
Rebecca Alexander

The Merger

The pool lay to the northeast of the casita before a copse of juniper and swathes of clay that scrabbled up the mountains from the base of the valley in the distance. A gravel walk ran from the house to the field, ending there suddenly and marking the termination of her morning walk. She did not go further.

The dog sat at her heels. She put her hand on his head and stroked the length of his back.

Lee would call her soon from the patio. There would be a large carafe of coffee and eggs on the table. He had china and silverware from his godmother. The silverware was tarnished and bore her family crest. A peregrine falcon and the letters NP. Nuestros padres. There was no religion in her family but the bloodline that ended in herself.

At the edge of the field Mariel stood with a hand in her coat pocket and fingered the bronze cast of the falcon skull that Lee had given her when she arrived. It was hard in her palm and did not remind her of transience. She would not remove the skull from her pocket. She did not want to look at

it. Its beak pricked the inside of her fist and she held it there and with the other hand rubbed the dog's muzzle.

The grass bristled in the wind. Skeins of pink dirt shuddered across the field in the early morning light. There would be two more days of this but she did not know how to communicate the silence she felt even in her breath.

They had been there a week. Lee had driven down from Los Angeles with the dog and gotten her from the airport. She had worn an ill-fitting dress for the flight because she had wanted to look ugly when he saw her. She had wanted him to feel the same revulsion that she felt for him but he had given her the package with the bird skull instead. It was wrapped in brown packing paper and tied tightly with a coarse bow that she could not undo. Her hands had shaken from the cold and nerves and she had dropped the parcel in her coat pocket unopened and did not open it until the evening as she stood on the patio listening to coyote calls in the mountains.

As the sun rose higher over the valley she wondered if she should not have opened the package. The back door opened and shut and she could hear Lee's voice muffled by the wind.

"Mariel, breakfast."

She did not want to turn. She did not want to move. If she did not move she would not have to try. She would not have to thank him though he did not ever ask for it. He did not ever ask for anything.

"Mariel."

Around the mountain peaks the sky had begun to whiten and the snowcaps no longer flushed rose in the sun. The gravel path was stiff under foot as she followed the dog toward the house. She did not know how she had turned and she did not

know how she would open the door to the kitchen. She did not want to enter the house except to gather her things and leave but there were only two more days of this.

Inside she took off her scarf and coat and placed them on the back of a chair. She unlaced her boots and pushed them under the table. The house was warm from the wood burning stove and the thick adobe walls.

Lee put two eggs on her plate and filled her mug with coffee and sat down next to her on the bench and began to eat.

"What do you want to do today?"

Mariel held the mug in her hands but did not drink.

"We can drive up to Boyd's Peak. You wanted to see that, didn't you?"

"Whatever you want."

She put down the mug and picked up her fork and sliced through an egg so that the yolk pooled in the center of the plate.

"It'll take a couple hours to get there. We can pack a lunch and go for a short hike. There's a good trail."

She picked up the mug again but did not respond.

"We don't have to go. We can stay around here if you want."

"It's ok, Lee. We should go."

"I only want to go if you want to. I thought you might like it."

"I'm just tired."

She knew he would not press further. She wanted to desire to leave the house with him but the skull weighed in her pocket and she did not have the strength because she did not know how to belong to a family that was not hers.

She finished the eggs and put the fork down and stood up. She took his silverware and laid it across her plate and stacked the plates one on top of the other and brought them

to the sink and began to wash the dishes. The water burned her hands, which were dry and cracked from the cold.

The air was thinner here than at home in the city. She did not know how to interact with the landscape except by standing in the dry wind until she could not feel her skin. She had told this to Lee but he did not understand. He had thought that she disliked it. He proposed every morning that they go out and explore the terrain so that she could understand where he came from but she insisted that she did understand. He had not grown up in the casita but in the town thirty miles to the west. The casita was his godmother's. They had come here all his life on weekends and holidays. His godmother lived in Los Angeles now but maintained the casita and allowed him to visit as often as he wanted. Mariel knew that his godmother loved her but she could not believe that it had anything to do with her self.

Mariel placed the dishes in the drying rack. The window above the sink looked out onto the field. She pushed the curtains to the sides and tied them back in their sashes. A scrub jay passed over the empty pool. The pool was painted the same light turquoise as the doors and the window casements. She did not understand how they filled it though. The casita ran on well water that was soft and tasted of minerals. There could not have been enough water to fill a swimming pool but she had not asked where the water came from. She thought that the large empty box in the ground looked like an abandoned patch of sky and she often wanted to lie in it as if she were floating in the heavens. The scrub jay circled back around the pool and on into the trees.

Lee got up and joined her by the sink and stood so that

his body faced hers and not the window. She could not look at him. She continued to follow the lost bird through the trees and beyond into the field where she thought it might be looking for food though she knew nothing about birds. She wanted to walk into the field and find the bird and hold it in her hands and feed it and care for it until it died.

Lee brushed a lock of hair from her eyes.

"We can stay here. Whatever you want."

She did not turn toward him but reached for his hand and hoped that he would not take hers. She wanted him to strike her while she stood there before the window immobile and she wanted alternately that he should instead decide to hold her and ask nothing of her except that she should love him and then that he should release her. He took her hand and she did not move.

"Let's go to Boyd's Peak. I'll make sandwiches," she said.

When they arrived at the trailhead it was already noon. The drive had taken longer than expected. Lee had lost his way around the switchbacks and made a turn in the wrong direction. They had doubled back and found the route but only after losing an hour. He had apologized profusely and Mariel had nodded that it was not a problem because she did not mind.

