

## OPHELIAC

Michael Hawley

“Gelatin silver print, 1890: A woman lies naked on a bench or small table; pieces of fabric drape her breasts and genitals; though her head is not shown, one can see her long dark hair combed out over the front of her shoulders; on her stomach sits an object like a bloated starfish; several clothed individuals stand as witnesses to, or participants in, this exercise of materializing ectoplasm.”

To the cover of the Moleskine notebook in which I wrote that entry, I have taped an image from another exhibition, this one of works by Odilon Redon, a French symbolist artist of the same era as the photographs. The image, cut from a synoptic brochure on the works in question, shows a black-and-white lithograph of two shelves of books, one nearly empty and in front of which hovers, as in a radiant cloud, a disembodied set of bared, clenched teeth. I look at it now, appended neatly with strips of clear packing tape, cognizant of the single air bubble that refuses to be completely tamped down by my thumbnail—a tiny pocket of microbes and exhausted oxygen that I could easily burst with the prick of a pin and smooth to obliteration. I used to be that punctilious.

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Outside, the light is stripped of color. Fog steeps the city. It is a warm, middle-of-February day, a day for walking through tunnels of fog, for sitting on a park bench whistling through fog. I have never seen such fog. Lethe fog, insane asylum fog. With my apartment windows open, it

seems almost miraculous that it does not funnel in to smother the furniture or prevent me from writing this piece.

What if darkness were like this fog? At five in the evening, it starts to thicken, wisps gathering in the parking lot and lurking between pantry shelves. By seven o'clock, only things within reach are visible; you can't even see your feet. At ten, the square of the television screen cuts a dim swath of light to your chair; the lamp behind you is a fibrous, butter-colored orb; *what you read looks like this*. Up the street, at Blarney Cove, patrons sit in obscurity. The frog-eyed bartender has a light on her cap. "What can I get' cha, guy?"

What if sleep were like fog?

\* \* \*

"On her stomach sits the glistening mass, as if it has just emerged from her navel. She lies in a '...rigid trance state, attempting to sustain the materialization. She is building the form of a psychic control, her liaison to the spirit plane.' It throws a shadow on the damp skin beneath. Refusing to look the least bit ethereal, it might well be constructed of lard or sheep gut."

In contrast, another print from the Spiritualist photos showed a young woman's head in profile. Her hair was bound up, her eyes blindfolded. From her mouth protruded a thin, phosphorescent arm, transparent in places, as if formed from a synthesis of wax and smoke. The photograph was beautifully composed and in crystalline focus, the woman's face cast in near-silhouette against a dim background. It almost looked like a negative image, so white was the ghostly protuberance. "This control, known as Dr. Silas, had replaced a previous guide called Bess. Dr. Silas's mandate was to convey evidence of his authenticity, thus to support the materializations that would follow, namely the spirit of a young girl drowned in the river Tyne."

\* \* \*

One night last winter, on a drunken dare, two young men from Brooklyn College tried to swim across the East River from Williamsburg. One body was recovered near the South Street Seaport, the other on the Brooklyn side of the Manhattan bridge.

I thought that I had saved some clippings on the incident, but a search of my desk drawers found nothing. The effort, however, revived certain dream scenarios that I thought had played themselves out, scenarios fusing story samples in the same thematic vein: my mother as a child almost drowning in a neighbor's swimming pool; the scene from the end of *Titanic*.

Formerly, dreams of drowning were the only kind from which I could not self-extricate, the submersion feeling so authentic that any alternative seemed a certain exit into death. Of late, similar nightmares, though retaining the power to transfix, have lost this terrifying aspect—their ability to deflect questioning. Conversely, the world as experienced in my waking body has become resistant to interrogation, its surface resolutely deadpan, its air a kind of disguise.

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I have pasted in my notebook images from a show at MoMA concurrent with the Redon. Two rooms of modernist lithographs explored the boundaries between representation and abstraction. To me, the most intriguing work was a series of four Picasso prints cut from the same lithographic stone. In this series, the image of a muscular bull is pared into lines of increasing severity in proportion to what was removed from the stone. The tension in the work heightens tremendously with each successive print; the last communicates the gestural

frankness—and magical power—of Paleolithic cave paintings.

