

THE GROTESQUE MENAGERIE

By

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ABSTRACT

The Grotesque Menagerie is an exploration of domestic and gender roles of the American West. The burlesque and the grotesque are used as the dissection tools throughout this manuscript to examine these roles, and in so doing pervert both the ideal and the abject. As the author, these poetic explorations and dissections leave me stuck in an odd androgyny: I am suspect of my own feminist preclusions and oddly obliged to interact with the established patriarchal tropes of the western poetic cannon. I do not reject the canon as a symbol of patriarchal power; I do not request the role of woman to be forefront; I am, at once, transfixed and emasculated.

This androgyny is mirrored by the main character, a carnival barker or master of ceremonies, Whispering Ted. Ted is a female hysteric: at once attempting to embrace and subvert gender roles while being haunted by the perversion of the domestic ideal. Hysteric in Freudian terms, or as Mary Russo explains in her text *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*, Ted is “ungrounded and out of bounds, enacting her pantomime of anguish and rebellion” (Russo, 9). However, as the Burlesque degrades from the intention of woman as gender equal to woman as sexual object, as the intellectual attempts of this manuscript begin to unravel under the perceived and demanded audience gaze, so too does Ted unravel, both physically and emotionally. Ted embodies the voice of the author struggling to maintain both feminine and masculine roles, enacting the tearing discrepancies between forces.

The Grotesque Menagerie is grotesque in three critical understandings of the term. The term grotesque was an exceedingly fortunate misnomer of sculptures and paintings

uncovered in apertures during the excavation of Nero's Domus Aurea. Grotto-esque, cave-like, earthy, dark, visceral: all traditional, if not Freudian, images and symbols for womanhood. Though I would not claim *the Menagerie* overtly feminist, the exploration of female sexuality inherent in the exploration of the domestic is unavoidable; the archetypes of cavernous female will surface because I cannot completely subvert the history of my language or poetics.

However, post-Romantic grotesque is tied to the Freudian understanding of the *unheimlich*: the uncanny. From the German *heimlich* meaning the familiar, the home, we would consider the *unheimlich* as the opposite: the terrifying and horrifying elements of gothic or horror narratives. However, *unheimlich* implies *heimlich* and therefore the disorienting coupling of unfamiliar within the familiar. The *Menagerie* embraces these further implications of the uncanny, the unknown darkness implicit in home and domesticity.

Simultaneously, and somehow not venturing far from the uncanny understanding, the third grotesque is tied to that which is outrageous: comedy, hilarity, and Camp. Both the uncanny (gothic) and humorous (carnival) grotesques are based in the abjection of identity and body brought to a point of spectacle, which both undermines and reinforces the existing social structure. As the poet Lara Glenum explains in her text *Notes on Women & the Grotesque*, the grotesque is:

“[A] hybrid body, its capacity at once monstrous and dizzyingly vertiginous, repulsive and seductive, male and female represents our appetite to endure and conceive and transform everything, despite the often hideous contours of our existence.”

(Glenum, “Notes on Women and the Grotesque”)

The *Menagerie* embodies this hydra-like grotesque in its deliberate transmogrification of the domestic scene and the traditional female role. My poems imply or enact transcendence

achieved through mutilation and body horror; marital and motherly tenderness achieved through pain and violence; and sentimental idealistic love discovered through unfaithfulness and masturbation. These poems are a deliberate and necessarily cacophony of oppositions.