The trail was wide and rocky and spotted with snow. They followed it as it curved with the cliffside down into a grove of spruce and up again onto a small plateau that overlooked the woods beneath. They sat on the ground and Lee took the sandwiches out of his pack and laid them on the rock and Mariel uncorked the wine and poured two small glasses into

clear plastic cups. She thought the wine was inappropriate but it was nearly the same color as the rock and shone violently in the afternoon light. They sat side by side so that their legs were touching. The sun had warmed the plateau and the air was still.

Lee put down his cup and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He pointed across the woods.

"We used to camp over there, beyond that ridge on the far side of the trees about four miles from here. It's hot in the summer if you can imagine. My brother and I took nets and we'd go out to the stream and try to catch fish."

"Did you?"

"No. We never caught anything."

"Because you didn't know how?"

"My godmother says that everyone has an animal. One you can catch and own. I thought mine lived in the fields but I haven't found it yet."

Mariel unwrapped a sandwich and balled the cellophane in her fist and put the trash in the sack and began to eat. She could not remember how many times she had made the same movements in Lee's presence and she wondered if she were not the animal he had been chosen to catch. "Do you like it here?"

"In the woods?"

"This land. Where I grew up."

She did not feel generous.

"Aesthetically," she said.

"It's not like your experience in any way?"

"It's yours. Not mine."

"You don't like it?"

"I didn't say that."

She wanted him to go further but he did not. She wanted him to ask what was wrong but she did not.

He brushed the crumbs from his lap and stood up. She could not hear the stream from the plateau but she continued to sit so that she might recognize its presence. She wanted to conjure an image of the brothers wading in the water as they laughed and did not catch anything. The cold water that slapped against their shins. The silt that spread between their toes. The viscosity of their bloodties more present than their bodies themselves.

There was no breeze but the air that wrapped around her skin like a heavy blanket. She thought that she should have heard the stream in such stillness and she thought perhaps that there was no stream and that he had invested a false image with a strong feeling but she did not know why he would do such a thing. She did not like his brother though she would not say so. His brother lived in London because he did not like the States. He had lived only in their hometown and in Los Angeles for a short time as an artist.

"Mariel."

She did not move. She wondered what would happen when she no longer responded and he continued to call her because he would call her without fail though she had long since stopped responding.

Lee walked to the edge of the plateau and stood with his back to her.

"We should get going," he said. "Walk some more before we have to head back."

The wood veiled the unspoiled land before them and she wished that she could leave him there where he belonged

because she had become polluted and he did not need such dirt. He turned and faced her again. She ran her fingers over the rock face and bowed her head and smiled. She slowly stood but she could not look at him.

They continued on along the trail as it twisted in the reddening sun. Dust flecked rock to either side drove down into a run of young spruce that acted as a windbreak. Needles and cones lay across the path and dampened their step.

Mariel knew that if she did not speak he would not either. She followed behind. After a ways the trail began to climb again and they turned back around. They would reach the trailhead before dusk but there would be no great reckoning. There would be no energy. The quietude of the wood a vacuum and pitiless. Only the hard sun chiseled across the terminal day. She would say nothing. She would nurture intolerance and spite like a mold and want that it should spoil her.

In the car she held onto his hand and did not let go until they returned home.

Lee's godmother called the next afternoon. The day was unusually warm and he had taken the phone out onto the patio where he sat in a deck chair talking to her.

Mariel sat beside him. They had pulled the chairs from the small tin shed by the side of the house. The dog ran in the field.

She did not know what Lee's godmother wanted. In a month low lying greenery and yucca would begin to fill out the dried field but she would no longer be there and she wondered what would happen if the surrounding mountains were no longer there as well. It was not possible but she imagined Lee's godmother with a hoe tilling a field full of white sand that bore nothing but itself. The asphalt on the

driveway a cracked gangway in a sea of virginal infertility. She reminded herself that Lee was not his godmother's child.

Lee's father had died when he was sixteen and his mother could not pay the bills and she had driven to San Angelo in Texas and had not come back. Mariel wanted to believe that Lee was faultless but she could not understand why he continued to talk to his godmother on the phone though he would see her in a day. She did not understand how he had asked her to become a part of something that she did not have the energy to understand. An encomium to a family that was not. A tangle of relations that overwhelmed her and set her in place and permanently.

The mountains to the left cast shadow across the field, concealing the few homes in the valley that Mariel had noticed. She had asked Lee who lived there but he did not know and he had said that they had never known. In the distance the dog had become a black spot on the horizon as he ran toward some unknown thing. This life here would all abate and the sun would burn over the precipitous mountains and darken then continually on and on each day and no one would be the wiser in this permanence of fiction.

Mariel stood and walked out onto the gravel path. She walked toward the field to find the dog because he had disappeared. She could not hear Lee. She thought that she would walk into the field and cross through the dirt and discover the dog somewhere beyond the low drumlin but she caught sight of him for a moment and stopped. She turned and walked toward the pool and walked down the shallow steps into the pool and on down the slope into the deep end and she stopped there in the dirt that had accumulated and

she lay down. She could not see anything over the sides of the pool.

The concrete was cold and hard and she thought that she could disappear there in the ground that was sky.

She slipped off her shoes.

She awoke sometime later and it was dusk. Lee was next to her. She could not hear anything but the wind and the smack of the front gate pegged in its place. She did not know what was happening. She did not believe there was anything in the mountains that night.

