

ANGELS

Ariel thinks the heat must be killing the mailman. He must have such a fortitude. Day in and day out in this monstrous heat. She thinks she could never, but the mailman's in good shape and she's sure he has a killer workout regimen. Every now and then, every few days, he'll catch her eye by chance when dropping off her mail, when she's sitting on the porch watching the sky, and when he catches her eye it rings out strange and primordial things in her.

Every day the sky swells with the threat of rain. Sometimes giving in, the bruised atrocity of that sky opening up to deluge the world as the original Biblical flood had. And these times are a reprieve finally from the steaming heat of this sweltering sun that tries to boil them all the rest of the days. The A/C in the new house doesn't always work. Sometimes, she moves the dial and nothing happens at all. In those moments all she can do is sink into the dark delirium of her room where it's comparatively not as bad, but the heat always finds a way in, always encroaches. She thinks she should call someone, but doesn't get around to it. Tomorrow, always tomorrow.

It wasn't the plan, that she would be here alone in the big, new house, all the long summer, but Michael is still gone on his work trip, out there with the surveyors looking at pollution in the air, at the water. She occasionally sardonically thinks, what's the point, you could just look outside, everything's right there.

The house, with its big stretches of hard floor and the echoing, seems fit for three or four people. The heat from the windows always finds her as if it is some kind of poltergeist that won't leave her alone. She doesn't know anyone in town, not really. Michael's told her to go and find some groups to join, hobbies, but she can't think of much that would feel fulfilling. Tomorrow, she tells herself.

She watches the great hulking plaster-white of the truck moving through the broad, smooth dark street. The mailman rummages and puts the mail where it goes. When he looks at the general area of

the street where she's standing, she wants to shrink into the nothing. Her hair is matted to her skull with sweat and she hasn't changed out of her spaghetti-strap tank top and pajama shorts since the morning. It would've been easy to change.

The mail truck groans and steams, traversing like a generous donor amid the gleaming black jewels of the mailboxes. The mailman is moving on, gone down that street to continue his work, and it doesn't rain, but the air is heavy and the sky rolls endless black. Whatever the intentions of that black mass of the sky, it's as dry as a desert.

Once he's gone, she ventures out on bare feet that are immediately warmed and then too hot, soles on the concrete. She steps on the grass which is still hot, but a reprieve of some faint nature. She reaches into the mailbox and pulls out three letters. All bills and perfunctory things sent from faceless institutions. Looking down the street, she sees the mailman leaning out in his mechanical way, an automaton, a lean figure of pure grace that does not fit with her own world. Separated as though by glass. The sun hangs above, a swirling yellow titan compressed by the weight of the blackened clouds and the light is a strange aching gold-tinged tangerine glow that makes the shadows deeper, and there's a fear building at the back of her throat for some reason she can't discern, and she can't be outside anymore, retreats inward as though an animal escaping some predator.

Back inside, as the shade caresses her burning skin, she tosses the bills on the counter where they'd likely be forgotten for the foreseeable future. Sweat sticks to her like a second skin. She can't get comfortable on the couch, her back aching in an acute way, the TV on to some trashy reality show. She drifts off to sleep for a little while, fading cocooned in that amber-light. A little while later, she wakes, still hot, the air like a blanket around her. She needs a smoke. Pushing herself up, she trades the pajama bottoms for khaki shorts. Then she goes out to the back porch. It's a small yard and the grass is green but dry. She lights a cigarette. Nicotine fills her like a sweet small heaven, and she blows smoke rings up at the languishing horror of the sky, suspended as it is in a trembling black wave. It's good to

smoke, she thinks, closing her eyes, the heat something of a wry comfort now. Michael says the smoking's bad for her, but Michael isn't here.

The neighbor girl, whose name she can't recall despite trying, opens the door and tries to talk to her. Tries to say how's it going, how are you adjusting, but Ariel just looks at her as though she is speaking some whole other language, tells her she's fine, not asking anything or trying to continue the dialogue. Ariel knows it's her worst impulse coming to the front, but what else is there to do. The heat is tenacious. Unrelenting. The other woman looks furtive and somewhat disappointed, but relents with a shrug and goes back into her own dwelling and leaves Ariel alone.