The *Menagerie* uses the structure and contrivance of a performed burlesque to embody the spectacle of the Carnival grotesque, but also to understand the multiple failures of overcoming the masculine/feminine divide the history of Burlesque embodies. What we understand as the Burlesque differs almost wholly from the Burlesque of the 1860s, or Thompsonian Burlesque. Lydia Thompson's burlesques, though socially outrageous, were based in sex as the striptease of our contemporary Neo-burlesque, but instead worked to parody gender and social roles. Thompsonian performers usurped gender-roles not by flaunting their genitalia but by simultaneously taking on and mocking the roles of men, as Robert Allen expounds in his seminal work on the Burlesque:

“[F]emale burlesque performers were never trying to present a convincing, realistic portrayal of a man onstage. Instead, they were utilizing their masculine attire as a sort of fetish object, in fact emphasizing their feminine sexuality by contrasting it with the markers of masculinity.” (Allen, 29)

This parody questions the contrivance of genders, mocking the artificiality of both. Travesties were perpetuated by women/men who constantly broke the laws not only of social norm but of theatrical production. The characters not only acknowledge the audience, but interacted with the audience, commenting on their own unusual costume, gender swapping, and overall artifice. The characters were simultaneously observed and observers, ultimately working to implicate the observer with the production. Ted embodies this complex duality of the burlesque acknowledging gender roles, subverting them, testing them, and dragging the audience along. Therefore, the manuscript attempts the same.

The *Menagerie* follows the same trajectory as the Burlesque historically, eventually succumbing to the projected expectation of the audience. If a woman is defined by her genitalia, what else will suffice in her exhibition? After interacting with her fellow troupe members, Ted, and Ted's subsequent lyrics, becomes seduced by the audience and the spectacle of herself. In this surrender to the moment of dual vision, Ted loses her vision, idealistically, physically, and metaphorically. The voice is lost, as well as the equality, and what was an attempt at social subversion only serves to reassert the norm. The manuscript ends with a failure of reinvention of self outside of the gaze. Within the realm of lyric understanding, the complex nature between audience and burlesque influences my writing of, and Ted's interaction with, the lyric.

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Ticket

Whispering Ted's Famouse:

Grotesque Menagerie

Novelty & Burlesque Co.

“...removing the ‘veil’ of domestic privacy to expose the terrible transgressions enacted in the secret spaces of American homes; demonstrating the uncanny quality of that which is simultaneously most familiar and most alien.”

Halttunen

Cast of Characters

[All characters are of and by the author, necessarily distinct yet indistinguishable from the same. Forgetting character for the self overwhelms intellectual ambitions; characters can fall off stage leaving the root of a person bare, revealing a self that is little unlike voice; performer as audience.]

Master of Ceremonies –

Theodora Lorraine (whispering Ted): The androgynous Master of Ceremonies, Ted founded the Menagerie to examine and challenge what creates female reality: to subvert the roles of gender. To further her research, she collected the absurdities of the domestic in one of the last frontier states, creating this troupe of performers most noted for their domestic travesty. However, Ted lost her intellectual focus in the roar and desire of seeing and being seen. She still attempts to observe and question the feminine while relentlessly pressing herself into it.

Ballet Performers –

Esti: As “honey” in Basque, “evening” in Hungarian, an anglicized “to be,” Esti is the stereotypical starved housewife. What portions of feminine Ted forcibly rejects Esti readily accepts. Though it removes her own idea of self, Esti is willing to surrender to her role as the redeemer, angel of the hearth; she is what it means to be a “good wife,” to succeed in the feminine ideal. Esti reaches toward an unconditional transcendence unattainable by Ted.

Marcus: A cartographer of need, Marcus is devoted but confused by the reversed power dynamic that exists inside his home; he fails at overpowering and embracing the role of his wife Esti, despite his masculine persistence. Marcus searches for a kind of androgyny simply for the power it infers, rather than the understanding.

Variety Chorus –

Margaret Hardy: Fire Dancer, as well as the first woman incarcerated in the Idaho State penitentiary, accused of murdering her adopted daughter.

Josie Kensler: Trick Shot, convicted in the shooting death of her husband while pregnant with his child. A bit of a brood mare, she was with child twice during her incarceration, which led to her pardon and release.

Rebecca Chacon: The exotic of the Menagerie Troupe, a Spanish dancer, hired a lover to kill her husband but, as in any good tango, reversed their roles.

Lyda Southard: Self proclaimed comedienne and soloist, Ted’s rival for the position of M.C.. Lyda left a tide of bodies in her red-headed wake, and successfully escaped from incarceration for over a year.

