2. Traces at the Crime Scene

Always arriving too late, the forensic photographer must depict instead only what is residual.
— Henry Bond, Lacan at the Scene

The opening of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* warps a familiar school textbook, the *Dick and Jane* reader series, in order to call attention to a sinister hidden narrative beneath the façade of the nuclear family. The first few pages reproduce a familiar passage three times, changing the layout each time. The first passage is reproduced accurately. It begins:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy.

The second time, Morrison removes the majority of the punctuation, which has the effect of disorienting the reader:

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy

The third time, Morrison dispenses with all punctuation and all spacing. This creates a confusing jumble of words:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreen-andwhitehousetheyareveryhappy

The effect that Morrison creates is striking. By dismantling the ordered structure of the sentences, she calls attention to the chaos at the heart of the nuclear family.

So too is the nuclear, Oedipal familial structure made strange in Cronk’s poem; it is, in fact, made hyperabject. Cronk writes:

Husband your wife
is calling from the yard again
calling on
about those rat holes
in her peering deep\(^\text{28}\)

Her language deliberately evokes a homely scene: husband, wife, yard, rat. On first view, this section of the poem reads almost as though it describes a household problem: a farm overrun with rats, or a wife not receiving support from her husband. What complicates and makes this poem strange are the more unusual language choices and word pairings she makes. When we hear that the wife is “calling on about those rat holes in her peering deep” there is an abject affect. The repetition of “calling” is frightening and suggests that the wife is calling out in distress. The “rat holes” suggest something rotting and decaying as well as fear of vermin and disease. And the wife’s “peering deep” in conjunction with the “rat holes” calls to mind vaginal imagery. On closer inspection, this is an abject and alienating piece of writing that problematizes the Oedipal relationship and suggests a rottenness at the heart of family life. This is a hyperabject political strategy similar to the one Morrison employs in *The Bluest Eye*. Like Morrison, Cronk excavates a homely scene to reveal the hidden horror beneath. By foregrounding transgression and taboo, the hyperabject promotes what is unwholesome, rejected, and marginal and reveals the limitations of what is normative, traditional, and safe.

There is an abject erotics running through *Skin Horse* that centers the desire of subjects that would usually be “radically excluded”\(^\text{29}\) or “jettisoned”\(^\text{30}\) from erotic discourse. These sub-

\(^{28}\) Cronk, *Skin Horse*.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
jects range from ones barely recognizable as human (corpses) to nonmammalian, alien life forms (lizards, squids). Near the beginning of the poem there is a highly sexualized, cultic moment that combines an erotics of death with polymorphous sexuality:

watch
your old friends
the naked squids
hung from a tree branch
Screaming

The figure of the squid can be read in two ways. An initial reading might place the scene generically within a horror narrative where “your … friends” are “screaming,” “naked,” and “hung from a tree branch.” A second reading, however, which perceives the naked squid as polymorphous and multivalent, a creature that does not conform to a neat binary and is fleshly, inviting, and an object of desire. Much as Kristeva’s description of the corpse can be seen as lexically aligned to desire and seduction so too the conjunction of “friends” with “naked,” “screaming,” and “hung” belong to the lexicon of sexual desire. This close relationship between sexual desire and death allows the radical possibilities of necrophilia as a form of alternative sexual strategy to be conceived. The following lines reinforce this dismantling of the heteronormative paradigm:

Hanging the pond
and reaching up to your utter
metamorphosis.

Lizard orgy.

31 Cronk, *Skin Horse*. 
It unwifes me.
It unwifes me.
Unwifes me like a slid-in skin. Unwifes me. Unwifes me.32

Cronk’s insistence here is on transcendent sexuality. The alien sexuality of the “lizard orgy” completes the “utter metamorphosis” of the addressee. The final repetition of “unwifes” is politically radical, breaking apart heteronormativity, female subservience, and the legal enforcement of patriarchal structures.

Cronk operates in the territory of the hyperabject; sexuality, gender, and desire are fluid in the poem. Not only is there radical potential for sexual experimentation with fetishism and sadomasochism, there is also ambiguity around the gender of the protagonist. Toward the end of the poem the narrator describes herself in this way: “There is someone very invisible standing inside of my body. And she is heating up, / boy is she.”33 These lines are spoken in a naïve voice, almost childlike in its simplicity. The conjunction of “boy” and “she” in the last line can be read as sexually ambiguous. Though “boy” can be interpreted here as a colloquialism, the commitment to polymorphous sexuality elsewhere in the poem — for example, in the section on squids near the beginning — indicates that this is a deliberate muddying of gendered pronouns. The sexual content of this line is heightened by the image of someone “inside” the narrator who is “heating up.”

