

NESTING DOLLS AND THE NARRATIVE ARC

by

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Critical Introduction to Metafiction

Critical Analysis of Metafiction

The term, metafiction, indicates a genre that coincided with the postmodern literary movement of the second half of the twentieth century which emphasized a mistrust of objective reality. In the 1960s postmodernism and metafiction boomed. Writers such as William H. Gass, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and Donald Barthelme wrote postmodern fiction such as *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (Gass), *The Crying of Lot 49* (Pynchon), *Breakfast of Champions* (Vonnegut), and *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (Barthelme). Other writers such as John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, and John Fowles wrote pieces of metafiction such as *Lost in the Funhouse* (Barth), *Pale Fire* (Nabokov), and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Fowles). Metafiction was one way of expressing this mistrust in reality, focusing on the writing and reading processes and the artifice that is a text. In literature this boom arose in the 1960s but two major literary movements, Realism and Modernism, are relevant in providing contrast for Postmodernism and Metafiction.

Historical Context Leading to the Development of Postmodernism and Metafiction

Realism was a movement of the late 19th and early 20th century which emphasized techniques that attempted to create fiction that was representative of an objective reality. These novels often focused on underrepresented populations such as the poor, immigrants, and women and used techniques such as the omniscient narrator to convey the plights of these populations. These novels and stories tended to focus on the ordinary,

everyday rather than extraordinary or uncommon but this is not an all-encompassing definition. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* M.H. Abrams further defines the tendencies of the tradition: “they [novelists] must render their materials in ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff of ordinary experience” (174). Abrams cites the “extraordinary adventures” of Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders as examples of extraordinary events that “seem to readers a mirror held up to reality by his [Daniel Defoe] reportorial manner or rendering all the events, whether ordinary or extraordinary.”

Modernism dovetailed off of Realism and precedes the Postmodern movement. According to Abrams, “many critics agree that it [modernism] involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general” (119). He also agrees that the term, modernism, “is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles” (118). Two common modernist techniques in literature were stream-of-consciousness and the unreliable narrator. Stream-of-consciousness is a technique that emphasizes the disorganized and fragmentary nature of thinking. Virginia Woolfe was one modernist writer who was known for using stream-of-consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The unreliable narrator is a technique in which the narrator of the story appears to the reader as though he can’t be trusted to deliver an objective truth. Ford Maddox Ford uses this technique with his character, John Dowell, in *The Good Soldier*.

Post-modernism further pushed the experiments of the modernist movement but, as Abrams explains, it also attempted to, “break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional” (120). The realist, modernist, and post-

modernist movements familiarize us with the problems with which literature and art were grappling. Metafiction sought to further push the boundaries of what constituted reality by writing about the reading and writing processes. Robert Scholes, who is often cited as popularizing the term metafiction, describes the genre as one that “assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself” (29). Patricia Waugh, another influential critic in the genre of metafiction, further defines the genre:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writing not only examines the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 40).

The genre of metafiction operates under the premise that the fundamental structures of narrative fiction are a construct. Waugh argues that metafiction draws attention to these constructs. Thus, metafiction is “not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency *within* the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (50).

Waugh expands upon this concept of metafiction as a tendency within the novel by arguing that:

metafictional practice has become particularly prominent in the fiction of the last twenty years. However, to draw exclusively on contemporary fiction would be

misleading for, although the *term* metafiction might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself. . . . metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels (42).

This underscores the problems with defining metafiction. Although the *term* metafiction is an outgrowth of the post-modernist movement, the *practice* of metafiction has been around much longer. Saussure reminded us that the symbolic representation of objects is not the object itself. In that reminder, we know that words and the artistic representations that we make with them are constructs, not reality. So, in a sense, any piece of literature could be metafiction. Any piece of literature could constitute a reason to question the realism of the work. Furthermore, any break in form from an established tradition could cause the reader to question the nature of fiction.

If metafiction is a tendency within all novels as Waugh argues how can we understand the term that we know today? Metafiction, which most notably emerged as a genre in the 1960s with the rise of postmodernism, actually has a much longer history. Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, originally published in nine volumes beginning in 1759, is considered by some as an early example of metafiction under its current postmodern definition. Others might cite Cervantes' *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha* which was originally published in Spanish in 1605 (part one) and 1615 (part two) as another earlier example of what is understood today as metafiction.

Waugh expands on the concept of metafiction arguing that not only does metafiction expose fiction as artifice and pose questions between the role of fiction and

reality it also “explore[s] the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2). In many ways, metafiction breaks the walls between reader, author, and the outside world. Waugh further defines the genre stating, “So, in many ways, we are always writing metafiction. The genre only brings writing and reading issues to the foreground. Thus, metafiction is fluid under Waugh’s definition but the Postmodern definition of metafiction that arose out of the 1960s and 1970s uses certain common techniques, such as the examples that follow, to further draw attention to the artifice of fiction and create juxtaposition.

Common Themes in the Genre of Metafiction

Reader, Writer, and Text

Some pieces of metafiction explicitly explore the nature of the triad, reader, writer, and text. These three dimensions of literary criticism are often taught in theory classes as a means of understanding meaning making in literature. Texts that explicitly reference this triad do so as a means of dividing and defining each part of the triad’s roles and blurring the lines between the roles. *Lost in the Funhouse* is one classic text that explicitly incorporates these three elements in literature theory. *Lost in the Funhouse* explores the triad through extended metaphors that break off and continue through in other portions. *Lost in the Funhouse* incorporates the binary of man and woman/sperm and egg as a parallel between writer and text. One section that explicitly incorporates these extended metaphors is “Night-Sea Journey.” In this section sperm swimming toward an egg metaphorically operates as a writer trying to reach completion of a text. In “Petition” Thalia is metaphorically the text and the narrator is the writer.

A subset of the triad of reader, writer, and text is to reference the author by incorporating an author as character within the storyline. The role of the author as character must comment on the role of the author in the writing process. Three pieces of metafiction that incorporate the author are Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, and John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. *Pale Fire* is a novel that consists of three parts: a 999 line poem written by the fictional author, John Shade, a forward written by the fictional character, Charles Kinbote, and the commentary that is also written by the character Kinbote. Thus, the novel appears as though it is a critical edition of the poem, *Pale Fire*, but the larger story of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is actually in Kinbote's commentary on the poem. In creating a story that appears to be a critical edition of a poem, Nabokov highlights the roles that the author and the critic, and their personal mental states, play in creating a product that another reader would see on the shelf in the library or bookstore.

The New York Trilogy references the author, most notably, in the first novella of the trilogy, "City of Glass." In this novella an unnamed author reports his events to a character who is named Paul Auster and is the name of the actual author of *The New York Trilogy*. This illustrates both the theme of transmission of stories and references the author. A reader could make several inferences based off of Auster's inclusion of his own name within his own fictional narrative. This inclusion of his own name places Auster as a character within his fictional world and places Auster, the real-life author, in a position other than the top of the hierarchy in storytelling. It also could comment that the author is never outside of his own fictional work.

Lost in the Funhouse highlights the role of the author. The “series” of stories, as the forward calls them, is often understood as a novel about an author searching for new forms and techniques for his writing. *Lost in the Funhouse* is divided into a forward and a series of stories in which a fictional authorial voice often intrudes in the story and comments on the role of author, reader, and text. This intruding voice indicates that the author is always within the fictional narrative. Moreover, as the series of stories progress, this intruding voice pervades and ultimately becomes the overarching narrative in the final stories. In the final story the author has eaten through all of the available forms and muses: Caliope, Thalia, Helen, etcetera.

Similarly, in *Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc*, an author voice is a pervading link through all of the sections. This author voice is in the text boxes. This voice is more detached and analytical in the beginning three quarters of the story and becomes increasingly animated and recognizant of his or her own role within the story. This mimics the intruding voice in *Lost in the Funhouse*. This type of narrative structure recognizes that the author is never outside of the story that he or she is creating. A second author voice is arguably Thalia. If we understand Thalia as the creators of Phoebe and Esmé as the font suggests then she is also an author of a story, memoir, or journal entries. Moreover, if we understand Esmé and Phoebe as the creators of the stories in their journals, they too are authors. This story within story within story structure is a nesting dolls effect. This technique varies from Barth’s use of incorporation of the author. In *Lost in the Funhouse* the author voice is writing stories that are intended to for

publication. Conversely, journal entries are something traditionally intended as private, thus the nesting doll effect.

A reader character is also explicitly referenced. This character is written in conjunction to references to Odysseus and often has conqueror qualities. As metafiction often makes plain a text is not something that is easily conquered in just one linear fashion. Moreover, Thalia holds a mirror up to this type of reader. The incorporation of reader, or at least a certain type of reader, in this way is different from the explicitly theoretical way that *Lost in the Funhouse* incorporates the reader. Holding up the mirror to this type of reader could be symbolically holding the mirror up to a reader who believes that a text can be conquered. If understood as a story about a rape victim, this affront to the overly confident reader could be understood as a stand for rape victims who statistically speaking are not believed.

Fragmentation

A fragmented style of writing is often indicative of postmodern writing, especially metafiction. Fragmentation occurs when the pieces of a narrative are broken in a way that is disorienting for the reader. There are a number of ways that authors achieve this fragmented style: the fragmentary nature of commentary in a critical edition of a book, the fragmentary nature of a collection of stories, and the fragmentary nature of piecing together historical sources. *Pale Fire*, *Lost in the Funhouse*, and *Dictionary of the Khazars* all incorporate fragmentation differently but all are nonetheless disorienting to the reader. *Pale Fire* incorporates this element through its structure and reader's expectations when confronted with a piece of writing in book form that appears to be a

critical edition of a poem. Typically, when confronted with a critical edition of a novel or poem a reader would sort through the work of literature first and use the commentary as a means of understanding the work of literature better, however since the story is also in the commentary and forward, the reader of the novel, *Pale Fire*, has a variety of ways that they might sort through the various elements as a novel. A reader could read the poem and then the commentary and forward, mimicking how a reader might approach a poem found in an anthology and then later researched by the reader. Or, a reader could read the forward then the poem and commentary together.

Lost in the Funhouse incorporates this fragmentation through the use of several short stories that link together. Each short story stands on its own and many were even published as short stories before *Lost in the Funhouse* the series of stories. *Lost in the Funhouse*, however, also pushed a serial and linked nature thereby commenting on the nature of a collection of stories or the nature of a more traditional novel which is a series of stories that link together in a meaningful way. The role of the reader is to fill in gaps and make meaning through these gaps. Furthermore, the fragmentation suggests that the reader is always filling in gaps, even if the form has become so well-worn that he no longer notices that he is doing so.

