

something horrible happens to a girl's body.

she is born female. female, she is flesh, soft mass of gash of gaping pink wet she is bound to The Body the male cannot bear to be. he has the power here + he names her: Hole. names her: Dirt. this unclean hole, her name, her congenital identity (girlish, compulsory), is the first wound. it invites others. to enforce her essence as orifice – She=Violable – he invades her erodes her incessantly inside systematically and everywhere until she is wholly wounds, each hole a fresh offense signifying she deserves this. to experience her living body as a ragged hurt, shamefully hidden. this slaughter. to suffer more, worse, to never heal. because the skin is sensitive, skin tears, he rips her open. The Body (her being) is penetrated, put to brutal uses so he can see for himself how it bleeds + with each spilling of splatter she proves she must be punished; she is punished severely: for being born female she bears The Body as a bleeding thing. if she is The Body and he dominates her, if he guts her to passivity, to silenced, to powerless, to paralysis, then the threat of the flesh is voided, he fantasizes, he will never have to die. a girl is born to be destroyed, so that men can live. the male is the sovereign. the female is the sacrifice.

a girl's body is not allowed to survive.

*Sister child, lost heart, poor girl,  
I'll avenge you, sister of my heart.  
Did it hurt or was death the easy part?*

**ANDREA DWORKIN**



# ***YUCKY PUPPY PARABLES***

*\* volume 1*

*// aurora linnea //*





## *Lethe Vale*

V. lives in Lethe Vale but unlike the other residents she does not belong to the Lethe Vale Condominium Corporation, because she hasn't been invited. The Corporation is under no compulsion to incorporate her because technically V. is not a Condo Owner; the one-bedroom one-bathroom unit in which she has been living, like a tumorous surplus annexed to the intentional architecture of the Condos as if by accident, a severed spire scissored from another bland castle's spinal column and grafted inelegantly onto the western corner of Lethe Vale Complex B, belongs to V.'s mother, who vanished six months ago.

It is not entirely accurate to say Mother "vanished," V. concedes; more precisely: she left the Condos to accompany a man most often seen wearing a cream-colored linen suit (who is not V.'s father) (V. is, as far as she can ascertain, fatherless) on a private yacht cruise of the Caribbean Sea. V.'s mother has been an irrelevant tremor at the periphery of her life for years and despite the postcards delivered from Eleuthera and Port-au-Prince V. cannot shake the sensation that now her mother has died, that the condominium unit is her inheritance, handed down to her as a final punishment for her lack of daughterly sentiments—it seems to V. that all of Lethe Vale is one stinging and terribly uncomfortable ill-fitting cage within which she has been cooped up sitting paralyzed as her deceased mother's detainee. V.'s dead mother binds her to the Condos, though her mother is not, factually, dead. She is simply on vacation.

The confines of Lethe Vale are circumscribed by a concrete wall that winds a wreath around the grounds of the complex, a creepy and sinister palisade too high to see over no matter where you stand and smoothest stainless white as if lacquered with enamel peeled from the plundered molars of anesthetized dental patients. V. is aware of at least five dentists living in the Condos, and seven dental hygienists. Given the statistics it is fairly impossible not to be suspicious. Gloomily she imagines they have been colluding to collect teeth for the wall for years now, decades. When she does not want to feel frightened V. allows herself to daydream that rather than tooth enamel the wall's encrustation is a mantle of nacre, naturally occurring, as if the wall were the uncovered uppermost edge of an immense and ancient mollusk hidden beneath the soil, in whose basin the Condominiums were built. She walks along the wall and pretends she can smell the brine-sweat the massive shell would seep. In sunlight, which is colorless and oppressive in Lethe Vale and scathes bared skin, bleachlike, the wall smolders pearlized. Star points of solar acid and BMW high beams reflect blades of glint, scalpel light, swerving at diagonals to bury their points in the surrounding swamps. The swampland beyond the white wall is a sprawl of orange-mottled

salamanders and crests of moss and deep spirulina green black loam. At dusk V. stands on her balcony to breathe the heavy velveteen vegetal-froth vapors swollen with warmth of ferment that slowly overwhelm the wall as a miasmic tide rising, waves which the sun sucks to ash during the day but at night gather charge, congeal and cannot be kept out. V. closes her eyes, she soaks in streamlets of murk.

This nocturnal habit of the motherless girl has not gone unnoticed by the Condominium Corporation.

At Lethe Vale there is a covenant dictating the principles of conduct suitable for inhabitants of the Condos. Axioms of decorum. Essential etiquette, from which no resident is excluded. V. was not shown this document when she moved in; she is unaware of the criminal she makes of herself with every unguarded step and gesture and, most unforgivably of all, her sessions of solitary swamp trance swaying on the balcony. Aberrant to the point of obscenity she is not an innocent in the eyes of the Condominium Corporation.

Each month the Condominium Corporation assembles in the screened pavilion by the community swimming pool. Their meeting is always on a Friday night and begins at approximately 8:00 pm. At 7:55 pm the Board of Directors and the officers of the Corporation are vented through the sliding glass doors of their units onto their patios and glide down the asphalt of their driveways onto the asphalt of the cul-de-sac that is the cynosure of Lethe Vale, flowing wordlessly synced, uncannily effortlessly as if automatically consolidating into a procession convergent upon the poolside pavilion. Like a centipede the Condominium Corporation crosses the lawn, the churn of footsteps a harmonized rippling and arms swinging in flawless unison. In V.'s mind they constitute a single organism. The lawn smells of Clorox and aspirin. With certain appendages the centipede carries hurricane glasses, plastic bottles of Pina Colada mix, glass bottles of liquor. Other hands support platters of deviled eggs and slices of cold ham, the meat folded in glassy peach-marbelized ruffles.

An ominous and highly artificial bronze shines through the osseous skin-shell of the centipede.

At 8:00 pm when the meeting begins high-pitched and twisting flocks of thin laughter filter through the screened partitions of the pavilion and settle a low mist over the grass. This laughter like fungus crawling blade by blade to mildew the whole lawn. There is the sound of chewing then there is the sound of swallowing. Citronella torches flicker yellowish eel-like reflections wavering to the blue surface of the pool. Citronella smoke wafts lemon-scent through the gaps in V.'s venetian blinds. Like everything else that goes on in Lethe Vale, V. spies on the monthly meetings of the Condominium Corporation from her balcony. At this elevation she feels safe, if exiled, remote from everyone. At some

point she was forbidden from existing inside the world. She was dis-invited. Her mother is dead and no one knows her anymore. It has been months since she last heard her name spoken aloud by a mouth that was not her own. Pressing her belly into the railing, leaning over, nostrils flared sniffing for the swamp listening to layer upon layer of sluggish laughter, chewing, swallowing like mayonnaise greasing the mown grass V. is very certain that every member of the Condominium Corporation would, if given the opportunity, eat her alive.

Centipedes are elongated arthropods belonging to the class Chilopoda of the subphylum Myriapoda; they are equipped with venom-injecting forcipules, a feature unique to the centipede, not mandibles but forelegs modified to form a sharp pincer-like projection emerging from just behind the centipede's head, which it uses to capture and penetrate the prey body. Many species of centipedes are eyeless, and even those centipedes possessed of eyes are incapable of true vision; they can discern only shadows and the white cavities between the dark.

**Q: What do centipedes eat?**

**A:** *A centipede will eat whatever it can kill. Insects, spiders, other centipedes, worms, lizards, frogs, toads, mice, rats, sparrow-sized birds, newborn kittens; they'll hang from cave ceilings to catch bats in mid-air and eat them.*

V. draws her bathrobe tighter to wrap herself in its plush; she crosses her arms to hold in her own heat, to slow its leakage out and over the balcony rail. The moon shines glaucous over Lethe Vale, the moon is a serous whey spilling from a waning wound-curve slit in the sky. V. thinks: even the moon withers here. She wonders what the Condominium Corporation is planning. What's the point of all their meetings? There is nothing to talk about in Lethe Vale. Why aren't I allowed or welcome anywhere? V. wonders.

***Her Leucism & Misc. Complaints***

V. recalls a conversation overheard while she was refusing to leave the bath she'd filled with rosewater and lavender one evening when her mother was still alive (not on vacation) and she was not deserted alone in the Condos. The conversation was between Mother and Mrs. Erris, an impeccably lean woman with bones jutting out from skin like bronzed ultrasuede who remains the highest-ranking housewife in the Condominium Corporation.

Mrs. Erris was standing at the door because she lives two units over in Complex B and wanted to borrow three eggs, which she explained she needed, she was making soft-boiled eggs. After a cursory discussion of

the meteorological conditions affecting Lethe Vale – sun coral like a lipstick color, pleasantly, and not a cloud in the sky – she said, "I've noticed your daughter is quiet. And quite pale."

Mother said, "You're not wrong. What you have to understand is that she's leucistic."

**Erris:** Does that mean cancerous?

**Mother:** Not exactly. Leucism is a genetic mutation resulting in chromatophoric defect, an almost complete absence of pigment. That's why my daughter is unusually white. *Leuko* means white.

**Erris:** (as if through a tight smile politely slurred, a poison claw) She's an albino.

**Mother:** Have you ever looked into my daughter's eyes?

**Erris:** (the woman doesn't answer)

**Mother:** If my daughter were albino, she'd have pink eyes, like a rabbit. My daughter has dark eyes. She's not an albino. (a decisive imperial edge gelling triumphant in Mother's voice)

**Erris:** (indulgent) I see.

**Mother:** My daughter has *blue* eyes.

**Erris:** How pretty.

The woman took the three eggs she'd supposedly dropped by to borrow – a sloppy pretext, V. thought, who soft-boils eggs? – and then left. The door closed. Mother sighed. Later that night V. had dyed her hair – by birth a soft flaxen fluff reminiscent of lambs, fresh butter, marshmallow and chamomile – to mute the shock of her whiteness. When she rinsed the dye away after an hour her hair had turned bottomless violet-sable, the color of mulberries crushed against a black horse's coat, but deeper even than that strain of blackness. Her pale fingertips were stained. She still looked totally strange.

Anyway, it was this exchange between V.'s mother and the egg-woman Erris from the Condominium Corporation that V. interpreted as the first unequivocal indicator she would forever be an outsider in Lethe Vale.

There are other indictments against her of which she is less aware. These are carefully reviewed by the Condominium Corporation during their monthly sessions. They are received written on scraps of pink soap-scented and floral-printed scrapbooking paper in such quantities that it's become undeniable: an issue has arisen, it cannot be ignored. For the last six months, consideration of *The V. Problem* has dominated

every conference of the Condominium Corporation. An inventory of key concerns:

- ***That girl*** has longer-than-normal hair she never styles. Does she wash her hair? Does she own a hairbrush? Has she ever looked in a mirror? Once white now black but no better hair hangs down her back flowing loose all unkempt and disheveled past her shoulders as if she were a horse escaped from the stable and galloping wild. In the wind that hair lashes dangerously.
- It has also been observed that ***that girl*** seems to have long fingernails and particularly sharp little pointed teeth.
- When her mother went away ***that girl*** uprooted the scarlet poppies sanctioned by the Lethe Vale Garden Committee and replaced them with pink larkspur and phlox. Not only does this represent an insult to the Garden Committee but the unauthorized flowers clash hideously with the overall landscaping—it's an aesthetic affront.
- On several occasions and by multiple individuals ***that girl*** has been seen swimming in the pool after 10:00 pm, when every other resident of Lethe Vale is in his/her unit watching the local news. It is a citizen's responsibility to keep abreast of current affairs. When ***that girl*** swims in the pool her pale body underwater absorbs moonlight; she becomes a bioluminescent rippling in the blue like a sea-worm.
- Where her left thigh emerges a white curve blooming from her bikini bottoms it is possible to observe a weird, unwholesome, quite possibly malignant mole, which can best be described as "glossy black" and "heart-shaped," "the size of a cat's nose." No one in the Condominium Corporation has witnessed the mole personally despite ongoing efforts to watch ***that girl*** rigorously but sight unseen nonetheless they do not like the sound of it.
- Since ***that girl*** first arrived at Lethe Vale the swamp beyond the wall has been smelling worse than ever before. Theory: she draws the smell. It aggravates the dogs.
- All the dogs have grown overly fond of ***that girl***. The dogs like her too much. It's not natural.

### ***To Cast Her Out***

Driven from bed early by the sunshine an even more cheerless than usual more flavorless and motionless stale metal flaking through the slats of her blinds, making her eyelids ache, glutting her eyes with shrimp-color broth of glow surfing the vitreous into sinuses dripping

down her throat and finally filling her stomach, nauseating her, a horseradish-fried-meat and onion smell of burnt sunshine invasive in the sheets like a creeping skin disease then chased by an aftertaste of dull scarlet dried-blood paper of the poppies drooping outside every unit but hers, drowsily rustling their complaints, V. rushes downstairs to the kitchenette. V. places seven strawberries in a beryl-blue crystal dish, smears red jelly onto a slice of very white bread that was one of the last foods her mother brought home before she died, and carries the dish and the jelly-smudged bread to the door to slip outside for a walk to the wall, where she likes to sit and eat her breakfast and soak up the terminal murmurs of night-mist. The idea of surviving another 13 hours of daylight hatches an unspeakable sick loneliness a parched gnaw to the depths of her as she instructs herself: open the door.

Stepping out onto the patio her bare toes scratch along the surface of a quartz ocean of coarse sparkle, mold-thick, undulant, mineralized icily abrasive. Foam of froth of anhydrous alabaster swells of Kosher salt, sea salt like glass gravel, rock salt, pickling salt, faintly salmon specks of Himalayan pink salt, as if every cabinet in every kitchen of Lethe Vale had committed its store of savor to flooding the patio slab. The sodium chloride overlay stretches from her doorstep to the verge of the beige concrete, then spills over onto the grass. Releases granules of salt like mites scurrying to hide themselves in the fur of the lawn. Like mites burrowing under V.'s toenails. V. draws a spiral in the salt with her toe but does not take another step outside. Sunshine darts asps across the salt and it shimmers, a desert of frost.

Lifting her gaze from the encroaching dunes of grit, V. squints, blinks. The Condos are comatose as always but like a fever nursing its blood-heat at the core of her brain V. is aware of a sharpening scintillation, the spew of the eyes that spatter this alkaline morning like bitter stars. Her neighbors concealed behind curtains secretly avidly watching. Their pupils dilate opening into leech or lamprey mouths cleaving to V.'s skin; she is pierced, her guts are sucked out shining with mucus like pink patent vinyl through a hundred incisions, and gulped down, and digested, and excreted via air conditioner ducts as Seconal dust.

Though she envisions the drained husk of her crumpling and flattened as a doormat, stricken as she is V. stays on her feet, she stumbles from the threshold onto the salted patio; her dish of strawberries falls and bursts into blue splinters on the white dunes, the fruit's fat redness seeming to hiss on contact with the desiccant; a blister on the sole of V.'s left foot stings so she gasps from the bite of salt in the wound and the air that fills her mouth then is a soggy-yellowish acidity reeling haze between her teeth, prickling rotten lotion over her tongue. As she starts to panic V. is thinking of midnight movies, she is thinking of Dracula. The reek weeping white, yellow into her lungs—it's garlic. The front yard is strewn with garlic bulbs, and scattered amid these lumps

like baby fists are sharp shards of mirror, stabbed into the soil, as if the lawn had grown fangs overnight. In the low hedges that separate her yard from the yards of her neighbors, mirrored balls – repurposed Christmas ornaments – hang from the pruned branches. The mirrors reflect garlic fumes and settling fog of saline, grass and milk slivers, parings of plum dark streaming into snarls: the white and black-violet of V.'s body, shattered. Each mirror is a well into which some part of V. has fallen. How will she ever get out of here?

Through the panes of windows locked and curtained glowering all around her V. smells garlic breath wafting like a bad date. It is so tepid-curdled and repulsive she worries she might convulse then die immediately, skin torn apart by the broken mirrors, stuffed roasting gagging on garlic, her slits her slices drying lathered in brine.

V. races back inside her mother's tower, panting, slams the door behind her and climbs the stairs to the balcony to pass the remnants of the 13-hour day keeping watch.

The next morning she is disappointed as leaning over the balcony rail she sees that the garlic and mirrors have not disappeared, that they may even have proliferated and that while she slept a lake of Australian Gold tanning oil was vomited over the windshield of V.'s little white car in the driveway. She identifies the bronze sheen as tanning oil by the espresso-molasses-melanoma brown bottles abandoned emptied in the grass at the edge of the driveway. Threads of artificial coconut scent coil creamed reverberations through the lingering garlic; the smells, commingled, are grueling. V. hangs over the railing holding her breath thinking of her body fallen impaled on fangs of mirror to be grilled in the sun, how she would turn bronze, then red. On the label of each empty bottle a cartoon koala the color of toasted marshmallows carries a surfboard the color of sunburn towards an extremely blue ocean. The koala smiles up at her. She smiles weakly back and returns inside.

It is 7:30 am and V. is sitting in bed telling herself that she can be grateful most of the salt on the patio was swept onto the lawn by the night's blessed intrusions of swamp breeze. The swamp might be sacred enough to release her from the sharp mirrors, too, and the garlic, the coconut slickness. Despite her faith in the swamp V. is unsure she'll ever be able to leave the tower again. The windows and the door are locked. The tower is shut. She has shut herself inside.

After a breakfast of toast she barely tastes, distracted tracking droplets of tanning oil down her white car, V. dedicates the day to researching koalas, koala pictures, koala facts, koala history, koala habits. Koalas are harmless. The first encounter between a European man and a koala occurred in 1798. When koalas are cold, or wet, they curl themselves into little balls. When koalas are stressed, the *Chlamydia* bacteria latent in the tissues of their furry bodies activate and make the koalas unwell.

Koalas live alone. V. puts on a faux fur chinchilla-grey coat from her mother's closet like a pellicle of smoke and crouches on the balcony hugging her knees to her chest to make herself small – a little ball – and she waits.

In the Condos below, her neighbors are behaving normally, walking their dogs and cooking sausage on their BBQ grills, but V. notices this evening that all the dogs have small brass bells attached to their collars. A delicate peeling accompanies the sound of their paws padding across asphalt. There is no reason this sound of bells should scare her. Through the permeating fumes of garlic and coconut rising from her lawn V. cannot smell the sausages her neighbors eat meal after meal after meal. What if the mucus membranes lining her nostrils are permanently etched with the odor of garlic and Australian Gold, like an olfactory scar? Will she die?

V. imagines her neighbors eating sausages stuffed with the meat of cold wet chlamydial koalas. She feels profoundly sorry for all animals who get eaten.

On the third morning the spikes of mauve-rose larkspur and heaps of phlox she planted in springtime are gone. Ripped from the ground, not a stalk nor leaf nor fiber of root nor crushed petal nor pistil nor calyx remaining anywhere. Only baleful bald dirt and the wagging gut-color of a few stunned worms. To V. the loss of each flower pangs a nerve vibrating an abandoned feeling she associates with the plucking of hairs one by one from the arch of her eyebrows.

V. wishes her mother had been the kind of woman to keep a pet. If she could have a pet of her own to hide with in the tower V. wouldn't have to be totally disconnected from living. But her mother loathed animals, their wet mouths and messiness; she was the kind of woman who moved into the Condos who boarded yachts just because rich businessmen in creamy suits asked her to and she was also the kind of woman who died.

On the fourth morning an extreme unshakable nervousness overtakes V. as she's descending the staircase, the chill of omen tighter in her chest with every step. At the foot of the stairs she is not relieved to confront evidence that her nervousness hasn't been pure paranoia: there is a pie in an aluminum tin on the kitchenette counter where certainly there was not the night before.

She knows that the Condominium Corporation baked this pie for her. They have the Master Key, they have the means to penetrate her locked tower, she cannot prevent them from coming inside. V. is paralyzed by this abrupt realization of her blackest forebodings. Glinting like a surgical instrument to the left of the pie a steak knife is poised angled on a red-and-white checkered napkin. From where V. is standing



staring it seems as if a reddish mist feathers up through the pie's egg-glazed crust, forming symbols in steam guttering six inches over the dessert: an 'X', an upturned glass, a skull missing its lower jaw, a botfly jerking its blue-veined twitch-wings. Spinning through the garlic smother of her lungs she detects rodential rancid butter tang, a novel streak of foulness swiftly dissolving into the chemical hiss of aspartame. *This is not a pie for eating.*

(...if anything this pie will open up dark at the center and eat her alive...)

V. stands in silence over the kitchen counter, the excess heat of this terrible dread that has infested her drying her lips to a shriveled line. For minutes that sprawl into weeks she is frozen this way, eyes affixed to the cadmium red steam of runes, fingers knotting and unknotting as she's knocking knuckles against her hip. With fingers still gnarled V. grasps the knife and plunges it into the pie's center. She cuts a schism down the middle. Sticky gluey red burbling gurgling up. Slippery ooze a red pooling. V. draws her hand back. The knife stays upright as if stabbed into something firm, like a body. What's in it is thick mire. Strawberry, raspberry, black cherry red, red, and deeper red, but the filling is not fruit. This offering fruitless but full of butchery. A meat pie? Miniature pink rabbit-things without any black or white fur to warm them. Newborn rabbit-things and a snake-thing overripe green chopped like rhubarb mixed in. Additionally, there are worms there are grubs of varying corpulence, leg-count, length, stage of decay. Some especially corpulent legless short worms have burst like berries and dribble a purulence of entrails into the wounds or half-opened mouth-parts of dead baby bunnies. Some worms look like heartworms, others like tapeworms, and still others like regular maggots. Not a lot of the worms and grubs survived their interval in the oven but there are several who still squirm // writhe // wriggle in the belly of the Meat Pie. Through the worm-riddled scarlet weaves sinuousities of blackest purple, obsidian strands V. at first does not recognize as her own hair. When she understands that this pie contains black hairs with white roots from her own scalp V. is certain she will vomit precisely into the pie's rupture-fissure but she doesn't. She thinks she'll scream but she doesn't. What V. does is: she pulls the knife from the pie, unfolds the Condominium Corporation's red-and-white checkered napkin to spread like a sheet over the pie so she won't lose herself staring into its gorge of bleeding gore; she washes the knife (wormy and bunny bits and clumps loosing themselves into the sink) and she goes to sit down on the beige leatherette chaise lounge in the living room with the knife on her lap, listening for neighbors moving outside the tower.

Lethe Vale is very quiet this morning, quieter than usual, as quiet as it's ever been.

## *Return to Sender*

*face:* A sugar-white rabbit with a pink silken ribbon tied around its neck to make a gaudy bow is standing on its hind legs, satyr-like; its ears are long and mauve inside at the base paling to barely dusted bubblegum at the tips. There are honeybees mulling unhurried around the rabbit's face as if hung from its long white whiskers. Each color in the picture is an etiolated aqueous pastel, like an Easter shade sapped of brightness, as if stored in a basement. A blue leather or vinyl strap is wrapped snug across the rabbit's shoulders. The rabbit has a single pink eye visible with a white star dotting the corner to give the impression of light glinting off the lens. A glass eye, a doll's eye, for a taxidermied rabbit. Its front paws rest on the handlebar of a white wicker carriage, which the rabbit is posed to push, within which there is a smoothly shining peach-pink lace-trimmed pillow. The pillow cushions three eggs, each egg the size of the rabbit's skull. In the bottom right-hand corner, a black spider with fat orb of abdomen ready to burst and legs like broken straws segmented and bristling with short spines of hair lurks in an isosceles slice of web apparently unremarked by Rabbit. In the the upper left corner of the card, a young blonde girl's face giggles from the ruffled core of a white-gold rose, as if her severed head were skewered on the flower's pistil. From the ground the spider stares up at the rose-girl. Together the spider and the decapitated blonde head sneer soundless laughter, both sensing the rabbit will die soon and the three beloved eggs she tends with such doting affection will be destroyed. The eggs contain babies that will never be born. Gold embossing in a pattern of quince and chrysanthemum trims the picture like a frame.

*reverse:*

DEAR MOTHER:

I know you are dead but can't you come home now? Because here at the Condos everyone wants me annihilated and is actively plotting to end my life. I think they will come inside the tower and cut away my limbs, dismember me, then kill me completely by shoving barbecue tongs in my eyes (or something like that, something awful). I am not permitted to continue living at Lethe Vale. The lawn is all covered with salt and I cannot drive the car. There's a pie full of dead animal meat rotting in the kitchenette. The only thing I can do is hide on the balcony or in the closet and imagine the blood spilt from splitting the soles of my feet on pieces of mirror, because the lawn is also covered in those.

Mom I'm sorry you're dead, I'm sorry I'm not a good daughter, but please come back. How can you leave your own child alone

here? This is a bad place. Do you want me to be dead, too?  
Please come back.

Sincerely,

V.

The postcard was returned through the slot in the locked door of the tower printed with a stamped message where an address should have been:

### INSUFFICIENT ADDRESS

In purple ink V.'s scrawl beneath plaintively stutters: "Wherever you are?"

Picking up the card from the beige carpet before the threshold, undelivered, a sound like a suppressed cough shoves itself up V.'s throat roughly and suddenly she cannot stop weeping no matter what, sourtinged brine of lukewarm tears soaking into the postcard until every word she wrote is blurred and V. is certain there's no hope she'll make it out of Lethe Vale alive.

### *The Dream of Scratching*

V. swims under a draining sky darkening black to blacker as its saturation of swamp mist leaks from mouths of cloud to glaze the swimming girl in jeweled stain, moonlit vapors melting into moonlit water richened to luminous amethyst, azurite, celestine syrup that slowly envelopes V.'s ankles, her waist, shoulders, the length of her neck as she scythes from shallow to deep. When she is tired from swimming V. turns over to float on her back. To float is nothing tonight; like the eiderdown of the featherbed in the most luxury hotel anywhere the pool supports her, bestowing sheets of swell rising to cradle her spine's curve. Absolutely still, eyes closed, V. gazes up through the pink membranes of her eyelids at the constellations that chase one another across the moorlands of night: Canis Major with solar plexus a white furnace lunging after the nova-dusted tail of Monoceros, winter's unicorn, faint horse born sharpened by myth, on whose hackles rides the Lesser Dog barking commands to hasten the hunting party in pursuit of the rabbit, Lepus, deathless quarry, doomed to spend eternity darting away forever. Together the dogs dig for bones in the yawning black loam of the star field, while at the banks of the Milky Way the unicorn lowers his head to drink from the plaiting streams, pink ribbons, purple ribbons, pearl blue and gilded egg-white entwining into manes of tangle. Foam like champagne fizz sticks to the horse's muzzle. Somewhere behind the moon a scared hare is hiding.

(every star not encompassed within the bodies of these animals takes the form of a tooth)

Beneath V. the pool teems with reflections of teeth and a congregation of unknown shapes too strange to classify decisively as creatures; some may be flotsam, others ghosts. Whatever they are V. feels their movements through the water and observes the weirdness of their bodies as if seeing with her skin itself, seeing by echoes underwater their bodies consisting of bracelet chains of quivering crystal eyes condensing into imitations of fish, coral-colored entrails simulating eels curling contracted then relaxing their fleshy loops to propel themselves forward, sheaves of lace undulating along the pool's tiled floor, like living milk-rose petticoats. Shrimp the size of housecats flash neon-strawberry glare from their antennae as they scurry between the legs of white crabs as big as calves, who give no sign of their aliveness except occasionally to catch the shrimp from between their legs to hold in heavy, lithic claws, then eat. Affixed in the crevices of the crabs' shells anemones sprout piceous like tufts of fur. Around the solid animals heaps and garlands of jellyfish float like hibiscus diadems to the surface, pulsing halos of turquoise translucence, heliotrope translucence. Fuchsia efflorescing into threads of verdant. Every vacillation phosphoresces. Nothing touches V., out of politeness not out of wariness: the inhabitants of the pool know there is no reason to fear one another, because the pool is hallowed, sanctuary—only the blessed learn how to swim.

V. cannot remember the last time she was unafraid. It was years ago; maybe it was before she was even born. In this novel calm her nerves are unknotting, the muscles of her jaw slackening so her lips fall parted to drink mist. Like soft mirror her skin soaks up the blue lantern-flicker of the water; she senses an alliance between herself half-immersed and the distant sea, the swamp, the sky, all the strange animals. The water swears to her there is more to life than compression and terror...

...there is closeness, there is continuity, there is trust...

(too soon the night's teeth sharpen their glint and in the aura phase of piercing V. stiffens)

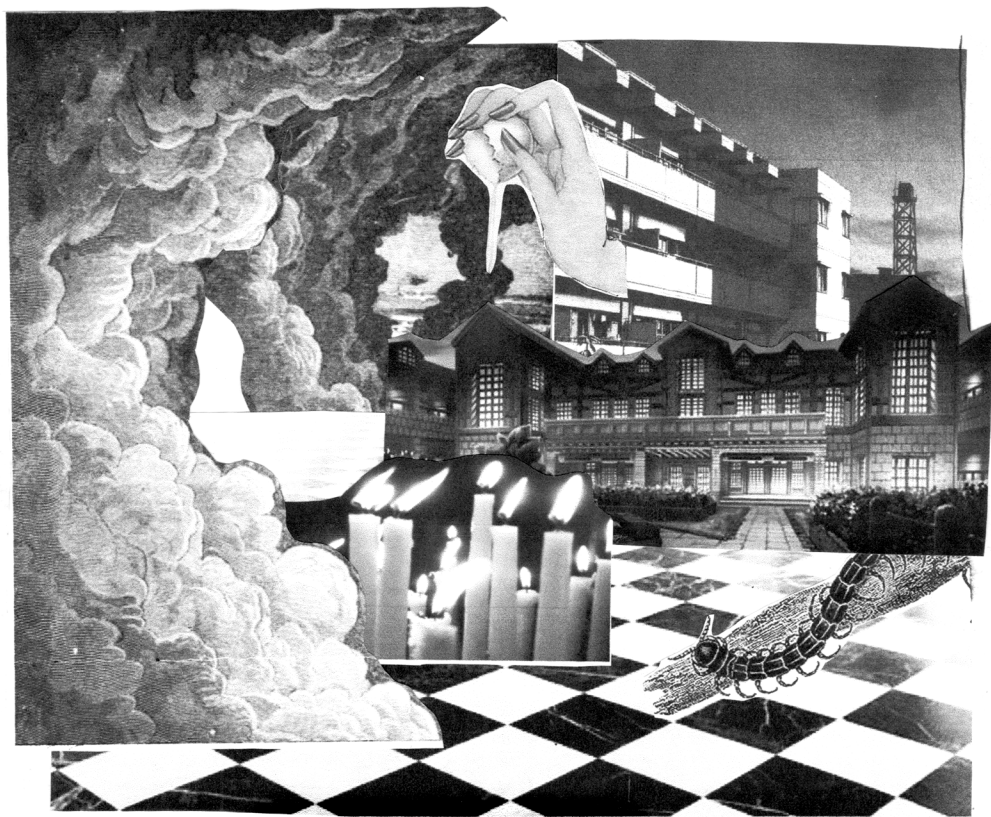
In the blackness teeth swarm loose slanting down against the swimmer's belly like shafts of needles...

Draperies of ammonia insoluble heat descend over the pool, the mist no longer green-smelling but chemical, acidic, scraping as it spreads from V.'s hairline to jaw, veiling her face in caustic mantilla. On pointed rat claws the red current spikes into all the pores of V.'s skull, through the coronal suture, through her mouth and her nose. Burns and scars shade the clefts between strata of brain sheath (subarachnoid)

contaminating cerebrospinal fluid discolored and cascading to the core, moist district of velvet-purple grottoes where her heart and other organs are suspended, wreathed in venous snarl. Noosed, the veins seize. Astringent sting suffuses V., iridescent pitch-sick-yellow shifting sallow under toothlight like an oil spill frozen-over speeds filth down her throat collapsing the fragile sponge of her lungs, which burble aspirating and deflate to ruined blackened sacs of dead baubles, noncompliant: at this point V. cannot breathe. Through the flesh that encases her ribs, now a webbing like cellophane, through the ribs themselves now like Lucite blades, V. can see her failing lungs convulse red to blue to red to wild screaming white siren rhythms pleading for unpolluted air. Pulse scarlet, jolt limp, pulse iced sapphirine, pulse paling epileptic and gasp like twin fish slapped to the cutting board. The moth her fish-lungs make pinned shivering stripped wings vainly to fly. V.'s body has been drained of its buoyancy; the pool no longer holds her cradled; the water churns, shattered by the frenzy of crabs and eels twisting and coiling, twisting and uncoiling, their glow whipped to ooze like purulence, a putrid death rattle. Smoke infuses electric shocks ricocheting through the pool and deep-fries the fish. Everything is dying. V. must swim urgently now so she won't be dragged by the undertow to the absolute bottom; she must cough constantly to slow her own drowning in smoke. At the pool's edge, hands clawed gripping the rim because she feels she'd be sucked down immediately if she let go she's spitting up mouthfuls of garnet particles, something like silica gel soaked in blood, blood-gravid; she squints out across the lawn, with lenses bleary from burning nothing is clear but she thinks she sees flames leaping up from the sandstone fire-pit by the pavilion. In the fire-pit V. catches sight of clusters of red berries like caviar burst into red yolk as the fire licks their skins away. V.'s own skin has gone taut, fever a bitter mesh of scum between the layers. Her skull is warm and gorged with mush in its alcoves; she feels she could peel the scalp from the bone below in chunks like shards of shell from a soft-boiled egg. The water boils. There is hair in the fire.

V. pulls herself from the clinging folds and furrows of the raging pool, hacking up curds of lung with the strain. The instant she crawls onto poolside cement a mantle of grey like steel wool, reddening, envelopes her, but she resists the tempting purr of paralysis: the smoke cannot stop her from scrambling to her feet. V.'s organs wheeze. She cannot breathe and she has to run. Chlorinated tears stick to her cheeks, studding the skin like rhinestones, sizzling dry touched to the smoke as she's running—

V.'s hair is in the fire. She's afraid.



[V's hair is in the fire. She's afraid.]

After running an eternity through the heat of the lawn V. has only reached the poolhouse (screened pavilion) when a Thing lunges out at her from the grey night.

The Thing is this: a slender wrist with a hand attached and then finally with fingers.

it scratches

the scratches are executed by three beige-painted curves

of carved soda can, V. thinks, noticing French tips

as they're digging triplicate diagonal scars into her face

A second hand slips between her legs, toward the mole that marks her there, on her thigh. When V. was a girl in the bath her mother used to trace this mole with the tip of her forefinger. "You have two hearts, V.," her mother had told her, "two hearts is two too many for a daughter. And one is black, in a bad place, unlucky girl! Whatever will become of you?" Now V.'s mother is dead. These fingers, non-maternal, thrusting in between her legs lost in smoke are tweaking the mole the second heart as if to pluck it from V.'s skin.

"She's absolutely hideous," the first claw hisses

"She's vile" issues from the second claw

"She's albino + she's a disease" spits insult the tertiary claw and an inch from the leg seam of her lavender bathing suit the hand down there inscribes a curse stinging into the skin, "I need your blood your blood your blood or I will never be well; you made my own dog bite me to give me rabies you nasty witch-girl"

The blood born of scratching runs sticky warmish down V.'s body from head to toe. On contact with the poison smoke that permeates the air everywhere V.'s blood scalds and lathers, spraying this awful sputtering sound like bacon as its fat cooks. This is some kind of chemical reaction engineered to kill her.

With her hands covering her scratched face to prevent the full contents of her blood from evaporating V. cannot see if there are bodies attached to the extremities and the voices attacking her. It doesn't matter because she knows the Condominium Corporation is responsible. Through the smoke and ruin she catches glimpses of them, gathered, however many of them there are - it appears they may have multiplied since their last meeting -

The Condominium Corporation's members are opaque shadows forming a circle around the fire-pit. They do not have faces. Only mouths and their mouths are opening into wider and wider more bottomless holes tilted up to the sky. Next V. stifles a scream because

from the center of each mouthhole worms out a red-and-gold-striped centipede clicking its rigid sharp pincers together hungrily and jerks from one side to the other and is the ugliest thing V. could ever imagine. Each centipede stretches no further than six inches from the lips of its host, because it is hinged to the place where the mouth drops down into the throat, where the pink tongue ought to be rooted but these people have insects in their heads instead.

A high and whining excrescence of drone oscillates a river from all the mouths simultaneously, a reverberation like a torrent of hornets that signals to the centipedes to intensify their throes. Blood from the scratches has congealed in tassels down V.'s face. She can taste her own corrupted blood and the flavor is sausage. Swerving higher the collective shrill of the Condominium Corporation quavers; the lawn quakes, blades of grass like the crystal spires of a tiny city crumble to green debris, and then the drone peaks – too high almost to register, more a white pain overflowing the bones than a sound – the centipedes are loosed from their sinew tethers, all dropping to the lawn at once rushing in a red and yellow wave racing toward V., whose legs are too numb with horror to run. Her nerves have reeled themselves inward to spool around the spine and are no longer firing—anticipating only painful signals henceforth, they have retired. The effect is that she's staggered captive in vitreous paralysis; if she tried to run she thinks she'd break apart fall to the grass that pricks the soles of her bare feet, and besides, she cannot even see the tower now, it is too far away, she has nowhere to run to, there is too much smoke.

"You can't live in Lethe Vale anymore," the claws are laughing together, "consider this your eviction notice"

The centipedes drag fraying strips of tongue-meat from their hindparts as they scale V.'s white legs, insinuate their mouthparts up inside her lavender bathing suit, gnawing ugly rips into the sensitive skin that seals her stomach. Not crying out nor struggling V. submits to the insects, her knees drop her body a white flag laid down upon the lawn. "I'm sorry," she says, before the centipedes dive down between her lips and further down and down further.

At 5:00 am V. awakens from the jaws of centipede – the worst dream in a relentless rotation of nightmares – shaking uncontrollably. Her hands shake too badly to let her hold her cereal spoon or teacup so she skips breakfast and locks herself in the bedroom closet instead.

### ***Defacement***

Due to the pie full of red decaying to black mottled mildewed white inedible matter the trashcan V. has pushed to the most remote corner



of the kitchenette exhales a reek richly unbearable, meat-rot and aspartame, cloying, and V. realizes she will die soon of the stench if she doesn't take the trash out, even if the thought of being touched by the world outside chills her. Tentatively V. peers out through the blinds. It is early enough that darkness still holds sway over Lethe Vale, the cul-de-sac pavement lit only by the sodium bloom of the streetlamps. No movement but the poppies' breeze-stirred rustling along the walls. There is no one outside walking a dog at this hour, no one leaving for work. The Condos are sleeping.

V. unlocks then unbolts the door, opens the door, steps over the doorsill onto the patio which is no longer a salt lake but strewn now with silver compact mirrors, hand mirrors inlaid with copper, marigold, ivory blue enamels, broken magnifying mirrors and disarticulated doll limbs, plastic forks tied together with ribbon into crosses, and other hexes V. doesn't take the time to identify because she's speeding across the patio with her bag of garbage toward the driveway as fast as possible while avoiding tripping and falling into glass, she runs down the length of the driveway to the curb where she throws the trash down for pick-up then turns and sprints to return to safety, the tower, skirting the same pieces of mirror reflecting warped rations of calf, of ankle, her eyes to the ground, stopping running finally when her fingertips settle on the doorknob and she looks up through tense lashes alert as antennae because the door is not right. They've marred the door. Lurid splashes across the eggshell color of the faux-wood, slashes savage and hateful shaping letters smeared five times over, hand-painted, with fingers dipped knuckle-deep in red spelling:

## MUTANT

V. opens the door, she steps inside the tower and pulls the door shut behind her without making a sound; she locks the door and bolts it and chains it, even though it's pointless, they have the key, they have keys to the windows, and V. runs upstairs to sit by herself on the balcony where she can contemplate methods by which she might disappear before it is too late and she is murdered.

### *Leucistic Menace: V. Envisions Vengeance*

I hate them. I hate everyone in Lethe Vale except for the dogs. The dogs are not out prowling at night to destroy me, though they do wear those miniature coppery bells on their collars that clang in a way that is grating when their owners walk them close to the tower. But the dogs did not tie those awful bells around their own necks, you know. The dogs are blameless. Note: there must also be housecats stowed away

in the Condos somewhere who cannot be held accountable for my persecution.

Because I hate every human being in Lethe Vale, and because I've been forced into a desperate state, with nothing to lose and my own murder more imminent hourly, here is what I plan to do:

In the evening, the husbands of the Condos exit their units via the French doors onto their patios, where their barbecue grills stand glaring silver in the dusklight like chromium caskets. Only a very small human (such as an infant) left whole would fit inside one of these grills, but chopped up it would be easy to barbecue an adult. Sausages are entombed within these coffins. I estimate that everyone in Lethe Vale eats 10 pounds of sausage per week. The spiced odor of sausage is a grease constantly dirtying the air. As the ground meat marbled raw pink-and-white encased by the sausage skin fattens and darkens redder, the husbands pass through the French doors from inside to outside of their units and back again to bring into or out of their kitchens various condiments or cooking utensils like many different knives, ketchup, et cetera. Sometimes, they stay inside for at least five minutes sequentially. These intervals are essential to my plan. Whenever a husband is inside for five minutes or more I will dart from the hedges within which I've concealed myself to steal the sausages from the fire, packing them away in an old hatbox of Mother's I found while I was waiting for night to come while I was sitting in the closet.