This heating can also be considered in the context of Skin Horse as an apocalyptic text in the tradition of Revelation. The ultimate hyperobject, according to Timothy Morton, is global warming.34 As Skin Horse can be read as an apocalyptic text, the sexually charged “heating” in this extract can be read as hyperobject: first, it calls to mind the ur-hyperobject, global warming; second, it takes us into the realm of the abject, where boundaries of the body and of personhood are radically transgressed.

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Morton, The Ecological Thought, 132.
In other places Cronk’s work has more personal interactions with the dead and offers them care. There may be some more negative necrophiliac connotations in a line such as “comb the corpse’s hair.” The power differential between the living being who is actively combing the corpse’s hair is uncomfortable and calls to mind necrophilia. However, there is also a reading of this line that elucidates the care that the living person is giving to the corpse. This grooming practice can be considered as an inclusive or at the very least respectful form of interaction between the living and the dead. That the corpse is so seductive to the figure combing its hair would be unsurprising to Kristeva. In *Powers of Horror* she says, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself from from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.” Though she describes a negative, threatening experience, the words she chooses could be interpreted as belonging to the lexicon of seduction, even love. The corpse is something “from which one does not part”; it “beckons” and ends up “engulfing” us. So too does the corpse in Cronk’s poem behave seductively to the figure who is combing its hair, and by extension to the reader.

35 It is useful here to go back to Seamus Heaney’s comments on the dual relationship that we have with the ancient burial of bodies: “Once upon a time, these heads and limbs existed in order to express and embody the needs and impulses of an individual human life. They were the vehicles of different biographies and they compelled singular attention, they proclaimed ‘I am I.’ Even when they were first dead, at the moment of sacrifice or atrocity, their bodies and their limbs manifested biography and conserved vestiges of personal identity: they were corpses. But when a corpse becomes a bog body, the personal identity drops away; the bog body does not proclaim ‘I am I’; instead it says something like ‘I am it’ or ‘I am you.’ Like the work of art, the bog body asks to be contemplated; it eludes the biographical and enters the realm of the aesthetic.” Seamus Heaney, “The Man and the Bog,” in *Bog Bodies, Sacred Sites, and Wetland Archaeology*, eds. Bryony Coles, John Coles, and Mogens Schou Jørgensen (Exeter: Wetland Archaeology Research Project, 1999), 4.

The disgust that the living might ordinarily experience when confronted by the putrefaction of the dead is given an erotic and even ecstatic cast in *Skin Horse*. The poem deals with bodily fluids and scatology, showing an obsession with filth, decay, and organic ooze that is one of the main tenets of the abject as theorized by Kristeva: “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.” Kristeva draws on earlier work by anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose book *Purity and Danger* provides an example of the hyperabject in operation in an anecdote about Catherine of Sienna: “St. Catherine of Sienna, when she felt revulsion from the wounds she was tending, is said to have bitterly reproached herself. Sound hygiene was incompatible with charity, so she deliberately drank of a bowl of pus.” Using luminol theory, I would argue that this contact with human waste to bring about a religious experience is a memorializing action, a closeness to death and disease that has a sacred aesthetic.

In *Skin Horse* blood and other organic human waste can be illuminated to reveal hidden narratives. Cronk writes:

> I went to see the dead men bleed
> But couldn’t find the balcony.

And:

> My nose bled a velvet collar
> and growling a face dripped down into
> my bra.
> The room it fell to moody and livid pinings.

---

37 Ibid., 71.
39 Cronk, *Skin Horse*. 
This preoccupation with blood and bleeding is a hyperabject strategy. Cronk first makes the reader aware of the materiality of the blood that leaks from every orifice, every object, yet is in some indefinable way completely obscure. The voyeuristic desire to “see the dead men bleed” makes the reader complicit, as there is a sense of disappointment in the thwarted attempt when the protagonist is unable to “find the balcony.” The balcony clearly signals a scopophilic space for spectacle, a theater of some kind. The lack of visual access frustrates the protagonist’s, and the reader’s, voyeuristic impulses. Cronk takes the scene into hyperabject territory, that is, territory where the abject is given centrality and reintegrated into the aesthetic, though it remains — as in Kristeva’s famous formulation — cast out of the symbolic order. By the time the blood has begun to bleed “a velvet collar” and fall into the pattern of “moody and livid pinings” there has clearly been a transformation; the blood is both a trace reminder of violence and a force for progressive, artistic creation. This movement of blood from violent aporia to aesthetic design mirrors the function of luminol. Luminol not only reacts with blood to excavate and illuminate narratives that are otherwise frustratingly obscured (in the way the “dead men” are in this passage), it also creates art from horrific, brutal materials.