As she closes the clasp of the sliding door, enclosed again inside the cool sanctum of that large, dark den of a house, she's thinking hard about what's been gnawing at her subconscious for days.

It's the image of the mail-truck, of the mailman with his lean form. Also, the dream. It's come to her a few times now, this dream of a past life. A rural village laced with the strange promise of the apocalypse. In her dream she is a new mother. Every day spent caring for the babe even as she cries, even as Ariel herself is burdened with a dread thick enough that she can't breathe right, sometimes. The baby so soft and vulnerable, and this only makes the dread deeper. She will stand out there looking at the horizon feeling something awful coming, and her husband will come home from the blacksmith shop, this man who she now recognizes as the mailman. In the dream, he is clear-eyed that the end is coming and they have to prepare. Every time the mailman comes, though, that dream lights up in the deep part of her soul and she knows that she cannot be idle forever and that all of this is but a facade.

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Michael's voice, over the phone, is always coarse from sinus congestion. He sounds like a smoker albeit never having smoked in his life. "How're you doing, baby? How're you holding up?"

There is always something a little disconnected in him now, as if there are great volumes of things he can't or won't tell her.

"Oh, well, you know..."

"I don't know," he says, answering too quickly, his voice sharp like a newly-minted knife.

"That's the problem. Is that I don't know... 'cause you don't talk to me, baby."

The voice over the phone, like something from some distant disparate island, like something on a plane she could not conceive.

She says, "When're you coming home, again?"

"Soon." A sigh, weary like he's old, and it turns into a bitter, dry cough. "They keep, ah, extending it. Giving me more shit to do."

"More of the... the surveying. They aren't done?"

"They keep expanding it. Finding things we have to stay, for."

She remembers Michael at a party they'd gone to just before moving. An old friend's house that seemed big and smooth like an alien spaceship. Everyone gathered outside, sleek bodies wet from the pool, open beer bottles, homemade cocktails in color configurations no one had ever seen before, charred meat on the grill filling up their nostrils so as to forget they'd ever smelled anything else. Michael looking away from her as someone else talked. Laughing as she'd imagined him laughing as a young single man. Years and years in the past.

"Have you, uh, found any work?"

"No. Not yet." She's looked a few times, but none of the jobs she's seen seem to fit her. It's been two months since she had a steady illustrating gig and the city seems like it is swallowing her up and running on and on into eternity without her.

The A/C in the house isn't working again, so the car's deluge of cool air is welcome. She cruises past low-slung buildings colored an oppressive drab shade crop up all over the place like acne rashes. There are homeless men on the streetcorners with signs asking for cash or prophesizing the end of something, flimsy cardboard waving lankily in the swelter of the air. Some of them young enough to be her little brother, but some old as sin. Buses and cars crowd the streets. The sky is a smear of perspiring clouds and the wind is a death rattle. She watches people sitting alone in coffee shop windows, on benches with slices of pizza, wandering as if they have nowhere to go, but clearly heading in one direction. A dog wanders along in an alleyway sniffing occasionally at the cracked pavement, at stains on the wall of the building nearby. A bus drops off a teenager holding the hand of a young girl on the side of a streetcorner and they both wear dour, tough looks. You have to, Ariel supposes. Her mouth is very dry. She pulls over into a gas station parking lot. It all looks too big and yet feels claustrophobic anyway. Inside the gas station with its ceaseless electric lights, she goes to the coolers on the wall and picks out a water bottle. It's wet and cool against her palm, and she checks out with her fingers shaking a little as she pulls a few dollars from her wallet, and the papery dry texture of the money feels odd to her but she can't articulate why. Outside, she stands in the shade and drinks a little, the water touching her throat like icicles forming, like the disaster of the world is reversing itself. A man walks up from somewhere she hadn't seen and whistles at her. He is asking if she wants to go somewhere. Grinning, feeling conscious of all her bones, of the way they are arranged neat under her skin, which is omnipresent under her sleeveless shirt, under her jean-shorts, she says no, no that's OK. She backs away. Her water bottle drips little black droplets on the concrete. Steaming in the sun.

As she drives around the town, there is a stretch of homes almost as nice as hers. What once would've been termed starter homes but are now things of luxury in this new economy. Little one-story dwellings, with small blocky yards of vibrant green grass and children's toys littering there as if grown like new plants. The blocky white mail-truck is parked out front of one of them. It's done its duties for the day. When she sees it there, she can see the mailman in that house, his silhouette moving from room to room.