Mary Crumroy: Escape Artist, confessed to poisoning her husband for insurance money, has yet to escape successfully.

Aethlyn Peterson: The strongest woman in the northwest, acts as both the strongman and the percussionist for the Menagerie. Aethlyn was convicted in the beating death of her eight-year-old step son.

Verna Belle Keller: Ventriloquist, convicted in the shooting death of a rival flirt, though she didn't hold a gun.

Elizabeth Lacey: Rope walker, used her husband's whiskey to get the only female conviction of murder in the first in a death penalty state.

Lesser Characters –

Hands 1-7: those pieces of body which are of and not of the body working to subvert or sublimate the self.

Brothers: Hands with faces.

Domestic Appliances: Fetters and buoys, depending on perversion.

Flasks: Containers of spirits/souls.

Mirror: final tool.

Overture

Orchestral flourish. Ted dances in silent suggestion before ambiguous audience in empty light. Four hands to direct, retrieve as requested.

Ted: I need my corset for this – Mesdames et Messieurs

Je vous en prie, You are missing here
 a little: footlight heat, smoky grease paint, spirit ice, cut of dress.
 There are no ratted curtains here, – *where is that damned top-hat*
 no paper scenes; and the brass tone, silent.
 Yet, You still have your murmuring obscurity
 and titillation the same.

Why should it not be – *laces?* – though the costume is missing,
 and we are stuck in white, Monsieur, you can still peek!

Fellow voyeurs, we are friends here.

My gloves – You want to see the inside of a person,
 that play of emotion, Where silken becomes wet:

taboo of the surgical theater,

thrum and strop of heart

beat of keyhole marriage. You want to see

love in bloodletting, Madame,

the velvet dark which rolls beneath every touch, every

brush of lips, sharp tugs

you feel at your innards

those horrified whispers:

mirrors of your nervous fantasies. – *stockings* –

Mesdames et Messieurs

vous en voulez: your abject face.

Come, peel the gristle

from your eyes.

ACT IN THE FIRST: THE FETID BALLET

Scene One (Wash)

[in which Marcus attempts an explanation, and Ted maintains her intellectual integrity.]

Enter Marcus, Esti in domestic attitude. Hanging linen striped, stained and balding, tent like on clothesline. Esti, expressionless in chore. Marcus, unsettled in shirt sleeves. Ted witnesses downstage near picket fence.

T, slowly molest fencepost:

The man woman design, ici, regardez, I have three
extra ribs cracking tighter corset.

Sucer les sécher, mes petits
bone lice. It hurts.

Tongue's thick with scotch.

Ted half exits, though with audience.

Tent line agitated by crisp breath from the west, pleading. Esti continues chore, Marcus attempts to hold linen to line.

*M: teeth were corn kernels: soft,
sweet yellow; oddly symmetrical
nestled against diastema marbled
carnation grey.*

*E: Too tired to faun. M: She looked
full in face, cornia
white of frost, before the tug –
before her languid stumbling.*

Who else would take her tatted dug, who else would milk that bound for grave?

Esti, struggles to light cigarette against breeze while Marcus is bent to tub.

*T, Aside: Wombs keep $\frac{3}{4}$ time.
There's something dubious
about accordions.*

[End Scene]

Scene Two (Wash)

[when Marcus and Esti try to reconnect, Ted subverts]

Esti and Marcus elbow deep in red bath. Marcus composing love poem aloud, Esti smiles demur.

*M:*I admit, my mouth tastes
death. But, could I hold your grace in my teeth
if I abandoned sang? Became distilled
autumn by polishing my teeth
with fructose and fiber.

Don't you want to be pressed
tightly against my sanguine incisors;
enamel cool and white as bathtubs?
Feel the harmony of voice
shudder through your protein
until recognition manifests as melody.

T, Aside: She was there
in the hollow
mourning tangled weeds
bleu-eyed and bloody.

E: “Attents mon petit mort.”
I’m closer to the shell.