The notes I took on this exhibition were clouded by a splash of Pino Noir from a glass taken at the Neue's café with a longtime acquaintance. An art history professor at Columbia, he endures my half-baked essays on the language of art, and generally offers temperate rebuttals. But he was uncharacteristically brusque that day, nettled in a way that I had never seen him, refusing to distinguish Redon from Moreau in any way that forgave my distaste for the latter. He avoided discussion of technique and subject matter, and commenced a lecture on the tenets of Symbolism, the influence of Baudelaire, Wagner, et cetera, stressing each point with a flick of his hand, resulting in the notebook casualty.

Several days later, I discovered a posting on *ManLink.com*, one of several such sites that I peruse at night to assuage the boredoms of insomnia. Both the posting title—"Sports with Uncle Amyl"—and the attending thumbnail photograph prompted investigation. Clicking on the photo, I was convinced that it was he. The head was cropped off just below the eyes, but the sharp nose and dimpled chin were undoubtedly the professor's. He lay on his back on a Kirman rug with his knees pulled up to his chest. For a man of fifty, his naked body showed no trace of fat. He was much thinner, in fact, than I would have guessed, and in a way that suggested an eating disorder, his buttocks sharp as elbows. The photograph, considering its purpose, was in artful black and white. Stranger still, the camera was positioned directly overhead, and not at any perceptible angle, as if the shot were taken from the ceiling. How precisely that feat was accomplished remains a diverting conundrum.

The verbiage attending the photograph, not surprisingly, was devoid of literary merit. To cite his specific requirements and proposals would suggest a prurience of mind quite alien to my disposition.

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My own brand of curiosity serves mainly to stimulate “poetic” associations and enrich a dream life which has increasingly become a refuge from a troublesome ennui. Perhaps “ennui” is not the word. I’ve moved beyond short fits of listlessness to a general feeling of emotional displacement. Call it old age, if you will, though I am only forty-three.

A Korean doctor in the holistic mold—an acupuncturist, specifically—suggested that this phenomenon could precipitate the onset of tumors. She recommended exercise, travel, brief stints in a tanning bed, and spicy Asian cuisine. She also advised that I give a name to my affliction, by which I could consciously address it. I should also ascribe it a sex and a face, though it could be visualized as an animal or a plant, for that matter. In return, she said, the negative agent would eventually reveal its temperament and agenda. At the appropriate time, it/he/she could be banished or, ideally, converted to more healthy occupations.

Given my practical, if curious, nature, I left her office disinclined to take this course of action. It seemed, much like psychotherapy, an occult or quasi-religious exercise. But perhaps, I thought, I might sample the benefits of a tanning salon.

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At Blarney Cove, the fog is poked in places by light from the jukebox, the TV, the Miller sign, the lozenge-like sconces embedded in the walls. Patrons exist as shapes on bar stools or sit at invisible tables at the back. To your left, amphibious fingers stroke a brimming stein. The stool to your immediate right is vacant and, beyond that, only a vague silhouette is distinguishable, the patron wearing a hard hat or helmet and slouched over a cocktail. A woman

laughs above the drone of music. You have been here before or in a place much like it.

A business card slides along the counter to your left, pushed by toad-like fingers.

“You might be in trouble some day,” the man says, leaning close. His round eyes glisten through the fog. They roll up and down as if to clear a stray eyelash. “Or just bored. If you find yourself desperately bored.” The eyes roll again; it is some sort of tic.

The beer on your lips has a rich, swampy flavor. Behind the bar, above the cash register, a faulty neon sign dimly flashes “VITAL,” then “WORLD,” the first in crimson, the second in purple.

Two blinks from your service button summon the bartender, the light on her cap swimming toward you.

“That sign new?” you ask.

Her face, beneath the cap light, shines like a buttered pie tin. “Say what?”

“Vital World.”

Her eyes pinch together, vanish in the fog, though you can see the crack of her mouth working like a hand puppet’s.

