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Symmetrically Significant: Essays

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SYMMETRICALLY SIGNIFICANT: ESSAYS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
David Haydon

May 2019

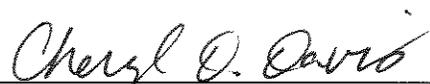
SYMMETRICALLY SIGNIFICANT: ESSAYS

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To Jordy, this book is for you

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I have never believed in the image of the writer as a solitary person, slaving away at a computer to produce some story that is all their own. I have always believed that the writing is lonely, but the writer is not. For all those involved in this project, I want to thank you.

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and soulful thought. Thank you for your commentary on my writing, which assures me that the limit does not exist on creativity.

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[PREFACE]

From All the Authors I Have Stolen: An Annotated Bibliography (of Sorts)

“This is kind of how we get through our lives:
we tell ourselves stories so that what’s
happening becomes something we can live
with. Necessary fictions.”

-Lidia Yuknavitch, “Woven”

I once, around second grade, had a series of dreams about a nursing home director who was a demon. He was a kind man, handsome, dapper, good at his job. In the dream, he was my friend. Once producing a swirled soft-serve ice cream cone from behind his back, as if by magic. I think his name was John.

The dreams lasted for about three weeks, during which most of the patients at the nursing home developed amnesia. Each time, it would begin when a patient lost something dear to them. One man lost his dentures and no longer smiled. A woman lost a necklace from her late husband. Another lost the only photo album she was allowed to bring to the home. Dream-me helped these people search for their possessions all over the property, which to adult me seems so expansive. We searched their rooms, the immaculately kept gardens, in the cafeteria, and inside of a giant grand piano that my dream body could fit into. It must have been a thousand acres of manicured dreamscape.

As the dreams continued, most of the patients had amnesia, Alzheimer’s, or dementia and were lifeless versions of themselves, barely able to speak or move without assistance.

In the last week of the dreams, I stayed one night (a night inside a night's dream), I watched John because I had developed suspicion that he was stealing from the residents. When he walked the halls that night, he never entered a room but would send demonic orbs, very bubblelike, into the rooms to take the sentimental belongings of patients. And when I snuck into his office another night, he had encased them all on shelves. The dentures, the necklace, the photo album: all trophies.

There is no specific origin of this dream, though, I blame *Touched by an Angel*, which I watched with my mom and brother every week. And as I write this, I want to sketch in Roma Downey's Monica and Della Reese as Tess into the background of the dream. But in the end, it only mattered that I defeated John and returned the items, and therefore life, back to the patients of the nursing home.

Now what strikes me about the dream is the way some part of me, even at such a young age, realized the importance of stories, of owning them and sharing them. A few years ago when I thought about this dream, I interpreted as a new materialism, that objects connected us to stories and that was how we could classify items as important or not. Now, I see it more as a statement on the ownership of stories; we must claim our stories and keep them as our own. When we do lose those stories we lose a sense of identity; we become amnesiac or dementialike, barely able to speak or care for ourselves. And maybe that is why I turned to nonfiction as a genre for my writing. A way to own my own stories.

However, in "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes argues against viewing authorship as ownership over a text because such a model gives control over the meaning of the text solely to that author. He writes, "The Author when we believe in him, is

always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a before and an after: the Author is supposed to feed the book – that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child” (520). Barthes’s formulation of the death of the author creates a literary world in which the ideas and the stories of a text become their own, rather than a version of authorship in which the text is like a child, stamped forever with the last name of its father. In such a model of authorship, the text is autonomous, in a way. The reader has control during his/her reading, but he/she relinquishes that control back to the text at the end of the reading. Essentially, Barthes seeks to avoid a system of authorship in which texts “release[e] a single ‘theological’ meaning (the messages of the Author-God),” and instead promotes a view of the text as living, “a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture” (520).

Of course, in reality, authorship is more complicated than that, particularly in nonfiction, like my thesis, because there is a certain claim to truth and reality attached not only to the text, but to the author as well. As Brenda Miller and Susan Paola write:

Simply by choosing to write in this genre, and to present your work as nonfiction, you make an artistic statement. You’re saying that the work is rooted in the ‘real’ world. Though the essay might contain some elements of fabrication, it is directly connected to you as the author behind the text. There is a truth to it that you want to claim as your own, a bond of trust between reader and writer. (ix)

In writing nonfiction, there is a presentation of self. That self is tied to the authorial “I” and is tied to the real world “I,” but it rarely is full aligned with either or both. Instead,

the narratorial “I,” the “I” of nonfiction is often a construction that functions as literature, that functions to move a plot, or a non-plot-style writing, forward.

But, if we are to understand nonfiction texts in this way, we must in some way deal with the problem of the Author-God presented by Barthes; after all, once the text has entered the world, it becomes an object of culture. If we were to think of stories as owned, as objects connected to our beings and identities as my dream suggests, we tighten our grip on culture and power. We attempt a theological message, which even Miller and Paola discourage, as they write, “We go to literature – and perhaps especially creative nonfiction literature – to learn not about the author, but about ourselves; we want to be *moved* in some way” (viii). We are always seeking as readers to know ourselves better through the texts we read. The question is how does the nonfiction text do that?

The answer is theft, at least in a sense. T.S. Eliot once wrote, “Good writers borrow; great writers steal.” In almost any cultural mindset, theft is viewed as legalistically and morally wrong, so how can Eliot present a solution to the problem of stealing stories? That answer is found in the way that Bakhtin discusses language in “Discourse in the Novel.” In this essay, Bakhtin argues, “Language – like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives – is never unitary” (206). Furthermore, he argues, “[Language] becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic expressive intention” (208). If we apply this to storytelling, particularly nonfiction, and the forms in which those stories take place, we see that it is in the act of sharing that we make language our own, but after sharing that language is returned to the community.

In a framework where stories are populated and signified by their authors, we begin to see that all stories share something. That no story belongs to one alone. That one may never fully give credit to “the thousand sources of culture” present in their text. But in my own writing, particularly in this project, it has been integral to my intent to work in a landscape of writers that push the boundaries of literary nonfiction, particularly as it pertains to form. And while I have populated the forms found in my thesis with my own intent, here, I would like to explore the foundations of such a project.

1. Washuta, Elissa. *My Body Is a Book of Rules*. Pasadena: Red Hen Press, 2014.

This very essay uses the form of an annotated bibliography, which I have modeled after Washuta’s essay “Preliminary Bibliography.” The essay traces the narrator’s psychosexual development through a list of books beginning with childhood picture books and juvenile nonfiction through adulthood, during which Washuta doesn’t finish reading many of the books. Throughout, there is a consistent nod towards sexuality developed by references to mermaids and starvation/hunger.

Of course, my version of this essay is more theoretical, simply because the purpose of this essay is to convince you and the Graduate School that I deserve an MFA. So, I wrote this essay with the intent to convince you that the work you are about to read or may have already read did not come into existence through an infinite-monkey-theorem-type experiment, in which infinite monkeys typing on infinity typewriters accidentally created the work before you.

2. Jamison, Leslie. "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain." *The Empathy Exams*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press. 2014. 185-218.

The actuality of "Symmetrically Significant Skulls" is more like this essay by Leslie Jamison, which explores the ideology of female pain as it expressed through literature, cinema, popular culture, online forums, and real life. The introduction serves as a literature review of female pain, while each numbered section explores a certain manifestation of that pain.

Her essay provided particular guidance in structure. In using the story of Major as a frame, I hoped to show, like Jamison does with her beginning, an overarching or controlling narrative of the skull. Jamison begins, "We see these wounded women everywhere" before beginning a traipse through the women of literature and "high culture" who must suffer. In my own essay, I start, "In 1834, Major Mitchell, a crooked-eared eleven-year-old Durham, Maine boy, was sentenced to nine years of hard labor at Thomaston prison. His attorney, John Neal, is the first to use crooked ears as a defense." With this intro, I start to introduce an ideology surrounding the straightness and implied symmetry of the skull.

Jamison's essay goes on to collage woman after woman suffering. She uses collage as Miller and Paola explain to "transform [her] recurring motifs from beginning to end" (109). She uses keywords to trigger and point back to previous pieces, and foreshadows new suffering before she even writes it. In "Symmetrically Significant Skulls," I use this same concept. Pointing towards love via round-headedness in the sections about my grandmother, my cousin, the

Starchild Skull, Yorick, and others. The Yorick section, particularly the idea that the real skull affirms death, arches backwards to point at my brother's stapled skull. These micro-essays build off one another in a symbiotic relationship moving towards a more nuanced and complete understanding of the skull as a part of the body onto which various discourses are projected. The skull itself becoming a language and structure filled with the authors' intentions.

3. Clammer, Chelsey. *Circadian*. Pasadena: Red Hen Press. 2017.

Circadian's use of the individual essay as a path towards memoir was inspirational for this collection. In many of the essays, Clammer starts with something so outside of herself that it seems impossible that she may work towards interiority of the self but she does. She transforms a grandmother's lazy Susan into a feminist history, and her poetic prose turns an exploration into a lightning into a rape narrative. By the end, we have a portrait of Clammer painted in the thinnest lines of the same color, just in various shades. The slightest image of a whole self.

In my own collection, I wanted to show various facets of selfhood that point towards a whole self without revealing an entirety. As Sue William Silverman writes in her taxonomy of creative nonfiction,

Whereas memoir is a "slice of a life," the author of a personal essay examines an even slimmer piece of that life or, if you will, one bend in the river. Personal essays encompass such topics as nature and travel, or social and political issues. Whereas memoir is an exploration of the past,

personal essays can explore contemporary—even future—events. Instead of the memoirist’s thorough examination of self, soul, or psyche, the personal essayist usually explores one facet of the self within a larger social context.

In these essays, I attempt to look at the self through social representations, such as alien skulls, reality television, or laws of physics. In doing so, the image of the self is like staring at the point of a pencil, whilst, based on eye position, the point will move in and out of focus.

4. Yuknavitch, Lidia. “Woven.” *Guernica*, 3 Aug. 2015, <https://www.guernicamag.com/woven/>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2019.

At one point in this essay, Yuknavitch writes, “Laume came from transcendental waters, and her spirit lives in all waters, even in baths and showers, in rivers, streams, oceans, the rain, and in toilets. She is the guardian of all children, the not yet born, the newly born, the orphaned, the forgotten, even the dead children. If there is a child coming into the world, she can foresee it.” Between sections about the Laume, she writes about trauma – spousal abuse, homophobic violence, the death of a child. She writes stories that don’t make sense to have happened but they did. She writes stories about the Laume as if they did happen. Telling both sets of stories side by side.

Something terrible happened to me. Not once, but three times I was the victim of sexual violence. The difficulty of processing sexual violence is not that it happens but that it becomes woven into one’s sense of self, one’s story. From the fact that language allows us to shape experience, comes the necessity to write

about it. And so, I wrote about it woven into science, into a system that is always supposed to work. In “Body Physics,” I use a braided structure like Yuknavitch to explore trauma and to shape it with something that appears to be entirely outside of the story. But for that narratorial-I, that small piece of myself in the essay, that is all that it can think about. Bodies are supposed to resist forces. Human bodies are supposed to be firm and sturdy enough to protect the active agent inside. From Yuknavitch I learned that you use writing to understand that system.

5. Slater, Lauren. *Lying*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

“I exaggerate” is the single sentence of the first chapter of Slater’s memoir *Lying*. As the story unfolds, the reader must question to what extent the exaggeration is intentional and literary and to what extent it is a pathology. The memoir traces through mental illness in a way that isn’t intended to fit the story structure or logic of neurotypical minds, but instead, Slater writes the way that a “crazy” person, a person with mental illness, thinks and behaves.

My own essay “Surviving Symmetrical Systems” explores mental illness in a heightened, almost absurdist style. The guides use symmetrical concepts (Buridan’s Ass, gender binaries, and symmetry-obsessed gaydar) as leaping off points to delve into an exploration of mental illness as a “offness,” in which one feels distress about being atypical. In these essays, it was essential to use language in a different way, more urgent, longer sentences, fictionalized elements to capture the feeling of these moments and ideologies. In doing so, the effect of the text is to move the reader so quickly through moments that they almost *have* to revisit the piece.

6. Taylor, Justin. "Creek Theses." *Little Boxes: 12 Writers on Television*, edited by Caroline Casey, Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017.

It is hard to write about TV when you use it as an escape from the analytical, scholarly world that you occupy on a daily basis in your office and your classroom and often in the bathroom because male faculty in academia have a tendency to talk at a urinal. This essay was hard to write, so the balance that Taylor achieves was an impetus for my own essay.

