

Electric Flesh

Claro

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And now swallow your law.
Artaud

Uncorrected manuscript

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discontinuous memories of the besieged current

If it were an animal, it would be a baboon, a raw rage, a gnarled fury ready to snap at the least caress, but it isn't an animal, it's only a date—date or disaster, same difference, same water brought to various degrees of boiling or ignorance, it's what unties tongues when they thicken, it's what rouses rats when they come aboard, it's the 7th of August 1881, the year when President Garfield is shot, when the leading dinosaurs (*brontosaurus amplius*) are christened, when the great Pop Smith plays for the Buffalo Bisons, and in fact this takes place in Buffalo, not far from Niagara Falls (in Indian: *Onguiaabra*, “straits”), it is near 11 p.m. and George L. Smith, 31 years old, dockworker by trade & alcoholic by choice, following-up on a not very bright bet with his brother Vince, tries to couple with the Brush Electric Light Company generator, located on Ganson Street.

Said generator doesn't flaunt particularly exciting curves: it's a stupefied pachyderm, kneeling in its own power, overhauled in a rush and as a result quite prone to outrages.

George steps forward, titillated by the regular purring of the generator, which is dreaming about curdling all his molecules. The thing gapes, parts silky and rusty skirts, arches its back. The energy emitted is such that any resistance makes it immediately increase. It's a remarkable moment: when desire treats ridicule with disdain in order to return to its forbidden roots, where to bend is to become an arc, no matter the arrows, no matter the target, blood becomes bone, bone bends, *tschaaak!* Hardly has George placed his callous-ridden paws on the zinc friction plates (first the right—tinglings—then the

left—*zrrrip! ting!*, than his entire mental & emotional system is absorbed and dissolved, his balls shrink to become knucklebones in a geezer's fist, the puddled cry that he is about to retch out dries at the rim of his nostrils, the temperature of his bladder climbs in a half second to 95 degrees, his vision inverts, all his memories are reduced to the size of the head of a pin which sinks without jolts or hesitation into the deliquescent marrow of his urges—the ill-bound scrapbook of his life explodes fanlike and pollinates his last moments, he rethinks, resees, reneges, at once extremely volatile and overcome by gravity for good, *schomp! schomp! schomp!* leaden images strike his hide—at random: the surprised face of his mother, a glove between her thighs, the taste of maple sap while staying in Montreal, a barber's flickering sign in the early hours of September when he came back fully intoxicated after a prolonged immersion in the land of venal pleasures, a fingernail once torn off when he lifted a 99 lb. crate, all that, all those things not worth recording but worthy only of being forgotten are instantaneously mixed ground tamped down then melted into a hard point, tempered by the moment of death, simultaneously galvanized and annihilated. The constellation George L. Smith has just entered its nothingness phase. *Paralysis of the nerves of respiration*, concludes coroner Joseph Fowler the next day, performing an autopsy at the authority's request. The heart was stopped as suddenly as a union activist beneath the convincing blow of the billy club. There apparently wasn't any "pain"—

(and that the pain must be rather incredible to not be apparent, that the body strives to give no evidence of it, muscular or otherwise, that's what starts one thinking, and what makes of this thought an even more abominable pain.)

The aforementioned Smith has just inaugurated the litany of the Great Toasted of Pan-Electric History. Without knowing, he attains the rank of pioneer of the new American frontier, which will tame continuous current and imprison the wild West of bodies in a reservation under voltametrical surveillance.

Here's where the Great Extractor intervenes...

ADVERTISEMENT:

“Tremble, oh tender gums, and you mediocre molars, for your patron saint has just walked into the Patent Shop. The maker of crowns, the encruster of fillings sees his reign begin.”

