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SHADOW PUPPET

Because I try to be a simple person, I am drawn to the substantial. I believe myself to be “of a substance,” for example, along with the buildings and the earth below foot. I am, in other words, as much a substance as any concrete thing: from the dense, grainy canvas of my olive-green duffle bag, to the nearly-ethereal threadbare silk of the multitude of women’s panties that fills it.

If abstract thought is to be considered unsubstantial in the material sense, then that’s why it can be inked across a bleached expanse of wood pulp: so careful people like myself can know it exists. There are other things to which this process of concretization can be applied. Staying substantial allows me to avoid unnecessary complexity. However, in avoiding that complexity, I’ve had my share of stumbling blocks. Sometimes I have a problem with my shadow.

In fact, at times I’m not that simple at all. Last year, I went around for a summer with a phrase in my head. “The imp hypostasis,” which I think came from *Ulysses*, and which made no sense to me. That it recurrently interrupted my thoughts seemed inexplicable. By August I went so far as to look up the word “hypostasis,” partly, I admit, to satisfy myself that it existed. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is what the word means:

That which subsists, or underlies anything; substance (a) as opposed to qualities, attributes, or “accidents”; (b) as distinguished from what is unsubstantial, as a shadow or reflection.

Shadow. You can’t tell me there isn’t a certain pathology in shadow, a certain insidiousness to reflection. I prefer substance. The broad impermeable canvas belly of my duffle bag whispers and rubs against my strolling pant-leg. Down the pitted surface of my nose imperceptibly slip the nose-grips of my sunglasses, as my face now sweats under a shadow-casting sun.

I live in a world of crumbling brick and snaking sidewalks. Past the cafés, the Middle Eastern and Greek delis, the Vietnamese grocery, the porous, white sidewalk concrete resembles my sweating face. If my sunglasses hide the avid and living orbs that might distinguish me, so does the sidewalk’s blanket of old wrappers and crumpled, colored papers eclipse its pock-marked swath of pumice skin. I dismiss any notion that this street is orderly and clean, as I have never witnessed a thing orderly and clean. Where some may assert that any given environment is the sum of its constituent substantive parts, I cannot see that sum: only a heterogeneous clutter of innumerable substances accosts my eye. Ignore any negative connotation in what I say: I *want* to perceive all this substance. Otherwise, I would find myself adrift in a wasteland of abstraction and shadow.

Some mornings—and this morning as well—a black man in a reflective suit is busy sweeping the debris from the sidewalk into the street. I try to light the cigarette

dangling from my lips, but my Zippo (a gift from a student) won't light. I follow this city employee, his arched back bobbing with each broom volley. Should I ask him for a light? Left in his wake are sidewalk cracks lined with cigarette butts: the butts themselves all bear the familiar freckled brown skin: no white is showing on any of the butts. Butts crumpled, careened, crooked, but nevertheless aligned end-to-end, so flush with the surface that no unintentional broom could ever dislodge them. I stroll past the city employee and the duffle whirs against my pant leg. The bag is heavy with substance, and I have almost reached Frank's Diner.

I used to fear my shadow. For as long as I can remember I have moved within these coordinates that situate me at a dangerous confluence between light and shadow. As a child, I was haunted by a dream of a gargantuan, earth-swallowing umbrage: it would hover in and engulf my tiny body, covering me up in its weightless, black mortuary blanket. I would discover myself suspended indefinitely within its unknown medium, the semblance of a womb. Then I would be born into an utter blackness and held there while the grating strains of all the world's most wrenching sounds enveloped me. I would then be suffocated as the tenebrosity of air became too dense to breathe.

The dream persisted but with age I learned words. I was soon able to expose this apparition on my own terms in the light of day. Mother stood hard-pressed to make sense of my descriptions of the dream, my infantine verbal divagations, but I continued out of frustration. "It was a big shadow that came over me, and I couldn't see or hear anything!" One morning I must have held the dream out before me, my little knuckles white from the grip, and wrung the essence out for her, because she suddenly understood the content of my nightmare. This is what she told me: that when I was just an infant she had set me down in the yard and gone into the house. I had then crawled out to the vast gravel field that constituted our driveway, and Father backed over me with his semi truck, missing me with all 18 wheels.

