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## **productions**

*Lately Josephine's routines had become haphazard. Beds were made a few hours prior to their reoccupation and dinner mostly consisted of Thai and Chinese take-out. Henry didn't get home from work until nine and Lillian put in an appearance sometime after that. Josephine sensed she was coming down with a cold. She wondered, while carefully placing bulbs in window boxes, whether plants were susceptible to contracting human viruses. At the first signs of mucus her birth mother had strung halved onions around her neck and applied eucalyptus compresses to her chest. Josephine responded to an itch below her right eye as three stretch limos pulled up in front of an adjacent building. Carelessly, she dusted the ledges. From the window she could see people ascending and descending the steps of the Metropolitan museum.*

*She closed her eyes, but an image lingered. It had been cold and raw on the day before Lillian's vaginoplasty. The only trace of Henry, a note left for Josephine on the kitchen table: "Feed plants and stalk Lilly at a comfortable distance, if and when she goes out." As usual, Lillian had departed at noon. Josephine followed five minutes later, giving her charge adequate time to vanish. Then, having nowhere in particular to go, she fixed on a different specter -- the museum's new installation of Oceanic and African art. Upon entering the capacious rooms she walked past two guards whispering at a volume calculated to attract her attention: "Hey man, look at her. She's come to the right place. Like she's part of the show. Stepped right out of the cases." They laughed, tapping their feet. Josephine clenched her jaw, narrowed her eyes and began to sweat an angry heat, a poisonous substance seeping through the porous envelope of her body. She turned and spat in the direction of the guards, then quickly escaped the exhibit.*

**circulations**

*It was recess on her first day of school in Marabone, Arizona. Josephine, encircled by children, was being prodded by the spiky branches of an ocotillo cactus. Children scattered as a teacher's hand grabbed the back of her neck. A gesture motivated by a secondary intention to lead the wounded child toward a first-aid station. Josephine recalled the look of disgust on the woman's face as she wiped her palm, wet from perspiration, on the side of her floral, polyester skirt. There had been no escape.*

*Josephine's adoptive father Billy, had uprooted his doubtful wife Rosie and the child born of another mother, and re-established his family in a ghost town, east of the Purpleseed Mountains. Billy worked as a guard at the state prison.*

*Josephine's imagination flourished like an adapting weed, fighting to stay alive in an inhospitable environment. And as the phenomenon of her presence weighed heavily on her frame, she grew crooked and strange, to others and to herself. Josephine became a spectacle in a community that fed incestuously upon its isolation. Her appearance was a sign, intuited as confirmation of the inhabitants own perpetuation and wholeness. For ten years she zigzagged between rundown trailer homes and flat roofed shacks, three churches, and two spirit houses.*

*One day Josephine stole two thousand dollars from under Rosie and Billy's mattress, packed a small suitcase and headed in the direction of the truck stop. There she exchanged her virginity for a ride to New York City with a bisexual trucker hauling pecans. For five days and nights her blood navigated the malnourished places in her body with a drunken delirium. And like a witness to an infant's first smile she responded to herself with triumph and relief.*

*All the bulbs in place and watered, Josephine went into the kitchen to wash her hands and run the dishwasher. She found some old shallots, halved and threaded them*

*together and placed them around her neck. As she lay down on the sunlit portion of the living room floor the odor of onions filled the air. Peacefully, she drifted into a deep sleep. Lillian, returning from a shopping spree, stepped over the body and quietly entered Josephine's bedroom. There she laid out a set of votives, gifts for Josephine, at the foot of her bed.*

**reproduction(s)**

*Upon arriving home one evening Henry wandered onto his enclosed roof garden. He pulled yellowing leaves off random plants, preoccupied by a phone conversation he'd had earlier in the day with Ruby, his octogenarian mother. Their weekly conversations and occasional dinner engagements sustained their troubled connection, while satisfying illusions of fulfilled obligations. Today he had suggested Sunday lunch. Would she mind if he brought Lillian along? Rubbing the bloom of an African violet between his thumb and index finger he recalled her greeting. "How's my little chameleon this week?"*

