3. Christmas in Colorado

For everyone who’s died in Colorado.
(It’s never too late to write teen poetry.)

Christmas in Colorado is murder.

JonBenét died on Christmas Day, 1996, and never grew up to be a teenager. However, as if by magic, in Michael Du Plessis’s Memoirs, JonBenét is gifted a new body, that of Tiffany. Yet like JonBenét, Tiffany dies in suspicious circumstances, while dressed in pink and tinsel and glitter and makeup, on a holiday, an occasion.

Tiffany is an important name in the recent history of Colorado. Matthew Murray murdered a young woman named Tiffany in 1997 in Colorado.45 This fictional Tiffany is an instantiation of JonBenét: both of whom stand in for the victims in a series of atrocities against women in Colorado and beyond. Yet Tiffany dies not because she is murdered, but because she is ignorant. She dies a senseless, wasteful teenage death from a drug overdose in her absent parents’ house. The chapter title “Tiffany Drowning in Ecstasy” has a double sense: that of her death from the combination of an ecstasy overdose and water toxicity, and an implicitly pornographic current that is culturally derived from her status as a pretty sixteen-year-old girl ripe for objectification. This chapter invokes the erotic dimension of the novella and offers Tiffany a redemptive release through death. By allowing her access to a blissed-out, inorganic state as an extension of her ecstasy-induced euphoria, Tiffany passes from childhood straight to death. She does not have to engage in the sexual, economic, marital, or social work expected of an adult woman. For Tiffany, all work, including the work of the body, has ceased.

45 As discussed in the preface, Tiffany Johnson was a young woman murdered by Matthew Murray at a mass shooting in Arvada, Colorado, in 2007.
Tiffany is presented as always-child and, more specifically, always-girl. She is dressed in pink glitter, with a tiara, sparkly nail polish, plastic high heels, and all the trashy pageantry of a sweet sixteen. Alongside birthday cupcakes and candy, Tiffany ingests six heart-shaped ecstasy pills. Her ignorance of the drug leads her to drink a massive quantity of water and die, a death that is imagined as drowning. In the act of dying, Tiffany becomes aligned with both the natural and artificial landscapes of Boulder:

She’s drowning, right here, on the carpet of her parents’ living room in Boulder, Colorado, while the Boulder Creek rushes past outside. […] When you drown in Ecstasy, the last thought you have is, this is not so bad. Or rather, when you drown in a suburban living room in Boulder, Colorado, from the water you drank because you thought you should drink a lot of water with Ecstasy.46

This suspicious, unnecessary death of a young girl whose parents are irresponsibly absent reimagines and excavates the death of JonBenét. Tiffany relates the experience in second person: “You are presently drowning in your parents’ living room, next to the sturdy Southwestern-style oak dinner table, glimpsing your reflection in the TV screen, black as a witch’s mirror” and “on the beige wall-to-wall carpet, on your sixteenth birthday with your friends going “GET UP TIFFANY YOU’RE SCARING US WHAT’S WRONG? GET UP!”47 At this stage of the narration, another kind of contraction is taking place, that of the bodily and the architectural. Buildings and characters meld. Tiffany is “drowning” in her parents’ living room; she is becoming fused to the furniture, disappearing into the carpet as the “witch’s mirror” of the television screen casts its otherworldly luminol glow on the scene.

For JonBenét, the life she reclaims, the teen years that Du Plessis magically bestows upon her, are banal and worthless.

46 Du Plessis, Memoirs, 81.
47 Ibid., 82.
In all of her guises in *Memoirs*, the character of JonBenét has a sinister and inappropriate presence; she is a troubled teen who dies repeatedly, inhabiting various bodies. The novella’s epigraph, “For everyone who’s died in Colorado. (It’s never too late to write teen poetry.),” sets its drily ironic tone, suggesting that there is titillation to be found in the death of a young, beautiful virgin, and that teen angst is not always worth the price. The epigraph also signals playfully that the whole book is a kind of previously unrealized sublimation of teen angst whose origins lie in the nostalgic Boulder of DuPlessis’s youth. This kind of teen-fantasy death drive hinges on the cheapness and squalor of life and the transcendent narcissism of the potential suicide. The fictional JonBenét describes the claustrophobia of teenhood:

