

A BROOM TO REMOVE THE DUST

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Immediately upon exiting the elevator, you will first turn right. Make a second, tight right into a glorified alcove dubbed ECT WAITING. The walls will be a pale mint green, so pale it's almost white—but also, not at all white. You'll know because the ceiling will be *very* white, the chairs cheap pleather gray and faux light birch, the contrast clear. There will be an old-fashioned telephone on one of three matching side tables, the one nearest the entry to the alcove and directly underneath the wall-mounted television set (which will be off). The phone is black, the numbered buttons gray and punchable. There will be a laminated sign above the phone requesting patients to please call this number (followed by a number) to alert staff of arrival.

The first time, you will read this number to your mother as she dials, stand above her silver head, her hair a squarish cloud of fluff above a black-and-white-striped t-shirt. You'll try, in other words, to make this easier. You will notice some things now, and others later. Later, for example: the black lockbox on the wall beneath the sign, purposes unknown. Later, the slim crucifix that hangs against the center wall between two dull, mismatched, matted prints in frames (scenes of Paris, windowsills, *boulangerie*), none of them lined up exactly, each a little off. Later, one slight desk lamp, decorative in curlicue wrought iron. Inexplicable beneath the halogen-bathed halls in this, a unit only open until noon, three days a week.

You'll learn to notice these and other things as you log time. Learn to recognize the other faces, bodies, here beside you. Everybody comes and goes, the schedule changes, new faces appear. Some you'll wind up talking to, others not. And either way, this is where you'll wait, three days each week for two weeks and then two days for the third week. You'll sit and read and look and think and drink your coffee. Down the hall, your mother lies back on a gurney to be seized.

A medically induced seizure is a mystery, even to the shrinks. That's what my mom, at 67, persists in calling them: *the shrinks*. That it works against depression is not only proven, but impressive—a success rate, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins, higher than any other single treatment or psychiatric medication. Controversial, vilified, and uncertain (when it comes, not to the *if*, but to the *why* of its effectiveness), seizure therapy is just that—therapy. Not torture, not “shock treatment,” and most certainly no ecstatic paroxysm of pain or pleasure.

In Cole Swensen's translation of *Now, Now, Louison*, Jean Frémon's “portrait in motion” of the late Louise Bourgeois, Frémon renders Bourgeois's inner dialogue, considering the experience of bodies sent into hysterics: “In a seizure, the body becomes a sculpture, the eyes popping out, the wrists twisted outward, the ankles angling in...” These past two evenings, I've devoured Frémon's novella—two nights, two bars, each episode an effort to assuage the neck and shoulder tension, the worry and relief that saturate these days begun at ECT WAITING at Providence Hospital in Spokane.

I stumbled on the book by chance back in March, after reading a review on Instagram; this, just weeks after getting a rendition of Bourgeois's “Spiral Woman” figure tattooed on my right tricep. Though I bought a copy quickly (smooth, white, slender, the title in classic Courier along the spine), it took until this week to crack it open—and once begun, I couldn't stop. Couldn't un-see the parallels between this story, this woman's concerns, and my own at this exact and trying moment.

Bourgeois's fascination with the body—its geometry, its rotundities—has come to fascinate me almost as much as her life and work. Ever since my friend Sarah sent me a postcard from the Tate Modern in London—blue, abstract, watercolor, untitled—I've found myself curious, drawn in by the peculiarity and independence of Bourgeois's strokes, her bodily awareness, her iterative attention to the little oddities (spiders, breasts, cellular arrangements) of this: our animality, our life. The tattoo idea was born of obsession and superficial research; but the tattoo itself, the getting of it, transformed into a commitment of

sorts—to Louise, to her interests, to understanding her work as best I can. I so admire certain aspects of her life: her creative audacity and determined psychological investigation, her independent approach to the work of making and remaking, asking questions, chasing down her loves in every shape and stroke. Her weird flag flying so damn high and bright.

“To create something where nothing had been before, that’s sculpting,” writes Frémon (as Bourgeois). Such is a tattoo. Such is a seizing body, headless and suspended from a string. Such is a synaptic flash.

The first time I went to Providence (an affiliate of Sacred Heart) was for my mom’s registration and intake appointment with the psychiatrist, Dr. R.—an artfully coiffed South Asian gentleman with respectable gray streaks in his dark hair, good shoes, and those translucent acetate glasses frames that are all the rage these days. I recall, despite my worry and the freezing temperatures inside the air-conditioned corridors, my summer dress a paltry defense against hospital AC, a blip of envy—envy, and appreciation. Such style, in these otherwise austere and empty, dull gray halls.