He’s a dentist, called Alfred Porter Southwick, and when at breakfast he falls upon coroner Fowler’s report, when he savors its barbecue-prose (“exceedingly uncommon detail, the brains were cooked”), he senses that his fate of being a stump puller is about to undergo an unexpected revolution. Southwick, so so so, declares out of the blue that electricity, toyed with at low voltage, could:

- 1) *Replace Anesthetic during medical operations;*
- 2) *become a form of Euthanasia for all unwanted stray animals falling under the responsibility of the city.*

Affixing his silver forceps onto the twin foreheads of his two newborn girls, wild Euthanasia and bitch Anesthesia, the former dentist becomes *de facto* the wicked stepmother of the unwanted—beasts first, then men. He organizes a crusade the way others launch a subscription, and treats himself to the help of two wicked fairies, Dr. George E. Fell, zealous electrotherapist, inventor of the “Fell Motor” (a pulmonary reanimator which we have nothing to do with here, and certainly not elsewhere), and Colonel Rockwell, president of the Buffalo Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. These three men, whom even a sexual deviance wouldn’t have been enough to bring together, throw themselves into a series of experiments on stray dogs and cats which could no longer decently be drowned in the river. An alcoholic dockworker understood how to properly bow out—if one didn’t dwell too long on the burns on his palms and his gray matter brought to a white heat—so it should be possible to eliminate likewise all four-legged criminals from the street.

Agreement of tenses and empathy of places: the opponents of capital punishment, hostile to the gibbet and anxious to finally give pain a reasonable Richter scale, these defenders of vertical dignity raise their voices, hoist them, even, up to the skies & to the judges' doorsteps. A current of opinion starts to quiver through the great democratic soup: hangings, often (and because) slapdash, start giving off with the help of press and attorneys a medieval whiff which immediately perfumes the pathetic concept of pathetic progress. Just as one right can cut across another only if each finds pleasure and interest in that bisection, so a certain MacMillan, sidekick to Southwick, advances the hypothesis according to which a painless death will nail shut the capital-punishment-abolishers' traps. MacMillan, whose wife has just perished, drowned in a slurry pit, MacMillan who his contemporaries describe as a "spat-out seed coming back to haunt the idea of the fruit which it pitted"—which says quite a lot about his maturity—consults Governor David Bennett Hill, who very quickly makes a proposal to the Legislature aiming to replace the gallows with electricity. A commission is set underway:

The Death Commission[↓]

Whose purpose is, let's cite & savor, "to study and to bring to public awareness the most humane and most effective method there is to successfully complete the execution of the death sentence."

Southwick, of course, the necessary abcess in the humanitarian maw, is named as primary expert along with two other members, two bold barking switch-flickers by the names of Matthew Hale and Elbridge T. Gerry. A man of law doubling as a brilliant orator, Hale will know how to sort out legal difficulties. Gerry is the founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Children (but not to Cadavers). A 95 page report inventorying all past and present forms of individual extermination is written up—forced labor unfortunately doesn't appear therein, nor does sexual

[↓] DC, as in Direct Current, Divine Comedy, Double Collision, Dominating Carnally, Dismembered Character, Danse Coupable,... Don't Come!

abstinence or electioneering. A 5 point questionnaire, mentioning electrocution, is addressed to hundreds of experts of every sex (as long as they're male). Responses rush in, numerous, nearly two hundred. A certain Dr. Brill, originally of New York City, assesses that since lightning doesn't kill at every strike, it is useless to expect anything from electricity; J. Henry Furman, of Tarrytown, proposes a metallic chair whose legs rest in a zinc solution; Alfred Carroll, of New Brighton, is also inclined in favor of electricity, because according to him the gallows no longer have any dissuasive power, they even have a certain prestige, a folkloric aura which urges the criminal to inscribe himself into the grim legend, it's a platform, a stage, a fucking podium! Professor Elihu Thompson estimates the cost of a lethal battery at two hundred dollars maximum and commits to mass-produce them.

As for Thomas Alva Edison he is content with sending a letter to Southwick on the 8th of November 1887 to remind him that he is opposed to capital punishment and a believer in reincarnation. But on the 9th of the following December, Edison drafts a second letter, in which he writes: "The most suitable apparatus for the purpose is that class of dynamo-electric machinery which employs alternating currents, manufactured principally in this country by George Westinghouse." Edison, the apostle of the continuous, immediately proposes the alternating, the spearhead of his direct competitor, George Westinghouse, because he understands that by associating discontinuous current and capital punishment, he is damaging his rival: who would dare invite into his house the executioner's lights? And here's Edison working the strings from a hardly clearer shadow and managing to acquire an alternating current generator, under the very nose of his hated rival. He throws himself body & bucks into a series of wild experiments, grills dogs, cats, horses, elephants, before presenting to the Death Commission his model *made in holy wood*, the First Electric Chair, the very one which will roast the murderer William Kemmler on the 6th of August 1890 at the Auburn prison.