Nothing happens under the thick plexiglass Colorado sky that domes this snowglobe in which I’ve become JonBenét. It’s midday, and it’s very warm, and I’m in a Boulder bathroom, with dingy floral linoleum and no windows. Bathrooms never have windows in Boulder. But they do have mirrors, solid as the ones in mental hospitals, except that this mirror doesn’t show anything of my perfect face.48

“Dingy floral linoleum” is used to invoke the abject parlor, the idea of home as a place of death and horror. Though she employs a very different tone, Kristeva likewise illustrates the horrors of Auschwitz through the image of children’s shoes and dolls under a Christmas tree. This contrast of innocence and violence recalls the horror of child murder:

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crimes reaches its apex when death, which in any case, kills me, in-

48 Ibid., 4.
Kristeva’s abject response to the Nazi crimes recalled by the dolls under the Christmas tree is invoked through the Christmas snow globe in which JonBenét finds herself trapped. The ritual magic of childhood Christmases are compromised, sullied, and made sickening by the reminder of the annihilation of so many children at Auschwitz. This use of the camp to highlight the obscene is a tactic that Du Plessis uses over and over again in his conflation of the dead girl, the doll, and the snow globe, a tactic that falls into Kristeva’s category of the abject.

The character of JonBenét tells us on the final page of Memoirs: “I see their little Christmas lights glowing and Boulder has never looked so much like toy town before. Snow Village. More landfill Americana for the twenty-first century. And they were hoping to keep me confined to the twentieth.” This inability to contain the murder of JonBenét in the twentieth century, this disastrous spillage of her presence into the twenty-first century, is the “true theatre” that Kristeva speaks about in her reading of the abject:

No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am on the border of my condition as a living being.

Alive, JonBenét was always presented theatrically. Almost no pictures of her exist without her platinum-blond dye job, her monstrous make-up, and her hoop-skirted polyester prom dresses. Yet the death of JonBenét as presented in the detailed, widely disseminated police reports on her mutilated body bring

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49 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 4.
50 Du Plessis, Memoirs, 98.
51 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 3.
her into the realm of “refuse and corpses,” the true theater that Kristeva speaks of. This uneasy ambivalence between purity and death makes JonBenét the perfect dead girl.

Among other things, Memoirs is an attempt to ameliorate the real death of a child by taking her beyond the pleasure principle. The real JonBenét Ramsey was not safe in the real Boulder, but the fictional JonBenét is safe in Du Plessis’s fictional Boulder; she is already dead and cannot be hurt. Lisa Downing reminds us that in Freud’s famous essay, “he postulates that the wish to return to an earlier, inorganic state is the primary and most pervasive drive of the human psyche.” JonBenét in her form as a plastic doll in Memoirs is a necro-fantasy. She is inorganic; she is passive; yet she is not dead; she has a voice. Du Plessis uses the trope of the dead girl to radically reimagine the clichéd perception of JonBenét as a doll-like sexual fantasy, a cipher for uncomfortable adult desires. He allows the dead JonBenét to ask questions that are stark and distressing: “Why am I dead?” and “Who killed me?” Because these questions are addressed directly to us, the readers, we are implicated in her murder. According to Downing’s psychoanalytic model of sexual maturation, we use necrophilia as a means by which to recognize our own deaths. Her model posits that the immature death drive of the pre-Oedipal child is displaced during unconscious formation and returns as necrophilia, which is used as a way to recognize one’s own death through the death of the other. We are acutely aware that in Du Plessis’s novella JonBenét is attempting this recognition through confrontation with her own death. In this way, interacting with the character of JonBenét allows the reader to practice a form of redemptive necrophilia.