My mother’s bid for treatment was approved. She was scheduled six days out. Leaving, we passed a wall of windows facing what seemed, at first, to be a courtyard. Fig tree leaves, heavy green, and unripe teardrops in brilliant neon. Our ECT nurse and guide back to the elevator explained, in broken English (she is Russian), that the tree belonged to the house that still sits in the middle of the campus. Private, historic, twenty-five rooms; satin wallpaper and late Victorian fixtures (the house was built in 1906); gracious fig-leaf green and painted wood and white and all of it just sitting there: a thing of beauty, sprawling and eccentric, in the midst of so much concrete, sickness, skybridge-fraught expansion. The owner, an immigrant herself and something of a Spokane matriarch, dug her heels in. Refused to sell. Now she is survived by several children, and the daughter—in her seventies—has followed suit.

The nurse laughed, said the old lady who had owned the house

(her name was Mary) used to make extra money charging for parking, renting out the lawn. Twenty-five cents per hour. That was 1947. In an article from the *Spokesman Review*, published in 2011, Mary's daughter Dorothy tells reporter Stephanie Pettit of a Sister from Sacred Heart who used to visit Mary nearly once per week, always asking the same question: didn't Mary think it was God's will that she should sell the house to the hospital?

"Mother would say that no, God hadn't spoken to her yet about that," Dorothy tells Pettit.

I find this article, and several others, in the wake of this passing conversation, and on the eve of mother's first appointment with adult psychiatry at Providence. I'm equal parts intrigued by the story of Mary's Place (that's what the house is called now) and anxious to quell my anxieties about the next day's treatment. On the one-and-a-half-hour drive from Moscow, Idaho, to Spokane, Washington, my mother told me all about the Bible study series she's been watching on her iPhone when she can't go back to sleep at night. A newly confirmed Catholic, she's already having doubts about the matters of tradition, confession, and sainthood—and finds herself falling back on the evangelical Protestant ideologies that used to give her so much comfort.

"I feel like such a dilettante sometimes, changing my mind, questioning," she says, leaning back into her seat as my Subaru Impreza rumbles over hills and under bridges through the green-and-gold Palouse. "Skip"—the born-again Bible study leader's name is Skip, he is a former surfer, tan, with such a perfect swoop of sun-kissed hair—"on the one hand, he really tears Mary to pieces. Says the way the Catholics speak of her is absolute idolatry. On the other, the only real recorded vision of Mary HERSELF coming down to say anything to anyone was just 'build a cathedral here; I want the people to know my son.'"

"That doesn't sound so bad," I offer, adjusting the radio volume dial down a notch. I spent ten years at Catholic school, after a Lutheran confirmation at age seven. My mom and I confirmed together. Despite my current unaffiliated status and extreme institutional skepticism, I don't think that she's crazy to believe. We both know our stuff in this

arena.

“Hardly self-aggrandizing on her part, right?” I venture.

“Well, yeah,” says Mom. She trails off, reaches for the half-full bag of Kettle Salt & Vinegar potato chips shoved into the inside passenger-side cup holder.

Not long after, she is back with all of this: the saints, and what Skip has to say, and how is one supposed to ever know what to believe. Every drive, back and forth, we loop.

Tonight, you wait for storms. Lightning, thunder—something to disrupt this aching heat. They say the storms will come by midnight, maybe. Bulbous clouds and wind. Electrical disturbances, most welcome.

Seizure, in the medical, biological sense, is defined as an abnormal electrical discharge in the brain. It is also, of course, defined as a sudden attack or possession-taking—either violent or, in certain contexts, via legal means and procedural action. ECT, from what you can ascertain, seems like the latter: a legal, procedural, consensual taking, for a period of roughly thirty to sixty seconds, of the patient’s brain. This conquest is neither violent nor vampiric, at least from the purview of the attending psychiatrist, anesthesiologist, and nurse. It would seem, on the contrary, to be thoughtful—cheerful, even—as well as closely monitored and altogether careful. In observing the patient prep and intake process over these past weeks, you find the word *paternal* comes to mind—perhaps in part because you’re teaching Eula Biss’s *On Immunity: An Inoculation* this semester, and are thus filled with thoughts on medicine, metaphor, and culture (not to mention talk of vampires). Plus, both the attending psychiatrists—Dr. R. and another, younger doctor, Dr. C.—are men.