She turned on her side and her feet were cold but she would not move them. She looked at him lying there next to her. She did not have to do anything.

"You fell asleep," he said. "In the pool."

"No."

"No?"

"It's the sky."

"How do you know?"

"Know what?"

"We're in the sky."

"I just do."

And then she laughed while she looked at him because she could not stop herself finally.

She did not have to do anything because he already knew.

The smack of the front gate pegged in its place.

Mariel said you are ugly.

She did not say anything else and she became violently sick and he continued to hold her.

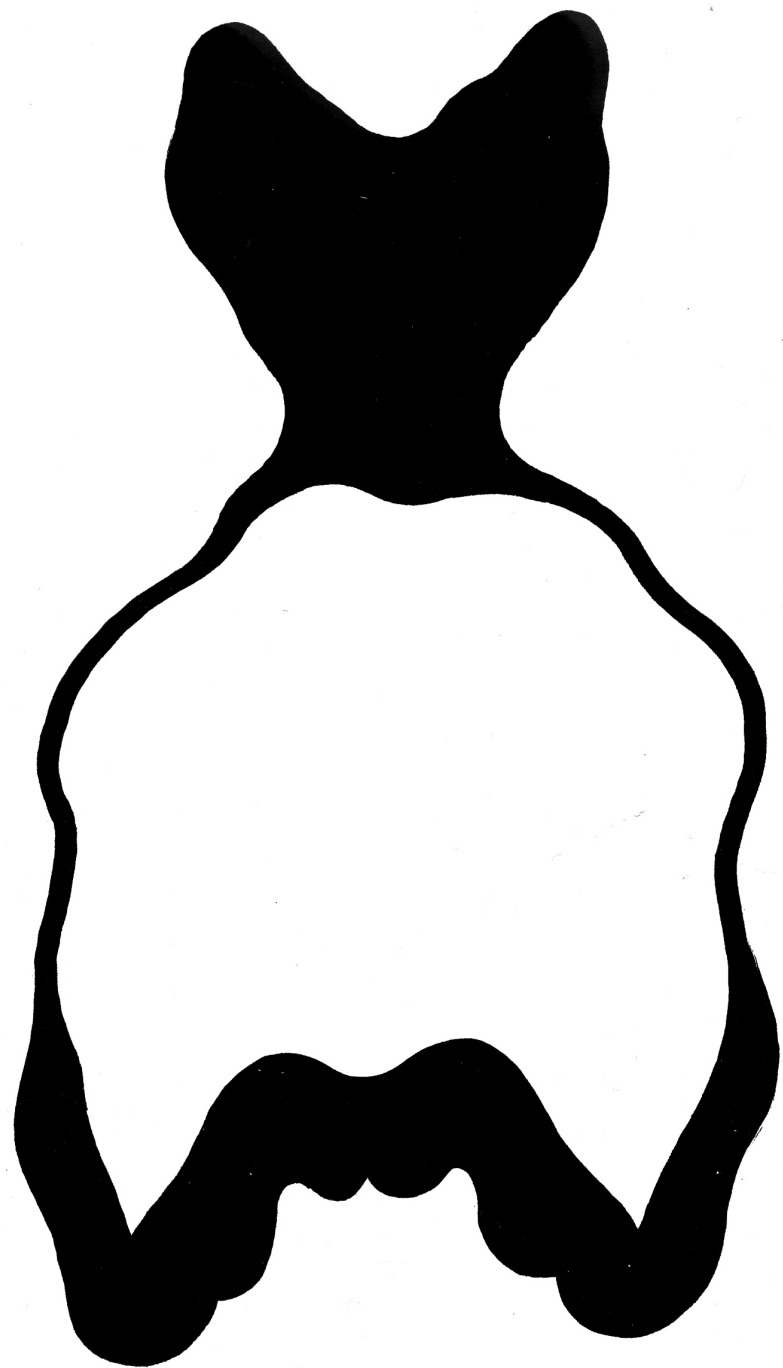
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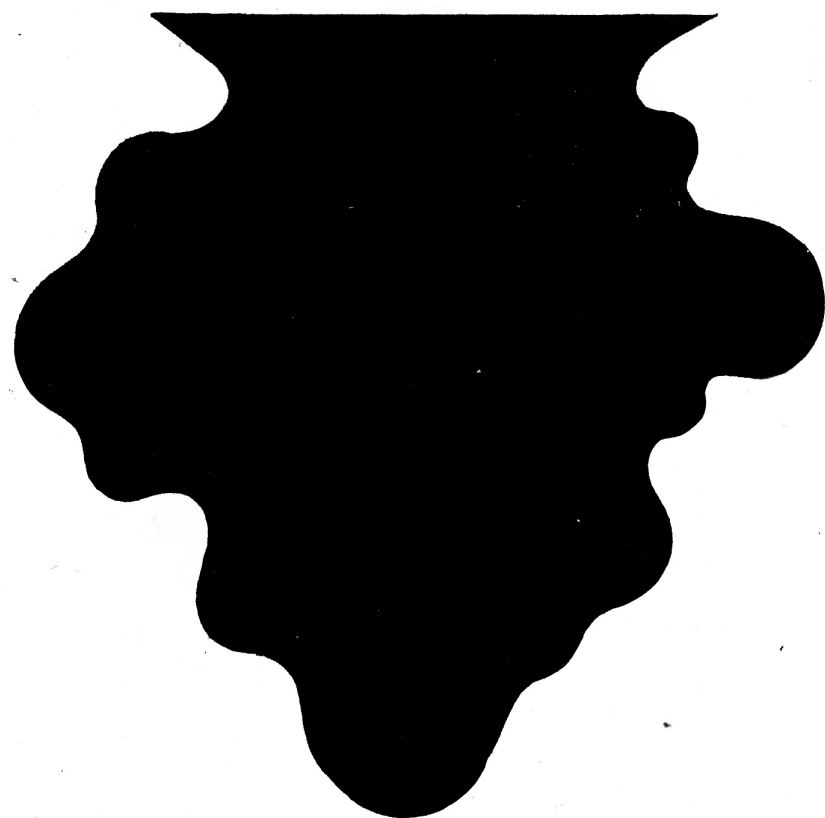
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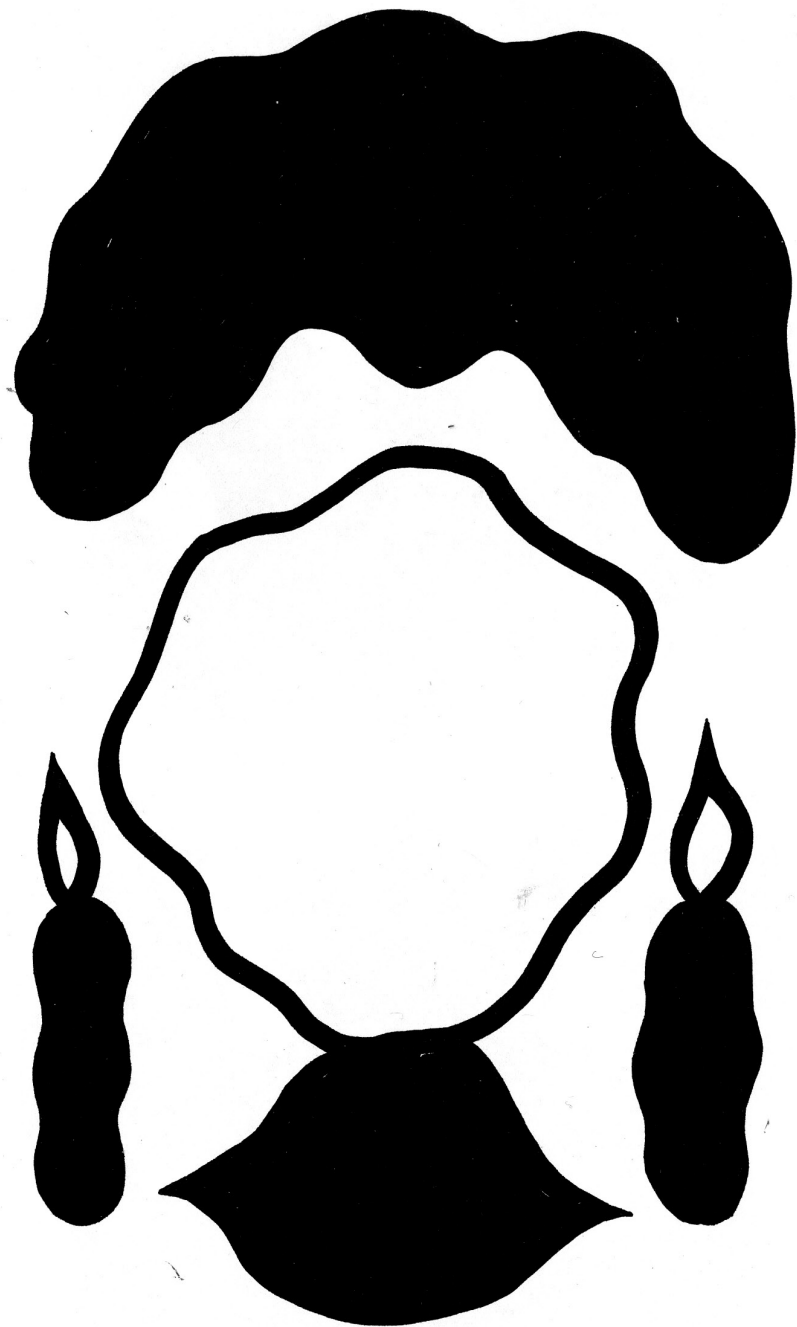
Massive Abstract Solids and the Human Idea