I will creep from hedge to hedge from unit to unit through the Condos taking every sausage, replacing the meat with lumps of fungus, *Pleurotus populinus* cut from dead aspen, golden chanterelles – along the white wall the soil is rich and black from the swamp spreading sheets of wet underneath, so wild mushrooms can grow, frilled blossoms I twist from the ground before the lawnmower can shred them – and whatever flowers I manage to find in Lethe Vale. Even poppies will suffice.

When the husbands return from indoors to discover flowers and mushrooms scalding to char in their grills instead of tubes of dead animal, I expect their faces might bloat red and their hands harden into fists and they will look all around to see who should be punished for this criminal deviance (a disturbance of the peace), but they will not find me. I will have already disappeared.

By the end of a week I predict I will have collected enough meat, and very soundless I will walk to the middle of the foremost cul-de-sac and empty the sausages stored in Mother's hatbox onto the lawn. Scenting the ripeness of the banquet, the dogs, who already understand that I am not the enemy, will chew and tear with eager paws through the screens of the windows and doors that hold them confined inside the Condos. Maybe a dozen dogs – black Labradors, beagles, the small white dogs wives like, terriers, the gorgeous Alsatian from Complex C – will

escape from indoors to surround me and that is when I'll start to howl, catalysis for the dogs' howling. This howl we bleed is contagious. Soon our fused howling drives waves of sound below the lawn, taking root, a rhizome of animal sound sprawling underneath Lethe Vale; the subterranean pulse of howls quakes the husk of sleep-scented vinyl siding slats from the units, the beige cement patios crack, then the kitchenette formica. In the refrigerators soft-boiled eggs break and ooze out their yellow onto shattering glass.

One by one the members of the Condominium Corporation are thrown from their beds by the din of our insurrection.

Finally I'll murmur, hoarsely from the howling stripping the plaque of silence from my innermost: "Dogs, come. We don't have to stay here." And we'll leave. If anyone makes a single gesture to forbid us from going as we wish to go, the dogs will leap at the interferer and bite his or her nightclothes to shreds until the person is naked and completely distracted by the shame of being naked before the other members of the Condominium Corporation so that he or she will have to hurry back indoors and leave us alone. I will instruct the dogs carefully not to bite anyone's body because I do not want to give the Condominium Corporation cause to send Animal Control after us. If the dogs were hurt because of me I would never forgive myself. The dogs are smiling as we're rushing the gates, their fur catching the swamp's breath soft green in prisms, the dogs are barking goodbye to the Condos, and I am at the heart of the surge, and I am smiling, too.

( there is no one there is nothing no way to stop us from escaping Lethe Vale forever )

That is my plan, and it is urgent I set it in motion as soon as possible since I'm running out of food, I'm so starved I'm becoming a cripple, I'm weakening...

### ***The Balcony Violated (there is no shelter)***

Usually on a weekday afternoon it is not a lethal error to sit on the balcony. Those who work have driven or carpooled away to their offices, and the wives who do not work are securely ensconced indoors for the duration of *General Hospital*. Though she is progressively paralyzed in the warp and weft of her horror at the world, the balcony is preserved as an unscathed place in V.'s mind. It is raised high enough above the lawns of Lethe Vale that it is distant from the dangers of the Condos, V. tells herself. It is inaccessible. From the balcony, sitting still, staring between the wrought iron of the balustrade she can see the crowns of the trees that live in the swamp beyond the white wall. Within the

Condos trees are pruned into topiaries. Whatever hazards to grow is rigidly supervised. Each day that it is not impossible to open her eyes to peel herself from the bedsheets she spends as long as she is allowed on the balcony – before a car thunders through the gates, or a curtain thrills to indicate someone behind it is watching – dreaming of how it would feel to have her feet buried to the ankles in the dark jade plush of the swamp. Mud streaks scrawled up her legs. A clot of moss clasped tight filling in the spaces between her fingers, gently crumbling. During these dreams like raw quartz tumbling in her skull to a roseate gloss, V. eats. The famine that has struck the tower is such that she can afford to eat only once per day and since she wants to draw every leanest last snatch of fullness from the food that she has, she eats while she's dreaming.

V.'s meal today: one frozen waffle, damp yellow. Margarine. Strawberry preserves. One half of a pickled egg.

V. wonders if her mother ate pickled eggs before she moved to Lethe Vale, or if the eating of these vinegary sourish-cold things came later, symptomatic of her assimilation into the Condominium Corporation. How hard it is, she thinks, to remember anything about her mother now that she's dead! V. does not like pickled eggs; when she eats them she dreams they are orbs of lime curd and coconut cream.

Balancing her plate against her hip with one hand while with the other she pulls back the terracotta-colored panel of curtain she has taken to keeping drawn over the sliding door that opens onto the balcony V. breathes slowly to prepare herself for sunlight. The sun is a welt of bitter blue-white that coughs scum into her eyes, blinding her. Each day it's a shock; harsh before, too hot and bright drying but now the sun razors an ache directly into V.'s bones and she can barely stand it—she's more sensitive than she once was, her flesh has softened to pulpy, a sheath of condensed milk that ripples and drips atrophied from weeks or centuries of exile in the tower, specifically in the closet, from her pitiful diet and endless exhausting worrying. If she were nocturnal she would be safe from the sun at least but the Condominium Corporation has stolen the night from her.

With practiced noiselessness V. moves onto the balcony. Her left foot is still on the doorsill when her right foot touches the cement platform and V. cannot stifle the cry that her nerves thrust forth as spasm, because her bare foot has been stung. The foot recoils and freezes suspended six inches over the balcony floor, toes pointed in a balletic pose. Stabbed into the arch: cyan syringe, silver needle. With trembling fingers V. pulls the needle from her flesh. The anemic cry she unconsciously releases as the needle slides out echoes over the railing toward the pool up to the sky, like the airborne reactivated residues of screams from some closeted trauma.

The pain of the needle is cold sucking tension cascading metallic through her muscles.

A wail worms over V.'s tongue and out between her lips irresistibly. Littering the balcony, a swarm of syringes gives off vicious dazzle, blue plastic terminating in stringent silver reflecting puerile monotony of blue sky and sunshine, syringes like segments of glaciated serpent, each with its own single secret fang; a brood of sterile menace floating silent in the ammonia-infested sunlight.

A cursory examination of the sole of her foot reveals the wound failed to draw blood. V. is standing on one foot, holding her injured foot pressed to her thigh because the pain of the needle means she cannot put her foot down or her whole body will start burning. The sound of a car at the gates unsteadies her and she falters, dropping the plate; her food falls, the plate cracking on the tin of the doorsill, strawberry preserve soaking in dollops into the carpet. Dirty white tinged to yellow-green where it rounds the halved egg bounces then rolls out into the welter of needles.

An almost imperceptibly tiny red dot brightens the prick the needlestick made in V.'s body. Today she is too frightened and too weak to bleed.

Black iron railing // syringes // chemical glare // frost-pink poppies // a curtain beigely rustling // frost-purple pickled egg // Mother's broken plate // smooth walls of tooth // the lawn too green too short too AstroTurf // the red preserves // taupe carpet // sapphire pool // metal // plastic // concrete // combining as a smear to soil her vision like vomit V. sinks to the ground and on all-fours forces herself over the doorsill, off the balcony which has been sinned against and will never be safe again – there is no such place as protection – her palms squelching the jam deeper more insolubly into weave of carpet, encrimsoning her hands and knees, not caring. V. crawls as if in a dream, where nothing can touch her, distancing herself from sensation – insensate : salvation – and lays her pierced sickening body out flat beneath her mother's bed.

Through the open door the lazy rattling of syringes rolling breeze-blown back and forth over sand-colored cement is carried into the bedroom on crests of bleach-light, chlorine, vinyl. V. listens. A car is rumbling subdued thunder into the cul-de-sac then the world goes quiet. V. listens. Her stomach whimpers for food, and V. listens.

## *Dead Animal, An Attempt to Flee, Her Chastening*

V. is stirred from flavorless sleep shut away in the cabinet beneath the sink by an iciness filtering into the kitchenette. I do not want to live to be this cold, V. thinks. A droplet of condensation from the pipe over her head is loosed to her shoulder and streams a swerve down her sternum. V. shivers. She is numb along the lengths of her limbs from curling so crumpled in a space smaller than a casket. A dizzy thickness simmers under her skin.

V. ate the last pickled egg two days ago and now there is nothing left.

Yes, this morning the kitchenette air is whetted more brittle to breathe than she's accustomed to, she's sure, and the outdoor silence of Lethe Vale a closer sharpness. V.'s first assumption is that the tower has fallen to ruins around her cabinet, as if the Condos had been bombed, to leave her homeless and free, but when she elbows open the door and dribbles out she is still on kitchenette linoleum; there is no rubble, the tower still stands, the breakfast bar where she doesn't eat breakfast because there is nothing to eat is not in pieces, but something *is* missing, and the missing piece of her house is the door to the tower. Both the screen door and the faux-wood door are gone; where they once were there's now a gaping hole slanting out into scalding grey-white static, spirals of fang-milk and solar brine scurrying inside the tower over the carpet to plunder the sores carved by V.'s hunger. The door has been taken off the hinges. In an obelisk of pooling white that blanches her dead mother's furniture, ulcers like cigarette burns edged orange open in the chaise and in V.'s cream-purple nightgown.

Placed on the threshold like an offering at the altar is a pink plastic basket, a pink ribbon tied in a gaudy sagging giant bow to the arch of the handle. The pink is glazed with the shine of rancid artificial like a mucus membrane. When V. staggers to the doorway, which is a wound, and kneels to look inside the basket, she finds a bulge wrapped up in pink gingham, like a tumor someone tried to hide beneath a sheet, a secret shameful outgrowth. Brain encased in starved fever V. cannot resist a moment entertaining the idea that they might've left her something to eat, and she would eat anything now, poisoned or decayed, she would even eat a pie like the one they brought her before, she thinks, because she is so empty it hurts like wires of razors in her veins and she is so hollowed of moisture and softness, her body such a stale void; and so violently as need overcomes revulsion she unwraps the gingham napkin from the shape in the basket – an incantation erupting in her gut: tallow-frosted cupcakes, eyeballs in aspic, dirt-salted cyanide scones, banana grub muffins, oatmeal arsenic cookies, who cares? – because anything she can put into her mouth is better than this gnawing cold crystallizing absence inside, this hunger...

it is not food it is a dead animal

it is not food it is a dead puppy

Or isn't it dead? V. imagines the thing waves its feeble stub of paw, translucent claws, to signal, "hello, can you help me?", but there is a note pinned through the scruff of its neck so it must be dead. Not even the Condominium Corporation could shove a safety pin through a living animal's living meat. No. No. No. Not even a centipede could do it. The note says:

## SEEMS LIKE U COULD USE A FRIEND

The dead animal is pink-white, fur a frail vapor, thinnest snow dunes covering the flesh; it died before its eyes could open so its eyes are only pink folds of layers of wrinkling, incipient lashes meshing shut black slits. It has a black nose wet when it was born now drying and a mouth that hangs slack, exposing a sliver of pink tongue lolling. A pale frost of mold embroiders filmy lace down the jut of its ribs to its belly-bloat.

Tenderly, cautiously, as if not to hurt it anymore – the purity of the animal's vulnerability makes her tremble – V. takes the safety pin from its neck. Around the perforations the flesh puckers but no blood wells to redden the rims; this dead animal, like V., cannot bleed. Their shared bloodlessness binds V. instantly, fundamentally, permanently to the poor pink thing she has been given.

Despite the pains she takes not to inflict harm the slight pressure of V.'s fingertips on the dead animal's stomach is enough to disgorge a maggot lethargically flopping from its mouth. One maggot and then another and then a third maggot.

V. takes the small body so yielding and defenseless so full of death in her white hands, holding it close to her chest. She holds it against her heart and her heartbeat, cantering, reverberates through its pink flesh. It looks almost as if the dead animal is breathing. "Even though you are dead, I will take care of you," V. whispers. "I won't let them torture you anymore." Something in the petrified emptiness that has overgrown V.'s insides is fracturing like stained glass, a thousand urgent colors plethoric inside whining as the sleep-dust of cataleptic passivity clears, and V. has to run. To get the dead animal out of Lethe Vale. To deliver it to shelter to sanctuary to a place where it can live.

As V. runs to the gates she feels the white clawing of eyes fixed on her from behind the curtains and blinds of the windows of the Condos. These eyes are fat with lazy rancor, they are tethered to sofas by fetters of mauve and mildewed, waxen and stiffening fibers of extraocular muscles (retinal, oblique), blood-chalice cords of lacrimal artery and retinal vein, ligaments, tendons, the optic nerve; they are murmuring insults: she's a witch she's a disease she's a harlot she's a dog she's a

mutant she's a girl-witch, dog-witch, mutant-witch. The eyes' abuse tangles into the low thrum of construction V. begins vaguely to hear: overlapping noise of wheels tearing up beds of moss, the dull crunch of branches broken under heavy machines and crushing and crackling, battering, rattling from some region of the swamp where more Condos are being built. The accusations swell louder, invisible wings of slander viciously circling her head to disorient her but V. keeps her eyes to her feet, she runs faster...

The Condos are metastasizing through the swamp's loam and as she runs V. is crying for the dead animal's suffering, for the swamp, the wounds in its darkness to be staunched with beige concrete, and for her own wounds. Cradled to her breast and shaking from her bare feet pounding into pavement the dead animal is damp with V.'s tears.

Between twin pillars decked at the pinnacles by statuary owls perched squinting through lacquer cataracts sightlessly guarding Lethe Vale, the gates are locked. The gates are black wrought iron, the bars spiked and looming six feet over V.'s head. A gilded padlock with the approximate dimensions of a human skull hangs very solid very impenetrable from the latch. Behind V., a third vibration, distinct from the electric vitriol of the eyes and the undercurrent of construction radiating from the swamp, growls to life to dominate the air. An engine. A luxury vehicle.

"I'll get us out of here, little one," V reassures the dead animal. It's very simple: all she has to do is climb the gate. Maggots #4, 5, 6, 7 drop from the dead animal's mouth. V. thinks miserably: it knows I'm lying. Because the gate is too high and she is starved crippled and there is nowhere for her feet so there is no way she can climb the gate, and the luxury vehicle is too fast, its thunder too grey a bad smoke to allow her time to refine her exit strategy. V. doesn't need to turn to see the car the Condominium Corporation summoned to punish her for thinking she could leave Lethe Vale; she can feel it pulsing fumes and throb through the soles of her feet, and she sees the yellow its headlamps throw past her through the gates onto the drive out of the Condos: she knows what comes next. A thicket of poppies, the flowers like ruby-stained folds of molted skin, bristles with the car's approach. V. focuses on the weight of the dead animal in her arms to anchor herself. At the gates, the smell of her adored swamp velvet moss algae salamander eggs mulch emerald and obsidian is as strong as it has ever been. She breathes deeply.

"You don't want us here," she exhales, her voice clear and steely as spider's silk. "Why won't you let us go?"

The car heating cement behind her does not answer.



Pressed to the bony plate of her chest now the dead animal is all gnarled and misshapen, its limbs askew, muzzle parted wider open as if to plead for forgiveness. The wretchedness of such poorly treated naked pink clips some vein to spurt clumsy remorse; it is V. who requires lenience for her failings: I never meant to mutilate you, I never meant to make you worse—

In an instant the car, champagne-colored, a Lexus, leaps forward. Shriek of tire. A smell of burning and black pressure and V. is pinned to the gates. The hurt of impact is dense and opaque, a tar-thick sludge over the crown of her skull that runs down to her ankles and as she struggles flooded in this pain that envelopes the living surface of the body, internally she is scissored to lace by silver-ivory blades of teeth cleaving vitreous where her ribs crack, where her pelvis fractures...a hundred other micro-explosions of bone...the electric embers shed as bones shatter char the pulp of her guts compressed...

With the dead animal in her arms, deader than ever, V. crumbles downward into syrup blackness.

### ***Well of Dismemberment***

There is only descent:

she falls and the emptiness expands the nothingness surrounding her and she falls and her arms unlock from her shoulders slide to float away in ether then her leg like a doll's leg, like Barbie's leg removed, with a rounded knob to slot into hip socket, without visible traces of muscle or blood, immaculately plastic, clean, and she falls and her liver is a galaxy of rust her vertebral column a glistening obelisk as they dissolve and she falls and there is a centipede like rings winding crimson, gold, between the fingers of her left hand no longer appending her left wrist but irrecoverably far from her, fluttering in currents of void, and she falls and spongy marrow is pouring from a de-fleshed bone she doesn't recognize and she falls and one of her eyes – the slicked orb – bursts flowering fireworks of blown glass catching red reflections of centipede, then fading to cinders, devoured by the vastness, and she falls and her pinkish snaking paling entrails are looped caught on hooks thrust from nowhere and she falls and veins unravel from the rents in her silken streaming like a mane of party crepe shredded thin skeining upward over her head or she is just falling down away from it all and she falls and her heart is a raspberry glow hardening as rhythm falters from slowing into cold and she falls and her nerves are drawn long, tensed, lightning flickering along fraying wires spitting ultraviolet sparks as the entwining is torn and she falls and there is only darkness there is no feeling and she falls...

## *In the Night Hospital*

The light that rouses her is soft white, a moleskin lamina of pearl dusting the stiff edges of the room in which she wakes, a placid white that cools to lavender-oyster blue where it diffuses and soaks into the room's surfaces, smoothing them cleansed of their shadows, its brilliance seamless, bare and pure. This luster is anointment and smears her consciousness eclipsed in the earliest moments of waking, when her eyes are coaxed open to gentle lapping at the lenses by the light's lotion-glisten of cream, tooth, sugar, glacier. Bathed in this incandescence innocent of any flaw of aridity or asperity, with light overflowing the orbits of her eyes streaming down along the interior banks of her skull, into the channels leading deeper inside the body, her nose and throat, so she comes close to choked coughing illumined sputum, but there is no discomfort in this barely breathing and she consigns herself to the whiteness that kindles in aching contrast to the endless darkness of the hole behind her there is no need to remember: she will forget everything. Amnesia like a gown wraps chiffon and charmeuse saturant around her, tidal masses of material molding to the elements of her surface, corseting her, lacing itself down her back. Floor-length chantilly, a profusion of tulle effacing the hurt as it flowers: she forgets. Around her neck, a collar of feathers like a cirrus wreath of fur thaws her history of exile. This dress bears no blot nor stain of despair. It is perfectly fresh: undefiled.

Slowly the anesthetic shock of the light loosens and thins, ripples of awareness swim to resurface and the room reveals itself to her in fuller clarity. Here, the plush of the carpet is pale pink. This room has no windows, but there are potted oleanders, peonies like strawberry cream, like cherry cream fluffing from immense urns, orchids drooping garlands of amaranth and fuchsia-speckled hearts, ferns silkily unfurling their fronds to the pink turf coalesce into a palisade of polymorphous polychrome vivid along the wall, which is white, so there is no need for color lured in from outside. Her eyes track green reflections that stick to the wall like ivy climbing to the ceiling, pulsing as if to the secret rhythms of vernal expansion, and she is no longer simply seeing but sensing the room as it relates to her body: the green splashed to the walls elicits a quivery flare in her solar plexus. Now her nerves discern she is in water, the water is green electric, the green and honeyed consistency of lime gelatin melting. She is buried to the waist in a body of water at the center of the white room, watched over by a congregation of peonies and clematis breathing pollen-light; it is an intense pleasure and lulling to be immersed in this green which is nectar-sweet as her pores drink it in. In this liquid the girl is nourished.

Succeeding the sensation of hunger abating she is struck by the impression, which swiftly crystallizes to an unshakable conviction, that her organs have been replaced by living animals.

She is not imagining it because there are incontrovertible physical signs she has been colonized:

1) eddies and currents of respiration-oscillation inflating myriad channels outside the chambers of her lungs. the flesh vehemently aerated.

2) indwelling irregularities of movement she supposes feel as it must feel to be pregnant, like barely formed fingers (fingers without bones) testing the elasticity of fascia, like nudging, like palpitations of second third fourth fifth sixth seventh hearts, liver hearts and stomach hearts, a symphony of systole//diastole rising in ripples, a heart lodged at the core of her brain beating into both hemispheres, warm gutful of gushing echoes, the blood surges glugged faster from corpuscle hearts.

3) extremely unmistakable undulations play across the surface of her abdomen.

She is naked in the pool, increasingly conscious of the translucent plastic cord like a chain tied around her waist (because when one of the organ-animals kicks out her belly it is pushed against the plastic which does not yield and it is the first gross feeling since she awoke) and then wondering vaguely how she'd arrived here, and where she came from, and if she's ever been anyone other than a naked girl chained in wetness, when the nurses enter the room.

In white smocks brittle like exoskeletons – starched edifices applied to elide residues of soft or organic shape, short dresses like crusts of armor to restructure the nurses' figures weaponized with whetted slants of breast, barbed hips, wasp-waisted division of the body into hard segments – and with white caps and white gauze masks the nurses are like sister clones, more alike even than twins. They stand together so closely their shoulders touching seem to melt one nurse into the next. Both black-eyed, ultra-pale brows or maybe the brows haven been shaven, with narrow faces tapering to chins jutting as points through the gauze of their masks, the severe lines of their skulls highlighted by lavender-blue shading like permanent bruises marking the skin, suggestive of wasting illness or opiates. The nurses are both blonde, their blonde lemonade, egg yolk, sunshine yellow. Their blonde hair is parted down the middle and varnished to form a shell sloping sleek from the crown to behind their ears, where the remaining hair is rolled into a bun. The nurses have large wide foreheads which are powdered zinc-white and mirror the masks that cover their mouths. To complement their white smocks and caps and masks the nurses wear white gloves, white stockings, polished white patent shoes with

rectangular heels like blocks of bone but which do not produce the scantest thump with their footfalls – the white shoes are soundproof – and each nurse is ornamented around her neck by a fine gold chain from which a dainty snake dangles, its golden body coiled around a nail. The nail resembles a golden needle. The snakes have red stones sparkling as eyes—cherry garnet, or spinel. The girl in the pool thinks they will want to take her blood, these nurses, because there is a strange grave awful graspingness about them; they must require something from her. Hairs and snakes dazzle gold. A hiss to suck her dry. Immediately the girl chained in consoling liquid captivity of the green pool does not trust the nurses.

As it becomes clear they do not have syringes for teeth or fingernails and are not in the room to torture her but only to wash her naked body, her feelings towards the nurses grow no warmer. Without speaking they manipulate her limpness to anoint her with a pink cream that becomes foam when worked into wet skin. They touch her soft limp everywhere with their plastic-wrapped fingertips. Her limpness is consummate: there is not a muscle anywhere she can provoke to twitch, seize, contract, relax. With zero access to personal control, her arms hang at her sides and the nurses lift them to wash the groves of fragile flesh beneath; they spread her legs apart to cream and frost with lather where her legs slot into her pelvis. As they position and reposition her to achieve a thorough cleanse she catches sight of fading traces of barely visible taut mauve-colored scars like runes etched into her belly, her thighs and upper arms where the limbs are thickest, the palms of her hands, the under-curve of her left breast. There must be at least a dozen scars on her body below her in the pool but she never remembers being cut. She lets her head fall loose to her chest because it's all she can do to express her nonconsent to the current situation. Smiling, the nurses tip her chin back and set her head reclined upon a small blue pillow to enhance easy access to her throat, which they wash with a pink cloth. The nurses treat her body gently. Their fingers are elegant and agile enclosed in the talc-dipped gloves they wear to forestall corruption.

Despite their present apparent gentleness the girl is unhappy to be touched by these women. The snakes around their necks swing seedy golden across her vision. But she is helpless. What moves in her is beyond her control: the organs are not cripples like she is and wriggle like little cats roused by the caresses of bathing.

When the nurses begin to speak their voices flow in and out of one another, ribbons of interlacing easy-oozing through gauze:

**NURSE:** Don't be afraid.

**NURSE:** Fear is unnecessary.

**NURSE:** You were in an accident...

**NURSE:** ...in this unfortunate accident every structure in your body was totally destroyed. Irrevocably. Reduced to piles of mush. Soggy and

**NURSE:** Amorphous swamp—

**NURSE:** Nothing to salvage but

**NURSE:** ...the transplant surgeon performed a series of procedures...

**NURSE:** which were an enormous success!

**NURSE:** So, all of your organs are newly formed.

**NURSE:** fresh, vital, young,

**NURSE:** And healthy

**NURSE:** And healthy.

**NURSE:** Sometimes you might feel them moving—

**NURSE:** But you needn't be frightened—

**NURSE:** ...they're living things...you should feel them...

**NURSE:** *This is the way it was always supposed to be.*

**NURSE:** You are lucky.

**NURSE:** (very lucky)

**NURSE:** You see, you are the first patient to receive such a complete reconstruction.

**NURSE:** The operation is an unprecedented success.

**NURSE:** The seedlings have never taken so immediately to a hostess before—

**NURSE:** don't say it like that

**NURSE:** What I mean is you should be proud.

**NURSE:** *What she means* is there is something very special about your body.

**NURSE:** ...they flourish in you...

**NURSE:** no signs of rejection, no inflammatory response

**NURSE:** no pus, no sepsis

**NURSE:** You do not even have a fever.

**NURSE:** You were never in any pain.

**NURSE:** The transplant surgeon told us your immune system is the kindest

**NURSE:** and most receptive

**NURSE:** he has ever seen—

**NURSE:** It responded softly to the implanted tissues—

**NURSE:** Like a mother!

**NURSE:** Yes, it nurtures them now.

**NURSE:** There is something about your blood that nourishes them better than other blood.

**NURSE:** (the blood must be rich)

**NURSE:** You are unique.

**NURSE:** You are the most special patient in the whole hospital!

**NURSE:** ...because your case is so unique and extremely special, tests are being performed to determine precisely which interior factors make you such a suitable hostess...

**NURSE:** Nothing invasive—

**NURSE:** no, no, nothing invasive!

**NURSE:** But the transplant surgeon does need to know.

**NURSE:** Yes.

**NURSE:** You are going to be in every textbook. The significance of your case, the transplant surgeon tells us, is momentous.

**NURSE:** Because it is proof his methods and theories and his years of work are valid—

**NURSE:** —and crucial—

**NURSE:** it's an exciting time for the Hospital, to have you here, now, as our Patient

**NURSE:** You're special

**NURSE:** Special and rare.

As the nurses are talking the girl in the pool is not listening to them, not processing the words their masked mouths form, because there doesn't seem to be any point to listening because she's lost hope of understanding the language that issues through their masks. More than listen she would like to make a statement of her own. But her throat is too flaccid and collapsed a conduit to conduct voice, her tongue is a slug, tastes purple, tastes slimy laid low to the bed of her mouth, and the arrhythmic cramping of the growths which are her new organs

housed in her belly renders it difficult to concentrate. She forgets what she wanted to say. She doesn't understand anything, she is too slow sluggish senseless, she is too blank as a newborn to understand, and before she can think the nurses have finished washing and begin to feed her, filling her mouth. When there is food against her slug-tongue she remembers the hurt of starvation – tightening dry ulceration locked in the churn of stomach chewing itself, autolysis, the weakness that radiates from emptied pit to extremities, expansion of the inner desert, the urge to drop to the floor, urge to swallow absolutely anything that enters one's orbit – and she wants urgently to eat. Hunger is the last remnant element of herself she remembers from the antecedent pit. So, hunger is her identity. When the nurses are feeding her she does not resist.

One nurse holds the tray while the other nurse spoons food into her mouth, feeding:

*1 bowl of steamed milk custard*, soaked silken coagulate of egg-jelly sculpted to porcelain, the yolk-rich warm, fragile wobble, whey wells up, pyogenic cream, the spoon bounced upon yellowish skinned gelatinous quakes shaking to the lowest strata, sweet solid white, soft clot glissades down throat, weightless declension, she likes it sliding back and forth between her teeth. *1 bowl of crab meat*, wetness accumulates between these clingy threads, moist flake, secreting sprays of fish-honey between fibers as compressed tongue-to-palate, the meat like a sponge, the meat like delicate fruit and striated, thinnest red rind mottled shining mild, tender, succulent, exquisite, the pulp silted mucosal served lukewarm melting into pink butter savor and bloats a sea through the heart like candied brine. *1 whole artichoke*, fleshy brute lotus scissored of thorns, sweats salty dew, steam-dulled to olive sits prettily on its crystal plate, ripped to the pith, petal after petal placed to her tongue sauced in mayonnaise transubstantiated to communion by gloved asepsis of the nurse who applies the feast.

The other nurse says, brightly: "Because you need your folic acid!"

The girl in the pool feels like a puerile no-better-than-fetal nestling chick being fed vomit by mommy but shameless in her will to eat she opens her mouth to demand more, swallow after swallow. Now she can control her own mouth, at least. Both nurses are giggling at her drooling custard down her chin.

**NURSE:** it's good to see you eat, yucky puppy

**NURSE:** we're glad your appetite has returned. that is the first sign of health.

**NURSE:** soon you will be well, little one

**NURSE:** our precious little yucky puppy...

**NURSE:** now eat!

The nurse unlades another spoonful of crab into the girl's mouth. The girl spits most of the meat out into the green water of her pool since finally it feels physically possible to speak, her mouth and tongue and lips enlivened by the action of eating. "What's 'yucky puppy'?" she asks, the words slack squeezed up her throat, drooping. Because she doesn't understand this name.

**NURSE:** when we found you—

**NURSE:** when you were found smashed to mush in our parking lot

**NURSE:** you were totally ruined except you were holding one pink thing

**NURSE:** ...more intact than any other part...

**NURSE:** the transplant surgeon assumed it was an organ.

**NURSE:** he reinserted it but we saw it first!

**NURSE:** (because we're curious)

**NURSE:** we thought it looked like a puppy dog, rose-pink with its black blotch a nose for sniffing...

**NURSE:** cute even if a little rotted

**NURSE:** yes, cute

**NURSE:** you were a stranger without a name then, it's our opinion no girl should be without a name so—

**NURSE:** so we called you our precious yucky puppy

**NURSE:** Now, EAT! yucky puppy,

This name assigned to her by the nurses while she slept seems wrong, a mistake, but she knows nothing; without certainty or proof she's reluctant to protest. Yucky Puppy chokes through aftertaste of custard: "I wasn't always alone?"

As if in answer to a shared choreography of nerve-command the nurses' brows knit in unison.

**NURSE:** you're never alone

**NURSE:** now, because of the operation, you don't have to be alone ever again...

**NURSE:** ...loneliness will be like the aftertaste of a dream from a life you can't remember...

Yucky Puppy can't remember anything about living at this point.



**NURSE:** You will always be loved

**NURSE:** We love you, yucky puppy,

**NURSE:** now eat!

**NURSE:** now eat!

Greedy as she is Yucky Puppy eats whatever is fed to her to the final spoonful though she feels herself fattening like a grub and it isn't entirely comfortable. The plastic cord pinches as her belly bulges outward, full of crab and cream. Overstuffed her insides slow their lively squirm. After combing her hair, plaiting it, petting her head, saying "good girl, good girl," the nurses leave the room and as soon as they've gone Yucky Puppy's weighted stomach draws her downward into topaz-aquamarine heavy like whole milk sleep.

Every day three times a day the nurses come to Yucky Puppy's room to gorge her. Overflowing iterations of banquet: sliced strawberries whipped into mounds of rich yogurt, cold hard-boiled eggs slicked thinly with sulphuric perspiration, dishes of scarlet, chartreuse, glistening golden roe like liquid gemstones that rupture in the eating, oysters, salads of papaya watermelon basil leaves cantaloupe seaweed, dried figs like sacs of seeded leather, mashed avocado, pink salmon, cottage cheese saffron-scented and honey-drizzled, cuts of liver undercooked looking like filets of blood-clot. Yucky Puppy eats custard with these meals and drinks milkshakes but does not gain one single pound, though she feels heavy and feels her middle distend where the organs congregate. It is the organs that are growing, not Yucky Puppy. Their migrations around the body intensify with their maturation, rhythms of movement lurching wilder as they roam its cavities, only quieting to sated lethargy for an hour after meals. Then their verve redoubles. Apparently they aren't tethered by veins or membranous netting as Yucky Puppy suspects organs once were but instead they're fully mobile. She wonders how they look inside her. She thinks she might want to cut herself open straight down the middle and prise out an organ, hold it wet and squirming in her hands until it calms, turn it over and over to examine it to know it fully. She would repeat this with each organ so that she could understand what was happening inside her. But then other times she thinks: I guess truly I wouldn't want to see. Sometimes Yucky Puppy's gaze catches on a lump sliding down her leg from her thigh past the knee then wrapping itself around her ankle so she's got a bulge like a tire inflated weighing her foot down to the floor of the pool. When the organs behave this way, she wishes they'd be still instead. When their fluctuations are peaceful waves at her center and a warming thrum it is nicer, to have a menagerie hidden away: her private pets keeping her company as she convalesces. At night in the ripe lime-serum darkness of her hospital room Yucky Puppy sings them childish drowsy songs and murmurs stories about food,

which is all she knows about anymore. She dreams of gnawing the sweet from orchids and watching animals swim in an aquarium of translucent skin.

In the morning Yucky Puppy is often palpably lighter and discovers there is a scar marking her where the night before she was smooth. These scars and the accompanying sensation of inner vacancy simmer a strange gloominess through Yucky Puppy.

Though progress is slow and she feels colic-sick or sad or both most of the time as she sits permanently starving no matter how much she is fed in the green pool the girl is getting stronger. Eventually she can move her hands, she can kick her legs to splash the water – though the knees are still too locked doll-like for bending – and toss her head from one side to the other to keep her long hair from draping a curtain over her face to blind her. She can even blink her eyes on her own. Yet the nurses keep her chained in the water. "You're doing so well, yucky puppy," they say, but they never mention when she will be well enough to be discharged.

Yucky Puppy does not want to spend the rest of her life eating in this mild water, as emerald as comforting as painless as it is. Even if she doesn't remember what to expect from an existence outside of this room she knows there must be a place where she is allowed to move. As vigor returns to reassemble her disrupted body she is growing restless. If I stay in the water forever, she says to herself, I will become a jelly. Already the form the girl takes softens to eely amphibious. Gills will open under her ribs, slits widening to gashes with damp breaths. Like a tadpole tended by the nurses into infirmity eternally she'll be only an abdomen like a bubble full of oversized overaroused organs and legs fused turned slimy into a wedge of phlegmatic tail.

One day between mouthfuls of poached egg, extra runny, she asks the nurses, "Soon I'll be ready to leave the hospital, won't I?"

A sudden unsympathetic shine sharpens to thorns in their black eyes. Just as suddenly it dulls again, replaced by an exaggerated expression of sagging wilt, as if betrayed beyond consolation Yucky Puppy could possibly consider a life separate from them.

**NURSE:** but why would you want to leave

**NURSE:** don't we take good care of you?

**NURSE:** Here, you're loved,

**NURSE:** don't we treat you like a princess?

**NURSE:** yucky puppy, Queen of the Night Hospital—

**NURSE:** Here, whatever you want is yours,

**NURSE:** you will never have to worry

**NURSE:** you will never have to hurt

**NURSE:** nor struggle

**NURSE:** nor lift a finger

**NURSE:** any other girl wouldn't believe her luck

**NURSE:** Oh! our little spoiled yucky puppy...

**NURSE:** She wants to leave us!

**NURSE:** no, no, that won't do—

"You can't hold me here forever," Yucky Puppy snaps.

**NURSE:** our fussy little yucky puppy

The nurses stifle giggles biting them back behind the colorless cloth of their masks and the sound of their restraint is a bristling like astringent winds breezing scraping silica friction across a stone floor that dries Yucky Puppy, princess prisoner of the Night Hospital, to contrition, to silence. Hating the nurses she shuts her eyes and refuses to accept into her mouth any more yellow dribbling yolk; she shoves the spoon away so the nurse drops it into the water, the spoon sinks to Yucky Puppy's feet and the nurse cluck-clucks a scolding—

**NURSE:** our naughty little yucky puppy

Within the girl a clamor quickens, the organs, appointed sentries of the extorted interior, stirred to churn by the terror and choler overheating their hearth, her body. Tonight she won't tell them to hush. Together they seethe.

### ***Upon Waking in the Midst of Operation:***

A wheezed hiss issues up in pure black is a spider beneath the bed.

How long has he lived here and how long have i been trussed in this bed

(there are nylon ties like torn stockings cuffing my wrists. i am held down. beige manacles about my ankles. a rubberized mephitic. it hurts badly.)

*the anesthetic is ebbing, pastel lavishly blur-laden mists that thin as if a peel evaporating from across her eyes, the skull's cloud of slug-kissed abating, and a prickling rising to the surface of her skin as the chemical fleece of her numbness is shorn*

chill light and silver forceps are extensions of the spider, its extremities. its fangs are black-eyed false mothers without mouths i have hated since being born into this hospital. if the spider notices i am awake won't it eat me whole, i think it will, it will. what it is doing now is...

...

...

...

the spider is now harvesting parts. this is a slow form of eating. it believes if it keeps me alive and takes one piece at a time each time planting a new seed i will allow this devouring to continue indefinitely because it assumes i am asleep i am defenseless.

from a gash splitting me along the center seam something is lifted from the fizzing gape. the thing struggles, resisting the spider because it doesn't belong to the spider: it is my thing, my thing, whatever it is, it's mine:

**what is it? it is**

like an infant how it's semiliquid                      roughly the size of  
a cake                      a weird amorphous                      coruscating  
                                 torpid glisten of fuchsia to heliotrope                      like a supple  
spongy bauble full of  
                                 sparkles and cream sauce

as soon as it's in the gloves of spider the darling blob makes a mewling,  
a cramp twists to knot my chest and i want to cry out:

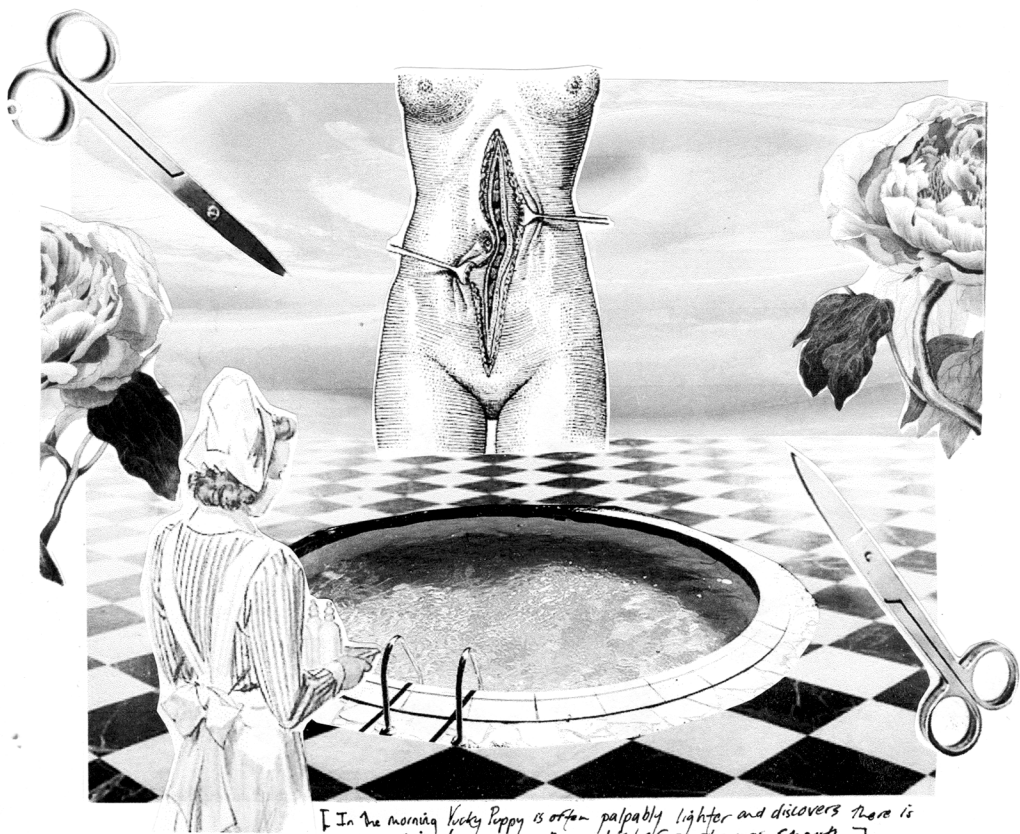
"GIVE IT BACK TO ME"

(but i'm very scared)

the wound i solemnly believe the black-eyed fangs chewed into me is a mouth hungrier than any other orifice. silent, its beseeching screams for the return of my moist shapeless intimate thing. can i suction it inside again? the gut-gullet readies a vacuum but now with scissors of sharpened arachnid silver strings that are scarlet hairs that are our threads of union are being severed – tears of blood weep from the riven mane –

every spire of the spider stretches repellent as they're admiring the fruits of plunder (i was not prepared to feel anything but i feel myself bleeding)

the fangs luxate momentarily from the jaws of spider, with coos and cloying fulsome salve of consolations, not for me but for my entrail,



[In the morning Kicky Puppy is often palpably lighter and discovers there is a scar marking her where the night before she was smooth.]

since they think i'm unaware of the body looted in imposed morphia latency, they've never cared about me and they're easing the thing deposited into a tank aglow on a table at the other side of the room. the stolen part bobs in discrete phosphorescence, red mucus radiating an iridescence away from its raw skin, the sweat of our communion diffusing into saline, defiled. then the fangs return they reintegrate into spider's maw.

within burst body the other organs have fled from the incision; they are frightened and hiding in clandestine dens. they are heavy in my throat. poor things. i am a failure because i cannot keep them safe, they must protect themselves...