Some days, there's a woman there. Slender and pretty. More put-together than Ariel with a pointed chin and graceful eyes, sometimes sitting in the shade on the phone. Always so put-together. Does she sweat, Ariel wonders?

One time, driving by, the dusk-glow set in, she sees them on the couch with glasses of shimmering wine like blood, the glow of the TV like something from another planet. They're smiling, laughing together. The house looks perfect.

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She is reading a magazine but not really understanding the words when a knock at the door startles her. Peering out the diamond window, her soul itching, she sees the a pale, thin face and a pointed chin, eyes curiously dark. It's the neighbor girl, Krista, she remembers from a few interactions over the last few weeks. Ariel doesn't get any imminent threat, so she opens the door. Krista is holding a tray of some lasagna. A shimmering warm glow emanates upward through the thick gloom of this neighborhood. "Thought I'd bring you a tray."

"Oh. Well... thanks."

"We do it for all the new neighbors, and we realized we hadn't for you guys, yet." Krista has a bashful smile about her, something guilty, even though there's nothing to be guilty for.

She takes the tray. Invites Krista in, and for the first time there's someone in the house besides her or her husband.

They sit at the lit kitchen table and Ariel pours them some glasses of wine. Ariel can't stop sneaking looks at Krista. Her lacy blouse and pale denim skirt accentuating her slight curves, pert breasts, a flat stomach, legs that seem to have a subtle glow even at night. Ariel thinks they might be two different species, for how different the two women look. Krista sits at the table nonchalant, making conversation. "I just know how hard it is to move to a new place. It's just isolating sometimes." Used to being stared at, scrutinized. Evolved to be some kind of new creature who can take it and reflect it as though creating a new kind of sunlight.

"Uh huh." Ariel smiles. She hopes she's coming off OK, hopes the house, with its dark deep pockets of shadow beyond the light of the kitchen, has not repulsed the younger woman somehow.

"That's why I wanted to bring you the lasagna. I thought of you."

"Oh. Oh, well - thanks, that's real nice of you."

"How're you liking the neighborhood?" Krista asks. "I never see y'all around."

"Ah, well, Michael's been away on business. And it's been hot, you know... I just lounge in here."

Krista giggles, a bubbly sound. "Well, come on down to the pool some afternoon."

"I don't have a swimsuit." Ariel tries to make herself sound regretful, like she'd love to go but just can't. In truth she doesn't know how to have regular girlfriends. Her friends have always been sparse. They've been a variety of punk kids and nonbinary folks and some hippie girls and she is used to aimless, disaffected strolls in malls, cigarettes smoked in the quiet, trashy daytime TV watched in silence except for the crunching on bowls of chips and salsa. Not this cheery optimism.

Krista looks downcast, but not defeated. "Well, let me know if ya want to go and buy one. I can always go with you."

Ariel laughs - the first time she has in a while. "Maybe."

Krista's eyes are a pure thing so bright Ariel doesn't even want to look at them, and Krista says, "I just want you to come out of your shell. I know I'm annoying like that. I want everybody to be happy and to flourish."

Ariel laughs and it rattles something deep in her soul. She doesn't know what to say.

"Are you OK, though?" Krista has something serious in her now.

There's an itching in her skin as she considers this. "I, uh, well. It's always a bit difficult to move to a new place."

"I get you. It's hard. Paul and I, it was hard for us, too."

Ariel takes in the other woman and it's hard to imagine anything has ever been difficult for her, with her soft-looking skin, the ultra-straight hair. "Was it?"

"Oh, yes." Krista's eyes are flat and unblinking.

Ariel decides to take the chance. "Is there anything you think is wrong here? Like, in the neighborhood?"

Krista, quizzical, just beholds her, not saying anything. After a moment of quiet, Ariel feels stupid for asking. Ariel says, "Well, maybe that's a bad question."

"Well, the neighborhood's so nice, once you get used to it. Really, it is."

"Sometimes, I think this isn't really my life," Ariel blurts out. She can't stop. "It's like I look at all this and I don't know what it is."

