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### **What We Want to See, What We Are Capable of Seeing**

Anne said something profound about what happens to cloth when you leave it folded in the attic. I don't remember her exact words, just that frantic feeling I get sometimes of "I need to write that down or I won't remember," and that it was something about how it splits along its own seams.

I had the same feeling last week at the book launch. The cartoonist looked pretty much how you'd expect a cartoonist to look: beanie, glasses, beard. Slouching and nervous, there inside his flannel. When the moderator asked why his characters are always so isolated, the cartoonist said that once you're in your mid-thirties, you have to be very intentional about reaching out to the world. Otherwise it drifts away.

I reached out to touch the silk Anne showed us and was surprised it felt coarse like flypaper. Now I'm staring at it and staring, trying to figure out why it makes me feel sad.

It's on my favorite table—the one with the removable layers of increasingly degraded handkerchiefs, the one I'm still looking at now. Some of the fabric is textured, beautiful in its roughness, and some of it is thinning, weak as if sickly, stretched to reveal the fibers that make it up. As soon as we got done examining one layer Anne would lift the board and move it away, revealing a whole new layer of ruin underneath.

Our tethers thin out like this, too. R was so impressed when I correctly guessed the number of bones in the human face, but later, when I asked them to help me pick between two possible titles for my thesis, they chose wrong.

Every day for a whole year I wrote in my journal some version of "I don't know what it is I think I'm holding on to," "I am lonelier when we're together," "I have not been living deeply," and every day for a whole year I did nothing about it. "I don't know when I became someone who stays in a relationship because they're afraid to be alone," I told my sister, afterwards, and she shrugged. "Maybe COVID changed you," she suggested, kindly. "Maybe what you needed most this past year was someone to watch TV with."

She said it casually, like it was no big deal. Like those words weren't some kind of verdict.

A verdict is, in the end, a sanctioned kind of story. The story I'm looking at now is more straightforward, but only just: textiles, dying. Some of them have borders around the edges, frames of ribbon, perhaps, though "ribbon" makes me think pretty French braids, presents smoothly wrapped, porcelain dolls propped up on display on gleaming mahogany dressers, and these borders make me think a sock on the side of the road, a school parking lot at night, an abandoned house, ghosts howling lost in the rafters. Empty things, or, more accurately, things that have been emptied. Scraped out, but having once known a feeling of fullness, passive voice intentional. Here a tiny hole, hardly bigger than a pinprick; there a gash, alarming, brutal, even, a desperate scrap of a lingering edge hanging on opposite, all the way on the other side.

After it ended with R my mom drove here all the way from St. Louis. I stood in front of my apartment building with my hands in my pockets while she unloaded her car, half parked on the curb: three duffel bags for her, a pot of marigolds and a bag of maple-flavored coffee and a box of homemade shortbread for me. "Stop that, hon," she kept reminding me, because I didn't notice I was using my fingernails to peel the skin off my lips. When I was small she used to rub Vaseline onto the backs of my cracked-dry hands every night, then cover them carefully with socks, protecting me from all the ways I was tearing myself apart.

Title 1: "An Incomplete List of My Hungers." Title 2: "There Are Over Two-Hundred Bones in the Human Body and None of Them Are Teeth."

Over shortbread I told my mom what my advisor said when I finished my thesis: "The first draft was so raw it was practically unreadable." I even laughed about it—ha ha.

This is a therapist-sanctioned technique—doing the opposite of what you feel like doing. Allegedly it can surprise you into a different emotional state.

Anne showed us the opposite of mending: stitching open. This is when she introduced the hair pieces—a whole display of degraded fabrics pinned to black foamboard like butterfly wings, their holes "stitched open" with human hair—and these are the ones I can't stop looking at. Sometimes it is difficult to tell where the thread ends and the human hair begins, especially in the pieces where the hair is matted into unsettling clumps. I think Anne called this matting technique "couching"—a kind of embroidery. To embroider usually means to make something more beautiful, but the hair pieces are uncomfortable to look at.

I'm looking and looking at Anne's hair art. Looking, and looking, which is not, necessarily, the same as seeing.