Dictionary of the Khazars by Milorad Pavić is arguably one of the more disorienting examples of fragmentation. The novel is set up as historical accounts of the Khazars using folk tales and fictional historical accounts. The book is divided into four main parts: an introduction, accounts from Islamic sources, accounts from Christian sources, and accounts from Hebrew sources. Each account has many separate stories that

don't seem to link together in any way until the reader finds the next source's set of accounts. The fragmentation is particularly disorienting because, although the story appears to be folk tale and historical account, the overarching narrative is arguably something both surprising and seemingly unrelated to the themes that are detailed in the accounts. *Dictionary of the Khazars* is arguably a murder mystery.

In *Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc* this technique occurs through the fragmentary nature of journal entries. Much of the story is told through the journal entries of the characters Phoebe, Esmé, and Thalia who is arguably the author of the text that is interspersed between the journal entries of Phoebe and Esmé. Journal entries are often personal pieces that are written for the writer's eyes only. Thus, they don't necessarily give backstory in a linear fashion and are haphazard to an outside reader. They must be pieced together. Further complicating this narrative structure is the question of who is writing. Esmé and Phoebe's journal entries are connected with text that is in the same font as Thalia's later journal entries causing the reader to question who is actually the author of the Esmé and Phoebe journal entries.

Dual Identity

Duality of human nature is sometimes present in metafictional literature, demonstrated most notably in *Lost in the Funhouse*, *House of Leaves*, and *The New York Trilogy*. Duality of human nature can be understood as the duality of writer and person, duality of id and ego, and duality of public face that keeps a person connected to the world and private self that is self-reflective. Furthermore, duality is often presented as two separate characters who can only be understood by the reader as the same person

through exaggeration of situation and technique. This theme is most notably demonstrated in *Lost in the Funhouse* is the story, "Petition." This story is narrated from the perspective of a man who is a conjoined twin to a brother who is drastically different from him. Consequently, the twins are at odds with each other. Although conjoined twins exist they are rare and, within the context of a metafiction, they are understood as one person with a conflicted nature. The narrator is smaller, less boisterous, and more introspective. They are conjoined front to back and the narrator occupies the back position. His brother is the front portion of the pair and enjoys the physical, sensual world. This pairing operates on the metaphoric level and is often understood as the struggle between id and ego or the struggle between the worldly self and the interior, introspective, writer's self.

House of Leaves incorporates this element in a similar fashion with the characters Johnny Truant and his friend Lude. Johnny is more introspective than his friend. Johnny is also interested in art, in the form of tattooing, and writing and reading, in the form of reading the transcripts of the video footage. Lude is more connected with the world. When Johnny no longer sees Lude he becomes increasingly cut off from the world and lost in the pages of the transcript. Again, Johnny and Lude could be read as separate people, however, there are a few reasons that could cause a reader to understand Lude as another part of Johnny. Opposing duality of human nature is a common theme used in metafiction and since *House of Leaves* is so metafictional its reasonable for a reader to understand the two characters as one person. Moreover, as the reader learns more about Johnny's past, it becomes fair to wonder if Johnny has mental health issues including

psychosis. One final tipoff that Danielewski uses is the exaggerated names. The name Lude is also short for a type of sedative and the name Johnny Truant, if not obviously metaphorical, is at least absurd enough to dramatize his character.

The New York Trilogy offers another example of duality of human nature. In the second novella, “Ghosts,” Blue is a detective who is assigned to watch a man who is fairly uninteresting and does very little except read. As Blue watches his assignment he becomes so engrossed in the uneventful life of the man that he is watching that his girlfriend leaves him and he loses his apartment for lack of paying the rent. Blue becomes cut off from the world. At a point in the story Blue finally sees his assignment up close and realizes that he is a man who looks identical to himself. As Blue observes his assignment, metaphorically, he becomes more introspective and as the novella progresses his assignment takes on a role that is more active. Thus, Blue and Black switch roles. This switch in roles could indicate that as a person watches himself he loses touch with the outside world. This reading would continue the theme of self-conscious literature that is common in metafiction.

Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc could potentially contain this common element of dual identity if we understand Phoebe and Esmé as different sides to the same character. The “Reflect” portion in between the Phoebe and Esmé sections could be understood as a mirror between the two characters. In *Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc* the characters are at odds with each other. Similar to the back and front brothers in “Petition” of *Lost in the Funhouse* Esmé takes joy in taunting Phoebe as in the scene in which Phoebe sees Esmé in the mirror in Phoebe’s room as Phoebe is examining the

scars on her stomach. Further on in the narrative Esmé and Phoebe are sitting together writing in their journals and begin to look through previous journal entries. Both girls state “I wrote that” with double quotes around some of the statements. Moreover, many of their statements are said in unison further indicating that they are perhaps connected.

Mirrors

Mirrors are a symbol in metafiction often symbolizing self-reflexivity. In the title story of *Lost in the Funhouse* Ambrose is in a funhouse in which there are mirrors that face each other. However, “no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way” Barth writes. This symbolic device is carried through in *Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc*. Mirrors and reflections are used, as in the previously mentioned example between Esmé and Phoebe’s sections. It is also used in the section in which Thalia holds the mirror up to the window and down at the reader man who is by the pond. This reflection is different in nature from the type of reflection that Ambrose encounters in “Lost in the Funhouse.” The mirrors that Ambrose encounters are self-reflective. Thalia’s mirror is used to reflect the reader back upon himself similar to the common technique in feminism in which a lens or mirror is used to reflect back the male gaze. Similarly, in an earlier section Esmé is a viewer who is taking pictures of a girl sleeping in her car. The girl in her car holds a mirror up as Esmé snaps the picture. Thus, mirrors are also used as an about-face on the masculine gaze.

Use of Atypical Punctuation, Symbols, and Visual Representation

Some pieces of metafiction, such as *Lost in the Funhouse*, *House of Leaves*, and Danielewski's *The Familiar: One Rainy Day in May*, incorporate symbols, punctuation, and visual representation in ways that comment on the nature of a text and draw attention to the artificiality of words. Abrams and Dorst's *S* is a novel that incorporates many unusual elements that draw attention to the readers of a work. *S* is the title of the novel that Abrams and Dorst wrote but it also contains a fictional novel called *Ship of Theseus* by the fictional author V.M. Straka. Abrams and Dorst's novel is about two students who are commenting in the margins of the novel and, in many ways, making the novel *Ship of Theseus* through their reading. Thus, *S* is a novel within a novel, placing the world as a part of Barthe's definition of a text. Abrams and Dorst's novel contains numerous pieces of materials that relate to the fictional novel that the fictional readers are commenting on. It also contains pieces of material that relate to the fictional characters' lives. These pieces are incorporated loose leaf as though they were stuck in between the pages much the same way that people use random bits of papers like bookmarks.

Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc also uses atypical punctuation and visual representations. The most notable examples are the text boxes, changing font type, and the Rubin's Vase illusion. The text boxes contain an analytical, scholarly voice that runs through the story from beginning to end and is the strand that finishes the narrative arc of the story. The changing font type is another feature that is usually not incorporated into a traditional narrative. Each character, including the scholarly voice, each has its own font type. This change in font type is partially used to help the reader understand who is

writing at any given point. Moreover, though, the font type is used to characterize slightly. Esmé, Phoebe, and Thalia all have sans serif fonts while the scholarly voice has Times New Roman which, as the voice points out, is the font used for scholarly writing not personal journals entries. The Rubin's Vase illusion is a third atypical element. It is visual representation that could have many metaphorical meanings. As the writing in the text box indicates it could mean equality. However, it could also be indicative of the singular vase in the middle, depending on how a person views the visual. Moreover, it is also an illusion which could be spun in several different directions such as equality is an illusion or the singular, masculine at the forefront is an illusion.

Craft-Related Challenges

Challenges of all Fictional Writing

Craft text books often focus on specific elements of writing repeatedly. In *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* Janet Burroway outlines several common elements of the craft of writing. She breaks the chapters of her craft book into story form, plot, and structure, showing and telling, characterization, fictional place and time, point-of-view, comparison, and theme. Essentially, Burroway names these as some of the elements that any story contains. Most basically, a traditional narrative has a setting and a time, it comes from a particular point-of-view, it often uses comparisons to make the story more interesting and compelling, and there is a theme or several themes that are developed throughout the course of the narrative.

In the section “Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution” Burroway relates the advice of Charles Baxter, a fiction writer and teacher of fiction writing courses. In *Burning Down the House*, Baxter writes,

Say what you will about it. Hell is story-friendly. If you want a compelling story, put your protagonist among the damned. The mechanisms of Hell are nicely attuned to the mechanisms of narrative. Not so the pleasures of Paradise.

Paradise is not a story. It’s about what happens when the stories are over (32).

Burroway continues about the nature of a compelling character. It’s not enough to have a character that is unhappy about a situation. The character needs to have some kind of desire. She explains the importance of a character that is active rather than passive: “one common fault of talented young writers is to create a character who is passive. . . . a character’s passivity transmits itself to the page, and the story also becomes passive” Baxter calls this “the fiction of finger pointing. . . . When blame has been assigned, the story is over” (33).

In *Happy Endings*, Margaret Atwood also explores the nature of storytelling and the necessity of a story with some kind of conflict. *Happy Endings* is a piece of short short fiction in which the characters, John and Mary, are placed in various situations. In the first example they are happy and live idyllic lives but in the various situations that follow are filled with trouble. The story ends by claiming that how and why is more interesting than the happy ending.

What we as fiction writers can glean from Burroway's text is that, as is often said in fiction writing, only trouble is interesting but characters must be active, rather than passive recipients of a number of blows, and it is the way in which characters reach their endings rather than the ending itself that is compelling.

Burroway also discusses what creates a compelling character. She writes that a character must be credible in that they are appropriate. On a certain level we are always writing types but the way those types are explored can be individual. A character must also have purpose. This harkens back to the passages on the active versus passive character. There must be a desire that impels him or her to action. A character should also be complex and have idiosyncrasies that do not always align. No person is always moral, always kind, always heroic nor are people always lazy, always underhanded, or always immoral. People are filled with contradiction. According to Burroway, so should be a character. A final aspect of character is the ability for change. Characters should develop over the course of a story.