Those bright eyes brimming with concern. Those eyes with something there that is more pure and somehow suspicious because of it. For a moment Krista doesn't know what to do, and the purity is almost endearing, and the smile is gone but then it comes right back. "I totally get it. It can be rough."

It's all Ariel's going to get. She realizes this like the color of the tile floor and the walls of this sarcophagus-like house that surrounds her.

They sit a while longer and finish the wine. Ariel thanks Krista for the lasagna. Krista thanks her for the wine. It has all been a completed transaction and yet Ariel, as she watches Krista sink back into the morass of the night, feels as though something great and powerful has passed unsaid through the world.

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She's told herself to stop driving by the mailman's house, but can't stop. Every time she has to go to the grocery store, she finds herself somewhat unconsciously driving by, slowing to a roll, eyes on that little one-story house that, to her, has taken on some element of serenity. The wife has something behind her eyes. Even from her safe distance, even just for those few split seconds, Ariel can tell. There's something more than human hiding beneath her skin.

The knowledge comes to her later in a dream. She bolts from bed as if her heart's received a great shock and there is something of a revelation. There are angels behind the sky. That's the sound. The angels coming down to reclaim the world, and the wife is a part of it, she's one of them heralding the gates for the others. Does the mailman know? She sees him the next day. Coming down the street again in that big white truck, and there's no mail for her that day, so he doesn't stop in front of her house.

Michael keeps a gun in a safe. The combination written on a little slip of crinkled old paper, tucked into some drawer by their kitchen cabinets, innocuous. The safe is in the back of the closet and, sitting in the bedroom, she turns the knob until it opens and then holds the gun sitting there on her knees. Outside with the grey summer mass rolling in, that golden light, coming like a fire. The gun isn't that heavy. She checks for the bullets and it's loaded. Michael always kept it loaded.

At the gun range, she practices her aim, before her lingering this beige hall with the soundproof headphones clamped over her ears, with the rhythmic bang of the firing. The kick strong in her, the weariness in her arms reminding her she is here, she is present, she is ready to fight if the need be. There is the grumble and groan behind the clouds. These things she cannot see. When she gets home, she puts the combination to the safe in the drawer right by the side of the bed where she sleeps, only she doesn't sleep anymore, doesn't have the werewithal to turn anything off.

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"I feel like you're distant, these days." Over the phone Michael sounds raspier than she remembers.

She smiles and tries to block out the images in her mind, knowing her own tendencies. As a child, she'd wander outside in the woods or on the streets of that bland little town, and then come back to her father with tales of monsters behind the trees, behind the windows, of strange worlds she was trying to work up the gumption to explore. Her father would pat her head and half-listen. Not knowing how much she believed it back then. How those things were as real as anything.

"Hon, I'm fine. I've just... you know, been adjusting."

"You barely answer anymore. I just hope everything's good."

"Are you having a good time over there?" She tries to change the subject.

"It's all a bit of a drag, these days."

"So quit. You keep saying there's some good places in town..."

He sighs yet again. A figure of nothing but the sighs. A vapor-ghost of a man. "You know I can't do that."

They lapse into a brief uncomfortable silence. She says, "I've been practicing with your gun."

“Oh?” He always tells her it might be a good skill to learn.

“Yeah. It’s pretty gratifying, actually. The, uh... the power of it.”

“Totally. Yeah. Totally. Well, it’s good you’re protecting yourself. That’s always a good skill...”

Out the window, the sun blankets great vast fields of yellow light, the green never been so green. In the far, far distance there are clouds that hang over the sky, a pall, a living shade. What lived in there? What was slowly descending? The phone call ends with a whimper. Him saying he’s coming back soon. That it’ll all be OK, but really, his words ring hollow these days.

Michael proposed to her after seven months of dating. He was 35 and she 27 and flailing. Working a shit job she hated. Michael with his unflappable demeanor and easy laugh. He seemed to be the avatar of stability. He had a good knowledge of expensive whiskeys and they went to the movies every week, her leaning on his shoulder, them both sharing popcorn, him talking a lot about the filmmaking on the rides home. When he proposed, it came as a lifeline and she said yes out of obligation. The years were getting away from her. Within two years she’d begun to feel like she was a trophy for him, a box checked off. Him barely seeming to see her. Gone all the time.