The fictional Colorado in Memoirs functions as a crime scene or a permanent shrine to the dead. Communion with the dead JonBenét, among others, is represented as a positive healing act. Du Plessis presents love as a queer strategy; in fact, the whole
novella is a love letter to a dead girl who stands in for the male partner Du Plessis lost during his time in Colorado.\(^5^5\) This is an example of redemptive necrophilia for both a dead girl and a queer relationship. Du Plessis wrote this book fifteen years after the 1996 death of JonBenét, in 2011. One of the characters in Memoirs, the Blue Fairy, explains that it is an “overblown break-up novel about Boulder that uses [JonBenét] as a metaphor.”\(^5^6\) This congruence of love story and murder story has a sticky logic that recreates the crime scene, Boulder, as the site of a teen love story and break-up. The insistence on using JonBenét as a metaphor is somewhat disingenuous as she is given autonomy and a strong voice — plural voices, in fact. She is no vacant cipher. The novella mirrors the ellipses and elisions in the real story of JonBenét, whose murder has never been solved. Another way in which Du Plessis positions JonBenét as a “body that matters” is by eschewing medical reports, morgue recordings, and other pitiless bodily markers in favor of reconnecting with and reclaiming the lost voice of the human child. Once a crime has been committed against a body, it is often the case that the medico-legal system will reproduce the crime through violent incursions into the privacy and integrity of the body and the person. Du Plessis refuses this hegemonic practice and allows JonBenét personhood and autonomy.

Another of JonBenét’s bodies in the novel is that of the dead writer Kathy Acker. Du Plessis represents the fictional Acker as a doll that is “exactly twelve inches tall” and has “the string of a voice box hang[ing] down the back of her neck.” The speeches the doll makes, however, are alien in the context of children’s toys, which are not usually a site for radical political and sexual expression.\(^5^7\) Du Plessis’s decision to depict Acker as a talking doll was informed by the episode of The Simpsons titled “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” where Lisa Simpson helps to develop a talking doll which comes pre-loaded with phrases such as (15:22) “When I get married, I’m keeping my

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\(^5^6\) Du Plessis, Memoirs, 93.

\(^5^7\) One interesting instance of a talking doll being used to advance progressive, feminist values was in the episode of The Simpsons titled “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” where Lisa Simpson helps to develop a talking doll which comes pre-loaded with phrases such as (15:22) “When I get married, I’m keeping my
doll\textsuperscript{58} is an explicit reference to a short story Acker published in 1990, “Dead Doll Humility,” which is in turn a response to Harold Robbins’s attack on her for appropriating and repurposing a story of his in order to interrogate his racial and sexual politics.\textsuperscript{59} Acker’s protagonist in “Dead Doll Humility,” Capitol, makes a doll that looks “exactly like herself” and functions as a parodic version of the feminine ideal: “If you pressed a button on one of the doll’s cunt lips the doll said ‘I am a good girl and do exactly as I am told to do.’”\textsuperscript{60} It is interesting that in Acker’s story the necessity to create such a doll comes when Capitol is told by “prominent Black Mountains poets, mainly male” that “a writer becomes a writer when and only when he finds his own voice.”\textsuperscript{61} Acker makes a travesty of this by producing a doll that represents Capitol’s voice, and then having that voice constrained by the limitations of regulated femininity. Acker mentions that Capitol “didn’t make any avant-garde poet dolls.” Du Plessis reverses this omission by returning Acker to life as just that in his novella.

The overarching metaphor of the snow dome that houses Boulder is a camp intervention that symbolizes the delicate freezing of a perfect Christmas moment as much as it represents claustrophobia and sterility. This fictionalized version of Boul-

\textsuperscript{58} Du Plessis, Memoirs, 71.
\textsuperscript{60} Acker, “Dead Doll Humility.”
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
der is a permanent crime scene, a dead zone haunted equally by ghosts and by the ambivalence of the living. With no perpetrator found in the JonBenét case, guilt and suspicion attaches to everyone, to an entire community. The spatiality of this fictionalized Boulder, trapped under the plastic dome, enacts a punishment for the murder of JonBenét.
When luminol theory shines its light on the abject parlor, it reveals, it is magical, it is prescient, and it has a nasty allure.
Figure 4. Deadly Landscapes. Still from *The Luminol Reels*.