IT CUTS BOTH WAYS:
FREUD, LACAN AND THE FRAGMENTED BODY

by

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Abstract

"It Cuts Both Ways: Freud, Lacan and the Fragmented Body" is a thesis written in pieces. Four sections give a reading of corporeal fragmentation, each layered with yet challenging the other, forming a work that comes together as it falls apart. The first section explores Jacques Lacan's *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, specifically the concepts of sublimation, *das Ding*, and the death drive, in order to analyse how it is that an object can so increase in value--can promise such dangerous, impossible pleasure--that one would risk one's death simply to tear it up. This section is followed by a reading of Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id*, an explication of some of this text's most productive contradictions. Freud asserts that a child identifies with a parent as a compensation against the loss of an object-cathexis: when this suggestion is taken to its logical conclusion it serves to undermine the possibility of a boy's heterosexual identification. I analyse the possible results of a boy identifying not with his father but with his mother, an identification accepted then rejected then projected onto his own daughter, onto a body the now grown boy can better control. The next section addresses Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, focussing on Freud's theory of the compulsion to repeat, where representation of a trauma gains momentum unhinged from the origin it can only represent, binding the invasion of stimuli only as it binds the subject to death. Freud suggests that tearing apart a body is a means to create one: I ask how it happens that the means overtakes the end, when destroying the body becomes its own return. The thesis concludes with an exploration of several key concepts as outlined by Lacan: the mirror stage, the drive, *objet a*, and the relationship between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. My
aim here is to explore what structures form the body and what is lost through this formation, when corporeality is cut and cuts back.
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Preface

*Literature is the unconscious of psychoanalysis...*

Shoshana Felman,

‘To Open The Question,’

*Yale French Studies*

This is a thesis cut off from itself. It began as an attempt to understand a specific tangle of traumas, compensatory behaviours, historical echoes: the following text was written in tandem with an autobiographical narrative about several interconnected forms of cutting, a narrative which became too large to fit into the constraints of a Master’s thesis, like a body grown out of its clothes.

The missing object. Let me represent it. The first section of the narrative details how my father, who spent his childhood in various logging camps up and down the coast of British Columbia, learned how to carve up a forest as a way to negotiate his mother’s strange delusions—her fears that others were poisoning her food or sneaking into her room to steal her organs or to hide scissors in her bed that sliced into her skin. Attempting to fix his place in a world that seemed always in danger of spinning free from language, he concentrated on mimicking the skills of his father, the camp highrigger, an acrobat of the forest, a man who could carve a tree limbless, top it, and sit cross-legged on its narrow wooden peak, sucking at a cigarette if he were not afraid of falling off.

The second section explores how my father’s childhood affected his relationship with my sister and I, whose bodies he treated with the same bursts of violent force he once had
used to carve up the woods. He marked our bodies as if to control them or make them his own, smacking objects against our skin with the rhythm of an axe, ripping limbs from sockets as if we were a tree to be stripped of its branches. This was a violence we learned to embody, turning not against our father but against each other, against ourselves.

She began to cut up my clothes, sneaking into my closet to slice them up, hoarding the fragments away so she could sew them together to better fit her own body as if she were stealing it from mine. She took my cheques and my identification, her hands intimate with my signature, my face becoming hers. My father did not stop her: instead, he bought me a lock for my room and warned me to keep everything shut away inside it. Anything left out would disappear, like a piece of my body lost.

I began to carve away my flesh, cutting into it not with a knife, but with starvation, as if I were punishing my sister by punishing myself, slowly becoming thin enough that I could slip her clothes inside my own. My body so cold from the emaciation that even inside the house I wore my father's Mac jacket and down coat, wrapping myself in the layers of the man I most wanted to resist.

Through this starvation, I banked my calories, fed the future with the present, as if I could save food as my father saved money, as if a female body were a form of wasteful spending that had to be denied. The less I consumed, the more I concentrated on the elaborate meals I would allow myself in the years to come, representation eating away at what it was meant to represent, a bodily economy that proved almost deadly.

*Cutting, stealing, locking a room, carving a body, saving for the future, representing toward death*: these structures saturate the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, whose
theories offer insight into why a man would be driven to violence against his daughters, and why these daughters would respond not through resistance but through re-enactment, or re-enactment as resistance, where identification functions as its own refusal, where the corporeal representation of trauma gains momentum until the duplicate is more devastating than its original. Self-destruction not simply an echo of my father’s acts against me, but a resistance to them, my flesh a testimony that cited the original violence to the point of its collapse, as if the only way to escape the father was to become him.

An emaciated frame becomes a tree stripped bare becomes not a phallus, but a paternal breast, a breast that cannot feed. The clothes left out of the room become the maternal body that must be cut up. A sister’s slicing and sewing becomes a father’s effort to create himself anew within his daughter’s frame. A starving of the body becomes a daughter’s attempt to return to the lost object that can never be found. Layers of clothes become those inescapable systems of representation that are the body itself, representation fed by a resistance to it. The thesis is propelled not by one specific argument, but by this system of motifs, these scraps of narrative sewn almost invisibly into the theory, extending and contradicting its reach.

A mother cuts into a son cuts into a mother; a father cuts into a daughter cuts into a father; a story cuts into a theory cuts into a story.

“It Cuts Both Ways” must be pieced together, always missing that part of itself that would make it whole, like a child torn from the breast. The project thinner than it should be, anticipating its own future, when the theoretical argument will be sliced with and against the narrative, analysing it but also analysed by it, brought to crisis by what it cuts out, the theory as fragmented as the body it reads. For while the project is about the relationship between
one specific father and his daughters, it is also about the relationship between gender and
genre and the always precarious boundary between psychoanalysis and fiction, philosophy and
literature, analyst and analysand. The daughter will talk back: the nuanced and contradictory
detail inherent in narrative will prove to be more than the limits of theory can bear. The story
not simply a case study used to explicate a master's hypothesis, but rather a form of resistance
to it, a resistance always in some way complicit with what it aims to cut down.

Note: I have included a short excerpt of the narrative as an appendix, like an organ cut from
the body. The entire work should be considered as a tentative gesture toward a longer
project: I was planning to create a sample collage of the narrative and theory, each
interrupting the other, but the final stage of the thesis was itself interrupted when I
experienced a break-in of my apartment, my body losing most of its clothes just as my writing
was losing the university's reassuring containment...
I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something 
more than you--the objet petit a--I mutilate you.

Figure 1: Father perched on top of a tree
It begins with a woman inside a room.

Let me piece it together. Stretched limb to limb across the sheets, her right palm tossed open, her body is as languid as a slow sentence.

Or, no, perhaps she is perched pensive and erect on the edge of the bed. Her hands are in fists braced tight at her sides, her arms arch slightly outward at the elbow to frame her chest like two protective brackets.

A man waits outside, stands on the threshold to plan each act, taste the scene to its end. He can see how he must leave the room once he has entered it. The exit door opens behind the woman so that her body forms both a pathway and an obstruction. He is aware that on the other side of this doorway--the one he will reach, inevitably, once he has made the first move to touch her--stand the gallows that will hang him. He knows that to enter the room is to enter the woman is to enter into a contract with death.

It’s the woman that I can’t quite place, can’t fix in this tale of entrances and exits, bodies and their thresholds, acts and their consequences. I’ve been told she is there, in the room, but not what she desires or fears. I don’t know if she is aware of the man and his
potentially fatal decision. All I can see is that she is bound with death, so intimately tied to it that to enjoy her flesh is to embrace the gallows, to have her body is to lose one’s own.

Yet the contract is left unfulfilled. In this borrowed fable, a tale cut from Jacques Lacan who himself cut it from Immanuel Kant, the ending has been sliced off. A new one is grafted on with each telling. For Kant, the terms are clear, the decision obvious: no one in his right mind would choose a momentary pleasure at the cost of one’s life. The woman remains alone; the gallows, empty. Both desire and death must wait unsated.

But when Kant assumes such a tidy ending to the story, when he so confidently anticipates the protagonist’s refusal of the deal, Lacan warns us that he “misses something”:

Our philosopher from Königsberg was a nice person, and I don’t intend to imply that he was someone of limited stature or feeble passions, but he doesn’t seem to have considered that under certain conditions of what Freud would call Über- oder Über-evaluation of the object . . . under conditions in which the object of a loving passion takes on a certain significance . . . under certain conditions of sublimation of the feminine object . . . it is conceivable for such a step to be taken. (Ethics 108-9)

A woman’s body can come to signify more than what it is, increasing in value to such an extent that to take one’s pleasure from it would be worth the final cost. But as Lacan develops his analysis of this bodily economy, he begins to alter the terms of exchange. In his final version of Kant’s fable, he takes yet a bigger step: the woman has become so overpriced that she must be removed from the market. In this particular ending to the story—a conclusion which we are repeatedly assured is far from impossible—the man embraces the woman’s flesh only to tear it apart:
... it is not impossible for a man to sleep with a woman knowing full well that he is to be bumped off on his way out, by the gallows or anything else (all this, of course, is located under the rubric of passionate excesses, a rubric that raises a lot of other questions); it is not impossible that this man coolly accepts such an eventuality on his leaving— for the pleasure of cutting up the lady concerned in small pieces, for example. (Ethics 109)

The tabooed desire is no longer to screw her body, but to destroy it. This new twist tossed off so casually at the end of the paragraph is not simply an extension of Kant’s fable, but its inversion, a step in the opposite direction. While it remains true that satisfaction can be purchased only with death, it is now the woman who must pay the price.

A female body cut into pieces is an image which can never be Lacan’s alone. It forms the climax of the film The Silence of the Lambs, where the villain desires not simply to rape his victim, but to tear off her skin. By patching the pieces together, he can sew himself a new form, slipping his body into a flesh dress. This fantasy was in circulation before it was caught by the lens: in a Vancouver murder case that defies or perhaps confirms the rules of sexual exchange, police found the body of a prostitute— pieces of her skin— sewn inside a man’s van and inside his clothing. Her killer had wrapped himself with her flesh not to hide it, but as if to form himself inside it, tearing apart a woman’s body in order to create his own.

But while “the annals of criminology furnish a great many cases of the type,” it remains to be explained what would drive someone either to destroy his sexual object or to purchase it with his own destruction (Ethics 109). And the question also stands as to what links the stories of the hanged man and the torn woman, these two different structures of
death, these “two forms of transgression” which Lacan patches together almost seamlessly as if one were the extension of the other (109).

A body gained, a body lost. A man or a woman destroyed. A rubric of passionate and violent excess. What Kant fails to grasp are the possibilities created by sublimation, where the object—or the sex—of one’s desire is never what it seems: “... the most general formula that I can give you of sublimation is the following: it raises an object—and I don’t mind the suggestion of a play on words in the term I use—to the dignity of the Thing” (Ethics 112). And what is this Thing, das Ding, that Kant appears to miss? It must be distinguished from “die Sach” which is “clearly the thing, a product of industry and of human action as governed by language,” a signified which forms a couple with its word. (45). Das Ding is found elsewhere, if it is to be found at all. It cannot be captured by a word, but is rather what language loses, or what it inevitably causes us to lose. While Lacan asserts that “the things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all (45),” he also suggests that this “all” is not all. There remains something, some thing, that language can but mourn. As “the true secret,” das Ding is “strange and even hostile on occasion, or in any case the first outside” (46, 52). It is a “dumb reality (55),” a “beyond-of-the-signified (54),” the “prehistoric, unforgettable Other (53).” It is the Other before difference, the body before speech, a prelinguistic object...or at least the myth of one.

We have come to another borrowed story with this myth of das Ding, this Thing that can and cannot be caught within a tale, that motivates yet always fails to reward our search. Snipped from Lacan who this time snipped it from Freud, the story tells us that a subject is
oriented around something that is missing. The subject is first drawn beyond its limits into an
external reality because it wants to reach back to an original object, an unforgettable loss. The
object of desire is always a refound object. The subject longs for this object as intensely as if it
had been a part of himself, as if it had been a piece torn from his body when he first entered “a
universe structured by words” (Ethics 45). In the symbolic universe, a universe after the fall
into signification, language bars the subject from the first and last object that could make his
body whole. Whereas once, in a mythic past before the signifier, the subject was self-
sustaining and thus did not need to expend energy to satisfy his needs, upon the entry into the
symbolic order of language and kinship he is divided from his object and himself. He tries to
retain his original status, his original stasis, driven to hallucinate the presence of the thing he
cannot afford to lose. Only when his fantasies fail to abate his longing for what he has lost is
he motivated into action, forgoing the delusion of a solipsistic homeostasis in order to reach
out or cry for an object that promises to bring him back to himself. Yet Lacan warns that this
promise can never be fulfilled. “it is, of course, clear that what is supposed to be found cannot
be found again. It is in its nature that the object as such is lost” (Ethics 52). There is no
original thing, but only the story we tell ourselves about it as we search for evidence of its
existence. There is no final closure, no reassuring wholeness, but only the series of objects we
endlessly use and lose, satisfied yet unsated. Circling what is missing, what we can never find,
we experience not das Ding, but “only its pleasurable associations” (Ethics 52). This
structure of productive substitution reveals that our perceptions are never independent from
our hallucinations; our actions never distinct from the tricks of our desire. The reality we see
and speak and create is structured from the outset by what can never exist within it. Das
Ding is what language leaves behind, yet what it can never do without. It is la causa, la chose, the lost cause.

Full circle. If das Ding escapes the story, it is also its condition of possibility. And if the word gives death to the thing, it remains our sole hope for catching it: “... the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word, hits the bull’s eye, as they say” (Ethics 55).

It is a lost object that has never been lost, a past given only through the memory that creates it. Like the man waiting at the edge of the room, we are thus faced with a dilemma. The relation between das Ding and language is chiasmic: in order to reach the object, one must reproduce it within a symbolic universe; yet through this reproduction, the object inevitably slips away. We can find it only through its absence, reach it only through its death.

A man must face the gallows if he is to possess what he desires. To enter the room is to enter the symbolic order: finding what had been a lost part of himself, the man finally possesses the body that will enable him to access his own. But with this possession, this assumption, language exacts its cost. He can finds his objects only through a symbolic system that kills them into existence. He enacts his own embodiment within a structure that takes his body away. In this story, the subject must pay for his body with his life.

The woman always gives more than one death. For if she is to represent that original object, the loss of which propelled the subject forward into the future and initiated the subject’s allegiance to the reality principle, where the present is sacrificed for a time yet to come, then finding her body would mean a collapse of this principle and of the future it represents. She is a deadly present. To embrace her is to cease representation, to stop moving toward the hallucinated reward that is always deferred.
But how has this woman come to stand in both for language and for what remains before, behind or outside it? Why does the story turn on her? For it is still the same story, the one Lacan tells us, this story where now the woman’s life is the one on the line, where the death of one tips the balance of the death of the other. In Lacan’s telling, the man must face the gallows not simply because he has possessed a body, but because through this act he has destroyed it, pulling it apart as if searching for what isn’t there. But if the woman’s body enables him to enact or form his own, then the man’s act of aggression negates not only his object but his own subjectivity. What would drive him to such an end? Following the impossible, chiasmic logic of das Ding, we must tear this ending in two directions. In one interpretation, the man is compelled to destroy the woman because she can never be the original object, because her body inevitably fails to give him back what he has lost. And in the second--an interpretation mutually exclusive to the first yet inherently bound to it--the man is driven to destroy her because she can be this object and her body thus threatens to give him a pleasure that his life cannot withstand.

What body can possibly be both another’s and one’s own, both a woman’s and a man’s, what form of embodiment promises what it can and cannot give? And what kind of pleasure, once obtained, would be experienced as the worst kind of suffering? If the woman’s body offers a return from language, the journey is a familiar one. While the room in this story can stand in for the symbolic universe--the room is a word, a name, even a proper name, that singular name that structures a given body as one’s own--it represents also another system of enclosure, “the Sovereign Good, which is das Ding, which is the mother” (Ethics 70).

Womb, room, tomb, the convenient rhyme serves to unite the associations underlying the
drive to return back to—or back into—an object one had long ago been forced to leave. Within the myth of *das Ding*, the division from the mother’s body is a kind of birthing into death, where the symbolic order divides the subject from the flesh he has known, giving him the gift of a strange yet recognisable body that only comes with a name. But if breaking from the maternal body constitutes a form of death, so does returning to it. Such a return would demand rupturing the symbolic order and its systems of deferral which form our body as separate from the mother. To reach *das Ding*, we must kill the order that tells us to want what we can never possess.

The villain of *The Silence of the Lambs* exists on society’s outer limits, breaking the codes that tell him what he can’t have. He keeps each victim not in a room but in a hole in the ground, her flesh feeding the space which his can no longer fit. Recreating, inverting, the birth chamber, he fills the hole with her body, then fills her body with his own. But because these acts are inherently a repetition, a representation of a lost relationship, they must occur again and again, each time failing to deliver the body he desires. He reaches not *das Ding*, nor the maternal body, but only a piece of what can never be his alone.

The subject cannot return to the womb, to that place where all of his needs were met, where self and other were one. His desire for the maternal body cannot be fulfilled. If the mother is the Sovereign Good, she is also a “forbidden good” (70), good precisely because she is forbidden, because she can never be reached: “The desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point, the abolition of the whole world of demand...” (68). Just as we don’t capture *das Ding* but only its associations, its substitutions, so we don’t possess the mother, but only the narrative of her body, a narrative given us through our
introduction to language. The experience of being barred from the maternal body by the
symbolic order is the mythical loss that in essence creates the maternal body as such. The
mother is configured here as a constitutive outside, as the forbidden and impossible presence,
the desire for which somehow simultaneously results from and inaugurates our first linguistic
act: “the prohibition of incest is nothing other than the condition sine qua non of speech”
(Ethics 69). Language, cognition, perception are held in place without her. To return to the
maternal body is to possess das Ding is to shatter the symbolic order is to scratch out one’s
eyes.

So the story goes. Kant is missing his mother.

But this story, this myth, comes with a warning. Just as one tragic hero failed to
recognise the maternal body where it was, so we must be careful now not to recognise it
where it is not. Is the mother das Ding? And if so, what does she experience in its place?
There is no reference made to her pleasure, or her lack of it, no analysis of what it would
mean to exist as the pre-linguistic object that promises to give all, no interpretation of how it
would feel for the mother to do her own thing. Yet although through his tangle of analysis and
myth, Lacan suggests an alignment between the maternal body and das Ding, he also
distinguishes himself from those who follow this “Kleinian register,” with its “certain though
partial truth” (Ethics 111). But if Kleinian theory “depends on its having situated the mythic
body of the mother at the central place of das Ding,” where does Lacanian theory place it
(106)? What part, or piece, of this truth does Lacan hold?

Let’s pretend—for a myth is precisely a matter of making believe, of making belief--
that the maternal body is das Ding, or is at least a piece of it. According to Lacan such
pretence would be an act of sublimation, where an object satisfies our search even if does not exactly match our aim. An act of sublimation and not, we are assured, of idealisation: following in the steps of Freud, Lacan has drawn a strict line between these two ways of relating to an object. “The fact is that idealisation involves an identification of the subject with the object, whereas sublimation is something quite different” (Ethics 111). As we have already been given to understand, sublimation raises the object—an unremarkable, everyday object which can also be, as in the case of the maternal body, an unremarkable, everyday subject—to the place of das Ding. Lacan asserts that this sublation reveals the relationship between das Ding and the Triebe, the drive. The drive is not oriented simply around an object; it circles the thing, that which it can never reach except through the myth-making act of sublimation where what is there can stand in for what is not. The difference between an instinct and a drive lies precisely in this relation to the object and in the aim that searches for it. With the instinct, the aim cannot go off course: the object and satisfaction are directly linked. With the drive, on the other hand, the aim can and in fact must find something else, some other way. It must be flexible, fluid, plastic. It must tell a story. For its goal is not simply an object but the thing, the impossible pre-historic other that an object can but promise to give.

Yet it appears as if the Triebe has already reached its aim: “What one finds at the level of das Ding once it is revealed is the place of the Triebe, the drives” (Ethics 110). If das Ding is the place of the drive, then the drive is searching for what in essence it could never have left. Das Ding is both the drive’s origin and its goal, both the beginning and the end. The distinction between sublimation and idealisation fails to hold. The two ways of relating to
an object function only when patched together. Sublimation works through identification and thus through idealisation. The thing is both the object we desire and the object holding the drives we experience as our own. The man in our story is drawn to the woman both because he desires her body and because he needs to form his body from it. He pieces his drives together, taking them from the other. And he tears her apart as he builds himself, compelled to destroy her in order to erase the evidence of his own exteriority, failing to realise that without this other body his own could not exist.

To return, then, to the mother. Or at least to the female body that stands in for her, the body that represents the mother that represents das Ding. To return to “the first orientation,” “the impulse to find again that for Freud establishes the orientation of the human subject to the object” (Ethics 54, 58). Kant’s narrative of a room and a woman and a man, of death and desire, of pleasure and its end is, above all, a story of orientation. For while the key dilemma is the relationship between satisfaction and death, the story circles also around the direction of one’s drives, the gender of one’s body, the choice of one’s object. It tells a story of how one sex makes—or takes—its body from the other.

When the man chooses to enter a woman’s flesh, does he ever leave it? When he pieces himself together from a woman, what does he become? Is he required to face the gallows because he has satisfied his lust or rather because he has crossed into a room, into a sex, that he cannot be allowed to occupy? When desire crosses identification, what is the boundary between having a woman’s body and having one?

Kant’s narrative can be read as either a heterosexual morality tale or as a fantasy of its limits. The man’s entrance into the room is either an acceptance or a refusal of sexual
difference, an affirmation or a negation of what the symbolic order has to offer. Death and destruction are tied not simply to desire, but to the assumption of one’s gender and sexual identity, where possessing a body always comes with a loss.

A man enters a room to have a woman’s body. The potential ambiguity of this statement suggests that the story’s dilemma may lie in the possibility that this hero was never properly a man. Perhaps we must imagine him differently, as a woman perhaps, or even as a figure without a sex, as an entity waiting on the edge of the room, a being on the border of the symbolic, perched spatially and temporally before the system of signs that will place it in a body, killing it into life.

How would the story change if the one who desired did not yet exist, or not as a human subject as such, but as a sexless being who pined to enter the symbolic bodily domain?

Or if a woman were the one waiting outside the door, desiring a body that lay just outside her reach, a body that looked not unlike her own, or like the idea she held of it, a female body barred from her grasp by the threat of death?

Or if no one was outside the room and the gallows were waiting not for a visitor, but for the woman inside and alone, the figure still lying or perching on the bed who must now weigh the cost of her pleasure, buying her embodiment with her life?

Yet in these questions, in this stolen story that has now been torn to pieces, something remains missing. For it is conceivable that the gallows were never the consequence of satisfaction, but were instead satisfaction itself. That desire was directed not towards the body, but to the death that haunts it. Not embodiment, but its termination. The woman waiting in the room is the means to the end. Her body—simultaneously an obstruction and a
pathway--is what one must cross. It is the price one must pay for this thing, *das Ding*, called death. A pleasure to end all pleasures. Flesh fixed in a room. A body that stops.
We must admit that the little girl is a little man.

--Sigmund Freud, Essays on Sexuality
The identity of a child is borne through loss.

An object is stolen away: one parent bars the child from possessing the other. The child surrenders this primal attachment by taking it inside, stealing back the lost object, hiding it in an inside that does not pre-exist the experience of loss but is constituted through it, identification built as an incorporative theft. Where the ego is nothing but the imbrication of other egos, the body nothing but the layers of borrowed clothing that it wears.

How then to fix a boundary between object-cathexis and identification when this boundary is built only by its betrayal? How to determine who owns what?

"At the very beginning," Freud tells us, "in the individual's primitive oral phase, object-cathexis and identification are no doubt indistinguishable from each other" (Ego 368). The child affirms the existence of its objects by eating them; it loves something by taking it inside. Freud suggests that upon the completion of this phase, with the child's increasing maturity, object catheysis and identification can be more confidently pulled apart. Yet if identification is always in some sense "a regression to the mechanism of the oral phase" (368),
then this phase is a beginning that doesn’t seem to know where to end: “we must also take
into consideration cases of simultaneous object-cathexis and identification--cases, that is, in
which the alteration in character occurs before the object has been given up” (369). Through
this failure to keep two interdependent structures far enough apart, the child both identifies
with and desires the same object. Even in those cases where the identification process appears
to be more tidily successful--the child becoming what he cannot have, incorporating what he
can no longer desire--the identification remains structured with and through a continued
object-cathexis. The ego carries the history of its object choices and the child is repeatedly
made aware of the existence of the object it has lost, an object which lives exterior to the
child’s body long after the child has taken it inside. The theft is never complete; subjectivity is
an imperfect crime. The cathexis may have been redirected, but the trace of love and loss
remains.

Something here is suspicious. Freud claims a boy is forced to give up his maternal
attachment, the first love for both boys and girls, because of the explicit or implicit threat of
castration. The boy gives up one object in order not to lose another. The mother is the object
to be lost and identification the child’s primary method of defence, its privileged means of
restitution. Yet why then would a boy be driven to identify with his father, and not with the
woman he must give away? According to Freud’s theory of compensatory identification, the
boy would learn to give up his mother by becoming her. In the expected outcome of events,
boys would be girls. Either this is the case and a boy’s identification with his father would be
the curious exception and not the rule. Or it is not the case and the resolution of the Oedipal
complex fails to cohere with the process of sexual identification which it claims to explain. Slip the theory over the narrative and it does not fit.

An identification that can’t lose its object-cathexis; an object-cathexis that doesn’t become an identification: these tangles in the theory are further complicated by Freud’s assertion that the ego incorporates the lost object in order to seduce the id: “When the ego assumes the features of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id’s loss by saying: ‘Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object” (Ego 369). One part of the subject identifies with the love-object; the other part desires it. The ego gains power over the id, but only by submitting to what it wants. The subject becomes loveable to itself, but only as another. Identification is a way to maintain an object-cathexis by cancelling it out.

Yet given such a seductive form of compensation the question remains how a boy would ever come to identify with his father. Freud explains that “along with the demolition of the Oedipus complex, the boy’s object-cathexis of his mother must be given up. Its place may be filled by one of two things: either an identification with his mother or an intensification of his identification with his father” (Ego 371). Assuming he is faced with both options, why would a boy choose the latter? If his first love-object is the mother, if this is the object he must lose to his rival and if identification is the privileged form of managing the loss, then wouldn’t the boy incorporate the mother within his own ego, thereby protecting himself against her absence? How would it ever happen that a boy aligns himself with his father? How does anyone become a man? Surely an internal alignment with the mother would go further in satiating the id’s desires, an id long trained to associate the maternal object with
comfort and pleasure. Indeed Freud states that such a reconfiguring of the mother can occur instead of or alongside the boy's identification with his father, that "the simple Oedipus complex is by no means its commonest form . . . " (Ego 372). For both boys and girls there can occur a double identification, alignments which are simultaneous and chiasmic, each child identifying with and desiring both parents: "The broad general outcome of the sexual phase dominated by the Oedipus complex may, therefore, be taken to be the forming of a precipitate in the ego, consisting of these two identifications in some way united with each other (373)." Yet the question still stands as to why either child would ever be driven to identify with a father when in fact it is the mother--initially her breast--who represents the first loss.