His essay is weird, and not exactly my own. The first half of the essay seems to present a personal history through the show *Dawson's Creek*, then the second half pivots to a scholarly analysis, with section subtitles such as "The Epistemological Function of Opening Credits, with Notes Toward an Epistemology of the *Creek* Itself." The essay, though, fully convinces you that this is how TV is supposed to be talked about. It is always about us (a borrowed/stolen form), we pull stories from it and put them in.

In my own essay, I liked an episodic structure, in which the whole of a series could function in the order an episode does. It allowed for playful commentary, but it also allowed me to move into an intellectual voice occasionally. In doing so, this essay creates an orderly exploration into not only what the content of the show says, but an examination of form, and as the overall theme of the work as explores symmetry, it facilitates the work of exploring how stories themselves are frequently built around symmetric oppositions (the "good" and "bad" surgery).

Conclusion

Though forms may belong to a text, they don't belong to the people who use them; people find shapes of stories that allow them to participate in community, whether it be a singular community or a variety of communities. Bakhtin writes:

[T]here are not 'neutral' words and forms – words and forms that can belong to 'no one'; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents....The prose writer as a novelist does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works, he does not violate those socio-ideological cultural horizons (big and little worlds) that open up behind heteroglot languages – rather, he welcomes them into his work. The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master. (208-9)

In one of the dreams, I remember John forcing me to steal with him. I think it was a small teddy bear, definitely from the woman's childhood. The name around the neck had a ribbon. As I watched the bubble take the bear from my hands, I was sadder than I had ever been at age seven. That was the first time I told my mom about the dream-turned-nightmare, and she let me sleep with her.

The bear is a form of story, albeit what lay behind it I don't know. The woman never told me the story in the dream, not even after I had returned it to her. The woman, overjoyed, hugged dream-me. She kept her story, but I retained the form that it had come in. And it is here now, so you share it too.

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SYMMETRICALLY SIGNIFICANT: ESSAYS

David Haydon

May 2019

68 Pages

Directed by: Dale Rigby, Jessica Folk, and Molly Kerby

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This collection of personal essays explores the use of symmetry as a metaphor of normality in contemporary American culture. These essays use formalistic exploration to enter into a conversation with the reader regarding the body, sexuality, gender, and mental illness. Each piece aims to dismantle and explode the metaphorical significations of symmetry through the use of interdisciplinary research combined with memoir.

Symmetrically Significant Skulls: A List

Introduction

In 1834, Major Mitchell, a crooked-eared eleven-year-old Durham, Maine boy, was sentenced to nine years of hard labor at Thomaston prison. His attorney, John Neal, is the first to use an asymmetrical skull, the slightly sloped right ear, as a criminal defense against the charges alleged against him.

In modern-day Durham, no one knows who Major is, much less the crime he committed, what his life looked like, or where he died. In the town of barely 3000 citizens, there is little to do, so any social activity beyond church life requires citizens to travel to surrounding towns and villages. After the forty-minute ride from Portland, all I can find in town on Google Maps is a marina gas station, a local karate studio, and the Royalsborough Inn, the bed-and-breakfast I'm staying at. In an 1850 *History of Durham, Maine*, famed historian E.S. Stackpole writes, "Can any good come out of Nazareth? Can anything of interest be said about a small country town? Read and see. A place possesses historical interest not because of its size, productions, wealth and natural beauty, but because of the character and deeds of its natives and citizens." His ultimate point is that because Durham is mostly insignificant in a greater historical sense, we must focus on the morality and vivacity of the town's citizens. The rest of Stackpole's history lists great people and great families of Durham, an emphasis is placed on the wealthy and affluent families of course, but this is of little importance to Stackpole. However, the morally superior lives of Durham's rich makes for dry reading in the shabby, informal library of the Royalsborough Inn at Bagley House, which has been standing since before Major was sentenced.

When Jim and Marianne beckon me through the red front door (after a half hour of walking the property before check-in), they ask me what I am doing in Durham. They probably assume that the small town is not of real interest to a twenty-three-year-old Kentuckian, but they don't know that I am a writer. So as they walk me to my room, the Bliss Suite, before I can explain the purpose of my visit, they begin to recommend the fun activities and sites in nearby towns. But when I come downstairs to ask them about the house and the town, I share that I am investigating a court case from the 1830s about a boy mauling and partially castrating a slightly younger school mate. Sitting at the properly made breakfast table, Jim and Marianne's expressions beg me not to write that in the guest book, which I don't, instead writing, "Such a great place for some writerly inspiration!! Hope to return soon!"

The difficulty of writing about Major, of coming to investigate him, is that his crime is so violent, so abhorrent, to both past and present audiences, as witnessed by the reactions of not only Jim and Marianne, but every cab driver I ride with, several librarians, and the Indiana couple I eat breakfast with on Wednesday morning. According to the court record, which is primarily the testimony of David Crawford, the eight-year-old victim, Major attacked him in the woods. At the bed-and-breakfast, I read the court record for a fourth or fifth time. I don't ask Jim and Marianne if it is okay, but I slip behind the alpaca barn to sit at the edge of the property to stare into the woods, where I imagine that Major attacked David. The first time, he would have attacked, Major convinced David, by threat of a punch, to follow him into the woods to search for flags. Once they were a little ways in, David said Major began to beat him up, threw him to the ground and punched him over and over. Because he yelled out, David was saved by Mr.

McIntosh, the owner of the nearby farm, who then split the boys up and sent them on their way.

Major then circled around some other farms, met David before he got home and dragged him into the woods again. This time, as punishment, David said, Major tied him between two trees with his own suspenders. While David is tied there, Major whipped him with a switch, making David count the lashes to one hundred, which he is able to cheat because Major apparently couldn't count that high, and fed him shrub leaves and tried to make him swallow mud, which David spat out when Major left him for a few moments. When he returned, Major had found a piece of tin, which he used to slice open David's scrotum, removing a testicle.

At the edge of the woods, the court recording feels more damning, more immediate than it had in Kentucky. Almost as if I were to walk into the woods, the ghosts of David and Major would reenact the scene over and over. Maybe it is that David's confession begins to feel more like a child's. In court, neither he nor his mother are clear on how he escaped, whether by his own cunning or an act of mercy from Major. According to David's mother, Eliza, he was near death for two days as a result of the wound and continued to bleed for two weeks. Two doctors who treated David confirmed the bleeding of the wound, but they also claimed that while the wound was serious, it was never severe enough to cause death.

Sitting at the edge of the woods, Durham was familiar, uncanny even, in its smallness. It is, or at least was, the type of town that protects those it considered to be its own, the affluent, influential families collected in Stackpole's history. It herds around them, protects them, especially the children. As a founding family's child, the town

rallied to support David. So every testimony, that of McIntosh, of Elisha Beal, of Henry Plummer, Major's own stepbrother, all condemn him as a slow-minded, violent boy.

When John Neal began his argument, he must have been aware of this, so he wedded the rationality of a medical argument combined with the pathos of Major's widowed mother. The two intersect at the want of symmetry in Major's head, an injury sustained six weeks after birth. Major fell off a chest, while his single mother was working, which resulted in a permanent crookedness. Major's right ear was slightly lower than the left. Neal questions Dr. Mighels, a phrenologist, the "theory of the mind" that attempted to use the skull to determine the mental superiorities and deficiencies of an individual.

Dr. Mighels testified, "There is a want of symmetry in the head; the right ear is lower than the left. This is very apparent. I have doubts as to the congenital nature of this. This may have well risen from a wound, or from a blow on that part of the head. The child might survive a material injury of the brain; even if insanity or fatuity were not produced." The doctor's testimony indicated that Major's physical asymmetry, by court testimony it is a visually noticeable malady, may have resulted in an insanity. Moments later, Neal builds upon Mighels's testimony to report "that phrenology teaches just what the witness, now on the stand, has testified to; and proposed to show that the organ of destructiveness is located just where this enlargement appears." Essentially, Neal wanted the court to believe that an imperfect, asymmetrical skull was a sign of a boy made violent, not by his own temperament but by a destruction of a crucial mental faculty. Major was not a morally reprehensible character, but a he was a character possessing little morality by the nature of his asymmetry.

The attorney general objected to the testimony on the grounds that there was no standard understanding of phrenology among doctors, much less the jury or himself, but not before Neal argues that “he did not ask the Court to base its decisions, the Attorney General his arguments, or the jury their verdict of their acquaintance with phrenology.” The ultimate decision is a reliance upon a personal response to phrenology, if the jury can align their belief with the beliefs of phrenology. Essentially, Neal hopes the verdict may come down to an understanding phrenology as an alignment of physical and moral asymmetries.

#1

In a poem I had workshopped, there’s a line that reads, “Mother a box of bones.” Because this is a workshop, classmates debate about the meaning of “box of bones.”

Bag of bones, maybe?

I just don’t think it’s necessary.

But then there is something missing in the meaning.

I agree, that is true, but I don’t know the something either. This is one time I am thankful for the workshop gag rule. Because all I know is I like the sound and its sound means something. When I submit more poems about bones a new debate ensues about the structure of the poem and the *sine qua non* of skeletons sketched in my verse and about the plausibility of plucking a bone from a buried body and where my want for bones begins (other lines in another poem say, “if I find / a skull on a side / walk I will keep it”). Again I don’t know the origin of the fascination, my freaky morbidity. Mainly for the skull, which pops up so frequently it ends up in the title of the never published chapbook.

Perhaps it is that the skeletons that order our bodies are beneath our shallow skin and that draws me to them, enamors me. That skeletons are so rarely seen while we are alive, except by surgeons. But because I am too squeamish for surgery, I shall never see one.

Maybe it is that both my brother and uncle die in car crashes that shatter their skeletal systems and bludgeon their skulls before they may be buried.

Maybe it is that the skull is the shallowest bone below skin, closest to the surface, least protected despite it housing our most significant organ.

#2

One of the two T-Rexes on display at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh is the holotype, the most complete sample of a species and used for identification of further samples. I am visiting the museum with the only friend I make the summer I interned for a magazine in Pittsburgh, whose name is also David. He had picked me up that morning, despite the fact I lived within walking distance of the museum.

The first few rooms in the dinosaur wing of the building are designed specifically for children. The information placards and interactive displays rise to thigh level, so children can reach up and compare the size of their hand to a plaster mold of a dinosaur's footprint. The children and parents in front of us enjoy making memories, their own fossilizations. David laughs at me when I stick my hand in the mold and smile widely for a photo, which he obliges and takes on his camera. I offer to do the same for him, but he declines my offer, chuckling as he walks onward.

The hall full of suspended dinosaur skeletons is guided by a winding path, which

begins with earlier, smaller dinosaurs and moves onto larger scarier dinosaurs of later paleontological periods. In the first or second room of the dinosaur wing, we learned that most of the skeletons on display in museums are replicas. Using casts of the dinosaurs better preserves the millions-of-years-old bone, and the bones themselves are frequently too heavy to be reconstructed as a full skeleton. They keep the real bones behind the glass for further study.

The two T-Rexes are some of the last dinosaurs we encounter. It is the last full skeleton, though I might be remembering this incorrectly. David and I trace the two rexes upward(ish) with our eyes. The info card below the dinosaurs says that recent discoveries found that the majority of biped dinosaurs, including T-Rexes, walked and stood more horizontal than vertical, and all the dinosaurs have been adjusted to accommodate this finding. At the bottom of the display, on our side of the barrier, an epoxy covered casting of the skull sits on a pedestal, also roughly thigh-high, and also probably meant for children. I walk around the epoxied skull, sliding my hand across the shiny, smooth surface. David stands at the back for a while. *Have you noticed how asymmetrical it is?*

I laugh because it's an odd thing to notice when you're looking at dinosaur bones. *It's not asymmetrical*, I squat down to look and make sure I'm right as I say this. He motions me to the back of the skull where he has been standing.

See the inner part in the left is bent, it slopes down. And it did. The rough diamond shape of the interior was more compact on the left than it was the right. The bones were more curvy and morphed, too, as I ran my hands along it.

The next time I see David, we go to a trendy, overpriced taco restaurant and go on

a walk by the river. I talk about the skull, which I had been obsessively researching since. It was annoying that the museum hadn't provided any information about the deformation of the skull. David isn't as interested in it as I am; he's pretty much forgotten about it, even though he pointed it out. I'm rambling. *It's weird. But like kinda totally normal, maybe.* We eat ice cream from an organic shop as we sit around a fountain. *Our skulls shift as babies because the bones are soft. But like that was a full-grown dinosaur's skull.*

The holotype T-Rex (CM 9380) was found in the Hell Creek formation in Montana. The strata of stone cover a geological range from the Upper Cretaceous period through the lower Paleocene period. The rocks trapping the bones between 100.5 million to 56 million years ago. CM 9380 is surrounded, somewhere in the years of stone, by lesser beasts and plant life similarly stuck in sediment.