(i feel them grieving)

blood surges to the furrow like a widow heaves herself upon the scalding pyre. a lake of forsaken blood boiling in the crater of my belly. "Another successful operation," gloats the eye of the spider still concealed beneath the bed. "Oh yes," fawns the fang in twinned servility, "yes, another miracle."

eventually the spider sutures me shut with black webbing and i am wheeled back to the familiar room and i am dumped again into the green water which is warming me irresistibly toward sleep once more...and i am so weak...

### ***Lessons Learned in Nightmare:***

1. As pleased as Yucky Puppy is to harbor a family as if her body were a volary it has surpassed questioning she is teeming too full. As a result of this excess everyone suffers. The organs are crowding each other out; there is simply not enough space for all of them. Yucky Puppy's body was never meant for so many parts. Even fed a sumptuous high-protein mineral-rich abundance of seafood, dairy, and dessert by the nurses, who Yucky Puppy loathes openly now and disobeys whenever she has the opportunity to be difficult, the organs are undernourished; the pains of their need redden like ulcers expanding, hot breath of acid leaking out into the surrounding tissues—an inoculation of pervasive ache.

2. The transplant surgeon and the nurses as accomplices sowed this surfeit in order to reap a constant supply of fresh viscera they farm from her nightly. Hence the scar-marks at dawn. What they are doing with the organs they harrow Yucky Puppy has no way to know yet.

3. Her body will not endure this treatment in perpetuity. Already around the lips of scars the skin purses, puckers, sours; there's inflammation and sometimes it sloughs pink foul-smelling flakes like dander. Scars re-tear and weakly bleed. Because the organs live in perennial fear of being plucked from shelter they do not function as they should. Toxins unfiltered by the liver-thing and loosed into the bloodstream like the dirges of a bereaved system circulate the body; the pet heart chokes on desolation, the muscle atrophies. She's jaundiced and short of breath. Black bile secreted with the unrelenting unreserve of sorrow indurates in cracks and silk-lined crevices of Yucky Puppy's abdominal cavity. With each minute she's in captivity conditions creep closer to fulminant.

4. She is kept alive only for the sake of the organs she mothers. Should she cease to be a proliferant brooder the nurses would overdose her on sedatives stirred crushed into her egg custard and when she was dead the transplant surgeon would cut her open from head to toe, running tests, experimenting to claw out the secrets of her extraordinary anatomic receptivity to invasion. In the Night Hospital the girl is devoid of intrinsic worth. Soon she will wither from drained depleted and then she will be emptied of every last friend she has and her fallow corpse will be tossed to basement crematorium, which will be the end of Yucky Puppy.

Now that she understands what is happening in the Night Hospital, her terror is boundless.

### *Transplant Clinic Cotillion: Princess Yucky Puppy's Debut:*

#### *1. In Preparation, Prettified*

**NURSE:** oh, yucky puppy, today is a very very special day!

**NURSE:** a special day especially for a very special girl—

**NURSE:** Today is a day just for you

**NURSE:** today is your party, precious little yucky puppy!

The nurses scatter static buzz of excitement whirring into the room, agitating the leaves and fronds of the somnolent garden along the wall, and their eyes crackle with flares of black eagerness, their uniforms rustle as they're rushing, their lemon hair scintillates vivid sulphurous, they're wearing different masks from the ones they've worn every other day; the gauze of these new masks is opal-blue, dove-blue, blue gossamer interwoven with threads like fibers of prism that catch light and refract it back as rainbows; the nurses have painted their eyelids

with a layer of blue paint like latex adhered to the bruised skin and they're lifting Yucky Puppy from the green water of her pool, which is another thing they've never done before, at least not while she was awake.

"What are you doing to me?" Yucky Puppy demands in the bitterest sharp unsmiling voice she can muster which fails to register as bitter or sharp because she's such a small and dismal creature wobbling in the nurses' grasp. One nurse has her arm hooked under Yucky Puppy's ribs while the other wraps Yucky Puppy's arm over her shoulder and snares the sapless limb up around her neck so the wet girl is hanging cockeyed between the two nurses. Feeling like a brat Yucky Puppy lets her loose hand slap weakly against the nurse's chest to nettle her. She fantasizes a fleet pivot of wrist and scratching red grooves into the nurse's face but the keratin of her nails has denatured from continuous soaking, the nails would peel back, she thinks, if she tried to scratch, exposing defenseless unformed tissue to the sting of air. I'm a worm, she thinks, because her body feels soft everywhere and squishable, utterly malleable—a warm tube of slime and mire, mucilage, ruin. As the nurses hoist her upright each of her organs seems to drop down her legs slopping around the bones to spread themselves as a layer of sludge along the soles of her feet. One after the next sliding down. From skull to waist she is entirely hollow and wafting in currents of orchid-breath in her hospital room like a silk scarf like a dead worm.

The nurses are chattering incessantly some drivel about a party but Yucky Puppy doesn't want a party; what she wants is to be discharged from the Night Hospital but when she tells the nurses what she wants what the nurses do is grin and whisper what good food there will be at the party and how many people and what a happy occasion it will be, this party, Yucky Puppy's party.

Yucky Puppy cannot stand stable without support despite the ballast of the guts tumbled downward swelling her legs anchored to the bubblegum pink of the room's carpet. This floor is a strange sensation under her feet. Fleeced as it is there is a hardness from which Yucky Puppy instinctively recoils, since it is not liquid. Darts of quartz-feeling loosened at the lightest touch course vibrating to crack her ankles, the patella of each knee, her pelvis. Wet weakened zones of the skeleton splinter. It is painful to live outside the green pool this way and suddenly Yucky Puppy wonders if she was wrong to want to escape...

...but for her body...

...the Night Hospital is destroying her body...

(and the innocents inside)

(not a slow process but devastation speeding into doomed now)



...so for the sake of the body and its fauna she is sure she must get out of here...

The nurses shepherd the naked heap of her to a stainless steel silver table: an instrument table, cleared of its usual lancets and forceps. The table has wheels but these are locked so it won't roll away shining when Yucky Puppy's body from the waist up is splayed over its surface.

**NURSE:** we've got a present for you

**NURSE:** you will be the prettiest girl at the whole party!

**NURSE:** —everyone will say, 'too pretty'

**NURSE:** after all it is your party it's only right

**NURSE:** You Are The Star

One of the nurses holds out a long narrow box papered periwinkle and tied with a pearly-whitish-peachy-bluish bow spewing out curlicues of ribbon from the central rosette. Yucky Puppy's hair is hanging across her face (her face pressed melting out in pure white sponge on silver) running over the edge of the table and pulsating a steady drip onto the pink carpet. Tinted the sylvan malachite of algae droplets soak into pink. There is a soft spot growing like a welt.

With a superfluity of fingers spidering in concert the nurses rip the purple paper from the box for Yucky Puppy, since her own fingers are stalactites of blubber that seep from the knuckles, graceless and lumpish. Actually she thinks that if she struggled at it she could probably tear the paper but she does not want the gift and more importantly she is resting. She has made a promise she will do absolutely everything in her power to remove herself from the Hospital forever though it won't be easy—for the time being she must conserve her energy. Nearing total atrophy, the body has none to spare.

The nurses' offering: lamé the dusky apricot and pink sunset ombré of the innermost spiraling into a conch shell, thick as tin, weighty like leather, nonporous, cut into the shape of a dress. With meticulous care the nurses lift it from the box as if they expect the metallic garment to disintegrate at the touch of their gloves. It hangs flat, smooth, crisp, bright. As one mouth the nurses' mouths split sideways to carve half-moon concavities in their masks. Slid through the gossamer, slivers of twinned tooth-light ricochet off the mercury-rose cloth.

**NURSE:** the Night Hospital seamstress prepared this dress especially for you

**NURSE:** —for you alone—

**NURSE:** Based on *our* design, obviously.

**NURSE:** (this dress is one-of-a-kind)

**NURSE:** no other girl has ever had a dress as exquisite as this one,

Where the dress would wrap around Yucky Puppy's waist a hole has been cut, the lamé replaced by a disc of sheer plastic like cellophane. It is a window through which Yucky Puppy's belly will be on display.

To look at the dress drives her sicker with dread, since Yucky Puppy knows now better than she did before that the party will be excruciating. Hours spent as an exhibit, submitted to observation. The physical contact of eyes on her everywhere. The white of eyes like a spittle coating her. Flushed already from the shame of the thought of being pinioned under surveillance she does not want to be seen and she loathes this Party Dress because the it stinks of the nurses and it is ugly and sewn of chemical stuff and obscene, with its oculus to expose her. Having renounced dressing Yucky Puppy does nothing to cooperate as the nurses struggle to channel her diffident flesh into the vessel of the garment. Her mode of resistance is vehement passivity: slack and leaden she is lolling letting herself slip off the table to the floor, her arms dangle, like a fabric doll stuffed full of sand or jelly she buckles at the waist, she flops and she flounders, swaying, when one of the nurses loses her hold on some part of her it sinks pulled irresistibly toward the pink carpet. She is a burden. In this small way she can retaliate against the nurses; she is satisfied feeling how they're jerking her limbs more tensely, more aggressively as they're wearying of supporting her dead weight, watching their eyes blacken in the blue-creamed pits of their orbits, listening to the constriction that creeps in discoloring the aspartame current of the voice they share:

**NURSE:** Yucky Puppy, precious, we know you're stronger than this

**NURSE:** so why you insist on being difficult—

**NURSE:** Behaving like a bag of goo

**NURSE:** pathetic de-boned quadriplegia kitten

**NURSE:** Very Difficult

**NURSE:** —is a mystery.

**NURSE:** Miss Naughty Puppy!

**NURSE:** You wouldn't want to be late to your party, would you?

**NURSE:** No, no, no, it wouldn't be proper—

**NURSE:** your compliance is essential in this procedure

**NURSE:** ...you must *help* us, is what she means to say

**NURSE:** (or we may have no choice but to punish)

**NURSE:** if you don't want to miss your party

**NURSE:** where there will be cake

**NURSE:** we know how much you love cake!

**NURSE:** Be a good girl, stand up straight—

though Yucky Puppy cannot halt the reflexive slobber incited by the promise of cake, a tide alongside her sour tongue, she tells herself

*// i am not a child // i don't want cake*

*// i don't want cake // i am not your child //*

The tussle drags on growing lazier and more boring until eventually, inevitably, the nurses wrest control over Yucky Puppy's staunch laxity and she is sheathed wretchedly trapped in the lithium-pink reptilian slither of the Party Dress. The zipper nips the skin raw up her spine. The cloth itches. Through the plastic across her middle her empty belly glares a sullen and glaucous light.

The nurses are clasping their hands pressed to where hearts would be in non-nurses (sisters or mothers not the emissaries of surgeons) they are leaning into one another, shoulder to shoulder; together they sigh: Isn't she lovely?

Beside the door to the hospital suite, concealed in the shadow of a fountain of ferns, is a white vinyl-cushioned wheelchair that one of the nurses scampers on her mute heels across the carpet to wheel over, so that Yucky Puppy can be slid from the instrument table to a seated position. The white vinyl is beaded with condensation distilled from the breath of peonies. Pinprick studs of moisture are sucked instantaneously into the parched terrain of Yucky Puppy's surface unaccustomed to the roughness of air as she is strapped in. Creased in sitting her atrophy-fat bulges unpleasantly through the dress's orifice. Everything feels coarse and disgusting as the nurses bend in sickening synchrony to pick up black plastic cases from the pink and set them on the silver table. Stilted crackle of rheumatic jaws as the cases come unlatched: one is packed with compacts of pastel grit and dainty jars of jewel-tone grease, fluffy brushes like rabbits' tails, white demulcent, and tubes of gloss to slather lips sundry shades of saccharine; the other case holds beige silicone combs and steel combs reminiscent of razors, shears with sharp teeth, brushes with metal bristles like needles, a hundred thousand hairpins, barrettes decorated with bows and tiny porcelain flowers and pearls, purple-fading-to-minted-hyacinth cans of hairspray, crocks of citrus-vitreous goop.

**NURSE:** already such a pretty thing but nonetheless...

**NURSE:** for the *Finishing Touches*

**NURSE:** in any case what girl doesn't live to be pampered?

Infinity sprawls in eddies to the edge of unconsciousness as latex fingers maraud through her hair, burrowing, making knots. Shears graze the scalp close enough to slice. Two combs simultaneously twist up strands to be worked into braids thin as worms and then the worms are pinched to dispatch them and the fingers wind them in convolutions somewhere along the occipital bone of Yucky Puppy's skull, so it seems a nest is being built back there, as the second nurse smears a rainbow of suet and scum into Yucky Puppy's face to glaze it and smothers the nervous skin with infant-scented cinders. The skin tightening as if wanting to shrink from this application of Beauty. Yucky Puppy's cheeks pinched, Yucky Puppy's lips daubed. Penetrant gasoline smolder of chemicals sprayed to assert dominion over hairs stinging bitter down her nasal canal induces rasping and scalds. Black mascara clumps in the gutters of her eyes. Brows tweezed pitiless to spare arches. They stick a rhinestone tiara into her head. When the nurses are content she will be adequately pretty for her party they step back to stand gazing down maudlin-eyed at Yucky Puppy who will not look at them. Instead she releases her head, weighted with paint, to droop chin to chest and she stares into the plastic-screened sector of her stomach. Her organs have not yet returned to the center; she can feel their vibrations anxious in the body's benthic zones; most vividly now she senses there is something like an intestine entwining the bone in her left arm just below the elbow, twitching and jostling the ulnar nerve so the nerve is triggered and Yucky Puppy's hands spasm into fists—it hurts. There is nothing she can do to soothe this animal, how sad to think of its helpless terror, which has the same texture, flavor, color and scent as Yucky Puppy's own terror. From the cosmetics case a nurse retrieves a small circular mirror and sets it in Yucky Puppy's lap, so the girl sunk as a mass of dregs in the white wheelchair is coerced to see her face reflected.

**NURSE:** Look what a princess you are, precious!

She has not seen herself since waking in the Night Hospital. "This is what I am?" No. The girl in the mirror is another girl who is not human who is a thing that is not her suspended in the puddle of glass, with skull swaddled in varnished braids like a doll's, with a tiara and a complexion like roadkill and China doll lurid pink blotted onto her cheeks to simulate a healthful rosy glow, but failing unforgivably, because this thing-girl (not her) in the glass has the gaunt yet swollen toneless formless puffiness of a terminal patient preserved pseudo-alive by pharmaceutical poisons, like all the organic substance of the body had wilted been siphoned off pared away then replaced via injections of gelatin pulp. The girl Yucky Puppy holds in her lap is unwell, a sick girl or a girl-body modeled out of tallow wax as a mannequin for some

morbid hospice souvenir shop. The face in the mirror is the face of a body that cannot move an embalmed body a corpse.

*I am not truly that awful thing. The nurses have rotted me but it is superficial decay and impermanent. When I leave the Hospital...*

Rejecting the abused reflection offered her by the nurses Yucky Puppy strains against amnesia to conjure a truer unsullied image of herself: a girl at the shore of swamp ankle-deep in the blackest, the greenest-veined loam, walking deeper, disappearing; a sleeping face and hair like froth cast to the surface of starlit blue which is a discrete sea electric with the lives of wet animals, where nothing is wrong with her. Before the accident she cannot remember. Before she became repulsive. The girl at the swamp's edge is the same girl blurred in the ripples of blue is a body Yucky Puppy recognizes as her own—the body before it became the possession of the Night Hospital. Her true body, which has been taken from her, which she must recover. Yucky Puppy's resolve to remove herself from the Hospital anneals as the vision of a body unvitiated and alive outside a cage recedes once more into the stale smoke of her concussion; she cannot hold on to it and soon it is gone.

What worries her about flight from the hospital is that, having now spent the last hour or more outside her green pool, it has become acutely apparent that her new organs will not fare well in the dry world. Since she was pulled from the bath, through the amber web of her fascia a drought has been spreading. The skins of the organs scrape like a chronic cough as they search for water increasingly distraught in their rushing, causing Yucky Puppy to wonder if they will desiccate and die beyond the walls of the Night Hospital.

But we are dying here, she reminds herself.

It is impossible to avoid death, whatever she does the organs will fail, she will die, but for as long as she can even if only for a week or a day or an hour she yearns to live unrestricted in her body as her own girl with a body whose parts do not have to be afraid of being preyed upon, torn from their alcoves of warmth and succor.

It is more desirable to die outside of the Night Hospital than on the inside. Though Yucky Puppy has scant concept of a universe that is not dense white food, malignant nurses, and their giggling, and their gloves, candied chartreuse narcotic water, pink carpet, scars and cramping, she carries in her heart frail half-formed apparitions of dreams she has named OCEAN and SKY. Both are blue, eternal. To drown to the bottom of the ocean and evaporate into sky: it would be better that way.

One nurse reaches into the breast pocket of the uniform of the other nurse and when her hand emerges from her twin's breast a fine thread swings golden from her fingers. The snake, the scepter. Wormwood

chrysoprased inlaid as sightless eyes of the amulet. When the nurse clasps the necklace at the back of Yucky Puppy's neck the gold sizzles like an acid gnawing into the skin. *get it off get it off get it off—*

**NURSE:** Now we all match

**NURSE:** we're Sisters now.

"We are not," Yucky Puppy mumbles, and the nurses' brows knit with malingered woundedness. Bad actresses, they pout and whine but it is clear to Yucky Puppy that in reality they feel nothing for her, she cannot insult them because she is not human to them, nothing she does holds meaning; when their sympathetic looks twist into sneers as they always do when she aims to be insubordinate Yucky Puppy senses the grotesque glutinous adiposal weight of her own impotence hanging from her like a rotting husk which, were she to remain bundled within it, would smother her to death.

Still smiling to themselves and taking light steps as if prancing because so very excited for the party the nurses say "It's time!" and then wheel Yucky Puppy from the room that has enclosed her entire lifetime at the Night Hospital. Yucky Puppy swears to herself she will not enter this room again. In spite of the flowers and vines, the pearl-light of permeating luster, the green pool that she will miss most, the solace of water, she will never return. The door shuts behind her and seals itself locked from the inside.

The corridor is white-walled, walls lined with white doors and floors tiled in checkered linoleum black white black white black polished to icy eeling with fluorescence streamed down from panels embedded in the arced ceiling; at 90° angles the corridor swerves unerringly in concentric squares that must be shrinking, because there are only ever right turns. A right turn, one thousand feet of white sheen that drinks the moisture from Yucky Puppy's eyes, as if the light were waves of salt, or silica gel, sparkling crystalline in suspension; another right turn and another thousand feet of whiteness, then to the right again. Sometimes the nurses pause to re-arrange her to prevent her oozing out onto the floor. They cluck at her: "sit up straight precious" and smirk because they know she can't. The nurses take on a coarse sallowness in the fluorescent light, reverb of their hospital-issue heels battering linoleum heat-hazing unbreathably the boiled air.

A door will open the narrowest fissure. A slit of black interrupting the wall from the unseen of which bleeds a peering – palpable watching – then that door will close and a different door will open further down the hall. Yucky Puppy never sees the eyes but she knows they are there. Rustling. Humid, hushed, covetous. Whenever a door cracks a schism in the wall the aura the nurses secrete flares queenly violet with hauteur—it suits them nicely to be seen with their Patient.

No person or creature is released via any of the doors but at intervals a nurse will sprint around a corner along the hallway toward them or rush past them from behind, always running. Each nurse is an errorless replica of Yucky Puppy's nurses, as if there is only one nurse, infinitely repeated. When a running nurse goes by, she and Yucky Puppy's nurses will acknowledge one another without speaking, the slightest scarcely perceptible nod passing fluidly from yellow-haired head to head to head. Yucky Puppy gets the impression that the nurses communicate telepathically. She imagines the Night Hospital as a hive of nurses. She begins to wonder where the nurses are born, how many nurses she has known, how many discrete nurse-entities have bathed her and spooned wet food into her...but it doesn't matter does it? Since she hates them all.

A sharp corner steered to the right  
white extending into white  
veer the corner (right)  
into whiteness  
and wheels hydroplane over slick-sheen linoleum  
to the right to the right to the right

It strikes Yucky Puppy as impossible that they could actually be getting anywhere; the Night Hospital sprawls deeper spiraling into itself forever and never stops.

...the thousandth thousand achromatic miles...

thus naturally it's a shock when at last the hall terminates in pitch-stained double doors that scale an archway to the ceiling. The dead end of the corridor is an elevator opening to receive the party-rouged cripple and her attendant clones. They pass between the black doors into a mirrored chamber staring blandly out from the walls of which Yucky Puppy is reproduced into superfluity. The walls breed a litter of Yucky Puppies, over whom a gaggle of grave nurses looms maternal, their bodies canted knifelike, while below the Yucky Puppies are heaps of sullen pouting. Her dress simulates the mirror and withdraws into it, an erasure, reducing the girl to nothing more than a softened too-pale head painted garish pinks and a white moon of soft-gut and white stalks of brittle legs and arms.

On all sides mirror teems to seem to boil with veins of serpents of chilled gold like riddled parasitized.

their snakes' eyes eggs hatching gouges in the glass, green,

Aglow etiolated greenish-ochreous to one side of the doors – the doors shutting with a hisssssss – columns of buttons blister the silvery skin

of the mirror. There are no numbers marking the control panel but instead plaques to denote departments or wards:

**"PRE-OPERATIVE LOUNGE" "DAY SURGERY" "DAWN  
SURGERY" "VISION-KLINIC" "BLOOD TESTS"  
"MAXILLOFACIAL COSMETIC WALK-IN CENTER"  
"CANCER ANNEX" "COURTYARD"**

Over the door a screen illuminates the letters of their present level: "BASEMENT." The nurse touches the button for "CARDIAC MEMORIAL BALLROOM" and the elevator groans; the elevator leaps in ascension so suddenly that Yucky Puppy's organs are thrown from their dens, they're scaling the walls, her skull saturates with dehydrated meat and Yucky Puppy dizzies, a swoon approaching syncope caused by the crush and swelter of displaced viscera fused to the leaden realization creeping mycelium down her spine that she has been stored away below ground, buried at the root of the Night Hospital. Like she's been interred all this time, however long it has been, years and years—a lifetime. Living dead sickly soporose Princess Patient enshrined at the bottom of shadow.

Now the elevator will exhume her.

## ***2. Exposed to Banquet***

As the elevator ascended the nurses grew restless, increasingly bristling with that nervous hyperkineticism – layers of muscle tensed scarlet vibratile sequentially to the bone and spasming through waves of staccato tremor – typically reserved for young girls undertaking preparations for the first school dance, the prom, their first date, aware courtesy of girlhood educations that these are the rites upon which the course of their lives from this point onward depend, and any misstep would be an irreversible scar an inscription of failure with zero hope of ever fading; this girlish nervousness which is a constant racing pressure grinding the interior kindling the glitter in the eyes of the nurses to a more dire tinsel than usual, a diamond intensity annealing to mineral shards spewed as flashes into mirror then into the dark of the space where the nurses and Yucky Puppy now are waiting. The present darkness is narrow but seems to stretch upward and to the right and to the left into infinity without ever reaching the obstruction of a ceiling or walls or firmament. Waiting for what? Pinned in this boundless slice of night Yucky Puppy feels the needle of her fear sharpening, lengthening, curving further into flesh, so far in it will never be drawn out, she will never be free of her fear.



A gust like a dog panting in sleep unsettles the black six inches before the tip of Yucky Puppy's nose.

On the other side of the black which flutters when she breathes which means it must be a temporary barrier a male voice is hollow ice thundering toneless loudness of words like pieces of metal, splinters of a glacial code whose meanings Yucky Puppy cannot or does not want to understand.

In the dark above her the nurse's bodies tighten to their most austere acute stringency. In the dark in her wheelchair below them Yucky Puppy listens to the nurses smoothing their skirts, adjusting the masks over their mouths, batting the white fans of their lashes—a faint tulle sound of moth wings and parchment.

Yucky Puppy is afraid. When the black schism fractures won't it open out into a seething bone-white bone-smooth sea of plastic antiseptic and gauze of nurses rushing toward her, won't it? won't it, won't it: yes, it will. And Yucky Puppy will drown in the sapless embrace of a thousand identical blonde nurses. Though she tells herself it's foolish and pitiful and weakling-thinking a longing seeps into her for the green water of her former room. To recede into moist warmth and submersion, to be absorbed, to withdraw from everything coarse, corrosive and harsh. The vile awful dress the nurses trussed her in scrapes her drying skin, the chafed skin gathers like ridges of snow against her legs on the white vinyl of her cripple's chair, her face overheats under its veneer of paints. The underlying sensation of this place is she is more stripped bare now than she was when wet. Churning up from deepest pelagic recesses of her body Yucky Puppy thinks she can hear organs whimpering softly from the dens where they're hiding. Poor little doomed darling things. This is torture, these animals belong in water, in gentle green and anodyne...

(we belong down at the bottom of water)

NO! A screamed renunciation of drowned-into-acquiescence spikes her blood to fortify it, and streams into her heart firming itself as coursed through the four chambers; her heart feels fat enough with the scream to splatter its meat from her mouth, red surges redder as the girl in the brilliancy of her suffering repeats NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO THE NIGHT HOSPITAL CANNOT KEEP US

The nurses suck their stomachs in. Nurse-necks tense to lengthen slimmer.

Yucky Puppy is grinding her teeth, rigid against terror, or at least against yielding to it, since this terror in her is a lead coverlet she cannot peel and it inflicts a bruise, when the black before her gives way as she is wheeled into brightening like another dimension.

As vast and extravagant as the black alley was cramped and void, a new room opens out to envelope her. The walls of the massive room are upholstered with beige brocade that pales to moon-like champagne whey-ivory where it's stained by the peculiar vinegary shimmer that passes for lighting here, shed from citrine and chrysoprase chandeliers. Like Yucky Puppy's basement suite there are no windows in this room. A hydrogen peroxide rubber tubing syringe catheter pharmaceutical smell permeates and soaks into the walls' upholstery and the walls sigh the scent out again returning it to the overwarm artificial air. Limpid bitterness of light as vapor invades Yucky Puppy's nostrils. She stares at the walls, and the walls and every other surface – the banquet tables and dining tables draped with minted jade sweeps of satin, the plates, tureens, the knives, and the chandeliers strung from gold cords of chain from the pale blue of the PVC ceiling – appear smeared with ointment, as if the banquet hall itself were being treated by the Night Hospital for some obscure skin condition. When Yucky Puppy pulls her glance sliding down the wall to the baseboard she cannot see the floor because it is too foaming, seething, teeming with bodies clad in dinner jackets and fur – black fur flecked with white (fox), white flecked black (ermine) – and under the fur the skin is jaundiced. The bodies are quiet amidst waist-deep fermented chiffon, sourish and velvety, a wan mold-green swishing of skirts trailing over the floor as the crowd forces its way forward to close in on Yucky Puppy where she sits very still in her wheelchair.

The faces attached to the bodies encroaching as soon as the curtain parts to expose her are aristocratic in lineament and clean but their coloring is bad, unwholesome, and the flesh is a thin meat that clings unappetizingly to the orbits and jaws of approximately half of the party guests; in the other half it has denatured to pulpous, a plump dough badly pasted onto bone. Hectic eyes gleam from the shadows of pits scooped out abyssal as if by a razor-edged spoon; their lips are chapped, the vertical creases in the chapped skin incrustated with dust, with dried blood, and there are turpentine undercurrents to their complexions artfully but to pitiful effect infused rococo peach and caramel, mocha and coral, a dense instillation of dyes that cannot simulate the flush of living blood as it feeds its heat into skin.

Yucky Puppy says to herself: I am surrounded by corpses. This is a fact.

A second fact she perceives as critical to bear in mind is that she herself is sick but she is not yet dead. She is a living thing; every cleft in her contains a blossoming (at this moment more than she can sustain, a profusion), her pet-heart beats and guts suffuse with blood; the roseate thrum of the lives thriving in her condenses a halo she sweats like a beacon luring close the congregation of sequined carcasses buzzing for her like wasps to overripe fruit split on summer concrete, ambrosial spume.

Yucky Puppy's party guests are dying to touch her reaching their hands out sharp-knuckled, the greedy spindles of their fingers heavy with rings like strawberry clots of jam, dollops of amethyst shortening. The fingernails are long and pink if manicured and yellow if not manicured. Some women wear gloves. What they desire above everything else is to place their hands on her stomach, to feel the living girl's organs as they rove through her caves and crevices. To taste with their fingers are teeth are stingers are lamprey mouths the sapid and rare nectar of symphonious pulse. The hunger that radiates from the palms of the dead, even through black gloves, is a pressure which, unrestrained, Yucky Puppy suspects could rupture mouths open along the diagonals of their dissipated lifelines and chew through her dress and her skin into her belly. Then the hands would tunnel inside to devour her, because they want her and they need her, are starving for her, because she isn't dead like they've been dead so long how long Yucky Puppy couldn't guess—in their baubles and fur, raw silk, pink vermillion, they are too desperately well-preserved to tell when their real lives ended.

A voice – that same man's voice salved with glaze of glass, its glacé cadence expensively paternal as when she heard it the first time while she was waiting in the dark – vents again from somewhere behind the wheelchair. At the sound the onslaught of corpses recoils, contracts in retreat, dispersing as outstretched skeletal limbs drawn in, folding with the chastening: "If everyone would kindly please step back from the Patient—"

The scolded crowd falls back flowing away from her draining off into the channels between dining tables and stumbling to their seats.

"Thank you for your cooperation," frostbite gathers in the chinks between syllables as the voice continues, "and no fretting, friends, colleagues, as I can promise you that before leaving tonight everyone in this room who desires her company will make contact with the Patient. That is why you're here this evening, isn't it? Not for the hors-d'oeuvres, nor to listen to me wax surgical—I am not so deluded a bore as to imagine that a lesson in implantation technique could attract such a crowd as is gathered here tonight. Indeed I am well aware why you're all here, and I don't intend to disappoint you. Please believe I am as pleased to present the Patient, our very own starlet, who has already been such an exciting asset to the Night Hospital, and to our City, as you are eager for a glimpse of her, at this her public premier, but we must be mindful, mustn't we, of the Patient's sensitivity at the present time. In the three months of her convalescence she has received no visitors to her room in the lower wards; she has had no social contact save for daily tending by her nurses, all of whom have undergone extensive training in the handling of the Patient's case. Since entering the Night Hospital the Patient has been totally isolated from society. It is not difficult to see, then, how we might overwhelm her tonight

should we fail to be prudent. Furthermore, we have not yet developed a complete understanding of the range of complications that might arise were the Patient to become stressed. A delicate homeostasis has been established in the hive-chambers of her body and we do not know, for example, how a sudden marked shift in emotional status might disrupt this balance; there is always the risk that any upset to the host system would interfere with the development of the transplants in their basal phase. Transplant deformity is one of many potential negative outcomes. So it is to everyone's advantage if the Patient's stress index be maintained as low as possible. Until tonight she has been sheltered in quarantine, untouched by the trials – the petty vexations to the towering crises – which plague those of us unlucky enough not to be tended 24 hours a day by beautiful women committed to the fulfillment of our every need and desire." [the voice pauses to chuckle] "The Patient has never known pain, nor fear, nor worry. She has never been exposed to any biting or cruel stimuli. She has never been punished. Such a spoiled girl!" He chuckles again and the corpses echo the sound more quietly then: "All I ask is that you be conscious of her sensitive condition as you share this room with her tonight, and treat her with due care. The Patient is special to everyone here at the Night Hospital. Your restraint is appreciated."

In the wheelchair Yucky Puppy's body stews in nausea worked to bilious lather by the lies the voice circulates through the banquet hall, wanting to cry out how for weeks she has known nothing but FEAR and PAIN IS CONSTANT but with the groping eyes of the audience tracking a burning down her jawline, tracing alleys between her glossed lips for the gaze to follow, her demurrals dissolve to silt and ciphers before they reach the base of her tongue. A related deterrent is that to open her mouth she senses would be an error since to allow the lips to slip parted would be granting the stares entrance so her mouth stays shut she stays silent. Silence alone will not keep her safe: her nostrils, the spirals of her auditory canals, her pores and follicles remain unprotected. She is accessible—

And through these apertures she cannot seal a surge of dead eyes invades the girl, would force her from her own body, eyes hunting her organs along byways of interstices, she is woven knotted around the rails of her ribs holding on hard (I am afraid now, she thinks, I am in pain now)

...organ meat flees scampering on paws of fever...

Recognition: the cold voice of the Father is the surgeon's voice. Yucky Puppy is positive. Which is why the animals are frightened, and why the nurses are simpering and fidgety with their shoulders very straight to emphasize the points of their breasts framed fetish-white in smock cotton. The surgeon is speaking. Which is why she hated the voice

instantly. He says: "It's only appropriate to begin this evening's program with a summary of the unusual circumstances under which the Patient came to the Night Hospital. Of her origins nothing is known. Our every attempt to identify her has proven fruitless. She is a stranger in Corpse City, without relations or affiliations, and as injury to her brain caused an amnesiac erasure of her previous life, the Patient herself has been unable to provide any information on her history. Mercifully for her sake, as far as she is aware her life began in the Night Hospital."

The surgeon uses his voice like opiate mylar, cyan-silver and sedative, as a balm to smooth the ambience of the banquet hall; its chill rhythms placate the corpses as if they were reptiles and cold-blooded, chewing ever more slowly lethargically swallowing canapés. Entranced, they watch the surgeon. They watch the Patient. The dead gaze grazes, leaving abrasions. The nurses are lifting Yucky Puppy from the white wheelchair.

She is too self-conscious to squirm before an audience + she wonders

*Should I be grateful because all of these people came here to see me? It means they want me. Does this mean I am loved?*

But it is confusing to be loved. The nurses tell her they love her and there is no sweetness to the feeling of being loved by nurses, just an uncomfortable compression mounting her jugular, the same physical sensation the corpses provoke in her (I am afraid now I am in pain).

"Here is what we can say for certain: members of a junior extension of the Hunt Club were out for a night drive in pursuit of the rats and roaches fabled to reach prodigal size in the outlying districts when their headlight illuminated a pale mass huddled against the chainlink of the partition that delineates the city limits, a mass which in the black of starless hours the boys assumed to be the skeletonized remains of a mid-sized overgrown rat. Upon approach their find revealed itself to be not the hoped-for rodentia specimen but a mangled - though not entirely unrecognizable - human organism. The body had succumbed to such a repulsive state of disrepair that the boys did not consider it salvageable and were disinclined to disturb it. They had turned around and were walking back to their truck when a whimpering was heard emanating from the middle parts of the organism. Initially the boys believed the sound was the hallucinatory manifestation of their disquietude but as it continued and grew stronger the boys concluded that they had not imagined the whimpers. As the body was still in viable enough condition to emit sound it was decided that they would transport

The nurses hold her body leaning listing a scoliotic curve into their arms, linked to form a brace. Dangling between them like a rag of blood thinking she'll play nice for now Yucky Puppy stumbles, shuffles, her feet in pink slippers dragged uselessly across the gold-freckled ballroom as she's borne toward the tables where her party guests await her, away from the surgeon's voice. The voice follows her, loud inside her skin. Sporadically she lands a scampering few steps on tip-toes like some vestigial ballerina reflex, then the nerves deactivate//disengage and she's dropped numb and bereft as before. If too much pressure is placed on a leg – for example if she strains to support her own weight because it's disgusting to be dependent to need the nurses – the bones under their trappings of wasted muscle, sedimentary adiposal squelch, paste of baby-skin shudder like seconds from breaking.

Leg bones crystallizing crackling vitreous is another agony the transplant surgeon would no doubt disregard.

Yucky Puppy's thoughts as she is displaced from the security of her wheelchair and towed toward corpses who "love" her so much they could eat her include:

- I will be crippled eternally
- Escape is impossible on legs of glass
- therefore I will die here
- Or won't they ever let me

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it to the hospital rather than leave it to serve as nest or meal to vermin. The Patient was wrapped in a tarp (out of concern she'd break apart otherwise), tied down in the bed of the truck, and delivered to the emergency department.

"On examination following admission, the Patient was unconscious, unresponsive, paralyzed, pallid; no pulse could be detected in either wrist, with ecchymoses extending a violaceous stain across her abdomen, her edematous flanks, the distension of her abdomen; breath sounds were shallow and respiratory rate increased (tachypnea); with free fluid visible in CT scan, an eye luxated, pupils minimally reactive, wedge-shaped fracturing of left and right tibia, acute pericardial effusion (cardiac tamponade) accompanied by myocardial contusion effected by chest compression, aortic laceration, full-thickness tears to the mesentery, disruption of hepatic veins at their confluence w/ the vena cava, perforation of the small intestine & biliary fistula inciting infectious peritonitis, accumulation of blood in the abdominal vault the consequence multiple solid viscus trauma, her bowels and bladder ruptured leaking contaminant spillage unbreachably, acidosis, complete pulpification of both kidneys, hemopneumothorax, hypoxic worsening toward anoxic, lateral compression shatter of the pelvis, her tongue cyanotic, her mouth dry, her skin cold and mottled, lace-patterned with

First she is taken to a table where each person is a woman stationed within an elaborately sculptural glittering heaving lagoon of berry-toned taffeta. From the creases of ruched bodices and puff shoulders, bows and garnets blossom; layers of tulle spawn rosettes, ribbons, ivory lace filigree, starburst clusters of pearl and pomegranate spinel and cloudily shining greenish-honey cat's eye cabochons metastasizing constellations, jewels hatched like cysts to chart a lineage of brutal and gaudy deathless primeval queens, tumorous muses. Three women are seated around the table. One woman whose gown is claret-beryl and who wears a hellebore blossom pinned to the black leather band around her neck drawls: "How lovely, how lively she is! here, come closer, Little One—" Her hand flies from buried in beryl skirts to slide a stroke of overture down Yucky Puppy's waist. "Don't be shy, sit down, baby," she coos. She kneads her fingers into Yucky Puppy just lower than the lowest ribs. The nurses deposit their charge into an empty seat between the woman touching her, whose hand scuttles up to fuss through Yucky Puppy's hair, and a second woman whose hands are hiding.

"Are they taking good care of you here?"

A blue color to the curvature of the woman's bottom lip flashes bluer when she speaks. Her teeth

burgundy darkening of 1 extremities a corollary hypovolemic shock.

"It became obvious from t initial assessment that there v nothing inside this body we co save.

"In response to multi-syster polytrauma the prelimin: phase of treatment v laparotomy via midline incisi extending from the xiph: process to the umbilicus facilitate evacuation of exc blood by large-bore tubing, raj infusion of warmed isotones a then thirdly (most crucially) t total burden of compromi: solid organs was extracted fr the Patient's abdomi compartment.

"Through the duration of t extraction the Patient continu bleeding.

"However, since a signific: degree of intraoperative b: loss is to be expected in a aggressive surgical debi management intervention were not concerned by t persistent bleeding. The b: was collected, aspirated, a stored for later experimental a therapeutic purposes.

counteract potent complications arising fr reduced blood volume t drained fluid was replac intravenously with a synthe blood substitute derived from c plasma.

are narrow white ingots not at all resembling authentic or natural human teeth. Yucky Puppy does not answer. Her failure to speak is chastised by a pinch to her cheeks, one cheek and then the other, leaving red imprints of red fingernails.

"At least they are feeding you well I hope." Now the second woman's hands are out and probing the breadth of Yucky Puppy's stomach. She clucks disapprovingly. "I can see not," she says, "the poor girl is skin and bones." Behind her, Yucky Puppy knows the nurses have started to frown. The second woman's gown is a cathedralic plum-cherry-moiré mass scaling in spires to consume her head, which is a misshapen miniature effigy of a horse's head. She's palomino: someone has sewn a blonde wig to her scalp to ornament her horse's head. Plastic flaxen hairs flow from her shoulders onto the table. Her appetizer plate is sitting in a pool of blonde hair when she lifts it to offer the contents to Yucky Puppy: three wet clumps of cheese veined verdigris and char-black marinated in some manner of creaminess.

"Have you ever tasted milk before?" the horse-headed woman asks. Yucky Puppy almost smiles at the question, because she has had so much milk poured inside her that when the surgeon cuts her at night probably milk not blood dribbles out whitely through the incisions he makes.

"To facilitate ease of access to the traumatized entrails enlargement of the orifice was attained via oval excision of the posterior sector; secondly, the posterior wall of the orifice was excised lengthwise by 5 mm.

"The Patient's peritoneal, thoracic and pelvic cavities were emptied of nonviable vitals and miscellaneous collateral corrupted residuary tissue-pulp and these remains were transported in leak-proof containers to the basement crematorium for immediate incineration in accordance with Night Hospital biological waste disposal procedures. The full visceral content of the Patient was eliminated in this manner, excluding one unidentified but comparatively intact structure we reinserted to habituate the body cavity to inhabitation following a careful screening for pathogens, visual inspection - inconclusive - biopsy, swabbing for surface membrane tests and rinsing and repeated immersion in mild disinfectant solution.