If the mother is the boy's love-object, then perhaps the internalised father can be a form of maternal substitute, better and never as good, an alignment that functions precisely as a form of counter-identification, an identification against the mother and the threatening power she represents, a compensatory attempt to feed and cut short the id's forbidden desire. Not "look, I am so much like the object," but "look, I can give what that object cannot." Where the mother's castration is a story told to lessen a boy's attachment to a body he can never possess. The penis and not the breast becomes the privileged object, the boy's contempt for his mother's wounded status functioning as a distraction from his own loss. His body signifying all that the mother is missing. No longer is the boy lacking the object; now the object is lacking the boy.

And what of the girl, this child who is doubly betrayed? She who must surrender the breast without the compensatory power and pleasure of possessing its substitute? This girl
may develop an identification not with the mother but with the father, as if she were ignorant of what would inevitably remain lacking in such a proudly suspect alignment:

Analysis very often shows that a little girl, after she has had to relinquish her father as a love object, will bring her masculinity into prominence and identify herself with her father (that is, with the object which has been lost), instead of with her mother. This will clearly depend on whether the masculinity in her disposition--whatever that may consist in--is strong enough. (Ego 372)

What appears at first to be an illogical identification in fact makes more sense than a boy's identification with his father, or at least better fits Freud's theory of a child's response to loss. Since for the girl it is apparently the father who is the lost love-object--although here Freud does not yet specify how or why this object is barred or even why the girl would come to desire it in the first place--the girl is driven to identify with her father as a compensation for letting him go. Whereas the boy who identifies with his father does so by turning against his lost love object, this girl turns toward it. She seduces her id into loving the object that she has become. Paradoxically, it is a heterosexual object choice which influences the girl toward a masculine identification. Yet Freud suggests that the girl would adopt such an identification only if she were already "masculine," already like a little boy--like the boy, in fact, who desires his mother, the boy who according to Freud's theory of identification would be most likely to identify with the maternal love-object he must give up. The girl identifies with her father because she is similar to the boy who identifies with his mother. Freud does not seem to be clear how exactly to define masculine or feminine disposition, or to explain its determining experiences, suggesting only that "whatever" it may consist in, it should be strong enough to
arrive both at the beginning and the end: while the process of identification is presented as an explanation of a child’s disposition, the disposition itself must first be in place in order for the identification to be established: “The relative intensity of the two identifications in any individual will reflect the preponderance in him of one or other of the two sexual dispositions” (373). The narrative told to explain the disposition needs the disposition to begin the plot. When it comes to a girl’s identificatory bond with her father, her masculinity appears as both the cause and the effect.

A boy identifying with his mother, a girl with her father—for the resolution of a “simple positive Oedipus complex” these negative identifications must eventually disappear, “except for barely distinguishable traces” (373). But what is the process of their disappearance and what is the effect of a trace? Which layers, which parts or pieces or residual effects are to remain? When two apparently mutually exclusive identifications become united “in some way,” with and against each other, how exactly does one tuck itself inside the next (373)?

A knotted unity. A unity of fragments, disappearances, pieces of loss. Where identification can function as its own refusal, the introjection of a parent producing an identity only as it is barred:

The super-ego is, however, not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: “You ought to be like this (like your father).” It also comprises the prohibition: “You may not be like this (like your father)---that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative. (Ego 374)
Another layer—the super-ego wrapped around or on top of the ego, the super-ego as a privileged form of introjection, carrying the trace of all that is highest in man. A layer which confirms and denies a given desire, creates and destroys the possibility of being the one to own it. So the boy who “in some way” both identifies with his mother as a compensation for her loss and rejects this identification in favour of an alignment with his father, this boy would be no more secure in his alignments were he to adhere strictly to a singular paternal identification than he would be with some precarious combination of two (373). The prohibition represented by the super-ego suggests that confirmation of the son’s paternal alignment functions simultaneously with its negation, each identification twisting itself up. The boy must become the father and he must not. Yet if the super-ego is a “residue” of the earliest object-choices, the question remains why the mother wouldn’t also be represented in this psychic configuration. Why is she not part of this specific inheritance? Like the ego the super-ego might also be doubled, layered, an internalised father to bar identification with the father; an internalised mother to bar identification with the mother—desire and alignment switching place at every turn. While Freud suggests that the super-ego gives “permanent expression to the influence of the parents” and is “the representative of our relation to our parents,” he specifies that it is “a substitute for a longing for the father,” represents “the role of the father,” “retains the character of the father,” and is “apparently not in the first instance the consequence or outcome of an object-cathexis” but is rather “a direct and immediate identification and takes place earlier than any object-cathexis” (375, 376, 370). An identification which thus takes place before the Oedipal complex and its dissolution, although the super ego is nothing if not its heir, although the narrative of this dissolution—the son being
barred from the mother by the threat of castration—is precisely the turn which inaugurates the super-ego’s place and its power (376). “A direct and immediate identification,” a first uninterrupted bond of boy to father, father to boy, as if the mother had been stolen from her place (370).

And what of the girl, she who must undergo the Oedipal journey not in an “analogous way” to her brother but rather in reverse, castration not as its end but its precondition, its cause and not its threatened effect (371)? If for her castration is a reality and not a fear, if desire for her father is inaugurated by castration and not dissolved by it, if this desire is thus never finally cut off, if her hope for a penis—a child as penis—is not refused or barred but “gradually given up because this wish is never fulfilled,” how does she come to develop a super-ego at all (“Dissolution” 321)?

Hers is borrowed. A conscience not her own, a super-ego shrunk to fit: “The male sex seems to have taken the lead in all these moral acquisitions; and they seem to have then been transmitted to women by cross-inheritance,” the acquisition smaller than the original as if cut to cover a slighter frame, women never possessing a super-ego quite so big, so super “so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men” (Ego 377, “Anatomical” 342).

Yet if like the boy a girl has a potential to identify with her father (depending, of course, on the strength of her masculine disposition), and there remains a trace of some form of identification even as it disappears, then would not the girl also be influenced by the prohibition against being like her father, against having what the father desires? She must be
like him and she cannot be like him. She must re-experience the chastisements that make up his own super-ego, the daughter’s ill-fitting inheritance.

Since she has already been castrated, the question remains what would possibly be the potential threat, what would be the super-ego’s specific punishment and power. What does a girl have to lose?

Perhaps when it comes to a girl who is given to identify “in some way” with both her parents, the punishment is not for desiring the mother, but for becoming her. Or rather for the precise combination of these relationships, for desiring a body that the father wants and the girl has the capacity one day to possess.

How to allow her to become the object, allow her to take on its shape, yet keep it from her? How to prevent her from stealing away, stealing inside what the father always suspected was never properly his own?

The super-ego repeats itself, borrowed from father to daughter, punishing the man and the woman in the girl, punishing the girl for the man and the woman, a cross-inheritance echoing ring inside ring inside ring.

But the punishment climbs the generations, circling up as well as down. The super-ego is an incorporated parent that punishes the child, but it is also the child punishing an incorporated parent. By making the analogy with melancholic identification, where “an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego--that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification,” by using melancholia as the privileged model for childhood sexual identification, the model for how a child chooses its alignment either with a mother or a father, Freud suggests that all such identifications function not simply as a way to retain a love
object, but also to punish this object for its betrayals (Ego 367). In melancholia the depressed individual criticises his lost love--unabashedly, publicly, repeatedly, without shame, without fear--but only in disguise, only once this object is wrapped in the guise of the individual's own subjectivity. His depression stems not from his own unworthiness but rather from his unconscious realisation of the unworthiness of his object, a realisation that has been turned around, cathected inside and against himself. With the analogy between melancholic identification and early childhood sexual identification, Freud suggests that chastisements of the super-ego are targeted not simply at the child's desires, but at those of the lost object. The object that disappeared, that somehow failed the child, that could never properly come inside. Identification as aggression, as incorporative violence. The child as a melancholic whose "self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego" ("Mourning" 257). Sadism as masochism, masochism as sadism, the super-ego punishing other as self, punishing self as other, where object love finds its refuge "in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction for its suffering" ("Mourning" 260).

So to identify is also to destroy an identification, is to keep and kill an object, punishing it for its pleasures while denying one's pleasure in its punishment.

A response--in part, in pieces--to the question of what remains of a disappeared identification, boy with mother or girl with father, those alignments that must almost vanish in order for the "simple positive Oedipus complex" to take shape (Ego 371). If a boy loses his mother as a love object, identifies with her as an attempt to refuse the loss, and then--because
of a real or perceived or even anticipated disappointment in this incorporation—is driven
finally to give up this identity, then what remains of the early object-cathexis is not love but
hate. Where ambivalence toward the object dissolves into a desire to destroy it.

Here is a punishment different from that exacted by the super-ego toward an internal
object, though perhaps no less ambivalent in direction or form. The hate contains the memory
of the identification and yet turns away from it, cathected not internally but externally, toward
an object that both threatens to become part of the boy's identity and yet haunts the boy with
its failure to do so. Freud distinguishes between melancholia and obsessional neurosis,
explaining that in the former the object under attack has been internalised whereas in the latter
the object remains outside: "in obsessional neurosis it has become possible, through a
regression to the pre-genital organisation, for the love-impulses to transform themselves into
impulses of aggression against the object. Here again the instinct of destruction has been set
free and it seeks to destroy the object, or at least it appears to have that intention" (Ego 395).

But when an object has first been incorporated and then somehow banished, when all that
remains of the identification is the trace of its disappearance, then the ego's relationship to its
object is neither that of melancholia nor obsessional neurosis, although it inevitably bears the
signature of both structures. When the ego turns against an object with which it once
identified—and loved through this identification—then the regression must be two-fold: a
lapsing away from identification as well as a diffusion of the love-impulses. The relation with
the object is released from the structure of identification; the death drive released from its
binding with Eros. This is a doubled regression that can never be complete: while the object is
structured as external to the id, it retains the trace of the failed identification. Whereas in
obsessional neurosis the ego punishes the object, here the ego punishes its own miss-placed part. Whereas in melancholia the ego tortures another in the guise of the self, here the ego tortures the self in the guise of another. This violent relationship with an object that has been loved and lost, that has served as a support for an identification and was lost yet again, is both an extension of and a defence against the super-ego’s chastisements against the ego: the chastisements can continue, but now they are focussed on an object that steals the ego’s failures away. In this object the ego finds its own inability to hold itself together while holding the other apart.

“Punishment must be exacted even if does not fall upon the guilty”: and how to identify the guilty, how to separate the other from the ego, the ego from the id, how to determine which part has failed to fit (Ego 386)? In its attacks against the object, the ego is not following its own impulses but those of the id, that reservoir of death drives that have now been released from the binding influence of Eros. But the super-ego holds the ego responsible: turning against the object cannot protect the ego from the super-ego’s wrath.

Instead, object and ego, id and super-ego become knotted with discipline: the super-ego punishing the ego punishing the object. The beleaguered ego, “helpless in both directions,” defending itself vainly, “alike against the instigations of the murderous id and against the reproaches of the punishing conscience” (Ego 395).

While this switching from love to hate serves to distinguish between the forces of Eros and Thanatos, it also reveals how close is their relationship and how precariously is the dominance of one over the other: “If this change is more than a mere succession in time--if, that is, one of them actually turns into the other--then clearly the ground is cut away from
under a distinction so fundamental as that between erotic instincts and death instincts, one
which presupposes physiological processes running in opposite directions” (Ego 383). With
the ground cut away, with the distinction cut up, the death instinct is unleashed from Eros yet
carries its trace, free to direct itself outward with all the cathexed energy that Eros supplies,
one instinct usurping the role of the other as if love could be satisfied only with and through
death, possession with and through destruction.

Yet what caused the ego to turn the object away, turn it out, what specific real or
perceived disappointment caused it to lose trust in its identification?

Returning to the boy, to the disappointed son and the trace that remains of his mother:
if as Freud assures us, “it is advisable in general, and quite especially where neurotics are
concerned, to assume the existence of the complete Oedipus complex”—the manifestation of
an alignment with both father and mother, a doubling of identifications—then perhaps there
exists also a more “complete” or doubled form of cutting, a parallel threat, not of castration
but of another possible loss, a loss related chiasmically to the one so privileged by Freud (Ego
373). Chiasmically and sympathetically, one loss slipping imperceptibly within another. If the
boy gives up his mother as a love-object only under the threat of castration, and identifies with
her—at least in part—in order to defend against the loss, then there must be another threat that
would force him to give up his identification. A doubling of threats where one possible loss
hides inside the next. But perhaps the threat of castration—a boy’s fear of another’s violence—
is already a double. It functions as the boy’s projected guilt for his own desire to cut into
flesh. The boy’s identification with his mother is precarious, vulnerable to failure: if he could
slice his mother into shape, sever her breasts from her body, he could destroy her and possess
her, keep the breast to himself and make his mother’s body match his own. Because he wants to cut a piece from his mother, he fears that another will do the same to him. The horror he expresses at the mother’s ostensible disfigurement allows him both to articulate and to repress his own violent desires. He can look at his mother and see that she is lacking, that someone has already cut into her body, that someone has done what he wants most to do. The missing penis is a stand-in for the breast, is a line slashed through a circle, a thin substitute, the boy’s narrow escape. She has been punished, this woman who always fails to stay inside, who cannot fill the boy or envelop him or otherwise bind her flesh with his, this woman who can never embody her son, who will never give her son her body.

By focussing on the mother’s loss—on all the ways that her shape does not fit his own—the boy can distract himself from how his body has failed her. What the threat of castration hides is thus not a parallel threat but a realisation—the boy’s frustrating recognition of what he lacks. Fear of a future loss masks the reality of a present one. Freud implies as much, although he relegates the implication to a footnote, cutting it from the body of his text: “It has been quite correctly pointed out,” he begins, giving authorship for the point to an unnamed other as if he were uncomfortable with owning it himself:

that a child gets the idea of a narcissistic injury through a bodily loss from the experience of losing his mother’s breast after sucking, from the daily surrender of his faeces and, indeed, even from his separation from the womb at birth. Nevertheless, one ought not to speak of a castration complex until this idea of a loss has become connected with the male genitals. (“Infantile” 310)
Here Freud admits the possibility of earlier and likely more traumatic forms of loss, yet he retains castration’s privileged position, as if the male genitals were in fact large enough to hold breast and faeces and womb. The footnote re-enacts the boy’s own attempt to mask what he does not have: what occurs in the text is both a recognition and an elision of the loss of the mother, a cutting away of this loss and of the specific trauma a boy must face when he realises that not only has he been barred from the mother’s body but that unlike his sister he will never himself possess one.

This realisation is a more complete or at least more final form of loss than that originally experienced with the break from the womb or breast, when the child still harbours the hope of reuniting with the body that it does not yet distinguish from itself. This secondary rejection of the mother occurs only after the boy has attempted to identify with her and has been discouraged from doing so. His consequent violent refusal of the identification is traced by the experience of first losing the mother’s body but is overlaid with a contempt which protects him from having to mourn the loss. “I never wanted to have your body anyway,” the boy says, as he cuts it from his own, as he cuts his way inside it. Castration as sour grapes.

Rejection exacts its costs: by thus excluding the maternal identification and by enacting his aggression against what he has rejected, the boy is in essence cutting into himself. Since the external object retains the trace of both the original erotic cathexis and the compensatory identification, it cannot be set aside as purely external. Any violence enacted against the object can but undermine the boy’s own precarious sense of corporeal integrity, furthering his sense of loss, exaggerating his suspicion of his own body’s failure to give him what he wants,
and heightening his long-established fear of castration, the punishment enacted not so much for desiring the mother as for desiring to destroy her.

If the boy’s fear of castration is haunted by, indeed initiated by, this other form of cutting—breast from body, mother from son—then it must be the case that a girl who undergoes a complete Oedipal complex and who thus identifies at least in part with both mother and father must similarly experience a castration that is also doubled, duplicitous. Freud explains that whereas for a boy castration is the threat that resolves the Oedipus complex, for a girl castration is the reality that initiates it. On realising that she is castrated, the girl is apparently driven to abandon her mother as a love object in preference for her father, this man who has a penis and who could pass on the coveted organ by supplying his daughter with a baby (“Anatomical” 340). Her identification with her mother is thus not initiated as a way to manage the loss of the mother but rather that of the father, or at least the loss of the organ that represents him, that he has come to represent. By identifying with the mother she aligns herself with the woman who shares her desires and the woman who deserves the father’s attentions. Here again Freud’s theory of identification with an object as a defence against its loss fails to match the narrative he describes: if the girl is mourning the loss of the penis, then by seeing herself as her mother she identifies at cross-purposes, aligning herself with one parent as insurance against the loss of the other. Either the theory or the story must be twisted to fit. Given that the girl misses the penis, it would be far simpler for her to identify with her father as a way to compensate for the loss. Surely such an incorporative identification would be as self-evident and accessible a fantasy as a girl’s rather curious expectation of receiving a penis from her father in the form of a child. Indeed Freud
says that these paternal identifications are common, at least in part, revealed in both the negative Oedipal complex and in the complete one, whether the girl identifies solely with her father or whether she swallows both parents whole. Through this identification the girl’s ego is able to seduce the id, to keep the id in check even as the ego submits to its powers: I am like the love-object, the ego says, you can love me, I am all that you have lost.

Underlying this identification is this initial desire for what she doesn’t have. Freud does not explore why the girl’s id would be driven to desire the father or rather to desire the penis he can supply, as if its value were a self-evident fact, the girl impelled to possess one the moment she sees what a boy has that she does not. The question remains whether this desire can ever be considered properly her own, or whether it is borrowed, as second-hand as the super-ego the girl can receive only through cross-inheritance or the penis she can possess only through her father’s gift of a child. Freud suggests that the id consists of the residual traces of countless egos, a reservoir of the desires and drives of earlier generations: if the super-ego is a paternal function, then in this case the id is as well: the ego identifying with the father to please a father-identified id that wants only more and more of itself. Penis envy as a representative not of a girl’s desire, but that of her father, assurance that in the face of all that he has lost he still possesses the line that can cross out anything else.

What would initiate this triadic form of identification, one form battling against the next, a father in pieces, a father divided amongst a daughter’s ego and id and super-ego as if he had no place of his own? Where does this identification start? If a boy’s fear of castration masks his desire to destroy—and thus possess—the lost maternal object, then what does the reality of a girl’s castration serve to hide?
As the girl always suspected, it covers something that is not her own. If the reality of a girl’s castration supports not her desire for a penis, but her father’s desire that this be the object to desire, then the missing penis is a stand in for a missing breast, a paternal breast, a circle become a line. This is a breast as non-breast, a breast fixed in the father’s place, a stolen object that cannot feed.

In “Female Sexuality” Freud makes a curious and off-handed and rather “surprising” suggestion (381): the girl resents her mother for failing her on not one but two accounts: not only is the mother unable to give her daughter a penis, but she has not given her enough milk (see also Ellmann’s discussion, 43). The two accusations are linked as if one necessitated the other. But which came first? Does Freud mean to suggest that the girl is actually being fed less than the boy or that she merely thinks she is? Does a comparative lack of food increase her hunger or does an excess of hunger create the perception of a comparative lack of food? Is the milk too little or a daughter’s greed too much? Is femininity the result of hunger or its cause? Freud never develops the possible significance of the mother’s double failure, the girl’s double loss, focussing solely on the girl’s castration as if he could simply cut away the breast, replacing it with a loss more narrow and more narrowly defined. But if a mother fails a daughter on at least two counts, then the possibility remains that a girl turns to her father as a defence not against castration but against this breast that is never hers enough. She aims to find not a penis, but another kind of breast, a penis as a breast, one that will not feed her hunger because it cannot feed at all. She turns to her father not to satisfy her appetite but to end it.
We have returned to the girl's own compensatory identification, a turning from the inside out, yet if identification is always borrowed, then perhaps even the girl's hunger is not her own. Perhaps her remorse at this double loss—penis and breast, castration and the flow of milk that can never be filling enough—is the loss borne not by one child, but two, not just the girl but the boy, or the boy in the girl, as if only the girl can speak what it is the boy will never have, as if only the girl can feel the boy's hunger, as if she must eat for two. Never getting enough milk because she has to feed more than herself. Turning away from this breast in an attempt to stop hunger, this need so much larger than her femininity can hold. Or turning away from the breast and toward the penis, a breast too thin to feed, in order to prove that a boy—a girl as a boy—can rely on a masculine body alone, does not hunger for more, does not mourn what a boy will never possess, does not long for the not-enough milk.

Outside turned in: here the daughter's alignment with her father is a result, a reflection, of his identification with her. This identification functions not to insure against a loss of the father, but against a father's loss. In his daughter he discovers both the mother he rejected and the mother he seeks to find. Like the maternal object, the girl possesses what the father cannot. And like this object, the girl's missing organ functions as a distraction from the pieces of the mother's body that he knows he does not possess. Yet this girl also offers something more. The father can teach her, he can discipline her, take her away from the mother, interrupting the maternal bond, cutting into it, shaping the girl to be a woman who is nothing if not like himself. A girl who promises to possess both penis and breast, who will bridge desire and identity, become mother and son at once.
Father and daughter, daughter as father: he identifies with and against her, she with and against him. The girl is an internal object cast out, an external object taken in. Through her the father can finally find his body. He can locate the mother he was told he had lost and could not become. He can create the mother only a man can be, build a breast only a man can possess. Here is a relationship structured by identification and object-cathexis yet exceeding the boundary that sets them apart: this dynamic between father and daughter is what remains of the disappeared identification between mother and son, the trace of which survived alongside that threat of castration which first impelled the boy to reject the maternal body as he desired it, as he desired to cut it up.

This child, this girl who looks like her mother and looks up to him, what violence will it take to make her body fit his own?

Each year she resembles her mother a little bit more, developing curves so unlike her father’s lines. He no longer has to tear into the maternal object; he does not have to cut off the mother’s breast, does not have to do this act still so shadowed by the threat of his own castration. For here is a young body that has already been castrated, a body that has everything and nothing to lose. His daughter can punish the mother without lifting a hand. She can cut the mother’s body as her own. For while she has identified with her father, has inherited his id and its threatened and threatening desires, her identification with her mother still remains, in part, in trace, one layer under or over another, mother and father wrapped around her so tightly that she has to slice into one to reach the next. And just as the boy rejected the maternal identification because what it offered could never remain securely inside his frame, here the girl turns against herself both because she embodies the mother and
because she will never embody her enough. She may strip the mother away, she may carve the mother to match the father's frame as if a girl could become a boy, but she cannot give her father what he wants. She cannot succeed at making the maternal body his own. She cannot fix it in his place.

Punishment within and against punishment: here not only is the girl punished for becoming the mother while failing to do so, she is also punished for enacting the discipline. The inherited super-ego chastising the girl's ego as it had chastised her father's, father punished inside mother punished inside father, a violence not outward but inward, where the girl cuts away the mother by cutting into herself, revenges herself against her father by taking his punishments further inside, repetition as an incorporative resistance, identification as refusal and refusal as identification, the more tightly the girl controls her aggressiveness, "the more intense becomes the ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against [her] ego," an excess of punishment which hurts the identifications it was established to create (Ego 396). Internal father turning against internal father as if the super-ego could suffer from its own torture. The daughter mastering the strictures to the point of their collapse, twisting and turning and exaggerating each punishment as if the only way to get the father is to get him back.

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These holes came from somewhere . . .

"The aim of all life is death (Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle 46)

Double quotation marks. Small black bites frame the sentence, keep it from merging with my text proper, mark it as something I use but do not own. This statement functions as a thesis of Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, if an uncertain and unacknowledged thesis, occurring as it does in the middle of the body of the text, sandwiched between words that move toward it then back away. The aim of all life is death: Freud must say it, is “compelled to say it,” yet by indicating that the statement is a citation, he separates it off, carving an edge between it and his own words as if to keep death from eating its way into the body of his prose (46).

Freud does not acknowledge his source, indicating that in fact the words are almost his own or perhaps rather that the statement is so familiar, so fundamental, that no one can be cited as its origin. The words represent a knowledge so common that it cannot be subject to theft. This ineluctable tension between what can and cannot be possessed structures the rhetoric of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, where Freud gives as he takes, finds as he misses,
grasps at a definition of pleasure that inevitably slips away, and borrows from another science to make his own more authentic, patching familial narratives together with biological myths. His writing follows the appropriative and devolutionary paths he describes: in order to prove or disprove his theories about death, about a drive to return to an inorganic state, he returns to the protozoa, this simplest and most original of organisms, as if human subjectivity—loss and desire and the will to destruction—could finally be stripped down to this essence. Yet biology, or at least its vocabulary, fails to be simple or sure enough: like a drive for death that binds a subject into yet more complex forms of existence, Freud’s turn to biology increases “the uncertainty of our speculation” instead of alleviating it (*Beyond 73*). To grasp certainty Freud would have to move toward a science even further from his own: “The deficiencies in our description would probably vanish if we were already in a position to replace the psychological terms by physiological or chemical ones. It is true that they too are only part of a figurative language; but it is one with which we have long been familiar and which is perhaps a simpler one as well” (73). Here Freud reveals a drive to move beyond figurative language to something more familiar and simple, more abstract and so more concrete, the body reduced to a chemical formula or finally withdrawn from representation altogether, flesh free from its difference from itself; figuration carved away until all that remains is the figure.

Yet if *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* successfully demonstrates anything, it shows that corporeality is formed only through relations of difference and representation, where what is foreign is repeated—represented—until it becomes part of what it betrayed. Pleasure and its death, the body and its representation: here any attempt to pull apart one from the other serves to further bind them together. To reach death, Freud begins with pleasure, specifically
a pleasure that involves a form of hallucinatory stasis, where the body can barely distinguish between satisfaction and its fantasy, as if representation were the real thing. This pleasure, which is more a form of inertia than of any specific enjoyment, is maintained by its principle: the mental apparatus seeks by whatever means possible to sustain an undisturbed state where "unpleasure corresponds to an increase in the quantity of excitation and pleasure to a diminution" (4). Given that a complete loss of life would be the ultimate reduction in tension, it would appear that death--or the drive toward it--would represent not the beyond of the pleasure principle but rather its ultimate articulation. An organism, human or otherwise, would simply refuse any new stimuli, any external affects, until its system ran its course. Yet Freud claims that the pleasure principle "follows from the principle of constancy" and is a special case of the "tendency towards stability": it serves to retain a state not of entropy, but of stasis, in which a decrease in excitation would be as undesirable as an increase, where in fact an increase may at times become necessary in order to maintain tension at a consistent level (6). Unable to decide with certainty, Freud can construct the principle only by pulling it apart: "The pleasure principle, then, is a tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible." (76 emphasis added). The principle is unprincipled: it aims for the organism to die and to continue, to be inert without giving up the inertia of its ongoing existence. It leans toward death, yet won't cross the threshold to enter its domain.