Paul Verlaine, a victim of his own verse, needing a poetic device of self-effacement, thought of shadow:

*L'ombre éteignit mes yeux, un cri vint à ma bouche,
Et mon vieux cœur est mort dans un frisson farouche.*

And I, having eaten a Frank's Special with extra hash browns, sitting in a booth on the Elvis side of the café . . . will I think of shadow? I stare at the piece of buttered toast. It lies near the edge of the Formica tabletop, tangent at one corner and then leaving the plane of the table-edge at a forty-five-degree angle, so only the one tangent corner actually touches the edge. In fact, it overlaps the edge and hovers in the empty bosom of air. Still sitting, I bend over to my left to observe below the piece of toast. I am not disappointed: drooping down from the toast, a small, blunt triangular shadow. It asserts itself against the metal table-edge. When I delicately push the toast back up over the table, the triangle recedes like a tongue and finally disappears into the mouth of light.

Where do shadows go when they disappear? Where? . . . But no. . . . Shadow is not substance: therefore, it can appear and disappear freely. No conservation of mass

laws are evoked by the dynamics of shadow. I look back at my right arm, covered to the wrist in the gray sleeve of my blazer. While I have been bending to the left, the mug of coffee I hold in my right hand has tilted and nearly spilled. The mug is black and says “Franks’ Friends” [*sic*] on it. When I set it down, it rejoins its discus shadow. No, that’s not right. It *effaces* its shadow. Yet . . . there is no doubt in my mind that its shadow is still there *under the mug*! Yes, it is still there . . . no need to look. In conclusion, doing away with the mug’s shadow poses more difficulty than does eliminating that of the toast.

It is nine-thirty. The provenance of the light is almost directly above my balding head (a little to my back); it comes from dual sixty-watt bulbs burning in their ceiling fixture (five or six feet above the table’s glossy surface).

Now I see it happening again. The horror comes. The shadow hand flies across the crowded dining room, across the air from some dimension of inverted light physics, and alights on the wall (as would a fly) to my right. The fingers move toward the metal frame of the signed photograph of Elvis Presley. There is so much substance there. The frame itself is metal—neatly polished and well hewn at the corners. Of course, it is adorned with a fancy, labyrinthine motif in bas relief, and it is cool to the touch (I imagine). The photo of Elvis is printed on old, yellowing paper that still glistens in the light. The old paper, with its visible topography of creases and convexities, appears so sure in its substance under the smooth glass of the frame. Under the faded portrait of Elvis, the hearty signature asserts itself in black ink against the white background. The shadow hand moves toward the picture. I watch, unable to breathe, much less move, as the fingers wrap around the frame. The next thing I know, I am zipping up my duffle bag and walking out the door. On my way out, the waitress holds the door for me and gives me a smile. Maybe she was impressed with my tip. Of what use is money to me? Outside, it is the light of day in which I rejoice: the light that distinguishes each individual hypostatic entity for what it is . . . and gives it its shadow. I light a cigarette . . . or, rather, I try to light it, but my Zippo still won’t light.

It’s true that Edgar Allen Poe said this of shadows:

We tremble with the violence of the conflict within us,—of the definite with the indefinite—of the Substance with the Shadow. But, if the contest have proceeded thus far, it is the Shadow which prevails,—we struggle in vain.

It’s also true that Poe married his thirteen-year-old cousin and was once found in a ditch wearing someone else’s clothes. He was never a simple person. I, on the other hand, strive to be simple. That’s what I tried to explain to my American Lit class. I, for example, understand that my body is supposed to come between the shadow and the light of day.

But then why—in the case of Father’s semi running me over—why was it the shadow that came between my miniature form and the light, and which clutched me in darkness?

In my recurring nightmare—I will speak briefly of dreams, despite their ethereality—in my nightmare, what started out as that amorphous, engulfing shadow gradually

began to articulate itself and vest itself in a familiar form: it looked like a boy.

If shadow is the absence of light, then the shadow's voice is the absence of sound, and after bedtime the house would grow quiet. Back then, even if my dream was relatively benign, the dark figure could wade his way from the dream he'd been inhabiting, and find me in mine. There was something perversely intimate about him. I always saw him from the side: a flat, black profile on the wall, patiently watching me: a small, round nose nearly eclipsed by a chubby cheek, the delicate brow with its bowl-cut bangs.

Then one day in school we undertook a fateful project that revealed everything to me. We were supposed to render silhouette busts of ourselves from black construction paper. First, they forced me to pose near a bright lamp and have the shadow of my profile projected onto white paper. Another student traced the outline of my head and shoulders and brutally cut it out with scissors. Next, they forced me to place this cut-out onto a fibrous sheet of black paper, and draw a new outline. Finally, I was instructed to cut this second outline from the sheet, and to hold up the black bust to see what my "profile" looked like. To my horror, I found that I was not holding my profile at all, but rather the incarnation of the shadow figure in my dream. We'd made him substantial with wood pulp and a few household items.