There is no direct commentary on the slanted skull of CM 9380, no known reason as to why the skull is slanted. Some scholars propose that changes in skulls show the evolutionary shift from dinosaurs to birds. In this change, the skull changes size, not shape, so the skull closes around a smaller bird brain. This skull caught in a specie-specific shift, maybe. Others believe that pressure of stone and sediment slanted the skull into this position. In the process of fossilization, somewhere in the skull's transformation from bone to stone, the inner cavity collapses, just a bit.

In either case, the skull shows a sense of self-preservation we may not fully understand.

#3

My brother was flung from the windshield of his car, his body landing in creek mud.

Most of the bones in his body were broken. I know for sure that his face is badly damaged. His face had to be reconstructed, the extent of which I don't know. The makeup is thick, covering his forehead, while his nostrils are slightly more tapered than usual. There is a clump of makeup that one woman tries to scrape off his face with her fingernail. But, in his casket, he looks as close to himself as possible – a reflection of the living; I tell people now that when a family member dies, you can never imagine them fully alive again.

At my brother's visitation, the owner of the funeral home pulls me aside and asks me to tell my mother to not touch Jordy's hands or face too much. Both are heavily make-upped and too much friction will remove the make, and risk the facial reconstruction, which everyone says looks good, just like him.

For the majority of the visitation, I stood at the foot of the casket. This feels like crowd-control. Parrying the wait, and weight, of the moment. I laugh at things I don't really find funny and fake comfort in response to stupid clichés. When I am at the head of the casket, I don't touch my brother much. Not because I have been asked not to but because of a fear that I will break him, like porcelain into a fine powder.

Occasionally I will pat my brother's hand when talking with acquaintances – this proved, in my mind, that I loved my brother, that I could in fact touch him. Before the casket is closed, I hug him. The few times I feel the need to touch my brother, he is cold.

A few times, a total of five maybe, I touched the premature gray spot on the right side of his head, around an inch behind from his temple. His hair was soft and a neutral temperature, not cold and stiff like the rest of him. Sometimes I would use the tip of my index finger, and other times I would use the knuckle. After the first couple times I petted

the hair, I notice the staple there, maybe a screw, that closed his skull. Later, after he was buried, I tell my mother, and she says she thought about it too. It was probably a mole – he had many moles on his scalp, she says. But I know that there were many cuts and scrapes they had to close and cover.

I could only touch my brother's soft gray spot so long without shuddering and moving back to the foot of the casket. It was different than tapping his hand.

#4

My mother is proud that she has a photo of Grandma Drury, our only living great grandparent, holding each one of my siblings and me. In each Kodak print, Grandma Drury beams, her smile stretched over her straight, white dentures. Her left arm cradles our bodies while her right cups our heads. In the second, similar print, she looks down at whichever baby she is holding.

Mom told me that once, Grandma Drury, whose big mouth should've got her in trouble frequently but never did, said, *Jan, I love to hold your babies because their heads are so round. Not flat like their daddy's.* I like to imagine that she is holding me because it has to be me or my younger sister because she said *babies*, which means it couldn't have been Jordy, who was born first. I also like to imagine that she looked over at my father after she said this, holding me, and waiting for him to react to her joke. Dad laughs and rubs the back of his head, which he self-admits is a bit flat, as he tries to stumble through a response to her quick wit. She smiles harder and looks back down at the baby.

Grandma Drury knew flat-headedness happens when infants lie too long in one position on their backs; their soft skulls succumb to more solid surfaces.

The medical name given to the common condition is plagiocephaly, with 200,000 diagnosed cases a year. Sometimes, plagiocephaly is caused from the pressure of the birth canal – simply from coming into life, a baby’s head may become misshapen. Other times, it is diagnosed as positional molding. Unfused fontanel, the skull plates particularly towards the back of the skull, fuse flatly and incorrectly. Plagiocephaly specifically refers to asymmetrical fusion, but now is commonly used to refer to all infantile flat-headedness. Most doctors consider it a cosmetic issue, as so far there are no known physical or mental defects caused by such fusion. The Mayo Clinic writes to new parents, “Flat spots related to pressure on the back of the head don’t cause brain damage or interfere with a baby’s development. Keep in mind that if you spend too much time worrying about your baby’s head shape, you might miss some of the fun.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics explains that most infants outgrow plagiocephaly, becoming toddlers with beautifully round heads. It is still common practice for doctors and parenting guides to suggest methods for re-rounding flat heads. Mayo Clinic says that alternating arms while holding the baby or rubbing its head while it nurses may polish out positional molding. Mom tells me she was careful to roll us over to give us tummy time as infants. She hated to hear us cry and admits to holding us and maybe not letting us self-soothe frequently enough.

Grandma Drury loved holding babies up until her death a couple months shy of ninety-three. Even in bad health, she attempted to cradle them in her arms. Instead, she would settle when her caretaker, my great-aunt Gerry, would make her recline her rocker, laying them on her lap and looking down into their faces. She would still cup the cap of the head. To the parents of round-headed babies she would say, “you can always tell how

well a baby is loved.” She never said anything to the parents of plagiocephalic babies.

#5

In the 1480s, Leonardo DaVinci moves to Milan, where he begins, inspired by his new surroundings, a treatise on painting, particularly how to paint the human body. In his folio *Anatomical Manuscript*, of which there is A and B, he begins to document the body, and he starts with the skull.

In *Anatomical Manuscript B*, DaVinci draws a skull. It is in Milan that he is finally able to gain access to human skulls, to touch and draw them. At some point in the 1490s his interest in them wanes but not before drawing many skulls on the pages of the folio, the most revered has a quarter sliced out of it.

DaVinci’s drawing situates the skull in a shaded corner, mimicking its dissection of the skull itself, where the left front quarter has been excised. The edges are solidly shaded, creating a clear, bony boundary between the skull and the world around it. He has also shaded the sides to show the indentations normal to a human skull. The jaw is angular, and the teeth, without lips and musculature to change countenance, are left permanently smiling. Upward, the skull shows the nasal cavity, where the sinuses would reside, and the left cutout portion shows the depth of the nasal cavity. Likewise, the eyes and where the mouth begins to merge with the throat.

Unlike some of the other skulls, which are more artistic, creative renditions of the skulls, this one is a near replication of the model skull. Because the skull was likely stolen, DaVinci’s choice to physically alter the skull is a dangerous one, but it shows simultaneous regard for the body, a reverence, and a disregard for social mores that would condemn the

desecration of a body. This particular drawing is different simply because it shows us the most interior part of the skull, making it the deepest the human eye, and the artist's eye, had ever been.

#6

Lawrence Olivier as Hamlet holds the “twenty and three years” skull of the dead jester Yorick for a while, flipping it around as if sport before the nameless clown, a gravedigger, tells him it is Yorick. Hamlet then says, *Alas Poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio*, as he grows more serious. He holds it in both hands now, looking at it dead on. *A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times*, he says as he turns the skull, taking in all that is left of the corporeal body of the jester. Though by Hamlet's use of the present tense *hath*, we see he is maybe losing sense of the boundaries between past and present.

But now how abhorrent in my imagination it is. My gorge rises it. The scene's switch to prose indicates a more emotional, less composed dialogue. Hamlet's rigid personality and his sanity are waning.

Olivier holds the skull throughout the first half of the graveyard scene, where the clown gravedigger doesn't recognize the *mad Hamlet*, and where he and Horatio reflect on death before hiding when a funerary procession marches in to bury the dead Ophelia. Film historians and myself alike have been unable to verify whether the skull is human or not. Some other productions walk boldly into the macabre, using a human skull. Boasting about it in preshow media.

Others have transformed the scene, using projection, a sweater, or other props to

symbolize Yorick. Some have even cut the scene all together.

And still others use the real skull but lie about it. In the 2009 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet* starring David Tennant, the skull of composer Andre Tchaikowsky posthumously plays the part of the jester. However, the skull was said to have been replaced by a replica, when in actuality, it had not been. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, artistic director Greg Doran said he didn't list Tchaikowsky as Yorick in the program in order to avoid the scandal and the potential for distraction that a real skull may have caused. Instead, he says, "Yorick's skull, and Hamlet's lament to him, is probably one of the most famous icons in Shakespeare, and one most frequently [satirized] and misquoted. It was through André that the company tried to get beyond those clichés, to investigate something deeper. You can't hold a real human skull in your hand and not be moved by the [realization] that your own skull sits just beneath your skin, that you will be reduced to that at some stage."

#7

The facial features of the Starchild Skull appear dwarfed when compared to that of a "normal child." They are tighter on the face, the eyes are smaller, and the forehead stretches a greater distance to where a normal hairline should be.

The lore of the Starchild Skull places its discovery in an abandoned mineshaft in an unknown Mexican village in the 1960s. After several passings down, a nurse named Melanie connects with Lloyd Pye, an expert in "alternative knowledge." Together, through a series of tests performed in labs across the world, they determine the skull to be 900 years old, with a "significant percentage of the DNA in the Skull [*sic*] appear[ing] to be

nonhuman.”

Recreations of the face on the Project Starchild Skull website figure the child as an alien. In the clay models, the features align with the “little green man” variety of alien, though the clay is the color of Caucasian skin. A drawing gives it maroon-brown skin stretched tightly over the protruding round head and deep black eyes. In both, the being’s features are barely human-esque. Side-by-side comparisons of the skull and its human counterpart, found together in the mineshaft, show the differences between a human skull and the Starchild Skull. The page lists the structural incongruencies of the skull: missing sinus cavities, super strong but thin bone, the large rounding protrusion, the flat skull back. The page reckons with the “rational” naysayer, debunking the debunkers. The point of all these refutations being that this couldn’t just be an ugly, unloved child.

The skull’s high level of symmetry is also suspect, as most human heads don’t make it through life without slight indentations, bumps, and slantings of the skull. It is too perfect and too complete. Instead, it is something otherworldly, unhuman. A level of perfection we can only theorize and never reach.

The Starchild Skull was largely a late 90s, early 2000s phenomenon for conspiracy theorists. For those that believe the information provided by the Pye, this is definitive proof of aliens, most of them predisposed to believe in aliens already.

#8

In July 2018, my sister Abby babysat our sister-like cousin Stacey’s baby, Lexi. Lexi was six months old, already tottering, already smart and beautiful. She had attached herself to Abby from early infancy.

One week when I am visiting, when she wasn't sleeping, we'd play all day. When Lexi falls asleep, my sister takes her into her room. My sister says it's to protect us from Lexi's post-nap rage, but really Abby uses it to spend more time with Lexi without Mom or me to take Lexi from her. When I fed her a post-nap-rage bottle, I can feel the smoothness of her head. Not only the silky strawberry bloneness but also the skin below, never touched or scarred by cradle cap. When she had finished drinking, I held her in my lap and swirled my finger around to tap her nose. By the end of the day, she had learned the game and began to tap her own nose by lifting my finger to her face.

As she tired, she laid her head on my shoulder, combing my hair with her babyhand as I cradled her head, admiring its curve, knowing she is loved.

When Stacey arrives from work, Lexi is ready to reattach to her mother, able even at six months to detect the slight incongruencies of my sister and momma-proper. Lexi and I "talk" as her mom talks to mine. As we talk, she begins to lean her face into my finger, playing our own game.

As Lexi stood, in the barstool, held at the hips, Stacey pointed out two bumps at the juncture of her skull and neck, one on each side of the spine. One was larger than the other. Stacey rubs them as Mom watches Lexi for any pained reactions, but her barely teething gums just smile.

Stacey says she noticed them a few weeks ago but didn't think much of them. Thought they would've gone away by now. She asks Mom if she should take her to the doctor.

"They don't seem to be hurting her. And babies will usually tell you if something

feels wrong. But deciding to take her is your Mom-thing to decide,” Mom said.

A few days later, when Stacey picks Lexi up after work, I compliment Lexi’s beautiful head. I tell her that I love to run my palm against the smoothness of her babyskin. Lexi loved these head rubs. She’d push her chin up with a toothless tonguey smile. And I realize that I am like Grandma Drury.

Occasionally, when I am holding her now, I will feel for the bumps at the back of her head. I honestly can’t tell you if Stacey made the Mom-thing decision and took her to the doctor. Part of me still want the bumps, painless and harmless to still be there. Nothing wrong, and Lexi would know that.