Lately all of it had begun to seem suspicious. The grocery clerks and the gas station attendants, some of them lately seem odd to her, something living behind the words. A strange, sneering knowing, as if she were the only one out of the loop. Something mechanical behind the eyes, something not quite human.

She tries to forget that she’s memorized the code for the safe. At night she can feel the beating heart of the world crying out save me, save me.

She comes to on the couch. Didn’t realize she’d drifted off. Another sweltering day with the rolling black clouds way in the distance. She can’t remember what day it is.

It's the late days of August and the sun's trying to murder them again. That great howling ball of fire bearing down like the purely undeniable, washing away all but what is real, what is material.

She's been trying to rein in the strange thoughts. Hasn't looked at the damn gun. Took Krista up, even, on a pool trip, lounged with sunscreen burning on her, occasionally dipped in water too warm, emerging sticky with sweat and the chlorine, shielding her eyes from the sun and retreating to the scant spiky shade of the palm trees lining the pool to read her dollar-store romance novel. There is still something lurking, always something lurking. She didn't have fun but didn't hate it. Krista smiled at her a lot, beaming as though she had achieved something.

One afternoon, she slips on a spaghetti-strap tank top and khaki shorts, sandals to yield against the burning pavement. She watches the truck make its slow descent down the road. There is something caught in her throat. Then the truck is pulling up, pulling up but the mailman isn't there, today. Instead it is an older man, pudgy and stern with a bushy mustache and sturdy eyes. Glances bored at her as he slides some perfunctory folds of mail into the mailbox, that squat black holder of secrets. He gives her the impression of a man who is all-there and beholden to the drudgery of the world, with clear eyes as he gives her a friendly nod before driving on.

She spends a lot of the rest of that day on the porch, afraid to move too much because the absence of the regular mailman is a sign. She wonders what has happened to him. Terrible notions fill her mind. They're coming. She can hear the sounds in the clouds growing louder. An ominous rumble like a great train reaching the station. Needing to know what happened to the mailman, she gets her car keys and gets in the car to go.

The mailman's house is a miracle of a structure, perfectly enclosed against the whole rest of the world in some way that Ariel inexplicably feels other domiciles are not. Not completely, not like this house is. This house that seems to ask nothing of anyone.

The street is empty. The road stretches on and on around her like a smooth black ocean totally still. She wonders if there was some plan in place, that she should be here in this street at exactly the time she needs to be, no eyes on her. That maybe there is some force for good backing her in this dark quest.

Her eyelids are heavy as she looks at the house. Her soul does not hum with a restless burning itch as it does when she wanders her own house, that big old husk. Getting out of the car, the grass pricks and chafes at her ankles as she crosses the yard. The hot air surrounds her like a cloud, inescapable, but nothing behind her exists anymore.

Taking a hairpin from her pocket between her fingers, she recalls the wayward youthful years breaking into the old factories, hollow spaces that seemed to stretch to the sky, with a lock-pick to drink cheap whiskey with guys who'd always been a little too much for her, wanting more than she even had to give. She put up with the mundane conversations because the guys had good booze and weed and sometimes she needed some sort of physical fix, some mess-around, even if she got tired of it quick and then had to go. She got out of there as easy as she'd broken in, soft, placating words and pats on the shoulder, empty promises, leaving them and pretending later she never knew them. Always sinking into the folds of the world, it was easy to come and go.

The hairpin opens the lock and she slips effortlessly into that airy domicile of the mailman and the thing he thinks is his wife. It is a cool, spacious dwelling with all the magazines and books in place, the sink a field of spotless chrome. The sun floods in from the window a wide triangle of imperious golden light bringing with it the heat as if on a chariot. It is what she thought from the outside, a perfect dwelling, but inside it's imperious and impersonal, and she feels the lack. The hollow in the fact that

this is not hers. She walks the cold floors and looks at the books placed like wax figures. At the sports trophies lining the top of the shelves, little gold men with hollow countenances. In the big TV on the wall she sees a reflection of herself and has to turn away.

She waits there a while. The shadows deepen and soon the sun is gone. The gun is in her pocket, dormant, heavy. There is a sureness to it. There is something defiant simmering.

The door is opening. She hears the light patter of footsteps falling on the tile floor. In steps the wife, or the thing masquerading as her. The other woman freezes when she sees Ariel. "What the hell?"