When reviewing these commonly taught practices of fiction writing courses an important question arises: to what extent is this useful in a genre that often flouts the rules of traditional narrative? One of the critical questions of writing in a genre that has a history of running counter to the established norms is the question: When does a writer incorporate the aesthetics of a more traditional narrative? To what extent can writing texts such as Burroway's *Writing Fiction* apply to genre writing which has its own aesthetics and traditions?

Breaking Norms of What is Taught for Traditional Stories

Metafiction, by its definition, breaks many of the norms that are taught in a fiction writing class. It is a genre that aims to highlight the processes and theoretical concepts that are usually beneath the surface. One of the challenges of writing metafiction is being attentive to the often taught practices of story writing while also remaining true to the genre. Many pieces of metafiction break conventions of traditional narratives. For instance, *Lost in the Funhouse*, as well as many of Barth's writing, uses stock and underdeveloped characters. Magda in "Lost in the Funhouse" is one such character. She is "unusually well-developed for her age" and does and says things that are stereotypical of a girl her age. Since she is a stereotype the reader can more easily understand her as representative of an idea. Thalia in "Petition" is somewhat stripped of individuality. She is so stripped of detail that she operates as an archetype. The reader can understand her only through her name and the way that the narrator chooses to describe her. She would not fit the norms of fleshed-out character in a more traditional narrative.

Other experimental stories use underdeveloped characters as well. For instance, Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings" uses undeveloped characters. The benefit of stripping characters down is that there is less extraneous detail to distract from the concept which makes the theory easier to recognize. In traditional narratives a stock character is often considered to be a sign of poor writing. It will be recognized as unimaginative and boring if it isn't serving a larger picture.

Another established norm of writing fiction in many fiction writing classes is that the writer does not "plant" meaning. The writer's job is to focus on character

development, the five senses, and developing theme later on in the writing process. This might be true for other types of writing as well, but in metafiction there are many places when it is quite obvious that something was planted. For instance, in *House of Leaves*, the first edition of the novel is within the narrative of the novel itself. However, on the copyright page it is cited as the second edition of the novel. Thus, it is safe to assume that the author and the publisher intentionally planted the second edition on the copyright page even though in the real world it was actually the first edition.

Another difference between a more traditional narrative and metafiction is that in a traditional narrative a writer tries to keep the strings or scaffolding hidden. In metafiction the purpose is to expose those strings which begs the question of to what degree traditional storytelling methods bear weight in a genre that disobeys those traditional storytelling norms.

Creating Variation on Genre

One of the goals of fiction writing in a genre is to create something that is similar enough to the genre that it is recognizable to a reader enough as part of the genre yet different enough that it is worthwhile to write it and interesting to read. In an attempt to do this, I chose to connect metafiction, a genre that has traditionally been written by men, with feminist theory and women's writing. The concept is not to attempt to force a reading but rather to situate the piece of writing within a context. A particular challenge of this approach is that the techniques must be well chosen.

The Revision Process

One of the main differences between revising a piece of scholarly writing and revising a piece of fiction is that the writer of a piece of scholarly writing is asking herself if the argument is compelling. Scholarly writing has a higher aim to convince a reader of the validity of an argument through a direct and appropriately concise channel. A fiction writer is rather looking at whether or not characters are interesting, if the ending is satisfying, and if the techniques create a desired effect. Or, incorporating Atwood's "Happy Endings," how and why is more important and interesting than what.

As I was writing *Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc* I wanted to remain true, both to metafiction and to some elements of feminist theory. Thus, I was thinking through which devices I would use and how they could be interpreted by a potential reader. Since the genre is often deemed analytical, I wanted to make sure that there was a rationale behind why one choice of detail or wording was made over another. This is a drastically different approach than what I normally use. Upon revision, however, I realized that it also had to be a story and too much fragmentation might be too off-putting. So, much of my revision was aimed at drawing lines between pieces so that a reader who was familiar with the genre would be able to fill in gaps and create an overarching storyline.

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Nesting Dolls and the Narrative Arc

At the tail end of a denouement, an illusion: one black vase on a white page or two faces meeting. Foreground and background flipping.



“I’d wonder whether I should after all have skinned and eaten her, whom too I saw I had misnamed. We could perhaps have been friends, once she overcame her fright; I’d have had someone to talk to when Calliope goes, and with whom to face the unwritable postscript, fast approaching, of my *Anonymiad*” (200).

Rationale: Metafiction is a male-dominated genre as demonstrated by the vast majority of writer’s in the genre who are male (Barth, Nabokov, etc.) *Lost in the Funhouse* is particularly male: sperm, mute female characters, narrative arc.

Goal: Feminize? Use feminism? Create female characters? Eee . . . Equality?

from "Lost in the Funhouse"

The action of conventional dramatic narrative may be represented by a diagram called Freitag's Triangle or more accurately by a variant of that diagram in which AB represents the exposition, B the introduction of conflict, BC the "rising action," complication, or development of the conflict, C the climax, or turn of the action, CD the dénouement, or resolution of the conflict. While there is no reason to regard this pattern as an absolute necessity, like many other conventions it became conventional because great numbers of people over many years learned by trial and error that it was effective; one ought not to forsake it, therefore, unless one wishes to forsake as well the effect of drama or has clear cause to feel that deliberate violation of the "normal" pattern can better effect that effect" (95).

Masculine portion:
Narrative

Arc. Kinsey study on
this?

Feminine portion:
Nesting

Dolls, Theory: Cixous,
plotless.

Introduction

A.

Just over a hill, a little farm in the countryside: hills gently roll in the distance, each more hazy blue, hazy blue the farther from the vantage point. Geese soar overhead. A small chicken coup houses a dozen chickens gently clucking. There is a barn for two horses, a Shetland Pony, Puddle Jumper and a Painted American Horse, Cotton Candy.

A small flock of sheep, about five in total, grazes and baas on an acre near the rear of the property. Sweet, warm country air of hay and wildflowers floats on the wind.

A pond reflects the serene blue sky. It is blue and shimmering, shining with a soft, tremulous light. It is so tremulous, so wavering, so insubstantial that passers-by in their cars and trucks, people passing through, taking the scenic route from town to town, people with a yen to leave the “hustle and bustle” of city life behind them, if only for an hour, gaze at the little farm with the pond and the rolling hills that become ever more hazy blue as they depart from the vantage point that the passers-by lose track of the road. They become entranced like Odysseus passing the island of Sirenum.

A passer-by spots a box, like a mailbox except larger and with a window. Its one of those “Little Library” boxes filled with books. He pulls over to the side, stops his engine. He is an avid reader of novels. Adventure? Fantasy? A Sweeping Romance? A Realistic novel by Dickens or Tolstoy. “Ooh, yes,” he says. He has been looking for a new novel. New vistas to see and climb! He opens the small-hinged door and takes out a tattered copy.

B.

Just over a hill, a little farm in the countryside: hills gently roll in the distance, each more hazy blue the farther from the vantage point. Geese fly overhead. A small chicken coup houses a dozen chickens squawking. There is a barn for two horses, a Shetland Pony and a Painted American Horse. Above their stalls are their names, Puddle Jumper and Cotton Candy. A small flock of sheep graze and bleat on an acre near the rear of the property. Sweet, warm country air of manure blows on the wind.

A pond reflects the blue sky. It is so blue and the light glitters on the surface. It glitters so that the passer-by on a country walk, he who has left his car, with a desire to leave the hustle and bustle of city life behind for an hour or two loses his footing on the side of the road. He is dogged with the heat and the sweet stench. He becomes engrossed in the climb like Odysseus after the island of Aeolia.

Book in hand, he begins to ascend the hill. It is rocky terrain. He wants to pat the horses. Maybe even take a trot on the Shetland Pony. He wants to dive into that crystalline pond and swim. Swim. He does swim like a fish, like salmon during spawning season.

C.

Just over a hill, a little countryside farm: hills plunge and rise, each a more hazy blue the farther from the vantage point. Geese fly overhead. A small chicken coup houses a dozen chickens clucking in a clamor. A barn for a Shetland Pony and a Painted American Horse houses Puddle Jumper and Cotton Candy and the flock of sheep graze and bleat in cacophony. The sweet, warm country air fills the nostrils, overwhelming the senses.

The pond reflects the blue sky and glitters so brightly, so dazzlingly, beaming, glaring. The countryside walker, the one who abandoned his car on the side of the road, the one who wished to escape his life if only for an hour or two, is overwhelmed by the dazzling spectacle of the light reflecting and the music of the sheep bleating. The passer-by is triumphantly at the pinnacle, the climax of his walk. He is overcome with the triumph like Odysseus on the island of the Phaeaians.

D.

On the down slope of a hill, a little countryside farm: rutted hills jut out, looming over the small valley. Geese honk overhead. A small chicken coup houses a dozen chickens flapping and squawking and clucking. A barn houses the two horses, swishing their tails at the flies around their dung. Their names painted above their stalls are chipped and faded. The sheep graze and bleat as a soon-to-be mother sheep cries as she gives birth on an acre near the rear of the property. Sweet, hot air of dung and animal permeates the air.

The pond up close is green and murky. It is so green and murky and full of the stench of rotten eggs from the stratified, stagnant water that one walking on the property pinches his nose and runs from the stench.

The passer-by pats the pony's rump. He gives a good brush to the mane of the Calico. Tries to mount her but she balks. The walker strides over to the pond, squats down, and examines the water. He stands back up, takes a long surveying gander, his eyes stretching as far as the east bank then up to the little country farmhouse.

What about the inhabitants? Who were they again? Oh, yes, a woman, poor lady. Her husband is always out of town, said he would pick up husbandry but went out on the road instead, the rat. Two younger women were living with her. Who were they again? Yes, yes, a younger sister, a student of about twenty, freckle-faced with full cheeks. Always good at listening and responding so well. It made one feel good, the reverberations of one's own mind. And who was the other? A girl about the same age. Bit of a temper if he could believe the stories. One duplicates and one is dumb.

He could offer some advice on growing larger tomatoes in the garden. Nothing too invasive. His uncle used to have a small farm. He could give some advice. Just a little critique. And how about that gate for the sheep? Surely the spaces between the slats were too far apart. Just a little friendly advice. Maybe he would just take a wander up the driveway and give some good old guidance. Analyze the situation. A little homespun council passed down from his uncle to him to the inhabitants of this little country farm. Right down the line.

The passer-by is at home, like Odysseus when he reaches Ithaca.

“Who was that?” they said in unison, one voice warbling with rage and the other voice quivering in fear.