*Henry feared his mother's disapproval. It left him bewildered and raw; incapable of insight. Indeed, her acute critical edge was so effective that he never suspected it was a ruse, a thin blanket over complex fields of envy, ambivalent entanglement, and pride. The less he revealed about himself the more she assumed.*

*"Is she one of us, Henry?"*

*"What do you mean, one of us?" he responded, knowing very well what she meant.*

*"Henry, I mean is she black?"*

*"Lillian's Jewish, mother."*

*“Well, I suppose I ought to be thankful she’s a woman,” Ruby said with unintended irony. What shall I bring in, bagels and lox or fried chicken and watermelon? A bit of both?”*

*“Whatever strikes your fancy, mother. Would you like me to call a caterer? Perhaps you’d prefer to eat at a restaurant?” His tone was formal.*

*“No, bring her here, to my place.”*

*Examining the window boxes and flower beds he wondered why no shoots had emerged from the spring bulbs he had brought home for Josephine to plant.*

**exchange value**

*It was Friday, noon. Lillian stepped into the mirrored elevator, checked her make-up and, within two minutes, was heading directly east toward the bank. She avoided upper Madison Avenue, a playground for private school kids in search of distraction, food, and other gratifications. Although the last skin graft had given her a more authentic female appearance, she was reluctant to subject herself to derisive inspection, especially by those who believed themselves exclusively permitted the pleasures of transgression. At the bank Lillian withdrew an extra hundred dollars from her lover’s account to deposit into Josephine’s savings; this was a Friday ritual to supplement their housekeeper’s wages.*

*Her thoughts drifted to an exchange with Henry. She had jokingly argued that he undervalued all forms of domestic labor, particularly when related to the maintenance of his daily needs. “When was the last time you made a bed?” she said, lovingly cupping her palms over his well-tempered buttocks. “I thought that was one of the reasons you*

*moved in with me, you know, to make beds and then lie in them,” he said, drawing her closer. “Anyway, you don’t even make the beds, Josephine does.”*

*“I think you have a perception of yourself as genetically predisposed to maid service,” Lillian responded, her manicured nails indenting his polished skin.*

*“Lilly, honey, don’t lay that on me. Josie spends more time as your companion than she does keeping house.” Kissing her on the forehead he continued. “Have I mentioned recently it appears we no longer have a housekeeper? I consider myself generous under the circumstances. And, sugar,” he said, shifting the focus of his gaze, “you can’t imagine how complicated the circumstances are.” Lillian, afraid to question his last remark, wondered whether he was referring to Josephine’s additional payment.*

*The machine disgorged its receipt; the transaction was complete. Had Henry investigated the destination of the missing funds? It was unlikely. Was he aware of her indiscretion? She wondered whether Josephine’s lapses as a housekeeper were related to her own urges to displace her. Henry’s enjoyment of candlelight dinners, so artfully presented, and his subsequent amorous advances provided her with interchangeable moments of pleasure; perverse longings to envision herself as sole attendant to her man’s symbolic incompetence. Was the hundred dollars, indirectly, an illicit payment to her evolving self? These thoughts generated panic. Lillian’s legs folded and she found herself in a heap beneath the automatic teller.*

*Collecting herself and a few scattered bills, Lillian wandered into a neighboring coffee shop. Over tea she evaluated her fortune in having met Henry, a man endowed with both imagination and material wealth, a man willing to collaborate in stitching together the biography of a woman with a boy’s history. When Henry insisted that she*

*move in with him she had agreed, under two conditions. Josephine was to be employed as their live-in housekeeper and Henry would have to cover all the expenses associated with a complete sex change. Prior to their living together Henry's housekeepers came through an agency contracting white girls from the Netherlands. Although Henry protested his parents' refusal to employ black domestics he found himself adhering to the same ethic. It was simpler to avoid scenarios provoking the unbearable rising of his mother's voices within. Voices that questioned his sense of duty and racial authenticity. Lillian managed to assuage his guilt which, under sensual pressure, temporarily dissipated. Henry reluctantly engaged Josephine and she started work the following week.*