Ariel doesn't buy it, this innocent act. "I know what you are."

"What I am?"

"I know you're an intruder. You're letting them in."

"You seem like you're... stressed. Is there someone we can call?" The wife's tone is high-pitched, the conciliatory, chiding babying kind of tone. Needling into Ariel's skin. Ariel has never been so still. All the wife's movements look staged, bigger than they perhaps should be, as if she is poorly imitating human distress.

Ariel feels the simmering, something old she's connected to. Something through time and the coursing of humanity. "You're... you're corraling them in, opening the door. A fuckin' canary in a coal mine. I see you."

"Let's just see who we can call..." The other woman's voice trembling, a gaudy theatrical performance. Everything is fast and yet slow and Ariel thinks time outside the house is not like time inside. The door still hangs open revealing the verdant green glow of the grass magnified by the thick golden waves of heavy sunlight with the clouds a throttled, menacing purple-black scar. There are no cars outside and the feeling that this has all been staged returns like a wave of nausea. Is this neighborhood even real? She feels a powerful desire to tell the mailman. To warn him if he didn't know. The thought crosses her mind that maybe he's in on it, too - that maybe he's one of them.

But she knows that's not true.

She's seen his eyes. The dream is too real. Him and her together against an apocalypse coming.

The wife is advancing slow. "Just, let's sit down." Her voice and her eyes don't match up.

Ariel's fingers grasp the trophy beside her and then her palm is comfortably around it. She swings it hard, and it collides with the wife's head. Her eyes widen and she cries out in pain and Ariel, too, is surprised. Surprised enough to hit the woman again. A second hard thwack straight to the noggin. She didn't expect this to work. Expected perhaps for the wife to activate some of her powers, to reveal the endgame and blow Ariel away with some blast of force. Yet nothing happens except that the wife goes down. Bleeding, so much damn blood. A fracture in her head now filling the world with the red substance of life, a gory end, the sun shining outside on the newly glistening crimson, this awful liquid which did not previously exist outside the body.

Ariel doesn't know how long she stands there watching the woman and listening to the thunder. She feels the gun in the back of her waistband. Blood runs in between the floor tiles and the woman on the floor is convulsing. Her lips opening and closing but no words coming out, like she's gasping for air, a fish out of water. Her limbs jerk in spastic movements and her eyes have become glassy and strange.

From outside, she can hear the truck engine sputtering as it's turned off, and then she can see him from the corner of her eye walking up. His silhouette familiar now in the shadows from that bright light. Gaping in the open doorway, the mailman's eyes are wide like saucers. The golden, obtrusive sunlight pouring in. There is thunder, but she can't tell how far away the storm is. Voice ragged with tears, he speaks: "What the hell...?"

"She wasn't who you thought she was."

On the floor, the woman twitches. Hollow eyes gazing at something none of them can see.

"I have to liberate the world," Ariel says.

He doesn't say anything. Maybe the words are useless now. Maybe all of it is just her own strange aversion to ritual, the savage thing in her that screams and preens, that tells her to go her own way. That strange thing since she was a child drawing in her room. The light is too bright. Behind that, the un-benevolent shadows, the gray clouds encroaching in their funereal march.

"I know how I can prove it." She pulls the gun from her waistband. Silent, shocked, he recoils but makes no other move. Watching to see exactly what she's going to do. Somehow he knows, too, knows as she does. She aims the gun and fires at the body of the woman on the ground, or not the body, or this other thing. It is a savage burst of noise, a primal boom, and out of the corner of her eye she can see the mailman flinch with eyes like a deer in headlights. The woman, or whatever she was, begins to shake as if a tremendous cold has come over her. There is a robust light flooding from her eyes, from her mouth, a golden amber-straw shade which begins to vibrate and tremble, something struggling to be free. The mailman remains rapt and silent beside her watching with wide eyes. She feels a great lightness and tenderness in her breast, a radiance spreading all through her, she was right, she was right all along. Now will come the hard work, but she marvels vindicated. The body becomes nothing but an old shell. Something is rising from its ruins. An angel with its many forms, shifting, more than can be contained. The angel rising from the shell of the body. A thing unchained and glorious, and neither of them can stop watching, watching.