Vertigo. Pleasure cannot stop trembling. To follow its logic is to move beyond the principle of noncontradiction. It is to enter a room where unpleasure becomes pleasure while
pleasure cannot be experienced as such, where the body adheres to an internal economy in which unpleasure in one system is tolerated in order to maintain pleasure in another, where certain instincts must be repressed, parcelled off, torn to pieces. Within this economy, pleasure gives way to reality, or at least to its principle. As Freud explains in "Two Principles of Mental Functioning," while a hallucination of satisfaction may for a time maintain an organism in a pleasurable stasis, eventually the organism will be compelled to make a change in its environment in order to meet its internal needs. Rather than a continual dissipation of energy, what is required is a toleration of tension so that muscular activity can be substituted for motor discharge:

... the state of psychical rest was originally disturbed by the peremptory demands of internal needs. When this happened, whatever was thought of (wished for) was simply presented in a hallucinatory manner, just as still happens to-day with our dream-thoughts every night. It was only the non-occurrence of the expected satisfaction, the disappointment experienced, that led to the abandonment of this attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination. Instead of it, the psychical apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavour to make a real alteration in them. (Beyond 36)

The reality principle is then not so much a substitution for the pleasure principle as its extension in time: it contradicts its structure in the present in order to reassert it at a later date. The present must be saved for the future, the body become its own banking system, with each experience of pleasure being a kind of waste, a spending, a non-utilitarian excess: to delay this expenditure, to bank it away, is to earn interest on the principle.
This economy develops not just a protozoa, but the sexed body. It protects not just the survival of an organism, but the survival of kinship. In his work on sexuality, Freud consistently aligns the reality principle with the father, or at least with his threat, with the spectre of castration which encourages a boy to give up his attachment to his mother. The boy sacrifices present pleasure in order to save it up for much later, relinquishing the use of his small penis only with the promise of a larger one yet to come. The father's body is the future to be purchased by deferral. The mother's body a present that goes nowhere, gives nothing back, a pleasure that swallows the future, a spending that must be stopped.

The boy and his faint hopes for the authority of his father. The organism and its projected pleasure ever to be delayed. For the reality principle to function within the logic of this economy, for it to replace the hallucinatory stasis offered by pleasure, it must offer its own hallucinations. Reality is a matter of thought; the needs of the flesh purchased through an abstract currency. What is established with the reality principle is precisely a form of representation, a kind of looking forward, a hallucinatory relationship to the future and the promised satisfaction it may or may not provide.

This is a representation against death, a re-placing and re-timing of a hallucinatory relationship with the external world in order to prolong and protect present existence: were the organism to remain in its comfortable stasis, representing the world only in order to avoid negotiating with it, the organism would eventually realise its own demise. Only through an orientation to a future--to an imagined time--can the organism live in the present. Only by tolerating unpleasure can an organism protect itself from its own destruction. To spend one's pleasure is to meet one's death. Within the pleasure principle, representation threatens life,
substituting real satisfaction with the pleasure of hallucinatory comfort; within the reality
principle, representation functions as death’s deferral: the imagined expectation of an eventual
return to stasis enables the organism to sacrifice the present and the death that it harbours. A
miserly reduction in the expenditure of pleasure, a toleration of the unpleasure necessary to
purchase shares in the future, and a trust in representation’s promise of a pleasure yet to
come: these structures of deferral keep existence from its termination. The present kills life:
the future saves it. The body must borrow from itself to buy itself, stealing itself away.

But the terms refuse to stay in place. The deferral of life, or at least of its pleasures, is
itself a form of dying. Delaying satisfaction demands propelling life forward to a fantasised
time that may never arrive. Taken to its extreme, this process will make attending to present
needs impossible, eventually killing the organism it aims to protect. The future hoarding life
to death.

This system of corporeal banking is nowhere more evident than when an organism
experiences trauma, when there occurs “a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against
stimuli” (Beyond 33). The organism is flooded by stimuli unwelcome and unbound: in order
to manage this invasion, the pleasure principle must temporarily be betrayed, the organism
forced to allow an internal increase in the cathexis of energy in order to be able to master and
dispose of the energy it does not want. It is in this sense that a physical wound can offer
protection from a psychical one: the infliction of physical pain enables a greater increase in
cathexis around the site of trauma, providing the psyche with a stabilising focus, a means to
bind the shock. Yet Freud’s analysis of trauma serves to undermine the distinction between
psychical and physical violation, one always becoming the other: “We describe as ‘traumatic’
any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (*Beyond 33*). A body does not simply perceive or interpret a stimulus but is rather betrayed by it, corporeal unity threatened by any external excitation. While these excitations threaten the organism, they also help form it. The psychical shapes the physical, creating the body it hurts. If the distinction between inside and outside is necessary for the definition of trauma, the experience of trauma is also essential for the organism to develop a distinction between inside and outside. The external layer of a organism—that which separates it from its surroundings—is formed only through the invasion of stimuli: "... as a result of the ceaseless impact of external stimuli on the surface of the vesicle, its substance to a certain depth may have become permanently modified, so that excitatory processes run a different course in it from what they run in the deeper layers ..." (*Beyond 29*). Each external excitation becomes the organism's own, functioning as it does to buttress the organism's external layer, its shell of death. The difference between the inside and outside is formed by a failure to maintain their distinction.

The development of a living entity appears to demand a number of such failures, between an inside and an outside, between a life and its opposite. Here death serves life, wraps itself around it. Just as pleasure must be sacrificed for its future, an external layer must be sacrificed for what lies inside: "By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate--unless that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield" (30). This breakage is a productive one: the internal energy cathexis required to bind the foreign stimulus serves to decreases its disturbing effect but only by transforming the organism in the process. The investment of energy is a repetition of the
trauma, a way of making it the organism’s own. A repetition: the most fundamental form of representation, where citation cannot be separated from the life form it builds. An organism becomes what it repeats, becomes the violations it cannot help but represent.

As life is developed from what threatens its destruction, the momentum for an organism’s growth originates from the outside. External excitation may itself dissipate, but its effect remains. An internal investment of energy functions with and against this excitation, with and against the change it demands. To bind is both an affirmation and a resistance; to repeat is both a process of development and a struggle against it. Representation can but swallow what it rejects.

This paradoxical dynamic always involves an investment of time. Something is accepted in order to facilitate its rejection; unpleasure tolerated for the promise of release. The pleasure principle reigns as it is put out of action, functions only through its deferral, the organism dominated by a principle that must accept delay. Freud’s analysis of children’s play gives several specific examples of how repetition serves the pleasure principle through its temporary suspension. He offers a corrective to those earlier theorists of this play who failed “to bring into the foreground the economic motive, the consideration of the yield of pleasure involved” (Beyond 13). The economic motive: present pain for future pay-off, where play is work, imitation of a trauma a means to control it, re-enactment an investment. Here the curious behaviour of a child’s repeating an experience that is unwelcome or painful or that simply has made “a great impression” can be understood as a more complex form of binding excitation: through the re-enactment, the child gains mastery over the experience, focussing, controlling and reinventing what had been unfamiliar and dangerously free in its form (16).
Similarly, a traumatic dream can be viewed as a way to develop a form of mastery: the dream is a retroactive preparation, imaginary fulfilment of a wish that the experience could be anticipated and managed as if its origins were the dreamer’s own. An investment in the past in the attempt to control the future.

In the case of child’s play, this replicative process forms identity: children mimic the behaviour they witness, seeking to satisfy “a wish that dominates them the whole time—the wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do” (Beyond 16). Here “growing-up”--identifying with one’s elders--functions itself as a form of binding, a way to manage what would otherwise override the pleasure principle, as if identification were the only way to manage trauma or as if trauma were a necessary function of identification. As Freud suggests, re-enactment can be a way not simply to master a behaviour but to exact revenge against its perpetrator, a child identifying with an action--and a person--as a form of resistance. Becoming that which the child seeks to punish. Affirming an experience as it is negated, an identity solidifying with each repetition as if “no” could be spoken only as “yes.”

The punishment hits its target as it misses. It is turned inside out: the child enacts the revenge against himself, becoming both patient and agent, both the one who sustains the act and the one who wishes to refuse it. Or the child inflicts the experience on a substitute for himself, making his playmate suffer as he once had done, becoming the perpetrator of the act and thus no longer its victim. While the memory of the original event may not itself be pleasurable, its re-enactment fulfils the economic motive and the pleasure principle it supports: by transforming passivity to activity, unpleasure to power, the child makes a calculated gain on his investment.
Yet a reading of one child’s game makes clear how difficult it is to decide exactly how or to whom the punishment and the pay-off occur. A good little boy who “never cried when his mother left him for a few hours,” Freud’s grandson had a habit of throwing his toys away, specifically a reel on a string which he tossed from himself while pronouncing the vowel “o-o-o-o,” which Freud interprets as an attempt at the word “gone,” the sound repeated jubilantly with each throw, a fragment of language making more pronounced the loss (Beyond 13):

What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive ‘o-o-o-o’. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da’ ['there']. This, then, was the complete game--disappearance and return. (14)

This game was the boy’s way of re-enacting his mother’s disappearance, a compensation for the “instinctual renunciation . . . which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting” (14). Yet while Freud establishes a link between this game and the exit of the mother, he fails to make clear his own relationship to her and her son, admitting only that he “lived under the same roof . . . for some weeks,” as if his observations were not informed by his familial role, as if the child’s game were free from inheritance (13). While this refusal to connect himself to the characters in his narrative speaks to his attempt to maintain or at least pretend a therapeutic objectivity--theory untainted by personal involvements, analysis feeding on the autobiographical while cutting it off--in this context it also appears as if Freud is mimicking the boy’s behaviour, tossing away the bond as confidently as the boy does his
Loss as gain, father to daughter as son to mother. The generations are thrown back and forth, a woman given to exist only through her body’s disappearance.

As Freud explains, it is through this disappearance—or that of the substitute—that the boy is able to possess his mother. He throws her away not to lose her but to get her back: as he pulls the reel toward himself he can re-experience the joy of holding her once more, as if the ritual were his way of insuring her return. According to the logic of the reality principle, the game is an investment, a toleration of pain for a future dividend of pleasure. Yet is the reality principle really in command, has the pleasure principle been so easily substituted, so easily tossed away? Where and when does the pleasure take place? While Freud makes clear that the “complete game” involved both the object’s disappearance and its return, he admits that “as a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself . . .” (14). Why then does Freud hold that there is “no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act,” why assert that the mother’s “joyful return” and not her departure is “the true purpose of the game” (14, 15)? Freud can’t make this claim without countering it with a concession, repeatedly pulling the interpretation towards him then throwing it away: “. . . against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending” (15). Despite possible demonstrations to the contrary, despite the apparent evidence that the boy’s preferred activity with the reel was “to play ‘gone’ with it,” Freud holds to the theory that the loss is a means to an end, that the possession is more pleasurable than the disappearance (14). Yet the possibility remains that what the boy enjoyed was not his reunion with the reel but rather his break with it, the means overtaking the end,
the separation from an object releasing a surprising pleasure, the management of trauma
taking on a life—or a death—of its own.

The boy wants his mother to stay...or to go. He throws her away to possess her or he pulls her back to toss her away. He kills the object so he can keep it, so he can kill it again and again.

Yes as no and no as yes: the boy does not simply toss the reel away, but into his cot. The object is lost and contained in one act, broken from the boy’s body yet boxed inside it. Erotic object cathexis and identification meet just as the object’s presence is temporarily destroyed. The cot as the boy’s uterus, one substitute wrapped around another, the womb a wooden room that is forever fixed in place, a rigid compartment that can hold only loss.

In Shakespeare’s depiction of a similar ritual, the mouth itself becomes the container, the object’s chamber of death: as a small child, the character Coriolanus makes a game of catching and releasing a butterfly, catching and releasing until finally he captures it with his teeth, its presence fulfilled by its destruction: “I saw him run after a gilded butterfly; and when he caught it, he let it go again; and after it again; and over and over he comes, and up again; caught it again; or whether his fall enraged him, or how ‘twas, he did so set his teeth, and tear it. O, I warrant, how he mammocked it!” (68). The butterfly a mockery of the breast. Or the mouth a mockery of the womb. The boy holding the insect inside his lips only to chew it apart. Birthing the object by tearing it to pieces. A feeding that kills. The aggression implicit in the grandson’s repeated tossing away of the reel is here explicitly dramatised, the butterfly’s death arriving with its return.
As with Freud’s narrative, this violent scene can be pulled in several directions. The butterfly is breast or baby. It is killed because it is the mother or because it can only represent her, destroyed because its presence brings her closer or because it signifies that she has gone away. With both games the pleasure of losing the object overwhelms or perhaps somehow coincides with the pleasure of its possession. Freud’s grandson throws away the object more often than he retrieves it while Coriolanus collapses in one destructive act both extremes of the ritual, both ends of the string, his mouth full of “fort” and “da” at once. As if the pleasure principle could overtake the reality principle, the present supplying the pleasure that only the future was to bear.

Yet Freud pulls the string back: while he admits that “no certain decision can be reached from the analysis of a single case like this,” he also holds that the act adheres to the logic of the reality principle, that the boy tolerates the loss as an investment (15). The ritual gives the boy a sense of control, of mastery. It enacts the transformation from passive to active, from victim to perpetrator: while the ritual itself may be painful, it promises a powerful return.

Giving the reel another toss, another catch, Freud states that yet “another interpretation may be attempted”:

Throwing away the object so that it was ‘gone’ might satisfy an impulse of the child’s, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case it would have a defiant meaning: ‘All right, then, go away! I don’t need you. I’m sending you away myself.’ (15)
Freud appears determined to hold onto the interpretation that the game is a means to an end, a ritual to punish the mother for the trauma of her betrayal, as if separation from an object didn’t offer its own rewards, as if loss could never be pleasurable by itself.

When Freud extends the range of the punishment to include the father, his reading of the boy’s game as an act of revenge becomes affirmed and curiously contradicted. The boy’s father too has disappeared, but this time Freud reads the boy’s behaviour as confirmation that he wants the loss to continue rather than to end:

A year later, the same boy whom I had observed at his first game used to take a toy, if he was angry with it, and throw it on the floor, exclaiming: ‘Go to the front!’ He had heard at that time that his absent father was ‘at the front’, and was far from regretting his absence; on the contrary he made it quite clear that he had no desire to be disturbed in his sole possession of his mother. (15-16)

Freud claims that the boy finds pleasure in his father’s absence yet none in that of his mother, the act becoming here a punishment not for a parent’s departure but for his return. The boy repeats the disappearance as a way to reinforce rather than refuse it: representation as affirmation and not resistance. Whereas he throws his mother away in order to possess her, he throws his father away in order to keep him from coming back: the game of disappearance signifies with or against itself depending on the presumed sex of the substitute.

Could it not be possible that the boy tosses the reel in order to refuse the father’s departure or to confirm that of the mother? Why is the mother the only one to arrive through her loss? What is it about the maternal body that appears to demand its own destruction?
The reel landing alone in the boy's cot like a part of himself lost. The boy scattering the object so he can refind it as if dismemberment were the only way to craft a body. The mother returning his toy, sewing her child back up, piecing his body together after he has ripped it from her.

If tearing a body apart becomes the means to create one, what happens when the first act begins to override the second, the investment more pleasurable than the return?

In this game the mother's role is more than simply restorative: the boy can toss the substitute away so she can bring it back, but he can also toss it away so that she will witness its disappearance. The mother supporting the corporeal dissipation of her child. When the boy plays at the mirror he does not use his reflection to affirm his existence, or use his mother's recognition of his reflection to keep his body in place. Instead he turns to the glass--and to his mother--to make his body vanish, finding his pleasure as he loses himself:

One day the child's mother had been away for several hours and on her return was met with the words 'Baby o-o-o-o!' which was at first incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that during this long period of solitude the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach to the ground so that by crouching down he could make his mirror-image 'gone.' (14)

The question remains whether the boy repeats a trauma—the loss of his mother, the loss of himself—as a way to bind it, master it, somehow overcome it, or whether he has begun to enjoy the trauma, or at least its representation, for its own sake. Does the boy tolerate the loss in order to gain the pleasure, or does he find his pleasure in the loss itself? Is pain
payment or return? The self-destructive potential of the boy’s games—each toss of the reel functioning as another loss of a piece of his body, each disappearance from the mirror’s image a confirmation that he can somehow fail to exist—accords with the pleasure principle even as it seems to contradict it: if an organism experiences excitation as unpleasure and the dissipation of this excitation as pleasure, then the fragmentation of the body may offer its own form of release.

Undecidable, then, whether the re-enactment follows the principle of pleasure or of reality, whether the pay-off comes in the present or the future, the reward at the near or far end of the string.

Whereas Shakespeare’s scene terminates in a final form of destruction—the dead butterfly will not be caught and released once more—here the boy has the potential to play his game of loss endlessly, as if what so intrigues him is not the act itself but the fact that he can replicate it. The body never there—or gone—enough. Whereas one scene closes in death, the other closes in repetition. Or rather it does not close, the repetition a form of death that cannot die.

The compulsion to repeat: an act is replicated in order to end it, to end it over and over again, killing it to life.

As Freud outlines in his description of the process of psychoanalysis, the compulsion to repeat is a refusal of memory, an erasure of the past only by making it present. A patient will replay a trauma as a way to avoid bringing it to consciousness: immersing himself anew in the pain is somehow less uncomfortable than talking it through: “He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to
see, remembering it as something belonging to the past" (Beyond 19). Here Freud distinguishes repetition from remembering as if one didn't always demand the other, as if repetition did not involve memory, as if analysis were not itself a process of citation. He explains that the analyst's role is to help the patient replace the first form of representation with the second, to funnel re-enactment into dialogue, the patient learning to borrow from the transference as opposed to surrendering completely to it: "It has been the physician's endeavour to keep this transference neurosis within the narrowest limits: to force as much as possible into the channel of memory and to allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition. The ratio between what is remembered and what is reproduced varies from case to case" (19). But the question remains how narrow is this channel of memory, how protected its limits, and whether it is ever possible to separate one form of representation from another, to pull recollection apart from re-enactment, dialogue from reproduction, so that speaking is no longer repetition and repetition is not speech.

Transference as a representation against representation, a mimesis to kill itself.

It will not die. The more something is repeated, the more indelible its effect. The more a patient tries to erase an experience through its re-enactment, the more bound to it she becomes. Where the ritual replaying of a trauma is also and always a form of remembering it, the body as history's first text. Reproduction cutting into consciousness. Repetition carving memory. Representation a living death. It is this dynamic which explains the ego's reluctance to facilitate the experience of transference. The ego resists the dramatic emergence of the past, afraid of what it has forgotten: "... the patient's resistance arises from his ego, and we then at once perceive that the compulsion to repeat must be ascribed to the unconscious
repressed” (*Beyond 20*). If repetition were to function only as a method of avoiding repressed material, keeping it safe from consciousness by throwing it forward, then the ego would have no need to fear re-enactment. Transference would have no therapeutic value other than as a form of protective resistance, a way to slow the progress of change. But repetition has the ability to bring history to consciousness by unravelling what consciousness seeks to hide. This unravelling is what gives transference its disturbing power. The act of repeating something is a way to remember as one forgets, the present producing the past as it kills it.

Since this experience is not pleasurable in itself—and Freud assures us that it is not, that the re-enactment of trauma inevitably brings to the surface all the pain and loss the child originally repressed—what the analyst must endeavour to do is make an appeal to the reality principle, where transference functions as investment. The patient submitting to the unpleasurable experience only as a way to buy the future, working together with the analyst to steal memory forward from repetition, the patient tolerating unpleasure because she anticipates a future release from suffering, when all the fragments she has collected can be counted and cashed in and she can finally trade in reproduction for remembrance.

Yet while this process may be tolerated in the name of a future return, something begins to eat away at the investment. There can always be one more toss of the reel. There can always be another reproduction. The origin can never be reached. Just as a game has its own compelling force, its rituals performed as fiercely whether or not the player knows the motivation for its rules, so repetition of a trauma has its own momentum, representation gaining power until its effect is often more terrible than what it seeks to represent. Losing track of the goal she aimed to achieve, the experience she hoped to escape, a victim can repeat
a trauma to the point of her own destruction, resistance giving way to replication’s deadly trance.

Reproduction lost from its source. Repetition without cause and thus without return, with no past and no future, the present spending and spending itself.

Daemonic possession: the death drive. A compulsion to repeat that serves no principle. The pleasure principle is betrayed because suffering has taken command; the reality principle betrayed because the cost has begun to override any potential reward. The pain offers no release, neither present nor deferred. The repetition is an expenditure become absolute, a representation that extends beyond and beyond and beyond.

Although Freud asserts that this compulsion to repeat over-rides the pleasure principle, he also suggests that repetition offers instinctual satisfaction, not just because it serves to bind an experience, offering the reassuring comfort of mastery, but because repetition is pleasurable for its own sake. He gives as an example a child who demands of his parents that they read the same story over and over again, the pleasure not in the surprise of the content but in the predictability of its representation. This enjoyment of repetition accords with Freud’s analysis of the inertia inherent to organic beings, where pleasure arises not from growth but from stasis. As Freud earlier suggests, repetition can be a way for a living form to return to its stability--a way to bind and therefore control the effects of an external stimulus, repetition as investment, a toleration of unpleasure for pleasure’s eventual return. With a compulsion to repeat, however, re-enactment becomes no longer simply a way to master an experience but to surrender to it. A simultaneous binding and dissipation where future pleasure arrives in the present as the body gives way to what it resists.
The pleasure principle aims to decrease energy or to maintain it at a constant level, to
establish entropy or inertia. It resists destruction or it serves it. The death drive lies beyond
the pleasure principle yet is its ultimate articulation. Deferral collapsing into presence, fort
with da.

Freud describes the death drive as a compulsion to repeat linked to the experience of
trauma, yet also as a force that compels an organism to return to its own origins, the force
that resists the interference of external stimuli which would compel the organism to adapt and
grow: “Let us suppose, then, that all the organic instincts are conservative, are acquired
historically and tend toward the restoration of an earlier state of things” (Beyond 45). While
Freud defends the legitimacy of the death drive with a recourse to the biological sciences, and
to the first stirrings of life, the earliest of living entities, those one celled organisms free of the
complex systems of communication that create the human subject, he can’t seem to reach an
origin free of reproduction. While he aims to give a biology of poetics, he instead creates a
poetics of biology. If protozoa are his representative animal, they are also his animal of
representation. He describes the organism as if it too were afflicted by representation’s
momentum, by a flesh become memory, a memory become flesh. A remembrance that must
be repeated because it cannot return to its source. Just as re-enactment of a trauma can never
present its cause--repetition always cut from its origin and so spinning ever forward--so the
organism can never return to the death it is driven to reach. For this death does not wait at
the end of life, but at the organism’s pre-organic beginning, a death as a birth. That time
before life interrupted, when the organism was only and never itself. Before existence, before
need. A time impossible for the organism to remember and thus impossible for it to forget.
An origin as a productive myth: this specific death, or rather the drive towards it, is what impels the organism to bind the external excitations that keep threatening to prevent it from the longed for return. The organism has a death drive, but it will not be satisfied by just any death. It wants its own. A proper death, a death that is self-identical, that doesn’t arrive from outside. A death free from representation. A death that brings the organism not forward to the end but back to the beginning, to this origin that can only be repeated, this source that gets further and further away, the organism’s return to it more impossible with each repetition that binds the organism once again to its life, destruction feeding existence, the death drive killing only itself.

This drive holds to the proper—to a first and original death—and so gives way to nothing but diffusion. It holds to an origin and thus can give nothing but a representation. It holds to corporeal dissipation—a return to a pre-organic state before the development effects of binding excitations—and so gives way to a compulsive repetition of identity, the organism becoming more and more its own as it repeats what it is not.

*So where is the body this drive seeks to destroy, seeks to protect?*

An outside come in; an inside turned out. While Freud explains that a living entity can repeat external excitations until they begin to shape its physical and psychical existence, he also says that it experiences its own instincts as if they were coming from outside. It has no defence against these internal excitations, no shell of death to keep them away. It projects them outward so that its outer shell can keep the inside from coming in, one layer protecting itself from the next, like a body worn outside its clothing.

*How does death grab hold?*
Another story. This one stolen not from the biological sciences but from Plato, who himself stole it from the Upanishads, although as Freud asserts, Plato can steal nothing that he does not already own: "... Plato would not have adopted a story of this kind which had somehow reached him through some oriental tradition--to say nothing of giving it so important a place--unless it had struck him as containing an element of truth" (Beyond 70). This story Plato slips "into the mouth of Aristophanes," as if theft must always be passed on (69). It deals not only with the "origin of the sexual instinct but also with the most important of its variations in relation to its object," returning to the first of first beginnings as to a stolen object that never leaves home (69). Aristophanes describes how man was originally doubled, "with four hands and four feet, two faces, two privy parts..." becoming himself only by being cut in half, losing himself by losing a woman (69-70). What is cut off is not an organ, but a body, castration too small a loss.

In the original myth--the one Plato sliced up to forge his own--the story goes that a lonely man who is "as large as man and wife together" makes himself fall in two so that he will have company, "the void which was there ... filled by the wife" (70). In this version, isolation is resolved, rather than initiated, by a man's division from himself. Whereas in the original myth the woman fills the void; in Plato's version, the division into man and woman is what creates it. This revision highlights the loss inherent in sexual difference: the sexed body is created through its self-betrayal. In Aristophanes's tale, heterosexual longing is a way to mourn--or rather, to refuse to mourn--the loss created by sexual difference. Object cathexis is identification, a man driven to find the woman he once had been. The death drive serves the life drive: the drive which aims to return to an earlier state combines with the drive which
aims to join with another; the drive towards a beginning as an end combines with the drive for perpetual existence. Only because no romantic liaison can recreate the original experience of non-division does sexual desire remain unsatisfied and therefore unending, heterosexuality aiming always for its own demise, each sexual act a form of failed—yet fruitful—representation.

Death reproduces. While Freud uses Plato’s myth to reveal how the death drives and life drives are combined, it can also be read as a manifestation of the death drive alone, a drive divided from itself, which binds as it tries to dissipate, destroys as it forms, a boy tossing his mother away in order to keep her, pulling her back in order to toss her away, forging his body through its dissipation. Each repetition an attempt to return to an origin the death drive can only represent.

Imagine a man grasping a woman not for sexual satisfaction but rather for a more destructive pleasure, eradicating her existence in order to join it with his own, creating his body by gaining and thus losing hers. Where to join with her flesh, to form himself from her, would be both to complete his body and to end it. Where keeping the woman, that essential part of himself, demands her death. In this return to a corporeal identity before loss, it appears that the body the death drive works to destroy—and thus the body it reinforces, that it repeats in the name of a deferred destruction—is always a sexed body. The death drive aims to kill the body’s sex.

A conclusion stolen from Freud: if his works suggest it, he never gives it away. Instead he here cuts the flow of his argument as if afraid to determine what might occur were these two sexed bodies to join, what kind of death or life. The question being not what lies beyond the pleasure principle but beyond the death drive, or perhaps rather beyond the drive’s
death, beyond the final destruction of the sexed body that this drive can but find and kill, kill and find. Freud interrupts himself, moves quickly toward “breaking off,” affirming that it is “possible to throw oneself into a line of thought and to follow it wherever it leads out of simple curiosity,” that it is impossible to analyse sex and death without “repeatedly combining factual material with what is purely speculative and thus diverging widely from empirical observation,” that “self-criticism such as this is far from binding one to any special tolerance towards dissentient opinions,” and that new information from the biological sciences could “blow away the whole of our artificial structure of hypotheses,” biology—and the body it reproduces--both supporting and threatening his words, as repetition does its origin, the future returning to kill the past (71-73).

