

Head (Excerpt)

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Head,
shoulders
knees
and toes

Head,
shoulders
knees
and toes

Eyes
and ears
and mouth
and nose

You learn this chant at four, at five, in preschool on the cusp of kindergarten. You learn this rhyme that sinks into still-soft synapses, kneading the supple nooks of your tender brain. Cerebral cortex spooling into shape. (Dolphins do this too.) You learn the sounds before your tongue, curling over unfamiliar phonemes, does. And it (soft and pink and coltish) will play catch up, hide-and-seek, tag-you're-it for three frustrating months because the words that sound pitch-perfect in your mind's voice will stick and clump, coating the roof of your mouth with the bitter, foreign taste of wheat flour. You will start anew: mix new syllables, fresh syntax, work their shapes with your fingers and wrists and teeth.

You learn this chant and it becomes more than habit. It seeps into how you speak and how you think and how

you see as the words see: look out through the nooks and crannies of the open vowels, peek into a world curved and light split around the horizon of the S's endless loop.

You do not think, until years later, when your bulging prefrontal cortex (no longer dolphin but distinctly *hominidae*) has found its balance, about all those sounds folded in. About what if you had poured them at fourteen and not four, your mind and tongue already rolled and cut to a different set of shapes; about pliability and the need to (slowly, gently, correctly) knead. About what a shoulder is, *really*; and about the shape (circle, lunar, almond) of an I. About whether color exists for the blind man, what music is for the deaf. About when your lunches fall into a different cuisine and your rhymes fall into a different cadence and you fall (or are pushed), stumbling over sibilants, into the cracks. About how dolphins talk to one another, and Inuits too; about no words for love and seven words for snow.

You think about standing in front of a mirror and

You think about words not existing,
and about red ink and fine erasers from Japan
and the gesture of pulling a cap over your head in universally-understood Charadespeak (*person, human*)
and disappearing from the top down,

Head,
shoulders
knees
and toes

Head

Adolf Hitler once believed that the size and shape of the skull were powerful pointers to the superiority of the person cupped beneath its bumps, its lumps, its unfathomable ridges. We are astonished-at his ideas, at his not-yet-butterfly of a mustache. Yet should we strip away the rosy glasses of hindsight, doff layer after layer of modern pretention, is it so strange after all? Don't we, even today, nod sagely at the kinks and swirls of the brain's planetary outer layer-we prod, clumsy savages with scalpels and bone saws, at that foreboding grey mass of alien softness, only to be proven wrong again and again.

Where does science end and speculation begin and how do we know for sure, *really*, that the *corpus collossum* connects the right and left brains (New York Times, 2010: sometimes, it doesn't), that the ridge of bone above my vertebrae and beneath my fingers means nothing (*philoprogenitiveness*, the academics of 1883 would have

whispered softly over good wine and white gloves), that having two parts in your hair isn't a sign of *tai duo shui*, too much water, and that you aren't prone to swirling emotions and anger truly torrential and the drought of deep, deep exhaustion?

To this I say: it's 2010 and fashion is cyclical, and history, and red blood cells (kind of). Phrenology makes us laugh when we see it through our 120° slice of the world, but perhaps not if our vision were lateral and our eyes wide set, *equine* or *sphyrine*, and we could see a glimpse of what lies behind and

a head

is never born but made.

When Tutankhamen was born, he was human-wet and squalling like the rest of us. When Tutankhamen died, he was a god, so flimsy that only the gold weighing down his skinny arms kept him fixed to the earth.

Somewhere along the way between dust and divinity, Tutankhamen's head was shaped as carefully as his clothes, his education, the oiled sidelock of his hair. In one bust of Tutankhamen that sleeps between colossi and broken pillars at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, King Tut's boy-thin neck extends from a lotus flower. His head is bare; without the heavy double crown of Egypt, the back of his elongated head protrudes. Its form is strange and bulbous and heartrendingly vulnerable. It sweeps upward, impossibly high, completing a curve begun in the stem and arched through the neck. Tutankhamen's eyes, too, look up. The paint has been worn away so that we will never see the reflection of what he saw.

The lotus in Egyptian mythology birthed the world. Lotuses, blue and sacred, sink beneath the Nile's waters at night; in the morning they reemerge nodding to the sun, water dripping from the petals of their newly unfurled

heads

as ornaments:

Buying souvenirs, one thinks of pretty trinkets, colorful enough that the burnished horizons and leafy fronds of a distant land might just shine through the thick layers of plastic glaze: keychains. Magnets. Coasters. Photo frames. Coin banks. Bead bracelets. Occasionally, little dolls with Alpine hats and tundra hoods, rosebuds mouths and calligraphy eyes. And one thinks, if one happens to be on a fingernail of rainforest-green that traces the sharper Andes and the drier lowlands of South America in the 1930s, of little heads. Wrinkled. Stitched. Pigmented and brushed and carefully arranged.