EIGHT VISIONS

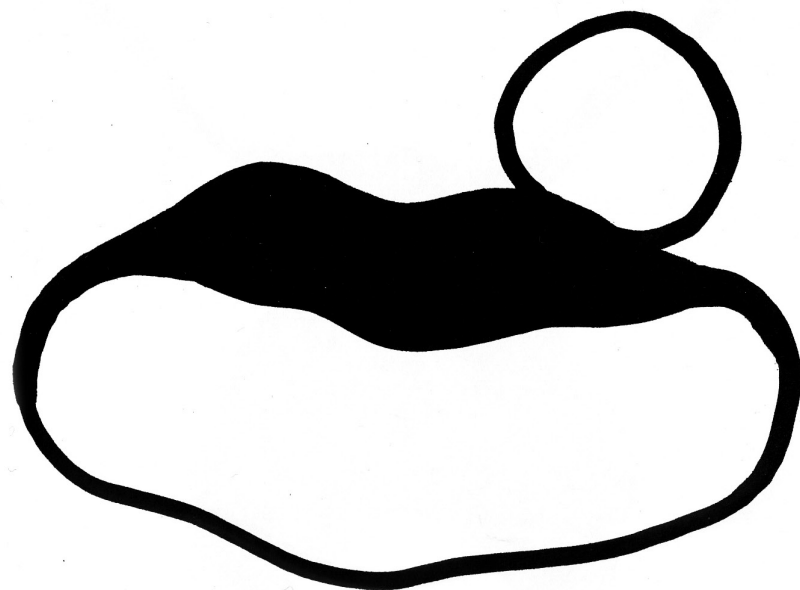
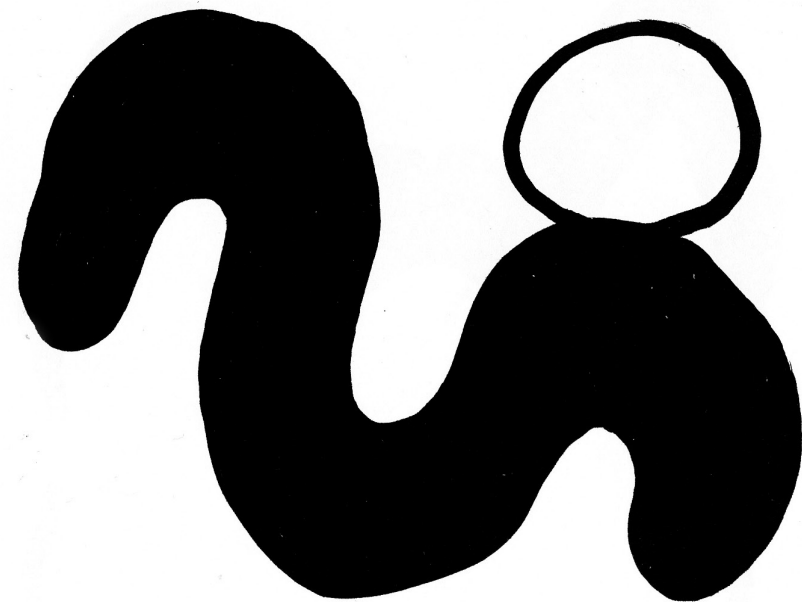