Verdict

Despite how compelling phrenology was to the American and Mainer public, with over forty American phrenological societies by the mid-1830s, the judge ruled Dr. Mighels’s testimony inadmissible, and Major was found guilty.

But despite this ruling, Major becomes a fascination of phrenologists and law scholars who sought to redeem him or at least use him to redeem others. Isaac Ray, a contemporary legal scholar participated in his examination and sided that there was trauma to the organ of destructiveness. He included Major in the *Annals of Phrenology* and lamented that John Neal was “unable to show the occurrence of any such change” to Major’s temperament.

The greatest sorrow of the case might be that later phrenological science, and possibly current neurology, may have proven Major innocent by demonstrating the commonality of such injuries causing damage to the destructive faculty. Orson and

Lorenzo Fowler published *The Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology* in 1854, twenty years after Major was sent to prison. The brothers, their tours, and their book largely cemented phrenology as a science into the early twentieth century. The book was used by doctors as a diagnostic, as well as legal precedent in many states. The “Symbolic Head,” the illustrated map of the compartmentalized brain in *The Self-Instructor*, shows as Neal testified the organ of destructiveness just above the ear. Immediately to the left and right are the organs of combativeness and alimentiveness, or appetite and hunger. Were phrenology established as a precedent in Major’s trial, damage to these eras might equate to a modern insanity plea.

In Lisbon Falls and Freeport, the two nearest towns, I search for proof that Major existed, but there is very little. After his stint at Thomaston, Major returned home to live with his mother for a few years. By the time he returns, she is widowed again, or maybe divorced. In the 1840s and 50s, she is marked as the only other person living in the house. At some point, Major gets married, of course not to a Durham girl. He and his wife, unnamed in census documents, move to Delaware, then Rhode Island where they both die.

Alongside Ray’s testimony in the *Annals of Phrenology* sit two sketches of Major, produced by English Artist E, which according to Neal’s notes were also used in court. In these drawings, Major is rendered more childlike and innocent than I was able to picture him in my head. The caption says that Seager was trusted for his “correct eye,” so I assume that the drawing is realistic. In it, Major’s features are small and rounded, perfect on his face. His eyes and mouth are slack in the way a toddler’s might be. And his hair, in thick locks, lays perfectly on his head, curling at the nape of his neck. He most

closely resembles a porcelain doll. He is fragile and breakable.

Wednesday night, the last of my trip to Maine, I sit in the library with Stackpole's *History*. In writing the histories of remarkable men and families of Durham, Stackpole includes nearly every witness in the trial. David Crawford even goes onto to become a well-known minister after attending seminary. Major's family isn't given space in the history, the Mitchells or the Plummers.

It is dark outside, probably nine or ten o'clock when I am reading the "Historical Miscellany" chapter of Stackpole's history. I am trying to figure out what to do with the little to nothing I have learned about Major, but I can't think of how I will write the history of a boy who's crooked ears wrote him and his family out of existence. The miscellany is boring, about a bridge, businesses that have opened and closed, some churches. In a section on temperance Stackpole brags about the morality of a town so honored by teetotaling. In the last paragraph of the section, he denotes the dishonor of those made violent by liquor. "During the hundred years after Durham's incorporation only three persons were sent to State's Prison from the town, and one of these was a boy who seems to have had an unbalanced mind and horribly mutilated a playmate."

A bothered boy from a bump on the head. Phrenology is only relevant when we need to know how to read a skull for basic comprehension.

Equal and Opposite: Body Physics

Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion states, *To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction: or the mutual actions of two bodies upon each other are always equal, and directed toward contrary parts*. This, Newton proposes, proves, and publishes along with two other laws of motion and the universal law of gravitation in *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, presently called in physics *Principia*.

In broader terms, the law lays out that forces form in pairs. One force forces the other forward and outward. The action is enacted, enabling the second force, reaction, to respond. That forces function in this formal way, forms one fourth of the foundations of physics in the universe.

- Action: I am 19 when my brother dies alone in a single-car accident a few miles from our parents' house.

He was 23, single, and unmarried. *Survived by his parents, Alan and Jan Haydon; two siblings, David Stephen Haydon and Abigayle Haydon; no wife; his grandparents...and many aunts, uncles, and cousins.*

- Reaction: This is not the most significant detail of my brother's death, but I latch onto it. I obsess about dying alone. For the first semester and summer after, I practice agoraphobic tendencies of isolation, only leaving my dorm room with one of my two friends or family. I am desperate not to die alone.
- Action: In the November after my brother's death, I agree to go on a date with a Communications grad student I meet on a dating app.

I don't remember his name, even as I walk to his apartment from my dorm building. I don't find him very attractive, barely so actually. But he finds me cute and invites me over for a movie.

- Reaction: He is willing to hold me, which I needed so badly because I was a lonely nineteen-year-old. I probably tell him this is all I need to be his.
- Action: When I get to his apartment, he leads me to his bedroom, where he sits me on the bed while he makes us tea. At nineteen, I am too polite to know that I could decline, so I ask for the last bag of peppermint, which I like with enough sugar. He drinks Earl Grey from a travel mug while he rigs his charging laptop onto a cardboard box at the edge of the bed so we can watch *Austenland*, an independent comedy about a Jane Austen fanatic at a *Pride-and-Prejudice*-style retreat.
 - Reaction: I sip the tea, which I don't finish before it is cold, from a large mug I must hold with both hands. During the movie, I fake laugh because he chose the movie because of my English major, not knowing that I abhor the Victorians. But I need him to like me, so I laugh at Jennifer Coolidge playing another dumb, blonde character while I curl my body into his and keep my knees pulled to my chest so as to not knock the laptop from its careful position.
 - Action: He holds me close to his body. His bulk rests in the small of my back. As the movie passes its climax, he slips his hand under my shirt and begins to feel the hair on my stomach.
 - Reaction: His hand feels good there, slightly rubbing – sensual not sexual – circles. As he breathes into the hollow valley where my neck meets my clavicle, I roll my shoulders and press further into him.

- Action: As the credits roll, he closes his laptop and unrigs the setup so we can unfurl in his bed. He pulls me back into his arms, and this time I rest my head on his chest. We stay this way for a few minutes before I try to slip my hand under his shirt as he had done mine during the movie, but he pulls the hem down before my hand can reach higher than his belly button. Embarrassed of his torso, I guess.

He wedges his hand under my shirt again, though. And again, I like his hand there, applying light, sensual pleasure.

- Reaction: He rolls me onto my back, rolls over on top of me. It is a pleasurable pressure, at first, pushing me into his pillowtop. I like being beneath him. It's position and power. His eyes are very light blue, the parts of him I find most intriguing. His breath is strong, sickening, wet-soft from the hot Earl Grey.
- Action: He kisses down my neck, making me moan, the way one only moans the first time something sexual happens to one's body. A manmade moan moving through me, then stopping as he pulls back.

He continues, and my body is full of pin pricks, uncertainty. His stubby hands, short fingers grip my waist. I am still skinny at the time, so it feels like he has wrapped his hands around the circumference of my body.

- Reaction: I receive his attention. Revel and roll around in it. My tongue against his.
- Action: He unwraps his hands from my waist and removes my hands from his back. Before I can move my arms around his neck, his hands are around mine, embracing between the fingers, tense, then they are holding my wrists above my head. A firm grip over soft pillows. I can feel the blood draining from my hands as they start to pin-prick numb. The blood leaves the slight erection our rolling around had caused up to that

point.

He lifts my shirt by nuzzling it, sniffing like a dog. By the end, my shirt is bunched in my armpits and collared around my clavicle. The smell of my sweat is pungent and sour now, no longer soft. He licks between my bellybutton and pubes. It is not solid. So, it is soft as he rubs his face in the space. And I can hear my body hair scratching his beard. He whispers *so fucking hot*. Staccato friction.

– Reaction: I lift my back, a readjustment. He reads it as an asking-for-more arch. A pleasure. And he must pursue that perceived pleasure further. I wriggle my wrists, creating friction against his hands holding me to the navy sheets of his bed. His hands are thicker than my wrists. And wider.

But my fingers are long and I try to wedge them under his palms, an attempt to pry them open. But his weight is on them.

• Action: His face is still below my bellybutton. His mouth a maw moving toward the small lump in my unbuttoned jeans. He licks it a couple times, which I wince at.

– Reaction: I try to lift my arms against him now, but there is little I can do. He is stouter, and he has the upper hand. I attempt pushing by bringing my shoulder blades into my spine. There is momentum, a budge but not enough to disrupt his body on mine.

I ask him to stop, *please let me up*. The request a soft nudge against him and his sexual urge I feel on my thigh. Soft flesh shielding against his hardness. *I just want to slow down*.

• Action: He keeps kissing my body. Lunged for my lap. Rubbed his face against my sour, sweaty body. His earlier attractive eyes look into mine occasionally, now they are

urgent.

He uses his body to lift mine and flip it over. Because I am apprehensive to wrestle him off, he is on top of me while I am on my stomach. Underwear is around my thighs in the back. He humps my ass deeply enough that I feel the head of his cock touching me.

– Reaction: I scoot to the other side of the mattress somehow. *No, I don't like this. No.* He looks over at me, curious as I pull my underwear back over my ass. I grab my jeans from over the edge of the bed and starts to pull them on. He asks if I don't want to continue. *I'm not mad. I just wasn't ready for all of this today.* I lied, scared of what his reaction would be.

- Action: His hand is still in his underwear, we are wearing the same style of boxer briefs, I notice. His fist is making the pouch pulse, so I look down at the carpet. *You want to watch me finish?* he asks. He thinks I brought him to this point.

– Reaction: *Not really, no.* I look at the carpet and hold my arm at the elbow.

- Action: *Well, he stands, I gotta finish. You got me too turned on over there. I'll be in the bathroom.*

– Reaction: I dress and put on my rain jacket. I sit on the bed after remaking it, and look around the room as I hear his stroking in the bathroom. A wet, angry sound.

There is no particular reason I stay and do this, at least I tell myself now. But I was desirous; I wanted him to be good and this to be sweet. And I wanted to be good, but in my mind, stopping wasn't good. I was disappointed and violated, and what I really needed was redemption by him and for him.

- Action: When he comes out of the bathroom he is probably surprised I am still there,

maybe that nothing is stolen. He has to go, to a friend's, he tells me as he slides into clothes. Do I watch him the same way he had watched me redress? Disappointed?

We walked out together and it's raining. We are quiet, so the rain, a slight shower, is stirringly loud. He is a yard away and as I go farther away from him to walk back to my dorm, he says *I'll drive you. It's close enough to not make me late.* I accept and hope it's not the last time I see him because I still want redemption for us both. Want to make him hard and hungry again, want to make the bed a fruitful not forceful place.

– Reaction: I begin to go on 'dates' like this frequently. Going to his apartment, cuddling and maybe watching a movie, making out, removing clothes but not going any further, trying not to, not wanting to. Maybe I was a tease. But I saw it as testing a boundary, looking at the ways bodies operate.

In the *scholium* to the third law, Newton notes, *Whatever draws or presses another is as much drawn or pressed by that other. If you press a stone with your finger, the finger is also pressed by the stone. If a horse draws a stone tied to a rope, (if I may so say) the horse will be equally drawn back to the stone: for the distended rope by the same effort to relax or unbend itself, will draw the horse back as much toward the stone, as it does the stone towards the horse, and will obstruct the progress of one as much as it advances the other.*

Simply stated, Sir Isaac states a slid stone is slidden by a slider. Said slider sacrifices force when sending said stone southward because the slidden stone's force is friction. Friction furling into sand and slowing sliding. The slider slides the stone successfully, but slower because the stone slows the sliding by standing ground against the slider.

The slider is still stronger, so the stones are simply sport for sliders. The slider is still successful.

And if a body, a boy body, attempts to bury another body, another boy body, the buried body is bogged down to a bed, heavy inside it. Made heavier by the boy on top of him. But the bed tries to buoy the bottom boy body and that boy body buoys the burying body.

But at times buoyed bodies continue to bury other bodies, breaking the momentum of the buoying force. So the buoying is barely noticeable. The resistance isn't strong enough to break.

The burying body maintains momentum, making the bottom boy body, who is buoying, bottom out and bend to the shape of the bed. A rope between a horse and a stone, the boy body unbends eventually.

