

from *A Brief Catastrophe*: “After”

“...nobody was bothered
by a reality that had already come, and nobody
was longing for the one that hadn’t.”

Justin Boening from “Nobody”

For Lilly “Lulu” Levinson, my great aunt who was institutionalized for most of her life.

“My world isn’t the same as your world,” I whisper into the delicate ear of the black-haired woman in front of me. All eight of us stand immobile, single-file, facing the one unlocked door in the grey room as if simply wishing would open it for us. Lydia, with her long, dark hair, reaches her hand out, touching nothing but air. Then she withdraws it. The usual astringent cleaner assails our nostrils.

It is quiet. Kevin, with his beard and blue jeans, sits patiently waiting in his chair. Eight empty, subservient chairs circle his. He, our leader, waits for us. We curse our terrible nerves and try shifting our arms and legs into supplicating poses aimed at the prohibited door as if we are worshipful.

Once Karen slipped out the door without permission, behind a guard who was exiting, and she was returned gelatinous, her viscous torso arguing with her bones. Her transformed body made her movements difficult, like a crime committed a long time ago, but it continued to chafe against new memories. Her body is now returned to its original form.

We don’t know why the door is left unlocked, perhaps for Kevin, although there is always a guard nearby.

There are motions and words that had happened to all of us, and each one of us can’t stop thinking about them. For me it is how thoughts become actions and then become

consequences, windows that break themselves in their restless carelessness, strawberries blooming near a pool of water, and how mannequins, behind department store glass, stare forever at crumpled clouds as if there is too much surface everywhere.

All of us are wrong.

I think someone behind me has turned around and ensconced herself in a chair attached to the side wall, giggling. Although it isn't true.

The grey room is the same color as the outside horizon, land, buildings, and sky. Some call it soothing. It isn't.

No one is laughing. Lydia is hollering that she is fighting for the person inside of her to come out.

Some days I wonder if we are all the same person in different disguises. We are all women who run out of things to say before we stop talking.

After one of us in the row turns away from the door, the rest follow. We bleed at the same time every month, unzip ourselves at regulated meetings or conferences, kiss the hand of the man who poisons us, and are brokenhearted by similar worlds that seem so close.

We reappear in our allotted chairs, good girls that we aren't anymore.

I whisper to Lydia, "It's about the idea of the attempt."

Her long hair rustles, "We could tell someone."

"Who would believe us?" A metal taste stains my mouth.

I want to try. Stricken, disobedient episodes live within us. I want to hear the clouds thinking about their bundled addresses, discover their theories the way I try to understand people's motives, long after they have done something awful, their pasts pasted to their present bodies.

My first interview here: Him: You have come here from far away. Me: In the place where I originated sentences and bodies sometimes went missing.

Him: Tell me more about being there.

Me: I think of too much black rain and rotting apples.

Him: Was it a place of acceptable secrets?

Me: Are you asking if it was my own invention? Him: I didn't say that. Me: My secrets keep me from dissolving.

Him: Maybe they are dreams.

Me: That's too easy.

Him: You will find me an excellent listener.

Me: I have lost events or lied to myself. What good is listening to me?

Him: Tell me about your name.

Me: I was named for my grandmother, Tessadora, who was always angry.

Him: Are you always angry?

Me: You can see right through me.

Him: Do you know what you are here for?

Me: That's up to you.

What He pulls out presumptuously from deep inside my head can't help me. Wednesdays and Fridays are white with humiliation and shuffle into the following days, lingering through Thursdays and Saturdays. Because reality is a loud noise that I need to speak over, I often need to shout.

A possible memory:

My young husband, Martin, and a young I, with long red hair, sat at a wooden kitchen table in a bright whitish room. (We were in a sunny state). There were numerous doors and windows. One unboarded window opened onto a swimming pool with its sunlit layers of water. We were eating strawberries from an almost full blue bowl. I paused, looking closely out the window behind my husband's head: palm trees, sad balding fruit, and stubbornly lush flowers. A corpse wearing a suit floated in the fresh pool. When he discovered what I was staring at, my husband offered me a crooked smile.

Now I wonder if the corpse was my husband. Was I feeding strawberries to the man that had killed him?

These are the facts I remember:

My husband is gone. I didn't personally know the man who hurt him. I am here in some form, but damaged. This happened long ago. I didn't know my husband as well as I should have but I miss him.