For a while after my mom left I was seeing dead squirrels everywhere. I couldn't figure out where they were coming from, their bodies and faces frozen in grotesque positions and expressions, like haunted house taxidermy except with insides still their own. They seemed to appear out of nowhere, shocking, disturbing, even, in their gracelessness.

But of course there are dead things everywhere. It's no great tragedy. Things die, sometimes in droves. A baby bird in the boundary between the pavement and the sand, so soft and feathered and clean it looks like a Christmas ornament. A sand crab overturned in the dirt, fossil-like, prehistoric. My mom's marigolds, wilted and brown in their pot on the coffee table, a rat in the alley behind my building, run over by so many cars it's completely flattened into the asphalt. When I first saw it it was wreathed in its own insides, bright red and glittering like a mess of rubies dropped next to the dumpsters. But the last several times I passed it I mistook it for dryer lint.

One of the textiles from the layered table is gnawed through its middle by time, a great T-shaped mouth of many teeth yawning there. In some pieces the holes are concentrated in one spot—the bottom right corner, for example, or all along the edges. But in others they seem random, almost artful, which makes me think about a line in the Jeanette Winterson novel I'm reading about how in physics, the right answer is almost always the most beautiful one.

A few days after she left, my mom sent me an email. "You're a beautiful person," she wrote, earnestly. I'd asked her to send me the shortbread recipe and instead of just taking a photo and texting it she scanned it on the copy machine at the library where she works and emailed me a PDF.

I read the email a few times. I felt both relieved and scraped out, now that she was gone. I thought of a line from my thesis: "I feel haunted by all the people I will never become." I looked at my hands resting on the keyboard of my laptop: red spiderweb fissures criss-crossed all along their backs, fingertips stained rust-red from burrowing around in my lips.

"As yet there has not been an exception to the rule that the demonstrable solution to any problem will turn out to be an aesthetic solution."

There is a certain violence to most of Anne's stitched-out holes, a certain hostility. But there's one that looks contented, aloof, even vaguely celestial. I can't tell if it uses human hair or just black thread plus silver and gold, the tiniest of stitches that look like little stars. Later Anne will tell me this came twenty years after the hair ones. "It just got played out," she'll shrug, when I ask why she stopped.

I place them side by side, the hair holes and this celestial hole, squinting at the edges of its nothing, which are reinforced with something beautiful, not abject, something that looks like sugar or sand or glitter—the kinds of celebratory tiny pieces that get left behind when the party's over.

There was sand in my shoes and salt in my eyes the night we accidentally watched the moon rise over the lake. The sun was already setting so much earlier than it had just a few weeks earlier when I moved in so by the time Kyle arrived the sky was just barely hanging onto its colors, and when we got to the pier and turned to face the east there was an orange splotch glowing like an explosion behind the clouds, so that Kyle asked "What's blowing up in Gary, Indiana?" and we were so enthralled we sat there cross-legged, sucking down our Spirits, watching the sky quietly burn, except it wasn't the sky burning after all, just the moon rising as spectacularly as the sun after a storm, and faster too since, like us, it's always circling, and all of it happening twice, once up there and once again in the water, and the next morning was the first morning in a month where my first thought when I opened my eyes wasn't "R doesn't love me anymore."

Sometimes it is difficult to tell where a fact ends and a feeling begins. When I first started working on this essay I left myself a comment in the margins: "Anne's hair pieces are interesting because they force us to find beauty in what is not traditionally beautiful." A few days later I left myself an angry comment on the comment: "Does something need to be beautiful in order to have value? You don't actually believe that, so why are you writing it down?"

The gnawed-open textile, for example: It could be whispering something ugly about how much it hurts to lose, or the point at which we stop trying to fix things, or what remains, after we give up. Whatever stories we tell ourselves so we can go on. Or maybe it's more like hissing, sighing—some kind of spirit sound, one with a mournful jagged edge. The holes in the bottom right corner look just big enough to slip two of my fingers through, but what would come undone if I pulled?