“Just a man who wanted to tell me what we should name the farm,” I replied.

from “Night-Sea Journey”

“Is the journey my invention? Do the night, the sea, exist at all, apart from my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am, who am I? The Heritage I supposedly transport? But how can I be both vessel and contents? Such are the questions that beset my intervals of rest?” (3)

‘Love? Love?’ We sang stilling the sea churned white from the swimming. For the inevitable, the joyous union. Come rest on our shores. Come eat the fruit on our

trees. Come burrow into our sands and populate us. Transmit the Heritage. Write on me.

From the bowels of an author, from the postscript of a novel, a sphere gliding through some three odd millennia, gliding on the winds and sea off the island of Sirenum. A wind whistling, high pitched, then deeper howling, warbled, past the entrance of a cave on the island. Farther out, “Shshshshlo” then a ruffling of wind hitting the surface of the ocean. The water laps and smacks, thrusts along in a current, the sphere(s) glides along. Wind picks up and the ocean crashes along another shore. The surf forms into breakers thirty feet from the beach and caps in a white, frothy crest. A sphere, two spheres (?), three(?) spheres, one(?) sphere like many others yet unique, variation, glide(s) onto the beach.

A Story

from Metamorphoses

The lecher, for enjoyment fully bent,

No longer now conceal'd his base intent;

But with rude haste the bloomy girl deflow'r'd

Tender, defenceless, and with ease o'erpower'd

Her piercing accents to her sire complain,

And to her absent sister, but in vain:

In vain she importunes, with doleful cries,

Each unattentive godhead of the skies.

She pants and trembles, like the bleating prey,

from "Glossolalia"

"Dear Procne: your wretched sister-she it is weaves this robe. Regard it well: it hides her painful tale in its pointless patterns. Tereus came and fetched her off; he conveyed her to Thrace . . . but not to see her sister. He dragged her deep into the forest, where he shackled her and raped her. Her tongue he then severed, and concealed her, and she warbles for vengeance and death" (114).

Shshshlo. Crash.

Phoebe (Philomena)

There's a gurgling warble, an oscillating between a low-pitched choking and a higher chirrup. Her tongue won't move. She continues for a few seconds, then, an inhalation of breath.

"That's not me, I'm real."

There's a sudden whisper, an exhalation of breath, voiceless. She's breathing hard. It's dark, nothing is visible except for a razor thin band of light cutting across the floor. Phoebe is in the basement bedroom. There are no windows, no light from the moon or the stars. She holds her hand out in front of her, faintly waving at herself, palm inward, but it is too dark to see. One might wonder if this is what nonexistence looks like. She is floating alone on a large body of water on a moonless night. The sky is cloudy and dense black. There is nothing.

Philomena. Echo. It's all about voice. Who should be speaking this?

Her heart is still beating hard. The room is so quiet one could hear the thump-thump of the muscle pumping blood through the aorta. This muscle circulates blood and tells the room that she's alive.

Water runs through the pipes above, sluicing and tinkling. The air conditioner flips on and the forced air ruffles the pages of a book.

She pulls back the covers and swings her legs over the side of the bed. As she walks toward the band of light from under the door she avoids the chair in the middle of the room then finds the light switch easily. There's a faint click as the room is filled with the bright light of an overhead incandescent light bulb fixture. Phoebe squints her eyes. They're deep blue. She opens her eyes more and looks at herself in the mirror. Her skin is the color of coffee with cream and her hair is golden brown that curls softly toward the ends. She combs her hair out of her face with her fingers and gazes at herself.

A bookcase sits against one wall with a small collection of about two hundred books. On one bookshelf there is a section of anthologies: an anthology of British Literature boasts Christopher Marlowe, Edmond Spenser, Lady Mary Wroth, John Donne, John Milton, Francis Bacon, Sir

Thomas More, Isabella Whitney, William Shakespeare, and Sir Thomas Wyatt on its spine. Another shelf contains: B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, *Don Quixote*, John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Yet another bookshelf contains several of the Bronte sisters' books and various novels by Austen.

Phoebe looks at her copy of *Lost in the Funhouse* high above her head on the bookcase just under the vent. It's on top of *Metamorphoses*. A few pages are still fluttering. She reaches up, her fingers brushing just under the soft cover. She stands on her tip-toes but can't quite reach so, instead pulls a thick book off of the middle of the shelf. It's her copy of a literary criticism text, a thick book with a hard cover. She places the book on the floor, stands on her toes and grabs both books. *Metamorphoses* slips from her hand, hits her on the head, and falls open to the floor. She winces, rubs her head, and lets out a faint gasp. Large passages of text are underlined and a few words are highlighted. "Terreus" jumps out in yellow on the page.

Phoebe opens to a dog-eared page toward the front of *Lost in the Funhouse*. It's heavily marked in the margins and highlighted in places. Her eyes scan the page for a moment then she cocks her head and raises an

eyebrow. She whispers, "Transmitting the Heritage? Sperm only have thirty-two chromosomes."

She puts the book back on the desk face down, pulls out the chair and sits. A hot-pink journal notebook and a pen are sitting inside the top left drawer of the desk. She pulls both out and places the journal on her lap.

May 3, 1976

Been here a while. Barely see her, tho. Mostly her sister I see, jutting through doorways with her camera, trying to "capture people in stills." Esmé struts with her camera and notebook in hand. And yes, it is a strut. Mostly, Thalia isn't here tho. Been at work or teaching. I think she has a bit of rented space downtown. Four students? Wonder if she would take me on? Wonder what she charges? Think I'd like to teach some day.

I see her every once in a while but who is she? Saw her yesterday outside, through a window upstairs. It was only her body, tho. Couldn't see her face. What was the pose she was in? Think it's called a chest stand. Legs and toes pointed, head tucked against the butt, weight on her chest. I could only see a little bit of her profile. Who is Thalia?

Phoebe puts the notebook down, bites the side of her lip, then picks it back up.

Sidenote:

By the way. My skin is washed out. My eyes are drooping and dull. My hair is lank and needs to be washed. I feel dead. I think I'm asexual.

She looks at the copy of *Metamorphoses* and pages through, licking her dry fingers and grasping the pages with them like two tweezers. Philomena, Daphne, Io are highlighted in yellow.

Sidenote 2:

I feel things. Stories? They're pressing on my head, in my mind. Rape. Is this the Heritage I transport?

The water swishes through the pipes above Phoebe's head. The pages of the book on the desk continue to blow to page 70. The air picks up a notch and through the vent, a voice flows. It's a cry or maybe a moan. Phoebe turns her head and peers up at the vent. The voice blows on the wind

of the A-C. It's an eerie sound, as though it were both far away yet right there in the room. A ghost? An apparition? Some kind of ethereal being?

Phoebe's eyes scan left and right, eyebrows furrowed, as though she's searching for something. She scoots the bookcase away from vent and pulls her desk chair closer, then steps on the chair. Her fingers reach toward the vent, her eyes growing wide. "Thalia," Phoebe whispers, holding the first "a" like aah. She squints her eyes, looking, and cocks her head, listening.

Looking. Listening. For moments. . . moments. . . moments.

The air shuts off.

Phoebe climbs down from the chair, her shoulders slumped. Then, she turns off the light and returns to her bed. Her eyes flit open and shut and the warble continues.

"koke" and to the ground he took her in the night "goh, goh" the loveless blows of passionate rage in flight. "keheuh' kopes." the knife he pulled from from

*

The clock buzzes to the hour of ten o'clock and Dr. Berry erases the word "Metamorphoses" from the chalkboard. Phoebe gathers her books and

pen and places them in her bag. She walks down the corridor and then she hears the whispers just behind her. "I heard they killed his cat." "You know Terry?" "There was an incident. It was awful. Then they killed his cat." "Just like Philomena." "My friend said they fed it to him."

Phoebe stops, fists balled, heat rising to her skin, glistening with perspiration.

Who should be speaking this?

The heat and moisture form so quickly the tiny hairs along her neckline begin to frizz into curls. She turns around slowly, her eyes cutting hard at anyone foolish enough to look at her. Her mouth opens wide like a cave, "It was only his cat," she screams.

One of the onlookers catches her eyes. He stares, transfixed, stock straight, then falls like a domino against the wall.

*

Papers. Scattered around the room are dozens of sheets of papers. Essays on *Metamorphoses*, writings from her journal, a few pages from *Lost in the Funhouse*, they're all strewn together. "Do these fit?" she whispers. Phoebe rearranges the pages, placing them in piles, organizing by character.

She pulls the piles apart and rearranges according to tone. Pulls them apart, organizes by event. Pulls them apart again, organizes by, "What is this I'm doing?"

The A-C flips on again. The cry. The moan, reverberates through the duct work. She pulls out the chair and reaches as before, fingers stretching, trembling. "Thalia? Where are you?" Her hands are reaching. . . trembling. . . eyes searching. . . "Thalia." Reaching. . . trembling. . . searching.

The A-C flips off again.

Phoebe is in English 210. They're still reading "Lost in the Funhouse." They've learned that it is post-modern work of fiction involving a writer searching for a new way of writing. They are reading a passage that follows

"Not content to be double already, he must attach himself to everyone, everything; he must hug, devour, absorb! Heads or tails, it's all one to Brother; he clamped his shaggy thighs about the poor girl's ears as greedily as he engorges a pot roast or smothers me into the mattress, threatening with a laugh to squash and ingest me."

"What is this passage saying," Dr. Berry says.

The class looks around at the walls, ceiling, floor. Anywhere but Dr. Berry.

"What is this passage saying," Dr. Berry says again.

A bright young woman with shaggy, brown hair timidly raises her hand. "It's about a man who shoves," the girl waves her hands and curls her upper lip. She continues, ". . . down a girl's throat," her voice squeaks.

A bright young man raises his hand. "It's saying that the author greedily attempts to use realism to place a point on a text."

A bright young woman responds, "The vehicle works because it's based in real-life people. The author is shoving his point on a text. He's shoving it on real people that are not himself." Phoebe pants, triumphantly.

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Phoebe sits alone on her bed, hair lying lank on one of the pillows. She walks over to the mirror on her wall and looks at her image. In the background are all of the papers and her bookshelf full of the books she has read for class. Her eyes move toward the image of her belly region. Her fingers move toward the bottom of her shirt, creeping like two spiders with

five legs. Her fingers falter then slowly they raise the cloth just below the belly button, just above the belly button, higher, higher, just below her breasts. In lines that have faded to white with blotchy red rimming are letters. Phoebe looks in the mirror: tnucl. The spiders let the fabric fall.