Marcus hands something fibrous to Esti, questions

*E:*What happened to the light ticking
that moment of heat before the flesh?

*M:*You highlighted the spring
with those low taps of toe, to heel
coming from the nether regions of the house.

Marcus Exits to porch

E, Still elbow to red:

Near silent movements
lay bare against the salt borealis
of mother's apron.
This means nothing

flayed by minor lethe swallowed
without water: the will
to sweat out the memory of self
and join the dance of ammonia,
of pilot light.

Wait for hands to come back
from their fetid depths;
they'll play softly: a waltz
in small flame.

[End Scene]

Scene Three (Wash)

[in which Esti succeeds]

Stage opens as bedroom, stead littered with linens, now crimson. Marcus asleep above Esti, Ted at foot.

E aside to T:

Crowded with an other
pressing me against my skin
until my hands
are not my hands.

I need a specialist:
remove the small bones
from my inner-
ear, wrists, knees.

Continue emptying self
struggle to make
room
perpetually hollow.

Enter Stilted Han. Ted offers one. A waltz

T: To bind there has to be a certain amount of willingness before the want like the moment you realize what trust means when drawled:

Panicked ascension.

Aside: He's built these wood appendages, pulls me into these awkward positions between rise and fall.

Lifted without touch.

[End Scene]

Scene Four (Cut)

[a perversion and failure of transcendence via surgical theater.]

Opens as kitchen, marigold Formica, Marcus at counter with Esti, Ted with blade, a gift for Marcus. Ted then seated, Down stage left, witness/narrator: Time passed since Esti's emptying. Marcus continues centered on Esti, though moved from bed.

M, to M: So this is despair:
warmer than believed,
as turffed sweetness of final thaw
before hardfrost

embraces soil;
or the defeat of rye
through soft mouths
of ivory yeast:

the last tools
of self sacrifice
to an older god.

M to E:

Ice becomes you;
firm lips to kiss,
silver lashes against cheek.

Do you feel our embrace
unjust as I? You allow me
but I cannot allow.

Ascend from the hoary palace –
don your crystalline gown.

T to Audience: Vous voyez, A professional boning knife is usually longer/thinner than expected. The blade flexes around bone and joint without breaking. Necessary in-field, boning prevents unnecessary weight from packing-out. Smaller animals are more easily carried by splitting spine and pelvis, creating four rigid quarters, the bones keeping the thinner meat spread and airing. Though, boning normally occurs at the butcher, where usable meat is separated and packaged. Note, the amount of strength required to separate joints, split the spine, sever tendons, etc. is a balance of power with keen of blade.

M: How light we could be Esti,
How fluid.

Directions as noted

M: Quiet porcelain, Esti
allow the steel softness
to enter between your legs
without breath; two small circles drawn
before caressing the midline to your chin.
Fall open to my gentle touch.

There are pearls
in your sternum, Esti;
beneath your suprasternal notch.
I will slide
my hands beneath your ribs.

Yield your wet jewels to me:
the faint sticking of peridot to amethyst
sapphire to jasper
rolling beneath my palms
until you are no longer inside yourself.

You'll excuse the slight tug
while your tongue remembers
Blade Song;
the three delicate pinches
before your pelvis remembers the dance.

Pull back your ivory frock –
expose blue veins encircling your breasts.
Your ruby bareness conquers my grace,
forces me to my knees wrenching
your guise to your waist, your
delicate wrists, your supple ankles, Esti;
make me tremble with ache.

T to A: When steel enters skin, pain is in the resonance; the pitch and frequency dependent on immediacy of heart, despite pale nerves. But it's silken pain, saccharine harmony of sister ferrums. The reverberation is first cold, but warms as it burnishes against salt and copper. In the throat, steel swallows hard, but releases brighter harmonies, mixing breath and blood. Sometimes shock forces a kind of convulsion, the count: half samba; short lived, but in rhythm.

M: Remember

Mid-thrust, Blade happens bright against Marcus, wounded becomes distraught as failure appears.