I, too, often feel like a walking corpse.

Welcome! Goodbye to the mind.

There are words that are clues but can't be said out loud, words forming sentences that might lead somewhere. Maybe I remember following a trail of strawberries to some antagonistic water strumming under a luminous sky. An unfamiliar man sat in a chair on the edge of the pool. His chin was cupped in his hands. Then it wasn't. The water motioned, beckoned in the breeze. He didn't belong near our house. Did he drown on purpose or accidentally? Did he drown at all?

Something is always happening somewhere else.

I am supposed to forget, replacing my memories with cautionary tales every Wednesday and Friday. Or maybe I am supposed to remember. I meet Him again and again, handing over my facial and verbal expressions.

"Do what you want with them." I am expressing myself.

"I see so many intricacies bound and occasionally released," He answers. Then He adds, "Sometimes there's too much action to find your place in a changing world."

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In the empty facility bathroom shower in the middle of the night the water resembles applause. I turn it off. Pause. Listen. My feet are damp and cool on the cement floor, an odor of sulphur rises from the drain. I feel grit or something like it in my hair, rubbing my skin. I wash again until I feel clean. I try to hear what the two men in the distance are saying although the only men nearby are guards or doctors. I turn the water on again. With all that wet applause I concoct a play.

First man: A body ripens in water.

Second man: It becomes indistinguishable.

First man: Even faces are hard to recognize over time.

Second man: I see where you are going with this.

First man: The cause of death disappears. And no arrogant looks or wrinkles remain.

Second man: Are you thinking about someone in particular?

Silence.

Second man: Have you decided yet?

I turn off the water and there are no voices echoing, bouncing off the cold cement. It is late night or early morning. No one else is awake. As soon as I dry myself my face is wet again. I am crying in my bed. This could have been a dream.

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Lydia, with her long dark hair, does the best she can, understanding our criminal histories, how each of us has lost or purposefully abandoned our minds. Lydia is one of us. We all do the best we can. In the last year I remember that in the outside world no one had learned to monitor our thoughts yet. If they had here they would have heard our complaints bubbling along the edges as well as raw and bare ideas covered by noise.

The women are roses topped by luscious red blossoms and suffocating weeds whose thorns are readily apparent and immediately invasive. Each woman makes different sounds and has various responses to danger. Karen bites. Lydia punches or scratches. I strangle. We are considered to have different (dis)abilities and therefore different cures.

Karen, with her fringe of blonde hair and excitable features, was admonished and delivered from her government advertising job where she said she could see through people. She tried to bite through coworkers' hands or stomachs to reach the digesting food there, which they frowned upon.

Lydia, a school teacher, began to tell everyone that she didn't believe anything she'd heard or seen. If she saw something happening that she didn't like she made her fist into the shape of a weapon and aimed.

I decided to imitate moss when I arrived. I stopped doing anything. I lay in my bed. I couldn't recall who I used to be. One of us killed someone, another tried and failed, and the other couldn't remember. These are the ridiculous stories that fly around, perching everywhere.

Some days I am a proposition. Other days I am an adjective or a noun or a verb. Standing in line outside the hairdresser's, we never discuss the events that propelled us here. Rumors run amok and, like snow, fall whitely and patiently, erasing everything underneath. The hairdresser pouts her lips and snips here and there briskly on our delicate heads. Our hair drops, in slippery clumps in different colors, raggedly onto the floor. In that room a sweet smell slips over the usual stringent cleaner one, smothering it. Sometimes the

hairdresser asks us what we want, mostly she doesn't bother. She likes my red hair, letting it grow and cutting only the ends so maybe she can make a wig later. When she concentrates, she looks mad. She is one of us but allowed to use scissors. The hairdresser has said that everything hidden underneath swirls together when it lingers too long.

Last night I dreamt my husband, Martin, had called me to our bedroom. When I entered, the room was lit by candlelight and the bed was covered with red rose petals. I sat on the edge and tried to brush the flowers aside, but when I peered closely, cut strawberries had been disguised as flower petals. I leaped up from the spreading red stain as my husband approached me from the bathroom. But he was wearing Kevin's face. I screamed loudly enough to propel myself from my sleeping world into this other one.