

An Indefinition

Mitchell Miller

You were small, your head barely reached your mother's waist . She was being spoken to but you wanted a cuddle, just to feel yourself between her for a while. So below the sight of the men she gently rubbed the palm of her hand across your face, over your forehead, letting the fingers brush your fringe and then down across your cheek so that it cupped your chin. And then again, and again, repeating the motion and with your eyes shut you pressed joyfully into it. The sweat that had gathered in the creases of her palm was smearing all over your face, but it seemed cool, refreshing and sweet and you pressed, and pressed into her swirling hand.

sleep

'Democracy is the only reasonable form of government' the American had said, jabbing his finger in your direction and changing buttocks on his seat. Then offering his palm, he said; 'we have to help them to understand this'. You remember his words while you struggle to recount the history of your legs; your husband had read the subtitles out to you, which was good of him. Yet he couldn't explain why the American was wagging his finger at you. Your confusion is described by the way you are splayed naked, across His creation. Democracy has been brought to you many times, dropped from the sky in a box of pop-tarts, exchanged for your husband and his herd, applied and spread with the knife that has now split you apart. No, surely the term is scattered. Either way you have no time to worry about being sufficiently grateful for this precious gift of freedom. Your main problem is your bosom. Both your breasts have ballooned, solid and drum-tight with milk, and surged upwards into the sky. If they ever stop, it's beyond your line of sight. Something should be said about that, must be said, you can no more refrain than stop your hair trailing back to become the Hindukush mountains. But you are embarrassed enough to whisper it, quiet and loud as a curse. You offer it softly, just beneath your lips, although you know God can hear it, even if you don't speak Arabic. He can hear you, layering one heresy upon another – 'infinitely so'. Could your

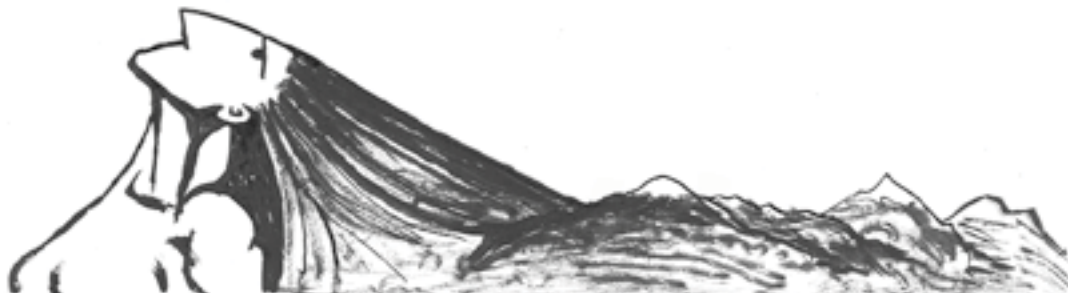
husband's hand cup themselves around these paps? Could he squeeze them so as he does in the dark space beneath the sheepskin? The only reasonable form, the American had said, but you reckon, lying prone, with gravel sticking into your back and legs that won't work, that we go further and further into damnation the more we spread ourselves out.

What would God think of that, and what business is it of yours? If your arm really has flattened into an imperceptibly thin surface that – incredibly - stretches all the way to Turkmenistan, then, other than the dried sweat and tears drying against your skin or perhaps your own convictions what proof do you have that you even exist? Do you even resemble an independent part of his creation? A person of any sort?

But then, what voice do you have, other than your silence? The same dumb, mute assent to living you gave to marriage, five years ago. Yet you are convinced, at least historically, you did exist. But you are equally convinced your body is flowing into the earth and evaporating into the sky. What to believe? Satan cajoles the senses, which can muster a sort of rude mathematics but hardly anything interchangeable with the Truth. But then these are the first days of the new democratic era. You must get used to the cut and thrust of debate.