The A-C flips on again. There's a voice. It's a cry, like before, slow, deep, heavy sobs punctuated with quicker, higher pitched staccato breaths. Phoebe pulls the chair closer to the vent and reaches up as before. "Thalia?" Her voice squeaks. Her face is searching, eyes scanning left and right, mouth open by a fraction. "Thalia," she says softly, consolingly.

Silence. Thirty seconds? A minute?

A voice explodes from the vent: a cackle, shrill and shrieking. Phoebe falls from the chair, her head grazing the corner of her desk. She's breathing hard, panting and holding her chest. She stares at the vent, eyes wide, her bottom lip quivering.

Slowly, she pushes her body up to a sitting position and rubs her head. The cackling is fainter now, reverberating through the duct work. Phoebe's eyes scan the room back and forth, narrowed. Then, they land on it: the white-spined copy of *Jane Eyre*.

"Thalia's room is in the attic."

In the reflection of the mirror is Phoebe's journal.

The A-C has turned on again and the pages are flipping. The A-C turns off again and the pages stop flipping. In the mirror several loose pages are reflected. Phoebe turns around and picks up the pieces of paper, examining the pages.

She finds a story from a while back. It's a nesting story.

December 1, 1976

A Story

On a winter night in the middle of a snowstorm a girl calls her friend from the train station. She needs someone to pick her up. A half an hour later the friend's boyfriend, Terry, pulls up in his 1967 Chevy Camaro, headlights shining, illuminating the wet clumps of falling snow. "Priscilla sent me," Terry says opening the passenger side door.

The girl shuffles through the snow, suitcase in hand, thanks him, and steps into his car. It's warm inside as the heater thrusts out the hot air. They drive, twenty

minutes maybe? They're on the interstate passing billboards for 7up, Aerosmith, passing exits for different towns.

Then the girl sees it, flips her head around, watching as they whizz by a particular exit. "I think you missed our exit," the girl says.

"Shortcut," Terry responds.

They drive on for several more miles, passing towns, until Terry veers onto an exit ramp and turns onto a county road surrounded by trees. Its deserted except for a couple of doe-chewing on some bark from a white pine. The car door slams and the deer bound deeper into the woods.

"What are you doing?" the girl says.

Terry strides around the front of the car, yanks at the passenger side door, and pulls the girl from the car by her ponytail. He drags her into the woods.

Afterward, he pulls a Swiss Army knife out of his back pocket and carves four letters into her stomach.

They walk back to the car and backtrack to the missed exit.

When they return to the apartment that she, Terry, and Priscilla share, Terry pulls her suitcase out of the back seat and drops it on the sidewalk. The suitcase unlatches and half the contents spill and roll across the pavement: a few shirts, a bottle of shampoo, a set of wooden nesting dolls. The nesting dolls are a set that she has been collecting from birth. The dolls themselves were given to her by her parents, one doll for each birthday, but the pictures she had painted herself each year as she grew older,

each more intricate as the years progressed. Before she can reach them, Terry snatches the dolls up. He surveys the outermost doll, studying the delicately painted picture of a girl sitting at a desk, her hands holding a book and a small smile on her face. Terry then opens the doll up, throws the outer shell on the ground and steps on it, splintering the wood. He then looks at the doll inside, a girl playing tennis. He takes that shell off, tossing it to the ground and proceeds to the next, a girl kissing an old woman on the forehead. Then the next, a girl dancing ballet, a girl blowing out the candles on a birthday cake, standing next to a car and holding out the keys, head to head with a boy, embracing another girl, playing hopscotch, gazing at the stars and moon, entering a yellow school bus, playing with legos. Terry tears each doll off and throws them on the ground, stomping each one, twisting his foot each time as though putting out a cigarette butt. He reaches the final, center doll, and holds it up to the light from the streetlamp. The girl painted it on her first birthday. On its stomach is a mess of red and blue paint. Terry squints at the girl out of the corners of his eyes and said, "I like the letter D. Doll and dénouement. I think I'll keep both." He then shoves the tiny wooden figurine in his coat pocket, jauntily hops in his Camaro, and speeds down the road, his tires squealing as he turns the corner.

The girl walks up to the porch, opens the front door and staggers into the living room. She sits in a 1960's pedestal chair with orange satin upholstery. She sits for moments? A half an hour? Who knew how long that time stretched out in her head or even how many times the second hand passed the 12 on the living room clock.

Priscilla comes into the room and asks her why she's crying. She shows her friend the marks on her stomach. Then a black and white tuxedo cat slinks into the room. It's his cat. Priscilla picks the tuxedo up and strokes him tenderly, rubbing her face against his fur. She pauses, gazing into the amber eyes, then she picks the knife off of the bedside table.

Later that night, Terry comes home. There's stew on the table. Stew just for Terry.

Phoebe closes the notebook and lets her head fall to one side. She opens the notebook up and writes:

It's not the same. His name was Phil, anyways. We didn't actually kill the cat.

Phoebe stands up and walks back over to the mirror. The spiders lift the hem of her blouse again. She looks at the tunic. Her eyes begin to droop near the inner corners of her eyebrows. She lightly scratches at the lines on her belly with her fingernails. She looks at her Ovid text, the papers on the desk, then back at her stomach. "Ph," she whispers, but that's as far as she gets.

Phoebe hears a voice again before she can finish. It's in the room, loud, bouncing off the walls. The A-C isn't turned on, though. It's a different voice, much closer, much more distinct, and much more vindictive. "Caught you," the voice says. "You *are* Philomena."

Phoebe looks up at two reflections in the mirror. One is herself but in the background is Esmé, holding a camera.

"Get out," Phoebe yells.

Caught in the mirror is the image of Esmé running out of the room.

"Get out. Get out," Esmé's voice squeals in delight.

Phoebe pulls out her journal and writes:

March 22, 1977

I hear her, calling me names, calling me weak. She follows me and captures me in my weakest moments. I'm beginning to think she's right.

The A-C turns on, the voice calls: Rewrite.

Mirrors and reflection are
often used as thematic
device in metafiction
often symbolizing
reproduction and
continuation of stories.

Reflect

A Story

from "Metamorphoses"

*She who in other's words her silence breaks,
 Nor speaks her self but when another speaks.
 Echo was then a maid of speech bereft;
 Of wonted speech; tho her voice was left. . . .
 Hence 'til she prattles in a fainter tone,
 Her mimick sounds, and accents not her own. . .
 She long'd her hidden passion to reveal,
 And tell her pains, but had not words to tell:
 She can't begin, but waits for the rebound,
 To catch his voice, and to return the sound.*

from "Echo"

"As for that nymph whose honey voice still recalls his calls, he scorns her and hears his maledictions balmed to music" (102-103).

"At fiction's end the facts are clear; Zeus unpunishable, Echo pays. Though her voice remains her own, she can't speak for herself thenceforth, only gives back others' delight regardless of hers" (100).

Shshshlo. Crash.

Esmé (Echo)

"tiful, ful, ful." A murmur, soft yet high-pitched, over and over,
"tiful."

Then, a low growl, teeth gritted. "I speak." Her eyes fly open. The room is softly lit with the moonlight from the open window. The sound of a sheep's baa is carried on the country night wind. She tears the sheets off of her sticky body. Her skin is sweaty and itches. It's filled with heat and she scratches red lines into her legs. A streak of blood rises to the surface in small red, beads. The droplets of sweat on Esmé's skin don't evaporate. They cling to the surface of her legs and arms and face and saturate the tiny dark brown hairs along her neckline. Her hair curls in tight, frizzy ringlets. It's up in a loose bun tonight. Her freckles are like tiny drops of chocolate on her porcelain skin, bleating red from heat, full cheeks and her eyes are a soft brown like suede or the fur of a puppy. Yet, her eyes, they're set tight in a glare.

The breeze from the open window is hot and humid but strong enough to scatter a few loose pieces of paper. A strong gust of wind knocks over a tall, thin lamp which rolls and pushes a book on the floor, open, face down.

The breeze blows her white nightgown around her calves as she looks outside on the country skyline. She picks the lamp and book up, places the lamp back on the desk and slaps the book down next to it. The book flaps, a few pages ruffled from a country night breeze blowing through the second story window. She picks up her English 210 copy of *Lost in the Funhouse* and reads:

"Narcissus would appear to be opposite from Echo: He perishes by denying all except himself; she persists by effacing herself absolutely. Yet they come to the same: it was never Narcissus himself he craved, but his reflection, the Echo of his fancy; his death must be partial as his self-knowledge, the voice persists, persists."

Esmé pulls out her journal and flips to find the next blank page. The breeze catches the pages and flips:

April 7, 1977

I'm not sure what to say about Cassia. She's so smart. And she's beautiful. She has a presence when she walks into a room. I'd be embarrassed to say it aloud but she almost glows. I think she is what I would like to be but somehow she's not.

Esmé scowls at the window, turning the pages roughly with her sweating palm. The wind picks up again:

May 10, 1977

She's beautiful, no doubt. She tells me I'm beautiful. I am kind, sensitive. She tells me all these oh so nice things. *She* is so kind and sensitive to tell me these things so I tell her them back. Why don't I feel grateful? She gave me a letter once telling me I have a dreamily beautiful face. Why don't I feel grateful? One half of me feels guilty, sad, anxious, the other is angry. I'm *so* angry. My entire body just itches with anger. I go over it again and again and again. She tells me stories so I tell her them back. I don't feel like reflecting the same back. I don't care if my face is beautiful. Beautiful, beautiful, who cares about beauty anyways?

I tried to tell her what happened two years ago. I tried to tell her about that girl, that one living in the basement. I hate her. Crying, sobbing! What a

stupid girl. How had she not known? I hate that girl in the basement but I tried to tell Cassia anyways. “You are so beautiful,” she said. I was obligated to say it back.

Esmé scowls again and huffs. She flicks the pages of *Lost in the Funhouse* with her clammy fingertips and finds the page she was looking for:

“Thalia is less simple than she appears. I suspect, in fact, or begin to . . . that there are two Thalias! Don’t mistake me: not two as in Chang and Eng were two, or as in my brother and I are two; not one Thalia joined to another-but a Thalia within a Thalia, like the dolls-within-dolls Your Majesty’s countrymen and neighbors fashion so cleverly: aThalia incarcerate in the iron maiden my brother embraces!”

The wind flutters her notebook. She finds her last entry and then turns the page to a clean sheet. She writes:

Times New Roman?
Calibri?
Maiandra GD?
Who should be
speaking?