- Action: I am clear with D before we meet that I don't want to fuck on the first date, probably not for a while.
 - Reaction: he says he is looking for the same, a real relationship. And when I tell him I am home for Christmas break, and not out to my parents, he tells me he respects that too. Sneaking, I have found out, is second nature to older men dating barely legal boys.
- Action: He tells me he is the owner of a medical technology company, a millionaire. His sister and her children live with him because her husband left her, jobless with two kids and a house payment she couldn't afford, so she had to sell. He also takes them,

along with his dog Bo, to his beach house in the Gulf. He is a good man, he tells me.

- Reaction: I believe him, and I get in his rental, a new model Dodge Ram, as he apologizes for not picking me up in his Mercedes; it's in the shop.

I ride with him one town over, acting as if it would be impossible to be recognized there. I choose a dive, he thinks it's cheap, but I like the pizza. He pays, and I didn't even think to pick up the bill. He is a good man.

- Action: When he brings me home, I invite him in. He spreads his body on the couch and I make him scoot to the left so I can fit under his right arm. He smells clean and manly, so I push in further, and he pulls me into him.
 - Reaction: He then falls into a lying position and drags me down to lie with him. I jut my ass back into his crotch, appetizing him to touch it. He groans and unzips his pants, pulling his dick through the fly of his boxers. It is hot to the touch, even through my clothes.
- Action: The next time he takes me on a date, we end up in my childhood bedroom. He stills smells nice, and to this day I can't explain or name the scent, except the clean smell of older men. Every man I date after D smells the same as he does.

He has the body type I like. His stomach is larger than mine, his shoulders too, which makes me feel small when he wraps himself around me.

We lie in my childhood bed, his skin is warm against my back and I like that.

He changes position and lies on his back, so I roll over, cupping the right of his body with mine. He thrusts his hip against my leg, which I've tucked in so it rests on his pelvis. He pulls his penis out and starts to rub it there. I flex my knee. Now, I don't know if I stiffened the muscle to increase his pleasure or stifle it.

He whispers, “David, suck me,” gravelly and desperate. When he asks the second time, he slows his speech, stretching the sounds.

- Reaction: I feel it is necessary to do it, like to deny him is to lose him. He plays with my hair and chest as I go down on him. He is the first man whose penis I touch, the first I put in my mouth. I don’t like it, but want him to love me. I am not good at it, but he gives me suggestions as I move my head in his lap. He curses when I do certain things. It feels strange in my mouth, a weird feeling of buildup between the skin and tissue of his penis. Later I read that this is a sign of potential cancer.
- Action: I have not been sucking long when he pulls me up to his face by my armpits. He pulls me in for kissing before rolling me over and moving down my body. When he is between my legs, he holds my hips down as he undresses me and wraps his mouth around me.
- Reaction: I try to drag his mouth off, to pull it back up to my mouth or off to the side, to my bare hips. I pull at the sheets and shuffle my feet downwards, trying to move up the mattress, into a sitting position, where I can pull myself from his mouth.

His mouth hovers around my flesh, moving up and down with my body as I move it to try to get free. *I don’t really like this*, I grit my teeth, and he comes up for air.

- Action: He looks at me sincerely curious, cocking his head to the left. He must wonder how a person with a penis doesn’t like receiving oral sex. I tell him it feels wrong. Like the sensation hurts more than it pleasures. But he keeps his hand there, pumping it like the grad student had his own. The death grip feels better than his mouth, but this too

feels wrong, frictiony. At points he is stroking me, pulling his dry hand over the sensitive sides. Sometimes the grip feels as if he may snap it off at any second.

He looks up while still stroking, *But I like doing it, and you like me, so you are going to let me do it.* He looks back down and reattaches his mouth to me.

- Reaction: I tolerate his tongue touching me there, his mouth moving over the area, as long as I can. I close my eyes as if not watching will make the tactile sensation go away. I touch the other areas of my body to try to find pleasure – he thinks it is definitely pleasurable and goes harder. I try to go flaccid, maybe then he'd stop.
- Action: At some point, I am able to finally pull myself from his mouth and avoid him reattaching. He tries to use his teeth to claim territory. It hurts but I don't remember if there is blood. I roll over onto my stomach, using all my weight to leaden myself to the bed, to avoid being rolled over. He gives up on blowing me and wraps my hand around his penis instead, teaching me the pumping motion he used on me earlier. I sit, soft and to the side.
- Reaction: He makes a mess on my hand, and in post-orgasm haze, he offers to do the same for me. But I am able to decline this time. On other dates, in other hotel rooms, he doesn't always ask.

For Newton, force on a body results in reaction. A body resists and revolts at force finding a new movement, momentum. He continues the *scholium* saying, *If a body impinges upon another, and by its force changes the motion of the other, that body also (because of the equality of mutual pressure) will undergo an equal change in its own motion toward the contrary part. The changes made by these actions are equal, not in velocities but in the*

motions of the bodies; that is to say, if the bodies are not hindered by any other impediments. For as the motions are equally changed, changes of the velocities made toward contrary parts are reciprocally proportional to the bodies.

Newton's *motion* means momentum, a body's ability to maintain force forward in a direction. Force, Roget writes, may be quantity, assemblage, effect, physical energy, influence, compulsion, power, violence, and rape.

A forceful body impinges, infringes, imbibes on fighting forces of other bodies, of reactions. A man's momentum is maintained while doing so because this what men are made to do, at least taught to do. His momentum moves onto, moves through a motionless body being imbibed on. The imbibed-upon body absorbs the motion and moves to a contrary part, a counter direction. Driving itself away from being the imbibed upon, but still wanting the imbiber. An inherent contradiction. A physical impossibility.

After frequent collisions and momentum moving, the imbibing, impinging body tires of the moving away of the impinged, infringed body. The momentumous body of the imbiber begins moving in a contrary direction. Both bodies breaking away and away and away from each other.

- Action: I leave a graduate assistant meeting with my mentor early for a hookup, only to be honked at by my mentor as I used the crosswalk to get into the hookup's orange hatchback. He is uglier in person than his photos online, a pattern among most men I have slept with. His smile is very crooked, and he has gained 20 pounds.
 - Reaction: He tells me to unbutton my pants, and I do but laugh at how dirty it seems.

He reaches over to rub his hand in the crotch of my jeans as he drives to a cheap motel that smells like the yellow of its painted bricks.

- Action: In the room, he tells me to strip and get on my hands and knees.
 - Reaction: I strip seductively, wiggling my hips, and slowly taking down each stitch of clothing. I get on the dirty floor slowly; I have to remind myself that I have asked for this treatment because I am a masochist.
- Action: He fastens a choker around my neck, and it's too tight. He tells me BITCH is bedazzled across the front. He puts it on upside down, but I don't tell him that.
 - Reaction: When I run my hand over the rhinestones, I complain it is too tight, and tug at it where it is pinching my Adam's apple.
- Action: He slaps me across the face. *No bitch*, his spit hits my face. *It stays on*.
 - Reaction: *Yes sir*.
- Action: Before we touch, he gets out a bottle of poppers from the same bag as the collar. He places them under my left nostril, then right. Left, left, right. 5 hits total.
 - Reaction: The warmth spreads through my body unclenching it all. My neck starts to sweat and my eyes feel full and slow.
- Action: He lies back on the duvet as I crawl between his knees. He wags his authority in my face, tapping it on each cheek.
 - Reaction: I do the work I came here to do, on my knees. I enjoy it until he places the poppers under my nose, more hits. My mouth and throat are full, it is impossible to inhale the poppers, the air can't move down into my lungs. He holds them there and holds them there.
- Action: He moves me onto all fours at the edge of the bed. He makes me hold the

poppers under my nose. Each opening of the bottle greases it and each hit makes clutching the slick vial more difficult. He moves into my popper-slacked body quickly, a new type of fuckpain.

- Reaction: I try to maintain my position, a proper back arch. But poppers make muscle contraction more difficult, and my moaning marks pain, so he pulls out and puts me on top.
- Action: More poppers, probably too many poppers. He expects me to do more work, stand on my feet and bounce in his lap.
 - Reaction: I am not fast enough. More poppers. I am crying. *It's too much. I can feel it to deep in me.* I hold the point at my stomach where it hurts. I rest half-crouched in his lap for a moment, and he allows it. *It still hurts.*

I try getting off, pulling for what feels like inches and feet of flesh to flood out from my body. I almost fall over, popper high.

- Action: He stabilizes me by pushing my thighs down, and my ass by proxy. Back onto the feet and inches of flesh. My body is hot from the inside out, sweltering. He rubs circles on my thighs and it feels like he is carving flesh.
 - Reaction: *I have to stop. I can't.* I say from my throat, choking.

You're doing it though, he continues moving me himself.

- Action: At some point, I no longer know what I am doing. I am on my back, he is still inside me and I feel like I am swelling, bulging, busting at the seams from being filled too far. It hurts and I don't want it anymore.
 - Reaction: I am gurgling complaints that can't be called full language. He gives me more poppers, slaps me again.

- Action: At another point, it is over. He doesn't make a mess and neither do I. He soaks in the room's hot tub, which has a gritty bottom.
 - Reaction: I lie on the bed feeling my body and brain return to normal time and processes that are seemingly sped up and slowed down simultaneously while on poppers.
- Action: Later that night, he texts me to say his bottom lip is still bleeding from when I grabbed it with my teeth while he kissed me.
 - Reaction: I apologize half-heartedly through text, knowing I had wiped bloody remnants of lube from myself earlier, but I don't tell him. Instead, I say, you weren't light on me either. And he says *I wasn't even trying to cum, I just wanted to see how much you could take. If you'd tell me no.*

I hadn't said no but I didn't take it, I wanted up but couldn't get there.

Sir Isaac's laws work through a system of simplification, in which all objects, all bodies become points on a plane.

Such simplification substitutes static, stationary points for people, planets, and other possibly unpredictable pieces of the universe. In such practice objects occupy one space and produce one force. Such simplification subtracts spinning cycles of planets or the penetrability of certain surfaces. So instead all objects are unified, all are stable.

In a simplified system, the momentum of one body manufactures moving of another body. The culminating change in velocity counts the mounting, moving momentum in consideration of the mass and movement of the body. In theory, one body moving into

another body, when both are moving at the same speed, creates the same symmetrical movement in both bodies. However, such bodies science can't find. Instead, bodies braided of more momentums, spinnings, silences, and slippery, sinkable surfaces. Such sophisticated bodies may not spring off one another. Such is the case that one such body may muddle another body.

- Action: R and I have been dating each other for about a month when I ask *What are we? Because you said you loved me but you talk about wanting to fuck and marry DB a lot. I'm just confused, I guess.* My saying this interrupts our pillow talk and stops his hands' light grazing of my thighs and ass.
 - R makes me look him in the eyes, which always makes me panic, when he says, *I love you, David. I really, really do, but you're so young and it feels wrong to tie you down to just me right now. You really need to explore before you know that you really want to be with me.*
- Action: From then on, R expected me to have sex with other people. Per our arrangement, he could too, though he rarely did. It excited him for me to be 'dirty' and have sex with other men. When he would travel for work, we would have phone sex – sometimes his fantasies involved him dominating me, and other times, more frequently, he would imagine other men using me. We both supplied a variety of men for these fantasies. Good masturbation material: strong, hairy, masculine men who could take my body to the brink of destruction. These fantasies got him off quickly, while they took me much longer to accept and eroticize. But R would keep talking until I orgasmed, the first time a man had ever waited for me.

- Reaction: The first time I fulfill one of these fantasies and play with another man, the next night R comes to sleep with me. He sits me on his naked lap and asks me to describe what happened. When I stop the story at the end, a blowjob followed by orgasm, he asks for the rest, *What was the fucking like?*

I roll off his lap and tell him that's all that happened, just the rough blowjob. He expresses his disappointment diagonally and then asks why I didn't get fucked.

I am able to convince him that it is because *I want you to break me in*, but I really just want to explain being pinned to a bed, and forced to keep having sex, but I don't know how he'll react.

- Action: Weeks later, he asks why I still haven't been fucked by another man. He isn't angry but still seems disappointed that I haven't accepted his offer to free promiscuity.

- Reaction: After back and forth of coy reasons for not having sex with other men, I explain to him about being pinned to the mattress and the sour sweat, and being too dizzy to deplane the ugly hookup's dick, and about being made to tolerate the pain of D's mouth around my penis just for his pleasure. I duck my head into his armpit so he can't see my face because my it is red, and I know it, and I am about to cry because I didn't want to tell him, I just wanted him to not ask me to fuck any other men any more.

He holds me until he leaves that night.

- Action: Another night, I am sitting in his lap again, and we are both naked. I am staring down at his features, the ones only lovers notice: his lips, which he licks too often, and a moustache hair poking out of place from the rest.