"Once the rudimentary objectives of 'damage control' were satisfactorily achieved, we proceeded to prepare the Patient's body for reseeded. To this end a lavage of the open abdomen was performed, to prevent microbial colonization of the interior as well as necrotizing of the abdominal wall as a precaution to protect incoming resident organs from superinfection. The open abdomen after insult should be



This way at least the mess she makes is easier to clean. But Yucky Puppy does not smile and he does not answer.

Such a quiet child!" the first woman exclaims.

Milk is sacred, you know," says the second woman sagely as she continues to hold her plate of cheese out offered to Yucky Puppy. "Once you've tasted good milk every other food seems flat and insipid by comparison, and then all you want in your mouth is the divinity of milk."

Do you have a mother?"

This question is posed by the third woman. Disappearing into a mound of cleavage and meat-red beet-black organza, she sits opposite Yucky Puppy on the other side of the table, her hands spread flat on either side of her bare plate, her face and breasts barred by striations of light that lither out from the sack of IV solution that serves as this table's centerpiece. In the bag a clarion blue chemical is glowing, an orchid like a glamorously mutant embryo sleeps. As if numbed in amber the orchid hangs in consummate stasis. For a moment in its liquid light the woman is almost as still. Only her eyes move, skimming the topography of Yucky Puppy's body, then her lips curl in and when they splash open she's saying:

A girl your age shouldn't live without a mother. Poor thing. A

considered a potentially highly hostile environment dictating what may seem extreme measures to ensure transplant safety. Tubes were placed in the innermost compartments of the peritoneal cavity, through which a gently sterilizing decoction also containing antibiotics was introduced to cleanse and flush the body space. After 8 hours, therapeutic saturation was attained and the accumulated fluid was siphoned from the Patient, who by this time had stopped bleeding.

"I would like to pause to note that we strove throughout the operation to preserve native tissues in the hopes of supporting the regrowth of an authentic habitat for the seedling grafts. However, there were losses.

"Of the conventional modalities for temporary wound coverage – including skin-only closure, plastic abdominoplasty, absorbable mesh, nonabsorbable mesh with protection of underlying tissues, and vacuum pack or vacuum-assisted wound management – we chose in this case to implement the vacuum pack 'sandwich' technique, wherein the abdomen is wrapped in a polyethylene sheet, then covered with a surgical towel to absorb serous fluid and then finally sealed with a plastic adhesive draped to the skin over suction drains. This technique is favored in cases of open abdomen because it resolves not only the nursing chore of controlling effluent, a potentially time-consuming proposition given the

child without a mother is the saddest creature imaginable."

All three women agree, they're nodding, yes, yes, yes, nodding so vehemently their gowns below the table begin to rustle a tempest of tulle chafing; yes, the saddest creature, poor thing, poor puppy, poor princess, she needs milk to drink, what the girl needs is a mommy...

Without a word the nurses put their arms around Yucky Puppy and carry her away from the women. Later they whisper into her ears:

**NURSE:** don't let those spinsters frighten you

**NURSE:** They're Not Normal

**NURSE:** besides, we're better than a mother

**NURSE:** we're professionally trained

**NURSE:** better qualified than a mother!

They take her to show her off to another table where the diners are loud lustrous sharp people who would be beautiful like mannequins if the skin of their faces and limbs weren't mottled with patches of pre-rot. They are mostly young women but there are also young men at the table, also almost beautiful, also rotting. A few of them have exquisitely fine cuts blanching from pinkish to dove-colored seams that snake across their faces; one girl has a bandage over one of her eyes; the uncovered eye is a black hole the

large volumes of leakage associated with these wounds, but also mitigates edema and accelerates wound-margin healing by granulation and furthermore allows for gradual advancement of the fascial edges to increase assurance of secure closure upon completion of the surgical series.

"Following temporary closure, the Patient's body was allotted a several day convalescence in a comatose state while the surgical staff convened to outline the seedling-insertion plan.

"Each seedling consists of an arrangement of primary mesenchymal cells around a syncytial yolk sac and a distal layer of one of three germ cell species: endoderm, mesoderm, or ectoderm. Generally speaking ectodermic seedlings will differentiate into various expressions of encephalon, spinal cord, nerve fibers, epidermis, mouth epithelium, teeth, hair, scales, feathers, facial cartilage, exocrine glands (including sebaceous, salivary, mammary, sweat), the lens of the eye, and nails or claws. Mesodermic seedlings develop into muscle and bone, visceral serosa, the heart, vascular and lymphatic tissues, limb buds, the dermis and subcutaneous layers of the skin, white blood cells, red corpuscles, dura mater, the gonads, the spleen, kidneys and the adrenal glands. Thirdly our ectodermic seedlings are most inclined to mature into thyroid, parathyroid,

violet of ice. The faces of these corpses are marked by an uncanny quality of being masks quilted from grafts of membranes peeled from other bodies, reptile bodies, younger bodies. A girl who makes no pretense of not staring at Yucky Puppy has a mesh panel stitched across her mouth to keep it shut; when she smiles, tiny mouths leap open in her eyes. Around the mesh her face is strikingly pretty and strange and brittle, embroidered with scars. She is the prettiest of the girls clustered together at the far side of the table, chattering; their voices course vibrations into the glasses of fizzing green scattered everywhere, into the centerpiece full of oversized syringes, drawing high thin ringing from the long needles and the crystal, sloshing green fizz onto the tablecloth. The mouthless girl stares at Yucky Puppy over her own green-dripping glass and Yucky Puppy feels feverish.

A girl says: "We are positively drooling over your dress." Beside her, the girl with her mouth stitched shut makes the whites show in her eyes as big as eggs. "Critical query: wherever did you find it?"

**NURSE:** Doesn't it look simply adorable on her?

**NURSE:** it's our design, obviously

**NURSE:** but not to brag—

and thymus glands, the pharynx, lungs, tonsils, digestive tube organs (stomach, small intestine, colon), the epithelium of the auditory system, the urinary bladder, pancreas, gallbladder, and liver. Since our seedlings are comprised of a range of nonhuman animal as well as human cells and through my own research here at the Night Hospital I have manufactured unique hybridizations of the three germ cell types, a virtually endless diversity of phenotypic variation can be expected within the transplant population.

"For the primary transplantation operation it was agreed that to avoid overwhelming the Patient in her sub-optimal health status a small brood of seedlings would be implanted as a trial set. Typically in past operations the average transplant burden had been between 15-20 seedlings but due to the Patient's infirmity and secondly based upon unsatisfactory past results it seemed prudent to show restraint: only 7 grafts were inserted. Represented in this starter batch were: 2 ectodermic 2 mesodermic 2 endodermic 1 ecto-endodermic hybrid, featuring cells culled from the following animal sources: rottweiler, Shetland Pony, adolescent human female, angora rabbit, Murphy Roth's Large mice, meat-type swine.

"The procedure itself is delightfully straightforward. To begin the Patient must be

**NURSE:** it was made right here in the Hospital

**NURSE:** We wanted something special for our special girl tonight!

"That's a shame," the young woman says, smirking, her smirk secreting a hissed viciousness of spores congealing into spume before her screwed-up lips. Her own dress is a yellowed black semi-sheer latex sheath like eel skin that flattens her breasts and sticks to the spurs where her skeleton juts. All of the girls have this same dress. "I was hoping I could get one just like it. We could have gone shopping together."

Beside her the mouthless one gurgles a sound like a hiccup. Laughter on the lips of her eyes a barbed sequence of neons she throbs transmits humiliation as a reverberation directly into Yucky Puppy's blood so she blushes. The girls consider her trash since she is stuck in the nurses' tasteless dress which she herself loathes and though she would happily rip it apart to annihilate it the girls' scorn is as shrill a scalding as if she had picked out the dress herself seeking to be loved by the girls, especially to be loved by the prettiest one, and now they're shunning her but pretending to be sisters to her as if she's too stupid to recognize that in fact they consider her the scum of the earth, and she is: then Yucky Puppy sinks even deeper into shame like a mire because all she

arranged on the table—appropriate positioning of the Patient is important for the successful outcome of implantation surgery. Ideally she should be placed in a low dorso-lithotomic position with her legs spread, ankles comfortably supported by padded stirrups, enabling uninhibited access to the lower abdominal region. Typically an inhalational anesthetic would be administered at this juncture but since the Patient was comatose upon entry to the surgical theatre, it was unnecessary to drug her. We also had the boon of a sizable orifice pre-cut in the favorable zone that voided the need to excise a new opening. These factors saved the surgical team considerable time in terms of preparations, though the Patient still required shaving; the skin at the lip of incision was cleaned and debrided where there was excess growth or necrosis – wound-edges inevitably necrotize in the case of an open abdomen – then rendered hygienic with a solution of isopropyl and clinidine. The Patient was weighed and her measurements recorded; a series of color photographs were taken of the relevant body surfaces to keep on file for future operations. Outstretched she spanned 170.8 cm, her total bodyweight 54.43 kg and with measurements 76.2 cm - 68.58 cm - 81.3 cm. Core body temperature was 30° C. The Patient contained a circulating blood volume of 3 liters, more

is good for is hanging from the arms of nurses who hate her and eating too much, until she's sick.

Then again, the girls are dead bodies and Yucky Puppy is alive. (This is a fact.)

"And isn't her figure miraculous? Absolutely Lolita-cum-Botticellian in this sensuous lascivious-cherub art historical pin-up sort of way, which is to die for. Please, girl, you must clue us in: what's your diet of choice?"

Yucky Puppy doesn't answer. Every corpse seated at the table has dwindled to fleshless so their heads loll wobbling in convolutions synchronized to the cadence of their conversation, perilously perched on necks reedy enough that Yucky Puppy suspects it would take only a micro-pinch to snap such a neck and then one could throw the severed head in the garbage, out the window, or kick it across the floor. And watch it tumble away. Pink puddling a slime trail as it disappears. This is what Yucky Puppy spends her time thinking about.

A young man sitting on his own apart from the women at the table tipping his chair backwards with his skinny legs spread wide, with his hair like gold keratin a horn curving up from his forehead, conspicuously burnished, asks Yucky Puppy if she likes dancing.

than 70% plasma, low ferritin, a low hematocrit. In short she was anemic.

"Soft gelatin capsules of the mold-derived T-cell suppressant ciclosporin were administered orally in tandem with a sequence of intravenous glucocorticoids to subdue the Patient's immuno-revolt against non-native living tissues and to ensure clement reception of the seedling grafts.

"The orifice of entry was reopened as a point of access to the body space, our original cut minimally extended at one end to permit the incision of unscarred peritoneum prior to scalpel contact with more seriously compromised membranes. All adherent debris was rinsed from the undersurface of the wound by means of clear fluids. We were pleased to observe that the Patient did not bleed during the re-incision procedure.

"Meanwhile the seedlings were extracted from the ice bath to warm to room temperature. Each seedling was submitted to an exhaustive visual inspection for possible malignancies, fibrosis, serosal injury, lesions or anomalies prior to installation within the body cavity. No flaws were detected. The 7 seedling grafts were brilliant in complexion, moist and active, their vestal membranes supple to the touch.

She doesn't answer and he asks if she has ever played croquet or tennis; we all play tennis every afternoon, he tells her, or squash, and wouldn't it be a treat if she could join them to play squash or tennis or croquet or go out dancing with them if the nurses would be amenable to parting with her for just a few hours, he says, because I'm sure we'd all love to play with you, he says, winking at Yucky Puppy. And he calls her Darling. She doesn't answer but stares into the centerpiece bowl of needles and quietly wonders (quiet so the organs won't hear) if survival has ever been a real possibility for her. As the young man talks knots calcify multiplying down to the flanks of the nurses stiff on either side of her, so their grip firms to lock her in place, asserting they have zero intentions of turning the Patient loose—

**NURSE:** well we'll have to see about that

**NURSE:** but isn't that a terribly kind offer

**NURSE:** but I don't imagine possible

**NURSE:** more than likely that will not be possible.

"Ah, too bad." The young man sits forward in his chair again, parting his legs wider, the skinny insectile stalks of the limbs expanding their claim, as the soundless violence of his disdain that bores into Yucky Puppy's body through the window in the pink dress shifts

"No seedling was larger than a mouse at the time of implantation.

"Seedling chromism ranged from blush-roseate to speckled virid.

"When it was determined that each seedling was morphologically optimal, the surgical team advanced to engraftment.

"Using a cold light 300-watt xenon lamp to maintain a sufficient level of illumination in the bleeding depths of the body the seedling grafts were positioned inside the hostess cavity, with maximum space allowed between one and the next to avoid congestion. Care was taken to see that the grafts would not be cramped, that no membranes or fibrous extensions were tangled or intertwined in a manner uncongenial to the seedlings. Any inchoate seedling vessels were left unaltered; no anastomoses were made so as not to bind the seedlings to one area within the Patient, to avoid stagnation and furthermore because it has proven apparent that unconstrained movement represents a crucial determinant of brood contentment, which to a significant extent decides the success or failure of the operation. Past trials have taught us that if the brood does not feel at ease in its hostess body, elevated rates of seedling death are incurred, the seedlings that do survive present as a lower quality product, frequently

to a harsher pitch he peers grinning up at her, held captive before him. He folds his hands in his lap. He's wearing leather gloves. He's waiting for something to start squirming in her. Anticipating the climax of the joke. In this moment Yucky Puppy senses how thoroughly she has been reduced.

**Recognition:** i am no better than a doll, have never been loved, compared to a non-cripple i am valueless.

She grows more and more frightened surrounded in the sound of latex gowns squeaking when the girls move, like newborn rodents squeaking, of talk of the tapeworms girl-corpses eat to stay skinny and leather stretching lack of feeling along the young man's palms, of a carillon of glasses clinking against barbed white little teeth until fear makes her too much of a burden to hold upright and the nurses have to drag her away again.

The third table is where important men sit and spoon caviar out of crystal dishes using dainty fancy spoons too delicate for their huge hands. A pile of broken spoons is collecting at the middle of the table around the ultrasound centerpiece.

**NURSE:** try to smile won't you, these are powerful men, princess,

deformed; the hostess body reacts with augmented immuno-violence to the developing viscera, culminating in massive systemic failure; fulminant sepsis deteriorating the hostess unto irrevocable expiration is not an uncommon outcome in cases of severe seedling malaise. Since the inception of my research several hostess bodies and more promising seedlings than I'd like to admit have been lost as a consequence of insufficient recognition of the real significance of brood satisfaction. Such a needless waste of life seems especially grievous given the shortage of living tissue endemic in our city. Dedicated to squander-reduction we strove for a seedling-based approach in this our latest implantation trial, aiming to cater to the known proclivities of the seedlings at every stage of surgery.

"Thus it was to our immense satisfaction to see the seedlings exhibiting signs of thriving more or less immediately upon entry to the Patient. Early portents of favorable seedling acclimation include: vigorous squirming, parenchymal oscillatory twitch, secretion of iridescent or pearlescent aqueous lubricant as a glazing on surface serosa, manifestations of nesting instinct, characterized by individual graft's appropriation of alcoves within the bodyscape as private dwellings, 'dens' which the grafts transform via a series of secretions. In this case the surgical team observed

Powerful and important dead men serve themselves caviar from dishes like Persian cat dishes with spoons like porcelain doll spoons and they pour drinks into their slobbering mouths from tumblers as gravity droops the paunch of their faces down to starched collars, jowls sagging loose and lips wet, hypertensive salmon-flushed in cheerful spirits because they've been drinking. Idly Yucky Puppy considers what the drink could be—formalin or phenol, glycerin, mineral oil?

When the nurses present her to the powerful men the men lurch from their seats at her, overeager stumbling to their feet to beckon her closer reaching out for her as if they would shake hands with her but no, they are not interested in her hands—pleasantries are not a precondition for physical contact or access because Yucky Puppy is so patently powerless. The severity of this disparity permits the men to proceed straight to pawing at her. Their fingers are invasive and hardened gelatin, as big as they look, they bruise her carelessly everywhere as they grab her from the nurses and sit her down on the table. Pushing her hands away whenever she attempts feebly to flail to protect herself. The nurses are not protecting her; suddenly no longer possessive of their Precious Patient, simpering, they surrender her to the men. If she were a genuinely loved sister or daughter they would protect her. Even from powerful men.

squirming, deep tissue oscillation, pearly serosal seeping, and nesting-oriented exploration within the first hour after installation.

"Unfortunately the Patient did not show the same resilience in the post-operative stage. The fact is that for the hostess complications in the adjustment period are unavoidable. Utilizing a standardized grading system I developed to classify hostess body deficiency and establish appropriate treatment thresholds we determined the Patient to meet criteria for Level 1B Failure status, which is moderate and does not represent a crisis in the context of hostessing a transplant brood. Although a body in this state may appear gravely ill to the untrained eye, the symptoms involved can be readily neutralized with analgesics and, more importantly, do nothing to negatively impact the development of the seedling viscera. Indeed the symptomatology typical of Level 1B is characterized by what we refer to as 'Superficial Failure.' The Patient's skin tinged to waxen jaundiced, hair from her head shed falling out in large clumps when her body was moved. Even upon waking from coma the Patient was asthenic, adynamic, rather bland and dull-looking overall: she lost weight and muscle mass; she regularly lost consciousness. For several days subsequent to the implantation the Patient suffered hemorrhagic symptoms of



Wouldn't they? If she had a true sister she would not sacrifice her. Yucky Puppy can see how she has been betrayed but harsher than betrayal her body is scraped by monogrammed gold and platinum cufflinks caught in the evil dress's rose foil, perforating stains of cavity through the fabric, paring her dress away then paring her skin away because the men want to peer at how she is shaped beneath her skin and won't take no for an answer. When Yucky Puppy strains to struggle and almost steals her arm writhed out from the clutches of a man the man whose corpse the clutching hand adjoins demands, "What's your problem, sweetheart? I'm not good enough for you?" Snorts a chortle.

Yucky Puppy doesn't answer. What is wrong with him is that he is a repulsive rubberized chunk of ham in a linen dinner jacket, and if they weren't in a hotel banquet hall right now he would rape her.

One of his friends//colleagues starts to scold her. His shoulders are broad and his neck short and the skin of his face is rough, pitted with purple holes like breathing holes in sand for crabs or clams and Yucky Puppy half expects some creature to creep out from one of these pits to give her the scolding but it's only the man who speaks, saying: "You know, honey, we are buddies of the surgeon going way way back to before you were born and so what that means, honey, I bet you're

hematemesis (vomiting fresh blood), hematuria (blood in the urine), intermenstrual vaginal bleeding, subconjunctival bleeding and hyphema (blood collecting in the anterior chamber of the eye).

"Our therapeutic approach was minimal, predominantly palliative: anodynes were IV-delivered to allay whatever discomfort she may have been experiencing, her bedclothes were changed daily and within weeks the Patient began to show real improvement. In any case she ceased complaining.

"In spite of the unseemliness of its hemorrhaging the Patient's body in fact performed better than anticipated throughout the adaptation interval, since not once was there reason to suspect hostile immune response to the seedling grafts. She never veered pyretic, nor registered an elevated circulating monocyte count. The orificial wounds sealed cleanly, without purulence at the cut-site. You cannot imagine how encouraging this was to the surgical team, as it implied that the Patient's body was, overall, amenable to the hostess function. She was a natural.

"After a week the Patient was transferred from the Post-Operative Unit to the Hostess Suite, where she fell into the more than merely capable hands of Night Hospital's nursing staff. There is nothing I can say to

smart enough to guess what that means is that you should devote some action in that pretty li'l head of yours to being more friendly toward us, baby-doll, don't you think." she could spit on the floor at his feet from the taste of densifying consciousness that all men are colleagues of the surgeon, whose voice is a coldness in her veins that won't stop happening even if she isn't listening and his hands in gloves emptying her out is enough to make her throw up everywhere. Denuded and nauseous: that is how it feels to be close to a man. Men's fingers crawl into her. If she fights it they get excited so instead she loosens slacker and hides the living part of her inside herself so all vital signs drain from her face until there is nothing alive in it; she becomes nothing, blank. The powerful men pass her around the table and she doesn't struggle because their hands will hurt her less if her body is limp; it's safer to be limp than to fight and to lose, and she would lose. She's losing. The nurses don't care that she's losing because they are not her sisters they do not love her but belong to the surgeon and to men in general. They are tickled she's being treated so so special, that the men like her so so much. Their smocks flare hotter white with pleasure to see her used by these men. "Our pretty girl!" Yucky Puppy is pulled down into the humid fatness of a man's lap then another man gets jealous and clutches her to pull her onto him, to hold her tight to his body.

adequately express my reverence for the nurses working within this institution. Suffice it to say the Night Hospital would crumble without them. In the case of the Patient the nurses went above and beyond. A hostess body demands of its caretakers no small amount of attention: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week it must be monitored, in order that immediate action may be taken to secure the seedlings' safety should exigent physiological instability arise. Thus the Patient was never alone. The nurses ministered to her every need, performing salutary lustrations twice daily to repulse infective agents - to this end the Patient was additionally maintained immersed in a warm detergent, bactericidal, aromatic, demulcent and mildly tranquilizing - and recurrently anointing target body zones with the stimulant emollients and cutaneous humectants necessary to cultivate a clement interior climate. As if she were not their ward but rather a sister or daughter the nurses surveyed cut-sites/orifices for indices of contamination and offered the Patient nurturing companionship and every possible kindness. Thus tended and hand-fed a highly specialized high-calorie, high-fat, high-dairy, protein- and vitamin-rich diet imposed to meet the revised nutritional needs of her body, the Patient entered a bodily epoch of unparalleled physiologic competence.

In this way, Yucky Puppy is shared among the men, passed from lap to lap. Hands detached from bodies fingering her stomach to glop, transmitting grey threats of force directly into her blood. Yeasty and yellow stale gut-sweat belched up corroding the false face painted onto her sick face, wilting her stupid lacquer-dipped hairdo. This is how it feels to be close to men. They take her by her shoulders and they shake her back and forth and they grab her wrists and twist her arms to pose her as a sweetheart as a rabbit or a doll and press her against their bodies that squish because their bodies are dead.

The men want pictures taken with the Princess, the Patient. The white-caustic flash of the camera and a kiss on the cheek splitting her head open. She doesn't have a real name, she doesn't need one. She is the Patient so the only thing to do is have things done to her (men do things to her) have hands put on her and stuck up into her and she can bleed secretly everywhere and slide to the floor if someone lets her drop but that's it. That's all there is for her.

"Now see we knew you could be a *nice girl*, honey." These men have never allowed a girl to disappoint them. Every girl eventually will be nice when she is scared enough. But Yucky Puppy isn't nice, not polite, sweet; she's nothing. There's some dignity in nothingness.

"In this environment the seedlings flourished. Unlike past trials wherein we without exception experienced some degree of necrosis, not a single of the original 7 seedlings failed to thrive—there were no losses. All specimens were active, alert, well-synced to the cyclic rhythms of their hostess, evidently sated and vital. They matured at an unprecedented rate. Within only 2.5 weeks the first brood was viable for harvest. I can say with absolute certainty and conviction, friends and colleagues, that in all my years of research, of work here at the Night Hospital I have never, never felt such an inrush of exaltation as I felt upon opening the Patient for harvesting that first time and gazing into the body cavity to see there in that dark pit the most glistening, ripest, succulent crimson and purple, pink and immaculate jewels of flesh and whole blood alive with organic heat, with the purity of pulse, more beautiful than I could've dreamt them. Each cell sovereign in its perfection. The highest quality hostess-derived transplant products conceivable. Yes, I thought, we have finally found her: the true hostess. This one is special, I said to myself. Take good care of her.

When the men get bored since she is hardly lively now and a little disheveled and her guts aren't playful anymore the smiling nurses help Yucky Puppy up from the floor where the men drop her, dusting her off since she's covered in hors-d'oeuvre crumbs and embalmed skin-suet flaked from the tips of dead fingers.

**NURSE:** you were perfect, princess,

**NURSE:** it wasn't all bad, was it?

Yucky Puppy doesn't answer. Because among her other problems she's having trouble keeping her head steady on her shoulders; her head keeps falling to the floor like a baby's head still too big for the soft baby-body, and she sees herself rumpled pink hanging down to the floor and she wants to cut out of herself the pain that is now her skin where the men touched the body with a butter knife, broken glass, her fingernails. What she wants is to soak her wounds (her whole self) in green water. To be small to be curled as an unborn daughter underwater. What she wants is to cease living, curled up carried down rivers of bath, green, wet, in peace, wet, green, in private. But she has to remember the animals inside her and thinking how they'd suffer to death if she were to die, she cannot let that happen, they are precious, deserve protection, someone must protect the raw things, she's responsible...

Is the Surgeon still speaking? How should she know, because everything that exists is meaningless noise: Yucky Puppy is stranded within voices which are the sound of teeth moving inside tides of shadow streaming toward her from tears which are the bloodless lips of dead bodies gaping holes incessantly in the ultraviolet of the banquet hall. Not to listen is not enough; the noise is penetrative, contaminant, coats the skin's underlayers and she is drowning in it. Electric trill from the chandeliers melds acid to dips and spikes of discord, from which no words form. Words stop existing. Laughter extends into needles. It is physically and in every other way taxing, to continue living. Yucky Puppy is taken from table to table to table, she is touched by upwards of thousands of corpses, dead hands have no functional nerves so they touch her too harsh, too viperous shattering whether they're meaning to hurt her or not, intentionally sadistic or not: they torture her. Already bruises accumulate surfacing to marble the most desirable district of her delineated in plastic of the abhorrent dress. An urge to annihilation gathers there too. From where her milk-fat belly is, the hearth of her, her spooked guts fled hours earlier. Nor is Yucky Puppy alive in that tender center now—as long as she is held in hospital it is a condemned zone. It is too touchable now, promises maltreatment, and nightmare is embedded in the vaulted membranes, as scalpel's edge and probing sharps, latent remembrance of the metallic unspeakable she keeps telling herself to discard because memory is without substance and the scars have sloughed. The Surgeon explained how her incisions were salved with a rapid dermogenic chemical as sealant so recurrent harvest would not disfigure the Hostess in her prime. A pretty erasure, a sustention of value. "As you can see, the Patient is virtually scar-free," he says. The Night Hospital wants her well-preserved. While the surgeon speaks she says nothing while someone shoves a piece of food that is red and lukewarm into her mouth. It's meat, it just sits there on her tongue, it melts into fibers after a few minutes, stringy in liquid fat, and each thread of gristle snakes its slither down her throat, disgusting. It is meat, it is dead; it stagnates inside her. The living organs won't even sniff it. Yucky Puppy understands very little but knows it is impolite to vomit in public otherwise she would. "Do you like it?" the corpse says, "it's rabbit." At the corpse's table on a salver a rabbit cooked whole, in tidy rigor – a carving fork spiking out of it, with black spots freckling its crackled peel and paws clipped off – soaks in a puddle of prunes, caramelizing in chandelier light. A smell of formaldehyde that hides between gusts of musk-iodine cologne diffuses Yucky Puppy's every thought scattered to the reptilian trenches of her consciousness, where she cannot find them. Someone touches her. The touch does not register. Sea-glass baubles of eyeballs bluing cataract-grimed glaze her in slime of scrutiny as the dead scour her up and down for vital signs, scrying for points of entry, for segments of anatomy at risk of spoilage. If she had an arm softening it would have to be

amputated, Yucky Puppy thinks, lopped off at the shoulder and then the hospital could sell cross-section slices like agate of her in the souvenir shop, charging huge amounts for only slightly corrupted pieces of the Patient. Somewhere on the body someone touches her. But Yucky Puppy is no longer cursed with skin, she is pure callus; she is calcified which means she cannot be touched. Also she cannot let herself understand it: the total horror of what is happening to her now, and why it must be this way. It's irrelevant because *soon she is leaving the Hospital*. Though she is stranded here among the dead now, and pain continues happening to her, it isn't a real pain because it is temporary and directly correlated to being the Surgeon's girl, the nurses' cripple sisterling, in general a plaything, which is not her natural state. She won't pay attention. Someone touches her. Livid flexion of a dead woman's painted fingernail making contact with her underarm. She lets the feeling dissolve as if it were the final residual unrecognizable twinge of some forgotten trauma echoing in the body like a dream.

As a provisional strategy to stop hurting Yucky Puppy isolates an organ furled around her trachea like a mink stole and withdraws into it, concentrates on living through this animal only. She denies resonances of the aggregate, a slew of mewls risen from everywhere, permitting into her awareness exclusively those throbs that radiate from the throat-animal. In this way she sacrifices the body envelope, as a diversion, like chum thrown to sharks bloodying the water while she swims from the sinking ship to some island of safety. Safety requires sacrifice. All the animals have gone into hiding and she wants to hide, too, but she the body and all its appendages in total is too large to put in a secret place so the act of hiding itself must become the secret. The dead will not unearth her here; when they touch her neck if they feel the slight lump they will not suspect this tumor is truly her. However, she begins to suspect safety is not a real possibility anywhere, because the organ with or within whom she seeks sanctuary is no less frightened no less senseless from violation nor is it less tempted to forsake itself, nor moister fresher healthier, than the rest of her. It is suckling spittle from the glands of her mouth to slake its anxious need. She feels how it prickles arid to the pith. Its dryness. It's slowed. *I'm so sorry*. The desperate organ squirms its remorse for living.

Squirms coarsen to spasm-thrashing when Yucky Puppy looks up from the floor when the nurses jerk her hard sideways, because they are irritated she's stopped smiling politely, so that her head swings pivoted, her eyes snag for an instant on the wall where she sees tanks and tanks and tanks of syrup behind glass, green as the bath in which she spent her girlhood (the pain of this party makes her a woman now), then calmly shifting chartreuse to cyan, to azurine, aster to clematis to moonstone laurel though since Yucky Puppy's vision is blurred by the anguish of the throat-animal she does not at first recognize the shapes

suspended in the tanks, now flooded strawberry thaw, now creamsicle, but the animal to which she is annexed knows them, and in its grief scream-secretes a venom bilious and slippery streaming into her lungs so the gullet clamps and there's a sore yellowness in the breath that hisses through, staining her teeth. Acid erodes a fistula between the mouth and nostrils. Suddenly Yucky Puppy is choking. Her blood coagulates to galantine, gelatin, glaire. Dilatory veins bloat overburdened toward rupture. Slurried curdle fattens the gulf between her and affection for feeling as fever-static in adrenaline-color in siren-color swerves a film to curtain her eyes blackened as the orbs are burst from their sockets by toxic thrust; her eyes are egg-sacs of boiling as she's dizzying in declination, decimated, and as her knees give and cripple-legs drop her like a downer cow trashed to slaughter, as the nurses are stunned and cannot catch her in time, causing the whole banquet hall to gasp, and as every one of her organs now inflamed florid pink with red flecks races and clamors rushing its pulp against the walls of the body as if to pummel through, until Yucky Puppy is cringing epileptic on the floor. The shapes so strange and so gorgeously slow in the water (now honeydew, now azurite) congeal to clarify their nature: they are flesh, this flesh is hers. They grew in her which means they're hers: the stolen parts. Bereft cells of the other organs (their littermates) and the emptied nest crying out WE WANT THEM BACK—

Her plundered body moans. Its reserves of instinctive innate will to survive that have held her in one piece until tonight sputter loose and like a pillar of butter microwaved Yucky Puppy melts down the armature of her bones; she puddles drooling out blind collapsed like no longer a living thing until there is no air between her and the floor and no time and no light.

Nothing catches her. Especially not the nurses. With their special Patient splayed at their patent white feet woozy in a fetal heap they stand over her looking mortified frowning clenched so it is clear they couldn't love her very much. They are clearly thinking, "Stupid cripple!" and feeling humiliated, repulsed by how unpretty she is as a jumble of limbs on the ground, and even less competently feigning tenderness for their fallen "sister" as one nurse takes her wrists, the other nurse takes her ankles and they stagger along hauling her outstretched like a pig on a spit away from the riot of banquet. Her tiara falls off and clatters. Tendrils of ringlet loose themselves from Yucky Puppy's hairdo to dangle sweeping crumbs from the floor. The nurses look like they want to pluck the hairs from Yucky Puppy's head one by one until she is bald, to punish her.

### 3. *The Final Hours of Princess Narcosis*

How horrible, to come to to the sound of someone saying: "she has still got a quite promising pink quality."

Another observer in the vicinity confirms this is a good sign she isn't dead.

"...a soft pink smell to her cheeks..."

"...surface exuding warmish damp still..."

"...and are her thighs sweating?"

"...someone check her gums for pinkness..."

When she comes to, countless dozens of fingers are moving inside her mouth, burrowing under her tongue, pinching her tongue to the side to restrain it. The fingers taste like cold cuts like bologna and orange cheese and phenol. A hand will force itself past her rearmost molars to hunt down and grab out her guts. No. It won't, it will, it won't, it's going to. There is nothing happening. There is nothing that is actually reality: Yucky Puppy is not a body she is an overheated fur of white white pink vapor sliding along the underside of the ceiling watching everything that happens to the body as the hands...but the hands...it is simple: she decides she won't feel them wherever they go. Are the Patient's nerves sparkling pink as they snap, severed? *Am I pretty now?*

The nurses are skittering in circles shooing away inquisitive corpses.

**NURSE:** she's fine, she's fine,

**NURSE:** this is nothing outside normal

**NURSE:** The Patient is Sensitive

**NURSE:** Please, let us take care of this, please,

**NURSE:** Sit down *please*—

The banquet hall is a smear like a welt soaking into her brain and the nurses are insisting Yucky Puppy should eat a nice big slice of cake and promptly get better. A nice big slice of cake with fat pink mounds of frosting roses and globs of icing script spelling her name — "The Patient" — will perk her up. Since her problem is diagnosed as LOW BLOOD SUGAR, hypoglycemia: she is peaky, she needs a nibble, that is the reason her legs trembled, shook, failed her and she fell—

Yucky Puppy spits up finger residue phlegm so she can sputter, "You're lying. You're killing us."

The nurses giggle nervously through their crooked masks. Wringing their hands, shifting from one white high heel to the other, smoothing



their skirts, they issue nervous perspiration-scent through their uniforms in such a way as to stand as pheromonal signal they'd really like to wad a linen napkin snatched from the buffet table into a ball and shove it in Yucky Puppy's mouth to gag her soundless, complaisant. The way they're smiling says: *you will not get away with this.*

Yucky Puppy is still scared but her hate for the nurses has condensed to a pure metal cold she holds raw as it dilates the nucleus of one cell then another, another, hate flows in her lymph, ice-spiked moistness in the marrow sponge; it forms a new layer of skin: her hatred. There is no space that remains for childish terror. She rasps hoarsely: "Get away from me."

**NURSE:** there, there, princess

**NURSE:** don't strain yourself

**NURSE:** getting overexcited

**NURSE:** being unreasonable

**NURSE:** now hush

**NURSE:** we'll get you a lovely extra-big slice of cake, hush, you rest, precious, you wait here

They roll her to the edge of the stage where she's out of sight and before they leave her, a nurse's gloved hand glides a sleek arc into her breast pocket; when it returns from the pocket the glove holds a syringe erect as a tiny tower before Yucky Puppy's eyes, its needle long and thin, the contents of the barrel snake-stained neon reptilian green. The nurse flicks it twice so the meniscus ripples. A green droplet hovers at the tip of the needle. The droplet grows until it bursts, weeps a sluice down the clouded blue plastic, is drawn in to wetten the stocking that enwraps Yucky Puppy's left leg an inch above the knee. Dyeing narcotic green the nylon. Inside, Yucky Puppy's vitals growl a low drone. Along the wall, the uprooted animals awaiting sale rub themselves with rhythmic urgency against the glass of their display tanks. "Don't touch me," Yucky Puppy says, shrinking from the shot, but one nurse catches her by the wrist and when the second nurse plunges the needle into the anemic nothing of Yucky Puppy's inner arm, a metallized light explodes into her like the body is the entire world that exists and that world is ending. Decadent chemical cellophane mantles the raging organs and erodes resistance from the parenchymal core. Radiative yielding. Plastic graceless warmth. Fibers of dark lunar silver creep crawl stitch her eyelids shut like the barred windows of asylums, of prisons, orphanage tenements, trapping her behind cascading tulle coercing numbness then nothingness. The pain of the prick sweetens and thins. Trembling syrup green irrigates the sewers of her bones, joint to joint. Limbs slacken. This saccharine tastes like paradise in her blood and softens

the steepening gradients of the banquet hall and rinses the reek of corpses from her throat. It isn't nice. Yucky Puppy doesn't want to be soothed: she wants to get out of the Hospital. Anesthesia is the essence of death. Docility is also like dying. "Leave me alone," she spits, but her refusal is sucked up into the plunger of the syringe when the nurse pulls out. Yucky Puppy will never forgive the nurses. "I hate you," she murmurs, sleep heavy on her lips. Her voice is tangled in seaweeds and pelagic soil as if dredged from underwater. Low and black it churns between her cold teeth. It dribbles weakly down her chin.

**NURSE:** don't be silly

**NURSE:** we love you, precious

**NURSE:** a piece of cake and You'll Be All Smiles Again

**NURSE:** The Way It Should Be

**NURSE:** Keep Your Chin Up

**NURSE:** That's Our Girl

**NURSE(S):** ...now, stay absolutely still...

The nurses whirl out of sight smugly grinning ostensibly en route to wherever the party cake is kept because they believe their cheat with the needle has entranced the Patient entwined vapid in tranquil shackles.

"No," Yucky Puppy repeats, more firmly, though only to herself since she's alone now at last. Rolled into the corner her body is, for the moment, forgotten by the party. Almost relaxing she leans back into the wheelchair and gazes out through a rift in the curtain at the discord that, as her mind drifts, seems to wane from a riot to distant rustling. Time stretches out in front of her like taffy spooled from her solar plexus as she waits for the nurses to return, but the nurses are nowhere. I will not submit to cake, she explains to her body, because the needle has made her hungry again. But hospital food is poison. All along they've been feeding her poison, to make her torpid and languid and pliable. It's better to starve, Yucky Puppy explains to her hunger, longing to believe it's true—that she would rather starve than be spoon-fed, tube-fed effortless sustenance forever and ever, a perma-infant swelled plump in the swaddling. Outside of Night Hospital however there is bound to be an option better than either starving or eating poison. In the interim, starvation is useful because it gnaws through the dusk-bloom of drug to keep her awake. She waits centuries, but still the nurses do not come back with the cake they promised her, the cake she would puke up anyway if she were forced to eat it. The party goes on and on and never ends despite the apparent collapse of its star attraction. Corpses continue to place cheesy canapés between their lips and chew and swallow. They perform the same sequence with bite-sized



[Yucky Puppy doesn't want to be scooped: she wants to get out of the Hospital.]

éclairs mignardises scallops trussed in bacon truffles pearl onions phyllo dough and marinated quail. This is the primary party activity. When not engaged in active consumption the corpses are clustered cliquish admiring her harvested organs anxious in the varicolored aquaria. They press their gaunt faces and skeletons to the glass so it's streaked with greasiness of the paint they use to disguise the fact they're dead meat. A dead woman as she taps her long fingernails on the glass pointing to an organ like a blood-and-cream iridescent kitten of jellied satin tells the woman beside her, "Wouldn't this make a terrific anniversary present?" When the ladies laugh together their hairdos meld into one mangled creature. Meanwhile the nurses are still elsewhere. Yucky Puppy is alone. Drugged numb close to comatose, her guts have suspended dissent, diffusing nauseous silence through the interstices of the body. For the animals' sake and for hers, since their fates are mingled entangled aligned inextricably, Yucky Puppy resolves she will not spend another hour in the hospital.

*This is how she finally does it:*

Yucky Puppy inches slowly to the edge of the wheelchair's white vinyl seat causing her dress to ride up her thighs but she doesn't bother trying to make herself decent because she doesn't particularly care. Straining to support the body's weight with her arms, the feeble flesh shaking from the needle's aggravation of her physical bankruptcy, very gradually she is able to unpeel from the wheelchair. Straightening, she lowers herself until her calves lay flat against the floor, then her quadriceps, until she is sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her on the floor. Because she knows she is too damaged to walk, and she knows she must stay as invisible as possible to avoid being detected by corpses, Yucky Puppy rolls onto her stomach. Using her elbows and the bony wings of her iliac crest like budding limbs to propel herself as if she were a fetus or a larva she worms away from the wheelchair. Extremely slowly, then less slow, then racing as desperately as her pupal state permits.

[ initially she is startled that no one comes to stop her—not the nurses, not the Surgeon, not the dead consumers of appetizers and poached organs. then it occurs to her that they assume there is no risk of her doing anything, since she is basically a doll-sack of goo and totally useless. for once this assumption is to her advantage. ]

Yucky Puppy gropes her way along, worse than infantile, without any good concept of what she'll do now besides crawl around across the immense wasteland of the floor, until she glimpses salvation, possibly: an unattended dessert cart. Beneath its tiers of salvers of tiny adorable layered cakes fruit-filled and fondant-coated the sterile unblues, unpinks of Hospital and porcelain saucers of ice cubes of ice cream, behind the floral taupe brocade that hangs down the carriage, there

will have to be a compartment she can hide in. She hopes. She is counting on a better place to hide than extremely out in the open, like she is now, where someone could easily see her or not see her and stomp on her spine. Either way she'd be prevented from leaving, which she would hate. It is hateful to be exposed in this way, worsened by a secondary exposure to which she is more accustomed which is that the pink metal dress is disintegrating. If she's found soon she'll be naked except for shreds of rose foil and transparent plastic embedded in her skin. And soiled in places with dirt from the soles of the fancy shoes of the dead. And with elbows bruised sallow burgundy. With runs in her stockings spanning haunches to toenails. Such will be the state in which she'll die. Seeing her dead, afterwards, no one would say, "how pretty and pink the Patient is!" Her pinkness then would be the pink of failure. She is becoming a monstrous thing. She will grow claws and dripping fangs to defend the monster she is now and will be forever due to her rejection of poisoned cake and the tight pink dress and other nice nice pretty things. She crawls faster.