“Look, guy,” she says. “You’re not a regular, as much as you might wanna be. These are not dense bodies here. You came in under your own sponsorship. Don’t get me wrong. You’re cool with me, but you better start payin’ attention.” She moves on down the bar.

Your friend keeps staring. Again with the eyes, but this time you see that they don’t actually move. It’s the soft, transparent, nictitating eyelids snapping up and down.

“Suit yourself,” he says curtly and returns to his beer. A tube of some kind reaches out of his mouth and drops down into the stein. You avert your eyes and pretend not to hear the gurgling uptake, the *gwok* of a swallow, the peristaltic ripple, and the ensuing high-pitched burp.

The business card lies limply in your hand. It has the texture of a thin slice of cheese. It

reads: *something, something, Ph.D.*

The bartender announces last call for happy hour and is booed by some schmuck in the back. Purple and crimson wink through the fog: ...WORLD...VITAL...WORLD...

\* \* \*

On my first visit to the tanning salon, I took a pair of swimming trunks that I had bought for a trip to Belize with my father several years ago. A month before the scheduled trip, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and underwent a partial gastrectomy. I spent that week and several more in Michigan, helping him cope with the jejunal feeding apparatus, until he could eat enough to sustain himself independently.

The trunks felt loose when I put them on. A reduction in muscle tone, I thought, must account for it, or the elastic had gone bad. Through the eye blinds, I felt the vertical tubes of the tanning bed glaring at me from all sides. My skin was engaged, awake as it had not been for a long time. A music of synthesized flutes and tympani filtered through the room. I was allowed only ten minutes here, my first session. By the third, the young man at the desk had told me, I should see “actual physical results.”

But I felt something after a mere two minutes—wires reaching from the epidermis and collecting the heat in their end points, millions of microscopic receptacles, as if converting it to wavelengths that the body could safely absorb. The wires had just started to conduct this energy when the light snapped off. The wires withdrew in the space of a breath and dissolved back into the skin.

I slipped back into my trousers and shoes in the anemic pall of fluorescent light, uncertain as to what had just happened.

\* \* \*

“To understand mediumship, one must know something of humankind’s various bodies. As well as the dense, visible instrument used in this life for material purposes, he has also a vital body composed of ether, a desire or emotional body, and a mind. An individual’s Ego or Spirit lives within these interlocking vehicles and uses them to gather life knowledge and experience.” This, from a webpage of the United Spiritualist Church.

\* \* \*

I arranged to meet the art history professor at a gallery in Chelsea. It was a windy, drizzly Tuesday afternoon, and my face showed the gleanings of three visits to UltraTan. Coming out of the subway, I saw that he had left a message on my cell phone. A deficient signal garbled the words—something involving an unexpected encounter. It didn’t even sound like his voice.

The exhibition of neo-realist paintings failed to connect with me. I visited two more galleries in the same building, and another down the street. Not once did I take out my notebook. I could not concentrate. I could sense the buzzing color in my face reflected in the walls of those trendy white labyrinths.

At home, I logged onto the *ManLink* site. Sure enough, after fanning through more than fifty listings, all posted in the prior three hours, I found his latest ad: “Postcard from Uncle Amyl.” The photo was the same that I had seen before—in black-and-white, with exactly the same naked pose captured by a camera directly overhead. But this time I noticed a movement in the image. On enlargement, it proved to be a video clip. In a succession of very subtle freeze



frames, he was shown rocking back and forth on the rug. As he shifted forward, I saw that a strip of dark fabric was bound around his eyes.

The esoteric nature of his post-title presupposed an interested audience—of one? of dozens? The verbiage containing his menu of interests had become more abstract, like a cut-up prose poem, admirably free of cliché. It was peppered with what I presumed to be euphemisms for activities that only initiates could interpret:

torque balloon toward manikin's mole  
fore glottal stretch lode sulfurous roll  
shallows bored on dormer slip tide  
stopcock pore more fiend in foal  
strobila suction catbird's seat  
teratological function eat  
horns for death ride  
sweet for sweet

The cradle-shaped body blipped forward, skipped back, held there twitching, like a film strip slipping on greasy cogs.