August 4, 1977

You--You would think these things. You would be impressed at the thought that there is a Thalia you don’t know! I know my sister and you can’t

hold her on your pinky. You think she fits there? You do, don't you? Arrogant! You see her smile and you think you know everything there is to know? You think you own her smile. What about before you were around? What about then? You don't know that part of her. You would be impressed by a part of herself she keeps hidden from you. You don't know her but I do.

The color of the ink changes from black to red.

They would have asked me why I didn't just stop going. Who would have believed me? She has a lot of friends. Everyone likes her. She never did reject me. I'm not quite like her her her.

*

Esmé is in class in a room in the basement of the library. The minute hand on the clock hits the 12 and class begins. Esmé writes in her journal:

September 9, 1977

Second day of class with Dr. Berry. When I looked at the syllabus on Monday my jaw almost dropped. The ding dong assigned *Lost in the Funhouse* again. Dear god! As if once wasn't enough, he finds a way to work it into another class? I guess he really likes *Lost in the Funhouse*. He's even found ways of incorporating *Metamorphoses* in again too.

Esmé closes her journal and Dr. Berry starts class. He reads a portion of the text:

“Is the journey my invention? Do the night, the sea, exist at all, apart from my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am, who am I? The Heritage I supposedly transport? But how can I be both vessel and contents? Such are the questions that beset my intervals of rest?” (3)

A boy with brown hair neatly combed and sleek with gel raises his hand. Dr. Berry calls on him in a booming voice, “Mathias.”

“So, so,” Mathias begins, one arm on the top of the empty desk next to him, both legs spread wide, his knees pointed at an angle outward. “We read *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Metamorphoses* in English 210,” he continues.

It’s generally conceded by his peers and most of the faculty that he’s a funny albeit “cocky little shit.” He continues, “So, many of these characters, the men, they’re rapists.” He says this waving his hands palms up. “So,” he continues, head bent down, eyes looking up, very seriously, “So, what I’m wondering is this: Rape. Is this the Heritage that I transport?”

Half of the class laughs uproariously. A quarter of the class giggles nervously and a few of the girls cross their arms across their chests and cluck their tongues. Esmé smiles.

*

A strong, hot breeze ruffles the pages under her sweating fingertips and flips to another page.

November 23, 1977

I park my car in the south commuter lot on campus. It's the one by the newer commons building. About two months ago I was walking from my car toward the academic buildings when I noticed a girl in her car. She was sleeping in the front passenger seat and there was a pile of clothes in a laundry basket in the back seat. She looked familiar but I didn't think much of it at the time but when I got to my ten a.m. class I realized that the girl I had seen in her car was the same one who sat at the back of my class.

What's even more strange is that I saw her in my English 304. How had I never noticed her? How had I thought that she was behind me, in the past, out of my way. I went to lunch and found that she was in the cafeteria, sitting only a

couple of tables away. I assumed that it was a coincidence until I saw her in my theory class. She was following me!

I saw her again the following Friday morning and again she was sleeping in her car. I saw her every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for about two weeks and every time she was sleeping. One day I just couldn't take it anymore. I decided to take a few pictures from seven or eight parking stalls away. I did it again the next day a couple of stalls closer. Then, a couple of days later I was walking about thirty feet away and it was strange because normally her clothes were in the back seat and she was usually in the front passenger seat. I hadn't been able to understand why she was sleeping in her car. Maybe she couldn't afford rent? I wasn't sure but I wanted to document the change. I was about six stalls away when I pulled out my camera when all of the sudden she bolted upright and held up a mirror in my direction. It scared me. What's worse is that I have the picture. Her eyebrows are furrowed but the rest of her face is placid. My own face is reflected in the mirror. What's worse yet is that there is something about her that reminds me of someone. I can't place my finger on who. Her face is eerily familiar, tho.

*

The wind blows through the open window again. Esmé glares at the window again. She slams her pen on the desk and stomps over to the window. It's an old wooden double-hung window from the fifties. Esmé places her hands on the top rail of the window but it won't budge. She stands on a chair and heaves her weight. She's sweating and red in the face again, panting hard. The breeze fills the room again. There's a voice blowing on the wind coming up the hill. It was laughing, giggling really. "Thalia," Esmé smiles. "What are you doing outside so late at night?"

"Feeling the wind blow up from the hill," the voice says. Thalia's voice is still distant, as though she's calling from the bottom of the hill a quarter of a mile away.

Then, there's another voice. It's loud, but it's not coming from outside. It's crying or maybe a moan. Heavy sobs punctuated with shrill intakes of breath. "Phoebe!" Esmé shrieks.

The wind blows again, blowing from the road at the bottom of the hill up to the top of the hill. She sees a figure there, indistinct. Esmé can't be sure, but she thinks it's Thalia. There is a sound that's carried on that blowing wind. It's:

November 25, 1977

A Story of Things to Come

A wail. A cry of grief. Low and guttural, then higher, short bursts of air in falsetto, then breathy pants. Grief.

Running, running. Through the creek, by the barn. Mud splattering. The house on top of the hill, sun setting, red, just to the left. What is to be seen? The house? The sun? Maybe it's the sky, pale, white-blue and cloudless. There's nothing there. Nothing there. Nothing there. The air is so thin and soft it's like candy floss except candy floss feels like *something*. It tastes sweet, dissolves, until only a thin layer of sugar coats the inside of your mouth. The air is like water in a tub but not really. Not even close. Water in a tub, in a pool, in a lake, you can swim through. You can propel yourself from one place to the next. The swimmer moves the water. Unless? Unless? Unless the water is turbulent. Then the swimmer drowns. No, no, the sky is pale like a ghost. But don't even ghosts have the power to scare? No, the sky is like the sky, so thin there's nothing to touch. The air is like candy floss that has already been eaten. What's left when candy floss has already been eaten? Air. Maybe the long, thin paper stick it was wrapped around and you're left holding.

Did candy floss, did water, did air make a sound? Not during a parade in downtown Chicago. The bands, the rolling of trucks, the loud squeals of delighted spectators drown out the sound of the air moving around the buildings, through the streets.

Running, running, not even her feet made sound. But they did. Slup, slup, slup of the late-May mud pressed beneath her feet. Did her feet against the mud make the sound or was it the other way around?

Running, running. There was no sound. But there was. Crunch, crunch, gravel under feet. Did her feet make the crunching or did the gravel?

Running, running. Up the driveway, toward the house, past the small flock of sheep grazing on a patch of soggy grass. Sheep. Damn sheep. Why did she insist on the sheep? They seemed so picturesque nine years ago when they bought the house and the land. Damn the sheep. Damn this picturesque fallacy. Damn it all. Damn the sheep. Why did she think they were cute and cuddly. They were lazy, stupid animals that bleated, “feed me, save me when I wander in front of a semi.” Damn them all.

Running, running.

Esmé perceives this as she watches out the southward facing window of the living room. Esmé puts her journal down upon the desk. Then Esmé jogs down the stairs and down the hallway. Esmé peers through the

entryway glass door. Thalia is about six hundred yards from the top of the driveway where the gravel meets cement. Thalia is still running, running, a direct path, straight toward the front door. Esmé moves out of the way, waiting for Thalia to run through the door.

The door creaks open and a few dead leaves from the previous autumn swirl in the entryway. Esmé moves closer to the door. She pulls at the handle and opens the door wide. There was no one there.

She walks, shoulders slumped, back up to her bedroom on the second floor and pulls out her journal. She writes:

November 25, 1977

Thalia is angry about her marriage. It is a picturesque fallacy. She thought that a marriage would save her from that time about two years ago. All she gets is a husband who's away making himself great. He tells jokes. Oh, yeah, they're funny. My two selves. "I do bad things, but I feel really bad about it." Wha, wha. Cry, cry. I will never make that mistake. Thanks for the warning Thalia.

Esmé slams the journal shut but the wind flaps the pages back open. It flips to a nesting story.

December 1, 1977

A Story

This woman. She's tall and thin, with broad shoulders and a thin waist and hips. Statuesque. She has long blond hair that's sleek and straight and ends in a blunt cut. Her eyes are steel gray like rock and her cheekbones are chiseled, the hollows shadowed. Her skin is so clear and pale it's like ice. She's beautiful, no doubt.

Once a week a girl goes to this woman's office. It's an office like many others on a college campus: brown upholstered chairs from the 1960s, a desk with a particle board top that's veneered over with some sort of plastic material and chipped in places, a metal bookshelf on a side wall.

Inside this office the same perfect face and v-shaped torso sits behind the particle board desk. Each week the girl and the woman have similar conversations. "You are beautiful," the woman says at some point during the first five minutes, leaning forward, the chiseled torso looming forward and the chiseled hollows of her cheeks ever more shadowed as her mouth makes a perfect O.

"*You* are beautiful," the girl repeats in a shrill whisper. The woman leans back, her hands folded behind her head, a small smirk creeping up one cheek. The girl clasps her knees together with her hands and looks into her lap.

The minute hand on the clock hits twenty past the hour. The conversation turns. "When I was a girl the other children didn't like me very much. They were jealous of me."

"The other children didn't like you?"

The woman tells a story, a very sad story. The minute hand on the clock hits ten minutes to the hour. "Now, people love me," the woman says.

"People love you," the girl says.

"I have friends, many friends. . ." and so on and so forth.

The minute hand on the clocks strikes half past the hour. The girl's throat feels tight like a hand is squeezing.

The breeze is still blowing outside, again. Esmé looks out the window down to the hill. Thalia is no longer running. She had made it back down to the middle of the slope. Thalia is in a pose, weight on her forearms, back curling around toward her head, toes of one leg touching the ground in front of her head. Her face is turned away from the house. "Why won't you come inside?" Esmé calls out the window to Thalia.

"I like the wind," Thalia calls back.

"He's away," Esmé calls back. "You could come back in."

"You're the one who said I didn't like him, not me."

*

The bulb of an overhead strip light flickers like an electric fly trap sputtering out light, flipping back and forth at an unsteady rate. The walls are cinder block and painted a once fashionable mint green. There are no windows or any other light source.

Esmé squints up at the light then rubs her temples. She surveys the classroom again. The head of a girl with red hair keeps nodding down. A skinny boy with knobby knees and elbows rests his head on his hand. His eyes are closed and his head has been making a slow, slunking process down his hand from chin to cheek to forehead over the course of the last fifteen minutes.