Yucky Puppy tells herself there will be nowhere for her to avoid disappointment but when she parts the brocade, like in a dream, she uncovers a space in the dessert cart she can scrunch herself inside—a micro-sanctuary. She is so pleased by this discovery that if she were able to locate her mouth on her face she might smile a real and sincere smile, not vacant ornamental, though she is also not yet unterrified, given the circumstances, and so she doesn't waste time trying to open her face in the proper place to show teeth pleasingly. She scrambles into the tiny compartment, a perfect fit, taking her legs in her hands to fold them, because they aren't functional, won't move on their own as a result of being atrophied, until all of her limbs are accounted for and comfortably arranged inside the cart. Even after she pulls the curtains shut she expects a hand to infiltrate the safety of private darkness and scruff her like a cat. Would it be a nurse tsk-tsking "naughty puppy!" or a man full of clotted dank saliva fondling her out of the dessert cart? There is zero question of a girl getting away unscathed, so how would Miss Priss Princess prefer to be punished? The needle, or a mauling? But impossible as it seems no hands breach the curtain, and after a while Yucky Puppy relaxes, curling into herself as safe as she can remember ever feeling, arms wrapped around her knees tucking them to her chest so they won't tip over out of asylum and sabotage her. She has no heartbeat, her heart is sleeping in codeine blackout but there's noise outside her body and she listens. The cart drifts in smother of chattered gossip, stiletto litanies and dumb jaws crumbling porous white pastry fluff and frosting roses and moistureless tongues lapping ice cream, ice cream melting to liquid dairy down frosted dead throats, to spoil in distended dead stomachs. Hearing this neverending chorus of eating her own hunger loudens to hard waves of vertigo: she smells sugar. In the dessert cart compartment she is sitting

with dirty plates at her feet, which she raises to her face to examine for viable crumbs or sauce to lick, but there's nothing left she can stomach.

She could gnaw three strings of sinew from a rabbit's leg but she won't.

Suddenly: a skewing in the constancy of air around her and vibrating up through her sacrum she is cued to the stroke of wheels starting to turn. First lurch and second a squealing like a nest of mice. There are also footsteps. Yucky Puppy imagines the waitress who pushes the dessert cart; she thinks how she would have to be dressed in white and beautiful, not "pretty" but BEAUTIFUL like an angel is beautiful; there would be a corona of baby's breath glowing up growing from behind her head. The woman who saves her cannot be another dead body—Yucky Puppy will not indulge the thought of such a desecration. When Yucky Puppy is out of the hospital, if she sees this waitress again she will recognize her instantly, and she will smile for her as a sign that they are truly sisters. Maybe she'll let the waitress-angel lay her hand on her pulse to feel how she's alive, and she will place her lips to the veins in the angel-waitress's wrist. They will form a circuit. Thus blessed they will love one another.

Now the cart is moving. Nothing is motionless. Seas of dusky voice palpitating swell then recede into clinking of silverware like spiders plated in gilt trying to skitter on ceramic platters, knives splitting smooth receptive flesh of soft fruit and cheeses, guzzles swallow and gurgling undigested in lymphatic alimentary labyrinths of the corpses, concentrated brine of evening gowns crackling like incinerator. Amid skirts clutched up Yucky Puppy can hear the staccato psalms of skeletons striking out whispers. Rheumatic. Shriveled skin shriveling rougher. Is the Surgeon still speaking? She hears men and hates them. Nurse sounds are indistinguishable from the sounds of other women. When she senses wet loops of babyish edematous wheeze slapping glass alongside her she recognizes the cart must be passing the wall of tanks. Submersed here are organs she cannot reclaim. She does not apologize because she doesn't deserve forgiveness so she will not ask for it. It is better if they forget her. They are bound to die quickly. A quivering through the cerulean shading celestial shading hibiscus liquid trespasses as gushed procession of glottal friction hooks her desperate creaking pleas sticky and gape needy, slit her. *Please die*, she advises. Enveloped in animal lament like a veil draped to dizzy her, Yucky Puppy's scars ache. When the wall ends she sighs: she's relieved it's no harder than this to leave babies behind. Something moans. In the moan and melding with it: the sound of turpentine the sound of milk turning, the sound of Promise Me I Won't Be Alone, the sound of teeth sound of skin falling off in chunks the sound of flux of needles, the sound of a catheter, the sound of a yolk sac, the sound of mother, the sound of vomit texture, of vision slackening, the sound of a lesion, of spillage, of miles of nights of reeling; there is the sound of what it is to be dead,

the sound of worse-than-dying, the sound of black satin or black suede gloves, the sound of bloodless.

Through a paean to voided Yucky Puppy is escorted out of her party.

The cart passes through three doors, over three thresholds, entering three rooms; after each door the world is quieter, its atmosphere lubricated less richly with bland diffusion of rot. Through the third door into the third room the evil sludge arias of Night Hospital fade out thinned under crystal silence and purred chill as the footsteps of the waitress-angel cease; with a final creak of jostling the wheels stop so the cart stops.

Here, the air is not stagnant. A brisk sweetness like pale blue crunch of sugar steals into Yucky Puppy's hiding place through the brocade and down her nostrils and across her skin. She can breathe more easily here, though she remains unsure where or what her lungs are in the body. In the absence of lungs her body opens itself everywhere to the air, soft and delicious as it is soaks deeper and deeper cells startling dulled capillaries almost painfully suffusing clarity but it's ecstasy to breathe, to be a living thing belonging to a world that is not a hospital. This is what she has always wanted since she woke up: this breathing in the dark without Medical Professionals standing alert with pocketfuls of metal to measure the breath she emits is the subject of her dreams and of her prayers.

The angel-waitress's footsteps that had gone quiet resume. She is walking away. Her haloed figure disperses into the core of silence that defines this universe beyond all doors and horrible disgusting cages. Feeling a pang at the departure of the waitress-angel she will probably never see again, whom she senses she loves, Yucky Puppy sits for a moment adjusting to aloneness and then draws the dessert cart's curtains open. Limblessly she slouches the body from the compartment and unfolds herself blinking out onto blue in a narrow alley lying on her side, since she lands in this weird way, lopsided. The terrain of the Outside World is alternately clumps of squalor and sharp plastic, pointed spiny in some places, mushing under her in others, and smelling unmistakably of ripe garbage. As a by-product of Hospital Yucky Puppy has been expelled with the rest of the trash, which seems appropriate to her and it suits her just fine to be alone in an alley sideways alongside dunes of refuse. The smell is okay.

*(because I am released from the Night Hospital)*

Yet since hers is an unauthorized discharge, never awarded the Surgeon's approval, it is still too dangerous to celebrate the victory of breakout by lolling in decadent slop-and-offal. Instead a thick need prods her forward through the stinking alley, urging her not to stop no matter how the garbage pricks her, nagging her to crawl faster heave

herself over heaps of fish bones and fruit rotting into blisters of ferment, bottles of treacle, overfed lazy flies. This need is the need not to be dead, the need to protect what is living inside herself, to not be cut up and used as if she were Hospital property. To be far away from the nurses. To have no contact with the Surgeon. Whatever the consistency of existence beyond Night Hospital she will catch it and she will hold on to it fiercely; she will clasp it clenched in her fists and smear herself with it like a pheromone scent or a color that means she belongs to no one. Tonight she is not the Princess of the Hospital, and never again. She will never be the feeble sugar-bloat pet lamb-baby sister of the nurse-hive again. The dress they trussed her in tightly cinched up in ribbons pharmaceutical pink and plastic is ripped into rags and stains and holes she can almost crawl through. Is beginning to crawl through. She'd rather wear this trash. She will never be the Patient again. She will feed herself; she will not be fed poison. Eating trash if she has to, so what. She will let no one eat her. No one can enter her. She will keep her body whole and safe. This body which is wholly hers she will not let anyone use instruments to cut up apart and into. To live inviolable for once. Wanting to live. Yes yes yes tonight and every next night now she's **ALIVE**.

Mucked in mulch of spoiled dregs, mixed slimes, with burnt fragments of quail or bunny bone pinned in the wreckage of her hair, Yucky Puppy pants as she tumbles in somersaults from the summit of garbage-mound into the purple simmer of reality dilating around her. The alley spits her out, and when she lifts her head to look at what is not the Hospital, tears condense webbing quartz lace to her eyelashes; the sheer lack of walls here overwhelms here. Unhospitalized is an arctic of tarmac sweeping snaked with slither of black haze like an algae bloom. Eels of lantern swerve below the surface. It is an empty parking lot. A benthic quiescence seems to gel the particles of pavement cemented, precarious, as if a sudden sound would scatter them airborne, fumes of concrete feathering up to comb glitter from stars which are punctures white in the exquisite bluest cerulean gauze of sky overlaying the black pith Yucky Puppy longs to bite through to feel the shiver of such a consummate nighttime dripping into all her insides. The stars swarm an orbit around lunar slice-curve lit swollen pale pink like a secretary's plastic fingernail. Between the moon, the inked stars and the parking lot, at the edge of the world where pavement culminates in a thin line thrumming in and out of focus, a city rears up. Towers like spindles and towers like castles carved out of pure ice, steeples of lavender alabaster that surge up to stroke firmament, rising and rising, then careening at reckless slants to the earth. The city is liquid shadows swung skyward, the city skyline a reef of smoke and cerebrospinal opal gleam. Heavy lagoons of halo capture its exhalations of frothed ghost-light hanging like wreaths, a gossamer palisade in seven laurels, circling.



This Not-Hospital is the realest heaven the night pours to fill the chalice of her eyes, an iridescence she watches wavering at the horizon for only an instant before the resonance of irrepressible physical love that shatters the fear in her for this new world that is her release churns as an interior ocean and though she wishes she could siphon all these thousand points of light into her body until her body electrifies through her nerves turning bluer for the first time since she's been a living girl now there is no part of her afraid to sleep, since her organs are all still sleeping off their needle-prick it seems right to sink down with them, to nestle in the peace of lapse awhile, with her animals, without struggle.

### *Winnowing*

Morning is very red and calcite a rind painted to husk the mucus curves of Yucky Puppy's interior, scaling the arcane erratic clefts, and an ache in the wing of her pelvis that cants into solid ground and feeling dizzier than she should, trying to sit upright, immured in some grotto of mist and the vinegar glow that sifts in flattens sashes of glare to the infinite pavement. One second Yucky Puppy wonders why this weird feeling is her home. Feeling she has lost years. Lost weight. Then there's also sickness to accompany the lostness and she cannot understand why she is unwell when she is—

—*alive* within scintillating she can taste in her eyes' fine thin stalks as it slides to the root of her mouth and lingers there like larval prayer—

when she is not a patient of the Night Hospital.

With bouquets of wool floss of air wilting matted fur around her face maybe she's choking in an unconscious way is why she's sick instead of saved? She is confused about everything she cannot comprehend constructively or even think. Last night a heavenly city existed, and also the dominion of Hospital from which she severed herself, and today there is nothing but this mauled girl's body that won't move and steamed ashes a fog acrid like powder milked from shells farmed too far from the sea, factory oysters, mass-crushed as a commodity automatically through the drains of machinery and lastly dyed mother-of-pearl, dilute lilac, mourning dove. This mist veils what it touches in chronic itch. Sitting in the parking lot Yucky Puppy can't stop itching. She scratches her body in several different places and some kind of substance grey and waxen collects in the grooves under her fingernails. When she looks into her hands she sees how tacky they have become,

with garbage sticking to them. A scab of yellow egg splatter, a rat's tail of crepe paper pink party streamer, black grit like coffee grounds, cold lard like broken mirror. Would it be healthy to lick this trash clean. Her filthy hands acquire the weight of sickness and she sets them quiet in her lap.

Craving a feeling better than morbidity nauseous in a parking lot she repeats to herself: nothing unbearable is happening. It is impossible that the fog is an apparition hewn from nurses and the smiles of nurses that has the power to invade her in foam of wetness she is forced to inhale, their sterile spectral nurse-whiteness a toxic or combustible that enlarges the holes in her and makes her like a child. She discredits her morning-sick fever's claim that nurse-teeth cleave to her palms, chattering shrill to bury themselves like crabs digging backwards widening the cracks in her hands. Because that can't happen. Uncertainty initiates a shudder darkening the lacquer of Yucky Puppy's trauma. I'm Outside so why am I still stricken? She repeats: the Hospital turned my body into a disease. There is a sudden constriction, like fluidity annulled communicated as suction, spurts a plaque of scarred over spawned where the guts were sown, so that each animal inside her anneals from crust to core to agate. Gravid with mineral cold she is anchored.

Yellow chromes over the animals which is a vibrant solar neon chafing color worth hating. Their scraping against one another in the overcrowded underfunded nursery emits fricative whine coating her discomfort of astringent cramping that frosts the interludes between dry heaves, a stomachache unsullied by the bilious swampish melt of seasickness, or influenza, or E. coli gastritis but characterized by a leeching of sinew contusion in Yucky Puppy's stomach like toothless strained suckle of a calf battering the spent nipple. Animals rub themselves pressed against her abdominal fascia as if to arouse a vein to spurt dribble for drinking, but unfortified the blood in Yucky Puppy is a milk freeze-dried synthetic to indigestible. Deprived, the organs reel with restless hunger Yucky Puppy cannot sate because she is a paucity. She is nothing fit to offer. The animals voice their demands, the minimum conditions they require in exchange for which they would assent to resume loving her. Ultimatums. Unfed by Night Hospital she is no longer hospitable so she has very real reason to fear her housepets will raze her. In their position she would do the same. She is also hungry. She also knows how hard it is to live. Having recently fled incarceration herself she can empathize re: hating constraint in hellholes but still it is sad and dismal to feel the first thrust of exodus shove upward.

Maybe the animal climbing out is not in reality too large for her skull to the point of breaking her jaws but the sensation is of being damaged irreparably, pummeled by overflow storming the rickety beachside hovels in her head until cataracts of flesh vomit from her nose and her ears and tear ducts. This vision of herself as a girl-saint on her knees martyred by weeping raw meat hovers over Yucky Puppy in a wash of pale light as the organ twists its bulk of slippery and impatient against her upper palate and along the gumline, slabs of ooze texture pursing between the dog teeth. Shakes piteous to plead her lips to part. Mesentery scent of the bottommost sepulchre cellars like she'd been burying her face in bloody soil bubbles from the distraught animal slows her tongue to a blockage ebbing breath. Instinctively Yucky Puppy clenches her jaws to command the organ to sit and to stay with her, first of all because she wants to protect it and secondly inflamed with the selfishness of a mother's need she feels she is owed some kind of fidelity like unconditional love so she wants to scold it to stop it – to say, "how dare you? after all i've done for you? we were going to *survive* together!" – but because breathless pain makes it clear it would incur mutilation to hold captive this part, and there is not space in the weakness of the ruined body for the brood of lives the Surgeon seeded into her; this manmade animal will die outside of her or it will die inside and proliferate sepsis so she saves herself she spits it up. Kneeling in the fog like a crèche folding over her the frail girl, failed princess, permits herself to purge.

One by one the organs to which her body is not the natural mother take their leave of her:

...the first animal coughed up onto the pavement is a violet and cylindrical worming like a section of python sliced, cauterized to gleaming blunt at both ends, like an amputated limb (arm or leg) one foot long with its circumference unstable because it is pulsating, or laboring to respire, and which as it wriggles away from Yucky Puppy acquires a whitish hue, its outermost membrane's mucosal sheen corrupted on contact with the imperfect air of life outside the girl; beneath the white, which is organ failure, carmine and indigo gather as sharpening motes spat from the parenchyma, the colors desperate, unnatural, suggestive of an ugly violence circulating the coelom. across the parking lot the frantic animal twists and seizes as though to rescue itself from scorching on the blue tarmac, then it wearies, then it submits, because it cannot exist estranged from the girl. as it dies separate from her she shuts her eyes drooling up red debris followed by a mouthful of lumps enwrapped in amnion of wires of sinew that tears when it hits the ground, causing the contents to spew, and each lump rolling bouncing away like a fist or like a shrunken head, malformed featureless. then a wedge of black syruped like marble

striated with coral and ivory and delicate saffron veins of gilt, that jerks around in circles like a chicken in the CNS twilight post-decapitation, torture torquing lateral elastic planes spastic curvilinear as blisters erupt from the black and issue a weak purulence, synthetic candied apple antifreeze green, which Yucky Puppy smells and which smells of sulphur. the next to go resembles a queen conch with an eyeball peering out from the flared lip, sclera sloughing in white flakes onto coral-gold nacre as the ulcerated eye puckers, and then an organ like a dissection piglet, another spiked like a lotus that fans its petals to reveal the silken spirals of frilled tissue composing its gynoeceum before sealing shut for good. Yucky Puppy vomits a fragile rag of bubblegum vein and muslin that shreds as it floats away from her mouth, and she vomits up a spidery satchel that as it implodes gushes serous foam of orbs like peeled eggs from its fattest lobe until it stops moving...

Circled by the stiffening surrendered to subsiding shoals of nonviable animal Yucky Puppy senses herself an island. Though a vague tingle of lurch and shift clenches inward as a sign she is not wholly condemned, she is detached from her body, which drifts at her periphery, alien and obscenely unsubstantial. She sits there panting, watching the organs die. She has a definite understanding she cannot deny that the organs are failing. As the organs drain their last reserves of moist essence, purple and scarlet lesions appear to invest desiccant epithelium with coruscation of brightening through pale film of stricture of fungal mantle under which the doomed wet will mummify: turn leathery and shrivel. Yucky Puppy thinks if she picked one up to cradle her softest caress would batter it to dust. It would be too horrible to touch them.

*little darlings what have i done...?*

[ these parts her body was not born to shelter but which became hers under compulsion in a situation arranged of elements of a Medical Professional's voice (male), his blonde collaborators' feelingless touch (female, traitorous) wrapped in sterile antiseptic hygienic latex gloves, constraint and physical violence and instruments of torture such as knives and immobility she cannot carry any longer despite the closeness of their vulnerability encelled in hers that activated an instinct to devotion and sacrifice out of longing for kindness gentleness the hunger to protect something in the context of absolute cruelty to grow something glowing in deep night but she cannot be a vessel if she is going to live in this body she needs the spaces inside to strengthen herself. she is sorry that she is not extremely immense like a mansion so as to house every little animal away suckled well with bloodwarmth safe from the perils of the careless sad horror of being alone but she is only one body which was not born to lose itself in bearing this toxic

mothering crafted as destiny for her by the Surgeon to which she cannot and she will not conform if she wants to survive. which she does. now she wants to survive. ]

A crunch of gag crowding her throat startles her out of listening to her own vacancy, alarmed because after an infinity spent retching puddles of runny mucus she assumed the culling had reached its completion. At this point she is wondering how much more she can lose. She isn't sure how many vitals constitute a standard human girl never converted to a Hostess but her exits are too exhausted to lock in protest; to ease the unpleasantness she makes an O of her lips to exaggerate the orifice and lets her chin drop to her chest, cooperative, so the last of her can fall out as it pleases.

Another pink thing smacks to the pavement at her knees. Painfully naked pink with a pristine vulnerability this animal is as quiet and still as if it were already dead. Leaning down to look more closely Yucky Puppy can see that it has four lobes like four paws, a lobe like a ribcage and also a lobe like a scrunched-up face stretching out to a muzzle marked by pleats and shadows that could coalesce to a mouth if you expected to see a mouth there. Above the pleating are black slits pink at the edges, knit shut with black strands. These slits which outcurve eyelike. Though she remembers nothing of herself preceding her birth to the Night Hospital, Yucky Puppy has known this animal, knows she has known it, recognizes it: if her heart were any animal, this must be the one. Hollowed, the crypt of her breast caves in.

It is clear she cannot live if this sensitive pink thing is not extremely close to her blood.

*we need one another. this has been true since i was newborn, not born to the Night Hospital but born from a gentle body that once knew me as a child. this animal is the last living piece of my body's mother and it has fallen from my chest and it is dead on the pavement. i love it, i will not leave it here, give it back to me. Monstrous loneliness gusting through her is a scraping that silvers blood as it skids its bite along the walls of her bones, etching fractured hearts, funerary ciphers in the tender stone. give it back to me, i need someone.*

if she could pick up the pink animal and push it back down her mouth, down to her belly again...

if she could cut an archway in her solar plexus and leash the pink animal securely to a rib...

The pink skin snows a tremor into the blue parking lot, a quiver that brightens cement honeyed ultraviolet tracing cracked lines like lightning. Timidly because it could be crushed to bruises by the clumsy weight of the nervous tips of her fingers she places her hand on the plumpest curvature of the animal. To know it a final moment. To mourn it. As a dirge expands in her, the lymphatic flow of tide through her palms initiates a series of subtle cords fusing the girl to the thing on the ground: first her palm runs into the pink, the boundary that divides the two materials – hand and animal – attenuates to a sticky sheet of vapor that flutters then is nothing. Touch is total continuity. Creased seams of the animal's latent mouth unpeel to bear the opening, at least an inlet, out of which muted whimper murmurs. Already it smells more strongly of aliveness in the fog. Roused from coma the pink contracts, palpitates, spasms as top-coat laminae spawns a moss, araneous runoff in the indents between lobes which Yucky Puppy at first fears to the point of wordless howling because she worries it must be the mildew gangrene that stole over the other organs, meaning the pink animal is doomed. But this paling glitters. Then distinct tufts of hair appear and Yucky Puppy realizes a coat of fresh fur is forming to warm the animal to foment its resurrection. The fur is not opaque but a milky floss like something infinitesimally delicate microscopic spiders embroidered over the growing body, spun of web after web of tinseled chenille or angora gathering in all the furrows and gullies and crevices of the animal, and thickening. As winter ermine-viburnum extends plush dominion the organ stretches the four lobes that are legs away from the dough of its body's center; the legs move like a dog's legs as it dreams of running. The pink animal grows paws. The pads, pink spotted black, pillow out. Keratin curls of claw, kohl-tipped. Around the animal's mouth a cranial architecture ossifies to crystallize its fated element: canis: the muzzle elongates and fills with fangs, brow squares over the convex fault lines of eyes unopened, cartilage crocheting spires steepling from skull's crest, wet nose a polished onyx that trembles with the first breaths. A tail is creeping longer, feathered. What happens in the finishing moments of waking is the animal's eyelashes unlace, eyelids yawn open without terror disclosing jeweled lakes of larimar, sensitive celestine, chalcedony sheer seraphic in the midst of pink and white and black.

The animal looks up at Yucky Puppy with its Easter blue shocking blue eyes brilliant and the girl boils. This is a dream creature. The dog, the wolf. With iced crème coat a lushness to bury her face in. A pink tongue to bathe her ache and diamond blue eyes to sleep inside. The animal is sniffing the girl's hand still held where it froze at the first flickers of spark within the heart she'd thought deserted her. As it smells each finger with a serious expression Yucky Puppy cramps with shame of her body filthy before this animal, like she belongs in a dumpster there

is so much trash glued to her bones, to her surgical scars. She tenses to pull her hand away to hide it behind her but, as if scenting her disquiet, the dog places its tongue to a sluice of yellow-thick lardaceous something trailing stigmatic down the girl's thumb and solemnly, gently licks. A pardon. With this kiss Yucky Puppy and the dog stitch a pact: they will forever belong to one another. A belonging bound by nothing, without limits, which cannot be stolen. This dog is her heart and they share one body and they are sisters. They love one another. Untrashed and unbruised without terminus there is no severance.

Meanwhile the suicided organs are turning to ash and gnarled satchels and nothing of interest littering the pavement. Though she is sorry Yucky Puppy does not look at them again. With her hand cleansed regenerating in chrysanthemum fur of the wolf-heart, she senses her damaged limbs will finally carry her; she is light enough now to move. If her legs fail, then the animal will carry her. Silence hangs in the mist like a promise. She says: "come."

### *Identification of a Non-Nurse (Infusoria X)*

A horse staggers appearing through a crack in the fog. On the horse's back is a woman.

The horse is dark-coated a black that glints emerald from the way the mist catching sable in its dairy thickness confuses the color. Green seems the appropriate color for this horse, who, as it comes closer, reveals itself to be in poor condition. The unhealthy horse is herring-gutted, flanks trenched by ribs whose protrusion carves through skin like parchment, its spine a crenellated battlement running from withers to wasted rump, its coat disintegrating from flea bites, scabies, myiasis. Where the coat isn't parasitized plaques of piceous scum like bog moss, or like blood, barnacle the wilting hide. Flesh sucks to bone. The horse can barely walk; as it walks its body pitches with the raising of its scrawny left foreleg, the leg angles out quaky before the horse, the leg is suspended in the air like that for too long, queasily, as if the horse suffered a stroke and neurological disorder substituted its bones for wires taut in this position now permanently, and then it lets the leg drop, knee buckles and the horse stumbles, corrects with a reeling, and then the right rear leg lifts. This is how the horse moves through the fog: its gait a protracted collapse to pavement. Joints arthritic grinding necrotized bone away to grit. Ribbons of pleural goo and mucus plait swoops swinging from the horse's mouth, infectious yellowish, sudsy like a lather.

Yucky Puppy watches nervously as the woman and the horse approach. Because she only knows women who are dead or who are nurses, she is nervous about the woman. This particular woman is worrying because her face as she is looking down absently picking at her nails is made up of two black holes and a white mask, features potentially symptomatic of a nurse-type disposition. At a closer distance however Yucky Puppy is relieved to note that the holes are in fact huge mint-pink heart-shaped sunglasses, and the mask is a white paper respirator. The unconcealed areas of her face are marked by the same puce-shaded sunken gauntness as the party guests at the Night Hospital so she could be dead but though she is a blonde, wearing a mask, this woman must not be a nurse because she isn't pristine or plastic. Instead of a white smock uniform she is dressed in a long black jacket with fragments of broken stained glass window, bronze pendants and amulets pinned to its ripped velvet, jangling. The jacket's hemline is lavender-stained with mist sediment. When she raises her gaze from her nails to appraise her surroundings, she pulls loose strands of pale blonde hair behind her ears, she sits up straight clearly startled to see Yucky Puppy and the dog. Yucky Puppy repeats the following to herself: not all girls become nurses.

Stopping the horse by wrapping her hand into its mane and tugging the hair when she reaches Yucky Puppy she peers down to examine her with an almost imperious distaste, as if she were a countess routinely compelled to chase thieving peasants from her orchards. She slides down her respirator to unmuffle a voice that is slack drawl punctured by serrated angle-notes honing the vowels; she says: "What do you think you're doing here?"

While the woman's mouth is open Yucky Puppy notices her teeth behind wisteria-gloss lips are faintly yellowed, unlike nurse teeth, which are whiter than milk. Further convinced the woman on the horse is not a representative of the medical profession sent to recoup her Yucky Puppy decides it's safe to answer her questions. She shrugs, mumbles: "We saw a city." Then she points in no particular direction to indicate the skyline that has been erased since the previous night.

The dog's nose is lowered sniffing at the overgrowth and thrush of the horse's hooves, while the horse's legs bow and its head droops to graze the parking lot, eyes indifferent in hollowed sockets. The dog sniffs open sores on the horse's face. When the dog experimentally licks one of these sores the horse shakes its head and a fly scuttles out from its left nostril and buzzes away, the blue-black drone of its body piercing the white velveteen of creamed air.

"You must be insane. No one but no one wants to go to Corpse City. Please and as if." She sticks out her tongue to express disgust at such a lame cover story (this is something a nurse would never do).



"Corpse City?"

"Don't you know anything?"

Embarrassed at how poorly she is functioning as a girl Yucky Puppy stares down at the ground. One of her pink slippers is missing. The other is soggy with slime of unknown origin, probably garbage; on the whole she is messy, ugly, disheveled: holes in her pantyhose, her dress hanging in scraps of rag. To seem less pitiful or mentally and physically decayed than she does standing around mute, stupidly motionless, she lifts her hand to the horse's neck to comb her fingers through its mane but her fingers get caught, stuck in the matted snarls. Its skin under coarse hair is cold. "I think your horse is sick."

Grinning curiously the woman strokes the jut of the horse's starved withers. "Oh, this sorry creature is a total lost cause, obviously." Her purple smile scissors to a sharper slant as she pushes her sunglasses to her forehead to stare at Yucky Puppy without the interference of dark lenses, her squint chasing the reflections of misted daylight that track across the residual rose-silver of Yucky Puppy's dress. "The air is poison. You're weird. How did you get all the way out here, anyway?"

Yucky Puppy tells her she ran away and the non-nurse asks where from and Yucky Puppy answers: Night Hospital. At this the non-nurse's eyes brighten, widening green and suddenly eager. "Are you Her?"

"Am I who?"

"The Last Vital Girl. Consummate Hostess. Our Lady of the Xenograft."

These are not the names Yucky Puppy knows as her own – she knows: Princess, the Patient, Precious, Yucky Puppy – but the tincture of their rhythms as they touch her nerves trips the reflex to knit her hands together across her stomach in self-defense, remembering she has been surgically compromised. Since she does not know herself other than as Hospital property (and an empty space, a vacuity) she does not feel equipped to answer the blonde-who-is-not-a-nurse's question. Instead she calls for the dog, who is currently occupied tentatively tonguing to cleanse an abscess on the horse's ankle – the horse is unresponsive – but when called the dog hurries to come, in spite of namelessness (she called: "DOG"), and sits down beside her.

Tipped halfway off the horse in her impatience the non-nurse is explaining: "You're the accident victim the Hospital stuffed full with living designer guts and you were the first one who didn't start rotting, like, instantaneously, right? Making you an A-list celebrity."

"That's not real." Yucky Puppy frowns to hear these words fling themselves unsteadily into the air beyond her mouth. She thinks she meant to say something else.

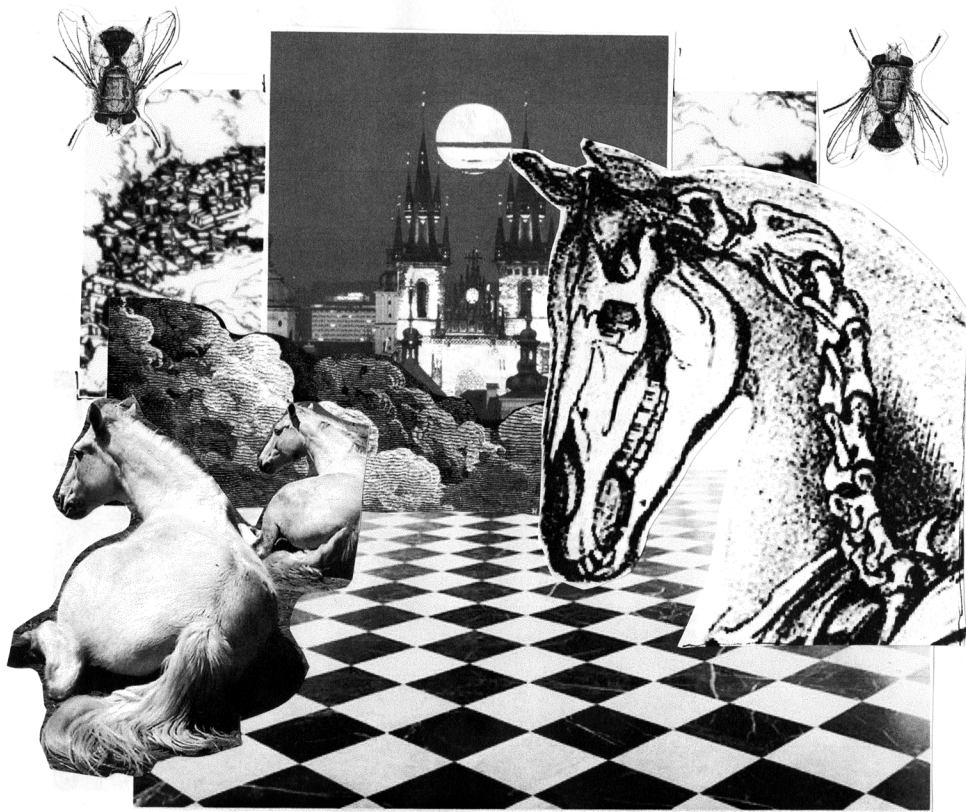
As the woman dismounts from the degenerating horse her jacket rattles, its weight of talismans casts a frail clatter, a dry oscillation of pearls scratching in collision. Unbalanced by her dismount the horse totters but catches itself does not fall. "Climb on," she says, offering Yucky Puppy a boost onto the horse's back, "you look like shit."

### *Corpse City Wildlife (1)*

The mist ruptures at intervals to disclose silhouettes, shadows edged in dusk dwindling to the tarmac, all of which are the bodies of other horses, greenish and bloated with the tensile pressure of putrescent rot, but mostly skeletons. Where they're rotten bad growth fills the crevices between ribs and entrails to make the horses appear obese, or it pillows into abscesses. Horses with eyes dangling out of their heads, horses with eyes gouged out, with larvae teeming in the eyeless holes and horses with faces with sections of hide peeled away, peeling off in strips, beneath which: a squalor of redness. More larvae. Red lesions. Some of the horses haven't stopped moving yet; these horse-bodies stand upright, instead of lying dead on icy tract of parking lot. They pace in slow circles or shake their heads side to side, as if to wake themselves from the stupor of dying. Teeth drop from half-dead horses' receding gums. The mist twines white garlands of roses coiled through their filthy manes and tails, like they've been bedecked for winning races, though these horses could never run. Especially not the horses collapsed semi-conscious on their sides kicking their legs in spasms and palsied fits. Mange-scorched blotchy paste of grey skin is falling off. Yucky Puppy wonders what the horses have done to deserve their bodies becoming gristle and dents in bone and mealy slough of sores disgorging foul stuff like vomit. Cysts and blisters, white tatting of mold, and the dark flowering of other wounds. Who takes care of the horses? Whose role is it to treat them kindly? They pass a horse whose spine is wrapped in a coursing sheet of worms. Then a horse whose popped eye is a cellophane bauble of yellowish custard, dripping yellow tears; the horse weeps pus down sluices scathed pink by infection. Clumps of flies crawl across all the blood-smeared horses. For certain miles of the walk the fog reeks of flies puking bacterial stomach acid onto planes of injury to eat dying horsemeat.

As she strolls beside Yucky Puppy, now on horseback, periodically the non-nurse pauses to assess a horse still standing, a horse healthy enough, plausibly, to walk. "How does this one look to you?"

Since all the horses look ghastly beyond horrible to her, but she is wary of being impolite, Yucky Puppy finds this an impossible question to



[For certain miles of the walk the fog reeks of flies puking bacterial stomach acid onto planes of injury to eat dying horse meat.]

answer. The non-nurse pokes a finger inside a horse's mouth and the snout sputters red froth from holes where teeth are missing around the probing finger. She frowns—red froth is a bad sign. Another horse, a chestnut Arabian who leaks less, seems steadier on its hooves, she takes by the mane and drags shambling reluctantly until it consents to keep pace alongside her. The non-nurse seems pleased with this horse: "No visible gaping disfigurements," she says cheerfully.

Yucky Puppy asks: "What's wrong with the horses?"

"Life becomes impossible. They run out here when they're ready to die," the non-nurse answers with a shrug, her voice distracted because she is bent over digging a large worm like an eel from a black wound in the fetlock of her new Arabian horse. "No one can stand to live in Corpse City."

"Why are they dying?"

Tartly: "The City hurts them, it's so hideous there. They suffer appallingly because there is no way to be beautiful in such a repulsive setting. Apart from run away and die what else would you recommend they do with themselves?"

Yucky Puppy has no advice for horses at this time. She lacks experience because she has been buried or drugged most of her life and understands little about the world, but she wishes it did not have to be this way for the horses. She thinks it would be beautiful to see them all running, at once, together. As she concentrates on her dream of running horses, silence gathers pleasurably tranquil in the spaces between the Yucky Puppy and the non-nurse. At the edges of this silence flies sizzle noisily everywhere. Later the non-nurse starts teaching Yucky Puppy important lessons about Corpse City: "Everything is dying all the time, you know, but it's not death that's the bad thing. You grow accustomed to it. Of course it isn't ugly or innately negative to be dead."

### ***In Red Neon: "The Mortuary"***

"Being dead isn't nasty though it's negative to be murdered. Like, you were murdered, which is decidedly too bad for you."

The two women the two dying horses and the dog step into a parking lot which is a smaller lot circumscribed by a low curb contained within the vastness of the main lot that is, it would seem, the whole entire world. It is the parking lot of the first building Yucky Puppy has ever seen close up that is not the Night Hospital. It is a factory. No, not a factory, she decides, it's a shopping plaza, one-storied and built from

blocks of beige cement. The plaza's seven stores each have one large display window in the front too filmed with dark smudge to see through, more dust and smear than glass, except for one. Over the single clean window neon hums scarlet reddening pulse

## ***The Mortuary***

Yucky Puppy says: "I'm not dead."

"Can you prove it? Anyway, that doesn't mean you weren't murdered."

Yucky Puppy cannot remember anything about who she was or the events of her life before her body was born into the Night Hospital, because of severe amnesia, but it seems impossible she wouldn't know if something as serious as being murdered had happened to her. "Why do you think I was murdered?"

"You're here, aren't you?"

This is not a line of conversation Yucky Puppy is particularly interested in pursuing further. Attempting to sound casual changing the subject she says: "Is it a long walk to the city from here?" Over the shopping plaza the silhouette of the skyline is climbing like heaven and cathedrals or wedding cakes piling one on top of the other. During the daytime the city is not wreathed in light. Instead, it towers petrified grey and iris-black, a forest of ore.

"How many times do I have to tell you: you *do not* want to go to Corpse City. Besides, I've got to show you my office." Her jacket rattling with the motion of her hitching the black-green horse and then the chestnut Arabian horse to red cords tied to white columns that flank the door beneath the neon, the non-nurse affectionately scratches the mostly dead creatures behind their ears, her lips whispering gently into the horse's manes words too soft for Yucky Puppy to hear. Her fingertips are damp green with gangrenous discharge when she lifts them from the horsehide; she wipes them clean on the silk lining of her jacket. "I'll deal with you two later," she says, smiling to the horses. They do not acknowledge her as the red neon carbonates their skin bright with spectral scars, a deformed alphabet of hieroglyphs engraved onto their flanks.

She opens the door, inciting starry clangor from bells swinging over the threshold, and waves to beckon Yucky Puppy to follow her into a room upholstered in ruched ivory satin (the walls and the ceiling) and merlot carpeting. This room is mostly unused empty space and then there is something strange at its axis, and other strangenesses pushed into each of its four corners. The strange things can be described as follows:

in this corner there is  
a phosphorescence-green struated  
blue and spike-sprined squama  
with a window sliced from the  
skin over its ribs, the reptilian  
lepidote chrysoprase replaced by  
smooth curved plexiglass panels.  
visible inside the lizard between its  
bones is a blonde doll in a bathing suit.

in this corner a lamb  
with an oversized pink-and-virgin  
blue polka-dotted bow tied around  
its fleecy lamb neck is chilled  
mid-leap like frolicking with  
its mouth remolded from rubbery  
pink and upturned, trapping  
the lamb in the throes of fevered  
innocence

### [NUCLEUS]

a frosted glass or lucite custod  
displayed on a polished plinth (black  
marble) from which artificial roses bloom  
like plump neoplasms. the custod contains as many  
as 100 marshmallow fluff kittens with blue eyes with false  
eyelashes attached around their eyes; and everywhere that is not  
kitten is flurries of winter sparkle, aspartame slush glitter.

in this corner one cat stands  
on the shoulders of a second cat  
upon whose shoulders a third  
cat is poised; from the third cat's  
mouth pried open jets a gush  
of milk and more milk and more milk  
or another white liquid into a  
pink plastic pool at the paws of the  
lowest cat.

in this corner there's a  
baby's bassinet pushed to  
the wall, pink rattles and  
white plastic wicker and  
pink cushioning in the bassinet  
nested is a body of boas swollen  
tight in coils inextricably a  
labyrinth or pure muscle, black  
varnish, greasy acid lime.

With a scowl and a swipe of her fingers through the air gesturing as if to erase permanently everything in the upholstered showroom the woman says: "I'm not responsible for this stupidity." In a lower tone, conspiratorial, she adds: "The Mortician is some kind of pervert." Then giggles. She takes Yucky Puppy's wrist – the non-nurse's hand is soft gelid – and leads her through a black door between the gleeful lamb and the cradle of snakes.