*Lillian paid for her tea and left a generous tip. She felt uneasy. Why was she gambling with irreversible transformation?*

**piecework**

*Pearl, a woman with an unreliable income, had always encouraged Leslie's love of ballroom dancing. Twirling, wall-to-wall, in their two-room apartment, he stepped lightly, always careful to avoid a slip of the needle on the old gramophone. Leslie's theatricality amused his mother. He was a solitary child who spent hours preoccupied with the contents of her wardrobe. His pleasure, to invent himself as her female companion. Appreciative of these attentions, Pearl began to rely on his excellent eye for combining stylish cast-offs. On Saturday afternoons she followed his instincts, as they combed uptown thrift shops in search of bargains.*

*Leslie's discriminating taste proved useful. On social occasions Pearl could mingle, able to perform a class above her income. Invested in his mother's fragile social status, Leslie understood the relationship between her cultural capital and his own ease in passing into a suspicious world. In turn, Pearl protected and nurtured his transgendered inclinations. Occasionally Leslie wore something of hers when they appeared together in public: a stroll over to the lower East Side for a blintz and coke. Sometimes, arriving before dark, they would deliver finished portions of the garments Pearl sewed for a living. Her employer, a bloated man with a half smile, might indulge his fantasies and invite them into the hallway. Scrutinizing Pearl and the fruits of her labor, he would pull money lecherously from his trouser pockets, count the bills in slow motion, and pay her-- sometimes less and sometimes more than she deserved. The exchange complete, mother and son would divide the new workload and carry the unfinished garments back to their apartment.*

*Memory traces were precious. They had survived a calculated amnesia, necessary to the transition from Leslie to Lillian. Other memories were undergoing erasure or reinvention in a blind and endless process of editing.*

necessary labor

*Leslie, impeccably dressed in Pearl's clothing, was delighted by Henry's declaration that although he wasn't really sexually interested in women, he could perhaps learn to be. Henry had materialized at every one of Leslie's six shifts. He sat at the bar, left of center, tipping Leslie generously for a series of whisky and sodas. Leslie was venturing to possess. Henry was intoxicated and determined to conquer, even though he wasn't*



*exactly sure what he was pursuing. It didn't matter. When Henry wanted something he settled the details at a later date.*

*A week passed. Leslie, sensing relief from his fiscal situation, agreed to quit his job bartending and work for Henry as a buyer's consultant. Unqualified and uninterested in what such a job might entail, he arrived to work for a man almost old enough to be his father. Promises of an erotic adventure served only as partial motivation. Unfortunately Pearl's death had left him both metaphorically and potentially homeless. He was insolvent. Her labors, which barely sustained their daily needs, had guaranteed nothing beyond survival.*

*Leslie was given an extravagant salary and a luxurious apartment on the eighth floor of one of Henry's department stores. Within a month he had paid off Pearl's debts, put their belongings in storage, and sublet the only two rooms he had ever inhabited to a pair of drag queens. His sinecure required a written report on the status of each unit, from cosmetics to pet furniture, in all six stores, suggesting potential improvements. Henry, a generous lover, transported Leslie to places he had previously only envisioned. The food and drink, new to Leslie's palate, sweetened his receptivity to Henry's aging, well-preserved body.*

**surplus labor**

*By the age of forty, Randolph, a self taught jazz musician, was a successful entrepreneur in the recording industry. His third marriage was to Ruby, an opera singer. Juggling her career with the subsequent birth of their twin boys eventually weakened*

*what had once been a flawless soprano voice, renowned for sustaining an unwavering succession of high C's.*

*Henry was David's eyes. The blind boy would cup his palms around his identical brother's face, drawing their bodies together. Together, in a playful ceremony they whispered, "You are the eye of myself, you are the eye of myself," their breath emanating, it appeared, from a single source.*