aborted escapology attempt

Another date other facts another life—another name, also: Howard Hordinary. It is Saturday the 14th of August 1996. It is exactly 7:28 p.m., *tixit* the living room wall clock. The adventures of Southwick & Co, the slaughtered baboons on the assembly line, the battle of currents, the first human barbecues in Auburn or Sing-Sing Prison, Howard knows it all, and for good reason. He is an executioner, an electric executioner, well almost, since here he is, unemployed, once more, lack of clients, the State of Pennsylvania just having opted for lethal injection. Out of work, Howard returns to his first love, the wearying worship of Harry Houdini—our man, following Gary Gilmore’s lead, is persuaded he is the unlikely grandson of the infamous magician. This belief, like digestion complicated by drowsiness, is the cause of surprising mental ferment. Thus, Howard has long believed that his ghostly granny is none other than Charmian London, Jack London’s wife with whom Houdini fooled around, but thanks to more or less orthodox research he has come to wonder if his grandmother isn’t instead the enigmatic *SZUSZU*, the Electric Girl who shared the billing with Jumbo and the Human Cannonball. He’ll have to talk about it with his mother, Emily, next time he brings her cookies at the hospice. In the meantime, he lets his cigarette fall into the circle of coffee that forms a mirror at the bottom of his mug, throws a glance out the window at the neighbor’s garden, the dog sleeping in front of its kennel, its skeleton well protected under his fleabitten hide, a cat crossing the alley as if passing beneath barbed wire. Howard almost didn’t sleep at all last night.

After having carefully avoided his wife Bess at the door of the kitchen and in the area around the living room, a Bess who does her best to limp to remind her husband that a pair of new shoes wouldn't be too rash a tribute, Howard shuts himself first in his study, upstairs.

The room offers the dust all sorts of runways on which various transitory objects leave their outlines from one day to the next (example: the imprint of scissors biting into the circumference of a quarter). A grimy PC occupies the center of the worktable and hardly whimpers when worried. At first the computer screen throws back at him an etching of a blurred outline, his own, and he must increase the brightness to the maximum for this muddy reflection to be followed by the block of instructions that he hasn't stopped embellishing for the last three weeks: THE DESIGN OF AN ELECTROCUTION SYSTEM INVOLVES THE CONSIDERATION OF A FEW, BUT VERY SIGNIFICANT, REQUIREMENTS. VOLTAGE, CURRENT, CONNECTIONS, DURATION AND NUMBER OF CURRENT APPLICATIONS (JOLTS). His fingers tiptap a few buttons while his eyes ascend slowly toward the photo of a girl in a swimsuit, subtitled *SZUSZU* THE ELECTRIC BITCH (1887-1909), and dedicated in soft pencil to Harry Houdini—*SZUSZU* who seems to contemplate him from behind a windowpane frosted by boredom, her two arms raised in a flared V, each of her ten fingers connected by tingling cobwebs (30 volts certainly) to two generators trademarked **Godhison Inc.** Under the stiff swimsuit, breasts and pubis thrust out, even the seal of her navel, a tiny switch. In the background, a little to the left, one makes out the smudged silhouette of a sidekick decked out in a baboon mask: Houdini?

The screen of the computer excretes onto its surface a livid pool which knots into a loop before rushing to the upper right corner of the monitor. Without realizing it, Howard has turned the machine off. Without realizing it, he sat up straight and brought his big nose close to the glazed face of *SZUSZU*, his tongue came out between his teeth, while below, against the frame of the monitor, the fabric of his pants strains against the contained arc of his erection. The lips of the woman seem to move away from one another, a hesitant mollusk parting and saliva forming a bubble, a—

Hoooooward!

Too bad.

Bess is calling him.