Esmé glances at her book. Dr. Berry is reading one of the passages towards the beginning of *Lost in the Funhouse*:

“I live, and make my way, aye, past many a drownèd comrade in the end, stronger, worthier than I, victims of their unremitting *joie de nager*. I have seen the best swimmers of my generation go under. Numberless the number of the dead! Thousands drown as I think this thought, millions as I rest before returning to the swim.”

“What is this passage saying?” Dr. Berry’s voice booms like a foghorn, warning students of some rocky terrain? “What is this passage about?” His voice is lower, calling.

September 17, 1977

Apparently Mariah and Jason both drown in the second class period.

Class ends. The minute hand on the clock reaches the 12 o'clock position. Esmé walks into the hallway, slumps down against the wall and begins to write:

October 1, 1977

He told us to bring in a piece of criticism. He told us to share it with the class. I bring this in, this essay about that lady with the snakes on her head and how she laughs and I try so hard to be the moderator. I try so hard to guide the class in the reading, I try to encourage open discussion, I try to encourage all voices. I don’t want an unmovable center. I’m not sure, but I don’t think it’s in the spirit of the essay. I try so hard but the boy I sit next to in class, well, I don’t know if it’s ironic or what, but he says in the middle of class. “What . . . is . . . your. . . point.” He says it like that too. He was really breathy like he was

fuming or something. Ironic? A simple coincidence?" It was nonetheless funny, nonetheless sad.

Esmé looks up at the corner in the ceiling and begins to laugh, lips sealed tight, corners of her mouth turned down, one eyebrow cocked down in the center the other eyebrow raised.

She pulls open her journal and pages through, looking at the entries.

A Story of What Was

January 10, 1977

A girl is working one of the check-out lines at a grocery store. Her voice trills and syncopates at just the right moments. Her eyebrows raise in interest but her mouth remains serious. An older man walks through the line, looks at her name tag and says "Emmy." He looks wistfully off in the distance and continues "My grandmother's name was Emily. Beautiful name." The girl behind the counter says, "I like that name too. I have a friend named Emily. I'm an Esmé, though." She pronounces it like "Ez-may." The man looks at her tag again and says, "Oh, Esm." He pronounces it like chasm. "Esm." The girl continues, "Oh, I'm an Esmé." The man cocks his head to the side and lowers one eyebrow, pays his bill, and walks out of the store.

A few weeks later the man comes through the girl's line and looks at her nametag again. "Emmy," he says. He looks off into the distance again. "My grandmother's name was Emily. Beautiful name." The girl replies, "One of my really good friend's name is Emily. I'm an Esmé." He replies with an air of dawning awareness, "Oh, Esm." The girl tries again, "Oh, it's Esmé." The man turns his head to the side and looks at her out of the corner of his eye. He pays his bill and walks out of the store.

A week later that same man comes through the girl's line. The man says, "Emmy. My grandmother's name was Emily." The girl doesn't respond. The man continues, "Oh, Esm." His eyes widen and his head leans back as though it had just dawned on him. "It's Esmé," she replies. He turns his head and looks at her out of the corner of his eye.

The girl calls the bagger over and asks her to watch the register. Then she walks to the back of the store, exits through the unloading dock, enters the dumpster area, and screams for a minute. She walks back through the loading dock, walks to the front of the store and continues smiling and trilling her voice at just the right moments.

A week and a half later he comes through her line. It's the same thing. Several days later the man comes through her line and opens his mouth to start the routine again. "Emmy. My grand." The girl cuts him off. "I don't have your grandmother's name and my name isn't Esm either." His head cocks far back and

his eyes peer from the very inmost and outmost corners. He pays his bill and exits the store.

A week later the man comes to the store but chooses a different line.

A couple of weeks later the man is in the grocery store shopping. Esmé is in the aisles straightening the cereal boxes. The man says “hello.” Esmé returns with “Hello, how are you today?” It’s like her voice is smiling. Her voice trills and syncopates at just the right moments. She raises her eyebrows empathetically. Her mouth remains fixed. “I like to see your smile,” the man says.

February 5, 1977

I saw her yesterday outside, wandering the hill up to the house. Her hair looked as though it were alive in the wind, the crazy curling tendrils gliding, sliding, slipping, then tumbling in a mass of wriggling only to be caught back up in the air. All that hair was writhing; it was so alive in the wind.

She was shaking. From the rain and cold? Was she in a fit of sobs? I couldn’t tell. For a moment all I knew was that her hair was like animals dancing, something wild and hypnotic and her body was convulsing as though in a fit of sobs.

I heard a sound, the one that I had heard before as I had watched her last week on the hill. It was the sound of grief carried along on the wind. They were methodical, heavy wails, mournful, like the sound of a blue whale calling.

Then, it happened. She turned around quick. I continued to watch her hair at first, twisting and slithering. I saw her mouth next. I couldn't believe the direction in which the corners of her mouth were turned. The smile was unmistakable. Then, I listened to the wailing again, but it had changed. Or, maybe the way I heard it had just changed. It wasn't a wail. It was a cackle, even and staccato. Bumps rose across the surface of my body despite the heat running through my veins.

My eyes went to her eyes next. They were piercing, intense. This woman who was my sister, this woman I emulated and aspired to, she was crazy, dangerous. My body went stiff. I couldn't move. Who was this woman who cackled on the hill? Where had Thalia gone?

A Story

Phoebe/Esmé

Shshshshlo. Cracrash.

Phoebe and Esmé are in the living room writing in their journals. They hate each other but somehow, wherever one goes, sooner or later, there's the other. They write:

May 1, 1979
May 1, 1979

I hate her. She's everywhere. She follows me around with her camera. She
I hate her. She's everywhere. She follows me around with her sad face,
captures me in my weakest moments. She laughs at me when I'm sad. She runs into my
just sitting there like a lump who can't do anything for herself. "Waa, waaa," she
room when I think that I'm alone. I can hear her laughing, cackling. "Waa, waaa," she
says. I tell her that's what she sounds like too. A giant baby crying about things
that were her
mocks me. She tells me it was my fault. "How didn't you know? Why weren't you
that were her fault anyways. How didn't she know? Why hadn't she been more
insistent about the
more insistent about the turnoff." She calls me a
turnoff? God, she's such a crybaby. She tells
crybaby when there aren't any tears
me that if there aren't tears in her eyes
in my eyes.
then it's not actually crying.

Trite, watered-down,
Hollywood
Garbage?

Phoebe is looking at her journal, her hair lying lank across the couch, her eyes lifeless, her skin washed out. "You look dead, you know," Esmé says, her neck craning to the side as her eyes pierce right at Phoebe, her skin bleating red with heat, her hair frizzing around her neckline.

"I'm not dead," Phoebe whispers, her eyes still averted to the living room floor.

"You *look* dead," Esmé says again.

"Well, you're going to burn out," Phoebe says. She looks at Esmé, her eyes piercing back from under the lids.

"You're already burnt out."

"What did you ever do?" Phoebe's eyes are glinting now, they are telling the room that's she's alive. Phoebe is on her feet. "You thought that you would be big and tell the woman at the office of _____." Phoebe's voice is screaming now. "You thought that you would be so big, but what did you do? What did you say? No, you're beautiful. You never cared about that."

"I tried," Esmé yells back. Both Phoebe and Esmé are on their feet, nose to nose, yelling.

"Look at yourself," they both say at the same time. They march over to the mirror by the entryway and continue yelling at each other, "You look at yourself."

They're yelling and yelling and there's supposed to be a magical transformation where they see themselves as the same and somehow that brings them both peace. At least that's what all of the books and movies say.

But they don't. They scream and cry for another thirty-five or forty minutes and then they crumple on the floor and fall asleep. When they wake up they're both a bit limp and looking for a distraction.

There's a voice on the A-C. "Re-write."

They are both pretty tired right now and they don't feel like trying to figure out what Thalia means so instead they pull out their box of journals and look, not to some imagined future, but to the past. Inside there are journals dating back to about eight or nine years ago. There is also a few news clippings. One they had forgotten about:

Review of The Act at Griffin Performing Arts Theatre

June 10, 1966

Lights, costume, music, beautiful choreography. Thalia Jens gave a notable performance last Saturday at the Griffin Theatre in her contortionist act. The performance began with a rope act, Miss Jens twirling fifteen feet above the audience on a rope attached to the ceiling.

During the second segment Thalia ran through the gamut of potential props including a hula hoop she spun on one leg pointed at the ceiling and a set of wine glasses she balanced on the top of one foot pointed at the wall. The second portion also consisted of a number of displays of extreme flexibility. One such instance included a back bend in which she bent so far as to be able to smile and wave at the crowd from between her legs. In another instance Jens dislocated her shoulder and laid her arm straight across her shoulders.

A box act was the finale. A young man rolled out a clear box about one and a half cubic feet in area. The young man then picked her up and stuffed her inside the box as though she were a ragdoll. The box was then shut and audience members were allowed to file past and confirm that she really was inside.

What did the people think? "It was a little freaky," Mary Ringstett, a twenty-three year-old said of the performance. "I thought I was going to be

sick." Her younger sister, April, was a little more positive saying, "I loved it. It was really neat the way she was all bendy. I wish I could do that."

Thalia Jens will be performing at the Griffin Saturday and Sunday, matinee and evening through July 27.

Thalia()

June 10, 1966

I had my first box act today. I don't know if my mother knows what that feels like. People watching as Joey crammed my body into the tight, plexi-glass box about one and a half cubic feet. I was limp as a rag-doll. I guess that's why they call it a rag-doll act.

Then, as the finale, the audience was invited to file past me. My head was between my knees. I could hear them commenting. They were saying things, like I wasn't there.

Sidenote: Is this my legacy?

Esmé and Phoebe continue reading. Inside are several more entries.

They continue. Both girls look at each other as they filter through the pages and pages of text. In Thalia's handwriting are entries dated from

just a few weeks ago. 1976/78. In Thalia's handwriting are full pieces that they recognize.

I'm not sure what to say about Cassia

I think I'm asexual.

She has many friends.

Terry, pulls up in his 1967 Chevy Camaro, headlights shining,
illuminating the wet clumps of falling snow.

"What . . . is . . . your . . . point." He says it like that too.

Her mouth remains fixed. "I like to see your smile," the man says.

the chiseled torso looming forward and the chiseled hollows of her
cheeks ever more shadowed as her mouth makes a perfect O.

a black and white tuxedo cat walks into the room.

The words jump out from the page. "Who is she?" Phoebe says. "How dare she," Esmé says placing her hands on her hips. "You write me?" they say in unison.