The *Reply to This Ad* button hunkered like a launch pad. The cursor dallied over it, pacing, circling, until a taste of iron flooded my mouth and I clicked to log out fast.

\* \* \*

In the dream, the lights on a suspension bridge make a blurry necklace in the dark. A

shoulder bumps through life preservers bobbing in the water. Not life preservers, they are black and slippery like the seedpods of some Triassic lotus. In the dream's last life, these pods were vicious, animate polyps that fastened to the nape of the victim and osmotically siphoned the spinal fluid from the ventricles of his brain. These pods now appear benign or uninterested, and are fixed in the vegetable kingdom.

The boy's dead body turns in the current, the shoulder sinking back into the water as the ivory breast rolls up toward the moonlight. The corpse is caught in the streaming, hair-like fronds of the pod-plants, fronds floating thickly under the surface and ticklish with air bubbles. As the torso sinks, the head emerges—chin and nose and gaping mouth—netted in long, black fronds. An arm floats up, as if elbowing off the shawl of fibers that would hide from the world the Tourneau watch which had put him 12K into debt. Success story. A young man like that would try to swim the East River on a 2-Gig, encryptible, fuck-yo-mama dare.

“What can I get'cha guy?”

Four shots of Sauza and a line of beaner meth.

“Ace your midterms? Kudos, honey!”

A swell from the wake of a garbage barge shrugs the body off. The pods float free on their stems once more, as the fronds undulate in the current.

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Rooms seven and eight contain the “superbeds.” They promote swifter tanning, evidently, and the infrared heat does not burn the skin. I pull the canopy down over me. This is my fifth and final visit. It is like a penance for having believed this could work. I've applied sunblock to my face, neck and hands, and am otherwise fully clothed. I don't even take off my coat.

This antidote had seemed such a promising one, more so than exercise—I walk a lot anyway—or “naming my affliction.” Pores revived by UVAs and UVBs, all the wires of the body reaching out to imbibe. Thought-holes pleasantly occluded, no scrolling pictures, no cognitive tangents, the *desire* body sifting out through the *dense* body like powdered ash through a screen.

But the subtle euphoria resulting from the sessions has grown less palpable. The wires rise, but not as far or as eagerly, and, once retracted, do not sustain any lasting effect. Or the symbiont, using these very wires, projects some kind of emulsive ether to coat the safety glass.

This exchange is muted by the sunblock and clothing, but I am still aware of it. I imagine the body underneath responding, yearning for a stronger exposure. I imagine other bodies, too—increasingly androgynous and reptilian—posed in various configurations, striving to achieve consistent melanin production everywhere. One has its knees drawn tight to its chest, baring its neuter genitalia. Another sprawls on its side with an arm draped over its face; this one is covered with transparent pustules which continuously erupt and deflate.

The cooling fans comb the nap of my overcoat, lick the shine on my boots.

\* \* \*

A draft as from a swinging door weakens the strata of fog. A hole peeps to a movement beyond, a black skin like the finest asphalt coursing left to right—but slowly, purposely, tense as gritted teeth.

In the classical afterlife, the dead ineligible for tenure in Elysium persist as diluted iterations of their earthly selves. They are described as wandering the banks of Acheron and the neighboring badlands, lamenting their reduced tangibility. The periodic arrival of barges spark

words of jittery excitement. They splash through the reeds to ‘welcome’ newcomers, to catch the fast-fading scent of mortal blood, then subside to enclaves of pallid relations sighing over deeds long past.

There is no touching here and the mirrors are blind.

\* \* \*

Notebook entry with wine-stain ellipses: “...terialization developed from small, jelly-like...to figures capable of independen...and speech.”

\* \* \*

His name is Slippy. Each mention of the name makes the possibility of his existence a little less remote.

I don’t know how many others he has entered. He seems to be new to the ranks of controls, unable as yet to materialize or even communicate a likeness of himself. Or maybe he has just renewed his license after decades on parole. He is out of practice, in other words, or my efforts of visualization don’t strike him as sincere enough to bother with.