Some things are easier to see through than others. "Learn from it," my sister keeps telling me, in the aftermath of R. "What can you take away?" But the truth is I like watching TV as much as the next person. The truth is I am usually sad and it is not the textiles or even R that is to blame. Maybe I was a beautiful person, once, or maybe I only had the potential to be. I laughed about

what my advisor said but I cannot laugh about how frequently I give up the effort of making my stories of myself less raw, more readable. I cannot laugh about how small I am not, anymore, how there is no one else responsible for keeping me intact.

What happens to a person, drained of their potential? The world drifts and drifts away. I still get out of bed in the morning. I peel the skin off my lips and rip open the backs of my hands and then I rub in the chapstick and the Vaseline, looking at the mirror like I'm daring it to say something cruel. I take my dog outside and we walk in circles. I carry him up the stairs and when I set him down his claws click on the hardwood floor. "It's driving me fucking insane," I complained to my mom, before she left, and she shrugged and said, "I find it kind of comforting."

Of course it is possible—perhaps, even, uniquely human—to live through the exact same event and come away from it with completely different interpretations. The last thing R said to me: "I think you're wonderful, but." They let the "but" linger and I listened to it eat the silence. "I feel like this relationship has just been a bunch of big conflicts surrounded by a bunch of little conflicts."

R was wrong, I thought. This ending was more about what wasn't there than what was. But as they wept I saw conflicts like holes, little holes swallowing the space around the bigger ones, and I realized that, at least from a visual perspective, we were basically saying the same thing.

A hole is a thing with a shifting identity in that it takes on the properties of whatever's around it. Anne's holes, for example, are only black holes because they are pinned to black foamboard. If I could hold the cloth up to the light they'd be something different entirely, less a comment on the ugly and mostly arbitrary nature of loss and more about what the loss reveals, what it allows you to see through to once the thing you've lost is gone. I guess what I learned from R is that you can look and look and never see, that sometimes you look at something so hard and long you stop seeing it altogether, and instead of wiser it makes me feel stupid, even ashamed, because I'm too old to have not known that already.

"Too old," like many constructions involving adverbs, is a verdict that only makes sense in context. The question, otherwise, would be, "For what?"

It's far too soon but I'm seeing someone new, someone who isn't R. She's taller than me, a first, and she crosses her eyes when she's nervous, and her little brother is a professional ghost hunter. "I'm surprised you didn't ask me more about that," she admits, when I don't. Already I can't

stop thinking about her, what her face does when she's telling a story and how good she looks in hats and the easy way she moves around in her body when we're walking the dogs or folding the weighted blanket or slow dancing in her kitchen to Third Eye Blind. I tell her I am less interested in literal hauntings and more interested in the metaphorical kind. When I leave her apartment in the late afternoon my lips are a different kind of raw and I don't feel sad walking past my mom's maple-flavored coffee on the counter, my empty running shoes lined up neatly by the door.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell where an ending ends and a beginning begins. How many ways are there to make yourself unlovable? What does a story become, defined only by what it's not? My unreadable thesis was a love story; maybe I wrote it about the wrong subject, but only just. It's cliché, played out, to break up with someone and then turn everything you look at into a metaphor for being left, but we see what we want to see, what we are capable of seeing.

I am haunted by all of Anne's textiles but I am mostly haunted by her hair art. Originally I wrote that sentence as "Anne's hair art is haunting me" but here, too, the passive voice is intentional. I keep trying to work something out about beauty and loss and loneliness, the ways we tease open our own wounds, looking for something: Look at all of us, splitting along our own seams. There are all kinds of ways to be lonely. There is only one way to be alone.

But sometimes it's not possible to dress things up with metaphors or deeper meanings or even words. Sometimes things are just what they are: The black bird is called a blackbird. The rat's guts aren't rubies, they're rat guts. To look at the thing that hurts and say, "That hurts." To look at the thing that mattered and say, "It didn't matter enough." I'm in love with my sadness sometimes but another rule of the natural world is you cannot make something beautiful when it isn't beautiful. It is or it isn't. That's all.

In other words: Of course I didn't want the mirror to say something cruel, it or anyone. Of course I only wanted to be seen.