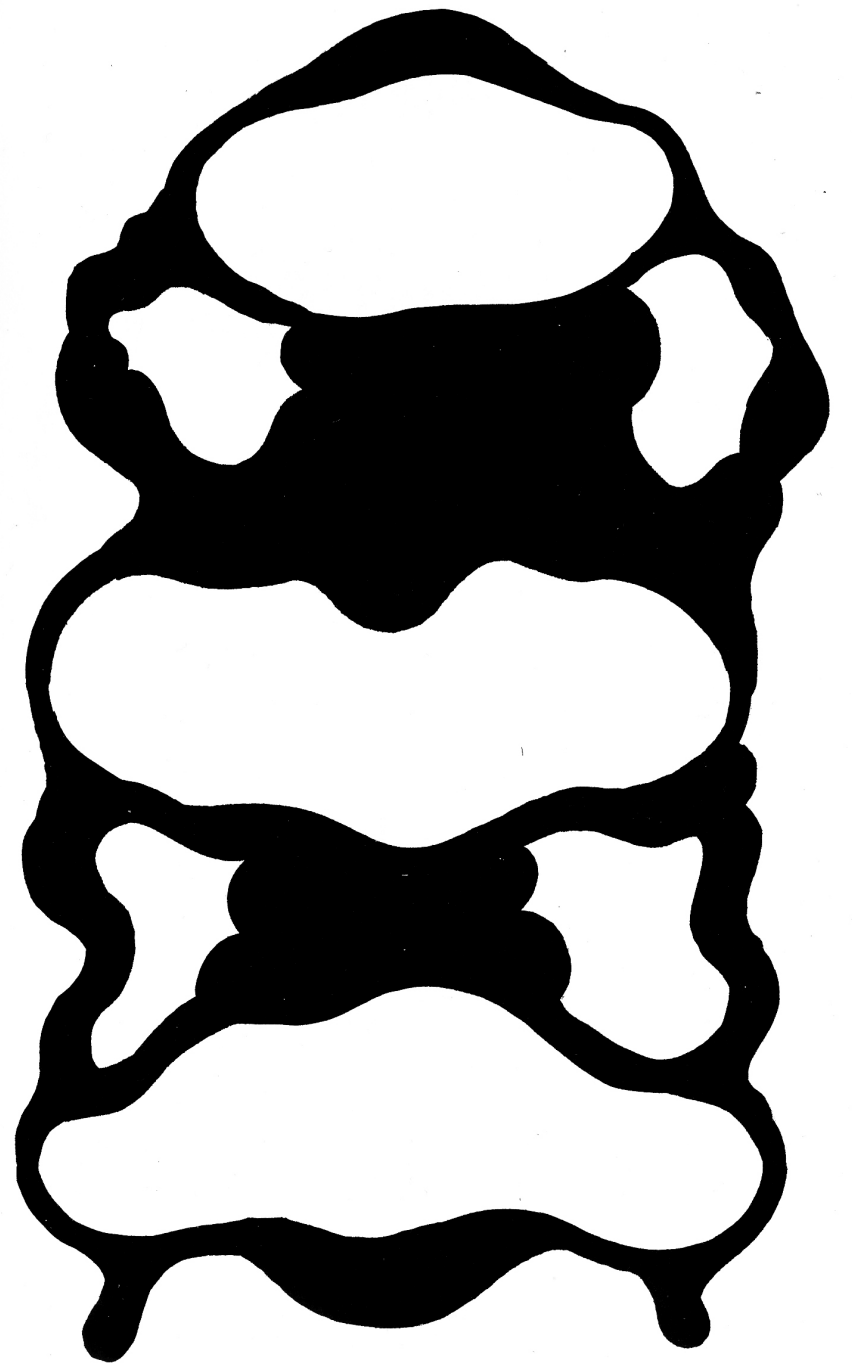


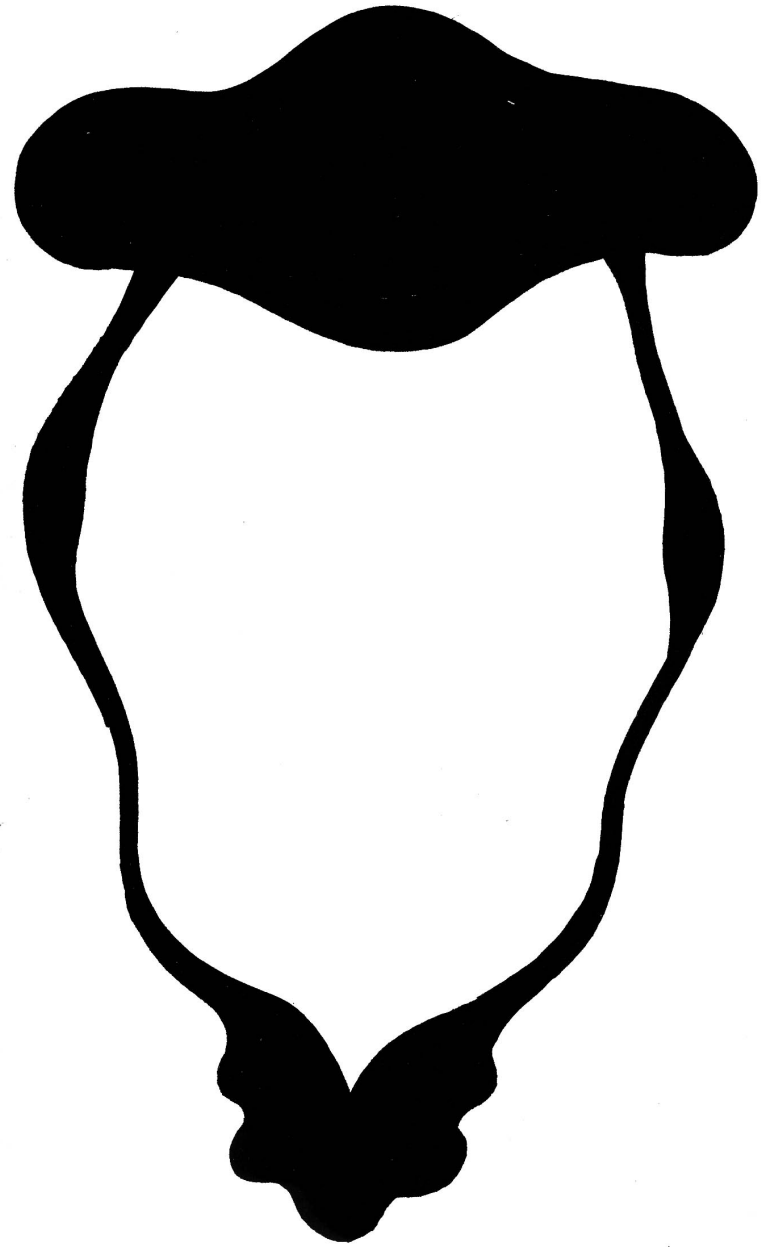












Simone Morris

White Walls

I work at the Marina Oak Gallery in New York City because one day I saw a flier, called the listed number, and had a voice that sounded unsure when the other side picked up. They hired me because, to use their terms, it seemed I was “malleable.” And I didn’t question it because I knew I would have something to say about myself when asked; that I have a job. Except the case was then and the case is now that that’s all I can say. Contractually, I can’t say it’s a job where I spend all day in a room, walls completely white, answering phone calls in as contrary a nature as I can muster, a job where I know so little about the people who employ me I sometimes forget they exist at all, a job where when I speak I must pretend to be someone else and when I don’t speak I try not to think about the someone else I once was. Outside of my agreement with the gallery, though, I’m still nothing but an employee, and I think about how it’s nice right now not really to be anything. And then I feel the vice around my lungs and let it tighten a bit before I take a deep breath and force it open, if only for a little bit.

Where I live is not far from the above-ground section of the F train, and when it passes it's ghostlike behind me, yet I can hear it, colliding with its tracks, making audible friction with the air. At times, when I am tired perhaps, or simply not concentrating, I can't bring myself to think of its location in logical geographical relation to me. Instead, what it sounds like becomes a reality, transporting me into some dreamlike state, in which everything is thundering towards me; the traffic otherwise not associated with trains, horns, voices, the usually silent buildings and the inconsistencies in the street's tar. It's not a kind of claustrophobia that overcomes me – that's what I would expect to feel. Instead it's this kind of acceptance of all the separate life out there in Brooklyn, separate from me and separate between each element that is to me one thing, united by the very fact of its detachment from me. The train sounds like it's passing directly by my window, though in reality its path is perpendicular and blocks away. It sounds like it's gliding through the air, the way dragon kites do, jerked by passing breeze or the child holding the other end of the string. The train becomes its own kind of creature: mechanical, sure, but distinct in and of itself, by way of routes taken and the marks people leave inside. It only makes sense that the city becomes a place not entirely manmade when I get into these states. Instead, what began as monolithic unbreathing monuments against nature have become soft and malleable, made so by the people who live here or the animals who have found shelter in its openings. When the residents of this bizarre concrete town become the rightful inhabitants of their environment, their influence no longer

can be characterized as “manmade,” instead they – we – have found our niche and created our own ecosystem. I don't get much greenery living here, it's true. But I am surrounded by a kind of moving vivacity that rocks me to comfort.