“Slippy,” whispers Dr. Park, the acupuncturist. She glowers over her reading glasses, the onyx chevrons of her eyes glinting. “But it’s dangerous to wait. You must quickly assign a face to your illness. Make it conform to your picture of it. Describe him to me.”

Something larval, I want to say. Something wet. One imagines a newt in a pond of Jell-O or a tadpole just sprouting limbs. He is black or dark brown, with a phosphorescent vein, like a thread of mercury, running down the ridge of his back. A pale current pulses through the vein.

Zooming in, one sees that the tiny fist of his head also generates light, or reflects it. Subtle contours of shadow articulate a face as one might see in a holograph. An inscrutable, funny, little mug he's got—like Winston Churchill or W.C. Fields—and an expression that can be construed as belonging to any emotional state. At the moment, he appears to be grinning.

“If you want respect, you have to set the rules. It may show you a face you have not assigned it. If so, reject it. You can change its likeness to anything you want, but each time remind it of its name. That's imperative.”

The face goes vague. Its distorted mass crouches, ready to spring into any configuration, something intolerably menacing. Zooming out, one sees again the tadpole suspended in gelatin. He is beginning to work himself free, moving slowly, eating his way through cherry-flavored Placent-O from one space-time to another.

“And caloric intake,” says Dr. Park. “Increase it. You're looking downright wan.”

\* \* \*

The posting title on the sex date site reads: “Uncle Amyl's craw.” The footage in the video clip is distinctly out of focus and the subject is positioned off-center on the rug, his left side and upper torso excluded from the picture. Except for a vague pulsing of the image, it could be a still, though crudely pixilated, photograph. If this was your first time viewing this content, you might question what was depicted. A naked body, certainly, but the sex is not clear, or the age. It could be a boy or a girl or some hairless marsupial dislodged from its mother's pouch. Maybe you recognize the pattern of rug—the stylized lotus blooms. Even in black and white, it looks like the same hand-tufted Kirman that covers your living room floor, the one that's still shedding a year after purchase.

But that thing lying on its back. Something is caught underneath it—a length of rope or a cord of some kind—strung across the carpet, trailing beyond the scope of the frame. It is light in hue and of dubious material, looking frayed in some places, dense in others. It appears to be wet or shiny, though the quality of the image precludes any certainty.

This time, the text beneath it forms no comprehensible words: “gatd tded ahge dgat,” the same letters used in different groupings of four, until the character limit was reached. “...degt adth ghed hegd...” Sub-vocalized, it sounds like deaf-speech, or someone talking with a clipped tongue.

You scroll back up to the black-and-white image. The caffeinated pixels sustaining it make a buzzing sensation in the temples. This vibration, nearly audible, comes in steady waves, synched with a subtle movement of light through or across that trailing cord. You sense the current running through it by a kind of empathic kinesthesia beyond your power to deny.

The picture snaps to a thin, twitching, horizontal line, then snaps wide again. The body has shifted further off center, showing more of the cord, which grows thicker at the edge of the frame, as if it conjoins to another body or object lying just out of sight.

\* \* \*

After his surgery for stomach cancer, my father spent three weeks on the J-tube. Though he managed to keep his sense of humor, he was embarrassed to be seen with the feeding apparatus. I can picture him dozing in his reading chair with the trolley standing beside him, the plastic pouch suspended from its hook, and the mild motor dispensing nutritional formula— together with little pockets of air—directly into his abdomen.

One night, he took a fall in the bathroom while shuttling the trolley around. He must have

attempted to sit on the toilet, but somehow tumbled, with a crash and clatter, into the adjacent bathtub. I found him completely covered by the shower curtain, which he had pulled off the rod. I could hear him whimpering underneath it, and emitting ghastly, pig-like hiccups. As I drew off the plastic, I remember wondering exactly who or what I might find. My father lay there, frightened and ashamed, with his boxer shorts pulled down to his knees. Blood trickled from the hole in his belly which had been the entry point for the tube. The trolley stood between the sink and the toilet, having been wedged there during his fall. The pouch dangled loose from its hook, and the tube draped onto the floor in a growing puddle of beige-colored cream.