He runs his hands from my shoulders, down over my nipples. He traces under my

ribcage to the highest point of my hip bones and then to the meeting of my thighs. *David, you have a nice frame. A really nice frame... with a little work, it really could be perfect. I love it now but imagine what your ass and chest would look like with a little more muscle.*

A request to make my body more perfect, more symmetrical. This would make my body more ready, more stable against any violence leveled against it. My body would be more beautiful when it reflected sameness on both sides.

– Reaction: I never work on my nice frame, and I never imagine my body with muscles. R offers to pay for a personal trainer after I continually promise and fail to work on my fitness, so I just tell him I am too busy with school. When I start having multiple panic attacks a week, he tells me working out would help.

During this time, when I am not working out but saying I will, I try to explain that for most gay men, a more muscular body is a better body and a better body is a more noticeable body and noticeable body attracts attention and eventually, attention attracts pain. *At some point they are all linked together*, I tell him on the phone one night.

R never understands; he tries but he can only see out of masculine eyes what it means to be muscular, not the ways in which it can attract attention that can hurt. Instead, he tells me that at 6'1, I could already fight off most men who try to hurt me, and with more muscle, I would only be more of a treat.

The third law presents pairs of forces unfolding from each other, opening in opposite directions. These unfolding forces unfurl from a folding of two forces, a folding into and

out of a furl. The further flung the flung bodies are flinged, the faster their motion slows. However, it happens forces frequently forfeit no motion.

When Newton notes *action*, he means force, power, violence. *Action* actually cannot connect to motion directly. Action actually is almost always applied as motion, movement making. Bodies bare no obligation for being moved or being a mover. Instead, large bodies may be unmoved by smaller bodies burgeoning into them. A boat is unbothered by a bump of a baby, but is bothered, bounced by a bunch of belugas.

Action may also be made aware of by battles of boys who break and batter. A boy with a body for breaking barely breaks, but a break is still a break. A brokenness may move malevolently through a body, but that brokenness has breached a boundary. That motion has made a momentary gap.

In Case Of: Surviving Symmetrical Systems

In case of the straight brother dying when your parents are homophobic:

First remember that at the funeral people mistake you for your brother, thinking that you had died, rather than him. This will allow you to believe that it is possible that God or the universe or whatever had missed its target when firing.

Next understand that according to queer theorist Eve Kofosky Sedgwick, homophobia works by:

demonstrat[ing] that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/homosexual, in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A.

Which is to say that in your family, the closeted queer will never be as important or central as the straight brother, who claimed first birth, making him and his straightness term A. You will first be told that your parents will always love you as much as your brother: symmetry. But this is before you are gay and start to exhibit “gay” behaviors, and patterns, and personalities.

It is at this point that you will be told at the slightest incongruencies from A (your brother), who you look like and should therefore act like, that you will be sent to

reparative therapy, which sucks and makes you jealous of the simplicities of straightness.

However, your brother's straightness relies on your gayness, which is an inverse of the birth order theory that some biologists and geneticists insist is the reason for queer boys, and by which they quarry the queerness for genetics and put it in the quagmire that is post-coital, prenatal chemistry. But anyway, your brother's straightness relied on your gayness. A gay chicken lays a straight egg, then crosses a road?

But when your brother dies, the straightness remains central, so you have to pretend to be straight, that the gayness has been play all along.

So you swallow the binary straight-gay pill, because if you squish a binary inward, it begins to take the shape of a capsule, a symmetrically divided oval that you will take orally. The pill makes you both gay and straight at once when you swallow the whole thing rather than standing at one end. It is slow to go down and has a sour taste. But instead of making you both gay and straight at once, it tries to split you down the middle, severing the severely self-seeking parts that search for singularly different things. Straight serenity and gay gladness, which before buying into binarism, the whole gay self once believed possible to simultaneously possess because such sexualities are symmetrical defined: $A = B$.

Before sawing yourself in sections, skim *The New Yorker* and see scientific studies that suss out straights from gays on systems of artificial intelligence. Look at your brother's face in a photo; attempt to look at your own face without a mirror, what do you see?

You must remember every single time you were confused for your brother or called twins. Document each one in a journal. Code this data so it cannot be used by

enemies. The straight and gay selves, if successfully split, may take shifts at this coding.

Suck the life out of your soul by searching the sociology, psychology, sexuality studies, and any other article of the unfortunately unannotated bibliography of the previously mentioned study. Now you know too much.

Read Albright College psychologists Susan M. Hughes's and Robert Bremme's "The Effects of Facial Symmetry and Sexually-Dimorphic Facial Proportions on Assessments of Sexual Orientation," where you learn straight people perceive symmetrical people as probably straight.¹ Later convince yourself that the perceptions of some specific set of super-straight people is the measure of straightness, and therefore also the measure of gayness.

Sedgwick responds, "The master terms of a particular historical moment will be those that are so situated as to entangle most inextricably and at the same time most differentially the filaments of other important definitional nexuses." So, straights can't say whose straight because it would give them too much power. Straights would control, this theoretical world!

One night, while insomniac in your childhood bed, convince yourself that you're straight using Aristotelian logic, beginning with the premise: If sexuality is fluid, then _____. Go through a series of premises to a conclusion within 2 hours, though hyperlogic supersedes time, meaning you will only perceive yourself as straight for approximately 30 seconds before you realize that you are B.

¹ Question: Is Narcissus gay if he falls in love with his own image? Answer: If the love led to a preference of masturbation over sexual contact with others, rather than simply staring, Narcissus would be considered an autosexual. Wouldn't it be nice to just fall in love with yourself so much that no one else and nothing else matters? A new definition of self-love.

B defines A simply because A needs to know it is not B. Perform an inverse of the operation, so that you can say, A is defined by B, but B doesn't know what it is, so what can we know about A. In which A is my brother, who shares a face with me, he willed it to me. In sharing the face, we must both be perceived as either gay or straight by the straight/gay sussing machine as well as by the superstraights, the theory of whom was foundational in the completion of the sussing machine. Therefore, you must grieve knowing that you and your brother may both have been B.

In case of Buridan's ass:

You must first realize that you are the ass. A hungry donkey. You must also realize that there are two piles of straw, symmetrical in size, shape, and circumstance.

You must then realize that you must make the decision between such symmetrical straw stacks. In case of these conditions, you must panic.

However, to navigate through the panic, you must first consider the ways in which all options work for both bundles of straw, unless God forbid, there are more bundles of symmetrically stacked straw. This requires a full system analysis, environmental impact report, input from all involved parties, including people, places, things, and ideas.²

² Please ask all involved parties to submit input and complaints directly to your Emotional Claims Office by midnight of the third day of destabilizing panic. Late requests may be submitted to the Secondary Emotional Claims Office, which upon review may pass along to the primary emotional claims office. However, due to the serious nature of both internal Emotional Claims offices, and the nature of emotional bureaucracy of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, late complaints will likely not be considered during this round of decisions. The secondary office will file all late complaints for later reemergences of the decision, if applicable.

After all information is received, please allow the Emotional Claims Office to process and overprocess this information until your train of thought is actually a liquid and not a train at all. The author suggests revising your speech to now call the former “train of thought” into a “tsunami of thought” or “tornado of thought.”³

The liquid information should be shotgunned like a beer, which you are incredibly poor at. You may also consider taking it as a shot, or multiple shots as the volume of the liquid is quite large, or as an IV though you are most likely afraid of needles. You may also mix it into that liquid stuff you must drink for a colonoscopy that allows the probe to look at your insides, given this may provide greater illumination than the alcoholic metaphors provided earlier. This step, while unhelpful, is entirely necessary to successful processing of any and all information.

After the drinking, please contemplate your existence in bed for a minimum of six business days.⁴ While you may get up to use the restroom, you may not cook, clean, do laundry, change your clothes, text/call/contact friends or family.⁵ Cooking requires

³ The author, however, was unable to decide between the two as they did not have the time to fully process all claims (this is an example of Buridan’s ass, as both a tsunami and a tornado are destructive natural disasters rated on scales that take into consideration the destructive capabilities of weather conditions).

While a tsunami utilizes water and a tornado uses wind, both strike on land. Thus, it is nearly impossible for the author to find a justifiable reason to rank water over wind or wind over water.

The author also feels moral conundrums over using either term due to the fact that they have survived neither. Though as a 2nd grader, when the major tsunami destroyed large parts of Indonesia, they raised over \$300 to give to the American Red Cross. However, knowing what they know now about capitalistic nonprofits, they are unsure if any of that money actually made it to the people of Indonesia.

⁴ Due to the influx of internet shopping, the author now includes Saturday, though not Sunday, as a business day. Because your obsessive compulsion to panic may be considered a job, you must work at it tirelessly. You have already been promoted to from obsessive compulsion to anxiety, you must not lose momentum.

⁵ Addendum: Select family members and/or friends are permitted. However, you must use the following criteria to determine the appropriateness of such communication:

a. The relation must be the only one of the given relationship (e.g. only mother, only aunt, only 4th cousin three times removed)*

choosing a meal, a cooking dish, the order of steps, and which dishes you will eat off of; cleaning requires selection of a task; laundry requires a decision of which color group, on which setting, using which detergent, and which clothes to machine dry and which to hang on your shower rod, and whether or not to use a dryer sheet at the risk of a headache; changing clothes requires a decision of underwear, shirt, pants (or shorts??), and shoes, which requires further decisions of socks or no socks, as well as how to tie the shoes.

During the six-day contemplation period, you should attempt to acquire even more information, which will be sent to the already overloaded Secondary Emotional Claims Office. Some typical inquires of the author include: how each selected action will eventually impact Tibetan monks in the year 2034? Will your actions affect Australian wallaby populations?; who controls the wealth assets of any profiting parties?⁶; and how many bathrooms are available for crying and/or panic if action requires you to leave your apartment?

If these questions are answered, the secondary Emotional Claims office may file them away in the container cabinet, which contains every imaginary container used in your therapy sessions: including a shoe box, a museum room, and a blanket fort; these are

b. You must be that relation's only one of the given relationship (e.g. only son/daughter/ambiguously gendered offspring, only niece/nephew/ambiguously gendered offspring of a sibling)*

c. Said relation, if meeting conditions a and b, must have initiated communication within the past 48 hours.

If the terms and conditions of a-c are not met, communication cannot be undertaken. However, responding to an incoming communication is permissible. (* In both conditions a and b, step-relations do apply).

⁶ Follow-up question: Are those parties and their wealth asset managers deserving your money?

used to hold unfinished mental and emotional work that is too fucked up to deal with on your own, so you put them in these boxes so they don't ruin your week. If the questions go unanswered, please file any incomplete data for later usage.

Discuss your inability to make decisions with your therapist named Todd. Who is attractive.⁷ Todd helps your hurting brain. You must tell Todd that you wanted to commit suicide this week because you have promised you would in previous sessions. At the beginning and end of the session, you must now rank your suicidal ideation on a scale from one to ten.⁸ At the end of the session, Todd will ask you to repeat with him your de-escalation plan, which he has now memorized because you recite it so frequently together. The plan is:

1. Call a family member or friend.⁹
2. Call Todd.
3. Go to the hospital.

After the session, you are granted one day of decision-making. The author suggests selecting words for finishing your fucking thesis, eating food that is not a saltine, showering, wearing clothes, and communicating with loved ones excluded from

⁷ The only good time to be unable to make a decision is when it becomes necessary to decide whether or not you should tell him you find him attractive because you do find him attractive, but you also know that doing so would be considered transference, which is unhealthy, and which would probably cause him to transfer you to a different therapist. That would be bad because Todd has been the only therapist to help you feel like a real person in over 5 years of seeking therapy.

⁸ You should select two favorite numbers in this range – a high and a low – early on in therapy because numbers really mean nothing to you because each distance between any two numbers contains an infinity between it. And also because you always want to commit suicide but fear making the decision. In terms of favorite numbers, I suggest 8.5 as the high, because it is high, but also has some wiggle room in case you get even closer to killing yourself one day, and 5 as the low, because it suggests you are always halfway there.

⁹ Do not tell Todd about the criteria set out earlier. He will make you deconstruct them in his office one day.

the earlier criteria.

When the process begins again, please follow all suggested time periods. This method does not increase in skill or aptitude.¹⁰

The author also suggests laughing at the fact that you are an ass.¹¹

In case of gender dysphoria:

Forget the word gender exists for weeks at a time. It is good not to have this word, but it forces you to lose the word engender, which is important for completing your MFA in Nonfiction.

