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FIVE STORIES FOR:

MILK

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## FIVE STORIES FOR: MILK

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MILK SWEAT

There on the shelf, is a bottle that fills itself. When the bottle gets thirsty, it drinks what it contains. We don't see the motions that occur, the subtle variations in the level of the liquid in the bottle as it rests. Waiting on the shelf, it consumes and then replenishes its contents. Behaving like a sponge, it goes through the imperceptible motions of thirst and saturation, squeezing itself out into its own mouth and then soaking itself up again.

It refills itself before we notice its levels getting low. Liquid seeps out from its internal walls, in tiny beads of condensation, dripping down, becoming full with its own precipitation. There is a pause in the sequence once its stocks are replenished, enough time for the spongy walls to get thirsty again. Then

they soak in the fluid like a dry mouth. Satiated, the next cycle begins.

When we pick this bottle up from the shelf, it is like every bottle. The outside is identical to the others and so is the liquid inside it. The seal of the cap, the label, and the shape tells us that the substance inside it is the same as the one before.

The liquid comes from a giant vat. A vast amount of fluid that comes from various sources is pooled together and stored in a place that is rarely seen. The bottle contains a sample from this common pool. Once sealed, it becomes its own, so that it can in turn become our own.

We drink its contents and the bottle disappears.

Within an instant, it reappears on the shelf again. We only see the full bottles, or we don't notice them once they are empty. Even if we know we aren't holding the same bottle in our hand, it is the same bottle to us. It looks and tastes the same. Like the illusion of a fountain, the illusion of the bottle makes us believe that this endless repetition is in fact an endless source.

The bottle goes on depleting and replenishing its contents for the duration of its life on the shelf. Once it's emptied, this action stops, and it has no recollection of its death. It copes with its separation from a part of itself by remembering the loop of feelings it experienced in life, the tandem of desire and satisfaction. It relives all the filling and the



drinking it did as it drifts in the ocean.

Washed-up on the sandy beach, the bottle looks to us like it's on vacation. It is devoid of its life function, to define the fluid it contains which we drink to fill ourselves. The body left behind, baking in the sun, changes colour over time. On the beach among the plastic bags and seaweed, is no longer the same thing. A body or a ghost, it defines nothing.

Walking on the beach, you get thirsty. They say that you cannot drink the tap water here. That if you do, you will bring home a parasite inside you. In the hot sun, walking along the beach, looking at empty bottles, you think about the next time you will drink and about how the liquid that you drink from the

bottle becomes part of you but the bottle does not.

At the airport, you remind yourself not to be too sweaty when you go through airport security. Sweat can be considered a personal item you heard that fat boy say.

EGG DAY

To calculate the number of eggs necessary, multiply the number of mouths to feed by two, plus one for every set of three. She counts to seven, cracking each egg into a large glass bowl. She mixes them with a whisk to create a mostly uniform, mucous-like substance. Her stomach turns slightly at the sight. The amount of whole milk or cream necessary in this recipe is half the volume of the total number of eggs to be cooked. She takes half an intact shell and measures out seven. Mixing in the cream, the eggs turn daffodil yellow and more opaque. Somehow they seem bonded to each other, falling with a subtle thump rather than pouring like a true liquid, as she tips them into the buttered frying pan. There, she gently coaxes them in the heat into a pile of fluffy scrambled eggs.

Spinning inside her, like a planet, is the circular form of an ovule, building up layers of life, accumulating substance like a planet with a gravitational pull. She is hungrier than usual. The third mouth to feed, she thinks to herself, has not been introduced yet, but the subtle way in which she attempts the announcement, by the number of eggs cooked this morning, goes unnoticed to the man enthusiastically putting two and one-third eggs into his mouth across the table from her. He beams at her, perhaps gratified by the hour they spent gloriously fucking the night before, sweating a lot and drenching the sheets, so they put everything in the wash and took showers before breakfast this morning. He does not question the larger yellow pile on her plate, containing four

and two-third eggs, which she is devouring in large snake-like gulps.