At the hospital, the doctors declined to restore the j-tube, as it was not a matter of simple reinsertion. My father was initially relieved, though the trial of eating enough to maintain proper weight eventually chiseled into his face what I called the “Tantalus look.”

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As if to attract a different clientele, the management of Blarney Cove has completely remodeled the place. Gone are the old neon advertisements, and brighter light fixtures banish the fog to the deepest recesses of the bar. A digital jukebox has replaced the old-style Wurlitzer.

The bartender, wearing a purple beret, has straight black hair combed over her shoulders.

“What can I getcha, guy?”

The patron perched on the stool to my left wears a pair of aviator sunglasses. His hands are sheathed in latex gloves and finger a dark metallic object the size of a disposable lighter. It’s one of those USB flash drives. He taps it against the zinc counter top. I record these details in my Moleskin notebook, along with other quotidian observations. The stool to my right is empty. The next has just been claimed by a biker, who unstraps his helmet and places it gingerly on the bar.

His face is so completely disfigured that it might be a petrified bat's—striations of tissue fused to nerveless resin. He orders a Stoli tonic in a voice like Marlene Dietrich's.

The man on my left clears his throat several times, as if to discourage my ogling. He sits up straight, swivels his knees back and forth on the stool, and nods vigorously at his stein.

"You should catch my show at The Vital," he says. "It's a video installation. The stats are encrypted here, and some excerpts." He sets the flash drive on the counter. "Consider yourself invited. And your friend."

Before I can make a move to claim it, the bartender snatches it up.

"I've warned you, Marvin!" she regales him. "One more infraction and you're out. Understand? Leave the dense bodies alone."

The patron cringes into his trench coat, the collar threatening to close on his head like the leaves of a pitcher plant. He raises the stein and draws it tight to his chest. The bartender examines the flash drive. Her fingers are nail-less, just smooth skin on the ends of her digits.

Above the cash register, in place of the neon *Vital World* sign, hangs an antique placard advertising a tonic of a hundred years ago: "Feeling ennui? Feeling dispersed? Dr. Silas prescribes MERRINOL. For clarity and affirmation!"

My notebook is open to a page with a single notation recorded with a purple felt-tip pen. I have no memory of writing it and do not use felt-tipped pens. It is the definition of a word put down verbatim, so it seems, from the dictionary:

"eurybathic - adj. Capable of living at a wide range of depths in a given body of water."

I hear Marvin imbibing his drink, the tentacular duct pulling up the lager.

\* \* \*



After two months of mild winter, more seasonal weather returned. The storm began on a Saturday morning, snow falling so thickly and windily that I was prevented from the kind of compulsive meandering that took me from window to window, block to block, even borough to borough, sometimes. Late Sunday morning, as the blizzard subsided, a ravaging disquiet drove me out of doors.

The winter spectacle harrowed the senses. I maneuvered the shoals of this white world, placing foot after foot. The transient tundra underfoot exhaled a sweet, spring-scented air. It carried with it suggestions of longer days, warmer days, days of ubiquitous colors and crowds. But thoughts of summer, with its specious promise of renewal and diversion, put a flutter of dread in my stomach.

I focused instead on the day's itinerary as written in my notebook: 1) Victorian tapestry show at the Armory (26th Street)—if it not cancelled; 2) winter clearance sales (Barney's, Bendel's and Saks); 3) the Edvard Munch exhibition (MoMA)—or, if crowd too pressing, the Folk Art museum.

When I reached the Armory, the snow had stopped falling. Already, the sidewalks of Lexington Avenue had been shoveled enough for pedestrians to get through. To my relief, the tapestry show had not been cancelled. The immense auditorium with its aisles of booths offered immediate refuge. I lingered for a full ten minutes over a small silk fragment of Chinese embroidery depicting two lavishly stylized bats circling a gigantic lotus bloom against a navy background. I chatted with the dealer about the provenance of the piece and whether it could sustain dry cleaning—it couldn't.