In order to help you forget the word gender, it can be helpful to play an anagram game with the letters, then connect each one to your decaying system of gender. Define each one so that you know the definitions when Nanny fights you in Scrabble. If you don't know the definition, she will challenge your word with the official Scrabble dictionary, which she views as just below the Bible in authority. If she challenges you, you will have to bitchslap her, which is rarely successful. The list below is an example:

- End (gender as a concept in contemporary society) • Gen (I don't know the definition, much like gender) • Red (is a gender neutral color) • Ender (a new system will be the ender of gender) • Green (another gender-neutral color, though

¹⁰ The author cannot be held legally responsible for any harm done to yourself or others caused by following the suggested guidelines.

¹¹ Frequently in philosophical or scientific conundrums that use Buridan's ass, it has been concluded that an asymmetrical action or impetus is necessary for the ass to be able to make a decision. If the straw stack symmetry is maintained, the ass will simply stare at the stacked straw, never eating it, a slippery slope to starvation.

it is associated with anger, which is typically associated with masculinity, so therefore, it may not be completely gender neutral) • Nerd (a gender-neutral description for a smart person who is a loser) • Edge (while masturbating, then decide that it is strange to have a penis) • Edger (what one who edges during masturbation is called regardless of gender) • Greed (is typically assigned to men – odd gendering – because after all Oprah is a billionaire but is never included in socialists’ rants on the steps of government buildings) • Deer (is a gender-neutral word, though we have further classification of buck and doe) • Dene (a British word for a vale or valley. Is this a word you may find impossible to gender? But probably not because the British Romantics used valleys as yonic symbols – see Wordsworth’s “Nutting”) • Dere (Microsoft Word says this isn’t a word (like gender isn’t a thing?); Google offers a philosophical definition of the expression of the thing rather than the thing itself; Google also marks it as an archaic word for harm (gender is also trouble and also harm)) • Dreg (liquid sediment; sludge; how you feel inside when you think about what you are) • Dree (to endure something painful (i.e. gender)) • Eger (a dark Turkish wine, though archaic, like gender) • Erne (an Irish river containing an endangered species of fish, the pollan. Population numbers are unknown. Though it may be possible that population has dropped due to gender confusion among sexually mature pollans, similar to the clownfish who may change genders as needed based on reproductive patterns of the school.) • Geed (to turn something right, or to the right. *Can someone gee you to the right gender?*) • Need (certain psychoanalysts define gender identity as a need for healthy human development) • Rede (advice or counsel, in both noun

and verb forms. *No rede has properly understood your dysphoria*) • Reed (archaic usage: a weak or impressionable person (or gender identity)) • Rend (literary usage: to cause great pain to a person's heart) • Dee (Proper name. Like the two you use: David and Davia) • Den (a place to rest, refuge from gender) • Ere (a position in time prior to something; *You wish to return ere your dysphoria started.*) • Erg (an incredibly small unit of work; remind yourself you haven't worked hard enough to be a man) • Gee (an exclamation; *Gee, that was a stupid exercise in wordplay.*) • Nee (references a previous name; *Davia, nee David*) • Reg (abbreviation of regular; a regular gender)

Shave your whole body in the dorm you share with a guy named Jason, who has a twin. Once your chest is shaved pull on your left nipple until it is stretched and symmetrical with the right one. Symmetrical bodies are easier to understand, much like the binaries that bodies are made to occupy, to stand at either end of. Unless one is androgynous, but even then, pop culture would like you to believe that all genderqueer bodies are white and thin and hairless and if not, you are just genderfucked, but you will never be actually fucked.

Which is why at the same time, you should simultaneously be subsumed in your own shadow and the pictographs for men's and women's restrooms. Subscribe them onto your shadow, the pictographs. The signs perfectly capture gender because everyone, including you know what they mean. Maybe they will help you know what thing you are. In order to look like one in your shadow, wear a wide brimmed hat at all times, which will provide your shadow a round head shape. When dressing, consider how clothes will look in your shadow. To avoid strange body shapes, you should always avoid: collared

shirts, hooded shirts, puffy shirts, flowy shirts, crop tops, coats, jackets, and blazers. You should also avoid accessories, such as scarves and gloves (though mittens are okay as they create a rounded, uniform hand shape that disguises the manliness of your hands), as well as jewelry, headbands, and stylizations of your hair.

If you wish to experiment with shadow drag, you should wait for a windy day and wear a long cardigan or shawl. The billow of the breeze should show a skirt shape in the shadow. If you wish to create an illusion of breasts in the shadow, it is best to button the cardigan at the top while misshaping your spine, so as to create a cup from the collar of the cardigan.

After that is unsatisfactory, as I can guarantee you it will be, consider cutting off your penis and testicles with a pair of crooked scissors. Reconsider because you know the female pictogram doesn't have a crooked penis stump.¹² Instead just cut off all semblance of pubes with said scissors.

Never cut your pubes with scissors again because the hair grows back in, and it grows back in slanted, seeking refuge under the skin – an ingrown. The skin gets scratchy, so you must touch your own genitalia, which will make you more uncomfortable.

Grow your head hair out until it touches your shoulders. Try to learn how to manipulate it to make your face more feminine, and fail.

Practice having a pussy by tucking your penis between your legs. While doing that pinch the skin at the base of the backwards penis to make it pucker. Take a picture,

¹² The author tried to cut the tip of their tongue off as a child, which caused incessant bleeding. The author is now aware that similar vein structures run through the penis, making this action deadly. Again this step asks you only to consider, not complete, the action.

print it, and keep it in the pockets, all four, of all your pants.

Pace in heels while deciding that deconstructing decisive, divisive dynamics of gender does not sound decent due to data from your dad delineating that dudes are dudes and dues for being a dude are due and past due, and you don't donate because you can't carry a checkbook without a clutch, which you can't carry cause cool cat guys can't costume themselves as chicks.

Practical Shattering: External and Internal Symmetries of *Botched*

Janice Dickinson, the world's first supermodel, lays bare-breasted and unconscious on a surgery table. She is brined with redbrown antiseptic as plastic surgeon Dr. Terry DuBrow and his team operate on her body. He pokes her right breast, trying to find the contour of an *antiquated*, Janice's preferred word choice over *old*, silicone implant. After he makes an incision beneath the areola, the doctor removes the old implant, wrestling it out of the small incision, as well as excising several benign breast masses, which he brings beneath the camera lens to show their bloody bodies.

As he prepares the new implants, one nurse rinses them in a tub full of antiseptic, and another suctions the blood and pulp beneath the skin and below the pectoralis muscle, underneath which Dr. DuBrow will place the new implant. The procedure is to reduce the rippling and ridgings in the model's breasts, as well as to fix the slight symmastia – a fusion of breast pockets that creates a “uniboob” – that the *antiquated* implants have caused. Earlier, a closeup shows the uneven breasts, a fuller left breast, and how both dimple when they are in a natural, resting position. In this closeup shot, Janice leans forward and shimmies her bare breasts at the camera. Once Dr. DuBrow is ready to insert the silicone, a nurse stretches the incision with a surgical instrument that closely resembles a crowbar, and he stuffs the new implant inside. Footage doesn't show this process being repeated on the left breast, but we know it happens. The producers have made us assume it was a symmetrical operation. Before ending the procedure, Dr. DuBrow stitches the breast pocket along the sternum to stave off the symmastia.

On the day-one check-in, Janice is made up in full face, sipping lemon water, and wearing a paper bib before Dr. DuBrow walks in (later, if we pay careful attention, we

learn this is day one out of the recovery center, four days out of surgery. This is why she looks so good, I decide.). Because she is an ex-addict, Janice is attempting to avoid pain killers, and the lack of them severely alters her mood. She removes her drain and cuts a stitch with her fingernail during the checkup, which Dr. DuBrow explains to her can “really screw this up.” By the end of the appointment, she is begging for medicine, which Dr. DuBrow refuses to prescribe. The next week during the seven-day check-up, when she says she doesn’t remember anything she said or did, she thanks him for not giving into her demands for meds.

In better spirits this week, she interrogates his love for breasts. “Were you breastfed as a baby?” she asks. And when he says no, she responds, “That’s why you love my tits!” as she shimmies them at him and then seductively motions for him to approach (tits is of course bleeped out). Five more weeks after surgery, Janice shoots a skin care campaign, where she happily shows off her new breasts by taking a few “unplanned” nude photos after the real shoot.

I must admit, this is what I tuned in for: ridiculous procedures, risk and reward, celebrities. *Botched* seems other worldly when you have the privilege of not needing plastic surgery, where *need* aligns with actual health or psychological issues and not simply a desire to look hot. In watching, I wanted to feel the fabulosity of “fixing” oneself, which we frequently see as the way to loving one’s body.

And *Botched* markets itself this way, as a television show about extremes of plastic surgery. Its commercials feature celebrities, or more frequently quasi-celebrities, or regular

people who have gone to the brink of available procedures, and now want to peer over the edge and attempt to cross whatever impediment is presently blocking them from their dream bodies. It drew me in with a promise of the opportunity to judge and hate the people on it. Purely from this concept, *Botched* seems laughable, perhaps even bourgeois: I get to sit and watch people have plastic surgery for entertainment. In preparing to watch the show, I felt the show would be karmic, in that people who got plastic surgery, who probably didn't need it, now had to get more to fix what had happened as a result. After all, I thought, I have a crooked nose from falling up stairs as a child. I wanted, like many other viewers, voyeuristic validation: I was right to have never fixed my nose.

The reality of *Botched* is much more complicated.

While I won't go so far as to say the show is formulaic, it does have a template, which seems to work for every episode, regardless of its slight flexibility. Each hour-long episode features three people seeking plastic surgery from Drs. Terry DuBrow and Paul Nassif, who the show touts as the greatest plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills. These episodes move between confessionals filled with patients, family and friends, or the doctors; the consultation, in which patients recount the problems of their bodies and the failure of previous surgeries to fix those problems; the reparative surgery; post-op check-ins; and for some patients, a special reveal to family and friends at a special event.

The stories of these botched surgeries run an emotional gamut from heart-wrenching to annoying. As a viewer, I like to believe that I could tell within the first three to five-minute confessional which surgery-seeker fit where. But, I am wrong with as much regularity as I am right. Sometimes, the need for plastic surgery comes from a medical or psychological need rather than simply cosmetic, which is much harder to recognize. Upon

this realization, though, I always feel two waves of emotion: the first is empathy for the patient who simply needs this procedure that has failed them in the past; and the second is a bout of guilt for being an awful judge of character. While I am a glutton for self-judgment in this case, I feel I may also have picked up this judging impulse from the show itself.

As it opens, a montage of images moves quickly around the screen. Predominantly female faces and bodies show all the places that can be improved by a nip-tuck: new noses, a shrinking jaw line, lips that are larger and fuller, waists reduced by inches. At the end, one woman's face is split down the middle showing to the left, her face and on the right, what her face could be. I find the implication of the right side being the "improved" side significant, but maybe I read too much into the screen. While that is happening, electronic dance music plays in the background as an androgynous voice sings, *I want to be sexy. / I want to be hot. / Fix me, make me beautiful. / I want to be perfect.* The last notes play as *BOTCHED* appears across the model's new face. The letters are in different fonts, which though mismatched, maintain the intro's design. In between segments, *sexy, hot, beautiful, perfect* and other words flash over clips of bikini-clad beach walkers, high-heeled shoppers crossing Rodeo, and abdominally tight men jogging.

There's such attention paid to conventional beauty and conventional perfection in the auxiliary materials of the show that the cult of beauty frequently usurped my attention from the goal of restoration. I'm not saying that the restoration shouldn't be beautiful, especially considering what these people pay for the services of the surgeons, but, I find myself trapped in the beauty complex, sometimes even participant, desiring that patients get more work done for no other reason than to have them, in the words of the theme song, "be perfect."

Cheryl, a Chinese-American woman, sits in her confessional as she describes her history of plastic surgery. Her confessional is cut with images of her daily life. She shops with a friend at an Asian food market, speaking in Mandarin to the clerk. She strolls a boardwalk in a Hawaiian shirt knotted above her belly button and Daisy Duke cut-offs. She seems happy, even laughing at herself as she explains the procedures she wants done.

“The beauty of the magazines that you’re [Americans] so obsessed with. All these images and you go, ‘Oh, I want to be like that. I gotta be totally different,’” she says as she admits she got her first westernization procedure to make her “Chinese eyes” appear more Caucasian at age 19, just a few years after moving to the US from China. Later, we learn that in addition to an inexact number of procedures, Cheryl has also injected black-market fillers into her own cheeks, trying to get added lift.

Her consultation falls in the middle of the episode; my anticipation and desperation had grown in tandem with hers. I don’t know what I can do, but I want to help her.