*Randolph was present only in the luxuries he provided, though he made an effort to materialize at holiday and birthday celebrations. Ruby favored her sightless son. Henry learned to get what he needed through David. David was Henry's voice. One day, in a freak accident, David was hit by a swerving yellow cab competing with another for his fare.*

*It was the fifteenth anniversary of David's death. Leslie placed his lover's head between his breasts. Wrapping his legs around Henry's hips he locked him in a maternal embrace. Henry began to suck. Leslie's breasts were full, wet and milky. "This morning I wanted to be your mother."*

*"You were," Henry said.*

**trans-actions**

*Josephine's traveling companion dropped her off at the mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel.*

*Her instructions, to call his cousin and take a subway up to 86th and Lexington.*

*Eventually she located the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a bed and breakfast run by an*

*order of nuns. On the basis of her connection, Josephine was invited to remain at a reduced rate. There would be a few light duties, the sisters were incurious, her room was spacious, and breakfast was edible. However, she was unable to abide by the requirements of a celibacy she had recently abandoned.*

*After a month she found a studio apartment and a job as a ladies room attendant at Henry's midtown branch. In a pink cavern located on the ground floor near cosmetics, Josephine worked eight hour shifts sanitizing surfaces. The defilers were women with urges to distinguish themselves through primitive acts of revenge and exchange, women seduced into acquiring beauty at inflated prices and profits.*

*By restricting his intake of fluids, Leslie was able to avoid restrooms during working hours. Although he was now a transsexual, with a distinct feminine demeanor, he harbored insecurities about providing the right signals. Urinating in the gendered location of one's choice was, to Leslie, the definitive test. What else did people have to do except examine each other, and themselves, while waiting in line? His initial encounter with Josephine coincided with his first appearance in a public bathroom.*

*The only person present, she was pouring liquid into the inner liners of soap dispensers. He was overcompensating. He commented on the pleasant aroma. One foot was placed too far forward, giving his appearance an exaggerated asymmetry. Josephine said the odor had become too familiar to detect, but he would be entirely convincing if he could shift his body weight to his back leg. She placed the out-of-order sign on the door and demonstrated how he could align the middle of his shoulders with the middle of his hips.*

## **unequal exchange**

*Henry mourned the financial and erotic losses incurred in the transitions his lover endured, from male to female. Hormone therapies and reassignment surgeries were depleting his play money. He was also reluctant to part with the vestiges of Leslie's male body which afforded homoerotic pleasures in the privacy of his bedroom yet heterosexual visibility in public arenas. Leslie believed he was clever enough to appeal to Henry's obsession with the unique and to the displaced allure of bringing forth inheriting offspring. If he represented his metamorphosis as an investment and miracle of birth, for which Henry was entirely responsible, Leslie could succeed in fully becoming Lillian.*

*Henry silently humored his beautiful, young lover, forgiving the transparencies of his manipulations. For Leslie had brought a myriad of possibilities into his middle passage, with promises of rare and endless fields of perversion; penectomy, orchidectomy, castration, vaginoplasty, breast augmentation, face lifts, eye lifts, removal of the adam's apple, electrolysis...*

*Mostly indulgent and sometimes irritable, Henry spent longer hours at his various offices, took business vacations and tended his beloved garden. The earth in the window boxes remained mysteriously undisturbed.*

## **investments**

*Following each procedure Lillian remained at home, confined horizontally for periods of time. When in their bed, Henry craved sexual attention, which Lillian was in no state to*

*provide. She suggested he temporarily satisfy his needs elsewhere; a strategy devised to produce an opposing response, for Henry disliked inclusionary practices. He would wait for the prize, ultimately more desirable.*

*Eventually Lillian occupied her own bedroom. It was then that she became aware of Josephine's night crying. Occurring always at the same hour, its tenor was sacramental. Josephine cried to open the pathways of her longing into consciousness. Crying aerated the recesses of her dreams, where she visited her places of origin. And once in that state her body revived. Her spirit rebelled against her location, and her anatomy celebrated night as light and winter sun as tropical warmth. She remembered her ambitions, symbolically enacted by the gesture of her plantings. "Mama, mama, mama, hold me in your eyes. I will find you."*