When I myself am on the train I have no identity; I am just a body sitting on a shuttle along with everyone else in our shared space. I have passively worked hard to become this way, starting midway through college, and by the time college ended, I didn't have anyone from home to call or call me, or anyone for congratulations from school. There were my parents, but now they've stopped trying. I let them know I am alive by sometimes calling them and saying the nice things they want to hear, like, “The weather is very nice today, yes, it's cold, but it's also bright which makes it easy not to notice!” Or, “Today the woman who lives downstairs' cat had kittens and I can hear their sweet mews through the door when I pass by.” This makes them happy. Other times I will send them things that are very New York and my message to them will be in the loops of my handwriting on the package's address sticker that has voyaged across the country to their Washington door.

I sit on the F, thinking about something new to send them, which is pointless because whatever I find usually presents itself to me and feels appropriate and insignificant, to the point where I have no idea what I have sent them in the past. For all I know I am sending them the same gift over and over again, and they are too polite to say anything, or too concerned to know how to act. In either case, there's a silence I appreciate, and I am left with no inspiration.

The train is forcing me to move in what is to me a very unnatural swaying, though within the confines of the car not to move at all would be eerie and force me to lurch into those nearby. A strange soft clanking sound draws my attention to the center pole a few feet from me, and on the ground is a woman, crumpled and dazed. There is an empty seat very close to her, and she reaches towards it, reclaiming it. She looks up at me, then around to everyone else staring. "That just happens sometimes, sorry," she says, eyes on the pole. She holds her head as she fills the orange seat, and stays like that for a little while, before moaning a bit. "It just hurts." No one says anything more.

I get out at 23rd Street and begin walking towards the river, trying to strip myself of the woman's weird cries, trying to make myself blank, preparing myself for another day of blinding whiteness all around. These streets are streets, I must remember, there is nothing to them. These people are not worth looking at, and they must be avoided. When I am in the circulating air, out of the subway in Manhattan, I am working and must adjust my thinking to the kind of mindset Marina so likes. I am not anyone particularly, though I could be whomever the caller wants as long as I am not myself. The place in which I work, the famed Marina Oak Gallery, the exclusive, gorgeously curated and perfectly managed art gallery does not sell art. Nor does it show art. I do not know why the gallery is, but it is, and I do not know what I do for them except that I do it. I am in no way a part of any kind of performative art, and I will not leave anything memorable behind, except perhaps a few million skin cells

or the scratches my bag's buckle leaves on the softer surfaces.

I work in the front room of the gallery, and the white walls and a computer I stare into for eight hours a day are the only things surrounding me. Sometimes people call, and if they ask for anything resembling the gallery, it's my job to tell them that they've reached the wrong number, unless they've tried one of our false lines. The real phone line connects only to the back room, but I'm not even allowed in there.

As far as I know, the only way to forge passage between the rooms is through the other side. It threw me, the first time, because the wall I sit against isn't actually anchored to the floor; instead it acts as a door, pushing out towards me when someone slips between the rooms. Other than Marina and the other, I don't know if anyone goes back there, or when anyone is actually back there. Sometimes I hear muffled sounds that seem like they could be voices, but I think that's just the blood in my brain telling me that it's still there, flooding around. Sometimes, though, I'll answer the phone and I'll pretend to be whomever the callers hoped to reach. Sometimes I am, anyway. They'll call asking for some pizza place – Mario's or Mama's – and I'll take their order and tell them how delicious it sounds, how I wish I were the recipient of that pie, how all those toppings together sound so, so good. One guy gave me his credit card number to pay, and I spent the rest of the afternoon looking at it, thinking about how I could use it, until the indecision and guilt of it all weighed heavily on me and I crumpled it up and dunked it in my glass of water. I watched the ink leave the paper and turn the liquid blue, slightly blue. Another time a girl called

me, complaining that she had been sent to the principal's office for biting one of her friends. She kept talking at me before I could say anything, saying Mommy, I'm sorry, but she just made me so mad. That time I hung up even before she stopped talking.

Though I'm trying to immerse myself in only work-related thoughts, I cannot help but wonder why, and then become slightly horrified by the reality of the fact that it was warmer in the train station than it is outside, now. I don't particularly like the idea of other people's body heat and who knows what other fermenting things keeping me warmer than when I am exposed to the city's circulating air. While I think about this I am attacked by wind coming off of the Hudson and picture it flapping away behind me, taking any remaining scraps of my personality with it. I'll gather them on my way home.

I reach the building in which the gallery is located, but that building's entrance does not allow for getting into the actual set of rooms itself. The true entrance is in the building next door, and even though I use it every day, the doorway always seems to elude me. Posters and flyers and stickers for bands going nowhere cover the opening. Every time I get here I feel like the paper changes and I always pass it by. Once I'm through, I have to walk down a long hallway, through another door, down stairs, up stairs, to an elevator that opens directly into the room where I sit every day. In my year or so of working for Marina, I haven't seen any outsiders come into the gallery.

The phone is ringing even as I step out of the elevator into my pristine white room. I sit down, pick it up, and don't

say anything.

"Hi," a man's voice says, comfortably. I still don't say anything. "How are you?"