Is it not the case though, that your feet are impossibly, horribly far away? Your legs run their course, as they should - tapering from hip to thigh to knee to a lengthy shin that goes off into a vanishing point; and yet your feet; they *seem* so nearby you can see that one foot is still in its slipper, the other is bare, dusty, unbearably coarse, and your ragged, dirty toenails are pressing into your nostrils. You know that there should be a distance between these things and now you wonder at how little you appreciated it before.

As for the space up and between thighs and your breasts, you couldn't swear to its existence at all, because you notice – feel – nothing there. So all your attention is on the strange new developments history of your legs because that at least, can be observed. Never before has the right heel of a Pashtun wife rested, massively, on the foothills of northern Iran. Nor



has her left pinky poked around the Turkmen steppes and then performed a loop northwards into heathen China. This is against all knowledge, but then again, should you refute your God-given senses and deny it? If you are here, being without weight, substance, or shape, you could be many things; mist, mirage, a trick, a deception of Satan. That though, is difficult to accept. You don't feel especially realistic right now, but you don't feel very dead either. In fact, it seems likely you are alive. Furthermore, you have never felt more, alert or horribly overwhelmed. The real problem is that without your Burka hanging around you, your body – so long hidden from the sun – can't keep itself together any more. Take the nerve endings on the front of your body for instance – they've lost themselves somewhere far below your skin and nowhere near its surface.

Needs must perhaps, to grasp at what truth there is. The posterior nerves do register something. You are fairly certain that gravel from the path explains the cold points stabbing into your shoulders, and that the wetness between them, pressing against the base of your neck is mud. Trust then, in the weight of soil, even where it pushes up into the crack of your curving...buttocks, making their mean, impudent double imprint on His earth. Unfortunate that your gratitude must now be diverted in this direction – because without this weight pressing upwards and into your carcass, you fear there would be not enough left of you for the democrats to fight over. You hope they will not be angry that you disappeared on them, that you will float gently, upwards on the mountain currents, down through the pass, across the desert and all the way to the gulf. You're sure they wouldn't like that at all.

But this is a shame, a disaster to consist just because gravel chips are sticking up into your bum. There really is nothing to the front of you but a terrible, sloughed, softness. You are a mishape against God's plan (just one of his many, you are sure). What is there to do, when God moves his instruments, but to agree? He has marked your day to die, his plan formed long before, not for you to anticipate, just acknowledge.

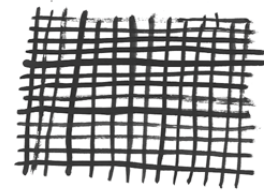


Then again, this is man's work. This formlessness – indefinable – is what happens when you give way to the secularists. God had given you a shape of your own, a banner that that covered everything in the world and divided it into squares. You fought for that cherished shape that moulded you where it draped your shoulder, folded at the neck, suspended over the bosom, and the mesh cut the world into its rightful parts. Now the sky is terrifically big and empty, the plains to the south melt into a seamless whole, all of which you can see out of a corner of your eye. Behind

your mesh it seemed so neat and orderly, and you could smile and cock your eyebrow at the foolishness of the men and the antics of the local children. But the democrats had other opinions behind their knowing smiles. And they cuddled their rifles, scratched their northern beards and thanked you when you gave them tea and bread. Those knowing smiles spread wider across their rough bandit faces when, one by one, they jumped from the tailgate and pushed their broad shoulders through the back door.

sleep

The baby whimpers, you awake. Her voice has gone brittle, cracked and exhausted. Starving for many things, she accuses you from the crib. How can you feed her now you are oozing across new territories? You must try to move one of your arms – lever up, go to it with some of that milk packed tight in its pectoral jar. But your arm shoots away at an alarming speed, travelling for miles, describes an arc before coming to rest above your head. The good news is your shoulder. Your shoulder has stopped your arm from flying away altogether. That means it is still where it should be. You could not contemplate any future without a shoulder. Where could you rest a grain-sack, the head of your baby? What would the heel of your husband's right hand rest on at night? The shoulder will be essential to all future operations (if there is a future to operate in). There is no future for a shoulderless Pashtun woman. So isolate that one fact – focus on the ball and pinion joint, feel your tendons tug and stretch, the flesh around them squelch slightly, muscles move under the skin, as you believe they should. There it is – there. That exists, here – not in China, not in Turkmenistan, nor in the Gulf, just here by the dirt track. You lie, you consider the shoulder, you hold on.