I cut off my thumb
for you bitch. Hold still and be
grateful in release.
No. You still don't
understand. It's your turn
inside me, just once.

Marcus produces large cast iron skillet, struggles with the weight in his one good hand, thumbs for recipe

T to A: English dictionaries describe *skillet* as a small shallow frying pan; definition more commonly used in North America rather than Great Britain. The etymology of *skillet*, in this sense, from *escuelete*, Old French, the diminutive of *escele*, meaning plate. However, in the match making industry, *skillet* is a term for matchbox or the cardboard used to make one; more commonly used in Great Britain rather than North America. *Skillet*, in this sense, comes from *squellette*, again French, meaning *skeleton*. There is no explanation as to how *squellette* came to be spelt *skillet*. Though, Swedish for *skeleton* is *skellett*.

M: Honey, bourbon, garlic, virgin oil.
I'm afraid of the heat for you.
I can't grasp a fork anyway.

One thin morsel at a time –
held on the tongue
swallowed whole.

E, immanifest:

Marcus, you should know:
blued lace, wound from tin tub by hand
has the same delicate feeling as
the last mangy doe before frost.

*Curtain dropped
shines like paper dog –
à l'exception du sang*

[End Scene]

T: I've taken to writing on paper plates
allowing spittle and ink
to create salt wash you wanted
for your steak.

ACT IN THE SECOND: A VARIETY OF MURDERESS

Scene Singulier

[In which Ted is seduced, the chorus of domestic travesty is sung, the Murderess are introduced for their talents, and comedy is failed for the sake of sensibility.]

Against curtain, enter Hand stage right, bearing down,

T: I know how to clean: the cute
 half rhyme of *gloves, spats, bat,*
 a dance of shears
 then sticky tug of cape; to slide
 fingers within silver cage
 pull moth hearts thrown to dogs;
 how the throat turns rub: juniper-
 berries and sage; by far favorite
 to palm their roundness and steel stencil
 woodgrained where feather caressed copper
 and dove into glut.

whispered: Hand over the damn quail and get out the kitchen.
half exit, quail consumed, full exit

Curtain rises on empty stage. Ted enters with seven hands, bearing the troupe in carnival caging, in various states of concealed undress. Ted carries a large set of keys to fit these women's locks. Beginning with Margaret, already fire laden, Ted releases the troupe. Brass and bass keep the beat for the removal of their trappings.

T: Voila, regardez: The Menagerie's Fire Dancer, in her flame – had a husband, two children, and an adopted negro daughter of whose murder (in the second) she was convicted in 1895. It's unclear how the girl died, if Maggie had poisoned, smothered, or strangled –

*LS: Margaret Hardy
 wrung the sin out of that child
 filling her with caramels
 until convulsions dripped from her lips.*

T: Not your place to say

Mesdames et Messieurs, s'il vous plaît pardonnez Margaret's silence – after three years in solitary, multiple arson and suicide attempts, she was transferred to the newly erected state mental hospital in Blackfoot, Idaho, her existence was promptly forgotten – instead, focus on the movement of her hips...

*MH: Iced nights
 wear mask as moon:
 dark drinking mouth, drinking eyes.
 Drinking. Bone
 china, fine as broke
 fingers enough sugar. T: Oui,
 le thé est charmant.*

T: Regadez! “Money Shot” Josie Kensler can shoot the heart out of a man, at ten paces, without a gun. Even the Warden had to force the prison’s resident medic to perform an abortion of his own unborn child. We need a volunteer! She’ll shoot the ace, the cherry, in a mirror – anyone?

LS: They’re afraid she won’t miss.

JK: You can’t imagine how fucking lonely it was

T: Foutu eh?

JK: That wasn’t the lonely part.

Warden’s wife was nice and all, but well

She wasn’t as good at obeying.

There were seven in

T: et dehors

those eight years. I was the only to pull

the trigger.

T: Donc - Solitaire.

JK: You know, that’s all they wanted.