At a booth featuring Italian brocades, I encountered the art professor. He greeted me warmly and asked me to lunch at one of the local Indian restaurants.

Over sweating dishes of vindaloo, we discussed our latest projects. I had shamefully little

to report, whereas he had made several trips to Europe, doing research for a book he was writing—a survey on the mystical impulse as expressed by imagery in western art, from Bosch to Kandinsky. He complained of academia’s lack of support for this kind of cross-disciplinary work. I had never seen him so voluble. He looked in such good health and spirits that I suddenly doubted his connection to the skinny, waxen personage on the internet.

The spices of the vindaloo kept me in an ecstatic torture which neither bread nor beverage could relieve: mouth enflamed, face sweating, sinuses streaming mucous. My dining companion appeared not to notice, seemed completely unaffected by the chilies in the dish.

After lunch, we parted ways. I wandered west through Flatiron and Chelsea, surrendering my itinerary to ad hoc inspiration. I trudged for blocks through tiny canyons of shoveled or foot-pummeled snow until my boots were soaked. The sky had cleared and the sunshine made the white surroundings glare oppressively. I kept my narrowed eyes to the sidewalk, recalling the fog of recent days, which had lent a merciful anonymity to everything in its mantle.

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At what point did those two college sophomores know that they would drown? The current was stronger than they had suspected. The temperature of the water retarded circulation. The cigarettes smoked as they studied for midterms had compromised the strength of their lungs. Then a cramp in the leg. Well, go with the current for awhile, don’t fight it. Try to float. But the cold made their bodies clench. Mind over matter. Skim the surface like a skipping stone. What choice but to live? Then the first gulp of water. Up! Stay up! One spent a precious breath on shouting. Had the other heard? Had the other given up this venture and returned to the Brooklyn side? Was that a barge upriver approaching? It passed him and continued on while he thrashed in

the freezing wake.

Did the feeling of terror, after reaching its peak—in the knowledge that physical power was spent—acquiesce, however grudgingly, to defeat? Did the panic turn at the last to surrender and acceptance, to gratitude for having lived at all? So with his last bit of strength—as he slipped into shock—he looked on that magnificent skyline, the glittering cliffs, all the Christmas trees of the world consolidated, the winking beacons of the planes overhead, and the lights on the bridges of New York.

\* \* \*

The doors are closed, the curtains drawn. In a Victorian parlor above a chemist shop in Blackpool, a kerosene lamp provides the only light.

The séance begins with the *Twenty-Third Psalm*. The participants sit upright, clasping hands. A thin rope, further binding the circle, is tied to each ankle. There are eight sitters: five women, three men. The medium, a Mrs. Birdie Moss, sits blindfolded in a shabby armchair, with a small night table wedged between her knees. A portly young woman, Mrs. Moss dresses for these occasions in nothing but a dark old robe. She wears her long hair loose.

When the psalm is ended, she goes into trance, her head dropping onto her chest. The others chant softly, “Thou art with me, Thou art with me,” or hum a single note. They wait for the ectoplasm to manifest. It will issue most likely from her mouth or nostrils, but occasionally one of her ears will give passage. Based on previous sittings, the luminous substance will emerge like a tendril, groping down toward the night stand, there to build and billow, assuming the shape of the spirit operator.

Mrs. Moss is utilized by three controls, one of whom will soon take form if all the

conditions are right. The most gregarious of these is a Scottish seamstress who died in childbirth in the reign of George III. The other two are brothers who met their deaths in a boating accident the year the Mosses were married. They are taciturn and short of temper, as if they would prefer to commune with a higher class of people.

The medium's body is taken by convulsions. Her shoulders twitch, her head jerks back. These reactions are more extreme than usual, and the sitters hold hands tightly and attempt to stimulate the flow of ectoplasm by silently bidding peace to the operator.