She must have found, hidden under a corner of carpet, the magazine that Sam Turnpike yielded to him the other night at the *Bright Angel Bar* in exchange for a mega-round of drinks. Sam is his only friend, even if the only thing that interests Sam is setting Howard onto dubious paths, fornication for three or four, with fleeting women upon whom he experiments with all sorts of gadgets, you got no idea, since you haven't tried one you can't imagine. Vaguely disgusted, Howard ended up giving in, and he promised Sam to come join one of these pathetic orgies some evening, all the more reason to since his electric talents, he has been made to understand, were not without use. In the meantime, Howard looks in Sam's magazine for clues, for grounds of abandon: those shaved and spreading slits, shiny gaping asses, breasts tightened on glans, pushed-in objects, too long hands, smiles daubed red, and, above all, those eyes which, mysteriously, don't follow you when the magazine slides left or right according to whether the right knee or the left knee hiccoughs while he yes beats yes off yes, all those attributes crammed between the glossy covers of the magazine must—imperatively!—be envisioned only from a servo-mechanical angle, yes yes yes, these are tools in a toolbox, nuts, screws, nails and rivets, greased pistons, and by supposing that the body is properly speaking this machinery which society covets, by supposing that by lubricating/plugging in/inserting one always ends up obtaining less rebellious surfaces softer angles and more subtle articulations, so there is most likely material there to invent something else, and since Howard Hordinary has no other desire on this earth than the worship of evasion and the improvement of a certain electrical device (which is waiting for him, on the mezzanine, where he will go soon, very soon), since he refuses Bess even the slightest soothing touch, why ever not, why not, not, make, here, there, ha-uh, a few, uh, adjustments, like like that, without a level, ah, or a chalk-line, oh, de-li-ca-te-ly, guesswork of the fle-uh-sh, yes, in the wood's knot the iron-hard fiber, MARVELOUS, see how the girl in the centerfold resembles can be mistaken misshapen misread for *SZUSZU*, with a

felt pen he closes her eyelids and puts his giant's index finger on her dwarf pubis, but of course nothing happens, flop-flop, the ink eventually stains the whorls of his flesh, and when he brings the finger to his tongue the taste he reaps isn't worth, by far, a glass of bourbon even cut with water he cuts the current.

It isn't the magazine Bess has exhumed, but one more bill: electric components, soldering lamp, circuit breaker casing, three-phase wiring... *Shit!* Howard sends back to limbo the portrait of his grandmother-hetaera and leaves his study. He passes past Bess without even favoring her with an ox-like wink and, body upset & mind warped, grabs his cluster of keys and goes down to the mezzanine, where nearly eleven years of sedimented illusions are going moldy: posters lit up in abattoir red, boxes full of cards, scaled rings, dried bouquets, Gordian knots, volumes tattooed with gilded riddles—the name of Houdini repeated in all manner of publicity and bluff, extolled at the head of all the leaflets—all the flashy rubbish of the great Houdini, peritonised some seventy years earlier: ropes, chains, and above all handcuffs—The Maltby Dead Lock Shackles, The Extraordinary Bean Giant Handcuffs, The Regulation Double Lock Tower Leg-Irons, The Double Lock Tower Ratchet, The Navy Handcuff Slave Iron, The Nova Scotia Leg-Iron, & The Parish Thumb-Screws & The Pinkerton Handcuff—

Enough!

Enough!

ENOUGH!

Have you ever seen a streetlayer collecting loose stone? Or consumptive phlegm? Or knacker carcasses? Even the worst profligate doesn't preserve in his mental tank all the asses he's penetrated. This mezzanine is a storeroom, a bazaar, an abyss—hullaba, sabbath, pitch—yeeuck—it's the winter of memories, the ice you must break by striking it with your heel before emptying your sluggish bowels. One door, then five steps to the worn lip, then another door, three point ten meters of hallway, a floor of packed dirt where Bud bottlecaps and cockroaches crunch underfoot, here and there the dull splendor of a quarter, congealed spit.

Howard only ever goes through there reluctantly, his backside kicked by remorse or domestic fear, his glands dessicated by the obvious fact of his own disaster.

In this pit, the outside world reaches him in irritating and muted frequencies, randomly piercing the walls of the mezzanine with the thin ice-axe of rumor. The light reeling through the solitary wiregrilled window barely dirties, with its uneven and floating lozenges, the grate which occupies the place of honor at the foot of the wall. Sometimes, rain collects in the garden's gravel and finds a path between the old joints, then dark, persistent, drips in. So the brick sweats, sparkles, slugs colonize it then wither with the return of the sun, then fall, raw snot.