Even though, between the warden and the guards

hard labor was harder than expected.

LS: A scandal: a full pardon.

JK: I could pass

for something with money:

fine features, fine hands, fine hair,

T: une vrai belette

LS: Yes, you think?

JK: wasn’t meant for some small stage, but

the warmth of unblinking gaze.

You know, he came

to me, despite wife’s dressing-down

(*T to LS*: déshabiller?). He took me beneath cane roses.

He took me by fresh mortar.

He took me against Chapel’s back.

It felt, I felt, appropriate.

Spread for him, thin

as butter. Let him lather

bowed before the turn of the heel. Witnesses

I wanted my fingered leeches

T: vous avez perdu votre métaphore.

The men just kept taking them.

Music Shift, to tango.

T: Our resident dancer, Rebecca “Two Count” Chacon convicted of second degree murder alongside her sixty-year-old husband for the murder of a past lover. *LS:* A bait and switch. *T:* Like any good dancer.

At release, Rebecca grabs Ted, et commence la danse

RC: I paid for my legs,

RC: lo mejor en Pocatello.

RC: He said he had money, the liar
and I married, but I had to earn my own
él no me dejaba bailar.

T: You really had the best.

T: But what about your husband?

I talked mi old lover

Edward up from Utah, y hemos hecho un plan:

Shoot the liar – take all he has.

We waited and drank,

T: Seems like a bad idea

RC: sí, then Ed decided mientras esperábamos
he wants it all or wants out. So I shot Ed
six times in chest, el hijo de puta did not die.

Por eso, cuando Robert llegó a su casa, tenía que terminarlo.

Uno a la cara. I’m not guilty. Robert killed him.

T aside to LS: If the guitar is a man's expression of androgyny,
an overcoming sexuality with phallic neck and fertile body,
then the vacuum is mine. I can thrust and I can suck.

LS: More useful than song.

T: Please welcome to the stage *JK*: From her Cage *T*: our resident celebrity who
 on November 4th, 1921, after a cross-country man *LS*: woman
T: hunt, and a media circus, and a six-week court battle, and a twenty-five hour jury
 deliberation – Lady Lyda Dooley-McHaffie-Harlin-Meyer-Southard was convicted of the
 second degree murder of her fourth husband, Edward. After a fanatical investigation on the
 part of a Twin Falls Deputy Sheriff *LS*: Mormon bastard,
T: arsenic was found in not only the exhumed body of Edward Meyer, but in the exhumed
 bodies of all three of Lyda’s previous husbands, and brother-in-law, and three-year-old
 daughter *JK*: Poor thing. *T*: But due to statute of limitations *LS*: and my
 good looks *T*: Ed’s trial had to stand for all five murders
LS: Alleged Murders: the flu was rampant so was ptomaine

T: Enough.

Sentenced: ten years to life: Idaho State Women’s Penitentiary. She served ten years
LS: then? *T*: escaped *LS*: then? *T*: lived on the lam for
 fifteen months *LS*: and married two more husbands on the run.

T: Then, Lyda was recaptured and served another eight years before being granted a full
 pardon. And why was that?

LS: I’d gotten fat.

T aside: Avez-vous essayé la tarte aux pommes de Lyda?
 Non ?
 Well, her green beans are killer.

LS: There is a bitter window
 Swept beneath the little straw
 and the moments of flaxen wool.
 We were allowed to sleep here, between the lumbering heat of daylight
 and whitewash. We were allowed to lay here
 with no soft thoughts, but those
 of our lost loss.

Devise new plots
 of roses, new schemes to pollinate these
 aching branches. What we need
 is a new deck of cards.

What we need is Gin.

T: Attends I'm learning to juggle mes sorts blancs. *Regarde: Ted reaches shadow,*

Flask: Ammonia, *nod*, cirrhosis – lethargy – mood swings – aggression.

Flask: Bleach, *nod*, defatting – saponification used to make soap – tissue scarring.

Flask: White Vinegar, *nod*, respiratory depression – skeletal weakness – flaccid.