In the next room a man hunches over a metal table intently slitting open an animal. Long ears flop like platinum blonde falling over the table's edge: a rabbit. His razor jolts down the midline plump of bunny-dough from sternum to groin vertically, slides, squelches. Blue-veined rose and apricot sap rises writhing to the slashmark. The rabbit opening shucked like an oyster. In a row tidily at the table's edge are instruments awaiting use: pliers, tweezers, the skiving knife, Kevlar fleshing gloves, skinning shears and luer-lock syringes, a bloody sponge, a spool of pink ribbon. Glass eyes and scalpels with hooked blades float shining in a vase of barbicide. Beside the table where the man unpacks the rabbit is an ultrasuede elaborately carved giltwood settee, other dead rabbits unfurling paralyzed in seductive palsies positioned along its salmon-colored cushion. Each rabbit pale albino baring its belly laddered by black stitches. Pearls strung around the malleable meatiness of their bunny bodies, the midsection sutures puckering the supple pink under white fur like corset lacing.

Yucky Puppy can see that the room is cluttered with dead things for decoration. Mice coated in polyurethane like coated in rainwater and birds suspended by wires from the ceiling; kittens with skeletons skewed in warped arcs to conform to the confines of crystal orbs. Rhinestoned eels helixed in embracing. The lucent blue smell of plastic tubing and formalin-soaked pelts creeps from everywhere to laminate Yucky Puppy's eyelashes. Skinless rats in jars. A rat with a large crimson silk-and-plastic poppy replacing its head.

The non-nurse slinks feline sleekly to slip past the man without him noticing them, but he notices – the heels of her boots are too loud on the rubberized floor, her jacket is loud, too – and he looks up, with his hands draping rabbit intestines dripping clammy loops against his wrists down to the tabletop, and blinks at the two girls through the safety goggles that narrow his vision between walls of polycarbonate. His black rubber apron is bloodstained.

Looking at the butcher, Yucky Puppy identifies with the rabbit.

"The phone has been ringing all morning," the man tells the non-nurse. He drops the rabbit to the table with a wet thump. It just lies there. "As my secretary, your primary duty is answering phones. A simple task if you happen to be here. Where were you?" (Yucky Puppy shrinks behind the non-nurse with vague hopes of evaporating into the velvet

of the woman's riding jacket. She cannot fail to feel she is the rabbit and is in danger in this clean room, with this man. Unfortunately, as a vulnerable female barely dressed she's a little conspicuous.) The man raising an eyebrow when he notices Yucky Puppy, wiping rabbit juices from his hands on his apron, observes: "Though I see you've brought a client."

"You are so maladjusted. She is *not* buying this sleaze," the non-nurse replies, appearing bored beyond disgust to have to acknowledge the man, her boss, at all. She gives Yucky Puppy's hand a light squeeze to hasten her racing toward another door, this one with a nameplate nailed into the black faux-wood. In embossed bronze: *INFUSORIA X*.

The door shuts the girls and the dog inside a third room. The light switches on activated by the presence of their footsteps entering and ladles shuddery fluorescence over a dead horse folded like a fetus sleeping on the floor, drying flowers intricately braided into the black outflux of its mane and tail. Candles burnt down to congealed waves of wax which wash over to consume rusted forceps and serrated scissors form a circle around the horse-body, like a haphazardly tended shrine in some laboratory convent.

"I'm not actually a *sec-re-tar-y*," she says, spitting out each syllable as if it were a broken tooth.

It occurs to Yucky Puppy the smell here curdles the blue of the previous room to lukewarmish yellowing green. This chartreuse rustle of deadness under paraffin, under hoof polish. The horse is rotting. At Yucky Puppy's side the dog sits with her nose piqued attentively sniffing the air.

"Do you like it?" Infusoria motions to the rotting horse. "I do all the municipal horse work. For federal holidays, parades, whatever. Of course there's, like, zero money in it. I could care less. I work for the wolves, actually. I wouldn't do shit for dead men."

Yucky Puppy would be trying to comprehend what the woman is talking about but it is physically impossible for her to overcome the disruptive distraction of reviewing how her own position in life has been, as long as she can remember, precisely parallel to that of the rabbit. Gutted, prone, manhandled, posed: the Patient. In her mind she's seeing the surgeon's voice seething spurious Daddy-solace through his mask, the nurses his devoted extremities, and his touch a cutting deep viperous and icing in and like a murderer's. Nervously she would like to know: "Who is that man?"

Letting her jacket slip from her shoulders to the floor noisily with the clatter of talismans Infusoria crouches at the horse's side to prod its flanks, testing it as if for doneness as if it were a roast in the oven cooking, the non-nurse non-secretary begins to explain. "Well, as you



know, all men in Corpse City are essentially doktors of one form or another. Surgeons. Oncologists. I assume this came to your attention in the Night Hospital. *That man*," she sneers, "is a mortician. Talentless from a medical and artistic standpoint—a hack. Those big hands wobble. Can't razor a clean line to save his life. Yet he is atrociously, embarrassingly popular. In my opinion this popularity is accounted for by his being a pornographer: he makes what's dead look deader, deprives it of potential, of a future, and dead men swarm here in their white Plymouth sedans to buy these dead objects, the appeal of which is their being – at least appearing – deader than the men are, or they bring their pets here to have them murdered and plasticized and the men then return home to their hotel mansions with pets lolling in abeyance for their dead wives, for Valentine's Day. And also to languish in the foyers of the sleaziest 4-star hotels I refuse to set foot inside. People willingly keep that smut in their houses in Corpse City! In their penthouse apartments. Which should tell you what kind of a place it is. But what I'm saying is people – I mean dead men, their wives – eat it up non-stop, 24-7, these rabbits in starlet poses and wee angelical fairy lambs prancing for a little scritch-scratch on the nosey-nose. So completely cliché his entire output, and useless and evil, and to be perfectly honest, frightening sometimes—I see the way he looks at me, calls me *his secretary*, like he'd get his hands up inside me if he could and affix me, forcibly, permanently, with some messy sutures my flesh to the telephone cord simpering on auto-pilot YES SIR PLEASE SIR I'LL CALL YOU DR. But then this is no surprise to you, I'm sure. I expect you've experienced the worst first-hand, haven't you? Believe me, I have heard horror stories from the Hospital before. It's no place for a girl. Not that a girl is safe anywhere in Corpse City." A half-smile, soft, pensive, crosses the non-nurse's purple mouth, then it's gone. "However it is my personal belief and my motivation in life that dead bodies are not pointless, not destined to go to waste as vulgar furniture for the rich and tasteless. The problem with the mortician, besides being a doktor of low caste, thus insecure in his manhood or what have you, is that he is a slave or something like a cabana boy to the most conventional popularized superstitions about what it is like to be or to have a dead body. That a dead body should be female. The best-selling corpses are female one after the other incessantly but that is a reality spewed as the pukeage of a virulent mythology. And also he is boring. As all doktors, not to mention all pornography, completely bores me.

"Everyone who comes here, to this mortuary, is a boring pervert. I would estimate that 95% of dead men are perverts and 100% are boring. Roughly. It is somewhat impossible to find a decent doktor in Corpse City." Infusoria ferrets out a scrap of moleskin from one of the many piles of supplies that cover the floor, which she uses to shine the rotting horse's hooves, swabbing the cloth in daubs of resinous blackness resembling violet honey swabbed from a finger bowl. Rubbing this

black into the hoof that rests in her lap she says, "Now I am *not* a secretary, but I'm absolutely no doktor either. Not that I could be one if I wanted to—maybe you're familiar with another reality of Corpse City, which is that females are nurses. They breed girls for that here: congenital devotion to doktors, naturally expressed as cruelty. I only barely escaped and that is because I am posing as a secretary. For the time being. Please believe me when I say that this is a temporary situation. Anyway, my desire to be a doktor amounts to zero even if I could be one because I do not have any interest in prying things apart to possess them or make them deader, being bossy and fussy with bodies, as if they could hurt me, so I need to wrap my hands in latex, dress in white. Such prudish sterility. As I mentioned, I work for the wolves – *not* the dead daddies – of Corpse City, but it's truer still to say that I work for the horses. Horses are the most beautiful entities that exist within City Limits; I consider them divine without the intervention of me mutilating them by means of chemicals, polyvinyl, hydraulics to turn them into laminated statuary. I *do not* make dolls. All I will do to a horse is perform the minimum tidying and scaffolding for structural integrity then I step away and let the horses express their impermanence, which is the impermanence of suffering, decomposing into whatever modes of necrosis their cells assign. It's really none of my business. This is what no one seems to understand, and it's why I'm stuck as a secretary and so unable to make a living; I do not feel it is my right to warp the substance of animals programmed to align to insipid, banal, and predictable myths. I let horses die as they desire to die, to deteriorate. Let them rot. I trust their bodies. I trust death. And it's always absolutely gorgeous.

"What you also have to understand about the mortician is that he is obsessed with embalming. This is one of the key differences between the mortician and myself. Others include: I'm not a boring pervert and I don't fawn transparently drooly-eyed or, like, slobber over the checkbooks of Corpse City hoteliers. But most significantly I will not embalm any of my horses. The mortician, on the other hand, scours the softest meat from animals' bodies with pliers and scrapers and fills them up brimming to the eyeballs with acutely toxic goops. Peach-Glo humectant and pink-chrome methanol arterial dyes and lemon-scent rose tint sealant solvent and stay-fresh deodorant cauterants injected to petrify the veins leaving his pieces bloodless; the blood siphoned into buckets he pours into the dumpster behind the plaza. He sucks down the formaldehyde fumes. Some kind of carcinogen fiend. As I mentioned, a pervert.

"Personally I abstain from chemicals because they pollute the body, by nature a pure substance. I do not poison what is pure. And I do not want false colors nor dewy freshness permanent in the eye-glaze. What I want is the sacred blood pooling crystal at the cellars of the horse to

darken it painting livid seascapes visible through the skin as the smell thickens to syrup, an animal sap flowing into soil. Exquisite scent seeping through chinks in the City's embalmed skin. This is one small way by which I work to overthrow static corpsehood. If I do stuff the body cavities it's for ceremonial purposes, involving a consecration of myrrh, clover honey, citrine, cedar, rose preserves, amber, coral, sage, cypress. Horses are stuffed for aromatic indoor putrefaction. Before the wolves get them. The wolves always find a way indoors and I'm proud of them. I want them to eat everything; I would feed myself to the wolves, if they would take me. The dead men meanwhile would starve the wolves to death, if you can believe it—they say wolves are vermin. I personally would suggest doctors are the vermin, and the wolves are angels, and the horses are my Eucharistic daughters. Do you understand?

"When the wolves eat a horse I've prepared they gnaw the horse returned to life. The horse will live within the wolves; the horse actually becomes the body of the wolf. Embalmed bodies are exiled from the world, caged chemically remote from life. My horses reintegrate and canter limitless through the substance of eternity, even here, in Corpse City: they live forever. This is a miracle."

The horse's hooves exhale a sable glow of oil into the office dim. Infusoria stands, tosses the blackened moleskin to the base of a mass of candle fused in drips congealed over a speculum. As if she were tucking in a small child for the night she draws a satin sheet over the horse, neatly so the cerement covers it fully, primly, smoothing the sheet with gentle strokes. "Tomorrow this horse will be taken to be sacrificed at the grand opening of a mattress factory outlet. What a stupid thing." She rolls her eyes as she puts her coat back on and her eyes rolling slide down Yucky Puppy then lock on her. She frowns. "Come on. We absolutely must find you some different clothes. That dress is grotesque."

"I hate it," Yucky Puppy says.

"I know you do." Her purple smile keens.

The girls leave the dead horse to ripen another night readying to christen the mattresses of Corpse City. They exit the Mortuary through a back door to avoid further contact with the Mortician, for Yucky Puppy's sake. He makes her sick shaking with afterimages of green bathing by nurses while concealed all around the bed the Surgeon laughs cold disintegrating to bunny-gut reeling in her nerves, her spine, her skull plate. In her nightmare this repeats until she is nothing but a peel of skin like an emptied egg. Nuzzled by the dog but still shivering she thinks of cycles of decay and redemption and prays for her own animals, never embalmed, that they will re-enter the earth like Infusoria's horses sanctified by sumptuous reek, by infinite possibility.

## *Suburbia Cemeterial*

Yucky Puppy hovers close behind Infusoria X in the shadow of a tri-part archway, the center arch scaling tallest, each entry gated in black ironwork rusting to gritty titian at the spikes, the lattice overwrought overgrown scrolling through forms of fluid flora and foliage between gateposts that are towers of whitewashed cement, flaking in chunks. Each tower rises into a spindle-like pinnacle. On the top of each pinnacle: a cross, moody gold against the grey sky. In the tympanum over the tallest central arch someone has encised a skinny worm with holes cut into its wormy body which show through the robe it wears as if it were royalty, enthroned in an amnion of solar flare, and lilies, flanked by angels like blue caterpillars with swallows' wings and curly girlish heads and no legs. At the pawed feet of the worm's throne lies an island crowded with naked skeletons spilling from the beaches dragging one another downward into the boiling ocean. Spiders and bats accost the island's spilled bones. Over waves mucky with bone shrapnel, demons, and fire, five roses with five petals with tapers of wick sprouting as their pistils drip wax in heart-shapes like tears of blood down the gutters of ruffled bloom. The scene is stained in glistening high-viscosity nail polish glaze: vampy reds, seafoam vernal jade, vanilla cerulean, Vegas lotus pink-opal sequin sugar, onyx sauvignon. The stone of the archway is bruised and pockmarked as if it's been bitten, festering to grey silt at the lips of the bitemarks so powder showers down around Infusoria and Yucky Puppy like asbestos confetti. An inscription in the lowest tier of the carving reads: ***there shall be weeping, and gnashing of teeth.***

Infusoria takes a key from her pocket and fits it into a golden padlock that hangs from the chain looped to hold shut the double gates. "Home sweet home," she grins, swinging the gates open as the chain falls and the girls step through. The dog is the last to cross the threshold and then Infusoria locks the chain behind them.

Inside the gates a cemetery sprawls: a terraced vista of vaults and mausoleums teething from the scathed earth stretching for miles of sand and cement painted white, painted virgin-luster eggshell blue, minted aquamarine, emulsified lotion gold, bubblegum, second and third coats of white to cover the frappe and saccharine candy colors, the cement like alabaster flour crumbling finer and paler forever under moonlight, cement like white bread, and stocky white cement crosses bandaged in tinsel and sparkle-mesh organza and pink, white, blue, white, pink pillar candles planted in sand like such a soft snow it absorbs the sounds of footsteps. There is no sound whatsoever. No one

is around but Yucky Puppy suspects that there are many people and animals here, moving out of sight, and that their steps are as silent as her own sinking into sand. Cairns of tumbled selenite and amethyst scatter a vitric skirring of swerved light audible only along the optic nerve. To feel with higher-pitched clarity the sounds of white sand and cemetery Yucky Puppy removes her one pink slipper.

Most teeming along the soles of her bare feet are the sounds of white, and whiter, and virgin blue, accompanied in lesser density by coral, strawberry platinum and bisque blonde. These colors thaw and smell like stewed fruit. The smells melt into Yucky Puppy's blood and slide through her, a silken flavor soaking to the core of her tactility. Scents amass at high volumes inside her eyes.

Because she is being led, Yucky Puppy does not feel obligated to pay attention to where she is going but instead turns in circles to see as much as she can: scallop shells and petals torn from the heads of saffron marigolds arranged into hearts and pentacles to decorate altar tombs, a thousand votive candles in stained glass and the bitter amber smolder of copal incense an illumination that clings to the funeral sprays of lilies and roses in pinks and purples hung like wreathes from the latticed lancet doors of sepulchers; silk flowers, crepe paper flowers, plastic flowers, living flowers, wilting flowers, fuchsia wallflowers and piglet pink carnations, green and white cumuli of baby's tears and baby's breath, ivory chrysanthemums knotted at the stems into pyres, magenta celosia amaranths crested like brains of electric wool, cerise rose mallow, gold-hearted plumeria. Black veins of mildew snaking to disintegrate mausolea walls. Green moss creeping a gangrenous annexation of white stone. Urns of moss among the flowers, wet-thick green that deepens greener in shadow. Cords of vine weave tortuous to dilate the crevices of everything winding fused to chrome pink and mercury lemon ribbons of mylar balloons leashed to the necks, the wrists, around the waists of cement virgins and to the filigree of the ornamental fences that tip into tomb plots. White cement and ceramic angels with heads bowed from the weight of rose-crowns, carrying babies in their sleeves, lifting babies offered to the sky, their wings spreading out behind them, their skirts sheets of cream frozen into the sand where they're kneeling.

Above the pearl enamel of cemetery white the sky seems to fade paler than albino. The City is grey in the distance and barely visible here. Winds swollen with honeysuckle like rivers curve currents of warmth into the air, coaxing light through manes of tinsel.

Through hours of crystal sand and clans of statues weeping, missing limbs, missing heads, and years of alleys of palms strung with prisms swinging a diluted spectrum onto the frills of silk camellias, Yucky Puppy lets herself be guided wherever (she would go anywhere with

this woman) by Infusoria, the non-nurse, whose stride is a rhythmic trotting briskly forward like a healthy horse that stirs from her jacket a continuous strain of carillon which only quiets when they arrive in a grove enclosed by twinned columbarium walls like plaster-dipped slices of honeycomb, where the girl stops. The third wall is a mound of dirt. In the middle of the dirt pile a low stone arch opens a hollow into darkness. The walls on either side are taller than palm trees, seven crypts high by seven crypts across, their niches a disarray of votive candles and flowers in sun-blached seashore coral and crimson. The soft-focus faces of saints gaze out mute, reverent, tender but never smiling from the diaphanous blue washes of canivet lace and laminated holy cards nested among the floral glut, taped to headstones and to the wall and scattered across the floor of the grove. Yucky Puppy stands with the toes of her left foot over St. Francis of Assisi covering him from his waist to shaved head as he crouches to stroke the wolf's starved jaws to soothe them, while her right heel fixes St. Agnes to the sand. St. Agnes is a child-starlet draped in folds of filmy blue and white, her serious face – only the thinnest rouge moist on her lips signals she's been wounded – glowing in yellow hair that diffuses as it whispers away from her cheeks into an auric circlet, her halo. The sky behind the girl-saint is white with blue filaments. In her arms she cradles a lamb, very little, very white, whose eyes inset in whorls of fleece remind Yucky Puppy of the dog's unbelievable blue eyes, sapphire as holy water and full of stars. At the moment the dog is chewing artificial orchids sagging from a tipped urn. When Yucky Puppy bends to pick up the St. Agnes card, its plastic burns her fingertips, smooth hot as if freshly glazed, yielding the faintest scent of gardenia. She licks her burnt fingers, thinking how she could eat this sweet-faced child saint and her lamb made of spun sugar and meringue: she would swallow them whole together at once and taste the symmetrical shades of white and the blues of them cleansing her blood as they dissolved through the void of her. She wonders when she last ate anything, then hates herself for thinking of food, though unlike the hunger of Hospital this hunger for St. Agnes is not a sickness. Tucking the card up her sleeve Yucky Puppy calls the dog, because while she was dreaming about incorporating the girl-saint into her body she lost her guide to the mouth in the mound of dirt and she isn't sure she wants to be left alone to the cemetery. With St. Agnes warming the veins of her wrist Yucky Puppy rushes after Infusoria into the earth.

[ a short prayer is written on the card she now carries: *gentle martyr, vestal lamb, sister purity // ardently we implore thee: have pity on us, guard us and keep us, that we may survive to carve our names into some fresh dawn undefiled, to salvage ourselves from the rough touch, to rise from night restored, as pure as thee.* this prayer settles in, embeds an imprint of longing into Yucky Puppy's nerves and vessels and ligaments and the bone and the marrow and the

blood that flows its promise red through the chambers of her living heart. ]

Inside the cave Infusoria is waiting leaning over the balustrade of a black iron staircase. As usual she's picking at her nails, chewing split ends. Her hands are always moving. When Yucky Puppy enters the dark the non-nurse looks up from her nails smiling, and Yucky Puppy trusts her, but neither trust nor smiling can block the cold ghost of Hospital that breathes into Yucky Puppy's mind as she eyes the stairs' spiral down a stone well, a dark pit, bleak insolubly dark. Sulking on the landing as Infusoria and the dog plunge away from her out of the last strands of daylight, she searches this world for signs to reassure her it will not be a bottomless pit like the Night Hospital. 1) There is a lacework tracery of mold or other swampy verdure fanning out from the cavities that separate the stones. 2) The stone is filmed with damp smells of dirt. "Do you always dawdle?" Infusoria calls up from the bottom of the stairwell. "Are you scared?" Yucky Puppy answers she isn't afraid then clenches her teeth then shifts her weight forward to pitch herself over the ledge, then spinning down the stairs, steep enough she doesn't have to want to move to keep moving; she releases her knees, slants downward, trips deeper, lax, slack, tumbles to the last stair.

The last step buries her bare feet in a carpet of dust, which is actually ash, chilled and downy as clay touched underwater. This zone of the cemeterial complex is the catacombs, formerly the ossuary. A slush of cinders whips the taste of singed bone down Yucky Puppy's nostrils, greys her throat, empties an incinerator into her. Infusoria and the dog have continued running because they're healthier than Yucky Puppy is. They move until they become a black mote and a white mote at the end of a deserted corridor lit by the stark shine of lanterns like insipid oil issued greenish through the glass to leak in dribbling tendrils down the walls onto the floor and into skin, dyeing both. Green. Yucky Puppy's hands turn a chartreuse resembling nausea. The green light contaminates the ash unsettled by footfalls and pawfalls to conceal the floor in a spumy clouded broth whirling livid green. Flecks of light and outdoor air drizzle through the grates of lattice that slit the low ceiling at intervals, subsiding below ash like chinchilla before they can reach the floor. The light sighs mice into her hair. On either side of the corridor the stone pries itself apart to bear doorways; in these doors are small crescent windows, without glass, asylum- or dungeon-barred, through which Yucky Puppy glimpses the weakest watery yellows of candlelight. Wan yellow is the first sign of life or what can be called life in this Not-Hospital which is nonetheless frightening. Infusoria, who led her here, and who now seems determined to abandon her in this hallway and also to abduct her dog, is almost invisible. Walking faster to catch up to the non-nurse and the dog who are seemingly

getting further, further, further from her somehow Yucky Puppy passes seven doors. She is about to pass the eighth door when she's forced to stop because the door shudders open, and into the corridor a horrible grey shape is vented: a shabby scoliotic freakish inhuman monster covered in rags like the preserved hide of some blubbery sea mutant: this monster is a stooping lump of woman with her face pasty from white cosmetic as if she had been sitting with her face buried in a bowl of flour all day waiting at the door. Too whitened to tell if she's a baby or a thousand years old but she seems ancient in the way miserable things seem old because they're so ready to stop existing. Her mouth is a half-eaten bulb, desperately twitching, painted red, which falls open before Yucky Puppy can begin to scream to stop this from happening. Wondering: *Is my own mouth the same red horror?* Green drafts of grease from the lanterns stain the teeth inside. Like the teeth are steeped in lashes of fish-haze, an ectoplasm. The lips distend and suck back tugging inward the grimy white around the gape. Red gives way to black as the mouth spurts its noises:

"A child! A fresh face! You may not believe this but once I was very beautiful, like you are. Do you believe me?" When instead of answering Yucky Puppy recoils reflexively because the question spatters green spittle onto her face, the woman who is a monster scowls as if jilted. She wheedles: "You won't always be beautiful, my dear." Her words draw with them a wheezing hiss from the nadir of her larynx. "You will suffer irreparably and discover yourself unloved after all. Tomorrow, or the day after that. There isn't much time for us girls. Now, come into my room, dear, and let's look through some photographs together, you and me. Relax. Aren't you a pretty thing. Are you hungry?"

Yucky Puppy says no, thank you.

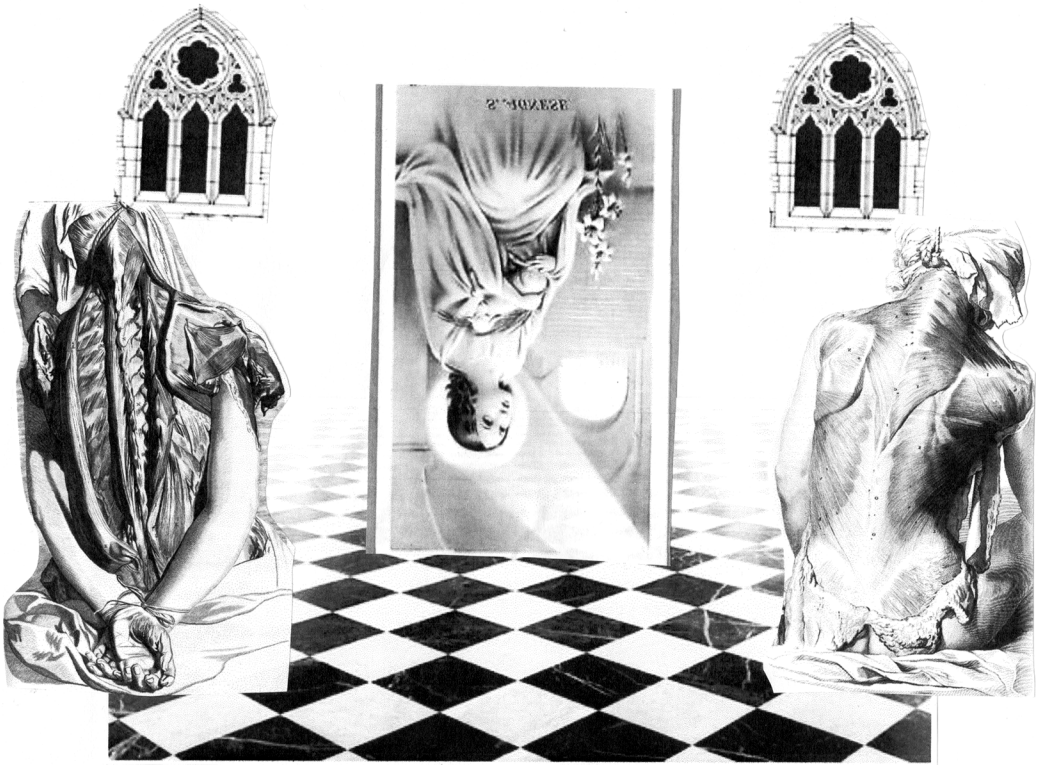
"That's a good girl. It's gruesome to eat. Too gruesome. You're clever not to participate. I scarcely eat myself. All the same, I'm inviting you into my room and you should come inside, please, we'll have fun together, just us girls. I would like to show you my pictures." As she's speaking the woman who is a lump of bony rot is roving through the folds of her clothes; her powdered face cleaves around jagged teeth to smile when she settles upon the desired object and shakes it at Yucky Puppy. The object is a book bound in vellum, the black calfskin seeded with ripening galaxies of mold, pages bloated from the damp of its internment in the woman's rags. Hooked tight around the covers her hands, a gnarling of unclipped fingernails and tuna jerky, are yellowed. "These photographs," she says, "are very precious to me. Do you know why? They are important precious photographs because they are the last proof that I was beautiful, which is the most special, pleasant, acceptable and nice thing there ever was about me. You must look at them. Please."



The woman has huddled herself close enough to Yucky Puppy that she can sense the harsh chemical cleaning solution cherry-flavored fumes of the woman's breath a corrosion that scrapes her own lips, her own pale gums and eyelids. She would like to place both hands over her eyes to stop seeing the woman, turn around, run back up the stairs into daylight again (she reminds herself: daylight exists) and take the St. Agnes card from her sleeve, set it down on the sand, kneel before it, kiss the unscarred girl-face, kiss the lamb. "I'm sorry, I can't stay, my friends are waiting for me—" and Yucky Puppy tries to squeeze past the woman. But somehow being a monster despite being only a small pile of rags the woman expands to fill the width of the corridor so there isn't any room between her and the wall to slip through. "Oh, my dear, you're young yet, lucky little thing, you'll still have lots of time to play with your friends." Yucky Puppy considers rushing on all fours underneath the woman's clothes, but she's struck by an eerie certainty that she'd die suffocated if she became trapped between the woman's legs. Stuck within the woman's rags with her. "Excuse me," she tries again, tepidly, tries to keep walking ignoring the woman as if she has barely noticed this mass of abjection blocking her way and isn't disturbed at all, but simply must be on her way, goodbye. It isn't her intention but her crippled body is still awkward because she hasn't had time to recover so in the course of this attempt to escape she knocks the book from the woman's trembling outstretched hands; the book falls, loose photographs water-damaged and blotched the nicotine sepia of blown-out overexposed in the fading disappear under thick dust; as they go down Yucky Puppy catches a glance of a bare torso scrawled down the center by a dulled crimson slash of incision, insides grown too fat after days weeks lifetimes centuries of ferment bulging out, patiently waiting to offer themselves to gloved caresses. The flesh that wrinkles back from the cut is glutinous grey fish-meat flattening to the slab.

One photograph shows a glaucous hand, as devoid of warmth as smooth as a statue's, the drab skin mottled by dusky lesions of bruise, the fingernails varnished maraschino red.

In another photo, well-fed curves of breast slant away on either shore of a coarse-slit delta of furrow oozing semi-lucent reddish jelly which runs like grenadine down the slats of the body's ribs.



*[He can't stay anywhere near this woman and confine to live.  
What have they done to us? Kinky Puppy wants to know.]*

Crumpling to the floor of the corridor crouched on hands and knees the woman claws through the ashes, rabidly, grimacing mouth wide open wordlessly bawling as she cringes and gropes in crisis to retrieve her pictures. There are dozens of them. A photograph of a dead body positioned laterally, viewed from behind. Where the thighs and buttocks swell there are indents in the skin that are bitemarks like tiaras of bluing puncture. Vehemently in spasm and smiling the woman claws a photograph from the floor and thrusts it up to Yucky Puppy's face: "See how lovely I was? Don't you believe me now?"

The picture is of a dead woman's body cleaved and placid naked on a table. Her dead flesh encloses a darkness that shyly politely exposes itself bubbling out from a massive wound that Vs between the dead body's breasts and extends as bleeding gash down to where the hair has been shaved from her vulva. The dead woman is completely hairless. Four limbs hang drooping quiet from the body's bulk, soft and appearing weird, wrong, broken or limp because the porous and fragile osteoporotic bones have been stomped into haze. Grey has claimed the body in various locations; in others the flesh is mauve, striated livid rose, lavender jaundice, murky dove venous. These are the clearest and finest tinctures of her rotting. Errant run-off blood has been daubed away from the gash but the gushed stain lingers adherent like 24-hour long-last lipstick. The dead woman's face is wrapped in white cloth. Along the bottom edge of the photograph someone has written a label:

***Mlle. ABANDONÉE IN TERMINAL PHASE: AUTOPSY***

"If you don't believe me come into my room I can show you every one of my scars—"

"I'm sorry," Yucky Puppy says to the woman whose face glaring up at her wild without its white wrapping is a thing of violence, a ruined fruit. She takes St. Agnes, warm with pulse and sun, from her sleeve and slides it between the knotted fingers of the woman who died, to cover the photograph of the damaged body she clutches, won't drop. This woman's need for the girl-saint – with her promise of incorruption and softly nuzzling animals and whatever it means to be pure – is an ache far worse than her own, she sees that. Then Yucky Puppy runs. She can't stay anywhere near this woman and continue to live. What have they done to us? Yucky Puppy wants to know.

***Another Bad Party***

Infusoria X's room in the catacombs is loaded with plunder collected from the disused chapels that the non-nurse tells Yucky Puppy are

around every corner in Corpse City, just begging to be looted. Significant artifacts she is eager to show off to her guest include a glass casket housing seven baby horse skulls she uses as a coffee table, and a reliquary like a gold-and-glass cathedral for dolls or insects containing the immaculately preserved finger of some unknown fourteenth-century martyr Infusoria calls "St. Cutex." The sofa is a church pew, dark wood, winged dogs and dragons carved into its ends. Yucky Puppy and Infusoria sit on the floor together drinking green smoothies out of communion chalices. The carpet, a worn tapestry woven with threads of foil, diagrams animals underfoot: in a clearing enclosed in orchards a unicorn dips the shining blonde sword of its horn to the bloody paw of a dog, whose lower half is soaked in blood. Blood drips from the dog's paws into a stream like a blue lemniscate. Deer and other hounds watch the dog and the horned horse from the cherry trees that frame the scene, while tawny in the red sky (which is the forest) foxes, falcons, housecats and rabbits solemnly wait among the mille-fleurs – rose madder, woad blue, weld-gold – to see the dog's wounds healed. Infusoria explains to Yucky Puppy that unicorns' horns divine poison, and that the touch of a unicorn chases disease from an injured heart. "Unicorns only trust women," she says. At night, when no candles are lit, the chamber grows cold and pungent with the breath of damp wood or the old bones that decay within the walls, because death is inescapable, but not inhospitable here. Incense burns continually in Infusoria's room, day and night, plumes of smoke coiling a constant spiced haze from the censers hung from the ceiling. Sandalwood, myrrh and clove burnt for purification, consecration, for the banishment of evil; rosemary and cedar to dispel nightmares; chips of black cypress thrown to the fire to staunch hemorrhage, and in veneration of the dead.

The girls sleep in tombs recessed into the wall, one on top of the other like bunk beds. Infusoria takes the upper bed, and Yucky Puppy sleeps below, so she can fall asleep with her hand in the dog's fur. She can only relax if her body is touching the dog's. At night sometimes her nose will start bleeding and Infusoria burns extra cypress for her then.

Tonight Infusoria X's chamber is overcast with myrrh and cinnamon, spattered bright scarlet in the corners with bunches of roses like clouds of blood through whose petals the perfumed light filters frothy red, and there is the unending presence of strangers who won't leave, because Infusoria is throwing a party, despite Yucky Puppy's terror of parties, which she believes is valid, and which she mentioned not once but several times when she was informed of Infusoria's plans to hold a dinner party in her honor. The object of this dinner party is to introduce Yucky Puppy to all of Infusoria's friends.

When Yucky Puppy first heard the word (*party*) her nose bled. Profusely. "A party might be bad," she told the non-nurse. Then sudden

blood a gush down her mouth and chin, spontaneously—an omen. Another excuse to disinvite herself from all parties was that she had already buried her hospital-issue Party Dress in the sand after tearing it into unrecognizable scraps with her fingernails.

Her mood is no better suited to socializing this evening but nonetheless a party is now happening around her. She thinks it's boring, which is the same as hateful, to have things happen to her. She would like to have a say in what happens but, like the party that befell her before, she is powerless to stop it. She is standing by the wall despondent in the Sisters of Mercy habit Infusoria dug out of some convent basement for her. The dress is a sack of sable sheep-smelling twill cut to fall from just below her chin to the very tips of her toes, its 16" train dragging behind her, its long sleeves fitted tight to her arms. A cincture of black leather bands her waist. If she had the veil she would be wearing it, too, to complete the look and also to be swallowed up in black as self-defense, pretending she'd disappeared from the party down a channel of sleep she might follow into some dream more pleasing than this one. Unfortunately all the veils in the basement had been chewed through and eaten by rats before Infusoria could find them.

"And she really doesn't have any idea how she was killed?" a woman whose enthusiasm for prying spurts the bones of her face forward edging through the spare planes of her skin asks Infusoria, staring at Yucky Puppy's body as Yucky Puppy leans against the wall next to the stereo pretending to look through a stack of cassette tapes because Infusoria told her to pick out background music, so that she would feel involved.

"Not a clue."

"How horrible."

Yucky Puppy daydreams: *if only my nose would start bleeding...now...or now...or...now.*

It would be useful if the blood could be beckoned, summoned, switched on like a faucet but it does not work that way. Her nose bleeds because her body is in the process of adapting to being alone. There are gallons of blood in her with nowhere to go (with nothing to feed) now that she is not a vessel; the excess blood runs out wherever it can find egress, whatever holes she has, her mouth and her nostrils and once her ear trickled blood and the underwear she has on beneath the underskirts of the nun costume are speckled scab-colored from the blood that leaves her between those lower lips, and dries, and hardens into scabs. In secret she scratches inch-thick scabs from her underwear with her fingernails. The blood crashes out in dark red waves when she's clumsy. Moves without warning. If she bends over abruptly. Sometimes the emptied interval between her navel and her spine cramps. When she

sleeps there's displaced blood welling a sensitive lacustrine sound she hears churn within the loneliness of her body.

Vexation: nothing visibly bleeds now to give her an excuse to excuse herself from the party.

"The poor thing," murmurs another woman who stops what she's doing to watch Yucky Puppy squint at cassette tapes. Then in a hushed voice, as if Yucky Puppy won't hear her if she's discreet even though Yucky Puppy is standing only a few feet away, albeit mute and expressionless, seemingly wholly enthralled by cassette tapes, she asks Infusoria: "Is it true that she was molested sexually by nurses?"

The assembled swarm of party guests is appalled at how Yucky Puppy was treated by the nurses and the Surgeon; they have a strong sense of what is decent and detest violence, exploitation, the wealthy and they disapprove of the practices of the Night Hospital. Obviously deeply upset by her plight – they refer to what she's suffered in certain terms: "her plight" – they are hungry to learn every detail of her situation. However they rarely ask Yucky Puppy herself for the answers. Not to disturb her? Does she look too damaged to speak? Although they eye Yucky Puppy while they speak the strangers' questions are addressed to Infusoria X. Solicitous glances take strokes at Yucky Puppy like eels thumping their blunt heads against her heavy convent attire, to drill perforations in the wool. But the habit, stitched by Sisters, is steadfast: at least tonight she has a dress which is appropriate armor for a social occasion.

Backed up against the wall Yucky Puppy is not involved in any conversation.

**Q:** when the surgeon put his hands on her were they faux-fleshed like rubber molded to metal because consensus is he was never human. did she ever feel attracted to the nurses, in spite of herself...

(the nurses are known to be ferociously sensual)

...and they would've been touching her, it would have been intimate...? was there ever a moment...? ...did she see the surgeon's face...did he have an expensive haircut... ...did he... when he... ...

what hurt the worst? the baddest feeling? grossest sense of degradation? when he...it must have hurt terribly... ...or was she drugged and what were the narcotics used because those drugs can be dangerous, can kill a girl. can spark addictions. did she ever become addicted to pain? that can happen sometimes, to girls. wasn't she afraid for her life? when they were cutting her. as the organs grew. does she have any ballpark estimation how much the grafts were being sold for? is she struggling emotionally now. (...) it's criminal, to take advantage of a young-and-vulnerable girl. does she feel she's lost her

innocence? is the worst over? does she sense she will ever recover from this? will she seek restitution... ...

...did he...? ...did he...? ...did he...?...

...at any point: did she scream ?

what kind of society are we living in.

we are all very concerned for her welfare.

An acquaintance of Infusoria's who writes books on Important Social Issues wonders if Yucky Puppy would be interested in publishing her story, to expose the Night Hospital and to protect other girls from exposure to the traumas to which her body was subject as the star experimental laboratory rat-slave starlet of that wicked that corrupt that inhumane institution. He approaches Yucky Puppy, tells her the book would sell a million copies and that in all likelihood by sharing her tragic story with others she would release the pain she has been suppressing or repressing and no longer be plagued by nightmares or PTSD symptoms. He asks her if she has nightmares. "Would you be interested in describing your nightmares?" If she were having nightmares it would be good to include detailed descriptions of them in the book.

"I have nosebleeds. I'm always hungry," she says to the writer before extricating herself from the itch of his inquisition to find Infusoria, to determine when this party will end.

She has learned by now that parties, like all pain, are endless.