*Skin Horse* presents organic and inorganic materials as inherently connected. Dead animals, humans, and even planets interconnect, as do plastic objects. *Skin Horse* is written as one continuous poem with no numbered pages, and it is possible to dip in and out at any point. This combination of zoetrope — like endlessness and its shattered, fragmentary character offers a commentary on the nature of mortality, our mortality — our mortality as humans and the mortality of our planet. Though we cannot conceive of our own deaths, or that of our planet, sometimes our sense of immortality is shattered and the awareness of death comes through. Cronk engages with themes of ecological disaster throughout the poem both implicitly and explicitly. One stanza is peculiarly haunting:
are stepping on a million glass roaches. 
The lady is busy all the time with 
her brain tests.  

The glass roaches call to mind two ideas related to finitude: that cockroaches are reputed to be able to withstand a nuclear apocalypse, and that glass is formed over thousands of years from sand (i.e., obsidian). The conjunction of these two points in the image of the glass roaches reminds the reader of their relationship to death and dying. On one hand are creatures so hardy and tenacious that they can withstand almost any horror. On the other hand, they are being “stepp[ed] on” and are made from a substance that is fragile and easy to shatter. This leads us to the question of annihilation: If the planet were to die in an ecological disaster, what of the cockroach? The hardy, tenacious creatures that can withstand anything may not be able to withstand every version of planet death. This asks us to reconsider the nature of planet death. Perhaps our understanding of it only goes as far as our understanding of its impact on us. Some ecocritics believe that we should not consider planet death only in terms of its impact on human life, and posit that planet death is merely planet transmutation. Our inevitable deaths in such a situation could be seen as part of a bigger cycle.

The second part of the stanza could be considered a gloss on the first. “The lady is busy all the time with / her brain tests” introduces a character type: the scientist. She is concerned with empirical data and is “busy,” perhaps not engaging with the bigger issues. She projects her human desire to control what is essentially unknowable, wild, and free. This line is followed by “[w]e die and rush into the planet.” The clear link between human death and the parasitical usage that the planet makes of

---

40 Ibid.
41 Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, http://vhemt.org/. The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement believe that human beings should stop reproducing in order to protect the planetary ecosystems that have been ravaged by human interventions. The members of the group have pledged not to reproduce themselves and they advocate that others do the same.
corpses as biological resources again recalls a redemptive version of necrophilia, a desire for the dead that is instinctual and deep.

The last few lines of the poem are eschatological and scatological. The entire poem reads like it takes place at the end-times, but these last few lines especially echo the Book of Revelation with mentions of beasts, lizards, orgies, crowns, and shit:

Lizard orgy.
Seep. Seep.
Crowns.
mold spots &
beasts taken &

I’ve got all night for this shit.42

Cronk repurposes the apocalypse, as predicted in the Book of Revelation, for abject ends. By reducing the overarching narrative themes of Revelation to a handful of loaded and overdetermined words such as beasts, lizard, crowns, and shit, she reproduces the essence of the apocalypse and takes away any comfort of narrative, structure, or parable. Instead, she brings the reader horribly close to the Real: the lizard face beneath the niceties of story and structure.

Compare the “lizard orgy” from Cronk’s poem with the dragon in Revelation 12: “And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth.”43 This exchange of bodily fluids between the dragon and the woman is a sexualized, hyperabject moment: a flood that can be both a marker of global warming and a release of sexual fluids emanates from the dragon. Skin Horse reads similarly to Revelation as an apocalyptic text and a revelation of the future—a future fueled by disgust, desire, and human destruction. The word beasts strongly connects Skin

---

42 Cronk, Skin Horse.
43 Revelation 12:16.
Horseto Revelation, which contains fifty-nine uses of the word. One of the most striking uses is in chapter 13: “Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.” This passage introduces the number of the beast as the infamous 666, a number that has passed into usage in schlocky horror stories and is used as simplistic shorthand for Satanic worship. Cronk’s poem doesn’t give context to the “beasts” she describes, but her use of the term in conjunction with references to lizards, orgies, crowns, and shit shows the text’s overt play with the scatological and the eschatological, both of which are bound in the hyperabject. The indelible mark of the beast, the sign that horror is present, can be read with luminol theory to reveal crime scene and perpetrator through a series of indelible marks.