Flask: Gin, vodka, tequila. Skin slicked, Mon Dieu, the smell is strong.

Drink.

Stage pulls – blurs.

T: Et maintenant, mesdames et messieurs, The Amazing Mary Crumroy, will attempt to escape from her cage!

LS: And she'll fail!

T: Lyda, are any of the other ladies interrupting your act?

LS: Why should they, my act is actually good, and she will fail, she always failed—

MC: Well, my son always planned the escape attempts,

LS: How?

MC: Through the mail.

LS: And what happened with each escape attempt?

MC: They transferred me to state hospital south, or back to the pen, day before the rendezvous.

*T:*How'd they know to do that?

MC: They read my mail.

LS: Et Voila! Right Ted?

T: And how'd you escape?

LS: A customized rose trellis and an amiable young man. Verna Belle escaped similarly, climbed up the older apple with a little thief; though the warden tore it out when they turned back up.

T: Aethlyn Peterson, Oh my strong Irene, will amaze you with her feats of

AP: He just wouldn't stop tugging. I couldn't

make him stop. His soul was damned

T: Son ame?

AP: Who ever heard of an eight year old wetting the bed so much?

I'd caught him again, so threw him in cold

water – like you would coupled dogs. Or tried,

he just wouldn't stop

LS: Little cheeky sinner

T: attendez qu'il,

AP: so I beat on him a little you know?

Tried to knock in some sense

LS: Right!

AP: against that foot bridge.

LS: Wait

AP: He gritted his teeth, a proud whore's son

LS: against a bridge.

AP: He struggled, so I shook him once or

twice, took him by the heel and rapped him there

like a rug

LS: eight years old?

T: attendez qu'il

AP: and dropped him

to the water.

Get on in the house, and he staggered

LS: he could stand

AP: so I kicked him against green gate

he broke of crawlin' through.

Kicked him with the hard sole,

T: et viola!

but didn't get up. I figured I'd take in,

clean him in the sink, but he wouldn't breathe. Damn thing

drowned in the canal.

LS: I'm sure.

I swear my heart strength I didn't have die of beatin.

T: of second degree murder of the beating death of her stepson. She was eventually pardoned due to her mental disposition at the time of the murder, which was noted as being "nervous."

AP: I miss the diffused burn
of laudanum: batteries
and jasmine *MH*: kept us
from fire. *T*: Bet you didn't
know laudanum is a derivative
of praise. *LS*: Praise me.
I am what it means to give up.

T: The youngest of our troupe, Verna Belle, cannot appear on stage at this time, being that it has been discovered she is not of consenting age,

LS: “Verna Belle at seventeen
killed a girl who was unclean:
She beat her ‘hind the potting shed,
stole his gun, and shot ‘er dead”

T: Arrêtez, Lyda, arrêtez. The child is agitated enough

LS: Well she killed the tramp didn’t she? The paper’s nicknamed her ‘Tarzan’ after that,
better than ‘Lady Bluebeard’ *T:* Oui, mais elle a hont, give it a rest.

The Menagerie would like to apologize for any inconvenience.

T: And now to the Stage the Grace of the high wire, The Lace of the Rope, Premeditated Lacey! Watch her deftly balance between life and death, after organizing an assassination of her husband and surviving the conviction of murder in the first degree in a state which strictly enforces the death penalty by hanging, without a net!

Could I get a drum roll please?

Curtain Dropped

[End Scene]

ACT IN THE THIRD: BODY SHOW

Scene One

[in which Ted abandons intellectual endeavor for the revelation of sight, the spectacle of self.]

Enter Ted, left, bearing head:

T: Salut? Merde. (You see – Hé
– voice gets stuck in all these fleshy apertures.)
Pardonne moi Mesdames et Messieurs: le moment est arrivé,
what you all came here for: the finale:
baring of Whispering Ted (a duet)!
What will lie between these curved thighs?
I've given away the ending, that's why
this doesn't make sense.