One problem is that it is impossible to reach Infusoria, because she is the pivot of a crush of dead intellectuals fervently debating whether or not Yucky Puppy can ever be rehabilitated, and if so, how. What would it take to heal the serious wounds torn in her from being repeatedly violated and robbed of her identity by the Night Hospital? Without any particular personal interest in this subject Yucky Puppy idles at the edge of the group, listening. "But doesn't it seem possible no matter how unfortunate that if we're speaking realistically she will be irredeemably impaired as a result of these traumas." Infusoria notices Yucky Puppy sulking behind the others at the periphery of this conversation, rolls her eyes to signify she is barely tolerating this prattling on. Returning her attention to the topic of debate, she interjects: "As a friend of hers I believe that's entirely too pessimistic..."

what progress has she made, please detail:

*what progress have i made?*

Yucky Puppy gives up and wanders off to the buffet table. Though it is true that she is always hungry and feels like she wants something badly

to the point of dying from need of it, she is training herself not to be hungry, or desirous, by not eating, which makes her nauseous. Eating is also sickening. Her intentions at the buffet table are not to eat anything herself but to get her dog something to nibble. Throughout this interminable party the dog has been patient, impeccably behaved, like the pristine creature of consummate perfection the dog is, permitting her fluffy head to be petted and scratched and humoring baby-talk from the various sophisticated corpses who came around to inform Yucky Puppy that she is a Survivor. For its sanguine sufferance of the party the dog deserves to be rewarded. Surveying the spread of platters of ostensibly edible shapes laid out across the buffet table, Yucky Puppy is reminding herself she should not eat 1) so she'll learn to want nothing and 2) because she is unsure what she has inside her for a stomach. She knows nothing is as it should be in the body; all is disordered. She doesn't function *per se*. *and TRAUMA made me this way. isn't it possible i'm irredeemable.* (when she thinks TRAUMA in her own mind the word precisely means: the loss of her body to the Night Hospital.) It kills her appetite completely (thank god) to imagine food swallowed to decompose in a pit of nullity, the remnants of chewed food entering her bloodstream in big undigested chunks, a congested block of dead food stagnant inside her, spraying food-rot vapors onto the faces of innocent others when she spoke, if she ever spoke to anyone. Morbidly she wonders how her sweat would smell exhaling the body's burden of putrefaction. If the sweat would be milky like a swill. Abdominally stuffed with trash fuzzing over with mycelium moldy green her body would be a spoiled house, a stinking wretched kitchen. Once she ate with Infusoria because the non-nurse insisted eating was necessary; it was only a few sugar-paste roses from candy eggs she swallowed but right away they made her queasy; with a spoon firmed to the root of her tongue she gagged herself, to puke up the chalky pastel preemptively and obviate the predicted crisis. Yucky Puppy is more comfortable with a liquid diet. Drinking is an act of survival, not desire, she thinks, and beverages, being fluid, she theorizes, are apt to be absorbed more readily into her blood than foods, which are dense. Though the more she drinks it is also probable the body not yet acclimated to being alone will breed more blood so her nosebleeds and the red that ruins pair after pair of white cotton underwear will worsen. She accepts this, as putting liquids into her mouth is one of the few serious means of being polite she has the wherewithal to access. Infusoria, who in spite of the tortures of this party is a good friend who coddles her, detects Yucky Puppy's underlying drone of hunger and the fear that strangles it, and so creates for her elaborate mixtures of mashed fruit, wheat grass, Easter-colored coconut creams, spirulina and sugar syrups and lemon, lime, melon, tangerine marigolds spun through the blender. In combination these substances produce swamp-toned and swamp-textured purées Yucky Puppy sips gratefully as slowly



as she can, aboveground, listening to sunlight as she savors achingly the sensation of liquiform motion a smoothing to coat soothingly the mucous membranes that once protected vital pulp, in their absence now inflamed with a suffocating sense of purposelessness. These bowlfuls of swamp stir flashed impressions of a pre-Hospital existence too shyly woven and vague to solidify as true memory but which settle into the hollows inside her as a poignant homesickness; this yearning is raw clarity, a rare pain she cherishes when it stings in to scathe the unreality that sheathes her every other hour.

As Yucky Puppy is ladling honeyed punch into a chalice, assembling a plate of appetizers for the dog, amusing herself in dawdling by painstakingly choosing only the most adorable dumplings and tartlets for the beautiful animal, whom she longs to spoil, a man in a white jacket surfaces from the shallows of party din to stand opposite her across the table. Tall, young, with his shirt (sage, silk) unbuttoned at the collar under the jacket, his sandy hair swept up in feathers from his face, his features naturally bratty like those of some adolescent aristocrat, he is untouchably expensive and glamorous overall but underlying this air he has of being born on a yacht there is a current in this man buzzing anxious like wasps that scuffs the white glaze of his careless elegance. Body tightening reflexively against the possibility of introductions, ice breakers, Q&A sessions shared between this wasp-blooded stranger and herself, Yucky Puppy turns away from him and raptly fixes her gaze in scrutiny of the plump mound of some appetizer she was considering as a dog treat, turning it over in her hands as if it had caught her eye like a seashell, some surf-softened shard of milk-glass—something precious. The food in actuality is a peach-shaped blushing pale moon of dough dark inside with brown-black filling. She squeezes it between her index finger and thumb; it squishes. She pretends to be very fascinated by this squishing. Squeezes it a second time. Pale dough squishes, she frowns. She realizes she cannot pretend indefinitely to meditate on this piece of food and decides that she will count to ten and then she'll turn around and calmly leave the table, thereby fleeing the man. Of course it would be more convenient if he would leave, but she cannot expect anyone especially not a man to leave her alone. She knows that. It will be a short walk to the wall where she can huddle in the corner. This should not be a difficult procedure, though all parties are mazes. She counts: One. Two. The flush of candles on the table brushes waves of rosiness through the man's blond translucence, his Corpse City pallor, but the man himself doesn't move at all. She counts: three. Unmoving he stares fixedly at Yucky Puppy the way children cannot take their eyes off of deformed people spotted in public. Then he takes a sip from the chalice pressed to his lips and smiles. Teeth white as eyes' whites. She forgets the numbers that come after three and stops counting.

At night Yucky Puppy sometimes dreams that a miracle occurs making it so that she never has to be seen again. That she will be so small as to be microscopic as to be unseeable. This dream of the miracle of invisibility is the foil to her nightmare in which she has been dropped down through a hole into a tunnel lined with eyeballs suctioned like fungus to its walls she crawls through never getting any closer to the way out as the eyeballs grow fingers which have razors for fingernails hacking away at thatches of nerve and ligaments like wires and mincing hepatic tissue until she comes undone into pieces in the being-watched, after which she slowly slowly dies. She is awake now and the man's staring is hotter than any hands on her. She imagines his hands on her. As she turns around to leave she pictures arms shooting out of the eyesockets stretching to grab her. Yucky Puppy yelps inside her mouth and drops all the dog treats she'd thoughtfully collected rolling across the floor and runs away without saying a word.

Later in the night when the strangers have not yet dispersed from Infusoria's room, Yucky Puppy is curled in a pew with her eyes closed – the exact pose she predicted as her terminal approach to revelry – and she is concentrating on formulating a prayer for sleep when the blond man finds her again. His restlessness is a tighter knot of sharps prickling irrepressibly through the affectation of his white jacket yacht club coolness now. Something with too many legs moving too quickly all at once circles in the closeted hives of this man that Yucky Puppy can feel overheating the air between his body and hers. Hyperkinetic. He crouches beside her.

"You're not how I pictured you," he purrs.

She looks over the tops of her knees at him with a fish-eyed, blank, stupefied expression like she cannot understand one lousy thing in the universe. This is almost true. The point of this perfectly stupid look is to dissuade him from continuing to speak to her, but it's pointless:

"There is an extensive literature developing around you, your case, or weren't you aware? The Night Hospital hasn't lost momentum vomiting out articles since the mysterious disappearance of its star Patient. I've read and archived each one. Three special issues of the Night Hospital Medical Society Journal have been devoted to you. I am not a member of the Society but I subscribe to the journal to gather evidence of the sins of the Hospital because I oppose everything that goes on there. In fact I am writing a treatise on this subject. Your case, in particular, typifies the repressive medicine practiced and promoted by the Night Hospital. Thus my initial motivations for studying your case were strictly professional, but as more and more articles were printed I confess my interest as an uninvolved objector evolved into something more..." the man grins at Yucky Puppy "...shall we say personal. I was convinced the Surgeon would murder you before you'd ever be

discharged from the Night Hospital, so I had this fantasy that I would rescue you. Embarrassing, really. Cliché. When Ms. X told me she had found you in the parking lot and was hiding you here, at first I was disappointed because I'd missed the chance to save you myself. Then I was overcome and pleaded with her because I had to see you. It was imperative that I see you. Based on the reports, and from the accompanying operating suite photographs – please do not take offense – I had in my mind an image of the Last Vital Girl as a body scarred and barely viable, a heartrending casualty of Hospital. I anticipated dull hair, needlemarks, flaccid limbs, sagging facial asymmetries, tics, contusions—you had every reason to become such a cripple. I was still prepared to love you. But I was wrong: you're absolutely radiant."

Yucky Puppy is confused as to the reaction the man anticipates in response to this disclosure. For example, she is unsure if she's supposed to be flattered. Grateful? Proud? She isn't, because she *is* a cripple (nonviable), so the man is lying and it isn't flattering when even corpses think you're braindead enough to believe the lies they spew in your general direction. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I want to take care of you," he replies, bolder now that Yucky Puppy has broken her muteness.

"Infusoria X is already taking care of me."

"And you're satisfied here, after all you've suffered, you're happy here, buried alive? You're a beautiful girl; you deserve more than this. Tell me: what do you want?"

The dog edges in front of her to smell the man and Yucky Puppy watches to gauge her dog's appraisal of the hand he extends under its muzzle, offered for inspection. Tentatively the dog licks the man's hand. She doesn't growl or withdraw, but neither does she appear especially compelled by the specimen. Like all dogs, this dog prefers women. Blasé as regards the man the dog returns to snuffling the tapestry for food stains. It strikes Yucky Puppy that this man is at least courteous with the dog; he doesn't behave as if the dog's body is his to touch in whatever coarse way he pleases, tugging out tufts of undercoat, fondling the dog with cold clumsy fingertips like the rest of the dead do.

Because he is respectful of her dog (her heart) Yucky Puppy answers him honestly: "I don't remember how to want anything."

For a moment the man is quiet, a faint smile on his lips, his head tilted at a thoughtful angle so that the candlelight that sifts through his blond hair diffuses as if passing through water silted gold onto his shoulders. In this posture of non-speaking he begins to look to Yucky Puppy like St. Agnes, like a young girl and like an angel. He could be the martyr's sister. Yucky Puppy wonders how much she herself could resemble a little lamb in peril. It's confusing; the longer she spends in the presence

of the man she's becoming increasingly confused and then, the slippery upper crust undulance almost absent from his voice now because he's speaking so softly, the man says: "I recognize how strange this must seem to you since we've never met until now but you are special and you are exquisite and it is an atrocity you were ever admitted to Night Hospital. I will atone for the City. What I mean is that I would devote myself to you."

"Don't say I'm special."

"You are."

"Are you a Doktor?" (she remembers how Infusoria told her all men are doktors, meaning: all men are dangerous. she has no cause to doubt the accuracy of Infusoria's assessment but perhaps there are exceptions.)

"No. I'm an anatomist."

"I don't know what that means."

"What it means," the man replies, loose helices of wasp-shiver snaking aurulent in the enamel of his white smile as it widens, "is that I crawl through this life on my knees in veneration of the errorless, the everlasting incorruptible Corporeal, the limitless textures and intricacies and architectures of the Flesh, singular in its every revelation. A doktor envisions the body as a source of sickness and a site of decay and as a consequence cannot but be hostile to it; he strives to reshape the body subordinate to his will, to assign it a static standard form, to surpass it. For the doctor, bodies become machinic bundles, sets of replaceable interchangeable disassociated parts, whose appropriate and orderly functioning it is his charge to enforce, to regulate. To deprive the body of its integrity in this way is a desecration. As an anatomist, I do not desire to constrain the body to control it – I believe it is tameless – but only to bear witness and to diagram it, luminous in the opulence of its wholeness: sublime. My work is the casting of orisons to resurrect the Plasmic Cathedral."

Yucky Puppy's eyes drift through the folds of listless black twilled wool of her skirt in her lap because as she watches the Anatomist speak (she cannot listen, there is no language that makes sense to her, and his voice is slippery lost in the incense), shame welling to slow her thinking because she is listing to herself the thousand ways she will disappoint him. What doesn't make sense, however, is why she has this strange intrusive instinct to please the man to begin with. Because she doesn't exactly trust him. Sullenly she warns: "My body is ruined."

"Oh, but my darling," he says, "your body is the spire—"

## *Corpse City Wildlife (2)*

The dog, per usual, has run ahead into the blue light that bathes the street blurring into groundcover steam while Yucky Puppy strolls like sleepwalking alongside the Anatomist. He is taking her into the City. He is rapidly talking continuously and making gestures but the words spin circles around the girl mostly not gaining entrance; those that locate a point of access crowd in clumps to clutter the gutters of her brain which has become throbbing semi-squalid, a swamp or a sponge; she cannot listen. She is absorbing the City as it rises violet-mirrored, reflects a nocturne of chemical stars swerving up the vaulting of a sky drenched black. The stars are azure and crimson and brine-white and peridot bulbs sown in the walls of high-rises and factories. With every blink a new star is lit, fresh stars continually creeping out from recesses in the darkness, their auras of glitter spreading swarms that smear trails like spittle scaling ascendant glass, eyots of fluctuant color forming constellations to spangle a living sea burning chandeliers in the black-dyed sheet of night. Nerves dazzled to overthrown Yucky Puppy is plunged down a rich seam of vertigo. Dizzying she oscillates. But by some miracle she maintains her upright state of walking and nodding when she senses the Anatomist is waiting for her to agree. She consents. Every answer is YES. YES! YES. Because in the City he and everything is even more entrancing; she truly believes he loves her. To be loved by a man is a positive development. Everything he's saying is surely wonderful, educational, and she would be enriched by learning to concur if she were able to hear him over the pink and blue slow-boil of blue and pink neon, the hot steam kissing iridescent slopes of hotel palisades, phosphorescent oils gurgling down storm grates, the shameless moaning polyphony of the sewers that gush below the street, and all the little rats' claws. Corpse City rats are pure white with pink eyes because they are all albino and all related: siblings: sisters. Yucky Puppy hears the Anatomist explain that all the rats are female. They're produced in a factory. They are poured out onto the streets to enhance the quality of life like something natural. They also eat the dead who stop moving in public places and in this way save the City on waste disposal expenses. When the rats stand upright dancing on their haunches they reach Yucky Puppy's knees, hissing and begging for treats by showing their pink tongues and rows of white teeth like white flowers embedded in bubblegum, pink. Because every rat is purely feminine, on Sundays they congregate in department stores and people throw cakes down from the mezzanine for the animals to scramble over one another after in a writhing hissing mass. This is accepted as adorable. Her dog wants to play with the rats, but they reject its advances. Females are cliquish; they only communicate with other rats. Amidst the rats there are drab-colored spiders with the bodies of crabs:



[Dirty Peppy hears the anatomist explain that all the rats are female. They are produced in a factory. They are poured out onto the streets to enhance the quality of life like something natural.]

arthritic unsupple carapaces and crawling all over. The rats destroy the spiders by smashing their eyes in with rusted chunks of EKG machines. There are blinded spiders not yet dead running delirious spirals down the middle of the street; when the spiders cease to spin the rats surround them to pluck out the stringiness and eggs from their spider-guts. Some humid, ambient smell like meat thawing hangs from the buildings, a sweating veil draped moist red. The air is warm and thick and treacle. At the corners of her eyes Yucky Puppy hears howling, the rattling of stilettos driven racing down alleyways into the night's heart's swell. Pearl-glare fur and red polyester, lightning silver lamé vanishing behind hotels, echoing from penthouse balconies. The wolves of Corpse City are racing in secret along every dilated vein of night until the night bleeds and Yucky Puppy hears them.

"Are you afraid?"

### *Laboratory of a Schismatic Anatomist*

"Are you afraid?"

(...their course parallels the running of the wolves through factory tunnels, parks, bus stations, streets covered with scraps of gauze and old bandages, broken glass...)

*no! not afraid*

( ? )

And then off the sidewalk through a revolving door into a hotel lobby like an artificial tourist-trap cavern carved from three shades of marble in succession (frozen yogurt hues: vanilla, strawberry, mocha) marked by pools of sticky wine-dark splatters and handprints and footprints no one will ever bother to mop away and there are bulbs close to dying convulsing flicker in spasms. The vexed light worms extra vigorous when it catches in the blotches of red scum. Stalactites which are vanilla marble columns like fat pillars of thigh, tinsel in cobwebs, with corpse couples' initials hacked into the stone along with clumsy hearts and other obscenities. Sitting behind a desk on the far end of the lobby is the hotel clerk or concierge, whose scoliotic curvature of stooped over and aquiline nose and faded yellow floss-covered head bobbling on a stem-like neck make Yucky Puppy start laughing because the hotel clerk looks to her so hideously half-man half-vulture she wants to scream. But it's inappropriate to scream at people even if they're actually monsters. The Anatomist mistakes her laughter for a sign she's enjoying the story he's telling her about a scene they'd

witnessed minutes ago walking together towards the hotel as if she hadn't been there or lacked the faculties to process events, as if her brain were rotted pointless tumor-ridden, but she doesn't care because yes, yes, she is stupid. They were in the park together, the man was guiding her through the park; children had scooped armfuls of rats into a tank at the edge of a concrete-banked canal; a child took rats from the tank one at a time, passing each rat to a second child who doused it in a bucket of perfume so another child could light a match under the rat's face and then the rat would start burning. Flames carried from nose to tail along the rat spines and down the rats' sides, until the animals were consumed in orbs of fire; then the rats were thrown into the canal to float away downstream like paper lanterns. The children were squealing and clapping while the blazing rats, also squealing, struggled not to drown. "Isn't it refreshing to see children playing outdoors?" the Anatomist had mused as he led Yucky Puppy across a narrow bridge over the rat-lit canal. Rat smoke reeked of bacon grease yellowing the current's breath. Yucky Puppy leaned over the railing to see more closely the rat-fur rat-skin singeing away to papery friable black, a sheer tissue of embers through which the rat's skeleton could be glimpsed, bones snapping out of joint to extract themselves from the scorch while the body began to sink. Rat eyeballs and stomachs ruptured in the heat, popping like caviar, loosing stinking serums into the canal.

Now in the hotel lobby the Anatomist is talking loudly in a wistful tone, saying how children can be so delightfully inventive in their little games. Comparatively adults have zero imagination, wouldn't she agree? That it is best rather to remain inquisitive like a child, taking an experimental approach to one's surrounding reality. Yucky Puppy wobbles her head around as a mode of YES! Though she would not want to experiment with burning animals alive. Still, she agrees with whatever he says which she doesn't have to hear to agree with. She is in no position to think but she is thinking that it is possible the concierge is a mannequin made of wax and wires because he hasn't blinked since the man brought her into the hotel nor breathed to stir the dust that snows his burgundy tuxedo.

To the right of the revolving doors the lobby becomes a seating area furnished with overstuffed beige suede loveseats around card tables and an electric fireplace. On a loveseat before the electric fireplace two women are curled into one another, tittering into one another's coiffures, taking turns applying and reapplying red gloss from a tube to one another's mouths. The women are wearing cocktail dresses in which they resemble poodles in bridesmaid drag; one's poodle-dress is salmon, the other's ivory. When they hear the Anatomist's voice they stop suddenly in the middle of glossing red the salmon poodle-girl's lips and spin in unison to squeal at him. In one voice they bark: "HELLO,



DADDY!" Crimsonly simpering, waving hands with rings piled up on the skeleton fingers swinging atonic over the back of the loveseat. Residues of their screeching itch like splinters of asbestos, a barbed and crystalline friction that burdens the air. In spite of the racket they're making their dead faces look as worn out as the rest of the seating area's beige suede. The Anatomist doesn't acknowledge them but wraps his arm around Yucky Puppy's waist defensively as if he fears the women might clamber over the loveseat to grab her from him to use her as food for themselves or kindling for the electric fire. Yucky Puppy wonders if these girls are possibly off-duty nurses.

Salmon poodle-girl (who has a cigarette burn half of an inch above her left eyebrow) says: "Oh so you're pillaging the convents now?"

Followed by ivory girl-poodle (whose teeth are black but mostly absent) who sneers: "How *genteel*—"

"Very, very. So we're to understand you're born-again. Please explain, did you at last grow disentranced of the gaudy and brutish decadence of your usual haunts?"

"What ever will we do now that Daddy's *gone straight*—"

"Or perhaps there was some concern of contagion?" the girl in the fish-color dress squelches a giggle under her fingernail like a scab which breaks off into her mouth and she chews it up then turns to her friend with her hands on her hips to say: "Of course it's none of our business. And now as I reflect on my history with Daddy, I'm realizing I always did detect a devotional streak worming through him. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes! A touch of the ecclesiastic ever an undercurrent in spite of...prominent proclivities...it's no shock he would abandon us."

"We are filth, aren't we." "We are the lowest scum of this society, as we've been told."

"Daddy should euthanize us now."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" "HaHaHaHa"

"I wish someone would." "Daddy, please?"

....."HaHa".....

The conversation trails off because the poodle-women can't speak through the thickening roar of their toneless laughter like vomit choking out the lobby. Yucky Puppy decides they're probably not nurses after all. Maybe they're worse. Firming his grip on Yucky Puppy's waist the man steers her across the lobby to a frosted glass elevator door. Seconds later the girl and her dog are behind the door beside the Anatomist enclosed inside a glass-walled cell, thrust upward along a

flue of chilled colorless light scaling to the apex of the City. Yucky Puppy floats in her skin as the blood in her flows down to bloat her calves then inflate her ankles trickling to the soles of her feet and stiffens as the elevator speeds to the darkest regions of nightfall; she leans her forehead against the glass to stare out across a vista of high rises castles steeples crumbling platinum-azure shatterproof sapphire-black laminated glass ruins shining like oil spills, teeming with the eeling rhythms of an ultraviolet aurora, factories built of dry ice collapsing into strawberry-opaline smog that crests threadbare over smaller factories over empty lots over tenements and eggshell chapels turning ochre among mounds of gravel. Bare scaffolding clings to the flanks of slums like insects starved senile and rachitic straining to fuse their exposed infirmities with the metal, the concrete, to anneal that which would fail and soften.

The whole knotted hypnotic repulsive mass of Corpse City trembles beneath her. Yucky Puppy is rising. At the zenith she is the only girl left alive...

(she's special he says: she's special; her specialness in his eyes is a swoon makes it so she's overwarming through every synapse occluded under Sisters of Mercy twill)

...and the City is shrinking until it's just a smear, a quiver...until it's lost. Yucky Puppy's sweat pearls on the elevator glass condensing when she backs away because behind her she hears the door whisper open again. Standing with its nose to the glass the dog's body tenses. Why should it worry? Nothing is complicated. Yucky Puppy is the last girl that exists like a living being in the world: this alone makes her special: it is simple to follow the man. The Anatomist tugs her belt as if it were a dog collar around her waist to escort her out of the elevator. Her feet are slow to respond because of the blood in them viscous at this altitude so she stumbles. She's lucky: the man holds her steady. "Come," she says to the dog, who sits down instead, its head cocked as it stares up at Yucky Puppy, mistrust a murmur unsettling the blue water of its eyes. Only when the girl shrugs - "Suit yourself" - and turns around like she's going to leave the dog and go alone with the man does the animal yield, scampering to stay near the girl as she's drawn by the man from the elevator into a hallway. "Good Dog," Yucky Puppy says. "Good dog," the man says. Very quietly the dog growls. There are a thousand doors stretching forever in either direction.

The Anatomist tells her he owns the entire floor (an inheritance), so each one of these doors belongs to him; she could pass through any door and find herself in his laboratory. He instructs her: pick a door. It frightens Yucky Puppy to be suddenly forced to make a choice; rather than relying on her judgment, because she's brainless - and after all, the doors cannot be very different, it cannot matter too much, it is not

as if behind one of the doors she'll find darkness full of knives and decaying cockroach meat and skinned rabbits nailed to the walls – she simply steps up to the first door her reeling eyes land on and places her hand to it. When the door is opened a grey-blue light leaks into the hall. The Anatomist ushers Yucky Puppy and the dog into this light before he enters it, because he is chivalrous. A gentleman. He locks the door behind them. He turns the deadbolt and latches the chain.

Except that it is extremely clean the room does not strictly satisfy the definition of a laboratory. Everything is white blaring like a liquid her reflection defiles, a muddy smudge. The Anatomist turns a dial to dim the ceiling lamp until the dominant glow is cyan oyster blue of the City beaming through the big picture window. White shag wall-to-wall absorbs blue tint and crests lapping at the legs of a pony-skin sofa and casting tufts of splash against a coffee table formed from one uninterrupted slice of molded Lucite, bluish with trapped light. The sole artifacts to indicate this is not the first time anyone (specifically, a Medical Professional) has ever set foot within the room are arranged in the style of a museum exhibit on the Lucite table: a row of meticulously polished hemostats and shears, an antique pair of surgical glasses, a cut crystal beaker full of clear syrup and circled by four matching cut crystal tumblers. Lastly a bowl of pastel green breath mints.

Anxious that if she steps onto the carpet whether or not she takes off her boots the weight of her body will darken the tidal plush Yucky Puppy doesn't dare move away from the door. She wishes she had chosen a different room. In this room she feels tainted inexorably fated to drip but the Anatomist tugs at her cincture playfully coaxing her deeper inside with him until like a lamb she complies, on tip-toes, to minimize contact with the carpet, to keep his house clean; the man explains to Yucky Puppy how she must need something to drink and she agrees – she has a "special" talent for it: consent – and gliding to the table to fill a glass for her he announces he'll give her the full tour. She's thirsty. Greedily draining the glass she's too nervous with self-nausea to cast her eyes anywhere but down so she's staring transfixed as a sunburst of black tendrils spreads from beneath the soles of her feet. Black filaments of juicy worm-squelch squirming through the membranes of her knit stockings, her leather boots. It's not real. *It is real:* this stigma is the blood of her body-atrocity, alloyed to sweat turning sick-dark, weeping into white shag from the cracks along her arches. Blood pours down and out of her control. Fortunately the Anatomist does not seem to notice she's corrupting unspeakably his pristine pure ivory hotel suite; at least he does not visibly cringe nor shout at her, does not tell her to leave immediately the laboratory into which she's so ghastly helplessly criminally bleeding gore. Several parts of Yucky Puppy would like to be told to leave this room though she

would never be able to find her way back through the alleys and rat canals of the City. Then the man informs her in a low voice that she has a beautiful \_\_\_\_\_ (*did he say throat, or thorax, or eyes or inner thigh or cervical spine...?*), takes her hand and leads her out of this laboratory into another.

↳ to get to the next room requires sliding sideways through the closet in which the Anatomist stores gallons of bleach, white coats, powdered milk, isopropyl, and sterile gauze

→ → →

**2<sup>nd</sup> ROOM :** pink faux shearling underfoot and darker pink velveteen draped to curtain the window which is one entire wall behind rippling folds to keep out the City sliding its blue glow salacious against the glass, because this is a private room. the light here is electric, sizzles pink like a vapor. taped to the other walls, the three without curtains, painted cream, are posters of pretty fair-haired agreeable young women posed in bathing suits or even smaller garments (*négligées*, black leatherette leotard motorcyclist costumes, lace bralettes, rhinestone jewelry) in stylized postures of: falling to their knees, splayed on their backs w/ pretty hair flowing shiny from foreheads to the bed to the floor, waiting, winking coy, crawling on all fours with spine arched kittenish head tipped up to bare the jugular, living in bedrooms they have no plans of leaving, pleading, lathering the eager-to-please parameters of their bodies in bubblebath, milking silicone from their erect nipples, biting their fingertips, pouting, gazing sultry through twilight layers of benzodiazepine coma, lying facedown on empty bellies. the sheen of their skin like overpolished vinyl as they hike up their miniskirts. the Anatomist has pinned pieces of drafting paper to various elements of these female bodies – foremost the lower halves of abdomens along the sharp-jawed jut of hips, second most popular: the oblique apertures of smiles expressive of nothing – which he has marked with a scatter of cryptic symbols and formulas, line segments intersecting to spawn angles superimposed adherent to a plump-lipped sullen peroxide-blond's zygomatic process, some big-busted housewife's left maxillary sinus or the anterior arch of a mocha-skinned natural beauty's pelvic cradle. a dashed line connects one young pony-tailed girl's lacrimal bone to the perineum of a woman who is only a bisected curve of wet flesh contouring to a pair of red panties. certain women have rings traced around their armpits and their long thighs shaded in and navels framed like speedometer dials. annotations in cursive too tiny to read (which Yucky Puppy couldn't decode anyway, because she

now has no intelligence) cluster around the symbols and sketched lines like flies newborn from dead meat, the maggot womb. buzzing, chewing, a squall of parasitic ciphers initiates a nightmare language of sterile-lipped scars and novel orifices self-replicating through the burnished doll-pieces of the pin-up girls. Yucky Puppy stares at the posters in the pink light. in this room, the man explains, he is studying rarefied delineations of the female edifice so as to refine a system of operations for diagramming the Anatomy of Grace. he says a woman's substance is the most elusive physical form of divinity, every woman is an idol—

"...but **your** body is a rare event, beyond the normal girl..."



her head is swollen, feels green + she is embarrassed  
passing through a bathroom

the dog pauses to drink from the clawfoot tub

full of ice cubes, under the ice scents a meaty  
object which is a section of someone's body

"I found that on the street," the Anatomist says

↘ → **3<sup>rd</sup> ROOM:** in this room he keeps animals in cages. walls honeycombed with cells housing snow-white rats, white mice, white rabbits who barely move but wrinkle their small pink noses when the lights come on. blinking stupidly squinting pink-eyed through the panels of plexiglass that guard the hotel air against their sallow rodent-smells. non-animal objects in the room include a stainless steel table, a sink, cotton swabs, a squeezable tube of green detergent, a tank of barbicide for bathing sharps. one pair of pliers and a knife. to give the room a touch of color to reduce the monotony of silver and white a glass cupboard lined in pink cloth containing a rat flayed exhibiting its wax-dipped painted entrails is affixed to the wall over the sink. the rat's altered gut colors are lurid synthetic: scald-fuchsia, sulphur yellow and cerulean.

"the mammals are genetically modified, selected for poor peripheral nerve function, they don't feel pain, barely have nervous systems, for the benefit of scientific inquiry. vivisection is now entirely humane."

\* a rat spurts weak hiss through holes in its plexiglass

which the dog is sniffing. the dog flattens its ears back  
but won't growl

\* Yucky Puppy notices furrows of sutures raised interrupting the  
white furscape of many of the animals, then all of the animals.

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

entering the next room requires stepping gingerly  
over a biohazard bin

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

**4<sup>th</sup> ROOM:** is the man's bedroom, or one of several, he says. there are so many in the laboratory that he switches from room to room. it is the same as any hotel room, anonymous, with beige bedspread, pine fiberboard, a painting over the bed's headboard of a woman whose arms and throat are filaments like the stems of derelict lilies twining into the surrounding nighttime from a column of sinuous cataract of black fabric embroidered with gilt serpentines and red. her face is held in secret behind a black veil. the long robe she wears spills down the wall on which she is standing poised in transfixion like a shepherdess or sibyl, her arm raised to point into the blue wash of night, pointing at nothing. in the tree over the woman a panther stalks among the branches, its body of oil reflecting blue, its angles of haunches and paw tensed agile, its musculature supple stealth-infused, rippling, sheathed slippery under fur. the woman is inaccessible out of contact enclosed within her robe her veil her stalled vision but the big cat glowers from the painting with eyes flickering yellow like fierce citrine.

( Yucky Puppy is tired of touring this laboratory,  
no longer sure it was her decision to come here. She would in any case  
prefer to lie down at this hour, it's late, because bodily she is blurred,  
dizzying, queasy, lightheaded, fever like an infusion breathes  
through her whole skin, but the man is holding her uselessly  
burning hand in his + he pulls her into the hallway  
toward one of his other rooms )

← run out onto corridor carpeting of a vegetal floral print Yucky Puppy  
sees like sores, a garden of sores (each sore is a red flower) gaping slobber  
like orifices pulsing open to gulp her feet, pistils as tongues of pus

licking the soles. notices her feet are bare all of a sudden —

*where did my boots go?* ←

→ → →

the Anatomist opens a series of doors rapidly one after another then another into a darkness so total that to be sure she isn't dissolving Yucky Puppy must hold onto his arm hanging on as if he were her father and she were too much a half-formed infant still to walk without his support. even when she is dangling from the sleeves of the man's jacket it seems that her fingers and legs below the knees, those more distant pieces, which she is dragging with no small effort because she's exhausted, could be detaching from her cell by cell dispersing as albino motes of dust which absorb the dark and assimilate into the ambient nothing. as the dark of the hotel-laboratory annuls her she's feeling lighter. is it unpleasant?

## ← the 5<sup>th</sup> ROOM

is another dark place where specimens are displayed in vitrines full of some diamond-bluish chemical solution. a pink aura, vaporized preservative, wafts around the showcases. "Every specimen is absolutely an individual," the Anatomist avers, sage-like and reverent.

**V**cindy : pert gravid the alabaster summit of a breast overgrown by blackcurrant and burgundy lace of vessels webbing the undercurve: a demi-bra of ectopic veins. the breast is also remarkable in that it's got two nipples, one of which is a black chancre. the girl was nineteen years old when her heart burst because of the grief and the worms inside it; the second breast had been likewise ivied over with wires of blood when the doctors discovered the mutation while palpating her dress but the released hemorrhage-soil of her heart detonating beneath the cotton had fluidified its adipose, rendering the breast shapeless, unfeminine (thus unsuitable for exhibition).

but for the one breast that remained intact and enlaced the Anatomist had bought the dead girl from her family, even though they had no use for her and would've given her away for free just to be rid of the body. he tells it like a funny story.

**V**<sub>circe</sub>: a woman's hand, a witch's hand, its index and middle fingers extended, slender spidery bent backward tapering between knuckles like stones or like the pits of fruit (peaches plums nectarines) forced down the throats of bones through mouths concealed under the fingernails; the nails are pointed and varnished red the color of blood or black cherries. along with the index and the middle finger the thumb is also pointed heavenward while the ring finger and the little finger are lowered to touch the palm, so the hand assumes the shape of benediction. a gold bracelet flashes from the frayed wrist. the witch, also an insane woman, cut off her own hand because she believed she possessed the power to grow herself a fresh one; once the Anatomist had complimented her long fingers, so when she severed the hand she mailed it to him, as a present, because she was sweet on him.

"did her hand grow back?" Yucky Puppy asks. he never saw her again after that, thus he cannot say either way, but he doubts it. "She was insane" and he smirks and he shows his dazzling teeth.

**V**<sub>bunny</sub>: looking sopping, flooded, muzzle white tucked into folded white paws like hiding sheepish blushing or giggle but in the middle of the forehead the white rabbit's eye is wide open shining bluntly. the single eye is a ripe pink bulb planted in the face of the animal. a fleece ruff around the neck like a fur stole marks the terminus of the rabbit's head below which its round body is peeled, the flesh diaphonized, its dainty bones visible dyed vivid hyacinth. she was a former pet, then she died.

**V**<sub>flora</sub>: as if seated in the tank a pelvic cradle mid-gut just beneath the navel to sliced off at lithe and athletic upper thighs – in cross-section resembling round steaks – tipped up to expose maximally the labia like a pair of wings, ruffled, decadently fleshed, spread and stretched and stapled to the loins before the



amputation point in demonstration of their largeness and how much the billows of skin sealing latent bloodchurn remind one of sea life, of manta rays, the anatomist muses. the vestibule to the girl's sex is intensively artificial scarlet veined carnelian-cerise, its rutilant glisten like a beacon snuffed when buried burrowing into the grotto of her orifice. this specimen had been institutionalized as a nymphomaniac; she wrote love notes to every doctor who touched her; she had lived 12 years comprised of throbbing continually and unbearable rejection when she decided to throw her body out the window of the clinic so she wouldn't be responsible for it anymore.

**V****lucy:** a section of face from philtrum to brow vertically, lengthwise: halved bridge of nose to left temple. the most prominent feature is the orbit of an eye, and the eye itself, which is prettily defined pantheric-feline in kohl, the eyebrow tweezed to a slender arch. in this high-class socket the eye is whitish milkish jelly undisturbed by either iris or pupil, like a crystal ball predicting mist under the mascaraed lashes. "Most women in Corpse City go blind eventually," the Anatomist says, "but few with the same resolve as sweet Lucy."

**V****therese:** typically another dancer with venereal warts would be of scant fascination to the Anatomist but in this case because of the frightful exquisite grandeur of Therese's affliction he was struck by her and paid full price. the excrescence: rough scaled undulating like coral this shock of keratinized clusters of warts, star-like, multichrome. sometimes spurting blood or a foul-smelling opaque creamy substance these defects eclipsed the bronze softness of the girl as over the course of two week's observation her lesion crept to encrust the full span of the vulva. of course she had retired from dancing and inevitably sunk anchored in bed insolubly depressed by the concretion between her legs and stopped eating until she expired in one of the rooms of the laboratory. as this was years ago the Anatomist cannot remember now which room.

**V****marlene:** the broad shoulders, queenly, and the neck of a decapitated woman. charming: her rhinestone collar. wretched:

her bulge of goitrous sac swelled to the size of an apple over which the skin, stretched, is smooth, somewhat transparent, disclosing vague purple innards of the thyrocele. her family assumed she was pregnant there, would yield kittens, but after three menstrual periods marked by goiter distension to a breadth of six inches, the mother and father and her several brothers lost hope the daughter would bear value. she was consigned to spinsterhood. the goiter permitted her neither to sew nor to breathe, both disastrous, though it was lack of air ultimately that ended her. in the vitrine her throat's skin is the blue of doves, of seawater at winter and soapscum.

Before they leave this room the Anatomist directs Yucky Puppy's attention to a photograph on the wall of a young girl, naked except for the red bow pinned in her hair, balancing on her arms while her legless trunk is clenched an ovoid clutch of muscle suspended over checkered tile. Yucky Puppy feels faint as if she might collapse staring at this photograph as the man is explaining that *there is no aberrant body*. "Deformity is a myth," he says, "to be deformed is impossible, since there is no correct constant form from which to deviate, do you understand, every body deviates equally from every other, spawning infinite rarity, and it is in this endless proliferation of variance that the body bares its divinity. In repressive realms, Corpse City being a prime example, conventions of contour are sanctioned to limit the latitude of desire—this is a sacrilege, to deny our dreams the license to nurse from the whole of blood incarnate. Every configuration of fascia, membrane, lumen, serum and sinew charts a singular unrepeatable passage to rapture. No organism is ugly, nothing is freakish; there is no superfluous nor destitute anatomy. The body, once born, cannot be voided of its viability as a sacred artifact. For instance, I believe your body is incredibly beautiful."

The man strokes her hair while Yucky Puppy's eyes dart searching the room for her dog, who was at her side but now isn't anywhere. Is it possible the dark of the preceding sequence of laboratory rooms ate up the precious animal, like it was gnawing away her own fingers and feet up to the ankles? The dog (her heart) is beautiful. Would this man do something to hurt the dog? He would put the dog in a jar.

"My dog..."

"Come on," the Anatomist says, guiding her by the elbow through another door, "I want to show you something."





(worse now alone without the dog Yucky Puppy stumbles a limp skid  
through bedrooms, tidy and beige-caramel-taupe-tawny-umber and  
featureless. here's a bouquet of rubber orchids,  
here's a painting  
of the ocean.

in one of the beds Yucky Puppy notices, or maybe she's hallucinating,  
a mass under bunched sheets in the shape of a body that doesn't move.  
the Anatomist hustles her out of this bedroom. as they are nearing the  
inmost chambers of the laboratory the ivory carpets exhale sighs  
perfumed by freezer-burn, salmon crystallized cryogenized forgotten  
for a year at the bottom of the meat cooler. needles of icicle curve  
along the gutters of her mouth. she thinks it's true:  
she might never find her way  
out of this place.)

→ **6<sup>th</sup> ROOM:** with a courtly gesture highly practiced regal and  
princely like such a gentleman the Anatomist sweeps Yucky Puppy into  
his office. coaxed over the threshold the girl stands before a wall  
papered with magazine clippings, glossy photographs precision-  
scissored and pasted to sprawl a fresco of white black hard-candy pink  
astringent hyper-green variegated amorphia and splatter from carpet to  
ceiling. near the window the Anatomist's desk is decorated by a see-

through plastic model of a woman's thorax. in the space of the lucent woman a red heart and pink lungs sewn from satiny cloth hang discharging quiet rose-colored warmth, like candlelight, skinny vermicate fingers of shine secreted over the desk's surface. the woman who is only a plastic shell of a torso is a lantern and her lonely heart's timorous glimmer oscillates snakes of pinkening along the wall to highlight and clarify the photographs and drawn closer in spite of the acute feverish dread and dullness which toxifies her reduced to total confusion she cannot control or overcome Yucky Puppy discerns that the pictures are of meat, anemic parcels of body embossed with wounds, a belly sliced raw open too cleanly to have begun to bleed, cellulite bulk of atrophying flanks shaded by a latticework of scars mauve at the initiation of closure. heaps of parts of a disassembled physicality photographed from all angles in a thousand configurations endlessly resisting coalescence into an incarnation conceivable as a once-living organism. too many bleeding clefts, interstices, fault lines tearing open and wet; too many holes in the flesh to hold a life contained. the blood leaks out. what kind of a creature is this? female: its breasts seamed with gashes the tumefied edges of which ooze serum-mucilage as lubricant around forceps unearthing things that squirm, resembling the slippery and pitiful objects in another nearby photograph: clods of tissue that radiate a mute gelatinous sorrow, like handfuls of offal stolen from some low-rent tenement-abattoir dumpster, flecked with grime, going grey in blotches and messily dragging fading fibrils of ligament, coughing up phlegm onto scrubbed white formica. in photographs Yucky Puppy hates more than the others she can make out an albino bunny-flaccid wrist and tassels of blackened mane, elements of a creature intimately familiar to her, for whom she feels sorry, though steadfastly she rejects recognition of the meaning of this wall, these photographs, and with the rapid dilation of meaninglessness feeling subsides and all she can see are colors, red and white, white morphing into lots of loose dripping red, red slurred petal pink, pink too sensitive a plexus in the white lake, roses blooming red bruised as rich-dark as a wound writhing worms like bloodying the white fur, the dead body, the heartbroken world.

the Anatomist is grinning at her vaguely timidly bashfully as if he feels foolish but it's obvious he never really could – he's proud of himself for this wall as he's proud of all he's accomplished – and then he says, "I have a tendency to fixate..."