Breaking off, throwing oneself, repeatedly combining, diverging widely, binding, blowing away: Freud’s rhetoric appears caught in the drive it describes, as if he can only repeat the repetition he aims to represent, as if the argument he is attempting to forge were itself a body, perhaps even a sexed body, one that can come together only as it falls apart.

*****
If there is anything resembling a drive, it is a montage.

--Jacques Lacan,

*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*
"a
subject,
through
his
relations
with
the
signifier,
is
a
subject
with
holes
...

(Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 184)

The signifier cuts into the subject. It takes a bite. Because he speaks and is spoken, the subject is “uncertain,” “divided by the effects of language” (*Four Fundamental* 188). Yet the symbolic is a system not just of language but of kinship, or of kinship as a language, where one’s placement within a family arrives simultaneous with speech, where the parents must talk their child’s body into shape.

Body?
Falling in place with the subject? Cut by the signifier? By the father? By the mother?

Or does it have any holes of its own?

Floating limbs, animal machines, a man become a tree. Contraptions that flap like swans across the sky as if there were no division between water and air, mechanism and flesh. Eyes blinking bodiless in a field, ears floating headless in the woods. Thin figures trapped inside translucent eggs, thin figures cracking and climbing out of simple round red things--ball or apple or pomegranate. Pregnant fruit. A knife in one corner points upward without human hand to guide it; a knife somewhere else emerges erect, its blade gripped tight by two thick and stable ears. A bird beak swallows a human trunk and legs. Vulnerable transformation. Brokenness. Tortoise shell as death's head. Fiddle pierced by flesh. A man's face a tumour growing underneath an antiseptic plate, his body bulbous and occupied by visitors, his body an egg with branches and bark and roots, his body a cracked and conquered hole.

Le corps morcelé. This nightmare vision--this intricate medieval lacework of forests that hear, fields that see, oceans that scream--captured the imagination of Jacques Lacan. In the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, Lacan found the fragmented body that he knew had been hiding behind the screen, before the glass. An aggressive disintegration that appeared "in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions" (Écrits 4). The dismemberment into which all humans are born. It is this fractured body--this lack of a body--that Lacan claims an infant abandons when it enters the mirror stage, when it first discovers the unity of its own reflection, an exterior gestalt that enables the child to experience its body as a whole. Held up to find its own image in a glass or to catch its face mirrored in the features of its caregiver, the
child enters the imaginary, the realm of images that fixes the body, bringing broken parts together, keeping this new found flesh in place:

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent that constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (un relief de stature) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. (Écrits 2)

Previous to this gestalt, the child had no ego, no concept of a bodily boundary, no sense of corporeal integration. It could not differentiate between itself and its mother. It could not imagine the disparate parts of its flesh as connected and complementary sections of a unified whole. Its body was in pieces, merging with the child’s environment like the limbs and organs scattered broken and headless across the hallucinatory machinery of Bosch’s hell.

If this gathering that ostensibly takes place in the mirror allows the infant to leave behind bodily disintegration, it also captures him within it. For the infant can conceptualise its previous bodily experience--or experience its previous bodily conceptualisation--only once it has faced the unifying force of the glass. A part signifies only once there exists a whole. To understand that its body had once been in pieces, the infant must first come to understand that it has a body at all. In the split second that the infant recognises itself in its image, it both sees its body as a whole and understands what its body once had been. In this splitting second, the conceptual experience of unity delivers a shattered past.
Fragmentation is retroactive, a cutting into a real that had been "without zones, subdivisions, localized highhs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric, woven in such a way as to be full everywhere, there being no space between the threads that are its 'stuff'" (Fink 24). Fabric woven full: only at the mirror, in the imaginary and in the symbolic this imaginary relation anticipates, does this material become tattered, an imaginary real full only of holes.

The mirror tells stories. It taunts the infant with an experience of a body out of control while its slick surface tricks the infant into believing in a body yet to come. For the child cannot yet co-ordinate what it sees in the mirror; it fails to match the gestalt of its reflection; it recognises itself in a vision that cannot be maintained. Even as we mature and our bodily grace steadily improves, we can never match our flesh to our image of it. But this image--this failure of an image--is not external to the body; rather, it constitutes embodiment itself. By using the term "imaginary" to describe the realm of corporeality, Lacan suggests that there is in fact something fantastic, hallucinatory, about an experience of a unified body, as if this body had never properly been formed, as if it were always threatening to come apart.

The nightmare body doesn't end at the glass. Integration is imaginary. The fragmentation evidenced by Bosch haunts us precisely because it is what our body knows best. What is hallucinatory about these visions is not so much their betrayal of the distinction between the body and environment or their utter disregard for the apparent essential connection between a head and its ear, but our confident belief that these boundaries and the corporeal integrity buttressed by them remain securely in place.
When a gestalt offers the infant an ego--this first fantasy--it can do so only by radically dividing the infant against itself. The gestalt "symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion" (Écrits 2-3). The double is the body's possibility as its impossibility, its gain as its loss. The ego is thus inherently paranoiac, fearful both of the disintegration that haunts the edges of an unstable unity and resentful of the relation to an other that holds the ego captive in its glass.

This ambivalent dependency--where the ego is enthralled with an external image yet anxious in the face of its alienating effect--culminates in the development of a complex dynamic of eroticism and aggression, a drama of love and hate. It is this dynamic "which the first analysts tried to define when they invoked destructive and, indeed, death instincts, in order to explain the evident connection between the narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the I, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other, even in a relation involving the most Samaritan of aid (Écrits 6). Scenes of torn limbs and floating organs are not simply what the ego in all its precarious confidence has almost left behind; these images represent what, in and from the other, the ego aims to create. An aggression that tears at the other in order to end the ego’s difference from itself, as if the only way to form a corporeal unity is to rip the body back apart.

The mirror builds a body from pieces, and thus retroactively constitutes these pieces as such. The ego attacks the other to defend a corporeal unity that is only precariously in place,
a unity dependent on the other as its only support. Integration occurs through disintegration and vice versa, each experience arriving only with its sibling. To fix the body is to lose it.

These are imaginary holes. These holes at the mirror will replace the real ones, will fill those real holes that come to exist the moment they are caught in the glass. One form of corporeality—of incorporeality—traded for the next.

So where does the signifier take its cut? Holes inside holes, rings inside rings, when does the symbolic redress the body?

While the mirror stage introduces the child to the imaginary, it simultaneously traps the child in the real, in the disorganised body that a unifying image cannot do without. And for the real to be caught by the glass, it must also be captured by the symbolic. Yet in Lacan’s early constructions of the mirror stage, the symbolic is banished from the scene. Lacan affirms that the glass fixes the ego “in a fictional direction,” yet claims that it does so “before its social determination” (Écrits 2). In this narrative, the introduction to the imaginary prepares the ego for the subsequent alienation, the subsequent fictionalisation, which will soon occur with the child’s entry into the symbolic. The mastery and co-ordination the child sees in its image is not of the present, but the future: the scene is an anticipatory gestalt, where the infant projects its uncontrolled and fragmented body forward to the socialised body that will soon take its place.

But where is this social determination that apparently has yet to arrive? Is it not true that the infant is already structured within the symbolic, born into its system, assigned a name, a gender, a place within a family? Can an infant find its own way to the glass?
Imagine a mother holding her infant up to its reflection. In this moment, the mother occupies all three realms. She is the real—what is lost as it is found, the breast and milk that the child experiences as somehow undifferentiated from its own body. In this sense, the child’s drive to destroy its imago can be understood as an attempt not to affirm the ego’s independent unity but to return to a primordial state of maternal connection, to an experience of jouissance, that mythical past before the mirror stage, before the child loses the mother by finding her image, her body suddenly separate from its own. Yet if she is the real, she is also the imaginary—her face the child’s mirror, her body its double, an image that affirms the integrity and unity of the child’s flesh even as it captures this flesh in an external gestalt. She is both the past and the image that marks this past as outside the child’s reach. She is the goal and the obstruction, what the child aims to rejoin and what the child must destroy in order to effect this impossible jouissance. Driven simultaneously to become the imago and to escape its power, the child must kill the imaginary mother in order to reach the real one. Yet the imaginary will not die. The child’s aggressivity towards its imago merely fixes it more securely in place, aggressivity itself a form of imaging, the ego investing more and more energy into creating a vision of what it cannot become.

And if the mother is the imagined loss of the real, a loss that the imaginary can but grieve, then the child is driven to refind her in the symbolic. The more cognisant the child becomes of this inevitable loss of the mother, the more the child is driven to replace her presence with sounds, syllables, words. By introducing the infant to the imaginary, and thus to the loss of the real, the mirror stage sentences the infant to the symbolic’s system of endless repetition, where words fail to present what they say. Like the real, the symbolic is a before
that comes after the glass. This system into which the infant is born—relations of kinship, the structure of language—this system of differences and endless deferrals which a caregiver must represent and speak and teach, is the imaginary’s necessary compensation. While Lacan aligns the symbolic with the Oedipal phase, and with the law of the father that marks this phase’s end, it is clear that when a child is held up to a glass, the symbolic has already taken place.

Finding its face in the mirror or in that of another human being, a child becomes one point in a triangulation of desire. Enthralled with an image seen by another, the child manifests adoration and aggression that cannot be the child’s alone. The child learns to want what the other wants yet aims to destroy what keeps the other from wanting only the child. The image recognised in the glass is never independent from what an other wants that child to see, never separate from what an other wants to see in that child. Lacan suggests that this triangulation anticipates the infant’s participation in the symbolic, where words and their residual desire arrive from outside, a constitutive invasion:

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation—the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex (Ecrits 5-6)

The imago and all of the ego’s objects will henceforth be structured within a bargaining relation with and for the other’s desire: “This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an
end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the school of Charlotte Bühler in the phenomenon of infantile *transitivism*), the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations” (*Écrits* 5). Although the child is born into a social order, the inauguration into this dialectic is described by Lacan as occurring only when the mirror-stage comes to an end, as if the symbolic did not exist at this stage at all, or as if it were condemned to lurk at the edges, a jealous sibling who must wait for the imaginary to finish its performance.

The real, the imaginary, the symbolic: the mirror stage fails to hold them together, these three realms that twist and turn and slip away like unruly children, like a fragmented body. Lacan was driven to return to this mirror again and again, rewriting it as if his words could keep the glass in place, as if the symbolic could finally fix the image. When Lacan states that the end of the mirror stage serves to introduce the child to the dialectic which will henceforth link that child to the social order, he anticipates his later reconfiguring of this gestalt. His original analysis reflects its future, projects itself forward to this imaginary possibility of mastery. Lacan calls his new version both “a very simple elaboration” of the old one and a “substitute” for it, the development somehow simultaneously extending and replacing what had come before, like a glass that becomes what it reflects (*Seminar* I 74).

Lacan is playing with mirrors, yet this time he throws us a curve. He steals a trick from optics, catching a vase and flowers in the gaze of a concave lens (see figure 2). In Lacan’s take on this experiment of the inverted bouquet, a cluster of flowers is first displayed balancing on top of an inverted vase. No mirrors have yet come into effect. This odd arrangement is the real: the vase represents the as yet unformed body, the flowers “instincts
and desires, the objects of desire which rove about” (80). Embodiment here is disorganised, impossible: the elements that define it remain floating outside. The ego as such does not yet exist. Yet when these flowers and this vase are caught by a concave mirror, the curve reflects and focuses the light in such a way that there will appear in front of it an image of the vase—a real image, Lacan tells us, not an image that appears as if it were back in the recesses of the glass but one that is projected in front of the mirror, floating in space like a hologram:

A spherical mirror produces a real image. To each point of a light ray emanating from any point on an object placed at a certain distance, preferably in the plane of the sphere’s centre, there corresponds, in the same plane, through the convergence of the rays reflected on the surface of the sphere, another luminous point—which yields a real image of the object. (Seminar I 77)

Since light rays cross each other when they leave a concave surface, the image of the vase will be inverted—or in the case of the above diagram, since the real vase was originally placed upside down, the concave mirror will turn its image right side up. The effect of this inversion is that the flowers now appear as if they were correctly placed within the vase. This effect represents the imaginary: the body is united with its drives and desires, but only through the power of the image: “the image of the body gives the subject the first form which allows him to locate what pertains to the ego and what does not. Well then, let us say that the image of the body, if we locate it in our schema, is like the imaginary vase which contains the bouquet of real flowers” (79). The concave mirror restructures the real. It defines the ego, puts things in their place, replacing the real vase with an imaginary one. Yet Lacan’s emphasis that the
illusion produced by this mirror is in fact a “real image” suggests that the distinction between the two realms may not be as real as it seems.

With this specific diagram, Lacan departs from the scientific experiment as he originally describes it—one which begins with an upright vase which already holds its blossoms (see figure 3). In the traditional version, it is the flowers and not the vase whose image is inverted, so that the flowers that are really in the vase are made to appear as if they were blooming upside down, underneath it. By instead starting with a real vase that is inverted by the concave mirror, Lacan turns the experiment itself upside down. This departure is significant for two reasons: first, in Lacan’s diagram the real is impossible. The cut flowers are left to stand upright on their own, without a vase, thereby constituting a “real” which is in fact difficult to imagine, other than through this diagram of it. At the level of the experiment itself, then, we can see this odd arrangement of ostensibly real flowers only through their imaginary representation. And secondly, since the flowers are not placed in the vase until the moment they are captured by the concave mirror, Lacan is able to emphasise the power of the glass to make disparate things appear united. The drives and desires do not begin in the body but are rather placed inside it only through an optical illusion. In the original experiment, the concave mirror plays tricks by disorganising the unity of what is real: things are in their place and the mirror makes it seem as if they were not. In Lacan’s version, the mirror plays tricks by organising the real’s impossibility: things have no place and it is up to the mirror to create one.

This place, this real image created by a concave mirror, is difficult to see. In order to witness such an image, one must place one’s eye precisely within the cone of the reflected
rays. In Lacan’s diagram the eye is positioned outside of this cone, unable to catch what the concave mirror creates. But in the centre of this experiment hangs a simple yet essential prop, the addition of which makes the effect of this experiment complete. Without a second mirror, without this plane mirror positioned precisely to capture the real image projected by the concave lens, the flowers inside the vase would literally be overlooked. What the plane mirror creates is an image twice removed, a virtual image of a real one. It is this image, this image of an image, that the eye is able to catch. If the concave mirror represents the imaginary realm, then the plane mirror--or, more precisely, its angle in relation to the eye--represents the order of the symbolic: “...the inclination of the plane mirror is governed by the voice of the other” (Seminar I 140). Were this angle to be slightly off or were the eye to be outside the effects of its reflection, then the vase and flowers would not meet but would instead remain separate and unseen “a sad, empty pot, or some lonesome flowers” (80). This focus on the relationship between mirrors, rather than the effect of a single one, is what distinguishes this diagram from Lacan’s earlier narrative of the mirror stage. Without this relationship, the imaginary would not properly appear. It is the symbolic, then, which positions the eye and thus enables the ego to access the imaginary. The eye sees a doubly alienated image, an object structured by both the imaginary and the symbolic. The image in the plane mirror captures the real image produced by the concave mirror which captures the real vase: the symbolic structures the imaginary as the imaginary structures the real: “It means that, in the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such as results from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject--you should know, I’ve been
repeating it for long enough—is essentially characterised by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech" (Seminar I 80).

Yet Lacan suggests that the positioning of the plane mirror occurs after the mirror stage, the implication being that this diagram is not an elaboration of the mirror stage at all but rather a way to tear it apart, projecting it into a future which it cannot yet own:

... the inclination of the plane mirror is governed by the voice of the other. This doesn’t happen at the level of the mirror-stage, but it happens subsequently through our overall relation with others--the symbolic relation. From that point on, you can grasp the extent to which the regulation of the imaginary depends on something which is located in a transcendent fashion ... the transcendent on this occasion being nothing other than the symbolic connection between human beings (Seminar I 140).

And if this future fails to cut into the past? If the plane mirror were missing? Tilted slightly at an angle? Cracked? What would be the effect on the bodily ego? What would it mean for the pot to remain empty, for the cut flowers to be left standing—impossibly, absurdly—on their own? These blossoms represent the drives and desires which become organised through a series of mirrors, a process of containment which in effect constitutes embodiment as such:

The subject originally locates and recognises desire through the intermediary, not only of his own image, but of the body of his fellow being. It’s exactly at that moment that the human being’s consciousness, in the form of consciousness of self, distinguishes itself. It is in so far as he recognises his desire in the body of the other that the exchange takes place. It is in so far as his desire has gone over to the other side that he assimilates himself to the body of the other and recognises himself as body. (147)
And when this complex optical relationship between vase and flower, eye and glass, is not perfectly conducive to creating a virtual image of a real one, then the body does not come into place. The objects to be introjected are left in the other; the corporeal boundary never becomes secure; the drives are not the ego’s own; desire is never stitched together from all its component parts:

If you put the mirror at an angle, the image itself changes. Without the real image moving, simply because the mirror changes, the image that the subject, placed on the side of the spherical mirror, will see in this mirror, will pass from having the form of a mouth to that of a phallus, or from a more or less complete desire to that type of desire which a moment ago I called fragmented. (150)

A mouth as a phallus or a phallus as a mouth: the precise level of consequent perseveration would depend on exactly how off-kilter is the state of this optical relationship. The ego may simply be a bit more precariously held together than most. Or it may be haunted by an especially disturbed and ambivalent relationship with its drives and desires. Or like a floating image that cannot be seen and thus cannot be said to exist, this bodily ego, this ego as a body, could remain outside of what it means to come into being at all. Empty and alone, the body would be nothing but a false start, a fragment, a failure all too real.

Lacan’s diagram is perhaps a little too perfect: even were the mirrors correctly to coincide, the flowers in the vase, the parents talking their child’s body into shape, there would still remain a hole, the container never quite holding the contained.

A hole: the drives are not inside the vase; they circle around the body’s slits. The mouth, the anus, the ears, the eyes, each opening a place of exchange, where the body lets
something enter it or forces something out, gifts of food and shit, light and sound, gifts given or received, accepted or refused, each drive leaving its hole only to return to it (see figure 4). A fragmented bodily economy where the drive comes home without reaching its end: “What is fundamental at the level of each drive is the movement outwards and back in which it is structured” (*Four Fundamental 177*). Each drive is a partial drive, never organised into a unity and never reaching the object around which it turns. The body is open to what will always fail to fill it. Sexuality is a patchwork of holes. The drive a montage. To create a montage, one cuts, selects and pastes together disparate sections into a composite, yet in this case the composite never forms: the drives remain persevered, incomplete, like a dress with arms missing, like a mirror with cracks. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud suggests that in childhood the drives function anarchically, remaining fragmented from each other until puberty has begun, when they finally fuse together to form a genital drive that ostensibly stays in place (127). Lacan argues that no such fusion can occur: there exists no unity, but only a sexuality precariously propped up by partial drives that aim only to return from whence they came. Freud suggests as much when he admits that mature sexuality can easily lapse back into earlier manifestations of pleasure, genital sexuality always in danger of default. For Lacan the drives can never be impartial: they rest loyal to their orifices, never unifying to create a drive specific to the genitals alone. A failed montage.

The drive is a border between the psychical and the physical: a drive represents an instinct, a drive is the instinct’s translation, what occurs when physical need is transformed through cultural construction. It is not an urge emerging simply from a biological need, but a momentum evidencing societal influence. It is the trace of those relationships that serve to
structure the body as other than what it is. Lacan creates two bodies, dividing them with “a new cut”: “The body of instincts is a body of need (Not) and the body of the drives is a body of want, lack or requirement (Bedürfnis)” (Jaanus 120). But here one of the bodies cannot be said to exist. A drive is a representation without referent, a translation without source: the body of instincts to which it refers arrives only as the drive represents it. If the drive marks the boundary between what is body and what is not, it both creates and undermines this distinction. Representation always crossing the line it draws. A boundary left trembling, a border that opens and lapses and fails.

The drive plays on the threshold, circling the orifices, those mucous membranes that cannot close off the world:

Body of need and body of drive are real insofar as their source (Quelle) is in the body, but whereas need involves the inside of the body, the inner organs (stomach, intestines and other vital organs) drive involves the surface zones of the body and the erogenous openings. . . . The openings are the vanishing points where the inside meets the outside. (Jaanus 120)

These holes steal their pleasure: “Even when you stuff the mouth--the mouth that opens in the register of the drive--it is not the food that satisfies it, it is, as one says, the pleasure of the mouth” (Four Fundamental 167). Teeth and lips and tongue, the mouth, this hungry hole: the body’s surface cannot be plugged up.

So the drive turns on itself. Like a mouth twisting to kiss its own lips, the drive circles its object and loops back to find its pleasure at home: “In the drive, is not this mouth what
might be called a mouth in the form of an arrow?--a mouth sewn up . . .” (Four Fundamental, 179).

Open and shut: the drive aims not to feed the mouth but simply to circle back to it. The means becomes the end; the circle its own goal. The drive ties us to life; the drive turns us toward the grave. There’s an element both of determination and acceptance of failure—a nihilistic belligerence—contained in this loop that never reaches its object, comes home empty handed. It keeps on course. It goes in circles. It cannot stop. It aims for its own end, it aims to finish itself, finally to reach that impossible object which will fill the hole, kill the drive. And since this particular death remains unreachable—this painful pleasure, jouissance of possessing the object, merging with it, destroying all separation, feeding all lack—since the drive cannot reach its end in this particularly utopic, or distopic, manifestation, it traces another form of death, the death of the trace. It repeats itself. Each repetition failing to reach that primordial loss. Each repetition functioning like a signifier that refers only to other signifiers, like a description generating more description, a compulsion so enthralled by its own ritual that it forgets the initial loss against which it was to protect.

Death is the object and death is the inability to reach this object. It is the incessant attempt to represent what can but elide representation. The drive turning its tricks, circling and circling its holes.

With each repetition, the drive affirms its adherence to the pleasure principle, this rule of not-too-much and not-too-little, and also to its elaboration in the reality principle, this rule of present sacrifice for future gain, where representation functions as a means to grasp what will always be missed. Since the object of satisfaction can never be reached, the subject is able
to retain an equilibrium, avoiding the death that hides behind pleasure, the jouissance that
tempts from outside the bounds. The drive maintains the body. Yet if the drive is structured
around an object, searches for this object that will give all, aims to join with it in an impossible
and final jouissance, then the drive also forces pleasure, works to go beyond it, uses the arch
of pleasure’s limits to swing itself out and back, each turn offering the lure of finally
surpassing these limits, each repetition both protecting the drive from this death--bringing the
drive safely home--and leading the drive toward what it should not be able to reach. The
drive circling and circling, each repetition resonating with a bit too much pleasure. For there
is something excessive about these endless loops, as if the drive had discovered its own
jouissance independent of an object, as if the drive were able to go beyond the pleasure
principle simply by riding its limits.

But if the drive’s home is a hole, sewn open or sewn closed, if home is a mouth or
anus or eye or ear, then the drive is still missing something:

... what makes us distinguish this satisfaction from the mere auto-eroticism of the
erogenous zone is the object that we confuse all too often with that upon which the
drive closes--this object, which is in fact simply the presence of a hollow, a void,
which can be occupied, Freud tells us, by any object, and whose agency we know only
in the form of the lost object, the petit a. (Four Fundamental 180)

It has a name, then, this lost little thing, although perhaps too little a name. It is not one
object, but a multiple. It is not a unity but a contradiction. It is the breast, the faeces, the
gaze, the voice. It is a surplus of jouissance, a piece of the other. It is the trace of the libido,
what remains of the real, the residue left behind a word. But where are these remains? When and how does the piece fall off?

In Lacan’s further development of the experiment of the inverted bouquet (he is driven to return to it again and again, reconfiguring it as if a substitute could ever replace the real thing, as if the symbolic could ever fix in place all the disparate parts, the body captured by a scientific eye) he adds letters to label the images (see figure 5). The essay that frames this specific diagram fails to define the meaning of these letters that float around their objects like broken bits of words, like pieces torn from the symbolic (Four Fundamental 145). But Lacan does make a passing reference to “objet a”, which plays the role of a plug: he draws an oval, a “hoop net,” cutting the net’s unity with this one lost letter (see figure 6). If the oval is the subject, the cut is the orifice. The ‘a’ both creates the hole and fills it. It tears the oval apart while keeping the outside from coming in: “We can conceive of the closing of the unconscious through the effect of something that plays the role of obturator—the objet a, sucked, breathed, into the orifice of the net” (Four Fundamental 144-145). Always back to the mouth, to what can be sucked or breathed—orality as the privileged entry and the privileged defence. We eat as if to reach the object and to deny its loss, each morsel failing to supply what we expect, each bite a disappointment, filling us only with the object’s lack. We busy our tongues with taste instead of speech, or with speech instead of taste, or we refuse both at once as if one could cancel out the other, food as signifier or signifier as food. To fill the mouth is to feed the gap, in the sense both of keeping it going and of stopping it up. To eat is to close the hole and pry it open.
In the experiment of the inverted bouquet the "a" hovers beside the real bouquet, those uncontained flowers, blossoms yet uncaptured by the glass: this fragment of a word floats beside a fragment of the real. The objet a is what the symbolic produces yet somehow fails to hold in place. The effect of the symbolic is not to overwrite the body, but to write with it, not to replace hunger but to bind it to this object that plugs the subject while cutting it up.

Lacan uses the figure of a Borromean knot to illustrate the interdependence of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, these three realms that coincide to bring the flowers into the vase while leaving behind this torn bit of a letter (see figure 7). His knot consists of three rings connected in such a way that if any one of them were cut free, all three would fall apart. The objet a is the empty space inside the rings that keeps them together as it distinguishes between them. It is a real loss and an imaginary object and a residue left in place by the symbolic. It is what remains when the signifier cuts the body in shape. It is a torn bit of flesh and the hole this tear opens up.

But how can this fragment of a letter be both an object and a gap, how can it be both what is missing and what we use to fill the empty space?

Trace it to Freud: in his essay “Negation” Freud explains that we can find an object only after we have already encountered it, after we have somehow happened upon it, lost it, and through this loss created a representation of what we had once possessed. It is this representation which guides us in our search: what we look for in the present is but a repetition of the past. Only through losing the object do we become driven to search for the satisfaction it once presented. Yet this finding appears unable to let loss go. While we may
attempt to fill the gap with various replacements, the original object will never be found again.

There can be no returning to that primary experience afforded by our first searchless and surprising encounter: “The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is, not to find an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to refind such an object, to convince onself that it is still there” (440). While this statement suggests that what is found is indeed the original object, it also implies that on the contrary this object can never again be retrieved. Refinding is not finding: a repetition does not present the original. The lost object can only fail to appear—despite or rather because of its many substitutions. Each replacement brings the subject closer to the object only by luring the subject further and further away.

In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud links this object specifically with the breast, or rather with its loss, as if the maternal body must disappear before representation can begin. If “the finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it,” the mother is a presence long gone, a necessary sacrifice to the subject’s development, a development that is dependent on an endless search propelling the subject forward into the future (145).