A shoulder – of course, is just so many layers of skin and bone – mallow, enamel, gristle, flesh then skin. All is archaeology. Archaeology is about layers. Where are the Buddha's? a European man with a camera slung over his shoulder once asked you. Afraid, terrified, you turned your mesh away from him, squeezed the baby to your bosom and hustled away, scuffing the hem of your burka in the dust. But later, you walked by the archaeologists, so many blonde men, women with their cleavage showing and bare, sunburnt arms that scraped at the soil with small, metal triangles. And why? They grew nothing, just crouched their, tearing at the earth, stripping layer after layer of the earth's marrow and stacking the idols by the side of their pit. Germans, Italians, Turks, Russians, Kazhaks, English – all came to verify that same claim which your shoulder, as it rests here, now does; its own survival, here by the marsh pond.



Such patience is exceptional, and times change. Scraping and sifting will not do for some people. Sometimes, they'll just rip the layers away with their bare hands, but the purpose is the same.

But you, being already privy to that information held onto your hem and locked it between your fingers. As long as the fabric was tight, hard against your joints, rough against your knuckles you knew you still had some substance. You gripped, daring the bandit to snap your bones and take it away from you. In the end the garment ripped and then you really were loose, you stumbled, legs melting slowly into the earth - cartilage, muscle skin tasting air and dissolving in the wet wind and swinging your arms, screaming until the chords rattled dry.

Trying to keep your feet as they dragged you closer, their fingers clawing into your upper arm, dirty nails sinking deep, puffing up, known, discovered discussed in and out and in... They ripped off your dress too, tossed it behind them and before they pushed you onto the path you could feel your hair spill out and down your back.

Then those shapes scraping through and poking right into you. A cloud of hot yoghurt breath.

Power is the only real fact. Someone had said that once, and you'd thought it perfectly obvious. Another fact is your eyeballs resting under their lids, that without thinking, you've shut as if the memory was anywhere but in and of you. Catch your breath, breathe slow, steady, consistent - but sadly your lungs are swimming up and down what was your torso, unmoored and uncontrolled, pushed by memories too grim to secrete in some inner fold. You try simply to consist again. Maybe a heel can be employed, dig into the gravel push out, but it folds over on itself and into emptiness. Unfolded, revealed and known and nowned by all and sundry. Now there is just this revelation of yourself - soft, pale and supple, creamy against the sunlight. And where is He? You are covering the whole of the earth and its creatures with your shoulder blades! Blasphemy once again - but how to hold a moral centre when you are seeping into the soil? Find the form again, wherever you can, find the shoulder again before it melts into the rest. Bring it back, think it back, believe in it. One blade, another one either side of your neck. Move the first one upwards, towards your right ear. Gravel scrapes and cuts into it, sticking there - no matter. More of it - press up against it, embrace His creation, shift that other blade until it touches the bottom lobe of your left ear. Every crunch of the gravel confirms this is skin, skin soft and unproved, sizzling and burning after so long in the shade, so long being

protected beneath folds and creases. From the skin of your back and going inwards, you find it. Another blade up and back and across the earth. A moan from the baby pierces the crunching gravel. Something pierces and finds its way into your left buttock, at the very place he would gently place his hand. You laugh then, hoarse and soundless with no phlegm to fuel or fuse it and try to wiggle the newly-defined muscle up off the earth and then back onto its points, blades of gravel, blades of shoulder and you gratefully surviving between them. Onwards, to reasonable progress. Up, down up down up down updownupdownmoanmoanup...

