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# On Form

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LIA PURPURA

### *On Form*

*... It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal of own,  
of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear...*

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Henry Purcell*

How does the guy with hooks for arms jerk off?

But it didn't come forth as a joke. Nor was the answer "very carefully."

More powerfully, there was his face, a face used to seeing questions like this in others' faces. How does a face like that look? It didn't shut me down. It didn't slam or ignore or isolate. But he recognized the question (hooks working the receipt into his wallet). He'd heard/seen it all before (outside the store, whoa, he drives a car with those things!) There was a shape to the question and it was a cliché to him. Thus, I felt seen, transparent. Naked. Looked through and turned inside out and found lacking. In imagination. Or just a beginner.

But neither did he see me imagining (the hooks unstrapped, the harness off) his arms on me: small of my back. Back of my neck.

Lifting my hair.

I'm practicing now.

Someone I know tilts her head to the side when looking hard at another. The gesture always annoyed me, seemed contrived, a show of attention. Then I tried it. And it was like voices pouring in; it was like opening the front door and sweeping wide an arm for guests. Like kneeling in front of a child, eye to eye, to ease the confession. Inviting. Hospitable. I didn't know that.

I'll go on then, angled to the pour of these forms.

Though this may seem indecorous.

The hotel manager in Cambridge that afternoon was impatient with me. His name was Khalid. He was bald and had a large, flat forehead that shone. But his forehead was crushed in one spot, like a soda can gets dented. Or a garbage can. And the light lingered

there, on the dent, and darkened as I asked—and asked again—for directions to the airport. Someone must run their hand over the dent and smooth it and know the dip of bone and hammock of skin as one knows the contours of a temperamental lock, how to jiggle and fit the key, first one way and then the other, unthinkingly. And though I repeated the words back—Red Line, Green Line, Blue Line, Shuttle—I was really, standing in front of him, jiggling the key. Hand on the tumbler plate, pushing to go in.

My child comes close to touch the imperfections of my face. Touches the flaws because they beckon. The white bumps and red bumps. Small scars. Dark spots. *Counter, original, spare, strange*. He touches because he can, *because* I allow it, though hiding back there (it's bubbling up, he's capping it, tapping it back down), is this: that thrill without a name. That weird package of love and revulsion, that "glad it's not me" layered over with real tenderness. Some forward sway. Some retraction. And him teetering on the line between. When he does this, all the soft, pink, round things, all the brown, scarred, pitted things that held me as a kid come back. I remember my own secretive glances at the compromised, familiar faces I loved as a child. The tiny, stiff hairs that made nets to catch me. How even as I twisted free, I wanted to be caught.

Here is a man fated to chew as if perpetually working an olive pit out of his mouth. There is a boy who spits when he talks and snuffles and is just too watery to make friends. And with the stem of a dandelion, cut, its bitter milk touched to the tongue, here I am, calling it "milk." Swallowing the bitterness so that an outward sign might match the inner atmosphere I carry with me these last, long days of fall. Swallowing makes me wince. Contort. I feel my mouth tighten and take some more in. If it's poison, it's not enough to hurt me, I reason. And anyway, I'm testing. Making tests. Rehearsing ways a face can twist.

I use a mirror for this.

I've been watching her run the bobbing-for-apples booth at the local Fall festival with her friends. After long minutes, I draw a horizontal line to see the way the girl would look if her jaw could be fixed, reinvented, if it weren't so lumpy and overgrown. I draw

with a black line, in my head. And then, because I'm at a distance, staring, I squint and hold up a finger to nudge the line of her new jaw into place. But the new line doesn't work. Not at all. The next week, at a restaurant, in a booth across from me, is a younger girl with a half-sagging face and a bulging cheek. I go to work with my tools, sharp scalpel of sight, and pare her back to a simply chubby moon. I tack the sag up by her ear, I fix the slipped mouth. But her face is a soft curve of fine sand, a dune blown to an easy rise. It slips back into place and the fixing is wrong. The swell is like a velvet bag. *What lovely behaviour of silk sack clouds.* Throughout dinner she rested that cheek in her hand, as if she was thinking. Though I'm afraid she was hiding.

"When the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it," said Wittgenstein. And DaVinci wrote of the bodies he took apart to study, and to others inclined to work as he did, "if you should have a love for such things, you might be prevented by loathing . . . and if this did not prevent you, perhaps you might not be able to draw so well as is necessary for such a demonstration . . . or if you had the skill in drawing, it might not be combined with knowledge of perspective."

And so forewarned, I'll try my hand: Anthony touched my face with his stump. We were fourteen. *Anthony touched my face with his stump.* I've said this phrase to myself for years. Sotto voce. Sometimes while walking. I say it in part because I like the beat, the variant anapests that beg another verse or want to break into hymn meter, and in part because the moment so impressed me. I hold the phrase itself up like an object of contemplation. His arm ended just below the elbow, this beautiful, Italian boy with raucous good humor, who played the trumpet and who, himself, called his arm "my stump." The sensation was like nothing else I knew. Not a head, not a nudge. Not a child's knee, not a ball. There was headlong force, texture, heat (this was summer on Long Island), and his unselfconscious desire, which instructed me.