Yet the object that Lacan finds in Freud proves to be even more lost. It exists only as an *impossible* object, as the encounter which must be missed. The finding of an object is a refinding of it precisely because there had been no finding—no original before its substitute, no appearance of an object before the appearance of its representation. In the time before an infant represents its mother’s presence, her body is experienced by the child as part of its own, her breast indistinguishable from its lips, gums and tongue. Only when the mother is absent and the breast is thus found to be missing, only when the infant is compelled to hallucinate its
presence—and driven to frustration through the impotence of this hallucination—does the infant begin to conceive of the breast as an object it cannot control, a thing separate from itself (Fink, 94). The child’s representation fails to bring the object to presence, yet through this failure the representation constitutes the object as such. The object is formed as it is lost, always failing to occupy the hole it creates.

Torn bit of a thing always caught in between. A part of the other as fragment of self, body lost in the signifier, flesh that escapes the cut. A piece of the mother’s body or a piece of the child’s, corporeality or the food that cannot fill it: objet a is the breast once the child imagines its absence, is food after direct access to it is barred by the word, is a piece of the real cut by the symbolic, is the gap in the body left in place by the cut. Of the possible causes of the drives, food appears as a privileged object, first sacrifice to signification. The object a is the food that representation cannot swallow. It remains “stuck in the gullet of the signifier” (Four Fundamental 270). It is the last lost mythical meal and the hole that is left in its place: “The objet petit a is not the origin of the oral drive. It is not introduced as the original food, it is introduced from the fact that no food will ever satisfy the oral drive, except by circumventing the eternally lacking object” (Four Fundamental 180). It is the void, the hungry hollow we cannot digest. It becomes the breast itself, the breast as an object separate from the child, not food but its representation, not the milk but the first sign of its loss: “as far as the oral drive is concerned, for example, it is obvious that it is not a question of food, nor of the memory of food, nor the echo of food, nor the mother’s care, but of something that is called the breast, and which seems to go of its own accord because it belongs to the same series” (Four Fundamental 168). There is always another layer of representation. The breast
is what is lost but is also loss's representative. The breast is objet a and yet fails to present it. The breast is not this object that can never be reached, but its stand-in, a substitute for a substitute, a representation for a representation, a lack for a lack.

Rings within rings: each time we try to grasp the object, we produce instead another reproduction, as if the effort to represent it just makes larger the hole.

Lacan's text does not define the objet a, but performs it. Each supplementary elaboration, each contradictory explanation, enacts the very slide which constitutes this object's lack and its alluring power. The objet a is neither an object nor its replacement, neither the hole nor the plug, it is rather this precise slippage from one to the other, a slippage produced by representation itself, where the signifier creates its things only as it cuts them up. The word finding its object as it kills it.

*The body. Food. Hold it tight and it slips away.*

*Objet a:* what representation cannot hold and what representation produces in excess, a symptom of representation and of its end, what remains before or after the symbolic, that piece of the body outside signification like an origin that cannot be repeated, like flesh almost stripped of itself. The drive circles this remnant, feeding itself not with the satisfaction the object could present but rather with the repetitive cycle of never finding what it seeks. Out then back again. Closed circuit. As if the repetition were more pleasurable than reaching the goal, representation of food more filling than what it represents. Yet this repetition is supported, motivated, only by the possibility of its collapse. By the possibility that the representation will somehow present the original object, that the object will appear with no difference from itself, the last lost meal, the body not yet clothed by speech. The drive
represents the instinct—functions as the instinct's representative, its cultural manifestation, what remains of the body's needs once the signifier has taken its bite—yet were the drive ever to reach its object, it would in essence become what it represents. Instinct and drive both satisfied at once. Together feeding on an object created by representation yet exterior to it. Drive collapsing into instinct as if one could swallow the next.

The drive circles the holes on the surface of the body whereas the instincts belong to its depths: if the drive were able to finish its course by finding its object, then the body created through such an impossible act would be a body without layers, without distinction between surface and depth, outside and inside, representation and its origin. A body as a line.

Lacan says that every drive is a death drive: every drive aims for its own end, pursues the satisfaction that would kill it, a reunion with an object that would finally cease the drive's endless turns. Yet these turns are themselves part of the drive's death: this endless repetition in the search for the object that would end all repetition is in fact a manifestation of death, that death that arrives with the signifier, with the word that gives death to the thing. Whereas Freud finds death—and the drive toward it—in biology, or in a poetics of biology, in a body that can't seem to avoid representation, Lacan finds it in representation itself. In the symbolic order and the drive it sets forth, where the compulsion to repeat is driven only by the compulsion to end repetition, where language is motivated by the possibility of its collapse, the attempt to find the object capturing the subject in a system of endless deferral. The line never leaving its circle, the drive only finding its hole.

But if the symbolic order is a system not simply of language but of kinship, if what the child is driven to find is also what the parents are driven to find in their child, then death
arrives not just with the word, but with the family. The death drive is a manifestation of the compulsion to repeat familial history, an entrapment within the detritus of familiar narratives, their repetition always promising and making impossible any escape. The lost object is not just an object before language, but before systems of familial place and their necessary substitutions, before the economy of the gift, before stories of investment and return. To grasp the lost object would be to escape the relationship between self and other, to collapse kinship, to finally hold what can never be exchanged. Yet just as the drive circles the object in an attempt to reach it, each attempt producing yet another ring, so the subject who aims to end the repetition inherent in familial relations—to reach the object before the mother’s absence made it her own—becomes more ensnared in kinship’s deadly force. Each circle killing the family into life.

And if the symbolic births the body as it fills it with holes, unleashing the partial drives that can never touch what they circle, then systems of kinship both form the body and destroy it. A resistance to kinship is resistance to the body itself. Yet this resistance is also an attempt to save this body, separate it from representation, keep it from the system that would give it death, from the relationships that would tear it away. The family cuts the body up.

Return to the mirror: to the flowers and the vase and the letter ‘α,’ that broken piece of a word that floats beside what it can barely name. In Lacan’s diagram of the inverted bouquet, it is not the mirrors themselves but rather their relationship which holds the blossoms in place. The placement of the eye, the placement of each reflective surface: one’s position within one’s family is what determines whether or not the flowers get into their container, whether or not the body falls into line. The symbolic order—which Lacan associates with the
father, or rather with his function, with that essential interruption that separates the child from a dyadic relationship with the maternal image—structures the imaginary and the real, the body as such arriving only as it is tied by this knot. Tangles and holes: corporeality is formed as the father gives it death. Yet while Lacan suggests that the symbolic must play its role in order for the real image of the body to appear, he also states that a child’s position within the symbolic arrives rather with the entry into the Oedipal phase, which occurs long after the mirror stage has performed its gestalt. While the role of the father appears to be fundamental to the creation of a body—a corporeality that is nothing if not imaginary—Lacan suggests that at the mirror stage the paternal intervention has not yet occurred. His diagram of the inverted flowers suggests therefore not a single moment but rather a layering, the two mirrors meeting in space if not in time, the roles of the father and the mother interconnected yet torn apart, the future sliding into place so that the present can take shape.

In the future that lies ahead of the mirror stage, the father will castrate the child or at least threaten to do so, a threat which will rip the child from the mother—the boy because he fears losing what he thinks he can possess, the girl because the mother cannot offer what the girl will always lack—this essential cut separating the child from the imaginary dyad and positioning the child within a symbolic world, giving it access to the “I,” that position that can be borrowed and exchanged but never owned. Yet if the symbolic order is what structures the eye so it can see the flowers in the vase, and the child is not situated within this order until the Oedipal phase, then it appears as if the body as such does not come into place at the mirror stage at all. If the Oedipal phase first introduces the child to that fundamental and apparently inevitable binary of sexual roles, where the child becomes one sex only to lose the other, then
the mirror stage represents a time before this loss. If the child is given a name at birth, assigned a place within a system of kinship, yet does not assume this place until the Oedipal phase, then what shape is the body the child finds in the glass? What sex is the mirror?

The mirror stage slices the period between birth and the Oedipal phase, between the assigning of a role and the acceptance of it, yet does not seem to know how to cut the body into shape. The mirror catches a corporeal transition. A body that has not yet become itself.

Here the body is torn apart by time: real and imaginary and symbolic must arrive together to put corporeality in its place, yet each one can only follow the next, the mirror stage’s future always in danger of being cut off.

Lacan makes clear that the father who promises to appear in this future, the father of the Oedipal complex, is a symbolic father, a position and not a person, a role that the imaginary father can only fail to fill. Each threat, each attempt to manifest the father’s power, makes more apparent his suspicion that the knife he wields is not his own. He can’t quite keep the body in place, he can never cut it up enough.

The elaborations of the mirror stage suggest that like this imaginary father who cannot hold to his position in the symbolic, castration is also not as big as it seems. The body must wait for the Oedipal complex to find its proper shape, yet the complex offers only a repetition of an earlier transitional loss. The phallus is a thin substitute. The alignment of real and imaginary and symbolic—the organisation of the flowers and vase and mirror and mirror and eye—has already broken off... what? A letter ‘a’? A fragment? A scrap? In the diagram of this impossible mirror stage that simultaneously invokes and anticipates the effects of a phase yet to come, what the symbolic father tears away—the father as symbol, as speech, as the
placement of the eye in relation to the glass—is not an organ but a pound of flesh. Always smaller and larger than anything he could possess. This flesh is the payment the subject makes to enter the symbolic: it is that last little bit of corporeality that doesn’t quite make it in, corner of a nightgown caught in the close of a door, that pound of the body the subject must lose in order to have a body at all. No more, no less.

If castration is but a repetition of this earlier cut, it is a manifestation of the death drive, is this drive’s primary threat, an attempt to control loss by making it one’s own, to return to what is gone by cutting it yet again. The father slices into the child’s body in order to slice away the mother’s, holds the child’s desires in check in order to resist the vertigo of loss, keeps the body together through the force of a threat that can come only after the event it promises to cause. For the body is already missing. Objet a is already gone. The phallus is its representation, its repetition, a fragment carved into a line.

Lacan develops at least two considerations of the death drive, one leading into yet contradicting the next. In his early work, he configured the death drive in the imaginary, in the child’s pursuit of the maternal body—not the body found in the glass, but the body before such a present absence was imaginable. A return to an undifferentiated state, to corporeality unrent by imaginary or symbolic cuts. This is the drive to smash one’s reflection, one’s double, an effort to remain one with the mother, a mother who cannot exist except through the structures the infant aims to destroy. Within this narrative, to return to the mother is to kill her, a death to inaugurate the child’s own, murder as simultaneous suicide.

Lacan will reconfigure this drive, stealing death from the imaginary to the symbolic, cutting it up and sewing it back together, the new definition never quite losing its original
shape. "The death drive," he explains, "is to be situated in the historical domain; it is articulated at a level that can only be defined as a function of the signifying chain . . . (Ethics 211)." While this rehabilitated death drive functions as the mask of the symbolic—it is the repetition the symbolic puts in place as the signifier fails to grasp what it names—this mask is formed around the imaginary's face, around the nostalgia for a body before the symbolic's first cut. The signifying chain is drawn toward its own end. The flowers and the vase—the drives and the body that will hold them—are captured by two fathers, by two deaths: a father divided against himself, killing what he most wants.

But if the father cuts the mother, the mother cuts back. Lacan describes how the symbolic slices into the imaginary, yet he also suggests the imaginary enacts its revenge. In his diagram of schema "L," two lines cross each other in a chiasmus, reaching their destination only as they slice each other in two, the imaginary shredding the line that fixes it in place (see figure 8). The symbolic can never quite hold onto the image, onto a body that can but find and lose itself in its others, a body that keeps doubling beyond the symbolic's control.

Lacan designates the lost object with a letter, as if the symbolic had failed to deliver a name, as if the imaginary had ripped away the remains of the word. Yet this object that pokes holes in the symbolic is not imaginary but real. The symbolic is eaten on all sides. It is torn in two by what it cannot represent. Objets a, this residual trace, this surplus value, this excess, is the symbolic's real loss. This pound of flesh sacrificed in the symbolic's name is a first and final resistance, a tear in the symbolic, each reparative repetition producing yet another residual trace that motivates yet another repetition that will produce yet another residual trace, the symbolic always failing to redress its holes.
The effect is a kind of secondary real, a real not pre-existing the symbolic but produced by its cut: the trauma of an original loss is repeated in an attempt to repair it yet this repetition produces its own effects, a real as residue, as yet another tear in the symbolic's cloth. A death with a life of its own. The real, the imaginary and the symbolic slicing one against the other. The body wrapped in their shredding layers, losing its pounds.
Postscript

The real may be represented by the accident, the noise, the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming.

--Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*

Things were missing. What I noticed first was the duplicate. It was gone, that safety net of repetition I had purchased this July in Berkeley when I so loved an outfit—a pair of blue pants, a matching blue top—that I returned to the store to buy another, a fabric insurance against possible loss, as if I could simultaneously wear the present tense and save it. I had left the duplicate in a bag in a kitchen cupboard—my apartment so small, with so little room for storage, that I had to push my new clothes into spaces intended for food—and I hung the original in my bedroom. The original quickly becoming a present that was past—a memory of a summer, of a time I wanted to repeat, promised myself I would repeat, would recapture, somehow, as soon as my thesis was finished, as soon as all work was done. The past and its future, the duplicate hoarded away for a time yet to come.

But the duplicate was not there, had disappeared like a representation that can never present its object. I ran into my bedroom and opened the closet to find the hangers empty, wires clanking against each other naked, a body stripped of its flesh. The original, it too was gone, as if it couldn’t be held in place without its representation. Two matching missing outfits, blue siblings.
Why both the original and its duplicate, why did the loss have to be so absolute? The failure of my attempt at protection. The past and its future, both of them, gone.

Representation's death.

My iron had been pulled out of the kitchen cupboard and left in the front room. The taunt of that utensil, how the thief smoothed the wrinkles before stealing the skin.

What else had disappeared? My wallet with my identification—my name and my face; my camera—with the film still in it from my trip to Berkeley, ghosts of new friends, that last lost evidence of a present now past; my tape recorder—the instrument I'd used to record my father's voice this winter as he retold his stories of the woods—and all my bags, all those knapsacks and purses and duffles, those containers I am forever packing around like metonymic representations of my body, always carrying at least two at once, hollows the thief had filled with clothes like a man's parody of breasts.

It was the film that hurt the worst, how the thief would rip it blind from the small black box. Fingers opening and tearing. The colours of summer destroyed. Faces never to be formed. Rape of a picture.

Also missing were other less valuable but more transparently personal items, like my make-up, moisturizer, prescription eyeglasses, lingerie. My sight stolen along with my image. It was as if I had packed up for a trip, taken everything and left myself behind. But what was I without my objects? And who was this new person who now possessed them? “Who would fit into your bras?” my friends teased me, “It must have been a teenage girl . . . or a teenage boy!” A younger version of myself? Of my father? The thief so careful in crime that I didn't notice the break-in until the morning after it occurred, had thought I'd simply misplaced my
wallet, didn’t realize that someone else was already walking around with my name, my face. That each door had been opened and emptied and then closed, as if the thief wanted only to gouge out the body’s insides, retaining its shell. Almost perfect, this pretense of unity.

I had left a key for my mother, and she had left it back for me. First time, first slip-up, a piece of my apartment left outside its walls. A serendipitous discovery for someone unknown. The room opening to foreign hands. “I’m not sure what happens when the two of you get together,” my father said, “Something happens, between you and Mom, you do things you wouldn’t do on your own, you lose track. Really, the two of you, you both got what you deserved.” As if I had been punished for a closeness suspect or dangerous, an identification with a mother that he could never achieve. As if the only way to insure against loss would be to separate forever from her.

I spent the week staring at mirrors that had betrayed me, slick silver surfaces that had held someone else’s face. I walked the neighbourhood expecting to bump into myself. “They’re just objects,” people reminded me, and I thought of my thesis, about how the body is formed through its exteriority, stealing itself from the other, the drive circling around its missing thing, that original object found only as lost, about the compulsion to repeat, how re-enactment of a trauma is both a representation and a refusal of representation, both a resistance to the loss and its devastating exaggeration. Repetition consuming itself. I was no longer writing my argument, I was living it. Full circle. Not thirty-two, but sixteen: the thief had cut me in half, a body ripped from its double. I thought of my sister, how she used to slice up my clothes, exactly half a lifetime ago, how she somehow targeted just those things I
especially loved, the ones I was reluctant to love for fear that representing them would
harbinger their loss.

The thief was not my sister, but perhaps her shadow. A residual trace. The uncanny.

My writing performing itself, each symbolic gesture creating a real it could not quite hold. The
vertiginous trance of loss tore me from my thesis--re-enactment making representation
impossible--but it also brought me painfully back, as if by embodying my work I was also and
only writing it.
Figures

Figure 2: Schema with two mirrors (Seminar I 124)

Figure 3: Experiment of the inverted bouquet (Seminar I 124)
Figure 4: The drive and its hole (Grosz 76)

Figure 5: Schema with two mirrors and 'a' (Four Fundamental 145)
Figure 6: Schema of the hoop net (Four Fundamental 144)

Figure 7: Borromean knot (Fink 19)
Figure 8: Schema L (Grosz 73)
Works Cited


Appendix

... the unconscious is not an ambiguity of acts, future knowledge that is already known not to be known, but lacuna, cut, rupture inscribed in a certain lack.


A failed montage. This is an excerpt of the narrative to be read in conjunction with the theory, which I intend eventually to collage--cut--into the main text.

Or, no...perhaps I will slide it underneath, an extended footnote divided from the theory by nothing but a line, one layer over another like a father’s coat slipped on top of his daughter’s form, the page divided like a body split in two.

Or rather...juxtapose them side by side, each shrinking to accommodate the other, one thin column of theory and one even thinner column of narrative, two narrow trees stripped of their limbs...

How to montage these disparate pieces? How to build a body of text?
Figure 9: Father perched on top of a tree
He can’t tell when it begins. He knows when it’s coming, but not what initiates it, what small spark swells into flames. It reaches beyond what he can see, catches him suddenly in the twisting thick of closing walls. It hovers around and underneath and inside of what remains in the room. He watches how the fusillade tremors from her body, the words escape her mouth, the words crack and split, the words take the furniture, they take the tools and utensils, the food that he thought had been there, right there, the cups and chairs and clothes that he thought he knew. They take his hands and his face, they take his chest, his heart that presses against his ribs as if trying to escape from its cage, forcing itself free of a frame that is no longer his own.

It’s not real. The house is real, the objects in the house, these are real, the smear of butter left on the side of the plate. Yes, smear of butter is real, handle of fridge, change in his pocket, a penny, a nickel. He catalogues his surroundings, holds fast to the edges of things, embraces them in his mind to keep them from falling victim to the appetite of her voice. His heels shuffle backward, one behind the other, slowly, slowly, his body fading from the room. He reaches the wall, digs his back into the firm line of a cedar beam, pressing its edge first into one side of his spine then the other, hooking the ridge under the bone. He holds himself stiff and waits for the sign that she is nearing the end, when her language gives way to cries, the sound of her voice wider and wider, tearing itself open, each vowel pregnant and moaning its belly beyond the limits of the word.

This time she says he has stolen something. It is him, he has taken what is hers, he is hiding it, he is keeping it. He sneaked it into the garbage, she saw his hands, she saw the torn piece of paper, it was wet from the rain, it was a disguise, she knows his writing, the message,
what was the message, what was he sneaking to someone else, what has he told them, they are waiting for it, it’s in the garbage, they have taken it, it’s gone, the garbage is gone, he knew, he knew. Her accusations echo against each other, they tumble and crash. She scrapes consonants from the back of her throat. He came into her room at night, he did, her son, he stole it. He’s in cahoots with his father, they all are, it’s a plot, she can sense it, she has seen it. Her body quivers with each threat as she points out the window then at him, her arms flailing open as if to embrace or catch him, her oldest child, her only son, then one hand flicking back to her crown. She twists a lock of hair between thumb and forefinger, works it back and forth before tearing at it, pulling the strands toward her lips. And his father, he’s screwing every slut in the camp, she’s caught him at it, he thinks she can’t hear him but she knows, she hears the laughing, she saw legs twisted together she can see in her sleep she can keep them from taking her organs, it’s her organs they want, the doctors, the men, those ones, the ones with their hussies, she knows what they do with their knives, she can’t sleep or they’ll take her lungs, they do it for money, they cut you up, they cut you open, it’s the insides they want, him and his hussy, and you, you are no better, fourteen year old nothing, you’re on his side, you are, look at you, I could kill you all, you first, send you off to my brothers, all of them selfish ungrateful, I won’t stand for it, I won’t fall down now, I’m nobody’s fool.

Breaks. He closes it. His hand on the door knob and he is out. It is closed. Look there, on the ground where he left them, his gloves, his saw. Smell of dirt, smell of pine. Leaves from the maple are already dead, clumped wet by his boots, cupping water in the curve of their shallow pools. His gloves squeak against the sweat of his hands. He has closed it. Someone is crying, inside the room, but he is outside. Wood to cut, shed to finish, the rhythm
of chores rocks along with the tap tap of the blade on his thigh as he whistles his way into the woods.

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He wasn’t one to talk of interiors. When he spoke of his past it was always stories of fire and wind and work. His childhood belonged to the woods. Not nature’s woods, but man’s, where trees were turned to lumber long before they were cut down, where entire landscapes were carved and pulped by a language heavy with creosote. *Eye splice, whistle punk, steam donkey, chokerman*: an insider’s code for the outdoors.

His father was the camp high rigger, the one who spurred his way up the spar tree, the tallest tree on site, stripping it naked of branches, great arches that fell to the ground in an explosion of needles and twigs. Before each climb he and his father searched the base for cat’s face, the fungus whose twisting eyes and green fingers warned of a rotten core. Then he watched his father belt himself to the trunk. He watched him clench his legs around it as if circling the body of a lover. He knew that if they had missed something, if the tree were rotting inside, if it began to split while his father scurried to its peak or when he finally reached the top to slice off its narrow head, his father’s chest would be crushed against it, crushed into it, as if by dividing in two the tree could obliterate the separation between flesh and wood.

Bodies were crushed, bodies were mangled, bodies were cut down. Men lost fingers and toes, arms or legs. One man fell into the wood chipper. Another was caught by the eye of the skyline, dragged to the bottom of the mountain, bits and pieces of him found scattered in
the bush, limbs planted into the wet ground. Two boys got trapped in the digester, their bodies blistered into pulp by the sulphuric acid in the massive metal stomach.

In the stories he told of his home, it was always switching places. Stillwater, Cranberry, Westview: tied to a raft of logs, the house floated up and down the coast, from camp to camp, dragged from the shore to woods and back again, its rooms rocked by waves while the family chugged beside it, watching as its windows became eyes and nose and mouth, became mirrors that caught the sun burning into the sea, became rippled ocean as if the house were spilling over with all that was surging underneath it.

Rarely did he mention the life inside this house, though bits and pieces slipped out, cracks running along a fresh sheet of lumber. He loved the smell of cinnamon. Coming home tired from the woods, he would slide his head through the door and wait for the evidence of that smell. A heady peace. Yes, she was baking, elbow circling over the bowl, flour like white gloves covering her hands, and he knew that those other thoughts hadn’t yet arrived, perhaps wouldn’t arrive, wouldn’t enter her at all, this day, this evening. It was alright. Things would stay where they were.

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Paranoid schizophrenia. A splitting of the mind. Voices that cracked a line through her body while her small son hung to her skirts, trying to keep hold of his mother without letting his own flesh crush into hers.
Delusions that her husband was cheating on her, cheating with the neighbour, or the woman at the gas station, or the one who had just sped past them on the highway, driving fast in the other direction, eyes fixed to something far in the distance. A sense that people were talking about her behind her back, she could hear them at night, in her room, in the walls, whispering, laughing. They were stealing things, sneaking into the house to take her money, her bag, her cigarettes, she knew that next they’d be after her arms and legs, they wanted her body. Each new vision rested dormant at the back of her mind, was woken groggy and resentful by the jolt of some incident, the sight of some object, the echo of some word. Then a frantic gathering of evidence—the missing scissors, a crooked smile—building to a frenzy of threats and accusations that climaxed in physical collapse.

She knew she was sick. It was her heart, it was her lungs, there was a tumour, a blood clot. Each time she heard of some disease or ailment, she began to mimic its signs. Listening to the other camp wives describe their children’s latest illness, she returned home certain that she had discovered the source of her own suffering. She could not hear about a neighbour’s headache without declaring that she had one of her own, could not witness another’s hay fever without complaining about a sudden shortness of breath. She circled the camp stealing disease. Pocketed symptoms from the dining hall and the post office, revenging herself against thieves, compensating her body for all that it had lost.

Her son learned to crawl and eat, walk and speak inside rooms where language could change the shape of things, where words didn’t stay attached to their objects but instead swung violently free, smashing through glass or flapping clumsy and panicked near the ceiling, like colourful but dangerous wings that had grown too large for the bird.
He watched how his own father did not read these words, did not become twisted backwards inside the kaleidoscope of his wife’s mad language. The man would leap silent out the front door, chased by a butcher knife, a fire poker, circling the camp till he tired her out, confident that her weapons could never catch him. He would return and begin tapping away on his latest project, a bed, a stool, a table, sanding down an arm or a leg. He muttered contentedly to himself in Norwegian, slipped into it, the rhythmic tongue, its whimsical up and down that made whatever he described seem playful, an ancient game. He could not speak it inside the house or in front of the children: his wife hated this intimacy with a language she couldn’t understand, distrusted the secret words, pockets of insult. He stepped into it and away from her with the casual disregard of ducking an overhanging branch, the ease of thrusting his arms into his jacket’s flannel sleeves. His son longed to climb inside this lost language with his father, to follow its lilting hills away from the house.

They never spoke about her attacks. To acknowledge them would have given them legitimacy, confusing one’s own reality with hers. Without hearing his father say it, he learned that women were just like that. It was best to ignore their outbursts, go to the shed and build a new door for the chicken coop, cut cedar shingles for the roof, build a table and chair set that would be sure to make her happy when she’d gotten over her troubles. From his father he learned the pleasure of making enough noise with a hammer or saw to drown out her screams. How to count and measure, do the calculations that would hold up a porch, a bridge. How to pound a punching bag that hung from the rafter till blood flowed through his fingers. And how to strap himself to a tree, carve it limbless, top it, then sit calm and cocky on its narrow
wooden peak, one boot hooked around the other, sucking at a cigarette as if he were perched on a kitchen stool, as if he were not afraid of falling off.

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When he was left alone with her, that was when he couldn’t make it stop, couldn’t keep her language from becoming his own. It ate him. His games and trains, sandwiches and homework became weightless and empty inside the belly of her dreams. A girlhood with eight hulking, cursing brothers, with a mother who visited railway tracks at night, a father whose weekend knuckles were red and crusted, cracking from the latest brawl. Stories of Jesse, the favourite brother, and his fiddle that sang and sang, its noise rattling the windows until her father smashed it. When she told this story her voice screeched against the strings and he couldn’t tell what was word and what was sound, what was past and what was present, whether she was angry because her brother had once been given a fiddle or because her father had killed it.