Mrs. Moss starts to hiccup. Something is wrong. She grimaces and grips her jaws, as if resisting what wants to come through. The temperature in the room has dropped so much that the sitters can see their breaths. A loud thump sounds near the window. The lid of the Mosses' sewing machine has flipped onto the carpet. There is a noise like fingernails scratching a wall and a fluttering sound directly overhead, reminiscent of a tongue lapping water. Mrs. Moss has stopped breathing.

In order to banish the hostile presence, the sitters recite the *Lord's Prayer*. With a screech, the grille of the fireplace yanks from its place and hits the nearest wall. The scratching and lapping noises stop. The chill recedes as silence grows over the room. With another hiccup, the medium revives, breathing unevenly for several minutes, until her blindfold is removed. The curtains are opened, the gas mantle lit. Mrs. Moss is put to bed. The participants retrieve their coats, brooding over the frightful experience and the sting of failed expectations.

Just what had they been hoping to experience? What revelations, what comforts, had they sought from "Beyond"? Perhaps a final word that they had never received from the lips of a lover or long-estranged friend. An apology by an abusive grandfather. Some hint or offering of secret knowledge. A grotesquery. A kick. Or nothing at all: one of the sitters had been an agent of the local constabulary's anti-fraud unit.

\* \* \*

Let Slippy tell you as he crawls from your navel. Through the blindfold you picture him building his luminous, coelenteric form. He slides down to your naked thigh, pulsing excitedly.

Hold your hand directly over him. Cold steam on the wires from your palm scintillates. Slippy reacts to the potential threat by shrinking his dimensions and retreating toward his point of emergence. As you pull back your hand, he grows again, but moves up your shaven belly to your chest. He comes to rest for a moment in the indentation directly over your heart. Once again you raise your hand, but in a less aggressive manner, presenting him with the back of your fingers. Slippy taps a warning on your sternum. He allows, however, for the second joint of your index finger to brush against him. The numinous plasm has a density or a force field that suggests a material boundary.

Slowly turn your palm to face him. As if in greeting, Slippy doubles in size, grows five nubs corresponding to the digits of your hand. Fingers spread, you gently touch him, palm against palm. His surface is not adhesive at all, but instead like an oily clabber. He seems to invite your initiative. Press your hand in. Gears interlock as you penetrate his surface. Gentle coils grip in the lining, cream at the hairs of your wrist. Slippy's mentho-gel scrapes over your knuckles as the wire-ends from your palm and fingers slam through his gelid interior to hot, hard-boiled flesh. Wires in wires. Slippy no here.

Slippy there. Hovering above you, tethered by a rope of fluorescent mucin. The tang of human sweat has excited a run of blisters on him; alien pin-stipples burn through his coat. Smell of sulfur and burnt lavender, spirit flesh kindled.

The senior controls at the Agency had warned him of portals like you.

“Amateurs with diseased minds will siphon up any wandering goop who flashes a business card.”

“You listen to Dr. Silas, sugar. I been there, too. Portals like that keep a trance eye cracked. Just when you buildin’ up free-like, they put they wires out. I had a young woman in Boston, sugar, pull two of us up simultaneous, and still try callin’ the shots. She dead.”

“Potentially very bad scene. Mutually.” Dr. Silas, the hue and luster of beryllium, had a preacher’s gravity. “Some guides go along for kicks.”

“Give us all a bad name. I advise you keep a tight ship, sugar.”

“Your mandate—Article 25B—is to ‘convey palpable evidence.’ That’s all. They get fresh? Black out a kidney.”

“Before a dalliance put a bruise on you.”

Slippy builds on his leash, his shape twisting away from the pinpricks, gathering into a human-like figure—a diminutive torso, sprouting head and arms. It is the form of a girl. Arms stretching out, she flails her hands, as if expelling drops of water. The ectoplasmic cord from your navel hooks to a spur-like projection on her left cheekbone. Her rime-white hair floats close about her, writhing like seaweed. Her eyes are black craters, not a spark in them.

In your throat, her voice. In your eyes a darkness, not like fog, but like stone. A cold tongue licks the salt from your lips. As the tap of your consciousness pinches. Heat and moisture of your manikin suspended.