In Botticelli's portrait of St. Sebastian, the one I've looked at most recently in my ongoing study of St. Sebastians, it's the outline of the arrows' shape, the many whole arrowheads buried beneath the skin, lodged in the flesh and those slight hillocks there, where the tip entered and stuck that holds me. So well-focused and attended, it's more than a detail of the ecstasies of form: light, muscle, shadow.

I think it's what Botticelli wanted to paint most of all. The rise of flesh, *stippled*, *blue-bleak*; the body so changed and so reshaped, and how to praise that awful beauty—*pied*. *Plotted*. *Pierced*. I think this was the task he set himself.

At one time I would go so far as to get out of the tub to better hear my neighbors fighting. I'd get out of the tub that winter and freeze and hang dripping over the toilet and open the window to listen more closely. I'd wish away the noisy trains coupling down the street. I'd wish away my housemate talking in the driveway below so that I might log new accusations in their falling and rising cadences. I practiced seeing gestures, appointed gestures to their words in the steamy cold. Deformities of anger, gnashing twisted mouths, inner bile stirred and poisoning their postures. I wished them peace, I did. But when they screamed, I felt I could see the corners of mouths pull back. I felt the word "gnashing" freeze a mouth. Eyebrows slant like blades sharply down. They were real gargoyles perched and turned to stone.

All the better for sketching.

Sketching, I consider the line "These fragments I shore against my ruin"—from a time when so much was felt to be coming apart. But no. My fragments I shore to *reveal* my ruin. And all the similarities my eye is drawn to: flaw. Torque. Skew. I make a little pile by the shore: cracked horseshoe crab, ripped clam, wet ragged wing with feathers. I look because a thing is off, to locate the unlocatable in its features, forged as they are, or blunted, or blown. I look because the counter flashes its surprising grin.

My own deformities of course abound, but they are on the inside. I do not mean the flaws of reason, the insufficiencies of heart. I mean my spine fused and fixed in place with metal rods—all inside, except for the eleven months I wore a body cast. And then I was the walking ruin for all to see, the shore to keep in sight while sailing free.

The woman with the half-arm, no, a bit more than half an arm (it stopped below her elbow) stands chatting with her friends waiting for the bus. In a gesture she must have developed long ago, she rolls a magazine into a tube and slips her half-arm into it. How well and how long must the gesture have served, because, really,

who hides an arm, a perfectly good arm, in a magazine? Whose, but a child's arm could be covered by a magazine, its length or its circumference?

One sees what one expects to see: "a magazine laid over the arm." But because I saw the arm slip in, I see instead her quiet strategy. And what does looking at her, what does knowing that teach me—since all along in here I've been practicing, letting the sight-of work on me. And recording, recording, recording. I am not her parent and so do not feel guilt. I am not her sister and so do not feel that dual reprieve/protectiveness. I call up the warmth of such an arm in my hand (I don't know if she says "stump"), the curve, the balance, its abrupt end and the ghost of its missing length. I feel, like a child, neither moral nor immoral saying this. I feel many things.

When the eye sees something beautiful the hand wants to draw it.

Or here's another way to say it: *a poem should not mean, but be.*

There is not, as many think, any air at all in a jellyfish, just organized cilia, bell muscles, gelatinous scaffolding for hydrostatic propulsion. These simplest drifters are like bubbles of milky glass, and who doesn't want to see through to a thing's inner working: red nerves and blood and poison with a clear pulse, circulating. And yet one scientist says "when thinking of jellies we have to suspend our bias towards hard skeletons with thick muscles and dense tissues." He means in order to see their particular beauty, to see *them*, we have to suspend our fear. We have to love contraction. Filtration. The word "gelatinous" too. The words "scull" and "buoyancy" are easy. We have to suspend "mucus web." And realize that their bioluminescence, which is a show to see at night, is used to confuse and startle prey. You can look right through them. As if into a lit front room when it's night outside.

Of course, we peer into houses at night not because they're beautiful, but because we want to see what's going on in there—illuminated, partial, beckoning.

I've carried this image for a long time now: the port-wine birthmark on the girl's pale face. All that summer at the beach, the mark was like a harbor, or what I knew of the shore, growing up near the ocean as I did. Tidal, it crept up near her eye and stayed like

a dampness. I felt I was supposed to separate that color—velvety, royal, berry-like—from its place: her face, where it shouldn't be. But I could not get the color to be unbeautiful. And I could not remove the mark from her face.

Magda, who worked at my favorite lunch counter in Warsaw, had the lovely plain face of a farm girl, a scar in the middle of her chin. When she laughed, her white teeth shone. And when she looked past me, into the distance, one eye rolled to the side. Her left eye was fixed in place during our conversations as she ladled out the borscht and beans I ordered every day. And every day, I'd wait to see it slip away—the whiteness, the angle, the variation: the hand wants to draw it. If that which is beautiful is balanced and symmetrical, a "pleasing unity," then the unbeautiful's more a form of interruption—like a gasp. A catch in breath. A form made of interruptions—a rough hand passed over wool's nap, snagging. And passed over again and again for the snag. It's a moment that catches your attention. It's a moment into which you fall, as when on a crowded bus, hot crowded subway, you forget yourself and enter some other, less populated world by an unexpected door: a woman's earlobe, deeply notched; the close back of a man's neck, oily and creased; a girl's cracked lip; a freckle; a boil; a split thumbnail with its crescent of dirt, next to which your own nail rests on the cool, aluminum pole.