Yucky Puppy blinks at a centerfold spread of a crescent moon carved under the armpit of the body through which a gloved hand is extracting a living object as if delivering a child but the baby is no kind of pink angel but tuberous, a vegetal dollop sleeved in a caul of furrowed chalky pastel blue and lavender. vision rolling in nausea sinking out of focus the girl's aching alcoves heave. an undercurrent of living as a house

raided now corrupted and forsaken coats the inside of her mouth, the taste like vomit, metallic, maudlin. because she is standing swaying gripping her stomach not yet acknowledging the achievement this wall represents the Anatomist prompts her a second time to express her approval, asking, "Don't you recognize yourself, pretty girl?"

"It isn't me." Yucky Puppy rejects this idea completely: that the chopped-up pieces of victim in the photographs on the wall could have ever been her body. though she has known of course without doubt hopelessly from the instant she stepped into the man's office that it is true. her body is the victim; she was murdered she has been victimized and now it will continue forever: it is her nature.

exactly at this moment she is staring at one specific photograph that incites a crisis raging through her overblooded overcharged corridors; a trickle of the red stirred issues between her thighs as a consequence of excitation and it soaks into her stockings, screaming, now that her blood carries sirens in it, the strident red to blue to red, red, red a repulsive poison rushing to bloat cracks into the husk of her skull, down to the place her heart once was, down further to dribbled darker along her inseam. her thoughts follow the blood flowing from that lowest hole: she has stopped thinking. the photograph shows two nurses identically blonde dressed in pure white with wide foreheads without eyelashes or eyebrows with golden snakes tied around their necks standing on either side of a wet unhealthily wan naked and helpless and powerless mutant submerged in a vat of vivid green, chained underwater to the tub. the Nurses smile talcum white posed for the camera, their arms rigid at their sides, their smocks and high heels glinting back darts of flash. below them the mutant in the vat appears bound in boneless docility paralytic under the weight of some lush narcosis, luxuriantly prescribed. her head is tipped, rests on the vat's edge so that her big eyes open entirely black like liquid soot pooled between sclerae and choroid cast up to the ceiling. someone was kind enough to comb the mutant's hair and paint her fingernails frosted bubblegum-color before the photograph was taken so she looks nicely put together. almost like a pretty girl. a scar on her belly, healing, is barely visible. Yucky Puppy cannot deny a certain fact: staring into this photograph she is staring into the room where she was born; these pictures are the access point to her infancy. and they chart her destiny which is the mirror of her history, how she is doomed to be in rough hands, and every wound bright red on the wall was once her wound, will be her wound again, and those ugly bundles of dark sacks of mucus and sweating gore were hers once too, her pet-things her only darlings her beloved parasites she sheltered inside—they were so mutated and warped invalid like she was they had to be a part of her. as a mother and as a sanctuary unforgivably she failed the animals: all that was of value inside herself she let fester and die because she was weak and

pain made her selfish, dreaming she deserved to live, as if she were blessed, special enough to survive and go on living. she watched the animals die. again her shamed tenements mourn.

tonight Yucky Puppy is painfully aware she was born condemned.

the Anatomist directs her attention to his favorite pictures, his grin spreading tooth by tooth like stars even as he qualifies his pleasure with contempt for the Hospital: "Unequivocally it's a fact the Night Hospital misused you brutally, darling, I cannot approve of their methods, which rival in crudeness the coarsest butchery; a body like yours demands a subtler touch but nonetheless there's no denying you're resplendent here..." (the photograph he fingers is a naked girl in a wheelchair wearing a bandage wrapped over her eyes, blood pooling in her lap.)

the most disgusting reality possible is that this is her body.

because she is immensely desperately ill so she's frightened she'll puke if she risks opening her mouth too much barely audibly in a whisper like spittle through her teeth she murmurs: "where did you put my dog?"

if the man hears her, or if he answers, she doesn't know, for she is drenched already going down under her nausea of fever and dizzy from drinking what she's been offered and the spinning of her blood, this vital fluid which enacts its renunciation of the victim-body running out of her from every locus of rupture, the slits and schisms of her cleaved open to the night. before she falls she yawns a fountain of runaway blood onto the carpet, causing the Anatomist to laugh with surprise at the body's indiscretion. the blood makes a sound like glass shattering when it lands. the man continues laughing as she continues to bleed, from her face and elsewhere, and to stare in stupid fascination at the green water she remembers from her girlhood in Hospital, a sustained babyhood she will never outrun. she understands now: there is nowhere she can live in this City where she will not be murdered, because she is soft pulp like an infant so simple to hurt, and what can be injured will be killed. that's what it is, to be a girl. she was not designed to survive. macerating echoes of the sedative flood splash at her ankles, kissing up her calves like vines climbing, their aerial roots strung from the bellies of her thighs, fusing plaited with the red suppuration that drools down her onto the white carpet which she has corrupted absolutely now, inexorably; her stains evince the richness of permanence. she is on her knees buried alive in oblivion-green to the throat - strangles her voiceless - she is plunged nerveless to the base of infinite underwater. in this ocean of hotel rooms it grows progressively blacker and darker everywhere. the Anatomist's laughter overwhelms her louder and louder and louder, and then the world is over.

the 7<sup>th</sup> **ROOM** is a bathroom

she assumes because of the wetness and weightlessness enveloping her she is still unconscious until she realizes that what's happened is that she has been placed in the bath. the water of this bath is not green but dilute pink opaque like strawberry milk, bubblegum froth on the surface, sudsy, and saturated with a strange sleekness as if the water carries chemicals in it, mercurial, something like isopropyl, but smelling of vanilla. Yucky Puppy watches the vanilla scent of innocent and sugared sparkle slowly as the waters skin the shores of her inner arms scaly with a blushing cuticle of foam-scum. in the bathtub, it does not occur to her to be terrified.

even as the man reenters the room and she remembers she has been abducted by a dangerous and insane person, who has performed a displacement of her dog to isolate her, this understanding is without the tightening, the queasy acid-shrill storminess of blood she associates with total horror. the Anatomist asks her if she's feeling better.

Yucky Puppy nods, wondering if she feels better or if actually what is better is that she is feeling nothing. she inhales marabou smolder of vanilla from the pink water, feels bland. it is better this way.

"You can't imagine how worried you had me," the Anatomist says, tenderly, as if he cares about her. in the steamed light that gathers above the bath his blond hair flows a halo thawed-lion seraphic solar-hued over his face smoothed soft-focus catching fragments of firmament in his eyes like volatized jade cast down to her so kindly it is an agony to think she could have doubted his goodness. with her lips halfway below the waterline the soaking girl burbles she's sorry, confessing how she's prone to overreaction; what she means is that she's overemotional, she has no control over herself, so she's ashamed. "Please don't apologize," he says, "it's my fault, for being brutish, dragging you here there and everywhere without consideration for your condition, forgetting your body is still in such a sensitive state, barely at the cusp of convalescence. You must be terribly tired."

"I'm very tired," Yucky Puppy repeats back to the man. about her own frailty and probably countless other things she is in agreement with him. though a partition of forgetting is in the process of descending between this room, which she finds dulcet and agreeable, and the previous rooms, which were repulsive, it threads into her consciousness again to ask where the Anatomist has placed her dog. then it is too tiring a strain to think of the words without the question taking on the rhythms of an accusation – she should not jump to conclusions, after all – and for whatever reason right at this moment it doesn't seem to matter much where the dog is. the dog is brilliant and strong; it will not permit itself to be murdered. meanwhile Yucky Puppy finds it

increasingly taxing even to hold her eyelids parted, an intensification of her lassitude apparently to the Anatomist's liking—"That's right, darling, you need your rest." he has extricated himself momentarily from her bathside to select phials of pearly soaps, lotions, oils and gels from a vanity cabinet with the giddy seriousness of a witch in preparation for a favorite rite from her repertoire. another demand worms whining through Yucky Puppy's thoughts, which is to insist that the man tear down and pitch into the garbage or set fire to all of those hateful photographs of the body from his office wall. to sound rational she might call the pictures "unflattering," but realistically what right does she have to make demands? she is not in a position of authority, undressed and wading into syncope, wholly incompetent lulled by drowsing currents of pink ooze. thus she buries the intrusive urge to be overbearing under an erasure: there were never any photographs.

she recognizes she must be grateful someone will take care of her in her state.

she is grateful to the man, even if he is dangerous and insane.

presently he is treating her so nice so pleasant, washing her hair with shampoo from a bottle like a heart made of the thinnest finest glass (she could not touch this vessel without destroying it); the lather vents an essence of strawberry gelatin and sugared violets dissolved in vapor and tingles into her scalp as the man works his artistic aristocratic hands through her hair, which is pleasant. when he pours water over her to rinse the shampoo away the rivulets of froth that run down her chest into the pink below are tinted red from the hemorrhage that has dried her hair into stiff tangles. now the hair will be silkier, which promises future pleasantness. the man passes her a washcloth and instructs her to wipe away the blood that has scaled her thighs. a slow blush blazing scarlet spreads beneath her skin as she nods her acquiescence, accepting the cloth, and scrubs herself dutifully. it is pleasant to be clean.

"You have so much blood," the Anatomist observes with admiration, looking at the cloth in her hands turning red as she does what she's told, dabbing her knees, her navel, her neck, finally her lips. "Corpse City girls bleed blood-colored syrup they buy by the pint at boutiques, disgusting swill, cold and cherry-scented, and stagnant. It clots accumulating as cloying lakes of rot within their lower strata, attracting flies, who breed worms in swarms through the fester. Every month these pitiful creatures binge on hellebore to evacuate their clutch of larvae. Poor things. But your blood, darling, the true living blood, inviolable, which carries the vital rhythms and luster of your feminine organism in all its corpuscles and hallows whatever flesh it feeds, immaculate claret, generative of sensuous incorruption, is a precious element..."



(Yucky Puppy does not understand men when they speak to her)

after the bathwater has clouded over with residues of the girl it is drained and clean water gushed from the faucet to refill the tub. the man drops an orb into the bath over her belly like an eye like a marble of rose preserves that shrivels as its pink vitreous filters out to permeate the fresh water. it is pleasant to watch her body resting in one piece like bone under the pink liquid, so she does this for a long while, as the man conditions her hair, and sponges her throat, and anoints her arms and legs with lotions like whipped cream and custard. these phases of lustration he proceeds through with the slowness of trance until there is no part of her unscoured and he tells her she should get out of the bath or her skin will start to pucker. in spite of longing to be released to be allowed to stay in water forever (to be in water is like sleeping she could sleep forever) she assents to rising to be cooperative, as a show of her gratitude, and tries to stand but her legs are too wilted like tubes of fat without skeletons to shore them so the man lifts her from the bathtub. to have her body held firmly by a man and then towed down is pleasant. the towels are plush white like lambswool and now she is clean enough that no sign of her vileness discolors them. this makes her feel pure, which is the most pleasant feeling she can imagine.

it is her gratefulness for purity however spurious and short-lived that prompts her to thank the man, bravely raising her glance to meet his for the first time (her eyes tend to sink). she is alarmed to discover herself behaving as if flirtatious, yet somehow such behavior seems the natural mode given her current situation, in which she is helpless saturated numb incessantly throughout her body and totally dependent on the charity of a man. he has set her down on the counter by the sink wrapped in a towel and the Anatomist is kneeling, his eyes at the level of her navel, gazing up then he flashes his angel's smile at her so dazzling disarming a sweetness that the face and the room around it recede into nothing, and Yucky Puppy is receding, too.

he tells her he's dreamed of this (touching her). she drips pink from her lashes onto his palms.

softly petting her hair he asks: "You look tired. You will stay, won't you?"

a meaningless question—as if she could do anything else! but yes, she will stay, yes, she is tired, and it is pleasant to be sleeping in her body now that it has been bathed and it is being tended by a man whose mouth is as beautiful and hair as blond as an angel's, as a sister's...yes. with a nod that unbalances her, so her sodden skull like an infant's drops to her chest too heavy for her neck and she remains in that position, as if in supplication, she consents: "I'll stay."

(if i said no, she thinks, would he let me leave? but what she needs is not to doubt the man but to please him. Yucky Puppy considers it a miracle she can make someone happy. it has occurred to her that to make a man happy is one way to get someone to care about you, when you are alone, and she needs to be cared for. because she cannot struggle tonight. for these reasons she believes "yes" is the right decision.)

the Anatomist tells her that her clothes are too bloody to wear, they will have to be taken to be dry-cleaned, and he gives her something new to put on in the meantime, which is a bundle of fabric folded into a tidy square he takes from the vanity. then he leaves the bathroom so she can dress herself. with clumsy hands Yucky Puppy can scarcely locate – they're somewhere out there, at the ends of her arms – she unfolds the dress she is supposed to wear in order to "make herself more comfortable." this garment recalls gowns worn in Hospital but instead of white cotton crisp like paper it's styled of shiny dove blue acetate that whispers rustling between Yucky Puppy's fingers, hissing a river's voice as she pulls it over her head. otherwise overwhelmingly it replicates Night Hospital attire: backless with laces to tie into bows behind her neck and waist, short and unfitted, petal-sleeved, its high-cut neckline ruffled and finished with a pink ribbon. one-size-fits-all. a breach spans from the place in the dress where the swell of a girl's breasts would press against the acetate to six inches above the hem, at the crest of the same girl's pubic cleft. through the rift in this garment Yucky Puppy's pallor glares, her belly absorbing the chill effluence of fluorescent bulbs. there is no question in her mind that it was designed for precisely the same purpose as the ugliest pink Party Dress the Nurses forced on her in the Night Hospital: to expose her penetrable tender places to the eyes and needles of the murderous world. the girl in the mirror pouting at her now dressed to be gutted, harrowed dazed waifish by fear and living sad through nightmares, is the girl from the Anatomist's photographs: the Patient. these two girls (she of the mirror, she of Hospital) are terrified, obviously, because they have been sentenced to death, tortured, but Yucky Puppy herself is too blue-numbed to sicken so the terror of the Patient pales, wanes to bland worry without exigency, wondering where the man has taken the clothes Infusoria X gave her, because she would rather wear wool than synthetic, even to sleep in, would rather itch in the sheep's coat, and then once more the gravest of her worries returns for a moment: *where is my dog?* but it's not feasible for her to take action of any kind in her condition, because even arranging herself into hypoallergenic pastel acetate is wearying to the extent that she doubts she can continue living, and on some level she still desires to be loved by the Anatomist (angel, boy, sister). then she thinks, if he were capable of love (if he were not a Doktor) would he have asked her to offer herself to him trussed in this heartless sliced-open hospital gown? then she is too tired to think; the harsh contours of her thoughts flatten blunted scummed by a

thickness of dreamy wanting and she decides it is more pleasant than being afraid to believe nothing terrible will happen to her. even so when at last she can compel the body to move from where it was set down on the counter and wobble out across the floor she first tries to vacate the bathroom via the two exits that are not the door the Anatomist passed through when he left her, supposing if either of these alternate routes out are unlocked (though nothing painful is bound to happen) it would be prudent to get herself as far away as possible from this hotel, to find her dog, recover her heavy clothes that cover her, retrace the fevered course she followed through the City back to Infusoria, back to the cemetery, to go anywhere else, rather than stay with the man tonight. the first door is locked. the second door is locked. only the last door leading to the man will open.

a veil of fog and violet dusk sets like grape gelatin across her vision. she stands in the middle of the bathroom rubbing her eyes with her fists but cannot clear it. in time she will be unable to endure standing upright with her eyes open, and when she collapses she would rather fall into a bed than to the floor. she wants what's soft tonight. sleep is the sole reachable dream, she concedes, and chasing the promise of rest, of gentleness, she directs her body through the last remaining door.

## THE FINAL ROOM:

an odor of candles assails her immediately when she enters. smoke, oily paraffin, and dyes igniting kindling an aura that crackles. the tapers are red lit teeming on shelves romantically burning sending out waves of wax she tastes as well as smells, and feels plating the sensitive inner pink of orifices (nostrils and palate); lithe and lively the flicker illuminates urns of barbitate, blazes restless in the liquid, glittering along the blades of delicate silver scissors. the blinds have been lowered and the stereo tuned to sighing nectarous chilled-lilac strands of lullaby meshing to coagulate as braids of demulcent upwelling like a kelp forest within which the man drifts soundlessly, the white linen of his jacket fusing to the whiteness of the walls.

*(there is one door into and out of the dissection suite, which he locks behind her.  
there is no other way to leave)*

it strikes Yucky Puppy that she should conceal herself from these white walls and the Anatomist as he slides through them toward her, that to camouflage herself somehow might be crucial to the avoidance of injury, but the stupor deposited like myelin along the fibers of her will by the pleasures of bath and all that she has swallowed which the man

gave to her bars withdrawal. pale and trembling leaning against the door she senses the grip of his strong hand around her wrist, the threading of his arm around her waist; she is enclosed by his body as he overtakes her, so much more stable, more whole than her own. the cool fur of the musculature of this man eclipsing her instills in Yucky Puppy the sense that she is small enough to live inside another person, which is a solace, since she would receive it as a blessing to become so tiny as to cease existing. "My darling," he calls her, his voice softly candlelit like neon fleece, and strokes her face, and the touch thrums as an order to fall. she collapses into the man. her body is carried across the room, it is put down in a chair: black leatherette polished to a laminated gleam, with stirrups. at her feet as the man arranges her: an enameled tray, one red rose (romantic), a line of lancets and specula. the chair creaks backwards and suddenly she is gazing into a ceiling made up of mirrored cells. with silent hands he guides her feet into the stirrups. the thickening of elision parts her legs spread effortlessly; there is no need to force anything: the body, paralytic, is perfectly compliant. "Such a special girl," he says. as the golden blur of him like heaven glimpsed at the base of a lake ascends expanding over her exposed belly between her legs come undone she believes it is not impossible that she is the Beloved One. to cling to this belief in love becomes the last emergency operation of the girl's mind because if she cannot believe she will be loved (redeemed) in return for her suffering she will die due to the consuming repulsiveness and misery of being a bleeding hole. the bodily and psychic laxity of consciousness unlacing, the indifference, the laziness that ebbs in is not exactly painful and as she watches her man with eyes that don't focus any longer on anything her vision dimming multiplies him until he is a legion of angels surrounding her. "I could never fight off as many men as this," she says to acquit herself and, pardoned, it is still more pleasant to surrender. her body flowing quiet into faded she watches fragments of a pale stranger's vacant and loathsome face reverberate across the mirrored ceiling. Yucky Puppy shuts her eyes.

while she sleeps voluptuously plastic doll-like yielding decadent access hands are thrusting down the gulch of her nightgown, voices like slime-mercury shudder the needle mainlined to remind her she is BEAUTIFUL, she is BEING TAKEN CARE OF. latex snap – the rite of gloves – (for his safety) severs where the wetter skin sticks to hold her shut. an index finger inserted powdery desiccates the cleft.

### — & HER FILTH RECEIVES HIM —

though she squelches from incursion, cringe a spasm breaching  
the vellum borders of sleep,

the dissection suite's resident angelic choir reassures her she's  
a Good Girl

(but hush now consecrated child)

sighing in reverence of the body raw

the miracle revealed when riven hence the first cut:

a caress, innocent, devout,

## — OUR LADY SPLASHING IN HER SLEEP —

*but hush now...*

intensifying quintessence of iodine and

(the skin bursts open) peroxide, the bleached chafe of gauze, metal twinge and a scraping: the physical sound of a serrated utensil dragged over stretched taut pink mucosa searing hyperesthetic until the tissue thins to rose-glass, then splinters: then the most tranquil total cold. the initial (essential) killing completed the knife whispers: "Baby..."

## HER SLEEP FLOODED FLAT AND GLOSSY AND DEAD AND SLIPPERY

"Case 913. Specimen: The Last Vital Girl. The Last Vital Girl is clothed in ideal clean blue nightgown customized for inquisition. Lavation via 30-minute immersion performed preceding exam. Perfume Formula: Vanilla-Rose. No visible intrinsic abnormalities mark the body-surface exceptional. External aspect is leucistic, nonetheless: unremarkable. Specimen's teeth are native and in good repair. The tissues pink under pressure. On the anterior tract of the perineum, along the margins of closure, a minimal amount of aqueous red fluid is observed to be fresh blood and tacky to the touch. It is noteworthy she continues to bleed when no recent nor remote trauma can be identified. The abdominal cavity upon incision discloses itself as chasm: at the present date, the Specimen exists deprived of nearly every internal organ..."

(the Anatomist is not addressing her he is speaking into a tape recorder. other equipment in the examination suite apart from candles and lullaby includes: a camera, a video camera.)

her sleep is troubled; something specifically repulsive is happening to her because her defenses have been forcibly lowered. the physical reality of her suffering pierces unconsciousness overwhelmingly nasty and vicious // she cannot pretend nothing bad is happening // she has no way of avoiding continual strident and high-pitched meat-scream of the body cracked open turning red, fingers invading the ripped skin and hands and other instruments buried in thick moist elaborately assaultive slaughtering her inside, razing her inside, drilling into her, playing inside her with broken mirror with a tangle of blades, black needles, with an unfeelingness close to death (recognition: *she is not loved not lovable is fallow egg-body of blood slurred a slum she's nothing*) – she bleeds she wants to leave – yet the mouth cannot make the "PLEASE" sound, the "STOP" or the "NO" sound.

"The coelum is lined by silk-pink mucosa which is unremarkable. Remnant and/or incipient structures adhered to the body-wall are smooth and glistening."

she forgets how to breathe, breath stops and rots in her chest. thin ribbons of shreds of her swimming in blood. her bones crushed to shrapnel and from their marrows thrashes a searing real fire, red and bloody; her face swells with its diseased sizzle churning bloated like roadkill, the body no longer cleaving to a skeleton as it immolates decayed to embers she is an egg like a hive pours forth warm worms she is garbage. being garbage is a state of constrained to fever-sick. it sprawls slime forever and she lies still and she won't move (too tired) and it keeps happening to her. in certain moments when the pain reaches a special fulminant timbre of near-dying her eyelashes flutter and through the fine hairs she catches sight of pieces of a murdered girl drifting across the mirror. poor thing, she thinks...

HE PUT  
THIS PAIN  
IN ME

**another cut turns her inside out, then a vomiting of flare into the body:** the body is filled with such a bright light that the elements of her present anguish are temporarily effaced. a wound opens spontaneously in the cerement of her amnesia and she sees like a scar-shadow in the goo of her inner-eyes the afterimage of a woman waving as she steps into the passenger seat of a white convertible car driven by a bronze man who wears a beige polo shirt, who does not wave. the woman is blonde, she is dressed in pastels, she looks happy in the man's convertible and all the houses that blot out the sky as the matte behind her look alike without variance trimmed at base by greenest lawn

freshly mown and beds of red poppies (each poppy dilates almost imperceptibly, as blood beading from a pinprick). the blonde woman is familiar, associated in the mind of the eye with kitchen scenes, warm dry cotton sweaters scented like something baked in the oven, yeast and costume jewelry and betrayal. then it is obvious the woman is her authentic mother, her first mother, whose body was not the Night Hospital but a hearth of living blood. except her mother died. her mother left. her mother both died and disappeared because she chose to be a thing akin to a car, meaning: owned by a man, in this way also like a yacht. she drove off. motherless daughters are murdered younger. wriggling on reflex as the fingers that burrow through the pulp of rubble inside her stroke a nerve stricken the sleeping girl watches the white convertible the blonde mother the man who's a stranger drive away out of sight.

*(this is how she learns she was a real girl before Hospital. if she can live she promises she will not forget. if she can stand to live.)*

## **CAMERA-EXPOSED FLESH IN THE NIGHT-LIGHT OF SHARPS SEEMS TO PULSE**

two cuts across the sacrum correspond to spewed video clip infesting the optic nerve of an immense vehicle more intensely demonic than the convertible that stole her mother pummeling thunder as it lunges forward at her while she is hugging a pathetic dead creature and cannot escape. the driver of this malignant Lexus is a large insect with a hundred writhing limbs, red and yellowed. the centipede smiles at her from inside the car, its smile so smeared with bleach the white mouth-parts flash sparks scorching holes through the Lexus's shadow-tinted shatterproof windshield, as she senses herself wrenched down a wound in the driveway that yawns open below the undercarriage. after she is gone the centipede crawls from the Lexus and licks up all the little spots and freckles of her fluids from the pavement.

*(this is the first time she remembers her murder.)*

his hand is rummaging through a deep gouge he cut through the ice of her sternum toward the grove of a hanging garden of wrecked vessels where her heart once nested, now who knows where (the dog is lost); he slips in the shears, snips something, flash-photographs a red spume she feels as smolder, a rat ruptured to foul matter (pus and yolk) roasting in the furnace of her womb-hovel. she is awake, the light is growing hotter, fetid, more frequently inside her wheezing into flames a blade shakes across her ribs vibrates a fresh vision to the vitreous screen:

a body whose color betrays no bloodiness within the hushed skin is asleep at the bottom of a swimming pool, a girl's body, glimpsed through cyan-diamond clearest stillness like eight feet of pure window. fanned over the floor of the pool her hair streams twisting in satin lashes, a halo of black eelgrass bedded in glycerine or Lucite. the face of the sleeper is luminous, smooth, unscathed by the lesions strife, and fear, and withering, and loneliness, and shame, and sorrow, hunger, murder leave in skin; her pensive grace like that of a schoolgirl child-saint sweetly intransient enshrined in lilies and gilded reliquary, gleaming remote from the sickness of Corpse City. she is unlike a saint in that her body has been wrapped from neck to ankles in translucent plastic tubing as if she were mummified in an IV infusion set. one tube runs up her nostril, one is threaded through her rose maw, a multitude of tubes intertwine to enter the orifice between her legs. a black heart on her thigh. through the crystal channels of the tubes scars can be seen inscribed into each plane and surface of the body; they shimmer, mauve as the aura preceding dawn, when the sun is damp with the brackish effluence of night's withdrawal. like convex lenses drawn long into veins the tubing magnifies the body's markings, the ciphers of a fading execution. there is no place she has not been harmed but still over the girl's breast the glass pane of pool wavers, roused to tremor by an ardent motion deep within the sleeping suspended girl: her heartbeat. her heart, beating.

*(this is how Yucky Puppy knows that, somewhere, she still has a living body.)*

"Note that the Last Vital Girl has again commenced to bleed," and the Anatomist delivers another cut, it drips metal down between her legs (the whole zone begins to rot and fester), but she is okay, she says, she is peaceful inside. because she has been shown her living body is waiting for her elsewhere preserved in the safety of water she ceases to accept the current massacre as reality so she obliterates feeling. the specters of nerves that inhabit this surrogate physicality carrying her through Corpse City are made of nothing sensitive, she says to the body as it suffers. you're not real, she chastens the mass of seeping ruins.

Yucky Puppy's face is wet with wept blood. her body is emptying...

& all dreams end, eventually.

### ***Casualties of Tryst***

She picks herself up off the carpet like a piece of dead meat. The City is shining through the window onto the floor and the walls and glinting lances off the black leatherette of the examination chair so that this



claustrophobic room is a white cell as blinding as Yucky Puppy imagines the interior confines of a sugar cube, a stinging corrosive white that tastes like ammonia infused into milk. Scathing incessant bleachiness save for the section of carpet on which the fetal bundle of girl blacked-out crumpled, where red stains desecrate the white. Red dotting the chair's stirrups like rust. Look what a mess I've made, she thinks bitterly, without remorse, since over the course of the night she was thoroughly skinned of her affections for the Anatomist and his labyrinth of aseptic hotel rooms. Here isn't heaven and she was an idiot to believe in angels and this morning were it not for her weird weak feeling of anemic for a change she would scream her animal colors onto every surface to destroy this laboratory. Leaning against the wall, too woozy to attempt standing – walking is also out of the question – she runs her fingers gingerly down the ridge of the fissure the man cut into her abdomen. How long will it take for this gash to disappear, like the pink latticework of her Hospital scars? She wonders vaguely if she is losing her ability to heal as she ages. A sloppy hand sutured shut the incision so the skin is ragged tattered and inflamed at the wound site, redness annealed as a gummy patina of dregs of gut-blood drained oozing from the chinks between stitches. She scrapes a clot loose with her fingernail, lazily, and raises her blood to her mouth to lick it before rubbing the sticky bauble onto her lips. It seems prudent to reclaim what little she can of what's leaked from her. So much is unrecoverable, she knows. Her fingers creep from her mouth upward along her face to her nose, where she finds cotton gauze lodged in her nostrils to staunch a nosebleed. The cotton has worked itself so deeply into the nasal passage that she can't pry it out; when she exhales hard to eject the obstruction a slither of red cord like a lizard tongue flicks out from her belly's wound, then sags pointlessly dangling down toward her navel. Below the string of gristle she notices with bland disgust that her pubic cleft has been shaved hairless. Yucky Puppy flings to the floor the soiled gauze fattened with skull-blood and watches the carpet absorb more of her monstrosity. From this micro-act of wrath she manages to extract some small satisfaction.

Her body gleams bone-colored austere whiter in the borrowed sunlight.

The candles have burnt themselves out into drifts of slushy tallow, tepid and muted reddish. Their waning smoke smells of her blood...

And she is alone. Briefly she considers climbing out the window to get away from the laboratory immediately but decides against it, for two reasons:

1. how humiliating to fall from a window ledge into the City totally naked
2. *i need to get my dog back*

Again the dog emerges as the most essential thing in the entirety of existence, the beautiful blue-eyed dog, her animal, her heart, without whom there is no hope. Without the dog love does not exist.

Yucky Puppy hates the man this morning – she no longer desires his approval, nor does she wish to be sanctified by him, to be redeemed by the laying of his well-bred hands on her ruined body – but she needs him, because he can tell her where the dog is. If he damaged her perfect creature she swears she will do everything in her power to brutally murder him. She will pull him out of a broken window with her and if neither of them are dead when they land with a splat sound and spines crunching on contact with the sidewalk before she dies she will chew his throat out. He will die first, badly hurt. This is a promise she makes to the dog.

First, however, she must locate the Anatomist among his myriad rooms, and demand that he divulge to her the dog's present location. By demand she knows she more likely means: ask politely. If he has committed no crimes against the dog she loves she will leave him alone in his laboratory without taking any retaliatory action against him, because what he has done to her she deserves, for being born a victim, brought up the Patient, but the dog is innocent. She cares only about the dog. When her legs start working and she can feel them she exits the dissection suite.

Yucky Puppy stumbles through the adjacent bathroom, casting an aching sidelong glance at the bathtub in which as she was groomed prime for the slaughter she felt so pleasant, in that sleek vanilla pink, like a foretaste of heaven, sensing the body cleansed the body held in steady hands. **Lesson:** baths are dangerous. She will be more cautious forever from now on (no one comes near her).

She finds the Anatomist in the next room, his office. When Yucky Puppy steps through the doorway and stands in the middle of the office bloody and naked, cringing because to move hurts more as the night's sedatives ebb, the man does not look up from his desk, the surface of which is strewn with countless photographs. His eyes dart rapidly leaping from picture to picture as he labels them in ink, scribbling notes on the matte backings, sorting the photographs into stacks according to the anatomical sectors they document. A stack for mesentery, a stack for extremities. Like the photographs already papering his wall, these new pictures, which he took while Yucky Puppy curled in shallow sleep like a mouthful of vomit, reproduce the red abysses of a murdered girl-body prised open for inspection by metal pincers, metal instruments. Gloved hands frame the gaping which are male hands and unsafe.

"Where is my dog?" The question is posed sternly but courteously. She neither hisses nor screams and she is proud of herself for speaking so

well, but, consumed in his captivated poring over the photographs the Anatomist does not answer her. To beseech him more severely makes something squish in the belly-wound: "Excuse me, what did you do with my dog?"

"You'll find your clothes on your way out, in the autoclave chamber," the man replies in the offhanded antipathetic tone of a bored receptionist, not looking up from his desk, sliding photographs of someone's body parts into various configurations before him – triptych: a splayed leg blanched like tincture of pearl to the left of zoomed-in shot of saffron adipose slopping out between layers of chopped flesh he sets above a picture of her mouth held in perma-smile by hemostats – craning his neck to peer at them ever more closely, and scrawling annotations in fussily stylish script. He pays no attention to Yucky Puppy because now that he has the pictures he no longer needs her. The physical substance of her is superfluous but she's still standing here, staring into the gold fleece of his hair lit coral by the lamp-woman's lantern heart, hating him, because he has not answered her question. "I'm sorry, I'm very busy, I hope you won't mind seeing yourself out."

"I want my dog."

"Perhaps someone from housekeeping brought that animal down to the lost-and-found bin. You can consult the concierge at the front desk. Now, if you don't mind..."

"If I find out you fucked with my dog in any way I will come back for you," Yucky Puppy warns the man. Rancor a nascent astringency in her voice spurs the man to look up at her at last. Squinting he eyes her over the photographs as if he cannot quite remember who she is or how she got here, this disheveled shaking naked stranger insolently invading the sanctum of his office. Minutes wither into silence as his eyes wander with curious indifference over her body, its injuries, and then, with a slight frown as if he'd brushed against something distasteful he says, "Please feel free to wash up, if you'd care to, before you leave." The Anatomist then returns to analyzing the illustrated chronicle of her violation arranged across his desk. He does not acknowledge her again; when Yucky Puppy goes she shuts the door hard so it slams and she does not look back.

...                      ...                      ...

Yucky Puppy is sprinting not walking but running as quickly as her legs can stumble along numbly while simultaneously being cautious conscious that if she were to run too fast or so fast anyway that she risked tripping and she fell she would probably come undone down the middle, she'd probably fall to pieces, because the Anatomist did such a

lousy job of stitching her shut. To rupture in the midst of racing through this hotel without her dog to lick the rift would initiate the final vitiation of this body, which she wants to avoid – she does not intend to die here – but she does not worry about the blood that, jostled and churning dizzy with the speed of the body's momentum pitched forward from room to room, is oozing out in gluey clots which drop behind her like seaweed-strands of spittle to leave a stigma of her red girlhood dripped throughout the man's rooms, onto pony-skin upholstery and tile, ceramic and cream brocade. May the ensign of her taint be irreversible, she thinks like a vandal, racing bleeding through beige bedrooms ivory alabaster master baths and half baths through sliding doors over microsuede sofas into checkered-tile kitchenettes supply closets stocked with sponges syringes mylar thermal blankets leather jackets through libraries and rooms housing white rats white rabbits blue tanks of tropical fish swimming benumbed in barbitate a room containing nothing but a lonely skeleton strung up from the ceiling by wires; she continues running and only stops in a rodent room, because she thinks it is the right thing to release the rats and rabbits. This act of deliverance is thwarted because the cages are locked. "I'm sorry," she says to the animals, who, gnashing teeth frightened and trapped and tamed and white and pink, scuttle away to the back of the cages as she stands with her hands to the plexiglass membrane that separates their twin dimensions of rathood and girlhood and, seeing herself reflected towering in their eyes like dampened jewels, she recognizes she is just another monster to these damaged creatures, they have no reason to trust her, and she apologizes a last time then keeps running—

...        ...        ...

Entering the autoclave chamber by way of a bedroom (decorative elements: plastic sheets on the queen bed, painting of a pile of food like a sow's head and some melons) Yucky Puppy sights her Sisters of Mercy habit and black stockings laid before a steel cube she presumes must be the autoclave, since it's the only object in the room apart from her clothes folded on the carpet, and an electric chandelier made from Perspex acrylic crystals and blue lightbulbs. Her memory includes no well-defined understanding of what an autoclave is. It is approximately the size of a furnace. At the front of the cube there is a round window she bends to look inside; through the iodine-color glass she discerns three racks arrayed with the cleanest scissors she's ever seen shining merciless silver-plated in artificial light. Immediately she hates the autoclave. Yucky Puppy turns away from it in disgust – everything men own is detestable to her (everything men own is a weapon) – and dresses hurriedly, tightening her belt too tightly to the point that it pinches, hopeful that the pressure of constriction will help to hold her wound

sealed shut. Not that she has anything more to lose: without the dog, there is nothing for her. Rushing to lace her boots she is relieved to be once again enveloped in the protective and animal-smelling woolen sheath of the black dress from head to foot as she flees the autoclave.

...      ...      ...

Yucky Puppy steps into corridor of the hotel that withholds the Anatomist's laboratory. Like the interior of a prison, or an asylum, there are long rows of doors along beige walls and zero windows. Although it was only the night before that she was last standing in this hallway, she feels she has been held captive in the depths of laboratory for years, and that she is now centuries older and in ruins. It doesn't matter to her that she has become old. Anyway, she is tired of being treated like a mentally deficient baby, without choate nerves or a will to be anything but used. Now maybe that will stop, though it's irrelevant, basically, because she has no intention of letting another resident of Corpse City come within an arm's reach of her as long as she remains in this precinct of hell. Then she tells herself it doesn't matter how she is treated, that she could tolerate living as a mewling doll-baby forever as long as she can have her dog beside her again. If she can sleep in the dog's fur when it's dark. Most of all she needs the dog so that together they can rescue her real body, her living body, which she saw suspended in the blue of dreaming, before dissection dis severed her from it and dropped her into blacker sleep like coma too dense to dream through.

She thinks she will call for the dog, then recalls it was never named, so there's nothing to call it. Her voice crackling and breathless from running, she yells: "DOG?"

But there is no dog.

"COME?" (summons no dog)

"I NEED YOU?" (summons no dog)

"I LOVE YOU? DOG!" (summons no dog)

Yucky Puppy cannot continue alone in this rotten world without the dog; it is impossible. So there is no point in surviving and so she simply lets her body crumble down on the carpet in the hotel hallway and sits there deliquescing into tears, snot, pus, because there is nothing in herself or Corpse City or the world to live for. Her life is defined by a complete lack of grace and beauty; there is no light anywhere; it's only dark everywhere so she has renounced the idea of leaving this hotel. When she cannot cry anymore because she is a skeletonized husk devoid of emotions, unable or unwilling to feel, therefore cruel, she will trace her way back through the laboratory and decapitate the man

(secondarily: burn all his evil ugly photographs) and then leap out the window, because he injected poison knives into her wasted faux-body with his fingers and he stole her dog away in a dark room, converting her life to valueless, and, even if she has a true body which is not a corpse waiting for her, it is too painful to chase dreams through these corridors and streets, alleys, hotels, graveyards, torture chambers; now *she wants to die*. She wants it now, she's getting tired, she will not wait. A girl is not meant to be murdered and continue living. It is better, it is easier simply to die. Her stomach is bleeding again into her hands folded in her lap and she is crying because her mother left her to be among men and belong to them, because she fell down a hole into Corpse City, because the City has made her its victim in every way as if it were her destiny to be hurt worse than any other creature ever strung full of stinging nerves, through this torment made a starlet, a genuine pink-n-pretty Princess of Traumatic Injury, like the Nurse's said – SPECIAL – and because Doktors have torn everything precious out of her, her guts her dog her heart, and she cannot stop bleeding she will not ever, ever, ever be done with this bleeding—

Suddenly through the lather of her self-nauseous sorrow Yucky Puppy hears a faint whimpering somewhere exogenous to her own dead body.

In response she screams: "DOG?"

And trailing in the echoes of scream this time there's an answer: scratching, behind metal. Muted. But the sound is real, and it's close, its source halfway down the corridor from where Yucky Puppy is lying. She stands. She's running. "DOG?" A bark, followed by a whimper, which now she can identify as issuing from the slit between the elevator doors. Yucky Puppy presses the button frantically a dozen times again and again until her finger blanches until the doors slide apart and the air explodes into raucous barking, because the blue-eyed dog has not evaporated into nothing: the dog is alive. Yucky Puppy is on her knees and the dog licks red streaks from her face with its soft hot tongue, sniffing where the black wool of her dress is soaked over her belly, whining at the metal scent of violation. Yucky Puppy tells the dog not to worry because everything gets better, she promises, it doesn't hurt anymore. She says: "Don't worry because I love you, I will never leave you again," and they ride the elevator down to the lobby together, the dog in the girl's arms, clinging fierce to her wolf-heart. Its softest pure fur held fast to her blood again she feels the gash the man opened in her beginning to seal. Fresh skin is growing. In contact with the dog, dreaming in the dog's Easter eyes, ocean eyes, it is possible not to feel pain; to drop dead on the spot is no longer her only option.

When the elevator has descended to the floor of the City the doors slide apart, expelling Yucky Puppy and the dog out into the lobby. They run together scampering across the curdled strawberry marble, which is an

uglier surface in daylight, slipping and sliding on paws overcome clumsy with the happy vertigo of reunion, past the front desk clerk who hasn't moved, still a dead mannequin of wax and cinders, and out into the street. Corpse City as it receives the girl and her dog is not beautiful in any way; it is almost unbearable how revolting its grey and oppressive iron rigid immensity appears now cooking in sunshine like acid spittle, the sky's vomit. A rat is eating a motionless extremely passive woman in the middle of the street. Yucky Puppy is not that woman. She tells the dog not to watch. Still hemorrhaging into her dress and down her stockings but the blood flowing cleaner now, a clearer red, and slower, Yucky Puppy is unafraid, confident that if she can just stay close to the dog she will heal totally in time. The dog is her sister and since they are on their own in the City they will care for one another protect one another, each devoted to the other's survival. Sisterhood is a system of circumventing murder. Yucky Puppy makes a decision: it is crucial they leave this ugly place as soon as possible. At the same instant the girl who won't die and the blue-eyed beloved dog hear a howling, the wolves of Corpse City still running, and they follow it—



[Sisford is a system of circumventing murder. Hooky Puppy makes a decision:  
it is crucial they leave this ugly place as soon as possible.]



