

## Thea Bowering / THE MONSTER OR, THE DEFERRED SUBJECT

*He had known it long ago, when his memory was intact, when he had not riddled his memory by using it. He had written about it in other shapes, but now that it was here again after all this while, he knew that all that writing was incorrect. Decent, but incorrect. — “The Creature,” George Bowering*

*I am thinking of an earlier time, a time before adolescence made monsters of us all. — “Prodigal,” Angela Bowering*

I walk past a bar window, there's somewhere It wants to be tonight, “inside” It's pleading, so I'm looking into windows. This is secret walking I've been doing since I was old enough to want It. I may not have know it was this. I would wander the alleys behind my teenage lover's house, It howling like a cat, and stare a tunnel through two layers of grimy garage windows past the tended garden and into the kitchen. Between the windows on a weedy mattress I had found out what a boy really was: the assistant to a small creature that turned itself in the dark, graceful manoeuvring far beyond the groping of the boy. I was not entirely comfortable. Its poking insistently suggested my inside was ancient, dark, and far away. I did not want to be a passive mystery, I was more like that creature: I liked to pretend I was a whale in the swimming pool, I jumped off fences.

The males collected in the yellow radiant square of the kitchen window moving easily together like women, the father's teeth laughing, an Englishman. I was afraid of these men, birthing each other, the older brother and mine the youngest, longing for him, 15 and longing beyond soft pink *Tiger Beat* pages. I stared with grotesque eyes, forgetting about what would later become gender, and grew outside a girl's body. I don't know what body it became. Oil slicked, bad, ugly, hairy monster stumbling on weak hooker ankles away down the alley.

It has not eased. Stalking, stopping outside gates. An engine purring in the night. Women are secret stalkers, will sit in the rain for hours behind a billboard just to see you come home, slip outta

your car, your beautiful rainy shoulders going inside. But we don't want to attack you from behind a curtain, or appear bloody and impassive in a closing bathroom mirror, our image next to yours. We go home, put on the music of an all boys band that wears makeup and shapes its hair, *girls on film*, *I got your picture*; all will eventually marry models . . . except one. And we try to find the small pretty face in the mirror again. When Michael Jackson's face bubbles into a werewolf's over the screaming woman, she is screaming up at her own face. Like us, Michael also tried to smooth down his monster's face into a young white girl's.

So I have always walked alleys alone with my monster face, imagining the language that might cultivate me, taught through the walls of various lovers' homes. The words: two cats, a voluminous living-room sofa, a woman's small garden in the back, phone bills that fix it to the fridge, and the boys and hockey on Sundays. A girlfriend of mine developed a whole monster body; she often wandered lonely from Carrall to Commercial in the dark in and out of pallid light. Once, she saw a woman with Veronica Lake hair on the roof awning of the Balmoral, a leg raised through the split of a gown, toe poised above the head of a giant bald black man on a ladder stretching fingers up to help her. She was cut like a fish across her thigh, the bright red gash women are always mentioning in their poems. Given to them, it always takes them by surprise. Men write instead about the time around scars: sewn up and insignificant markers — her pressed lips. In a room that was like the room returned to in every bad dream, my monster girlfriend lived with a boy who threw a pail of piss over her. Her in my white angora sweater. Hands splayed open, she shook, dumb violence blazing in her that she would later express on him with a penknife he gave her. He gave all the women he knew knives, said a knife was the best gift you could give a woman.

While you men sleep through every sound, the early morning streets are crawling with monster women howling for their makers to show themselves, dragging garbage cans across the street from 7-Eleven to your windows, peering glumly into the familiar dark with stitched faces: a scar raises the cheekbone, makes it more defined. This was from Andi who at 15 had a perfect child and said at first it was my boyfriend's. It wasn't, it came from a young teenage boy,

otherwise a virgin, who escaped her and became born again. I tried to dress like her, she was small and perfect like her baby, my heart was sick to see her in the halls, black shiny hair, mouth half-open in red protest. I clanged my locker door. But she was desperate for him, already a monster at 15, and I was calm, It came off like skin from a fish. The second cut pulls the skin leanly under the throat. Cynthia's family had a farm somewhere with horses, I had half her name. She danced to pay for college, but she had so much money she bought him things like pewter goblets inscribed with his name. He told me he had made around 10 thou in gifts off her in the two years they were together. She left pizza boxes around the floor for days that she threw tampons into. Or she forgot to take them out, once for over 2 weeks. One afternoon she froze on stage at the Marble Arch, her face changing colours in the lights. Next moment she's running naked through the snow, it's late November and the trees are black, up Richards towards the church banging on their big door, he following her for the first time. This is the only beautiful thing I remember hearing about her, her running, and the horses somewhere. The third scar is Lise's, runs across the scalp accentuating the forehead where delicate hairs cling like small lines of ice. A white flawless dome he and I huddled under. Lise wrote him love letters about colours. Whenever I saw her, I imagined yanking her gold ponytail and climbing up. I've loved them all, grafted them to me. They have no real history, but perfect parts. But in me: incompatible, a horror, a miscalculation. Mutilation until a girl asks: who am i? where did i come from?