A smell of torn up grass lingers as well.

Once more, therefore, Howard Hordinary has decided to come sound out/inhale/lick the raw fabric and the tepid leather of his straitjackets, quite inclined to don the toughest, even if that means struggling for a solid hour—arms crossed into an X, thorax compressed by the trussing strap with metallic buckles, all struggle reduced to its barest expression. The stakes are the following: to break up gesticulation to the extreme until it is no more than the imperceptible contortions of a demoniac and nearly invisible maniac, little gears of chaos. The day before yesterday, he met failure. Three hours to torque his body in the wrong direction, all his muscles rolled up, folded, refolded and not a millimeter gained, not a nerve smoothed out, the feeling of being your own vise, of having padlocked skin. Forced to tear the canvas of the straitjacket on the rusty arc of an old spade, Howard was weeping about being so inept at so many things that he very nearly contracted tetanus.

Down here, the pink mortar peels and turns to powder between the bricks, piled up papers give off a scent of carrion dulled with straw. Howard presses the pear hanging above a turret of tires, and suddenly the luminescent bulb stamped with the initials of Godhison Electric Co., the Memorial Lightbulb presented by Edison to the Great Houdini for services rendered to the electric chair (and for which Howard paid three hundred dollars in an online auction, a first-rate web swindle), suddenly this cherished relic with mica gleams EXPLODES in a shoddy noria

*tink*¹

*tink*²

*tink*³

*tink*⁴ exposing a fat bent & ringed filament which starts to glow red, to swell, stretching stretching stretching until one of its ends is freed from the brass spiral which forces it into a ring and turns toward him, toward HH, strangely snakish & complicit, staring at him with its bifid point from which pearls—*pliiip!*—a spark which seems made of mercury or of stigmatic blood and which grazes, in mid-fall, his upper lip

—an ounce of volt, no more no less, that's enough. Howard lets out a gasp the size of a lump of phlegm, which he swallows again immediately, failing to choke

(and what happens belongs to something else, to another life, to another episode, the child's bottom lets loose a grown up shit which an old man's hand wipes away, the milk of life sours, bile rises, the body capsizes, one doesn't dare say when or how, everyone knows that, everyone has lived it and will live it, again and again.)

Here he is hostage to an obscurity of tightly-wound fibers, of suspicious density, a shroud at once dense and dripping, ignorant darkness—sabbath, hullaba, pitch—muscular water. These are the new coordinates within sight of a less restricting space, a space from here on out built by the hands, widened by the feet, shaped by the head, a made-to-measure space which sticks to the body while anticipating its most minute movements, its most muffled contractions; another body, perhaps, veered away from itself, toward other enslaved flesh. A body in recovery or expansion, of varying dimensions, a loop of skin without beginning or end.

So Howard understands that his existence is nothing but diminutions, levitations, undulations, excuses, ether, forgettings, chains, nails, drunk shame, slow exertion, rust, abcess & absences, is nothing

but the heart of a white irrationality so urine-stained that he can no longer distinguish it from the white of a still paler irrationality bearing a name [here that of the envied master forbearer = Houdini] and a mark [here his own = HH], because where does he think he comes from? from what god? from none! from a slit? moistened? distended by the growing pressure of a cracked and stubborn ram's cock? Blah. Howard knows quite well that the life of an escape artist is composed exclusively of disappearances, contractions, expulsions, moods and conspiracies, legendary suffocations, and thus thus thus why not act in his turn as Houdini, why not escape into the flesh of the illustrious magician and don all his wounds, all his memories, the Holy Lightbulb is broken, the seal-fastener deflowered, *click-zarp*—and after his flight from Hungary, when his Rabbi father, having taken as his second wife Cecilia Steiner, transfused the name to him and his brothers in Wisconsin, in America, in the month of September 1876— — barely landed, he received a new date of birth in exchange for the old, much too budapestiferous one, his name itself slowly rotted from the inside and he who was called Ehrich Weiss, the little prince of ether, through one of those phonetic trickeries which come under the most atrocious patch jobs, became out of guttural shame—Ha—Har—Harry—Harry Houdini!