Later that day, there are twenty eggs boiling in a pot. The number of eggs necessary for this recipe is one per mouth to feed plus one for every set of three. There are fourteen people invited to lunch, and she wonders if her mother, who taught her this trick in the first place, will notice the discrepancy in the number of deviled eggs on the chilled silver platter.

“Is it egg day?” he asks as he walks into the kitchen, seeing her sat at the table, peeling off the shells from the hard-boiled eggs.

“Yes, Easter. Eggs all day.” she says, tracing her thumb between the membrane and the slippery

flesh, if you can call it flesh.

He takes the jug of milk out from the fridge, with a celebratory air, and is about to pour himself a glass, something he has never done in the whole time they've been together, when she stops him, saying, "Please don't. It'll make me sick".

" I knew it." he says " I could tell by the eggs". He puts the milk back in the fridge, takes out the mayonnaise, and helps her make the deviled eggs for the party. They neatly line them all up on the platter with a bed of lettuce underneath them, and it looks, to them, like a birthday cake.





MILK SPONGE

Since it was first taken out of its clear cellophane packaging, the bright pink sponge has been resting on the ledge of the creamy white ceramic bathtub. Frequently, but with no regular schedule, the sponge is passed over the various surfaces of the room. It presses against the blue-green tiles, cracked with age, and their cracks, filled with rough plaster grouting. It glides over smooth painted walls, faux-marbled countertops, steel faucets, and contoured ceramic fixtures.

Squeezing the sponge into a bucket, the effect of transforming water into another substance occurs. Water, combined with soap and dirt within the sponge becomes a rich milky foam. The suspension of grease and particles in water, made possible

by the chemical properties of soap lathered into the sponge, give the fluid an opacity and a bodily viscosity. Like squeezing juice from a fruit, the sponge sheds its fluids, containing a mixture of short hairs, dead skin, and oils left behind by different bodies washing hot skin in the shower, scrubbing faces at the sink, and brushing hair in front of the mirror.

With every swipe of these surfaces and every subsequent squeeze, the bodily bucket cocktail becomes more concentrated. As the cocktails potency increases, the surfaces become reciprocally clean. It's as if there were an understanding between the sponge and the bathroom. The sponge takes in the refuse, cumulatively changing colour over time, and the bathroom, miraculously, returns to a clean

state, time and time again. The sponge absorbs the bodily burden placed upon the bathroom by its occupants, projecting cleanliness onto others, while acquiring a bodily dignity of its very own.

Over the course of the many cleanings it has performed since it was first taken out of the plastic film, the sponge has taken on new properties. Not only have the physical particles become logged into its once homogeneous substance, it has also absorbed the many scents the bathroom has offered. Its tiny air pockets have become full with a concentrated version of the space it occupies, distilling it into a version of the room it has been tasked to wash clean. The smells are all there inside its pores: a ceramic coolness, a mildewy wetness,

an underlying grime emanating from the plaster in the cracks between the glazed bathroom tiles, and the acrid film of chemical remnants from cleaning products applied to the surfaces, designed to leave behind the cue for cleanliness. Also present, are the remnants of the bodies that have passed through the room, naked skin thinning out its oils and grime, mixing them with hot water and soap, and letting the mixture run down the drain, people pissing, a bit like sponges squeezing themselves out several times a day, or expelling their refuse, late at night, or early in the morning, through their mouths, if they are ill, or out their asses, on most days, in complete privacy, into the smooth ceramic bowl, and then flushing it away before the air becomes too thick.

The sponge becomes coagulated with these smells and all the bits of bodily refuse it has reclaimed from the disgraced ceramic chambers. Within its pores, it synthesizes these substances into the milky fluid you now see squeezing into the bucket, giving off the unmistakable odour of sanctity.

HOLY WATERS

If sweat could be read, it would tell us about its owner. The smell of the sweat depends on personal factors, the emotions behind it, the climate that caused it, the clothing it soaks in, and the foods laced within it. The sweat of a milk drinker, the sweat of a meat eater, the sweat of a lover, nervous sweat, polyester sweat, dancing sweat, the sweat of summer is not the sweat of winter, a brother's sweat is not the sweat of a stranger.