But if he did not want to be with his mother, he also did not want to share her. While he needed to protect himself from her world, he also wanted to map it, measure it, teach it to obey his rules. He needed to know where it was, hated how it slipped away when she held his sister. He did not want this new rival to take it for herself. She of the garbled words, syllables like approximations of speech. The chatter of shadows. He envied her deafness, the snail’s curve of a hearing aide. Why would anyone desire the exaggeration of sound? How could anyone need the use of such an instrument in this house? He was driven to take it apart

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and see how it worked, how it could turn speech on and off at will. The most expensive, most valuable toy. He watched his sister put it in, grimace, take it out, lose it, leave it lying on a shelf like a shell that contained the ocean, all his mother’s wild cries. He measured his sister’s need. She of the sincere danger, ailments that did not have to be borrowed or stolen from a neighbour. Quiet girl, quick girl, legs that spun outward like a pinmill when she ran home from school. His mother folded into her. Eased herself into that small body, cupping her palms in hers and holding this frail one’s gaze so that her eyes could read the maternal lips.

Silent speech. Secrets of gesture and shape. Round “o,” wide ‘I,’ vowels like blown glass, blown kisses for the only daughter, the ailing child. A mother calm and sick and happy in a wordless world. Disease wrapped mother and daughter together in thick sticky lines of a cobweb—youth and its illness that was real, age and its illness that was pretend—the two experiences knit so tightly that an outsider could hardly tell them apart, mimesis becoming what it was meant to represent.

He had reached for his mother’s body after this sister’s birth—what was he, two, three?—but his mother’s arms were full. Her judgement fell like the thud of a cleaver on a block of meat. He was too old to be held. A noisy fiddle. Discarded instrument.

And his father, busy cutting things and slicing things and hammering them back together, he had his own protection, the sharp saw, the foreign tongue. It was the son alone who had no escape from his mother’s visions, no hidden code, no shell he could tear from his ears to keep out her sounds, no tool to cut those visions that bound him to her as they tore him apart.
He was suspicious of language, the thin paper of his classroom textbooks, the newspaper print that brushed off in his hands like coal etchings, like the dust from a moth. The letters disappeared. He couldn’t read without thinking of the hands that pulled the saw, the machines that digested the wood into pulp. But he planned his attack, aimed to learn how to use well what he did not trust. How to push enough words out of his mouth to plug up the hole that let her world take his. How to make his statements precise, elaborate, objective, a careful science that could cling to the real of things. He drew rows of figures that scarred the woods into nothing more than percentages and annual returns. He fell in love with algebra, geometry, calculus. Straight straight lines dividing a page. The arch of a perfect curve. Calculations so exact that they sliced up light and sound. Words so abstract that they no longer needed objects, words that had left words behind, were simply letters, or numbers, or signs, the closest thing to a single point, like the narrow top of a tree stripped of its limbs.

Yes, this new language could kill a body. Now the forest sustained him, gave him confidence and control simply by being available to be cut down. He walked through the trails with his head full of physics, eyes fast to the angle of branches as the trees swallowed the sun.

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In one photograph two men are cutting down a tree, one standing on a plank that has been wedged into the trunk six feet up. There is another plank sticking out of the other side, although no one is standing on it yet. The two planks both enter the tree at the same height, so it looks as if there is only one, a single plank that runs right through the tree or emerges
from it, like whiskers or thin arms. The men will perch on these planks and saw through the
tree as confidently as if they were standing on the ground. In his way they will save having to
cut the trunk at the width of its base, the waste of six feet of timber being worth the savings in
effort. The long stump will be left to rot, a finger pointing out of the earth. The man stands
on the plank with both hands on his hips, the axe by his side like a cane he will magically turn
into a baton, into a weapon, his legs strong and free as he swings the axe through the wood.
Swings back and forth cocky on the narrowness of plank, the narrowness of a kitchen shelf, a
sea-saw, a diving board to the forest floor.

The men have already carved out the undercut, that ‘v’ shaped slice in the tree, an
open letter that will close as the tree falls, snapping at the base. The man who is not yet ready
with his axe, the one who is not standing on a plank, has stretched himself out inside this gap
in the trunk, this cut where the twisting veins of bark give way to an sharp indentation of
flesh. The tree accepts him, its width generous enough for a bed. He is lying down with his
head braced on his arm as if to take a nap, as if the cut would never close on him, could never
smash flat his body into the wood. A man inside the mouth of a tree.

The photographs are of strong men, the girls have seen the arms of their father and
grandfather as they carried a wooden beam across the yard. But here the men are dwarfed
beside the corrugated bark, beside a tree the size of a room. They are birds, their limbs
worked into muscled sinews, their bellies robin round, as if all the effort of cutting came from
their extremities, their stomachs storing away fat like a camel’s hump. This was hand logging.
Men downing 6000 to 8000 calories a day: flapjacks, Klondike potatoes, crowded rows of
sausages fried in lard. The body a machine. Used hard, used up. Its energy consumed by
trees. This was before the entry of the power saw, that riot of noise. The boy’s adolescence caught in the transition, the end of his childhood first told by the death of the quiet blades, the stillness of their subtle bending, their give and take, as if the unfamiliar vibrations in his body, the surprising urgency of its desires, could be matched only by this new metal buzz. The men of the camp awkward as they learned another way to hold their bodies, to grip a saw, another rhythm of the cut. The loss of one language and the gift of another. A period of time when both operated at once, hand saws and power saws, one used for this task, one for the next, the novelty of power favoured by one man and detested by his neighbour. The woods a collage, loggers dizzy with competing tools. A bilingual forest.

*Power saw.* The word “power,” a machine whose spinning metal teeth could eat through a mountain. All that a boy could want, could hope to hold in his hands. The first machine 350 pounds, so heavy it needed a man on each side to lift it. A shaking dance. The planks abandoned, the bursting energy of the saw cutting easily through the tree’s thick base. The men on solid ground. Only the firmness of earth could support such frenetic movement. Vibrating steel, vibrating arms. Vibrating beer bottles hooked to the trunk, the tree become a kitchen wall caught in an earthquake, the woods a vulnerable home. Beer bottles holding the kerosene that would eat through the pitch clogging the machine, a tree’s residue, its last defence, the men stopping only to drip the burning liquid into the remains. Lubricant to speed. Metal teeth spinning faster and faster, chewing through more and more trees, evergreens as food, as fodder, the men exacting their revenge for all the energy their bodies had fed to the hills. Their father racing to catch the logs with the cables as quickly as they were cut down. Choking the logs. *Chokerman,* the tree a stopped throat.
To turn around and see the forest cut bare, just the lone spar tree left standing amidst the debris of bark and sawdust and stump. Its cables stretching down from its peak, stretched along the empty forest floor, steel mourning the too fast loss of the logs it pulls down the gruff bristly face of a mountain.

He rushed toward the rupture of this invention, its violent efficiency, learned fast to work with the most recent saws, the ones that could be used alone, whose teeth circled right round one end of the blade so the whole thing could dig its way into the trunk, just the single handle held back, the blade burrowing. He practised on stumps, slicing again and again what had already been cut down. His body an extension of the shaking tool. Power gripping flesh. The blade spitting sawdust, spilling wood’s debris around his feet. Soon he knew what he was doing. He did not hurry the blade, did not work it like some men did, the ones who had grown old with their handsaws, who did not know how to hold the body back. He let the power do its work. He leaned into a tree, pressed his shoulder into the intimacy solid and sure, caressing its bark with his new machine.

Gone, the silence of woods—that background silence surrounding the axe’s dull thud or the handsaw’s lonely whistle, the silence behind boots crunching pine cones underfoot, behind a wolf howl, the flutter of birds—a landscape of silence that was replaced by noise. Power’s hungry whine. A machine so loud it had replaced the human voice. Drowned out the yawning snap of a trunk. No more grunts or groans or cussing heard over a steady two man pull. No more stretched out warning *timber*, vowels that echoed wide and lonely as if they could hold the tree as it falls.

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Each day he followed his father into the woods, a man whose strength and agility demanded respect, a man who could climb a tree to the tune he hummed, who leapt from floating log to log in a manic jig, daring waves to catch him. The forest acrobat. A mime’s daily triumph over the hulking body of fir. Then came the introduction of the power saw, that bright new page. When all the awe he felt for this man, the pride in his quiet performance, became tempered with contempt, a slow but growing realisation that his father had been caught by time, cut down by it, his energy and skill as useless as bark against a spinning blade. His arms no more powerful than the stubborn desperate threat of crab claws from inside a trap. How his father inhabited the house of his mother’s cries, how he ducked flying chairs, crashing plates, never once telling her to stop. How he slipped outside to the tool shed, carving faces into cedar like a man banished. Searching wooden eyes instead of looking into those of his own kin. The pen knife turning on a point.

The boy shook his head against this man’s refusal to accept the entry of power. He watched him shimmy up the spar tree weighted down only by the lightness of a handsaw. The handle worn deep by his fingers as if the wood had let his body enter it, would not release the intimacy of grip. The boy counting the financial waste as this old logger persisted in using his own energy instead of oil. The inefficiency of calories. The speed of a machine effortlessly slicing in half all that could be offered by the quickness of human limbs. The contrast making well-trained arms and legs seem suddenly slow-witted, lethargic. His father working twice as hard to keep up with a power that was not his own. The effort of pushing a blade against time.
But his father was not an arrogant man. His battles were solitary. Whenever he was
called on, whenever there was a man missing in the morning division of even and odds, he was
always there to team up with another logger, work one of those heavy spitting machines that
needed two men to hold it up, hold it down. Four arms smashing noise into a tree. He
understood that such compromises were necessary, a social requirement, like using forks
when hungry, like maintaining a conversation in English, word boxes passed from palm to
palm, dumb and steady, a communion in discomfort as he strained to keep up his end of the
weight. Only when he worked alone did he return to his own language. His thumb testing the
edge of an old blade.

*Handsaw,* a name that held a piece of his body. The tool an arm’s extension. What he
carried with him, forgetting its presence, its separateness, as he dug the spurs of his boots into
the dignity of a spar tree, using the saw to cut off each branch, trimming the tree like stripping
the rungs of a ladder while he climbed it. A magician’s trick. Nothing left to hold but a naked
trunk, a quiet saw. Topping the tree, swaying with it as it arches wide, the narrow height
curving downward as if trying to touch the ground with a tip lonely for land. Then the fir
finally still, a flagless pole straight and thin above man, above power.

His father was a man who spoke the forest. Knew what could poison and what could
feed. Knelt into a log, bucked it as fast as only his arms could move, carving the cut with his
whole body, a line written by flesh. The sweat of a handsaw. Its rhythmic back and forth like
the rise and fall of his mother tongue.

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He meets each of his father’s cuts with his own, the thud of one axe followed by the thud of another, the steady rhythm of wordless talk. Swing out, swing in. Each swing matched by its opposite, as if one man’s arms were taking apart what the other had just put in place. Trick mirrors, the inversion of movement. Two men framing a tree, standing on planks that stick out on either side of the trunk, up six or seven feet from the ground, the height of a logger. A man could walk underneath them, his hair touching wood. The two men twin each other, as if their equal weight were what held horizontal this see-saw of planks. Nimble feet. Muscled arms. Shirts folded up in thick rings above elbows. Summer sweat spraying like rain with each swing. The axe cutting into a sky angry with heat. They finish the undercut and step back on their planks, both moving at the same pace away from the trunk, like a curtain opening on their work. They survey their progress. One side done. Now the backcut, a hole carved into the side that faces up the mountain. Cutting into the scalp of a tree. This cut must be larger, deeper, it will be the one to force the tree to fall toward the water, its narrow tip facing down. He remembers learning this as a child, his father explaining the puzzle, demonstrating with hands and knives how you must cut a tree down from the direction you don’t want it to fall. Carving into a tree is how you push it away. You nick it first in the front, a flirtation with cutting, a slice of flesh that may help coax the tree forward but won’t bring it down. Then you gouge out the back of the trunk, carving the backcut, axing your way through the dying wood. It is this cut which the tree wants to escape, leaning towards the narrower wound and away from the violence of this larger, more devastating hole.

Now he understands that it is not the hole alone that falls the conquered trunk. He understands the precise synchronicity needed, how the gash must be replaced with wedges of
wood larger than what had been removed, a triangle forced into the tree, prodding it down. He knows the speed and danger of these gestures. Creating a hole and closing it, carving a gash then smashing it full. Each wedge larger than the last. The trunk raped by a piece of its neighbour. A mouth force fed. Cannibalism of trees.

The direction of fall must be controlled. Must not be allowed to respond to the tree’s own leanings, its roots and limbs. The forest a land mine of dead wood. A crowded family, live trees and their ghosts. A snag that can catch in the path of the tree a man has falled, snapping at the base as if in sympathy for this new lost life. A snag waits for a logger’s first mistake, does not listen to the direction of the hill, falls toward the movements of a man, a shadow crossing his chest a split second before the wood cuts him down. The forest’s revenge. Better to run from a bear than a tree. Widowmakers.

Suddenly he sees he has worked too fast, sliced the axe in too far. The back of the tree yawning empty to the forest’s steep rise. A hole deep, he knows the wedge in his father’s hands is not big enough to fill it, thinks of the jokes, the loggers bragging about the size of their wedge, thinks of past nights of laughter, firelight, the flicker of a flame’s shadow across a face, sees all this as he realises that the tree could fall either way, would fall now according to its own desire. Knowledge that rips the air from his chest. The trunk above the plank carved into two lopsided “v”s, facing up and facing down, the touch of sharp noses, the kiss of fishes. One hundred and fifty feet balanced on the perfection of a point. He freezes, sees his father freeze with him like an image caught in a glass. Thinks he will stand here, perch here forever on this plank as he waits for the tree to make its choice. A deck of cards poised for a cough. Will the release of his weight be enough to fall the tree, will it rush the tree
towards him, towards his father? What if they both pull away at the same time, the same slow
movement, could they keep the balance even, keep the symmetry of an algebraic equation, the
promise of mathematics leaving the tree fixed in place? He does not gesture to his father,
afraid the breath of a hand will be enough to sway the trunk. He looks at him, questioning
him with his eyes. And then he realises that he is himself moving, has been moving, he feels
his body move with his father's, move as if not by will, his foot edging backward to match his
father's foot, his arm dropping to match his father's arm, as if with his own retreat the father
is drawing the son's body backward, the repulsion of magnets. Slowly, slowly, he sneaks
himself away from the tree. Each movement so subtle that the tree could not recognise these
men as anything other than a member of its own family, two saplings, two stumps. They
reach the end of the plank and understand that now they have to jump, do it at exactly the
same time, a circus act. Bodies trained to know each other. They hit the ground in an
explosion, legs suddenly released from the weight of resisted movement, legs spinning like a
sawmill, carrying each man in the opposite direction, one right and one left, one uphill and one
down, insurance against the odds, against a tree that can fall only in one direction, take out
one man yet grace the other, neither knowing who would play which part, both running away
from what they had tried to cut down, not looking back, not stopping, waiting for the wooden
sword to pierce them through the heart.

They counted days before they risked a return. Surrendered their tree to weather.
That patch of forest no place for men, no place for tools. They watched a storm rise and fall
across the mountain, knowing it would complete what their axes had begun.
Later under peaceful skies the two men walk careful in their approach to the newly fallen tree, a tree they did not fall, that did not catch them as they ran, a tree that graced them with their lives. The crunch of needles and twigs like the sound of luck, the shame of luck, what a logger should never require. Gratitude a heavy obligation to the woods. A father who will never comment on the exuberant stupidity of his son’s too eager axe, a son who will never smile about the inadequate size of his father’s wooden wedge. Each man a witness to the other’s fear. Breathing in the relief of wind. The tree now safe, dead. Nature taking back her own.

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He talks the woods, carving away the branches by describing each falling tree, his daughter watching the words conjure his boyhood as the windshield wipers whine. He takes his eldest along with him on his Saturday errands, a ten year old girl together with the man she wants most to impress, the two of them joined together on long hurried days divided into lists of wood and glue and nails. He talks to her about his wife, her mother, this woman they both share, a talisman they passed back and forth in the car. Smell of gasoline, fresh cut cedar, wet pavement, and the sound of his voice, always loud and alert, as if he were still shouting against a saw. “Your mother is all over the place,” that’s how he puts it, how he always started out, each syllable sharp and heavy, his frustration spitting out the words. The child nods, the tip of her tongue touching her upper lip, just the tip of her tongue, reaching toward some thing or some word, yet barring it from entry, her own flesh pressed against itself. She listens. She can feel how the insides of her mother’s thighs touch each other, warm and wet, sticky against car seats, against lawn chairs, how the design of the chair holds to her skin when she sits up,
pockets of pink and white, environment seeping into flesh. Hers was a body hard to contain.

All over the house, he says, she leaves everything all over the house. Stacks of TV guide
blocking the front door. A side of beef forgotten in a cupboard. And the laundry, he says, not
dirty but clean laundry left in piles on the muddy basement floor until you couldn’t tell what
had been washed and what hadn’t, it would all be a mess with us trampling over it, it’s on the
floor for Christ’s sake, she’d have to do it all again, that’s what she’s like, she’ll just leave it
there and have to do everything twice, she won’t even notice, she can’t tell the difference,
your mother doesn’t know what anything is.

Her mother carts things home, discoveries at garage sales or discount stores, chairs
and frames and gumboots she shovels into the bowels of the house, prancing casually through
the front door with something tucked into her coat like a child hiding a stray. She knows how
to get things by him. She stops the car on the way back from a warehouse fire or flood, the
bags still smelling slightly of smoke or mildew, and tells her daughter to slip the new clothes
underneath the old, each purchase a hidden layer, a secret skin. When the child enters the
house she is larger than herself.

His wife never wants to leave a party. She laughs loud enough to beat the band,
laughs into this crowd or that one, gets lost in this story or the next, her husband following
her with his eyes red from the haze left by cigarettes, tugging at her skirt to let her know he
wants to go home. She is always just out of his control. She is too much, this woman, too
loud, too big. What she lacks in physical size, she makes up for in colour and fabric and
sound. Her slimness vibrating beyond her. She scatters herself across rooms. He can never
keep track of her family, the names of all those drunks and ditchdiggers who laugh as much as
she does. They are always climbing out of somewhere. They are always eating. If she is offered something free, samples of bologna at Woolworth, fried chicken at Stong’s, she would take it. She never stops talking. She nibbles candy before dinner, consumes a second meal after lunch. She cries watching the commercials for BC Tel. She sleeps too much, she’d lie in bed the whole day if you let her. She’s always late. She has no willpower, he says, none, that woman never knows when to stop.

He tightens his fists on the wheel and shakes his head like a tired priest as he details her crimes. And his child joins him, heady with betrayal as she gathers the evidence, a sweet, sick feeling filling her mouth. She would not be like her. She would not pile clean laundry on dirty concrete. She would not sneak potato chips while vacuuming, lips and fingers guilty with salt. She would not leave pill bottles spilled empty on the bed table and wrap her eyes in her husband’s socks to keep out the light of morning.

He points out other women, this one, that one, never because they are more attractive or younger than his wife, but because they are examples of the kind of person whose body stays in place. Precise nose, careful handbag, hips that don’t swing, hair held tight to their heads. They keep their lips pressed together in a line. His daughter imagines the neatness of their lives, conversations evenly spaced, stomachs and thighs like chiselled wood.

*****

Whenever I try to describe my father, I talk of women. Stories of his mother, his sister, his wife, all these women that surround him, reflect him, arrange him in place. I
recollect them, detail their habits and faults, their angers and wants, imagine the comfort
found in a lap full of crumbs or the warning in a hushed cough, as if I expected to find his
body in theirs, as if I could build him from the fragments of others. Why do I think of him as a
little boy, his short stocky strength hiding behind his love of his hatred for this triad of women,
how they swelled into the space that was his own? Who am I trying to protect? Where is he,
where was he, that booming voice full of bluster and violence, memory that now seems so
empty, so weightless?

Oh, he was there alright, in the basement with his hammer or his saws, cutting
something up, sanding something down, or in the bedroom with his head hugged by a pillow,
sleeping off another overnight shift like recovering from a hangover. We learned quickly how
to navigate these two extremes of sound. He was always building things, from wood or
words, grand designs and mathematical problems with which he trapped us at the dinner table-
another lecture on the uses of electrical currents or the importance of a certain kind of glue.
His sentences filled our plates, echoed off the walls, pushed furniture and food into the
corners of the room. They could not be interrupted, they did not stop, they were his own, and
we listened.

He labelled the objects in the house. Punched letters into thin strips—white on black or
white on red, our names and the name of the object, Erin’s brush, Dad’s camera, so that no
one could get anything mixed up. He didn’t like music, how it soared beyond the room it was
in, could not be contained behind a closed door. Music was a waste of time. Novels,
conversation on the telephone, board games, sunflower seeds left in the shell: so many wasters
of time. He caught me stretched across the couch in my pyjamas reading the comics,
contempt curling his lips. There was work to do, there was always work to do: if I had time to lie around, I had time to do the housework. If I didn’t have any chores left, I should find some. His voice was both authoritative and anxious, his jaw set in place, his face a perfect square, eyes locked on my bare legs, my messy hair, as if the sight of me sprawled out, so inattentive to the rhythm of his orders, the urgency of his projects, threatened to undermine their legitimacy. If you work now, see, he explained, as if pleading for me to confirm his logic, you can set aside free time in the future, save it for a rainy day. He described time like a piggy bank, as if the hours of work would somehow be returned in the future, a promised rest that was always deferred. I waited for this time that would never prove to be free, watched the incessant raindrops spatter across the pavement and wondered when the real rainy day would arrive.

*****

He had to protect us, keep track of our money and our time and our space. He wandered the house finding things we had left in the wrong room. He owned the house, he owned the kitchen and the furniture, the clothes and the food, everything we wore and ate and read and watched, he owned. He could tell us when to eat and when to clear away the table, when to talk and when to shut up. He could snap the TV off or swipe free our bedclothes or take my toothbrush away, change the label from my name to his.
I watched him with a mixture of loathing and pity and fear. Flinched when he entered the room, yet felt embarrassed for him when he talked so loud in public, his voice swallowing all other opinions as he tried to extend his reign of the domestic sphere into the larger world. When he began jogging—three loops around a track multiplied by three makes three miles, three times a week—he wore cut-off jeans, an undershirt, work boots, and keys that snapped against his belt, as if he couldn’t interrupt his day to change into sneakers, wouldn’t spend money on the softer needs of other athletes. I ran with him, ashamed to meet the curious glances of each jogger we passed, pacing myself circle after circle with his steady, angry breath, the click click of metal hitting metal.

Sunlight in his eyes made him look like he was smiling: lids clenched, lips stretched back against the glare. I knew this, yet each time it happened I was surprised, taken aback by sudden calm. We’d be standing outside by a gas station, light reflecting off the cars, and I’d see his mouth pulled wide, eyes wrinkled, and was thrown giddy with the belief that something had made him happy, that perhaps it was me, perhaps it might last.

*****

Her mother had no door to close or lock. Her mother had no room to call her own. She slept in the night or the day, her lazy daytime lethargy illegitimate compared to the urgency of her husband’s naps, the hours he desperately needed back after the bodily expense of a double shift. The room was his, the space parcelled out according to his needs, keeping
time to the flicker of his digital watch. When he slept, the children knew enough not to enter. They knew the fear that snapped at their spine when they forgot he was there, when they ran crashing exuberant down the hall or laughed too loud in the kitchen, when they forgot to whisper. Their mother they could always interrupt. Even when she slept, they could creep into the bedroom and ask her something and she'd answer, a groggy closed-eyed "it's under to cupboard to the left," or "you'll have to ask your father," as if inside her body the boundaries between sleeping and waking had softened, quivered, become less determined, one slipping into the other. She wore an earplug--only one, she didn't like the feel of it pressing it into the chamber of her ear on the side where her head hit the pillow, she plucked the earplug out each time she rolled over and stuck it into the other ear, her body always awake enough to do this, plucking and inserting, in the middle of dreams. The earplug did not mark her as separate from the house, the earplug attached her irreconcilably to it, marking her dependence on a knot of wax, her body vulnerable and open to the meaningless doorslamming television-squeaking noise of her home. Every night, she had to plug the hole. Tossing and turning, plugging and unplugging and plugging again.

During the day the earplug sat on the floor by the bed, one end pointy and the other round, sometimes smashed flat by a wayward ankle, sometimes red at the tip where her blood had seeped into it, the shiny beige wax marbled by specks of red, an exotic jewel. With nightly use the wax hardened and shrunk, dried up, until she had to pull out a new one, stripping it free of the freshness of pink cotton baton and sticking it in, that wax promise of separation, of uninterrupted sleep, the old earplug discarded like the curled up corpse of a fly.
Then the sudden afternoon scream of the saw. The plug couldn’t bar her from that noise, that cutting cutting cutting into her dreams.

******

Children were objects to be controlled. They were part of his body, pieces that had fallen off, limbs that suddenly refused to obey a message from his brain. When his first child fussed in her highchair he ran a metal spoon across her knuckles. When she wouldn’t go inside on a bright summer evening, he grabbed her by the wrist and carried her up the stairs, her weight hanging by one arm that twirled in his fist, bone ripped free from the socket. When he heard the two girls giggling—each chord exploding higher than the next, exploding free from their room at night, they were awake again, the second daughter’s face bobbing upside down from the top bunk, her knees and feet wrapped around the bedposts, night-gown tucked into underwear, hair swaying like a flame—he left his TV, thumped his boots in a fast and heavy thud down the hall, and before she could cough back the last giggle, before she could twist herself up and into bed, he swiped his palm back and forth across her legs, back and forth, like waving away smoke, like swatting at a fly, the sound of each smack as loud as her screams as she dropped into his arms.

There were lines in the house: no water in the living room, no laughing in the kitchen. The house did not belong to children. Spoons, belts, brushes, spatulas, wet towels: any object, labelled or unlabelled, could turn against them, leaving wide red stripes across backs or legs or
bottoms, a mark that would fade into white, would fade paler than the skin around it, as if the mark had gone too far in its attempt to hide itself.

After each episode he lay in bed with a pillow over his head like a man trying to smother his strength. His first daughter peeked into the room and listened for his breath, worried that it might stop, that this time she might have stopped it.

*****

The first daughter twists the skin on her sister’s shoulder like turning a dial, switching something on, winding something up, the timer above the stove, or the crank on the back of a toy soldier. The child’s face splits open into the shock of a cry, but she is too small to identify the cause of the pain, turns toward her sister instead of away, her eyes searching her sister’s eyes for protection as if she were solace and not source. The older girl holds her in place as she screams, as their father’s feet pound up the steps—the saw abandoned, the saw left to whine and cut and scream by itself—she pinches skin white. Her sister’s flesh so openly vulnerable, as available as her own. Fingers finding a wrinkled fold, a twisted letter. And suddenly he is here, he has arrived, as if manifested by her violence, as if hurryng to answer its call. Her hand opening the letter, her hand cupped gently over this mark she has left, this mark he cannot see. Tented over it, keeping it safe, her palm caressing the line back into the skin.

