn acts of sexual violence more than ever before. Yet many people still find fictionalised portrayals of sexual violence thrilling and erotic, perhaps even moreso as we condemn it more loudly. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the cause and effect of this phenomenon, it would be disingenuous to leave it unacknowledged or deny that there is a moral dimension to the decision to write about eroticism and all that it entails.

Lacan tells us it is impossible to write about this *jouissance*, this brush with the Real, because it doesn't exist. But, as Bruce Fink notes, Lacan's use of the term 'existence' requires elucidation: “existence is a product of language: language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality)” (Fink 25). Yet this experience, whether identified as eroticism or as an irruption of the Real *does* exist—in the sense that we want it to exist, or perhaps in the sense that, like a black hole, it is known to be there by the way it curves the space around it and bends the light nearby. Similarly, Lacan said that the Real is impossible to imagine, to speak about, to write

about, and yet he *did* and we *do* (McGowan 81). Many inner experiences are *impossible* to write about, and yet writers try and sometimes succeed in describing the curvature of the space around the experience.

For many writers, the prospect of writing the *impossible* simply isn't worth the trouble. While they feel confident to chronicle their characters' most harrowing experiences, when it comes to the bedroom, the narrative often ends at the door.

Martin Amis, who has not stopped at the door, famously said:

Good sex is impossible to write about. Lawrence and Updike have given it their all, and the result is still uneasy and unsure. It may be that good sex is something fiction just can't do—like dreams. Most of the sex in my novels is absolutely disastrous. Sex can be funny, but not very sexy (Burns).

Perhaps the problem is that 'good' sex isn't just 'sex'? Perhaps what makes it 'good' is that it is more than just sex. However, to make too much of it is also problematic; we are caught in a difficult place between the liberationist demand to write frankly about erotic experiences and the marketing hyperbole of commodification. In our determination to reject the prudish censorship, veiling, poetics and allusions of the past, we are exhorted to represent the concrete reality of sex. But describing the mechanics of sex in minute detail is not the same as representing the reality of the experience. Meanwhile, to resist reducing the erotic to a commodity and gilding it with the impossible sheen of a shiny new product, we must avoid presenting it as desirable. Perhaps in refusing to allow eroticism the complexity it requires, we have denied ourselves the tools with which to write about 'good sex'.

Advancing Upon the Sands of Silence

Offering proscriptive suggestions for how to write what cannot be written seems not only absurd, but limiting. As trite as it rings, honesty is the best policy, and

it is always brave and effective to lead by example, so I offer a passage from Jonathan Kemp's *Twentysix*:

Forgive me for not having the words to describe it, this place in which I dwell. I have tried, I have tried. I have drenched myself in words and sensations, seeking a way to make them speak to one another. This is all I have to offer. The body wants what it wants. The chaos of the body's wants – as we know – will never surrender itself to language, can never succumb to reason, even if, even if, even if it wanted to – which it never will. Words will help you to live, as your body will help you to die. When the body lets go, the mind lets go too. And fear is the least part, that's what I learnt first (Kemp 89).

In my view, what makes Kemp's passage so effective is its acknowledgement that sensations and words cannot be forced to speak to one another. This “chaos of the body's wants” deftly describes the capacity for *jouissance* to break language, destabilise Symbolic order, and render ourselves unintelligible even to ourselves. Kemp's admonition that “[w]ords will help you to live, as your body will help you to die” encapsulates, for me, the inherent conflict always present in narratives of eroticism: the intersection between the Symbolic order with its potential for meaning making and the Lacanian Real of the bodily drive.

8. Conclusions

In this project, I have sought to compare and contrast contemporary and mainstream understanding of what is erotic against Bataille's definition of eroticism. I argue that our culture perpetuates and commodifies nostalgia for taboos and transgressions we have, largely, already dispensed with. Where erotic writing was once a site of resistance against dominant social forces, it has now, for the most part, become another product in the marketplace to be consumed and thus a reinforcement of it. However, I have argued that, while our understanding of what is sacred may have changed radically, the structure of the sacred/ profane dichotomy that produced possibilities for transgression still exists and offers the possibility to of resistance through the identification of new 'sacreds' that might be transgressed.

The creative writing accompanying this critical exegesis does not neatly mirror the ideas presented in this thesis; they are offered as fictional narratives that might be fruitfully interrogated in the light of them. They were written under the influence, as it were, of Bataille's concept of eroticism read through a Lacanian lens. And while the stories were written with a greater understanding of Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, I hope that the effect of it has not been to produce fictional analytical portraits, but rather to produce richer and more complex characters. A reading will reveal examples of transgression, ecstasy, the continuous self and the fragility of language, bound together, in the experiences of the narrator or the characters in the stories. Above all, my goal was to produce a varied set of fictions—in terms of narrative approach, form, length and style—which propose alternate or laterally approached sites of eroticism while staying within the constraints of the genre.

The loss of erotic literature as a tool of resistance to hegemonic models of how we should experience enjoyment is, I feel, more significant than literary critics acknowledge. It is my hope that other creative writers of genre fiction will find the ideas in this project inspiring and motivate them to explore their characters' erotic lives in a new, more contextual light.

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