"What can I do for you?"

"Is this the gallery? Marina Oak Gallery?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't know what that is, sorry," I say and hang up.

After all calls it is my job to note down the tone of the caller's voice, the questions he or she asks, and if he or she tries to call again.

I wait. He doesn't.

I lean back in my chair, take off my jacket, and take out the glass of water waiting for me in the mini-fridge beneath the desk. It was made to look like a filing cabinet, white. The phone rings again.

"Hello? Is this Marley's Oats and Goods?" It's a woman with a hoarse voice and a thick Queens accent.

"Yep, since nineteen eighty-three. How may I help you?"

"I want to get some oats. A pound?"

"Great," I say. "Which kind would you like? We have all sorts."

"There are kinds?"

"Uh-huh. Rolled, whole, or steel cut. Gluten-free or not. Each kind can come mixed with other wonderful breakfast grains, if you should choose, for a little morning excitement!"

"Oh," she says, suddenly a bit trepidatious.

"You know, you sound like you're a rolled kind of woman who doesn't need any hodgepodge with your first, all-important meal of the day. Let's just get you some rolled oats. Would you like a jar or a bag? Jars are more durable, but

cost an extra dollar. Bags might break during the shipping process. Let's set you up with a jar."

"Okay," she says, and sounds relieved that these difficult decisions are being made for her. She gives me her shipping and billing information, which I listen to and then forget.

"You'll have this in a week or less," I say, "otherwise the order's *out* of our pocket!"

As I hang up and start towards the notepad, I notice Marina has just slipped through the wall-door and is moving away from the created gap. Every time she makes such an entrance I feel dizzy; I feel the room should be turned into some kind of a vacuum, filled with the negative space created by the wall's movement. She is this tiny little woman, Marina, she has these small, small hands that are always fidgeting, and she never looks me in the eye.

"Keep doing that," she says. "That's in your job description now. I loved it. It was so funny." As sincere as she sounds, I don't think anything I have just done is funny enough to warrant a visit from my otherwise absent employer.

"Um," I say, and before I have the chance to say anything else, she's gone into the back area, which seems to have no light at all compared to the overwhelming white that envelopes my own room out here. But before she fully closes the door, she opens it again and pops out. Standing in the gap, she asks, "Did I ever tell you about when I nursed my second-born?"

"I didn't know you had borne any, actually," I say.

"Yes. She would get so annoying that right before she would feed, I'd drink a martini or two! She'd go straight to sleep after that. Of course, those were easier times, the

seventies. I know it's wrong now, but it's very funny!" She is not laughing, and I realize I have never heard her laugh. She disappears again, and then once more opens the wall. "I am so glad you've done this." She grins, toothily, and I notice for the first time that her teeth are more yellow than white, and at least three are gold.

No one calls for the rest of the day. Marina doesn't come out again, either, and I hear no sounds from the back, no thuds, no human noises. I don't know if she or the others live back there, or what she spends her time doing. I leave, taking the extended pathway to the street exit, smelling the heavy, dry odor of old paint, which has lingered in the final corridor for as long as I have worked here. I close the door and wait for the satisfying clicks that indicate I might slowly begin to let go of the day and become myself again. As I turn around to begin walking, I notice a guy, my age maybe, leaning against the side of the building, a few feet from me.

"Hi," he says, comfortably. "Do you know how to get to the Marina Oak Gallery?"

I freeze and my face snaps into a vacant wide-eyed smile. When I speak my voice is a few notes higher than I am used to. I say "I don't know," and I do my best to move my face into an empathetic and apologetic smile. I nod, awkwardly, more of a tic than a social symbol, and start to walk away.

"Wait," he says. "Did I talk to you earlier?"

Instead of answering I look at his nose but there isn't anything about it. I cannot bring myself to look at his eyes, so I breathe and say, "I don't think so." He nods and his entire physicality seems to fold and weaken. If I move too quickly

I feel like I could create a gust that would push him into the crevice between the building and the sidewalk, and he would be defeated. So I don't move, and I look at him, fully. His eyes are hazel.

In my saving him from the concrete, he has gained himself another breath and says, "Okay. Okay. But do you know anything about the gallery?"

"Why?"

"Because it seems like you would know."

"Why?"

"Because I need you to."

"Why?"

"Well, do you see the sign there, in that window in this building on the corner? On the second floor, the one reading 'Marina Oak Gallery'?"

I nod.

"You can't get in from that building, there's no way to get there, and this building, the one you just came out of, is the only one connected. I think. Well, there's a weird alley on the other end. Anyway, do you think you see why I might ask you?"

"Yes," I say, "but I'm afraid I can't help you." He is not moving. I am not moving. I look at the ground and see our shadows stretched under the streetlights, knowing well that in a few months, early spring, the lights won't be necessary at this point in the evening; the sun will provide all the light we need.

And I think about sunlight. It travels however many miles, and its color refuses consistency. It is warm and it makes things

here grow. It helps us with our natural processes. We need it. I understand now that we are dependent upon something that is not even a part of this earth, yet it changes everything it touches here, both chemically and in appearance. Earth flirts with it, causing constant, imperceptible changes in shading and brightness; in concert the two make every object and every staging unique.

The streetlight is stagnant now, and so is he, under its influence. I appreciate what I need, and I have had enough, tonight, of what I don't. I stop looking at the ground, and I turn around and walk quickly away from him, back to the subway and back to myself. The white walls, gold teeth, and hazel eyes become a part of the receding distance, and I am tired.