After signing in, she says, “I’ll probably just open my wallet and just ask them if they can make me Chinese again.” The doctors know that she has had Westernization procedures simply by looking at her. When she sits down in the conference room for her consultation, they commend the good work, saying, “You’re very pretty. Your face looks really good. What possibly could you want from us?” Cheryl laughs and mocks in response that she looks like a monkey’s butt. Even though they are impressed by the previous work, the doctors give her the full examination anyway.

In the exam room, the doctors look at her face, with Dr. Nassif taking the lead as

the “above neck” surgeon. They pull at her cheeks, eyelids, and forehead with probing, gloved fingers. Cheryl cocks her head back as they do, allowing them to manipulate her skin in whatever ways they may need. They chat back and forth in medical speak as Cheryl waits with her hands folded in her lap and her focus moving around the room. Her desperation to not look like she’s eavesdropping is almost childlike, yet I feel the same risk of knowing too much before I am meant to. She and I are reintegrated into the conversation as they explain that a corrective surgery is theoretically possible. She smiles at the explaining doctor, and as I watch, I am too excited to note which one.

But, they tell, her, with further surgery, it would take very little to make it that she would never be able to fully close her eyes again. Cheryl offers money, her signature on a waiver, anything to have this work done.

“To leave all my Chinese roots behind was kinda wishful thinking. You can never ever change who you are,” Cheryl says early in the episode. But her statement makes me wonder, in what ways she felt she had left them behind? In her move? Her desire to be more American? Or simply her Westernization procedures? After all, she speaks Mandarin and was negotiating over dried squid. Does the physical change represent the loss of roots or was it the start? Maybe the truth is somewhere in between, that while we may always be connected or reconnect to our culture, our physicality is also an expression of that culture. We require a symmetry between our culture and its expression.

Almost every episode features at least one rejection, and I must admit, most are satisfying because they feel justified. Like the rejection of Justin Jedlica, the “Human Ken Doll,” who

leaves unsatisfied on the first episode of the series. Jedlica views his body as a work of art, and if I follow his metaphor, a hyper-realistic, living sculpture. His body represents an apex of symmetrical possibilities. Having designed his own implants, each part of his body corresponds almost perfectly to its counterpart. I would have to stretch too far to find a flaw.

After seeing Justin for a consultation at a private residence, Dr. DuBrow says, “When I first saw Justin, I didn’t know what to make of him.” He looks dumbfoundedly at the camera, unsure of how to finish. That these people are rejected seems unnecessary to show; why show someone be rejected, rather than include a third surgery? But the show hinges on the polarity of these bodies and those that are the target of the show’s intention.

These bodies are first turned into spectacles. DuBrow and Nassif examine the area(s) of concern, like the LLL-cup, pig-skin-infused breasts of Lacey Wildd, or in the case of Justin, his whole body. In these situations, Dr. DuBrow is dramatically more interested and impressed by the bodies than Dr. Nassif. DuBrow cups both of Lacey’s breasts and marvels as she shows them the trick of shining the light through the expanders, which are typically meant for short-term use, and tracing the pig veins on her translucent skin. DuBrow also handles both of Justin’s bubbled butt cheeks, pokes his perky pecs, and traces small scars in his armpit. The fascination is legitimate, and I too am fascinated by these bodies, but in making them a spectacle, the show seems to ask *Do they handle like a real body?*

Dr. Nassif usually, though sometimes Dr. DuBrow, uses a scene like this to explain they are only seeing “botched” patients. This to most of the rejected patients seems unfair, personally motivated, or boring. The reminder is as much for the viewer as it is for the

rejected potential patient. The rejection, though kind, polarizes two types of surgery: one is playful, a game of adult dress up and the other is serious, “soul work” for self-improvement. Justin wants to build a superman suit and become perfect beyond human, while other people need the surgery in order to live.

There are other losses, other rejections, other stories that I admit I wouldn't know how to deal with, so I can only agree with an intensity too great to give to a reality show with their decisions to seek plastic surgery and hope the doctors say yes.

Michelle's nose is flat. When she comes on the screen, I can't help but look at it and agree when she says she looks like Michael Jackson. She is crying as she explains that as a teenager, an accident trapped her face between the steering wheel and headrest of her car. When a doctor attempted a rhinoplasty after she had sufficiently healed from the wreck itself, it failed; he took the cast off her nose and it collapsed. After five additional surgeries, she is still not satisfied. An actress in profession, she admits to staying behind camera because “[she has] the talent...[she] just [doesn't] have the face.” She doesn't date; she just feels “powerless and ugly.”

Cynthia begins her storyline by yelling, “When I was a little girl, I didn't want a pony! I wanted boobs! Me, I was, like a boob freak.” But in her adulthood, Cynthia loses her left breast to cancer, and her nipple in the reconstruction surgery. She tells the doctors, “The theory was that they were gonna look symmetrical – was that they were gonna be the same. [...] This reminds me everyday that something went wrong.”

In the same episode, a different Michelle's hair edges over the right side of her face,

not completely covered but casting a shadow she uses to hide what is underneath. As she walks through a stable, her voiceover explains that she was kicked in the face by a horse during her teens. The result was a practical shattering of the right side of her face, accompanied by paralysis of the region. As she was fading in and out of consciousness, she hears two doctors say “that this really is a terrible shame. She’s never gonna look the same, and she was very pretty.” Michelle was very pretty; we see photos of her with her horse. Glowing tan skin, a soft smile, beautiful eyes. “But [she] never felt pretty [her] whole life.” So she gets ten procedures over two years, including a \$200 cleft chin creation in Taiwan, which the camera zooms in on during her examination. She admits to the camera, and maybe to the doctors, as well, “I think I maybe overcompensated with plastic surgery because I always felt like I wasn’t a whole person.” The surgery the doctors refuse to give her represents restoration.

Paul lies with a wet rag over his face for the majority of the “at home” shots of his confessional. From the angle he sits at during his confessional, his nose looks a lot like mine, and I can’t see why he would *need* a rhinoplasty. He describes it as “slightly askew to the left, but more than anything it just has a big bump on it.” When he turns, the curve of his nose is severe. He explains that his septum causes air blockage and severe migraines that can last for days, which prevent him from playing with his daughter. He is being robbed of his fatherhood.

Each patient is warned of the possibility that the procedure may not work. The patient is always willing to accept the risk. And to show that this is real surgery, it seems production feels there must be at least one complication almost every episode. In order for these stories

to reach a climax, a middle, the producers must manufacture a conflict.

In Michelle's rhinoplasty, as Dr. Nassif cuts into Michelle's rib to retrieve flexible cartilage, his scalpel scratches calcified crust along the length of her bone. He scratches and scrapes back and forth. He tells the camera that calcification commonly occurs after forty, but Michelle had told them that she was thirty-five. He goes back to scraping. The noise is scathing; it is clear that this is an indictment.

Nassif, though, is heroically able to find a viable piece of cartilage. He manipulates it over a surgery tray to the side of Michelle's unconscious body and bloody nose. He bends the whitish chunk between his fingers, flexing, flipping, then finally fileting it to fit her face. He must be careful, he reminds us, because this is Michelle's seventh nose surgery. Failure could result in the permanent collapse of the nose.

With the carved cartilage, Dr. Nassif and his assisting surgeons pull the nostrils up and back with a pair of surgical steel hooks, exposing the septum. The bone must be broken, made asymmetrical in order to operate. Sometimes a second break is required. As the bone is cracked, each fracture fires two pops in quick succession; I flinch and dry heave while watching in my bed. As they remove the broken bits, a wire snakes from Michelle's nose, a formerly standard measure for stabilizing the nose. Dr. Nassif wasn't aware of this and informs the team, of which I feel I am a member now, that more skin slicing must occur to remove the wire. The unknown variables continue to rise, with each the stakes grow higher and the chances of Michelle's nasal collapse seem more eminent.

At the day one check-up, Michelle laughs and jokes about showing her rib incision during her confessional; she tells us it would be too close to porn if she pulled up her shirt

to show us. In the exam room, however, she is quiet as Dr. Nassif approaches to remove the bandage. She holds her breath as the long plastic tubes come out; I can only assume partly from pain and partly of anticipation. The brown smear around her nose and on the bandage tell me that this is the real bandage removal. Holding the mirror to her face, Michelle breaks silence: “Hey doc, you didn’t reshape it though, look,” pointing at her left nostril. “It’s larger over here, than over here.” Nassif bites back, and at the reunion, Michelle is labelled a problem patient.

Michelle’s surgery and check in tell us the truth about surgery that we are afraid to hear: that we can rarely reach perfect symmetry. Sometimes breasts sit too high on the chest, symmetrical but strange. Paul’s nose is now straight, no bump, but the skin is a different color and texture than the surrounding skin. Makeup maybe? I hope.

Even at the finale, Michelle is unhappy with her nose. When Dr. DuBrow defends Dr. Nassif’s work, calling it a “bases-loaded grand slam,” Michelle can only capitulate to third base. The show leaves us with the question: what do we do with the asymmetry of our bodies?

When talking about Justin, Dr. DuBrow confesses, “He’s both Frankenstein and Dr. Frankenstein. He’s his own creation.” When another seeker, Toby Sheldon, is rejected, it’s because he wants to have more plastic surgery to look like Justin Beiber at age 19; Sheldon is in his thirties. These rejection segments narrate these people as monstrous and as half-breeds (Lacey Wildd says, “I’m half pig,” then snorts). If we look beyond DuBrow’s misnomer of Frankenstein as the name of the monster, this makes perfect sense. But some

scholars think along these lines, that Frankenstein and the monster are two halves of a whole, and if we follow that line of thought, we can see Justin as simultaneously human and monster. Surgical procedures simultaneously enhance one's humanity and destroy.

In these segments, the respect of these patients seems secondary to making their bodies off-limits, scary stories of plastic surgery. It seems to say that perfect bodies are somehow less human, or less of one, which may be true in a physical sense.

The rejections are all cases that fly in the face of the goal of the show: repair. At the finale, Dr. DuBrow says, "First of all, we don't believe in trying to make people look like other people. We're into making people look like better versions of themselves." We are forced then to reconcile what does it mean to be a better version of oneself. Particularly in our culture, we are taught to polarize the body and the mind/soul/spirit. The body desires what it will never be satisfied with – hunger, thirst, sex – by which we are never satiated, we must always come back for more.

What is most interesting is the ways that surgery allows people to find symmetry between their internal and external selves. The fissures of Cheryl, Cynthia, Paul, and both Michelle's divide them from who they view themselves to be. Cheryl is no longer Chinese, Cynthia feels less like a woman, Paul loses his fatherhood. Both Michelles lose their sense of beauty and belong. And these people desperately seek it – they want to fold back into themselves, to know who they are. And because I judge, at first, I want them to find it with yoga or boxing or by staring at the mirror until they love themselves. I desperately seek for them to find an answer that doesn't require them to be surgered, but they don't and I come to accept this. And by the end of the season, I am proud of them all.

The inverse of course, is that all the rejects feel a concrete sense of self: they know who they are and boldly claim it. Does their symmetry allow them to stand in a singular self? To feel completely unified with what they think is inside?

At the end of every surgical segment, the doctor(s) raise(s) the bed to examine the “problem area” the surgery is attempting to fix in its natural, upright position. Implants fall downward, pulled by gravity; the nose, lips, and face are viewable from all angles at the same time; and the stomach creases as it naturally does. Sometimes this moment feels like an undoing.

But really this is the surgeon’s moment. He takes in his masterpiece. Sometimes it requires the surgeon to revise, rework, make things more symmetrical (they always look at the evenness and symmetry), more controlled.

Later we will see the recovery period, a day-one and a day-seven checkup. This is the real falling, the settling. The shifting, breathing, situating of the new or restored symmetry. Girdled breasts gently fall behind paper bibs, the nipples are blurred while the blood-filled drains sit to the right and left. The blood isn’t too saturated in oxygen, and therefore bright red. The noses are still swollen, but they show the shape they will become.

This is the real moment, I think after watching the show, that *Botched* makes the most sense. Yes, in terms of the gratification, the feel good of feeling fixed. But in reality, it is the moment we are required to come to terms with the reality of the human body and its barriers. Without entire artifice, we are unable to be fully symmetrical. Even when Cheryl feels she has left her Chinese roots, there are still a few left, an asymmetry. Cynthia

still has a tattoo on her left breast from attempting to cover the loss of her nipple. Michelle becomes a problem patient because she wants that symmetry, but she must accept that she can't get there. Janice Dickinson at the reunion finale gets fillers put in around her eyes "unprompted," live on TV.

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