Mother hung it on a wall in the living room. This all took place many years ago, but it was about that time I began paying close attention to my shadow wherever I went; consequently, the dark figure became a daytime fixture. I knew nothing of him and he followed me tirelessly: the essential stranger, desirous of watching my every move. With the dead stare of the blind or the emotionally devoid, with the sideways eye of the seagull showing no expression in its scavenger's vigil, he silently scrutinized me.

My shadow and I continued on in this incestuous manner under the seemingly nervous eyes of everyone. To avoid him, I read all of Mother's books. There was a substance to the dark letters on the page. I kept finding substance everywhere—behind the headboard of my bed, under the apple tree in the back yard, in the mushy ground of the hill behind our house: substance lost to the world that I could claim for myself. But the shadow's hand would often lurch forward with a velocity unknown to me and attain these things before I could, perverting them with his insubstantiality.

Despite all that . . . this is "the here and now," and I'm no longer a child exploring the autumnal decay of a wet backyard to find crumpled pornographic magazines and antique dolls' heads. This is *today*: I stroll down the street: the crumbling brick edifice of my apartment is now visible at the end of the street. I don't see her car in front. . . . The walls are littered with graffiti here. To my right, cartoon people, in an eloquently opaque black spray paint, adorn the boarded-up façade of what used to be a liquor store. The graffiti woman has two ample eggplant breasts: the artist's success in representing reality with these breasts is surprising. Dabs of brown paint constitute nipples. Now that I think about it, the surface of the brick, with its wrinkles and pores, resembles that of a nipple. I glance intently, trying to make out the surface of the nipple, but I don't stop to stare. . . . That is, I stop, but I don't look like I'm

staring. Behind my sunglasses, I stop to see if that texture created by the rude paint over the crumbling brick actually looks like flesh. I don't stop, but . . . yes, I stop, but I don't walk over and touch. . . . I *would* walk over and touch the object, because its substance cries out to me as it sweats under the midday sun. However, the fact is that I do not stop, stare, or walk over to the building; nor do I touch the nipple. I continue on, never losing step with the flow of people, my eyes on my apartment at the end of the street. The texture of the nipple was only examined in my head, never by my finger. My palm did not reach out and feel the scratch of the brick nipple like a cat's tongue. The crumbling brick did not come loose and tumble to the ground, drawing the attention of a passerby. In conclusion, the entire experience of that object remains unsubstantial for me. However, I feel that my notion about that surface is correct. But, still, I do not go back.

The door opens behind me and my wife is there.

"Shouldn't you be at the school, honey?"

I ignore her and extract the attic ladder from the ceiling. I toss the duffel up through the gaping black hole and start climbing. I don't teach on Mondays. Tuesdays, I mean. Whatever day of the week this is: I don't teach that day. I'm taking this duffel bag upstairs because it is so heavy with . . . things! Things of substance, picked up along the way. I need to empty it out, arrange everything in boxes.

"What's in that duffel bag, honey?"

I ignore her; I pull up on the trap-door rope and disappear from her sight. I sit down among my boxes and flip on the flashlight. After dislodging the pink cell phone, the heavy, leather work-boot, the handful of stale cigarette butts, the chipped garden gnome, the Elvis picture, and the crumbled surface of brick with the brown nipple painted on it, I fully unzip the bag, allowing its sides to billow out. I stare at the multicolor bundle of panties remaining in the bottom of the bag—a load of dirty laundry (which is exactly what it was when the shadow first reached for it). I plunge my hand into the center of their buoyant softness. My hand slips and slides against the silk. With my other hand I take hold of something more familiar: the canvas strap of the duffel bag. The canvas is substance in the most dense, opaque way; the silk panties seem unreal. I hold up a red pair with small embroidered roses just under the waistband. The unimpeded beam of the flash light seems to pass directly through the triangle of fabric and yet . . . it is substance. And yet—yes—it is substance, because of this: where that fabric is, there can be no air, no shadow, no abstraction . . . even though my fingertips can't seem to grasp that red triangle, its substantial nature endures; even though it has no formal integrity and molds to the contour of my fingers, of my face, it is no less of a substance than these fingers and this face. Perhaps in what constitutes an effort to condense and solidify this elusive material, I now stuff the whole bundle into a small box, forcing the yards of relaxed matter into one condensed square about the size of a child's lunch box. After a second's hesitation, I decide against storing the box toward the back of the attic, where it should be placed in accordance with my system; I leave it near the trap door.

