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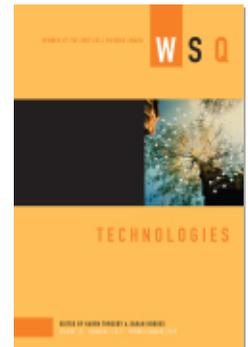
Stockings

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The parking lot of a vast department store had finally (!) unchained its gates, allowing early birds to flock, park, and waddle to a small particular air-conditioned corner of the sprawling establishment where 25 percent was to be taken from already low, low prices of selected items (at the register, all sales final). For sixteen consecutive weeks, the sale was advertised on airwaves and various streams of various media, scrawled upon circulars with dizzying fonts and announced, broadcasted nationwide with slow clarity (and a slight English accent) to accentuate *the two* and *the five*, a simple pairing of numbers that, when combined, formed one entire quarter of a whole, and *Yes!* indeed, this entire portion of a price tag was to be removed, at the register, all for the patrons, all to experience a burst of opulent savings (percentage deducted prior to city and state taxes, where applicable). Upon a Mall Map, brown and snug, a one-dimensional color-coded rectangle found itself between the thick thighs of a larger red square and an even larger purple circle. It was here, the sale, found with a brow-tweezing squint and the tip of a curious index finger. One level below, surrounded by a plush wrapping of salmon carpeting, the air-conditioned corner waited in silence for the coming droves, who, in their numbers and forward propulsion, driven by excited shaved calves, would beat a permanent dent into the twine, transferring the loosened bits of the parking lot's asphalt and its filth onto the cotton, slowly dying its shampooed loops and happy light pink hue the sole of a shoe. For generations this slight shallow depression will be seen, it will be felt in the toes as one transitions from the buoyant shag lying outside the purple circle to this dirty little area on the Mall Map, one will feel a slight drop in altitude when stepping onto the flattened coarse carpet, into a route dug by the many who once sought a sale, *Yes!* this will be identified as the trailblazing path leading to the hosiery department.

Arranged by the distance between hip-to-hip, row upon row of packaged garments fit side by side. A brand's signature wrapping, a repetitious composition of cardboard and cellophane, is separated only by the inches of a shopper's girth, as identified in white block lettering in the upper right corner of the item, *SMALL, MEDIUM, LARGE, X-LARGE*, hovering, above the color photo of a figure, watching, as a lidless gaze upon a Brunette, reproduced several hundred times over, inked upon the cover of every package of ho-

siery, whose waistband dwells anywhere between the border of twenty-four to thirty-eight inches. Though nameless, this figure is easily identified by its figure and shoulder-length hair, wearing nothing but skin and a pair of these particular stockings, hands and arms dramatically, strategically positioned over this and that, exposing only fine blonde hairs tickling an abdomen and the sharp angle of a collarbone, jutting forwards, once toward a camera lens, now toward the eyes of stockingless shoppers famished and full of need for exceptional support. The figure's choreography is deliberate, simple, a twist at the waist, one loitering between *SMALL* and *MEDIUM* at most, gracefully ending with the knee of one leg bent, the arch of a dangling foot flexed, stiffening toes to a point, a position commanded by a photographer's vision and corporate enticement, and innovation, as snug between the stockinged thigh and calf of the Brunette is a perfect square cut from the cardboard. Two inches by two inches, or, say, the distance created by a fingered partition of venetian blinds, this revealing window allows for a peep, a small, yet clear, view of the hosiery's coloring, a shade lighter than the brown smudge of the department's location on a Mall Map, a shade darker than an average tan gained at poolside, during a nap induced by laziness; a distance wide enough for an index and thumb to enter and pinch the garment, to fondle with an examining clockwise roll between the tips, to determine the fabric's thickness, and to feel the slick manufactured elegance of nylon.

With the rub of fingers to and fro, thoughts are propelled, beginning as a soft growl deep within quarantined areas of the mind, who, being fed details of a smooth, soft texture, excite, and pace, from one wall of the cage, a short distance, to the next, and returning, creating heat with its repetitive, needy movement, rising and entwining with the low, throaty vibrato, lulling the more rational areas into action, justifying the want for such a product. Yes, indeed, the quality of what is being considered, rolled, and pinched is a monument to science and thighs alike. It is wondered, between the left and right waxed eyebrows of potential buyers, how billions of fibers now stretched out upon fingers, squeezed tight underneath the calcium ridge of a nail, so suggestive and alluring, poking through its tiny window, began as a highly toxic clump of urine-hued crystals, infamous, for sudden combustible changes in mood, at one moment pale and unassuming the next, taking layers of skin from the lips and cheeks of manual laborers. Such unfortunate moments have deemed glass masks mandatory with factory use, to be worn at all times to protect the face from these violent, random slaps. Standing several yards from a beaker, pouring crystals into a sanitary lab container is

enough to stir anger in the molecules, enough forward momentum to collapse their structure, to cause an implosion whose remnants is a collection of dissipating dust, a fluffy burning cloud, light enough to travel along a draft filtering through vents in the ceiling or a decaying window treatment, light enough to scald flesh. It is to be quarantined. The only friend such a compound could have in this world is something just like it, in habit and with such historically bad manners. An acid is its only companion, white, nearly featureless except for its apparent gluttony. It is enticed, slowly drawn out of fat itself with half a dozen plump oxygen molecules. Stomping after the treat as a greedy child, it eats them up one by one, becoming a rotund little acid, the perfect playmate to be combined with our angry little crystals, in the oven of a reactor.