*****
The eldest was a sick child. Her body turned on itself. Allergies, asthma, repeated infections: her stomach and skin and lungs rejected her environment, refused to let the outside come in. Nights on the front porch, wet cement under her nightgown as her father tried to calm her after an argument, coaxing air back into her body like quieting a frightened animal, urging the air inside, the sound of his voice soft, unfamiliar, soft only then, only when she was sick, his voice pacing her breath, her breath following his voice, in, out, in, out.

Her sickness drew her father toward her, yet marked her body as her mother’s own. Fragility separated her from the second child, that girl’s muscled energy, flippant leaps and dares. Sickness aligned her body with the weakness of all those other women whose presence haunted the house. Her father was suspicious of her symptoms, as if he couldn’t tell between what was real and what wasn’t, couldn’t distinguish between an illness and its representation. He let her walk on a broken leg until she began puking from the pain, told her to stop complaining when her appendix ached and swelled and finally burst, stomach tight like a water balloon, fragments of the hidden organ floating in residual liquid and debris. Flesh that had exploded from the inside, body choking on its own poison. Stop your goddamn belly aching, his voice louder and louder as she swallowed the irony of his words.

*****

Appendix. A shattered piece of herself to be found and cut out. Scar healing like a mouth sewn shut.

*****
What does it feel like, the snap of his skin against hers? Open palm meeting arms or legs or face or buttocks or back, how he yanked her night-gown up to her neck. Fabric bunched in his fist like a rope. The flinching spasm of her muscles against the attack. The sharp sudden chill of skin where his palm hits its mark.

The edges of herself burn cold. His hand shapes her body.

Here she is. And here. And here.

She learns that the skin comes to knows itself through pain just as a boundary can be drawn only through is violation.

But the body is also lost. Fragmented and stretched and torn. Gone. Flinches involuntary when hit, spasm of eyes, skin quickening at the hostile hand. Body lost not through its absence but through its presence, the stubborn stagnating persistence that is not herself. Flails thick and dumb, physicality a mistake, flesh a miss-placed forgotten thing left in her father’s way, why didn’t she lock it up, hide it? Her fault, these limbs that catch the air. Organs that thump and thump against the edge of sense. Clumsy wordless needy things. Flesh and its want want want. As if her body had reached out to find his, stumbled upon the knotted reassurance of a smack.

*****

Years later when she stubs a toe, she is angry not just at the wayward foot, the carelessness of her steps, but at her whole body, the shooting pain a reminder of its crimes. To exist, to eat and sleep, the blundering aimless unworking stupidity of flesh.

*****
He had a way of pulling his children up by the arm, swinging a small resistant body above the ground by this one limb. He'd find them in the backyard and yank them inside. Or he'd find them in one room and toss them into another. Thump of dangling body hitting the wall. Scream and cry of dangling body, the limbs hanging and falling like a part of himself he'd chosen to ignore.

*****

He never left the woods, how a man showed his strength by roping a log, that thick wooden bull, and dragging the weight of the forest over his shoulder.

*****

Arm out of socket, hanging like a dead thing, like a branch snapped from a trunk, like a robin falling wingless once its body has hit the invisible shock of glass. Flight and reach and windlift stopped. Intent stopped. If she stood up now, if she crept away from him, the arm would sway slightly, swing with her movements without her willing it to do so. Rocking as if in sympathy with her body, but no longer inside its aims. Swinging just off-key, just left or right of the beat, just shy of the rhythm of her body's time. A bag hanging off her shoulder. Her mother's purse as she prances through a mall.

Dead thing.

When she thinks "bend elbow," when she thinks "open hand," the arm cannot obey. It is a limb torn from thought, an object split from its word.
She stares at it as if it belongs to someone else. The sharpness of the pain is an invasion. It does not emerge from her own body. It knifes its way in. She imagines tearing the arm off completely like picking at a hang-nail, how a finger returns over and over to that same jagged edge, worries it, the pleasure of pulling at it, that reassuring repeated flicker of expected pain, then the final satisfaction of ripping it off, flicking it away, returning the body to its proper smoothness, its promise of containment.

Arm gone, dead thing gone.

Will it leave a hole? Will the skin heal, a shiny shoulder stump?

The lump in the backyard where the maple had been, her father planting grass over the mound as if the tree had never grown.

“It was dangerous. I had to cut it down. It could have snapped in two in a storm. It could have smashed through the roof and killed us all as we slept.”

She wanted the gouge to remain, that thick part of the trunk that becomes indistinguishable from the vegetation that surrounds it, the tree’s stubborn mossy skin. The axed up pieces surrounding it like broken echoes. The shirts her father and grandfather had stripped off and tossed over their shoulders as they swung their arms into and into the tree. Wings of flannel plaid. Flying woodchips. Spit of woodchips like a skunk spraying against attack. Red plaid on woodchips on grass. The earth’s wound. Evidence of the men’s last hour of work.

After the satisfaction of tearing off a hang-nail, there’s a kind of emptiness, vertigo, as the finger begins its search for the next uneven bit of nail or skin. What to do now? What to
feel? Body restless, afraid of the impossibility of sustaining this unity, this pause. The anticipation of inevitable failure. Always finding another edge to smooth, to tear.

Each time she looks at her arm it becomes something else, as if by ripping it from its socket her father has unhinged it from its meaning, swung it senseless and separate from the body like a word ripped from the necessary embrace of other words. A lifeless limb swinging through images that crack and join and crack again as she struggles to sit up on the stairs.

******

My mother wrapped me in her clothes. My father could not look at me without marking my body with his own. I had won them both.

******

An autumn night, the year construction workers began burning down trees in the next block to make room for a new row of houses. Her father smells the smoke. He slams the front door and runs after the source, returning half an hour later to wrap potatoes in tinfoil and scoop his eldest out of her bed, swinging his Mac jacket over her pyjamas. A potato weighting each pocket, they walk toward the fire. She leans close to him and tests her waking eyes on the orange that leaps and sputters through the dark of the trees, her palms filled with the solid round comfort of potato.

The ring of firewatchers opens and she and her father close the gap. His hands swipe clean a log so his daughter can sit down, her eyes fire-lit and dreamy beneath the now bright faces of men. Her feet wrapped warm in her father’s gumboots, the heat of the flames almost
melting the rubber, her slippers tucked inside like a sleeping animal. He chats with the builders as he waits for the potatoes, shouts proud over the cracks and pops of the flames that licked the tinfoil black. Questions about plans for the foundation, the windows, the roof. Hoots and clapping as another log loses itself to the fire.

He smiles at them all, the circle of men. Presses the potato with his finger and thumb to break the skin, steam hugging the warm white flesh, and her tongue burning with it, a speck of tinfoil caught in a back tooth like an extra nerve. Her father and the borrowed salt shaker the men pass easy from hand to hand. Chewing, talking.

She is his son. She can sit in front of a bonfire in the middle of the night with these men and nod her tired head to measurements.

*****

His eldest would be the child who was most like him. If she was a montage of the other women in his life—the feigned sicknesses of her grandmother, the real sickness of her aunt—she was also the first born, the one to watch her parents with the acuity that comes only to those who know they are in danger of being displaced. She was a careful child, rare to complain, sickly yet always quick to meet her father in his strange tests of strength and endurance—lugging leftover wood to the backyard or hiking for hours with no lunch but root tea. She nodded when her father lectured, chattered along with his explanations, matching his theories with her own elaborate narratives that could withstand interruption. She understood that the world was unsafe, that she would need to hold her body against both external and
internal chaos, measure and control what she could. She stayed at school until the janitor
closed the building. She made up test scores, greeting her father at the door each night with
the same perfect number. She ran through a year’s worth of assignments in a single week,
then asked her teacher what to do next, hurried to meet the oncoming expectation before it
could surprise her, as if in one punishing rush she could finish with the obligation of
childhood.

She knew things the second girl did not. She made sure that her existence counted in
ways that her sister’s never could. If it was anger that he expressed towards his first born—the
disappointed yet attentive anger that one would reveal when working with a prized piece of
wood that had split with the nail—what he showed toward the next daughter was contempt.
He had no time for this girl who could not possibly be his own, who skipped off indifferent
and careless after his tirades, spinning cartwheels across the front lawn. She of the smart
aleck mouth, quick legs, hair that spun around her head the colour of dirty hay. The second
child. The one who could never be first. He was no longer the small boy pushed away by a
mother whose arms were well filled by a new and wordless sister. He would help the first
born guard her place.

*****

The two girls circled each other. The second watched her father hit the first, smirking
when she had not been caught. Limber and quick, she slipped back in the top bunk, slid her
body against the wall so that he couldn’t reach her without climbing the ladder, without
getting in the bed. The eldest slept closer to the ground; he would strike her first. The middle child held herself and waited. He might break the spoon across her sister's back, he might never get to her at all.

Or the first daughter watched her father hit the second, the bad child, the one who would not listen to his words, spun away from them as effortlessly as if he were shouting in water, as if she had willed herself deaf. He would find her at the neighbour's, lift her up and carry her home, her limbs like fireworks, arms and legs flailing against his angry hand. Rows of faces peaking out of windows, then a quick flap of fabric, curtains drawn against her screams.

Each tried to outlast the other. The first daughter begging him to stop, her words tumbling against his hands, each hit a scratch on a record, a hiccup. The second daughter taunting him to keep going, to try harder, her voice more flat which each assault, refusing to give him the spectacle of pain, the triumph of tears. Two girls trading strategies, switching places without foresight, without plan, selling stubbornness for submission, deception for honest loss, no longer sure whose body they aimed to punish, who they were trying to protect.

*****

I wanted him to break her. I wanted her body to crack.

*****
If his second child was his enemy, the one who threatened once again to displace the first, she was also an unacknowledged ally, outsider in a private dance. Like him she understood that her mother found something in the first born’s face that she could not find in theirs. Her mother wailed when the fist born was hurt as if her own body had been punched. She sneaked clothes for her, past husband and second daughter, secreted overstuffed bags into closets to make up for whatever buffer she had failed to erect. Purchases to be hidden from her husband, from his careful columns of money in and money out.

The eldest wouldn’t let her sister see her changing. She twisted under her covers to slip on the new skirts and blouses, pulling on a second body, another skin to hide what had been battered and bruised. Her mother making her anew.

*****

I could not let my sister be wrapped in my mother’s clothing, in the layers of fabric she sneaked home. If my mother saw herself in my sister’s eyes, found herself in my sister’s body, I would disappear.

*****

He stopped hitting his daughters when their bodies began to change, first one, then the other’s, that quiet swelling ache in the breast, harbinger of the last of his violent attention, the last of handprints and bruises and parallel white lines, as if the ache were a wound’s replacement, the mourning of flesh. Who or what did he see in these two young women, in
the open shame of their growing, in the surprise of a body’s betrayal? He looked away when
he spoke, looked beside or behind their shapes, avoiding the evidence of a body’s lack of
response to his rules. The power of flesh, the impotence of his words. His nods filled the
pauses in his lectures. He bridged each gap by answering himself, trying to loop his two girls
back into the circle, to grip these now foreign shapes back inside his lines. The direction of
his eyes just beyond the edge of a shoulder, beyond the wisps of hair, focussed intently on a
point outside his daughter’s bodies the way a dog trainer would teach a dog to sit by staring at
an imaginary mark on the ground, his pupil gesturing toward where he wanted the animal to be.

His eldest felt herself drawn to this invisible shadow, a residual trace, this other
daughter walking just outside herself. A girl whose shape would not change, who would
never grow breasts or hips like her mother. A girl as a boy. She wanted to occupy a memory,
longed to slip into a lost shape, return to that small and familiar corner where her body would
once again be her father’s, flesh made real by eye, by hand.

*****

Things went missing. At first just a shoe, one earring, never a pair. Then her jeans
were gone, returning the next week as if they had never left. Or she found them in the
basement, sawdust clinging to the denim. She became more careful when she hung up her
coat, closing the closet doors then opening them to make sure that the coat was still there,
that it hadn’t walked away. She could not trust things, these objects that fell from her body,
turned against her, moving of their own accord.
Are you sure you didn’t put it there yourself?

Her new dress stashed under the driver’s seat in the Pinto. Her blouse under her sister’s bed.

You’re always leaving things all over the place.

She walked the rooms, gathered her pieces, tried to put everything back where it belonged.

Maybe she didn’t know it was yours.

A hole cut in a sleeve. Narrow lines like angular grins scissored along the hem. A dress sliced at the waist like a body cut in two.

*****

She walks home from school dreading each new discovery, objects swirling around her body like a hallucination. She tries magic games, believes that if she focuses on a certain blouse all day, if she carries its image with her from classroom to classroom, never letting it drop from her thoughts, it will not be cut up. She will protect it, keep it from being destroyed. It will still exist when she returns. As she approaches the house she holds tight to each image as if representation could not be betrayed.

When this method fails, she reverses the ritual. When she realises that only her favourite things go missing, only those things she had been planning to wear or use, she begins to try to prevent the objects she especially likes from entering my mind. She imagines she can keep an object in place by never remembering it, by never imagining its role in her future, by never making it anything other than itself. She begins to fear that her sister is inside her,
reading her thoughts. If she could defeat anticipation, she could trick her. If she wants nothing, looks forward to nothing, then her clothes would be left alone. Desire harboured loss, representation killed the thing.

*****

*Her word against yours.*

*****

She watches her younger sister at dinner, her quick fingers, the way she won’t look at her father’s end of the table, nods when he speaks but keeps her eyes to her plate, a silent barricade. Sucks a chicken wing and swings her feet. Appears to hum, but there is no sound. She counts what her sister eats, bite by bite, from salad to dessert—wing and breast, mouthful of turnip, five forks worth of mashed potato, second helpings of pudding. Her own number must be lower. At night she subtracts what she ate from what her sister did. Five hundred calories, plus the chocolate milk at lunch makes six hundred and fifty. The number rides the day, floats like a remainder, something of her sister that she has cut from her flesh. She collects these residual traces, these consumptions outside her limit, sews them together like scraps. A clean simplicity emerges from her narrowing flesh. She removes the body’s excess as if doing away with the need for clothing.

*****
Six bites less of chicken, no potato, no dessert. I subtract my meal from my sister's. Our food fits together, the larger portion wrapping the smaller like Russian dolls, mine inside hers. I make her wear me.

******

Her younger sister in the corner of the closet trimming long skirts, removing sleeves and collars, ripping open backs. She slices the seams out of a dress, the pieces falling away like a side of beef. She cuts sections out of one blouse and sews them into another. She stitches scraps together to fit her small frame, hiding these crafted outfits in the back of the closet or under the bed, creating a secret body from the one her mother had given someone else.

******

When she finds something missing, she doesn't eat. When she reaches back into the closet and feels the tattered edge of a shirt, strands of fabric brushing listlessly against her fingers, she gouges into her next meal. Cuts into it, enacting her revenges. Lunch or dinner, gone. In this way she strikes a balance. The food that does not enter her body, that does not calm her stomach's dull throb, somehow cancels out these tears in her clothes, replacing external holes with internal ones. A little less of her flesh to match with her shrinking wardrobe.

******
Scraps of fabric left on a hanger like meat on a bone. The triangular metal shoulders snapping against each other, high pitched and hollow, skeletons of wire.

*****

My t-shirts and jeans in the highschool, not crammed in lockers or garbage cans, but floating by me alive in the hall. A familiar colour catches my eye, or I hear one of my sister’s friends laughing, and I know that my sister has given something else away. My pants, my pin or hairband, my leather satchel. I see myself walking towards me.

*****

*How do you know it’s her?*

*****

At night I dream her beside my bed, the blade of a giant pair of scissors entering my flesh.

*****

Sister smirking behind mother’s face, behind father’s voice.

*****
Her father doesn't make her sister stop. Each time she presents the evidence--another t-shirt sliced in half, or a skirt cut to her size--he acts as if she has imagined the incident, as if the object she was holding were simply the residue of a dream. Yet he buys a lock and chain for her bedroom door, a slim golden key to keep out this threat that could not be real. Each morning he asks her if she has left anything out, if she has locked everything inside. What was forgotten was fair game. He seems pleased with this arrangement. Her room the one safe square in the house, like a body rigidly controlled, a mouth closed up.

******

He doesn't punish his second daughter: to chastise or hit her would have meant giving her more respect than she deserved. Instead he begins bringing the sliced up clothes to his wife, presenting them to her as his eldest had presented them to him, laying them at her feet like the kill of a cat. This was proof of a mother's failure, evidence of children out of control. He held half of a new blouse, shook it at her, ordering her to examine closely what her daughter had done. Look at what you've created, he says, I've written her off. He repeated this last phrase loud enough for the thief to hear, as if his dismissal could sever their connection, as if words alone could make this second child disappear.

******

His wife--guilty for all she had given her first daughter that she did not want to share with anyone else--she does not let her eyes rest on what this second child had done. She takes
her eldest aside, not to console her but to whisper that her sister didn’t know that the clothes were not her own, that the girl must have thought she was slicing into her own clothes, had somehow mistook what was in her sister’s closet for what was in hers, as if their sizes were the same, their bodies indistinguishable, as if even these two sisters couldn’t tell each other apart. Her mother holds to the strange comfort of this explanation, does not stop to question the logic of this defence. She believes her second child’s gestures each time she shrugs when asked where something had been hid, each time she looks surprised at another torn piece of fabric found under the bed. She does not express curiosity about why her daughter would mistake one body for another or even why a girl would cut up those clothes she thought were her own.

*****

This second child, she was nothing to him. She was his wife’s problem now. He punished her not by hitting her or by yelling at her but by not bothering to do so. Pacing past her in the hallway as if he couldn’t see her face.

I’ve written her off.

Not written of her or to her, but written her off, where the act of writing could kill a body.

*****

I’m going to take something of yours and you’re not going to know what it is.
He would fix everything, he would hold everything together.

If you'd locked it in your room, it wouldn't have been cut up.

If I am small enough I can sneak inside her. I can steal her back.

I cannot fill these pieces of fabric with more than they can hold. Cannot trust these holes that would spill my body like water through a sieve.

I lean into my hunger. It is an ache, a loss both comforting and terrible, something I cannot define but cannot escape. It is the hunger of my sister. It is my sister. I force her to hunger. I hunger for her.

For my sister the confusion between our clothing was not enough. She went to the motor vehicle branch and had a new driver's license made up, replacing her name with mine. An identification card arrived in the mail, her newly labelled face. How did she do this, what
did the syllables sound like when she told the clerk who she was? Did she speak quietly, apprehensive and alert, or did she just fling the words across the counter, tossing my name as casually as if it had always belonged to her? Before they took her picture they must have asked her for my secret code. It was only through my mother’s maiden name that my sister could pass as myself, this code I chose as if no one else could know my mother the way I did, as if no one else could say her word. My mother’s name—the shibboleth intended to stop such a passage—became the vehicle to possessing my own.

My sister slipped through one woman to reach another, stepped into my identity as easily as pulling on my clothes. But did she use my mother’s name to reach mine or my name to reach my mother? Who was she trying to sign away?

I find this pale, plastic coated image—my sister’s face, my name—stashed in her top drawer, together with a belt, a spoon, a brush, objects which had once been snapped across our skin. She has punched holes in the belt, a man’s belt, two parallel holes so that she can cinch it small enough to fit her waist.

What was this strange alchemy, black magic of objects and names and faces? Did she keep these household weapons to stop my father or to encourage him? Who or what was to become the next target of his violence—the face or the name? his daughter or her representation?

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The police phone and tell me that they have me in custody for shoplifting and would I please come down to pick myself up. I stutter, begin to assure them that they don’t have me,
that I am myself, not her, that I am standing here, right here, on this end of the phone, I haven’t taken a thing, I am not a thief, the thief is my sister, she’s the one, she’s the girl they have caught, not me, the picture she has handed them is a fraud, she has stolen my name, but I am home, I am right here, I have not stolen anything. But my voice wavers and I realise I cannot explain where or who I am, that I don’t know how to take myself back.

******

No one sees her, no one catches her or holds her back as she slips into me, opens my mail, swipes my cheques and deposits the money into her own account, signing for us both, her pen now intimate with the curves of my name, tracing a signature more original than my own.

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And finally I am small enough to fit her. I sneak into her closet. I steal jeans and a sweat-shirt, the comfort of rough, the comfort of soft. I wrap myself in her. Over her clothes I slide my own. I wear her inside me.

******

I wear her to school. Underneath my pants are her pants, underneath my blouse is her blouse. The extra padding hiding all that I have managed to subtract. The layers hug thinness, buffer bone. Each stolen item replaces a missing part of myself. It corrects the
balance. The columns cancel each other out. Fabric filling my clothing like the shape of a
body. I have stolen her back.

*****

No one can tell, the students walking by me in the halls, the teachers smiling at me as I
sit nodding in the front row, no one can see that she is inside me, tucked inside my clothing,
outside my skin.

*****

The body becomes colder and colder as if anticipating its own death, slab of marble,
cold hollow clink of the doorway to a morgue. The body in a slow freeze. Conserving
energy, fighting all expenditure, resisting the frenetic spending spending spending of flesh.
Worn down to the bare minimum, to corporeality’s common denominator, its last essence.
This is a muscle. This is an organ. This is a bone.

*****

Always there are at least three layers. Underneath her own clothing, she hides the t-
shirts and jeans she has stolen from her sister. And on top of her clothing, she wears her
father’s Mac jacket and her father’s down coat. The body’s last defence, a final attempt to
retain itself, its stubborn belief in the promise of warmth. Fabric circling her like the rings of a
tree.

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Sister under sister under father.
And where do the rings start? Is there a core to a tree, one long pure inner line that is the tree’s essence, its truth, or do the rings simply repeat inside and inside and inside, always another circle inside another circle, a year inside a year?

How much of the body does she need to subtract in order to reach it?

How to punish a girl who steals the punishment?

Each layer of fat a piece of clothing I strip off.

The more of her body she strips away—the colder, sharper, slower her flesh—the more clothing she must wear. The layers of her sister and her father. An external corporeality. As if in the effort to simplify the body, prune it to its core, she becomes inextricably bound by its layers. The act of resistance becomes a re-inscription of what she most wants to escape. The act of destroying the body becomes a form of creating it. She is a line and a system of rings. A stripped essence and an excess. Herself and the residual trace of others. Death and the life that it cuts into shape.
Her revenge is asymmetrical. She never cuts up her sister’s clothing. She wants to fit inside the unity, the symmetry, of their unruptured shape. She wants to swallow her whole.

*****

Now she knows when she can eat, she knows how. There is a pair of her sister’s gymnastic tights—trim, slick, black, the kind that holds the body in place, fixes it firmly, gracefully, so it can fling itself across a balance beam, dance and twist and spin without falling off wood’s narrow horizon—she sneaks these and slips them on underneath her sister’s jeans which she wears underneath her own jeans, underneath the logging blanket she wraps around her knees as she prepares herself to eat. She likes the smoothness of the tights, their slick black sheen that makes her limbs more certain and solid—black like a streak of ink, calligraphy, a hieroglyph—and yet also makes her limbs fade away, erasing them into the dark. The fragility of lines. Absence and presence at once.

Now she wears the tights every day. Careful to wash them by hand so her sister won’t find them in the machine. Suds filling the bathroom sink, the dark shape floating, filling with water, sinking, surrendering under the force from the tap. Her shower-wet hair heavy across her shoulders as she scrubs the crotch. She doesn’t hang the tights up to dry. They’d be gone by morning. She lies them underneath her bed, spreading them out carefully so they will keep their shape, the flat black legs sleeping underneath her like a shadow cut from yet loyal to the body.

*Tights.* She likes the name, the one-syllable snap of it, tightness, firmness, its abrupt certainty, how the waistband forms a ring around her stomach to tell her when she’s had enough. This is where her body ends. This is where she stops. Without these tights, she
might keep eating. Her body would grow and grow outside the limits of the slick black cloth, the food punching holes in her, exploding her, the food stretching and swelling and bursting beyond her skin. Once her calves and thighs and stomach are tucked inside the long black lines, the fabric as comforting as the numbers that pulse through her legs, she knows she can part her lips. She can open her mouth, she can eat—something small, something measured and counted and watched—she can let the food enter her without fearing she will grow outside her sister’s shape. A system of closure, of containment, enables the risk of opening. She feeds her sister’s body and not her own.

I'm going to cut up something of yours and you won't know what it is.

She knows where she is, can feel the triangles of her ass against the toilet seat, how bone meets porcelain, a solid ache. Or her shoulder blade brushing sheets, pressing through skin rubbed red raw at each pressure point as if the bone were trying to escape flesh, a wire hanger protruding through a sleeve. Wakes from dreams and feels spasm of stomach, hip angular piercing the mattress, yes, she is here. She picks at bed sores, pulls the scab to enlarge each circle, each entry point, her body pockmarked by extra mouths. False doors.
Fingers pushing at flesh ripe red under skin. Could push food through each hole, a direct transfusion, bypass the lips that cannot swallow, cannot speak.

The pulse of hunger. It roots her to the hour. It floods her belly, weights her limbs, hovers inside and outside, time chaser, shape changer. It is a small man who laughs at night, waits in dreams, small old crooked man tapping a cane against bone, each laugh pouring into empty stomach, small sharp laugh poking walls prodding walls no room for food, no room, no room. It is a woman who taunts her from the kitchen, inside the swelling evening smell of stew and dumplings, inside the hum of the fridge, holds a loaf of bread in her arms like a baby, the soft whiteness unsliced. It is scissors the dull metal clack of a blade running through flesh, cutting organs, cutting bone. It is a box the size of her body, death she folds herself inside, feels its wooden edges, the surprise of splinters entering her skin.

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Bones like blades that carve her flesh from the inside. A body sharp enough to cut through air.

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A body become a line, a tree stripped of its limbs.

*****
She dreams her sister is a pair of scissors, legs become blades that open wide, scissors sneaking into her room at night, slicing through her closet, shards of dresses, t-shirts, jeans unseamed, cloth corpses on hangers, the metal naked clang clanging against the night, he’ll get angry about the noise, the noise, metal clicking metal, sound of scissors, clash of metal hovering over her chest, silver flashing in the light from the hall, sliver of light through crack of door, sister open above her, closing legs to slice through the body heavy with sleep, trapped with sleep, the blades holding her hugging her, sharpness into skin, one cut yawning red on either side of her chest, one cut alone on each side now opening wider reaching to the core, through her ribs, crack of ribs, will slice her right in half, cut her in two as the scissors join, the blades closing, legs closing, each cut reaching rushing to meet its sibling.

She overcame me. Circle to my line. Woman to my child.

Sheets of cookie dough she consumed in lethargic bites in front of the TV’s colourful frantic blink, her legs tossed over the edge of the Lazy-boy. Frito’s shoplifted and finished before she’d hitched a ride home. Rounder and rounder she grew. Her body fattening on my spent flesh.
And my body began to spin. It began to move faster and faster until even my father couldn’t stop it. Wings of a hummingbird. Roll of a wheel. Reach your arm in the machine and you’ll lose a hand.