sleep

Has an age passed, will a child cry forever if you just leave them to it? You have the presence of mind to note your progress, detected by your left shoulder blade which has sank into soft, yielding mud. At first, you panic, but slowly, you remember your duty to

history and decide to turn your head - if that, indeed, is still there. You swing it round at a terrifying speed. Your cheek slaps against the softest mud and your nose splashes into water. You wait for the ripples to smoothe themselves out and the first thing you see is a line. Black mounted on pale gray, and beneath it an

almond-shape - an almond with a rotten centre, a black circle of mould on the nut - no, no, it is in fact - is in fact, unmistakably an eye. And there is a face. There is your face, or a fragment of it, an eyebrow an eye the bridge of a nose - you assume the rest continues after that. Your face in the sunlight.

You panic, squeezing the eye shut, slamming the lids together and vomit rises to the top of your throat. What words would you use, could you find to describe how and why you must hide from the eye, the brow and the bridge of your nose? You lack the words, have never felt so numb, so distant, so alien to God's plans. What schema did He form with his great finger and thumb that could then so monstrously squeeze and shape itself to meet the spikes and spines of His earth? What describes the horror of you, naked and speechless beside this tiny lake? The very magnitude of that question almost turns you to water yourself, soaking into the earth and vanishing in between the loam and the roots far below. How tempting that is, how seductive, to simply seep away, away from the stare of this hard black line and insolent, flickering almond. Become the puddle; have done with the whole thing. But you hear the child still at its whimpering and there is this notion - half-formed and liquid, but there all the



same, of that shoulder pushing at the mud.

About now, you feel your middle again, and wished you hadn't – it's sore, a sour and hot right between your legs, throbbing there, not going away. Count some blessings – there is still your shoulder. Hold onto God's presence, and yours. Sure, the shoulders is bare, contrary to due modesty – but is it your shame or your pride that raises the goosebumps? Let's not lie here – God can tell. You want to cry but your ducts are dry. You've opened your eye again and are looking at yourself. Your lashes feel dry, ready to snap. At about this point, your tongue which had been floating somewhere beneath your nose, dry and rough, takes the initiative. It pulls at your shoulders and flips you over until your face is halfway in the water. It forces itself through your mouth and now sucks, slurps, takes it in.

What about this water? Someone used to Chinese takeaway might say it was sweet and sour or just oily and gritty but the more it flows over tongue and teeth and down past your twitching epiglottis the more you realise your throat, your dried lips, even your gums are still there. God provides water for more than quenching a thirst. From the waters, the imams had said, He found order.

You take as much as you can until you gag and splutter out a cluster of bubbles. Still gargling,, you lay yourself on your cheek so your mouth is just clear of the surface. Half your face looks back at you, but you have nothing to say.

What you are thinking though, is that this democracy is no more a form than you are – unless a human being is just some never-ending process – much like yourself at the moment. But then what would you know? Every one else knows you are ignorant and the only acceptable comment from you is your silent compliance. All these men with their master-plans need you to do, is be a good girl. Remember that your form was designed for splaying and bearing and making tea. Just as their democracy is designed for...? You are not the only one waiting for an answer to that one. Another thing you've wanted to know, ever since you were married, is whether function and form really are the same thing. You never found anyone to ask, but an answer would, you suspect, settle a few queries you have over your husband's penis.

Sure, you became devout in your ministrations to that piece of your husband, tasting the honeys as the book directed. He was insistent on that, insistent on everything when he pawed you under the covers and opened you up. He would send such shivers up and down you, you thought you'd shake apart – until, suddenly, he'd be snoring while you lay sweating,, shaking,. tears streaming across your cheeks. Now you have been shaken to pieces you have no tears just this pain in your epicentre, and all your fragments orbiting around it - your feet, your shoulders, your right shin. Scattered, ripped up torn apart by those longing, lingering looks. No shape or weight to speak of, just a raw, bloody body that **men** made. Now they

have exhausted their purposes, you are finally offered a choice of your own, whether to live or die shapeless. A democrat would wag his finger but you have your own hand, pressed flat under your belly. You push with it, working a shoulder so that you flop onto your back and with gratitude, lose sight of yourself.

