

2008

Alter Ego

Amy Leach

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Recommended Citation

Leach, Amy. "Alter Ego." *The Iowa Review* 38.1 (2008): 11-12. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6385>

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Alter Ego

Once I dreamed that a man tore open his chest and handed me his heart. I rarely question what other people decide to do, and so I held it, and it throbbed, and it was still connected to him by arteries. He was very thin in my dream. He stared at me. I did not like holding his heart.

But after that dream, which made me remember how nearby our hearts are, how accessible, I have sometimes thought of removing mine, just for a little, not to hand to someone, but to see if I could know it. I would look at it under a warm light. I would be careful.

For the mirror discloses nothing. I looked at myself for hours when I was seven, eight, ten, sitting on my floor late at night with a mirror tilted against the wall: Who are you, I said. Who are you, she said.

Does the heart mind being so hidden, so shut away with no aperture through which to communicate itself? Was that why the man had torn his out—was his heart clamoring to be seen?

I wanted mine to have a chance to communicate, but pulling it out of my chest seemed too intrusive, and I was scared I wouldn't be able to put it back in again correctly. How much more horrible is an irrecoverably exposed heart than a hidden one! So my plan was this: I would go out and stare at things until I sensed a twist of recognition in my heart. Then I could know my heart without forcing it out into the open.

I went to an art museum. I liked the loud paintings. I liked the paintings that started out quiet and then got loud the more you looked at them. I liked the paintings that stayed quiet. I liked all of the paintings, and could not imagine any of them different than they were. But I did not feel any wrenches in my heart, saying "That is like me! I am like it!"

Then I took my dog on a picnic. He did not want to be on a picnic, he wanted to be on a romp, so we ran all over the park and I ate my picnic on the way, and I tried to stare at things as I ran by them. My eyes said "my tigerlily, my dragonfly, my fern," my mouth said "my

nectarine,” my hands cried “my beagle,” but my heart cried “my nothing.” Or—my heart did not cry anything.

That night I made my bedroom as dark as it could get, to see if maybe my heart would recognize that. I covered my window, I blocked out the moon with a navy blanket and peered at the darkness until my eyeballs hurt. Nothing happened.

The next morning, early, I went to a dollar store where I spent a contemplative hour looking at buttons. Was my heart like a pearly orange button? No. Then a tall little girl in a moss-colored dress with long black hair came and took my cart away. She must have thought it was hers. Her parents had babies so they did not notice the overall accrual of shopping carts. I followed the girl and my cart down the soap aisle. When she banged my cart into her mother’s cart at the end of the aisle, then they noticed that they had two carts. They turned around and saw me.

The little girl was embarrassed and hid in her father’s hands, but then she came and apologized to me with her eyes down. I said, “I don’t mind.” She went to her father, ran back to me and apologized again. “I don’t mind,” I said.

After that, I thought I might try something fantastic. I went and asked a salesperson if he knew where people found their alter egos, but since I was irresolute, I whispered, and since he did not understand me and was kind, we looked up and down the dustpan aisle.

I did not know what to do. I bought the pink fragrant soap the girl had put in my cart. I went home and twirled around in my chair until I accidentally kicked over some bowls that were stacked on the floor. Some objects spilled. I had no idea what they were. My heart jumped.