Such is the origin of nylon, within a cylindrical metal chamber, dimly lit from above, shedding a scant amount of light on the reactions taking place inside. Swimming through gallons of murky grey water, the two previously named delinquents skinny-dip, exposing their jagged bodies to the solution with every wading motion, with every paddle and playful splash, guiding water under and through fingers, around soft ankles and the sensitive curve behind the knee and the like, bathing carelessly inside a heated tub, that slowly dissolves the figures with a faint sizzle, a faint sigh misinterpreted as the other's joy, until, upon midbreaststroke, all has completely fractured and collapsed. Silence remains, and a mild current carrying their chunks into the distance, into the center of the reactor, where memories of limbs and awkward laughter combine to form a simple, poisonous salt. *This* is to be harvested, to be drained by increasing the reactor's temperature from the casual, massaging temperature that numbed the youngsters to their happy doom, to hundreds of degrees in Fahrenheit with the press of one orange button. With a quick clearing of a throat, *a-hem*, it is pushed and coils begin to heat, burning the scene, and the useless parts, the heart, muscles, lovely dark eyes, the youthful hair, all of it, evaporating into a fine, toxic mist, sucked into a vent whose tight paneling twists and turns and exits into an unknown location.

Inside the Ladies fitting room, a cold breeze filtered through the gaping teeth of a ceiling vent. Cool and dense, the air sunk with heavy speed, past shoulders slouching over hands, busily fumbling with the hosiery's packaging, past charm bracelets that jingled with every forced vibration, past a waist, whose *SMALL*, *MEDIUM*, *LARGE*, or *X-LARGE* status was in question, sinking further still, past thighs, to settle as a puddle around naked calves that bubbled in defense from the chill. Underneath the bloating, countless nerve endings

numbed, stunned by sensation and, immobile, drowned in the accumulation of a puddle building every passing moment, flooding around a body exposed to the elements. Faster, faster, hands work their way through the soft spots of the cardboard, into perforated lines, which with a mild thrust open upon a crunch, releasing the sight of brown withered folds of nylon. Extracted with a delicate grip, the garment slowly flowered, unraveling its two deflated legs with caution, waking with a stretch, pulled by the gentle tug of gravity and ten fingertips. With brow-raising concern, it is wondered how a goose-pimpled, fatigued, and, quite honestly, fleshy calf will scoot into what appears to be an unfortunate fruit or legume that has been forgotten at harvest, left to rot underneath the rays of harsh sun, lying in a field for days, to dry and die, quietly. With an examining stretch, the waistband is pulled left to right, doubling its expressionless gaping mouth in size, open and waiting, for a foot, left or right, either is nourishing at this embarrassing moment in time, to enter and fill its empty, chemically engineered belly.

A toe is dipped into the open hosiery at a hesitant speed, slow and controlled, guided by a knee bent uncomfortably at its hinge, straining thousands of ligaments bearing the weight of a shaved calf, foot, balance, and all in between. The descent is awkward, maintained with genuine concern, or fear even, of jamming one or several toes into the unassuming fabric from a loss of control, a complete unhinged fumbling thrust at the knee driving an unclipped toenail or two or three through the product, with such shocking force the entire arch of a pointed foot, to its heel bone, is revealed upon the exit of an accidental hole. Purely accidental. So, fueled by curiosity and an unspoken bowel-tingling need to deter embarrassment, the garment is tried on inside a room wholly unfamiliar except for the partially naked reflection in a full-length mirror, returning a stare of brow-furrowing effort, mimicking the descent and a pleased expression slowly filling a face from lips to relaxed scalp, as the toe, foot (the heel bone), calf are successfully, safely swallowed by the nylon esophagus. Surrounding the flesh, the hosiery conforms, inflating to a human shape, rubbing against skin and warming it back to life as it travels, up, tracing the body, easily past a straightened knee, over thighs, to a waist no longer in question. *MEDIUM*. With several quick pinches and pulls, the hosiery is set into place. An index and thumb peck here and there, and in excited eagerness, mistakenly grab a bit more than the fabric, squeezing sensitive layers of capillaries, which, under a sudden burst and release of pressure, pop, like fully mature grapes, and randomly ink through skin, producing spotty blushing, red, ecstatic, yet clothed, all for a reduced price.

JILLIAN CIACCIA has been making the mundane profound since 1982, when birthing contractions struck a young mother in Brooklyn, New York. The result was a short story writer whose work can be considered literary portraits that immerse the reader in situations where all five sense of the body are engaged to create an experience. She is currently working on her fourth collection of shorts, “Curiosities,” and is active in street art installation by placing the written word into the urban world. Photos of this project—along with video, audio, and free downloads—are available at <http://www.TheFictionistOnline.com>.