Enigmatically, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking of shadows, said this:

Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see.

As a child, I feared him—the shadow. I would stand close to the living room wall in the evening with the lamps turned on. As for the shadow, he would be cast fully upon the white wall next to me. Even now, it is he who presides over the memory like a judge. There is the smell of buttered popcorn because Mother has just cooked some. She sits down on the dark blue couch next to my little brother with a big bowl, and I remain near the wall, leaning against the rich wood of the piano. *Sit down, son. Have some popcorn,* she says. The television casts her and my brother in a blueish, shifting light that conducts subtle shifts in the shadows on their faces. On his white wall, my shadow is perfect—the tiny lips, the bowl-cut bangs. . . . *Come over here and sit down, son. You like this show!* I stay near the wall and pretend to admire the varnished wood of the piano, knowing that if I move away from the wall the projection of him will grow taller. I choose to stay, knowing that, if I cross the room to join Mother, he will only scramble over the ceiling to meet me again.

Nowadays I just watch him, horror having replaced fear: horror that can be enjoyed, I mean, whereas fear cannot, because horror purifies your faculty of sense: it galvanizes your sensorium. This horror I speak of, in the true sense, paralyzes you, occludes all introspection, absolves you of yourself, of your guilt, and reduces you to a trembling eye that can only watch the object of its horror. Still, it is a paralysis in which you can walk like a somnambulist, irrelevant to the world. I realize that I do this more than I should—and, most likely, more than others do. I drag myself across the ashtray surface of the street, paralyzed in motion because the sun casts him now against the brick in front of me. I hold my breath and follow his ducking, bobbing head. What happens if I purposely walk along at just the right distance from a curb so that his head will be severed off into the grass? This won't deter him. I'll admit it: the only way to get rid of your shadow is to be buried in the ground away from the sunshine. He is nothing to me. I would laugh, but I am paralyzed with horror. Will his hand extend out from him now? Fingertips spread, ready to grasp . . . will the shadow find substance now and take it? I am already unzipping my duffle bag.

When I descend from the attic, my wife is already gone; she has left me a sticky note that I barely notice amid the traffic of dirty dishes and moldy crusts of bread that litter the surface of the kitchen table. I read her bubbly scrawl. She has left me a list of things to do, since I am “apparently not working today.” Does she think I have nothing to do? Look how the empty duffle hangs loosely at my side: the mere skin of a body without any flesh or bones inside.

Late afternoon: the sun is at a propitious angle now—a long, swooping blade that just clips the rooftops—as I stop in the waste-bestrewn street. In the window of Lucinda's Laundromat I see myself against a backdrop of flash-past vehicles and crumble-brick buildings adorned by their backwards-written signs. In the upper tier of the window roll cumulus clouds from the sky behind me. I gaze at the reflection of a red newspaper vending machine across the street behind me, focusing on its shadow, which lies tipped, toppled, like a thick, hot splotch of ink against the sidewalk. I stare more closely at this image captured in the glass. . . .

What I am seeing is nothing but this: the reflection of the shadow of a red newspaper vending machine. . . .

How far I am from ever being able to touch such an illusion! Should I consider it a travesty that my eyes can even pick up such abject nothingness? Even if the limitless space within my skull should fall prey to the conception of nothingness and ethereality from time to time, I might still expect my eyes to maintain some dignity of discrimination. Yet this awkward black square splattered against the ground, this reflection of a shadow displayed in two dimensions against the glass, can distract me now because I can perceive it with my eye. With an index finger I push the sunglasses back up my nose and enter Lucinda's Laundromat.

Immediately I make the count: five women, two men.

The laundry baskets all look the same: white plastic with diamond-shaped holes and smudged-on handprints. Their structural integrity astounds me. From what height would you have to drop one in order for the impact to compromise that squared-off receptacle form? This one's contents billow over plentifully. White t-shirts, socks, white shirts: men's attire. Through the stylistic apertures in the second basket, I glimpse folded and colored fabrics. As I approach, a knit sweater and jeans become apparent at the top of the heap: I am almost convinced that this mound of matter comprises merely the wrinkled wardrobe of a nondescript person, and not the pummeled, disfigured remains of a man. What might be some kind of black, feathery sweater now looks like his matted hair. And now, suddenly, fingers with long, red nails enter the field of vision delimited by the sunglasses' vista. They plunge into this basket to extract the pummeled man's wardrobe: I move on without looking up.