Your only fault is that you sweat so little, just barely at all. I cannot read your scent. One time I smelled it and it felt like entering a room I had never been in before. Your smooth skin opened up into a place I had never seen, and I walked right in, visually drinking it all up like a blown-away tourist at sea.



If I had bottled your scent, and opened it up now, while we are apart, would it have the same effect on me, removed from your skin and the moment it was taken?

I visited antique shops in this unfamiliar place, a tourist, on Vancouver Island. I had the disembodied feeling of having been there before. I was seeing it through your eyes. The man at the store was telling me about perfumery's contemporary disconnection from the body. We do not use the fluids secreted from the reproductive glands of tortured animals anymore. New perfumes contain a space constructed from an arrangement of associations to places and things. He brought me a bottle, sealed so tightly that he was scared to crack it open. When he did, I took a whiff

and he said, "Can't you smell the piss in that one?".

I didn't buy the antique bottle, with the antique animal smell, and he didn't have any genuine milkstone to show me. Instead, he offered to let me smell this green plastic container made of another early plastic from that era, but this one wasn't made of milk. It was off-gassing some vintage chemical used in the production of another antiquated polymer.

I ended up buying a shell, an exceptionally large one. It was pretty expensive as well. It's not like the shell from *The Birth of Venus*. It's not as big and it's not symmetrical like the giant scallop shell she rides. This clam shell looks more like a surrealist vulva telephone, a rococo bathroom sink, or the fingernail

of a giant sea creature. It makes me think of sea milk, that calcified shell, because of the association of milk to bone. As children we are told that it will build our bones, but it's always hard to image one substance turning into another, from milk to stone, from sea to shell, from semen and eggs into flesh and bone.

The opalescent milk in the shell is like water that comes out of the tap white and cloudy. At first you feel betrayed by its appearance, then you watch the whiteness slowly dissipate as the milk becomes the water you had hoped for in the first place.



SUN ROOM

There is a cloud of steam that forms around him as his pressure builds, fogging-up the window, or one half of the window, while the other half remains perfectly clear, chilled by his spouse who is shivering, teeth clenched to prevent their chattering, her muscles tensed in an effort to expend energy and create body heat. Seated in her chair, mere inches away from his chair, they are framed by this window where they sit, overlooking the trees. They are sealed in their third story sun-room having breakfast on a chilly spring morning with the leaves beginning to bud and the tulips just showing their green heads through the grey-brown matted grass that has reappeared after six months underneath the snow. He is self-heating, carrying inside him the landscape of a tropical

island, teeming with life in a constantly shifting play of movement and growth. She is temperate, like the dewy blue hyacinth defying the cold, showing the rest of the plants that it is time to grow despite the chill in the air and the frost on the soil in the flower box outside their window where she grows.

Upon entering a room, they choose their locations carefully, assessing the currents in the air and the brightness of the sunlight, they negotiate their placement for optimal mutual comfort with real empathy and concern. What communication is not done telepathically, or through signs and gestures, is achieved through conversation centered around air flow, internal and external temperature, the removal or putting-on of attire, and the balancing

of their consideration of the other in relation to their own individual concerns. They are like two house plants in the same pot, with slightly different care instructions, caring for each other.

With age, the placement of their chairs, in a situation like this morning in the sun-room, has become a delicate dance, a bit of a ritual before they can commit to being in one place for any amount of time. There is no reliable sense of continuity from day to day because of changes in the atmosphere, the location of the sun, the weather, obviously, and their own imperceptible internal movements.

Like two weather balloons in space, the atmospheric pressure has different effects on them. One



experiences the climate as pressure on the exterior of its walls and responds by compressing its internal space, while the other feels a decrease in external pressure and responds with excitation, pressing outwards on its membrane, in an expenditure of energy that releases pressure, or in this case, releasing vapours onto the window.

Though they are not literally conjoined, only bonded metaphysically through a partnership, their internal temperatures are connected as if they were two vessels with a shared capacity for comfort. One full and one empty bottle will eventually temper into two half-full vessels.

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