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A Thief, a Desire

IT WAS 2004 AND unapologetically frigid in Minneapolis. The radio had pronounced it the coldest day of the year, though I had learned by then to trust nothing that came from news channels. The heat in my studio apartment was out again, and I was bundled indoors in woolly socks, long johns, and a bulky coat watching my breath billowing out of my body in smoky plumes. My building had been robbed twice within the past week, though my apartment had been magically spared. This is not quite true, because the intruder had in fact come to my door and taken from my doormat my sole pair of sneakers. He had been at the threshold, not quite inside my home but at its border. And he had taken something from that borderland, something that held value for us both. In this sense, it seemed to me that we were undeniably linked. Despite the fact that he had not entered my space, I could feel him palpably inside – not only in the fearful sense of anticipating his return, but in the sense that some trace of him had been left behind, had made its way across the threshold and into that tiny frozen space that had become my makeshift American home.

Anticipating that the thief would strike again, I searched the apartment trying to evaluate what else of mine might be seen as valuable to him. Attempting to abate my fear,

I decided the ethical move was not to defend against him but to find a way to welcome him, to make his forced entry feel less violating. I put a post-it note in the fridge affixed to a can of Red Bull that read Please Feel Free. The note was a strange welcome to my unwanted intruder; an offering of something that it would not hurt me to lose. In fact, the Red Bull was the remnant of some other visitor, someone I had already forgotten who had left behind an item I would never consume. I knew there was an ethical flaw at work in my act of strange hospitality, of offering something to my intruder that I myself did not want. I was deep in self-critique even before the sticky had stuck; I was young and cold and could feel my body aging.

As a brown Canadian kid, I had imagined America as a two-headed monster. One head was a gleaming blond-haired boy with a mouthful of exotic American candies, a big perverse smile chewing unrelentingly. The other head was cloaked in the clownish headgear of the Ku Klux Klan.

I found both heads silly and terrifying; both in different ways seemed to want to devour me.

I came to the United States to study, urged by keen Canadian professors that a PhD in hand from an American university would make me "golden" upon return. I came with hesitancy, never once considering that I might not return, that moving south would over time transform me into an expatriate. When that frigid day in Minneapolis had come to pass, I had been living in America for months and no longer envisioned the nation as a monster. In fact, I had grown to love monsters, recognizing their social function as the abject edges of society. The creation of the monster, I had discerned, is a way of crafting an outside so that a collective can imagine itself as bounded, cohe-

sive, and impenetrable. The monster is a being who will not or cannot fit normally, whose existence makes others uncomfortable and who therefore must be shunned and exiled. No, America was not a monster, though it was highly skilled at creating monstrous figures and exerting force against them. My intruder-guest felt like a monster – like something lurking at the edges of what I had come to believe was properly mine. Something that threatened to come inside, and in so doing to force me to reckon with my relation to it.

Waiting to be robbed is like waiting for an imminent accident in which both you and your assailant are together in disaster. Your assailant in that single moment wields more control, and in response you become in a sense other to yourself. You cannot uphold the usual fantasy of being a self-governing body; you are palpably exposed. I responded to this crisis of being by doing what I always do in moments of critical uncertainty. I did what I had come to America to do: I studied.

I constructed a makeshift nest on my ratty old orange sofa, aesthetically a cross between a bus seat and a church pew. The cushioning inside was endlessly disintegrating, leaving piles of dust beneath it that spread across the floor like a listless diaspora. But I loved the look of that sofa and in any case had no funds to replace it. I was burrowing myself between blankets, flipping through the pages of a foundational work of postcolonial studies, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, when I came upon a passage written by the Italian neo-Marxist political theorist, Antonio Gramsci:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of trac-

es, without leaving an inventory... Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.¹

An infinite history of traces without an inventory! An endless collection of oneself that is impossible to gather... I had no concrete idea of what it meant, or what currency it had in my own life, but I knew how it *felt*. It felt as though the broken thing I was might be restored, and it felt like an embodied idea I would never stop desiring for myself and for the world.

The heat kicked back on in the middle of the night. I could hear the strange clanking of the radiators fumbling back to life. But by then, it was not the double threat of freezing and burglary that left me sleepless, but the opaque and desperately seductive idea of my own impossible archive.