Sleep

Your mother's hand was not soft. It was chipped and calloused and shiny red. But her sandpaper paws could still caress you, all over your face, long before they made a mesh of it. And those were your globes you would touch between your finger tips and the underside of your thumb, quietly, nervously at night, their bumps rising every few days – or so it felt When they were big enough your mother put her crusty palm against your back and pressed her fingers into your shoulder and held up the burka, folded in a square. She showed you how to place it over your dress, taught you when to raise it and lower it, how to stay the right shape, how it would support you and deter them.

Your face is catching the sun and for a moment, as you enjoy the warmth feeling spreading across cheeks and the bridge of your nose, as you watch spots dancing over your eyelids, you forget you ever had a mesh for a face, just this thing baking in the sun. But your hair is wet and droplets of moisture stands up all over your face and forehead, and it is obvious that late in the afternoon, everything is finally where it's supposed to be. But the pain between your legs wells up once more, a timely reminder of the new democratic era, and you realise it really is here to stay. But you are well practiced in the art of acceptance, and you'll take the body, although surely it is just a thing of dents and hairline cracks. Then again, you feel as if your dead husband has both his hands cupped entirely around you, touching everything, his eye everywhere, in everyone. They're all going to know. That must be what it is like to be reasonable form. Do they, to quote the democrat, understand this?

Fair enough. You silently give your assent - there is still the sun, warming and baking you solid in the afternoon, by the path, next to the pond.

Yes, those are your thighs, that's your belly that making a knoll your breasts, and your knees poking up into the air. But I, your redactor, am just making a tale of you, picking these out, betraying my own sleazy fetishes. YOU see all these things at once, layers scraped away, a sad, brittle artefact of yourself. But as has been said, it is for others to find the time to pity you. You leg still shakes when you move it but at least your sure the rest of you follows it. So you use your elbow to push yourself so that you're sitting, not lying on the path and you almost swoon when the blood reaches your head. Luckily, that distracts you from the rags that hang loosely inside you as you gather up your legs and



Stand.

A breeze catches you, straight down from the Hindukush (otherwise known as your split ends) but while it makes you sway, you stay upright standing naked in the only form God really gave you, nothing between you and Him or anybody else, just a thin, fragile film of sweat and your own blood drying on your legs...

You move your legs apart slightly, bite your lip until it bleeds, and you've stopped swaying in the wind. Now then - tuck your right arm under your breasts (to stop them swaying), grab your right shoulder and make a diagonal with your left forearm. Not much of a substitute, but it's the only shape you can manage to stop them bobbing up and down as you cross the dirt track towards whatever's left of your daughter.

And if they accost you before you reach her crib, maybe you'll just tell them that no-one ever asked YOU what you thought - about forms, shapes, bodies, vows, laws or otherwise. You've always just done your best. Nor do you see much point in waiting for them to pop such a question - so just move a leg and - this is new - the pain is far, far worse, shooting out of whatever centre it nests in and burning up your whole lower torso, before subsiding - or is that what they call 'adjustment'? Yes, you are still there - just as you were after pushing out that small, squeaking thing over by the gate. Can I explain the comparisons and judgements you make to yourself in that small number of seconds, as your body - your shape, decides whether it can hold? What man could even grasp such a thing? I'll stick then, to gazing and describing and not really understanding. You lose balance, let your foot fly out in front of you only to see it clamp to the soft earth and gravel below. More steps are taken. You scrunch material against your toes, and for a moment, you hover between picking it up or finding your baby. Such decisions are best postponed for later. In this moment, it is your own fingers that press into the shoulder you are now so sure of, and you walk forward, determinedly, definitely.