On the one hand, you trust these doctors well enough. You do not find their maleness predatory, fearful. Then again, the ideas and images you conjure of the vampire’s victim and that of the woman in contorted ecstasy—whether from divine visitation, or sexual pleasure, or electrical disturbance—are not at all dissimilar. To be seized, it seems, is a much-anticipated fate: one that’s planted deep within so many of your metaphors and monster myths alike. Your ways of looking at

and wanting, fearing, and believing in the world. Your ways, even, of contending with desire—the tricky politics of sex, of bodies, and of wanting in a world fraught with so much wrong and horror that the very urge to be caught up against the teeth of want, to be held there, powerless, ecstatic, feels insensitive at best, and sick at worst.

Tonight, you are up too late. This, despite the long day, despite your mother's 7:45 a.m. appointment with the black rotary phone and gray pleather chairs in ECT WAITING earlier this morning, despite the drive home afterward, despite unpacking and dishes and emails and chores. But you can't sleep. You're waiting for the storm.

Eventually, you go to bed, leave the window cracked.

Near midnight, having drifted off, you wake again to this insistent and repeating “clink” against the windowpane. The sound is so repetitive, so regimented in its tones, you can't help but assume (in that singular state of mostly asleepness) that it's something mechanized: a neighbor, a timer, a car battery gone rogue. That this clink, in fact, is rain, takes longer than usual to register. You have to wake again, hours later, to that smell: summer rain, the wet and heat commingled with a sudden breeze, pushed right through the dirty screen into your room and then your nostrils, suddenly. Beautiful and soft, and likewise startling.

Once upon a time, you had lovers. Sometimes, lovers who would wake you up with kiss and touch and seizure, soft and quiet and adroit. Sometimes, sleeping bodies are like sculptures: seizure by soft hands and lips might wake a marble frieze into new life—of ecstasy, or fear. It's hard to ascertain, at times, which sense is which. Something in this muggy gray-sky nighttime, in the smell and soft of 2 a.m., makes you want that thing you've lately given up. The sense and grip of ecstasy you can feel all by yourself: all you need is some electricity. A pair of batteries and soft-worn crimson sheets between the motor and your naked skin. Neck kicked back, wrists gripped tight, ankles firm to ground your feet into the mattress plush.

The mystery of electroconvulsive therapy is partnered with that surrounding depression. Because researchers and psychiatrists are still

pinning down the exact cause and function of depression, the ways in which extreme electrical stimulus to the brain can and will alleviate symptoms remains, likewise, unclear.

A seizure is the most a brain can take, point blank. This may cause the dampened-down emotional barometer that many patients feel from ECT. Recent studies (again, drawing on research from Johns Hopkins) have begun to examine whether or not ECT may work, in fact, by altering the very structure of the synapse—that is, “the small gap between nerve cells where the brain’s chemical messengers play such an important role.” Such changes would, as ECT has shown, impact “memory, learning, and mood.” Results, however, remain inconclusive.

Meanwhile, my mother has been “zapped,” as she calls it, six times. Her memory does lapse. Her balance and awareness also lapse, as do her taste buds. Vision shifts, turning into what she calls “HD,” as in high-definition (this began after the very first appointment, in a hotel room, with an HDTV screen and Mom, with such a brutal headache, hooked to watching something, anything, even as the HD format made her feel unsteady and confused; it hasn’t left her since). During Mom’s registration appointment, Dr. R. informed me that I may well notice changes before she does—so I’ve been watching. She is sweet and generous and far less angry than she was; but also, she is tired and “just out of it,” as she has texted me over and over (“everything feels weird” is something of a canned reply at this point, any time I write to ask how she is doing).

It’s Sunday night. We’re back in Spokane for the last two treatments—that is, the final two of the initial eight. Call time is tomorrow, 8:45 a.m. For now, my mom is tucked in, listening to surfer Skip unpack the book of Acts on YouTube; I am at a nearby bar, wine and salted pub mix and a book in hand, watching rain deluge the heat-baked city streets downtown. Today was it: the long-awaited storm, in earnest. Bold thunder; sky-wide lightning; sudden, violent, heavy rain—flooding gutters, prompting squeals and hollers up and down the street. Earlier, walking back from running errands, I found myself caught up in it—running, laughing, helpless in the face of so much wet and torrent, feet soaked, legs soaked. Uncontrollable relief, after a

week of such relentless heat.