Phoebe and Esmé sit at the kitchen counter, staring at each other, brown eyes to blue, nose to nose, as though about to kiss. "You say you wrote this," Esmé says, the curl of the hair along her neckline frizzing with the heat and moisture from her skin.

"Yes, I wrote this."

"I wrote this," Esmé echoes.

"I wrote this," Phoebe echoes.

"I wrote this."

"Well, we know we both wrote this."

"Neither one of us ever really liked being stuffed in that box."

"Joey was always kind of a snotty little kid."

They laugh, their hair curling in rings, sliding and slipping.

There's a sound outside. Esmé and Phoebe stop laughing. It's a voice, speaking, yelling, "I read, I write." They look out the window. There's a man marching up the hill with a book in his hand, swinging his arms. He reaches Cotton Candy and Puddle Jumper's stalls. He tries to climb on top of Puddle Jumper but she rears back, kicking her front hooves in the air, whinnying her disapproval.

Esmé and Phoebe look at each other, mouths agog, an eyebrow raised on each. They turn their faces in unison back toward the window.

The man is marching towards the pond. His arms are chugging like the coupling rods on a steam engine locomotive. He reaches the pond, gets down on all fours, and stares at the water, thirty seconds. . . forty-five seconds. . . a minute and a half. Esmé and Phoebe giggle in unison.

The man springs to his feet. He places one hand on his hip and the other he uses as visor. He swivels at the waist, gazing at the surroundings.

""What is he doing?""

Esmé and Phoebe watch as the man turns toward the house, walks up to the front door, and rings the bell.

Phoebe and Esmé open the door. "I know what to name the farm," he says.

Ten minutes later, the man is gone and the girls are laughing.

Then, there's a voice from above. It's not ethereal or sad or cackling. It's a matter-of-fact voice, "socio-cultural limit," the voice says. "Not representative. He's real too."

Both girls' faces fall. Who wanted a story without a plot anyways?

Esmé and Phoebe both go back to the living room where the box of Thalia's journals are. They continue to look through the familiar pages. They're looking and reading, thinking. It was all pretty fresh to be quite honest.

After about a half an hour they reach a set of journals that have Thalia's name on them. They have the dates starting in 1980 and are through 1986. Thalia's handwriting is on the covers and on the pages inside, marking the dates. Underneath the dates, though, there aren't any entries.

Phoebe and Esmé both roll their eyes. They're angry with Thalia. Always so mysterious.

Thalia (Medusa?)

May 10, 1986

Stories. Stories. Are these all just stories floating through my head? Are these just the stories of my imagination? If I never speak are these stories real? I see Phoebe in the basement sorting through her papers, pulling the cloth of her shirt up, examining the thin, white lines on her stomach, looking to a voice on the air of the A-C. I see her now. I see her like an apparition, there but not quite substantial, hazy. I hear her voice, faint and distant, soft, squeaking with questions. I hear her voice, choking, tongue stuck.

I see Esmé, her skin bleating red with her heat, her curls frizzing with sweat. I see her strutting with her camera trying to catch a moment, catch it and hold it all in her two hands. I can hear her voice accusing, angry. I hear her squealing with delight as she taunts Phoebe. I see her eyes grow wide with fear as she glimpses the crazy woman in the attic. I can see her right now!

Am I the mad woman in the attic, cackling? No, my hair dances on the wind. It slides as though it were alive? Do my eyes cut? Do you become rigid with my glance, falling over like a domino? Do you? Do you?

Do you see my smile and think that I am mad? Do you hear my laughter and think that I am threatening? Are you threatened by my laugh? Are you threatened when you don't know what caused it? I laugh on the wind of the A-C, never reaching a point called D.

I laugh and I am beautiful.

You think that I am a mad lady in an attic making up stories? You don't believe me? What does that say about you?

Thalia will hold up a mirror and walk over to the window in the attic. It should be the one that faces the pond. The man who chugs his arms like the coupling rods on a steam engine locomotive will be outside examining the pond. He will look up to the window in which Thalia will be standing.

Reflecting back is a common device in feminism, so common that it has made its way into mainstream commercials.

Reflect

The man by the pond goes stock straight and topples over like a domino.

But wait.

Her room is in the attic. How
can I write a story that indicates
that she's not the crazy woman in
the attic when she's laughing away,
all by herself? She never sees her
reflection. Without someone to
laugh with maybe she is
Bertha laughing in the attic. She
must connect with someone else.

Thalia sits in her room in the attic of the house and writes:

May 10, 1986

I was at the downtown hospital again volunteering yesterday. There
was a woman, a patient, whom all the nurses were calling Jane. I'm not sure,

but I think they misnamed her. She was in the general ward and I had heard some speculation on what had happened to her but nothing conclusive.

Assault? I wasn't sure. Just didn't know enough of the story.

She had a couple or cuts on her arms and the skin on one side of her face by her temple was bruised. Her jawbone was broken and had been wired shut.

I was helping the nurses bring in pillows and blankets for the patients and their families. Jane had requested another pillow to help her sleep. I walked the pillow into the room and helped her place it under her head.

I wanted to connect with Jane. I wanted to give her the opportunity to tell her story but her mouth was wired shut and she had difficulty speaking. After placing the pillow under her head I stopped for a moment. I was half turned away from her, my right side facing her. Then, I turned toward her and began to open my mouth, pulling in a breath, my fingers clasped awkwardly together, my head cocked at an angle. I wanted to share some sort of comfort with her but the only things I could think to say were trite: "time heals all wounds." I can only imagine what my posture looked like to her. As I was standing for a few seconds with my

mouth half open, she cut me off before I could speak. Although her mouth was wired shut she could still speak a little. Jane opened her lips; a little of the metal wires and brackets on her teeth were showing. Her eyes were narrowed and, even though, yes, her mouth was wired shut, I could have sworn her teeth were gritted. When she spoke her voice was difficult to understand. The r's weren't quite articulated fully but the message was loud and clear. Through the clenched jaw and the searing eyes I could hear the words, "I don't want to hear your story." Then, she turned her head to the side and stared out the window.

My story wasn't the same. I didn't try to speak again. Instead, I reached out and gently held her fingers.

May 26, 1986

I've been writing these entries for years. Esmé and Phoebe only know part of the story. They're too close to understand. They can't yet see into the future, imagine a new story, one that is different from their own. The

pieces are not yet formed into anything meaningful. They are still stuck in their own story. Phil and the woman at the office of _____.

How does one write a story when memory floats, as though on the air, flitting here and there? Can we pick our own point to call D? Or, maybe we're always floating on the wind of the A-C, never reaching D.

From outside, the sound of a car door opening and closing can be heard. Thalia picks her notebook back up and writes:

Label me, drag me into whatever box you want, I have a sense of humor. Tomorrow is unsure, but, at least for today,

Thalia will put her journal on the bed and pick up her checkbook from the bedside table. She will pull out a copy of the mortgage repayment plan with her name on the mortgage. She will write out a check and place it in an envelope symbolizing the freedom that property ownership has given women.

my "rat" is home and I've got the monkey off my back.

Thalia puts her journal down, smooths out the bedspread, walks down the hallway and opens the door.

Out upon the hill a passer-by would see an image:



I believe this works well, opening image
creating closure in the end.

But wait. Doesn't this say that the love of a
man heals all wounds? Love. Come burrow
into our sand and populate us. Write on me.

How closely did she connect with the
woman at the hospital anyways?

Best to make it a woman.

Thalia sits in her room. She writes about time on the A-C and floating around and laughing with her hair sliding as though it were alive. And yes, yes, she is laughing and she is beautiful. She writes about Terry or Phil, whichever you believe. Oh, yes, and since we're not being heteronormative let's make it Terri or Phyllis, whichever you believe. Terri or Phyllis raped her.

Thalia is not alone. She has friends and a partner who loves her and that love has healed all wounds. Thalia sits in her room and is writing in her journal. She holds the mirror up to the window, the reader/writer man by the pond sees it, he goes stiff and falls over like a domino. She writes the check out. The car door slams. Her “rat” is home. The monkey isn’t on her back anymore. There’s an image. Equality? Love? Enough power to leave a bad situation?

But wait. What does the writing of the check have to do with anything in this situation? A hundred and fifty years ago neither one of them would have been able to own property. The check has nothing to do with the previous situation either because holding property wouldn’t have protected Thalia from her rape back when she was a college student. Where does that leave us?

And don’t go hiding off to the side now Miss Times New Roman font. You’ve been all over the page this entire time. A story within a story about a woman who was raped but never claims it as her own? All

texts point at the author. Not quite. I imagine a blink, blink of eyes and I fear a sympathy that is not deserved. What? Because I'm a woman should I lay claim to stories that are not my own? I'm throwing in theories, stories, coming up with an oh so clever structure: a woman writing stories she can't allow herself to claim. Oddly enough, I've woven myself into a dilemma opposite of the dilemma real rape victims face. I must convince you that this really didn't happen to me. No, seriously. Please believe me, it didn't. This isn't some exercise in reading children's drawings, finding the trauma.

I fear I am the blind seer, unable to see the end until it is too late (page 42. That's when I realized that it might be understood as me pointing to myself). I fear I am Narcisus. I'm the man chugging along on the hill, arms swinging like the rods on a steam engine locomotive. "I write. I read." I am the man, stepping on property that is not my own, offering to name another's property. The most narcissistic convention of all: a writer, writing about writing that all points to herself. The authorial voice creeps in, telling the reader what to think. But I can't. I can't claim to this story that is not mine.

Lost in the Funhouse is masculine, taking characters, people, and having them stand in for concepts, grand ideas. "Not content to be one, he must hug, devour." You say I take this out of context? Well, I have an apology to make.

I fear I have misnamed you Sara, Maria, Lizette, Ada, Changying, Martha, Concepcion, Natalie, Pearl, Leah, Megan, Olivia, Zoe, Bronwyn, Avery, Skylar, Estelle, Clarise, Sunee, Brittany, Kalina, Eli, Alora, Susie, Penny, Candy, Russ, Lucy, Leslie, Tracy, Maya. Is it all the same to you? Do you stand in for a concept? Did it happen so long ago? Maybe it did. Maybe not. Does time flow on the A-C never reaching D?

Maybe you're there right now or maybe you are stuck at a D you never liked in the first place.

You, ,have been skinned and eaten enough with theories and other's stories. In any narrative structure there must be a point and this is the one I will choose: You are real. This really happens and I cannot hold your voice on my pinky, so write if you need to, speak if you need to, or be silent for a time if that's what suits you. No shshshlo crash. I'm not passing along the next pages to you, they should have been yours to begin with.