Curtain rises on ratted library, an odd penumbra of domesticity, Ted reaches and bends for texts suggestively, side glances for darkened audience. Enter Brothers, one blond, one brunet. Brothers, perform as directed

Catch myself
 fantasizing: imaginary brothers
 the row next to mine
 whispering death.

I'm married, wrong phantasy;

but death, the research
 keeps me: burning.
 Their breath, across the leaves
 one honeyed flesh –

the other, well, fermentation
 – so much the sweeter.
 I ask them to a table with me:
 two hands stroking my thigh.

Blond brother smirks: slides hand against sternum;
 brunet brother's palm: saccharine against my jaw.
 Enough struggle to turn over quick reference,
 shelving clitoris next to HV6524; .H28.

Bb: It's difficult to get
your clothes off.

BB: Practice these contortions:
shoulder then hip then groin
smoothly. Touch yourself.

T: "C'est doux," *Bb:* that's right
reticence lives
in the expectation of liquid, the disappointed fumble,
and the smell.

T: You know what it means to be naked, Non?
The shy prick of areola, and the space lost when you stand.

Curtain Drops

[End Scene]

Scene Two

[In which Ted flails at domesticity, her fear of womanhood drunk on lust and pride.]

Curtain drawn, et venu bedroom dampened, Ted drops head, in concealed undress as the Variety. Prostrates.

*T: I'm still terrified of the dark –
awake, pressed, panting
against my husband's damp flesh
I believe
in the outline past the doorway –
waiting to walk through.*

Remove Corset, eye for audience

Ted, in front of stead, pulls jewelry box from under-shadow.

My husband doesn't know about my vibrator:
 A Colgate Pulse, one of the first sonic models.
 Accidentally turned out of a jewelry box kept under the dresser,
 "it's for cleaning the silver:
 Pas pour la consommation."

It's not that I feel guilty for having one –
 It's that it's mine, only mine:
 me reserved for myself.
 That's not good; right?

I don't fantasize about other men sexually
 but about first surveyors in Placerville,
 flowergold, the effort to float a wagon into Daggerfalls
 – ponies pulled blind at Sunbeam
 until I too am wracked with yellow sweat.

Brothers: Liar.

Remove petticoat, eye for audience

Brothers, mount bed. Ted directive, movement as tin

your leg – here
my leg – here
and my arms
and your hands
and that face
and that breathless noise
and that naked springing mechanical.

All geared.
All clockwork.

Scene 3 (Reticence)

[in which Ted acknowledges her failure at subversion/transcendence]

Ted, half struggle against the encroachment of Brothers.

Ammonia

a sex noise

I can't get these stains out,
sticky and pliant. Give
back this blue.

Brothers, Pull against Ted, spread nakedness towards audience. Ted, desist struggle, allow the bearing.

T: Despite your
calls, your verbal
wanting, your erection;
despite your
groping, your kneading
of breast; despite
your desperate thrust,
I will never feel pretty
without the eyes
of thousands, the gaze of Time.

Brothers Exit.

[End Scene]

Aside, Ted to Reader :

What happened to my violence?

A thick humming
between neck and nostril,
between rib and pelvis.

Throw something
see if breath breaks loosened.

Scene Four

[Ted's Recognition of reflection, self in other, the loss of anonymity and the failure of androgyny]

Ted produces mirror:

Give me bobby-pins, tweezers, reflection,
those twisted metals of feminine realizing
and I will vivisect my cheeks for you
make a pale beard from laced nerves.

I'll take this moment to say, "fuck you,"
with utmost tender sincerity
"I am the failure you will worship."

Black Out

In Darkness

You've lost your eyes here
amongst the orange drops of limb.
What does it mean to say glass?
What does it mean to say looking glass?
You've silver plating in your orbits
corralled behind dark lashes.
Do I look like you from that angle?

Heredity blisters between
fat and skin – plastic routes
against Hazel. Mother
Dit: nous sommes aveugles -
if I am to be blind, let the brightness be
overwhelming; loosed from abstract shadow.

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