## **distributions**

*When Josephine didn't seem to be recovering from pneumonia, Kora faced losing the child through death or social intervention. Visiting a doctor inevitably led her case-worker to diagnose neglect and justify separation. Penicillin cured Josephine's infection but one month later the child was removed from her mother. Kora's connection to life and her dreaming were abruptly severed.*

*As soon as it was confirmed that conception could never take place, Billie and Rosie considered it their moral obligation to adopt. God would look upon them kindly. The couple visited the orphanage once a week. Having little else to do on Sunday afternoons they took pleasure in this duty. Kora was barred from seeing Josephine. The*

*four-year-old was informed that her mother loved her, but couldn't afford to support her. Soon she would have new parents, white-skinned and hard-working.*

*Billie, a policeman, took the night shift. Rosie worked part-time in her uncle's grocery. Having long ago submitted to the rote practicalities of subsistence, she was prematurely aged, her body striated with the markings of deep and enduring distress. Rosie lived in fear of Billie's aspirations to preside over the incarcerated. He kept a watchful eye on listings for prison jobs, insisting that he would go anywhere when the right one appeared. When offered the job in Arizona he accepted immediately, saying that the change would be good for all of them. At first Rosie refused to go. But Billie was very persuasive. He convinced her that the child would be taken away from her. As an unskilled, single parent, her earnings couldn't sustain them both. She relented.*

*Billie and Rosie were churchgoing people, well-respected and blindly schooled in crafting devotions under the required circumstances. They were incapable of intimacy, their love appeared cruel. Josephine had never known such poverty.*

**communal appropriations**

*One night Lillian crawled into Josephine's bed. They lay, still and undisturbed, two permeable forms, collaborating in a subversive gathering of strength drawn from all that had defined them as aberrant. Knotted together, they felt secure, their bodies damp and salty from intermittent tears.*

*Henry's sleep was interrupted by a full bladder and the subsequent discovery of an erection. He masturbated, urinated and then wandered into the kitchen to get a seltzer.*

*Josephine's door was slightly ajar. Widening the crack, unobserved, he watched. In general, Henry controlled all visible exchanges between his investments. In this case he avoided intervention, his curiosity and jealousy tempered by empathic lust.*

**gifts**

*After the vaginoplasty, Lillian was afraid to let Josephine out of her sight, as if being alone substantiated her non-existence. She desired only the company of women. A newborn adult, she needed to concentrate her energies on charting semblances of femininity. Josephine became her beloved paradigm. Domestic life fell into disarray as energies centered on the shifting relations between an unstable cast of characters. The winter passed slowly.*

*Endless streams of beauticians, speech therapists, and herbalists drifted through their physical space. Josephine stopped answering the phone and cleaning the bathrooms. April approached. Lillian, having created a paper trail of social and legal documents fully identifying her as a woman, was waiting to hear whether she'd been accepted into college. Josephine, gratified by the substantial funds in her savings account, was also making plans.*

*In need of a different venture, Henry proposed marriage to Lillian. The thought of an early summer wedding gave the household direction, a sense of temporary resolution. One evening Henry, in a mood both amorous and generous, arrived home with reservations for a week in Paris. He had successfully opened three new stores on the West Coast, a task far simpler than reestablishing a domestic hierarchy at home.*

*Sensing Josephine needed time alone, and feeling confident that she could survive without her, Lillian agreed to go.*

*When the couple returned, the apartment was unoccupied. On the roof garden they discovered a note. Complete with a map, it was pinned to a window box. A line was drawn marking a route from New York to Mississippi. The note said "I have flown in the direction of the spring flowers, never to bloom in your garden." Henry smiled. He dug into the earth, his fingers searching out the inverted bulbs.*