Last week, Sarah and I attended a small but significant exhibit of Louise Bourgeois's later works. The exhibit, titled *Ode to Forgetting*, has been visiting the art museum at the state university campus where I teach. Somehow—burdened, I believe, by my own sense that I needed to allot the proper time for reverence, reflection, not a hurried detour on the busy days that find me intermittently on campus in the summer—I'd been putting off my visit. I am, admittedly, (and much as my own mother would love me to forget), my father's daughter: a master procrastinator. This meant Sarah and I caught the show on its penultimate day.

After her first two treatments, my mother complained most acutely of disorientation. The headaches had been swiftly fixed—simply a matter of preemptive medication, hospital-grade Tylenol, administered before each treatment. Confusion, though, remained: she found herself unsteady (“wobbly,” in her words), not sure what was going on at times, or how to navigate the crosshairs of an otherwise uncomplicated prospect like a gas station mini-mart or grocery store check-out. When we returned to Providence, and she explained her confusion, the attending psychiatrist switched her procedure from bilateral to unilateral application—that is, switched the electrical disturbance from both sides of the brain to only one. According to Dr. Reti at Johns Hopkins, this is a verified approach for mitigating short-term memory loss when undergoing ECT. Rather than applying leads to both sides of the forehead, the unilateral approach involves one front and one side lead—and, from my perspective, a drastic difference in my mother's sense of comfort and confusion after treatment.

Bourgeois's mother died when she was young. Louise, the artist, loved her mother with a fierceness that perhaps only single daughters (privy to the misdemeanors and neglect of fathers) truly can. I do not mean, in writing this, to say my father was neglectful. He was, however, often absent, and unsuited to my mother, and vice versa. On that count, they agree. He has since moved on, re-engaged himself. Mom and I, in all of this, are on our own.

Frémon writes, as Bourgeois, of the stricture Louise felt after her mother died, as her father bought her frilly clothes and found her

monied suitors. Not long after, equipped with an artistic eye and an astute weaving acumen (not to mention a taste for professorial fashion and a young man eager to take her away), she ran. She married the man. She kept her father's name. She memorialized her mother in countless shapes and sizes as a spider—protective, watchful, caring, clever, black against a backdrop of bright white. In the end, she, too, likewise remained her father's daughter.

Looking at Bourgeois's prints and drawings and multimedia textiles, I can see it: the tension and the truth of this split self, of her mother-love and father-likeness. How she interrogates the intersections of her past and present: Saint Sebastian as a woman, headless, heavy-breasted, and beset with arrows. Spider after spider after spider—some slumped into corners of what seems to be a single room. A multimedia piece titled *The Guilty Girl Is Fragile: the triangular figure rests on a single point and can easily fall down. Her guilt has nothing to do with religion.* I see, and I can understand, and I am happy for the ink along my upper right-side tricep. For my tattooer's rendition of Bourgeois's *Spiral Woman*—her head all flowing mane and Mona Lisa smile, her arms and legs cartoonish, her body larval and rotund—as a reminder of the themes that drew Bourgeois to the spiral figure in the first place. And from her attraction, mine.

Freedom and control. Freedom and control. Turning, turning, turning.

Writing as Bourgeois, describing her sculpture of a body in hysterics, Frémon says, "I'll suspend the arcing body by a cable attached to its navel and let it turn slowly around. Appeasement. Joy in eternal gyration. Head gone. Out of control. To each their own orgasm."

Your mother's last appointment was on Tuesday. Today, it's Saturday. Tonight, you meet her at a restaurant for wine and fresh caprese salad—ripe heirloom tomatoes in their season, oil and balsamic-drenched, a little basil, and a ball of fresh-made cheese to complement. All you could taste were those tomatoes in the oil; richness and salt, flavor and abandon. A summer blessing.

Before the tomatoes, you walk up to the restaurant patio and

see her from behind, her silver hair, her trademark black-and-white stripes. When your order arrives, the two of you clink glasses: your prosecco to her Lambrusco (“Not what I got so sick on all those years ago, is it!” she chuckles to the server, when asked how the wine is holding up). You toast to the completion of her treatments, eight in all, and drink to better days ahead. For now, she is still tired and (as she says) “just weird.” Her sense of taste still off, her energy reduced. You see it, but you also see a shift in how she seems to view the world. Sometimes, her eyes are vacant, and that worries you (because she’s always been so sharp). Other times, she smiles in the sweetest way—tonight, for instance, watching a woman with a dog on her lap at a neighboring table, how the tiny dog wanted to chase a fly, how the woman wrapped her napkin around the dog’s small, spotted, black-and-white-furred body to soothe him. “He must be the best dog in the world,” your mom says, watching, the edges of a smile creeping in against the borders of her eyes, her lips. “So close to pizza, and he isn’t even sniffing it or anything.”