Interspersed within the loud, droning hum of dryers is the rhythmic clicking of a quarter that found its way into a load. It chimes in my ear over the heavy droning dryer sound. It coincides with my slow step as I approach the abandoned basket at the end of the room. Painted a wild green color, the basket is actually wicker, not plastic. Silk panties dangle over the precipice of its rim, promising more inside. The provenance of the light in this corner of the dingy room is one four-foot fluorescent light suspended one-inch from the ceiling, which itself is eight feet high. I take several steps to my left. . . .

Now the horror comes. I can see the shadow appear against the floor ahead of me. Discreetly, one of his hands opens and readies itself to grasp. The chiming of the quarter in the machine rings maniacally in my ear: I can feel it reverberate throughout my hollow rattle of a body. The shadow moves forward; I stay motionless and observe. That is, I move, but whereas I am moving away from the green wicker laundry basket, the shadow is advancing toward it. I do not perceive the scratches at the cusps of the wicker bands where the green paint is worn away. That is, as I move farther away from the basket, unable to breathe, moreover—as I am sucked back toward the exit and the waning light of evening—I cannot make out distinctly the waistband of pink lace that holds together that impossibly fragile triangle of material dangling over the rim of the basket. What I mean to affirm is . . . on another pair, I cannot clearly read—because I'm nowhere near them—the words “Squeeze me.”

A man's voice booms in the room and breaks the rhythm of the quarter in the dryer. He has yelled something about a thief, but his exclamation couldn't have been aimed at me. I was nowhere near the panties; I am already out the door. What I mean to say is this: the man may have yelled, but I did not pay attention, because I had no reason to do so. I had gone into Lucinda's Laundromat to buy a newspaper, which I did. The quarters had slipped noisily into the metal slot. Whether or not a green wicker basket could have been found on those premises at that precise moment—an unattended basket filled with some woman's undergarments—I could not say. Whether or not a second man with a moustache and a trucker hat had made threatening gestures at a shadow aligned against the back wall of Lucinda's Laundromat, and whether this drew everyone's attention to the incriminated shadow . . . I really don't know. Strolling down the darkening street, hugging the duffle to my hip, I am in no position to affirm or deny such a claim.

Now, as I walk briskly, zipping up my bag, the sun is splattered in lines of color that barely brim over the buildings in the street: a brilliant brain dashed tranquilly across the rooftops. Whereas I prefer substance to shadow, T. S. Eliot probably thought too much about shadow. He said "shadow" four times and then said "fear":

*There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

Because I try to be a simple person, I am drawn to the substantial. I believe myself to be "of a substance," for example, along with the buildings and the earth below foot. I am, in other words, as much a substance as any concrete thing: from the dense, grainy canvas of my olive-green duffle bag, to the nearly ethereal threadbare silk of the multitude of women's panties that fills it. Leaving Lucinda's Laundromat, I light a cigarette. . . . No. The Zippo still won't light. I should find out what's wrong with it. Dropping the fresh cigarette on the ground, I move on.

During my visit to the laundromat, the sun has crouched lower in its perch above the rooftops. Ducking and bobbing his head, the shadow is dimmer yet taller against the brick wall to my left. With the dying of the light, the shadow will disappear as well. He will fly up into the black sky. The men's voices have been getting closer behind me. They sound angry and menacing and I quicken my step. It is getting darker. Despite this faltering luminescence, this impinging darkness that offers to swallow all the substantive constituent parts of the street within itself, that wishes to subsume them into one abstract whole . . . despite the fact that I could dissipate into the encroaching gloom within its pixilated darkness in which crumpled balls of paper dash not only across the street but also perform lunar spins through the air, this ethereal air of tar in which cigarette butts and crumbling brick construe not only the ground on which you walk but also the air you breathe . . . despite the possibility to float, breathing the nocturnal liquid air of shadow, to become one with the cries behind me that

mingle with the black all around . . . I will not. I will prefer substance. I will worship the concrete and hold onto the daylight that is left. The sounds of men's voices shout somewhere close behind me. Everything slows down as I continue to walk. Instead of looking back, I watch my shadow against the brick wall. It seems to be observing me as well, expectantly. Little does it know, I think, sadly. I watch with something like pity as the shadow hands of the two men apprehend my shadow and drive him violently to the ground.