*******

For months she eats almost nothing but popcorn. A magazine article claims that popcorn contains almost no calories, can be eaten without limit, without ever making a place for itself inside flesh. Food from angels. Food without substance, without weight. She fists the dry white clouds to her face, the saltless, butterless, wooden puffs of corn. Paper food, between her teeth a comforting bulk that fills the hollow of her mouth. The white flesh pulped. Kernels caught along the gum line. One kernel always remaining, the meal’s residue, the meal’s payment, narrowness stabbed behind a molar. She works it for hours with the tip of her tongue, presses it deeper into the flesh, worrying the fragile ache, how the skin of the kernel hugs the curve of her tooth as if formed exactly for it, as if never wanting to let go. How she couldn’t tell exactly where it was or even whether it had finally been dislodged, her tongue twisting around the phantom annoyance, around the neighbouring gums that pulse in sympathetic pain. She chases the kernel’s thin edge, thin memory of eating.

Corn popped by air, by the swirl of invisible heat, no cooking liquids, no testing or stirring. The machine she finds at a hardware store, the one she and her father had paced through when she was a child, the two of them sifting nails through large and small hands. At the checkout she remembers the gadgets he gathered home, pulling them out of the paper bag.
as proudly as if he had invented them himself, another tool to wash his daughters without
touch or a toy to cut onions without tears. Now she has her own tool, the sturdiness of metal
and plastic, cylindrical mouth that holds the hard golden grains. She protects it, keeps it
separate from the toaster and blender, keeps it pushed back along the wall above the locked
liquor cabinet. She uses it in the kitchen, or sometimes sneaks it to the living room, though it
is precarious on the carpet, always ready to tip.

The popcorn shoots into the bowl, spits out fast from the machine’s angry mouth. She
can eat her way through three or four bowls in an evening, sitting for hours at the kitchen
table, chewing. Jawing the food like a cow her cud. It’s not the taste she wants, it’s this
repetition of her teeth coming together and apart, tearing and smashing, the internal click.
Eating as exercise. Her jaw hard at work, her hand back and forth from the bowl. She
imagines her body burning more energy than it consumes. Her stomach swollen with nothing,
with a fibrous pulp. Each evening she is reassured by the consistency of the taste and colour
and texture, each meal exactly the same as the next, yesterday folding effortlessly into
tomorrow. How it takes up time, swallows time, how she has to eat and eat and eat before
the bowl is gone. Fists it to her face without measurement, without care. Reaches for more
before her saliva has begun to moisten the last mouthful. She props the bowl between the legs
of a book, one hand holding the page as the other cups the swollen grains to her lips. She
must do this each time she reads or studies or writes, cannot concentrate without the comfort
of this rhythm, the white of the page and the white of the corn, each kernel an idea, a word,
her mouth eating language.

*****
Her mother and father do not like to watch her eat. They sit at the table and cut their meat, their eyes charting a course around her as if drawing her shape by its negation. She starts the machine in the middle of dinner. The shrill interruption like the noise of her father’s saw. She sets the bowl down on top of her empty plate, forgoing knife and fork, forgetting taste and appetite with the endless sound and rhythm of chewing. Hand back and forth, back and forth, a waving sign, the flicker of a railway light separating her from the voice of her father. Her jaw up and down in a parody of speech.

She uses it at night. She stands in the flat light cast by the bulb over the stove, and covers the machine in a towel to shelter the sound, disguise it like a woman veiled. Each kernel jabbing at the towel, curiosity’s finger. It will wake them anyway, the whining electric buzz, the steady staccato fusillade of bursting corn. The noise will triumph over the creak of a door, over the sound of footsteps down the hall, her father bursting into the kitchen in his bare feet and boxer shorts, kernels catching his heels like small speed traps. He will stand with his hands on his hips and yell. He will unplug the machine. But he cannot stop her. This is what she will eat. The night-time racket of exploding food.

She waits for them to return to sleep then pours the kernels into the machine, a rattled confession of all the events in the day, the stares of strangers, the insults spit out from her father’s mouth, the clothes found cut from their hangers like carcasses stripped from the bone. She pours it all in, set it spinning, destruction’s tumbling noise.

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If you weren't so messy, if you kept your things locked in your room, then she couldn't find it to cut up, could she?

*****

It is late at night, one, perhaps two, and she is crouched over the kitchen table studying for a test, munching popcorn and memorising quotes from Macbeth as her father enters the room like an apparition set free from the page. He is just home from a double shift, the left side of his shirt untucked, his tool belt dragging low his jeans. He spreads honey and peanut butter over bread and sits down to work his way through the sandwich with a regularity mechanical and tired. When he begins to talk, his mouth full, spit spraying, bits of bread caught on his lips, his words tumble across her notes, fill the bowl, make reading or eating impossible. His lecture tonight is forceful and sharp, as if all of the energy of his wilted body has been funnelled upwards to his voice. The topics as predictable as her meal: the threat of sloth, the importance of protein, the annoying habits of his wife. She gets up from the table to make more popcorn, although she hasn't yet finished her first bowl. She turns the machine on until the kernels have just begun to explode, then turns it off, waiting for them to cool, her hands cupping warmth, circling the machine to keep it in place. She likes to slow the kernels this way, to bring them just to the point of explosion and then stop, heating them twice, each one haunted at the core with the faint taste of burnt. Her father does not interrupt his speaking. The boom of his voice competes with the rattle of the corn, his words fading and returning as she switches the machine on then off, on then off, tearing away entire sections of his speech. The shift in sound when a car enters a tunnel, the solid hum erasing the
colours and noises of landscape. Pieces falling off her father's language like plaster from a wall.

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You never know where anything is. Don't come crying to me if it wasn't locked in your room.

*****

He catches her in the kitchen, contempt twisting his face as she hovers around the machine, protecting the plug from his hands. She is hungry. She has not eaten in two days. She cannot let him turn it off.

"Keeping up the whole goddamn house you sick selfish bitch there is something wrong with your goddamn head is this how you eat is this how a human being eats look at you look at your stinking body you are crazy you are nothing but a crazy animal you are sick sick sick."

Her mouth is full. She is trapped here, cornered by him in the middle of the night, stopped with this noisy shameful pleasure. He rummages through the drawers, fists a butcher knife and lurches towards her, his body glowing white in the weak light, the knife too large, too real. The popcorn clogs her voice so that she is screaming as if in a dream, her body cracking with a sound that cannot escape. He does not cut her. The knife does not grace her skin. He yanks out the plug, lines the cord across the counter and smashes the blade down, into it, through it, again and again, carving the scar of each cut into the counter, slicing the cord into thin black marks, the internal wires curling upward red and green and blue, an
animal's steaming innards. He has killed it. He gathers the pieces, slides them off the counter like cupping crumbs, then tucks the body of the machine under his arm, never letting go of the knife. He opens the back door and walks out onto the porch, bare feet on the slick surface, rain pelting him as he pitches everything out to the night air, a fireworks dark and wooden.

Her cries are swallowed by rain as she runs after her machine, scratches for it, tearing her fingers through the grass in the backyard, collecting the frantic scattered parts, awkward shapes holding moonlight and water. A doll's limbs. Brokenness. She holds it, folds herself around whatever she can find, rocking it back and forth. *I will never eat again I will never eat again.* Tears and snot running into her mouth as she curses her revenge, swears allegiance to what she has lost.

*****

She sits alone at the kitchen table, papers spread around her like a waiting feast. A feast still empty, plates open and blank in anticipation of the meal. The comfortable dry shuffle of pages as she plucks her way through her notes. The hum of the fridge, the drum of rain on the window, rain windswept so it falls parallel to the ground, thumping hard and angry at the glass as if trying to push through. The light in the kitchen is bright enough that she can see nothing beyond it, glances up to the window and can see only a mirror, the lamp hanging greedy for attention, its round whiteness imprinting itself in miniature on her pupils so it follows the darting movement of her vision when she closes her eyes. Beneath the lamp, the window catches a large white square, papers and table indistinguishable, the flat width cutting
the dark of her body in two. She can’t see trees or sky or rain. She stares at the blind glass until it seems as if the source of the pounding is no longer the rain but the kitchen itself, a rattling urgency wanting out.

The cuffs of her father’s Mac jacket hide her hands. She does not roll up the sleeves, she tugs the soft flannel over her fingers and fists the ends, pulling taught the shoulders. The buttons drag along the table like lost teeth. On top of the Mac she wears a down coat, the one her father wears only when it snows, when he pokes through the Pinto’s engine in the frost filled garage, cursing as he brings his knuckles up to the puffs of his breath. An old logging blanket wraps cocoon tight her legs, although it doesn’t stop them from moving, her heels bouncing up and down in a steady beat that rattles the legs of the table and mimics the sound of the rain.

She is warm inside these layers of clothing, old things her sister wouldn’t bother to cut up. Finally warm after shaking through the day, her shoulders vulnerable to drafts and open doorways, she shivers as the thought of the afternoon, how even in long johns and a sweater she is cold in her classroom, as if her blood lacks the energy to heat itself, blood slow and heavy against the small frenetic beat of her limbs, red sludge of liquid winding its way through her body as cold as tap water, as lethargic as a creek hardening in the frost.

Her arms quiver. She yanks harder at the sleeves, the wide balloons hiding her bones, makes sure that the openings are closed completely, that no kitchen air can sneak through the cuff. She presses against the down coat to push the flannel against her arms, wishes she could bind it closer, seam it to directly to wrist and elbow, stitch it right into her skin. She loves the weight of the jacket, the coat, the blanket, how they hold her to the chair, keep her
body from slipping away. The soft wisps of flannel that cup her forearms as she rests them on the table. Without these layers the air can go right through her, can reach her spine, the pelvic bones that jut out into her jeans, the air can touch her muscles, make her flinch, she is too open to it, her shoulders and arms and legs, her body stripped of all protection, as if by carving it of fat she has removed her skin.

“You get to bed.”

She hears his voice before she hears his feet, he must have started talking before he reached the kitchen, knew she would be in here without having to check. He shuffles to the cupboard, slaps peanut butter and honey on bread, smashes his sandwich together, the bread flattening where his thumbs hold it to his lips. She keeps her legs still. She looks at the papers, scans each page as if to memorise their placement in case he wipes them all away. But he doesn’t come toward the table. He stands over the sink to chew his sandwich. Wide hurried mindless bites, teeth jabbing and jabbing, honey spattering the steel. She tenses the muscles in her legs but does not move them, does not bounce them. All the energy of her body concentrates in the eyes that flicker from her father to the table, the mess of paper. She begins to pick at her thumb, hand still inside the sleeve, tears a small chunk of skin from the cuticle of her thumb, keeps tearing until she knows she’s reached the first wrinkle where the knuckle bends. She doesn’t pull the skin across this line.

“I said I don’t want you up here.”

He makes no movement towards her, no gesture that would confirm the threat of his voice. He is tired, she is too much to deal with at night. He repeats his statement, tosses it out as if it were something he’d found it in his sandwich, a spec of lettuce left from the knife,
a torn bit of a label, he does not expect her to do what he says. She is still. She understands
his warnings are a way of marking territory, of letting her know he can walk into the kitchen
any time he wants, that he can interrupt her when he pleases. If she doesn’t move, if she
doesn’t speak, he will leave her alone. He will let her read if she can just sit silent through
these nightly commands that escape his mouth like burps.

He won’t look at her. The picking and bouncing, the quick darting back and forth of
her eyes. The shame of her, of his clothes. Skinny crazy mouse-like daughter in his clothes.

When he leaves she rubs the flannel into her arms, rubs it as if lighting a match, the
bone hard and dry waiting to spark.

*****

Wisps of soft hair, goose down, fuzz. Soft as flannel, soft as fleece. It begins to cover
her arms, her chest. A breast’s replacement. She lies in bed at night, the skin rubbed raw
where pelvis and spine imprint their signature into the sheets, a red etching, a cross of bone,
and she glides her hands over this fuzz, this fur, her palms lifted slightly above the skin like a
healer touching not the body’s surface but its energy, its aura, touching only the fur, whisking
it slightly, without pressure, without aim, hands round and round over fur surrounding body,
blurring flesh, hugging flesh, fur folding into the creases of her elbows and her knees, soft as a
whisper, a breath, a caress, fur wrapping limbs in a pocket of warmth, rays of light glowing
from each inch of her skin, soft downy new-born hair, touch it, feel it lifted by static electricity
so it clings to the flatness of a floating palm.
It is efficient. It is useful, this new coat of protection. Much better to keep warm with fur than fat. It grows in place of fat, in place of food. Weightless, it will require no fuel. She won’t have to feed it, this insulation that rests on top of her skin instead of underneath. She has turned her body inside out. Now she can feel where her body is, feel the soft buffer between her flesh and the world, the fur that will keep her warm, keep out the kitchen air, the classroom air, the bedroom drafts that seep through the sliding glass door, keep it all from touching her skin, her blood.

Her sister won’t find it in a closet. Her sister won’t tug it out of the wash. It won’t slip down an armchair, vulnerable to scissors. It won’t wander the hallways of her highschool on the backs of her sister’s friends. It will be with her all the time, a shadow that wraps her body, slips under her pants and blouses, under the Mac. A flesh echo.

She will let no one see it. She will keep it clean and dry. Her night hands round and round over soft. Soon she won’t need her father’s coat, the bulky nylon puffs of down. Soon she will have grown her own, a private suit of hair fitted only to her limbs, her hips, her neck, a layer of clothing permanently attached.

*****

Her father saved for the future. Overtime shifts, a second job, hours spent in the basement on endless projects of wood and nails, he banked his time as if it were a cheque that could be cashed in at a later date, the lost days returning with interest. The body as investment. The body collapsed in front of late night television, its limbs used up. Each
muscle and reflex trained in efficiency, how to exact the most power from the least gesture,
how to create the greatest long-term effect from the slightest cause.

Wasting time, how could they do that? He saw legs sprawled across the couch, toys scattered on the floor, a neighbourhood of bodies running through the sprinkler. His children spiking spades into sand, digging holes then filled them in again, letting the grains return to where they had been, all effort erased as if consumed by the moment. His wife listening to music, Patsy Cline or Loretta Lynn, the dishes undone and her eyes focussed on nothing at all.

In the future, he would have time to rest. In the future his bank book total would allow him to stop. Imagine, no more shooting lights, no more sawing. Time empty, open swathos of it uncut. It will swirl around him, overtaking the present or becoming it, a large and easy present that will embrace him like a woman he can’t control.

The more he thought about this future, with its time undivided and unknown, its spaces yet to be built, the more diligently he added to his accounts, as if the expected chaos had to be buttressed by a lifetime divided into rows.

How much was enough? When would the numbers tell him it was safe?

Small black print, the deposits like a fence running down the right side of the page, a barricade to protect the future from a present jealous and sly. He liked to add the columns, always pleased to confirm that his own arithmetic matched that of the computer. He denied himself the purchase of a pair of running shoes, refused to replace a shower curtain that had ripped free of the rings, fixing it with a roll of electrician’s tape as he ran through the total of what he’d saved, a phantom life running in the margins beside his own like an exuberant undisciplined twin. He watched his wife cut coupons, search the flyers for sales, sort through
the cousin’s clothing to find something her children could fit. She reported back to her husband how much was left of her allowance, the weekly twenties he carefully unfolded and placed in her hands. “There should be enough for change,” he’d say each time, his tone never varying, “I want to see change.” For every purchase, she collected a receipt, filling a kitchen drawer with these scraps of evidence, a drawer he would pull out and dump upside down each month in order to calculate what she had taken, tearing at the edges of his thumbnail as he added up all that had disappeared.

He kept two accounts, one in which he deposited funds, never withdrew, and one he used to pay bills and whose balance remained close to zero, as if he were trying to tease himself into greater diligence. Whenever he checked the figures of the full account, he also checked the empty one, balancing the larger with the smaller, reminding himself of what poverty looked like, how close to the edge he could be, one number swallowing the other like a decoy killing what was real.

And was it money? He never made plans for what he would do with it, what he would buy once he reached the future, when the present had finally been surpassed. What age would he be then? And if death failed him, if he lived longer than his funds could allow? How was he to make a correct equation if the age of his demise could not now be known? He calculated compound interest and inflation and rates of pension—death at seventy? eighty? eighty-five?—dividing the money by the years, worrying the shape of his head into his pillow as he tried to make the numbers hold true.

The present was sloppy and slovenly and thick. It had to be controlled.
Any hours he spent with the family was time stolen from the future. He could feel the present eat away at it, feed itself on it, each day fattening as the future thinned. He had to protect the years to come, keep them separate from his wife and his children and their needs, their constant wants. A child, he told his eldest, costs $100,000 before she reaches age eighteen. The girl nodding. She was familiar with this figure, counted the zeros as she walked beside her father, skipping her feet at every fourth step in order to keep up with his pace. Where does the number come from, she wondered, who did the additions, was it her father and how did he know already, how could he complete the calculation before she had finished those years of her life? How did he know now what she would want or need? Who had transcribed everything a child could eat or wear or read, all those minor and major consumptions in the first eighteen years?

Desire predicted by mathematics, a childhood and adolescence projected forward like the answer to an equation. Every financial need subtracted from a mythic lump sum that existed somewhere before her birth. She saw the total price written beside the age of maturity, wondered how she could reach adulthood without further exacting such cost.

Imagine, if she’d never been born, how much money her parents would have saved. How much work her father would not have been obliged to do. She understood that fathers carry the weight of a present not their own, that her days were parasitic, demanding yet compromising the health of her host. Every bite, every pleasure or purchase, exacted its cost on her father's body. She was living his time.

How to cancel the debt? How to give back to the future?
He showed her the empty account, compared it to the total printed at the bottom of her own bank book, the sixteen dollars she was saving for a pair of skates. "See," he said, "my own daughter has more money than I do. You're the richest in the family. Look, look at what I have, compared to you, I have almost nothing." She wanted to correct his total with her own. She subtracted one number from the other, her father from herself, guilty and full with the difference.

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She eats numbers. An apple is one hundred, a carrot is one hundred, a slice of bread one hundred, a container of yoghurt one hundred, the number always rounded upward to the evenness of zero, the number always louder than taste. Numbers echoing in her head with each bite. Numbers added together in narrow columns that border diaries and homework, napkins and books. Numbers that threaten to slide off the food if she is given too large a serving or if she cannot determine how to divide the portion she will allow herself to eat. How to tell, how to count, with a loaf of bread uncut, with a bowl of pudding? Foods soft and open, she cannot trust them. The slickness of butter, yellow that oozes into toast so she cannot judge how much is there. The white sloppiness of sour cream. She wants food that is hard and dry, bread cut by a machine into trim and regular squares, crisp grains of cereal she can pour into a measuring cup, the grains scattering across the counter as she slips the smoothness of a knife across the cup's rigid mouth. She crouches down to stare eye level at the rim to make sure she has trimmed the excess, not a single grain poking above the edge, the food perfectly matching its container.
When she is without paper, she writes the numbers on her hands, the numbers march along the curving lines that divide her palm, life lines and death lines that trail off listlessly under the determined ink. Skin mapped by mathematics. Her body etched with the numbers it consumes, the numbers that consume it, that translate themselves into so much muscle and blood, fuelling the pace of her heart, the twitch of her legs, an arithmetic become flesh.

Organs pumping as diligently as a machine. A factory hum. Eyes and nose and mouth and ears always working, working.

How much can be bought with one hundred calories, two hundred? What is the precise energy required for half an hour of reading or bathing or walking? The minimum necessary for the body to keep warm? At what cost the fuel? And if she fails to feed the machine, if she steadily decreases the amount she consumes, numbers scratched off before she lets them cross her lips, skin slackening over the hollowed core, muscles atrophied to keep even the balance of the equation, how much of herself can she subtract?

With each day the body will need fewer numbers, it only makes sense. Each organ smaller, each limb more narrow and less greedy, able to perform the same tasks with less fuel. Her body stripped of redundancy, each cell worked to its maximum effect.

Precise calculations of the negative. How to make the system run at a more efficient pace, how to coax more from less. Until the body begins to consume itself, thieving its own resources for its energy. The logic, the tidy impossible grace, involved in such a reversal. She eyes an inch of her arm, pinches the inner slack of thigh, counts the numbers yet required to burn up another square of flesh.
One hundred and one hundred make two hundred and two hundred makes four hundred: the numbers divide the day, slice it as regularly as store bought bread. When the columns line her papers and her palms, when the numbers pulse through each bite and breath, when she can move her lips to their rhythm as she falls asleep tabulating the day’s costs, then she knows where her body is. Without the numbers her skin will simply fade into the air, she will lose the edge of herself like the blank paper that lies flat against the white kitchen table, its border almost indistinguishable from arborite. Rows of numbers, their harsh blue, their perfect record of what was eaten and what wasn’t, it is these numbers that keep the paper visible, that separate the margins of the page from all that surrounds it.

But she cannot always reach a pen. She may be on the bus, or walking to school, or baby-sitting, bouncing a child up and down beside the hollow of a crib. She develops a secret code, a series of tenses and releases in the muscles of her legs, a pattern that mimics the numbers she eats. Foot and calf and thigh and hip, each segment comes to signify another one hundred calories, four segments times two legs equals eight points of pressure equals the eight hundred calories she will allow herself in a day. Tensing and releasing, tracking the beat of the day’s consumption, her legs become a memory system of what she has accepted or what she has refused.

Halving eight hundred makes four hundred, her new total, her latest limit. What is the smallest number that will maintain the machine?

The numbers limit her food choices, help her to negotiate the chaos in the kitchen, all the leftover casseroles, fork marked and finger picked, saran wrap gaping open at one edge. The cookies her mother buys on sale, in bulk, nothing holding them together but clear plastic
and a twist tie, no box, no coloured squares listings fibre and calories and fat. How would she know what she had taken inside? How would she know when to stop? Her father's granola, pickle jars full of it, how he oiled the almonds and spread them across the baking sheet, lecturing her about the dense promise of their energy, how a nut holds the future, will become branches and leaves and trunk. They were a small food, but potent. They would put some meat on her.

She has to watch them. They will trick her, those eye shaped ovals that fill his palms, they would expand inside her like a tree.

An apple is one hundred, a carrot one hundred, a slice of bread one-hundred, a container of yoghurt one hundred. Each day she returns to the comfort of those numbers. Even a small carrot, even half an apple, it all counts as one-hundred. This way she knows she is safe, knows she has not underestimated, will not break beyond the perfection of her daily limit, the number four and those two zeros that look back at her like empty eyes.

She cooks nothing: how to tell what was left, what was added, through the changes created by heat? She likes best food that is ready to eat and clearly labelled, there could be no mistakes, no eating of a large potato when a small or medium is all that the body requires. She buys individual-size containers of diet yoghurt that list nutritional information on the lid. Before opening it, she can divide its contents, calculate how many spoonfuls are in a serving, how many numbers are in each bite. Chemical strawberry on her tongue and she knows she has eighteen fewer calories left in the day.
The only food she eats without measurement is popcorn, her jaw clicking steadily through a bowl as she calms herself with the belief that she has discovered a food that takes more calories to consume than it could ever supply.

Calculating her intake of food like balancing a cheque book, she carefully withdraws the day’s nutrition from four-hundred. If she has to make up for what she had eaten the day before, she will begin with a lower number or even a negative balance, starving herself to pay off yesterday’s debt. The present consumed by the past.

But she also owes calories to the future, must save her numbers for that rainy day when she will be able to eat what she desires. She is not starving herself; she is banking calories, storing up her pleasure. The less she eats in the present, the more she will be able to eat in the days and years to come. The refused meals function as a security deposit; her columns a record of the calories she has saved. All that she hasn’t eaten, all the numbers that line her palms, are sent to the future like a promissory note, a commitment to what she would one day allow herself to eat.

With each bite she refuses, she imagines the meals to come, filling the plates with the present. Years of food she hoards through her rituals of rejection, the careful closing of her lips. To eat in the present is to steal from the future. It is to spend all, to give in to a body that would save nothing, record nothing, an unorganised corporeality of pleasure and need, a fleshy ravenous being that can only want.

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Now it is the future that sneaks itself from the present. The future feeds on her. It becomes more hungry, this promised time that records each bite taken, each morsel left on the side of the plate. The future is a body that writes as it eats, that transcribes her into existence as it calculates each subtraction. Inch by inch she sacrifices her flesh in the name of this system that promises to allow her, finally, to exist. She will disappear, slip free of the present, only to re-emerge in the stomach of time.

To reach the future, she has to keep moving. She calculates how much exercise is needed to burn off the calories she eats, tracking the numbers in and the numbers out, two matching columns that must balance before she sleeps. She does not factor in the energy needed by the body at rest, does not consider the calories burned while sleeping or reading. A calorie can be cancelled only by movement. No food is allowed to remain in her body without being exercised away. What would happen to it, this excess, this unnecessary residue of the day’s consumption? No, she must make one column subtract itself perfectly from the next. In this way, when the equilibrium of the columns is perfectly maintained, she is able to fool her body into steadily decreasing the energy it consumes. She knows, secretly she knows, that the body needs more than zero by the end of the day, that even sitting still requires an expenditure of energy, that she does not need to pump away everything she swallows, that each night when the numbers match, when running has cancelled out the apple, swimming the orange, her body is smaller. The total is zero yet the balance is negative. Carefully measuring calories in and calories out, she can maintain and decrease at once, hiding
a system of entropy within a system of stasis, keeping everything the same while insuring perpetual loss.

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Exercise cuts the day. The hours expand around her like water, uncharted, unnamed. She has to divide them, extracting from each minute the greatest amount of work. Each week she becomes more efficient in her schedule until her body is in a process of continuous motion. Swimming from 6:30 to 8:00, walk to school, school from 9:00 to 3:00, walk home from school, biking from 3:30 to 5:00, swimming again from 5:00 to 6:00, running from 6:00 to 7:00, an aerobics class until 8:00, then homework, the papers spread around her like a protective frame as she taps her feet under the table, the snap of sneakers beating into the night.

On weekends—the most frightening, most open hours—she walks. She wakes early, drags on her father's Mac jacket and paces the highway, checking her watch to see how far through time she has gone.

Her father can never find her. She doesn't lie in her pyjamas reading on the couch like she used to—eleven o'clock and look at you, wasting time, half the morning and you're still undressed, it's disgusting—she doesn't sit in front of the TV. If she has twenty minutes free before dinner, she will run five times around the block. If she has to wait for the bathroom she will jump from leg to leg or stretch her calf up the wall, the bone clicking into then out of place. Her father tells her to rest, to sit still, and she smiles at the novelty of these words, how
they sound awkward coming from his mouth. She knows that he can’t catch her. She has become better at this than he is.

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At night she rides her mother’s exercise bike in the basement, repeatedly checking the speed and the tension and the mileage as her feet spin the pedals. A stationary bike: she moves constantly and goes nowhere.

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Faster and faster and faster. Forward momentum and inertia balanced to a stop.

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While she pedals, she reads recipes. Racing in the dank smell of dust and cardboard and damp cement, the books propped across the handlebars, she consumes photographs as if the eyes could eat. Legs pumping heavy and determined, almost reaching the food, the image large enough to fill her stomach, representation more satisfying than what could be real.

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Perpetual saving becomes absolute expenditure. Constant work becomes total waste. She perfects her father’s system to the point of its collapse.

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But how to stop representation, flee the stories of the body, their careful weighted tyranny, when the escape itself becomes writing, when she can reject her father only by carving his words and numbers more deeply into the lonely page of her flesh?

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A girl become a line. The abrupt sketch. Hard lead of a pencil dragged down and ripping open the page.