A month ago, the sight of a dog might have sent your mother into a fit of tears and anguish—missing all your old family pets, lamenting her little apartment, its restrictions. Tonight, she looked at this small dog with love that felt so purely of the moment, so appreciative of life. It gave you hope.

Saint Bernadette—the French girl, the one the Virgin Mary singled out for visitation, the one whose visions eventually established Lourdes as a principal pilgrimage place for Catholics in the Western world—offered (at least according to Wikipedia), when criticized or questioned, this frank and tidy statement in regard to her visions: *The Virgin used me as a broom to remove the dust. When the work is done, the broom is put behind the door again.* While you have no idea where your mother will come down regarding Mary, or the Catholic Church, or Skip, or any of the ways and means by which guilt might be used to push one into corners, you do have some idea that she is better off after these past three weeks, after Providence and ECT WAITING. It’s tough, because you worry—still, you worry—and, as both you and she and all the shrinks and doctors can attest, ECT changes the brain itself. It doesn’t change the circumstances of one’s life.

In other words: your mom will still be aging and alone, at sixty-seven. She will still be often tired, often parked in front of TCM movie marathons (like tonight, which is Errol Flynn night, a fact that—because you are your mother’s daughter, too, and watched these films with her as you grew up—prompts much discussion: of Flynn and Flora Robson and Oliva de Havilland, of the overlapping casts of films like *Robin Hood*, *The Sea Hawk*, and *Capitan Blood*, and what else was being made each year, and how the plotlines, likewise, intersect). She may very well stay tired; may very well still want to travel in theory, stay at home in practice. You cannot know.

As for you? Your time spent pacing back and forth across the bridge between the Main and Children’s Hospitals at Providence, looking out the windows at the figs and leaves and white and greenery of Mary’s Place; or drinking Thomas Hammer coffee in the ER coffee shop you didn’t even know was there until Week Two; or making conversations with a mother, then a social worker, then a husband under too-bright lights, under the auspices of ECT WAITING, the filtered atmosphere of such a spare and label-ridden space, in fact, facilitating openness in ways you never would have guessed at..what of you? What of that? What of this?

“*The Guilty Girl*...is an example of Bourgeois incorporating personal fabrics into her printmaking practice.” So reads the museum information plaque beside the Girl herself: a devilishly relatable pair of disgruntled, crossed eyes, housed in an upside-down red triangle of a face, printed “on the artists own undergarment,” a delicate and gauzy white slip. I took a photograph of Sarah, standing to the left of the red-faced *Guilty Girl*. Sarah is standing in a corner, wearing red pants and a black T-shirt, examining the red-and-black portrait of the artist’s aging hand; I am examining Sarah as juxtaposed with said hand and said *Guilty Girl*, myself dressed all in black (Sarah takes my picture with one of Bourgeois’s iconic, headless, heavy-breasted, black-and-white Saint Sebastian prints mere minutes later, and I look back at the photograph to make sure I do, in fact, recall what I was wearing). We could not have planned it any better.

Bourgeois's hybrid works from *Ode to Forgetting* include many instances of personal fabric—literal, as in pieces of her clothing, or metaphorical, as in language drawn from her diaries and journals—arranged against the type of steady, regimented, black-and-white-striped lines most often found on music composition paper. At the time she made these pieces, she was in her late eighties (or older), repurposing and recombining elements and pieces of a life, a self, a body. Holding on? Perhaps. Letting go? Perhaps that, too.

I look back at the photographs I took at the exhibit, as well as those that Sarah took of me. Photographs of art and space and text, of black and white and color. Looking, I recall the way I'd noticed, once, out of the corner of my eye, that she was holding up her iPhone as if to take a picture, and how I'd tried, in that moment, to steady my body, restrict it—cinch in my belly with a breath, hold my shoulders back—and still, despite my hyper-self-awareness, failed. The photo itself, all the evidence one needs of what a T-shirt dress does and does not hide about the body of a thirty-something woman, in profile, leaning back, at the end of yet another wine-filled summer. Rotundities, geometry. The dress was fairly loose; my body, from the outside, thoroughly unsculpted. All that shaping, seizing, came from me: my sense of what I ought to do, controlled and without pleasure.