When I walk past the bar window, looking in, there you are. It suspected I was charmed tonight. I have my hands in my pockets and am fully clothed. I have been out with the men layered in underwear, plastic bags hanging from their belts. A sad Romantic, who looks ancient outside a club, has, over the thrust of bass, been unintentionally spitting his poetry on the pallor of a girl with mint green eyelids and butterflies in her hair. And so, he's been disposed of by Mr. Universe-bouncer who twists the man's imploring reach behind his back. The glittering butterfly laughs, her stick limbs folded. Invincible.

Who are you, I see I've made you shrink just by standing here, how old are those arms in your T-shirt? I didn't mean to be a monster in front of you. I can't hide all this ragged disgusting longing, it goes back too far. Back to the first pulse. It rode the edge of my mattress, imagined a honkey-tonk bar, a cowgirl on a mechanical bull, a cowgirl sliding along the bar her red spangled suede boots in the air, a line of cowboys pouring heads of beer over her in celebration. After, It tried to stuff anything It could find from the bathroom into me, the handle of the toilet plunger frustratingly too thin. Was I repressing something? I went over all the potentially iffy moments of baths and left open doors. No, but something was being repressed *for* me. Betty and Veronica had hard mounds that looked more like constant erections through their sweater sets than breasts, and Ken had a polite undetailed hill that looked more like a woman's pelvic bone than a penis. In fact, these lumps were interchangeable alien life pushing through the plastic. Over and over the excitement of possibility was betrayed by a blank stare under the clothes. That's when a child first knows she is being monitored by corporations. She tears down uniforms, yanks up tutus to find the same smooth shine, like Ken's smile, again and again.

Artwork came later in life in hopes to repair what the straining plastic had snubbed in the bud. I have only ever seen Jay DeFeo's giant painting/sculpture, *The Rose*, in a black and white photograph. It looks either like a luminous galactic implosion or a fresh compact of makeup — a design of lines radiating from the centre pressed into the powder that crumbles beautifully at the edges from teenage-drugstore handling or transport in a purse. She painted every day, embedding jewelry and wire, circling towards a centre, deepening the material. *The Rose* became immovable, eight inches thick, 2,300 pounds. It became a part of the Artist's home. In 1967 DeFeo was forced to move and so *The Rose* that had been built into the home had to be wrapped in chains and with a crane extracted from the bay window by movers dressed in doctor's white. DeFeo was carried out over her husband's shoulder her arm extending to the rose, a brush or paint knife pointing. She had to concede to its completion and once removed, it became dry, it began to crumble and was put into storage for 25 years.

I can't hide the monster who suspects there is something to uncover. It's foreplay is still a buried narrative. Once, in hope of uncovering it, It let a boy chase me across a golf course at night, naked and pulled down under the sprinklers, gently clicking forward. And with one ear pressed against the green, a passageway widened down underneath. It takes a woman so *long* because she has so far back to go, you cannot imagine, all the way back from Hades on a boat. She wants to dance before you dressed as a schoolgirl, or a brownie, but also to retrieve you from the deeps by actually peeling away each illusive veil. Hers is so new it requires physical ritual. *I'm going down yonder, behind the sun, gonna do some fire, ain't never been done. I'm gonna hold back the lightnin', with the palm of my hand, shake hands with the devil, make him crawl in the sand.*

You catch sight of me through the window around another body, and you wave suddenly awake and airy. For less than a second, we are young girlfriends. Then I brake my gate, turn back, grounding It. Come through the bar head down, thicker and heavier with each step towards you. You are surrounded by a round of guys, suspicious and having to work machinery in the morning. You are a small boy, growing smaller under my stillness, as though I'm punishing you with unflipped hair, unlowered eyes, uncertainty that isn't coy. My monster face twists, my monster heart is confused. To be what you expected, I would have to unzip and step out, or smooth my fur down with cream and powder. When I was quite young, for a time my parents seemed to forget me. They walked in straight lines through the house without turning their heads stopping only to bring a chandelier down from the ceiling. I realized that gorillas had taken my parents away and now walked around our house beneath their skin. I was certain.

What we say is besides the serious terror on our faces. You don't invite me to sit down. Why can't we be girlfriends? I go back outside telling myself again that I will starve the monster. Like I imagine PJ Harvey does, *plants and rags, I ease myself into a bodybag*. The way Ani DiFranco did after she said she wasn't a pretty girl, that that was not what she did; the way good lyric girls do until one day they are hanging off of hangers on their album covers, pumps falling from their feet.