The Shuar peoples inhabited a lush cradle of Ecuador spilling over into Peru long before those countries had built names and border roads, and the Shuar still claim neither nationality for their own. They instead distinguish themselves by *muraiya* and *achu*, of the foothills and of the sprawling swampy plains. Shuar families roamed semi-nomadic through their blurry borders largely unknown until the 16th century, when contact with the Spanish brought not only new gossip and trade goods but also violence, forced taxation, social restructuring, and a burning market for shrunken heads that exploded into life in the early 20th century.

Ask a Shuar in 1930 about shrunken heads, and he would have explained how it was not about the heads but the spirits contained within, the *muiskak* of the dead. A male warrior's *muiskak*, carefully dried and molded, could be shaped to control his living wife and children, who were responsible for pounding and pureeing the all-important manioc root into dense streams of digestible carbohydrates. Sustenance flowed from their mortars and pots straight into the bodies of future warriors and future leaders. The shrunken head represented not death but life; not the gaping mouth but the filled belly.

In 1930, the finely clothed and delicately gloved ladies and gentlemen of Europe clamored for a shrunken head or two for their museums, for their private collections, for unveiling at the end of a night of dinner and dancing to a room of slightly tipsy, delightfully amused guests. Demand swelled, and with the tantalizing glitter of beads, of tobacco, of gun shipped Transatlantic to silence the rustles of a forest with one blast, so too did supply. Shuar earned Western riches and new Western names: *violent*, *savage*.

as signs.

On the other side of the pond, Western Europe of 1930. Odd, flipping now through its yellowed fashion plates, how easily its elite were swept up by the giddy tide of fad consumerism despite the girth of newly puffed shoulder pads, the weight of relengthened skirts. Hemlines fell as precipitously as stocks in the 1930s, a rejection of the twenties' flapper flamboyancy. So it was with fresh-pressed gentility that Europe's best-dressed crowded, crushing trousers and skirts, to pick the choicest, most grotesque heads from across the ocean-forgetting in the frenzy of acquisition that heads were far from new to their own countries. But fashion is cyclical, and history too:

In Paris, where ladies' lace was knit and designers such as Madeleine Vionnet forever changed the shape of the neckline and the society that wore it, fine fabrics (and coarse woven ones too) had all felt the kiss of the indiscriminating guillotine. Only a century earlier the guillotine had marked a path like that which Vionnet's seamstress scissors now took: bold, aslant, cutting against the grain to force new lines and sharper impacts: the guillotine's blade too had cleanly severed thread from thread, flesh from flesh.

The heads of 19th-century Paris, of 16th-century London, of 1st-century Rome BC, had been part of structured social order, of organized politics and the civilizing arm of the law. They had been literate heads, fluent even in death. Heads were often displayed as warnings, more succinct and more effective than the crude geometric symbols of their modern-day descendents: STOP, DO NOT ENTER, BEWARE OF DOG.

as bowls:

Upended and emptied; hearth-dried; filled again with wine as red as blood though perhaps not as sweet. Drinking, the mouth opens and the gates of Valhalla come rushing in a heady stream to fill the conquerors' stomachs with meat, with mead, with the warm jasmine scent of nubile virgin flesh. Victory is this taste, this glance over the skull's craggy rim.

as cups:

"Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull"

was the title Lord Byron appended to his six-stanza poem in 1808. He had, on a whim and a scrap of remembered myth, fashioned a skull unearthed in his garden into an elaborate cup. His was a mad impulse, a bad one (in life, it was likely a monk's), and probably dangerous to health: he drew drink from this joke as well as Gothic inspiration.

As when Byron had bathed with his pet bear in Trinity College's public fountain, as when he had tried on Sufi Islam and Albanian costume, as when he had carried on indiscreet affairs with lovers fanned out across the European continent, Byron once again successfully shocked society. He also unintentionally added his words-penned perhaps in parody, perhaps in high spirits, perhaps in drunken effusiveness-to a lofty canon of Romantic poetry reproduced in libraries and classrooms to this day. Whatever his reasons, Byron signed his 24 lines with a flourish, satisfied. And then drank to his success.

as pedestals:

They women and the men in this room hold their plastic heads tenderly. They set them down with eggshell care. They brush from their cheeks invisible flecks of dust; they run combs through their hair. They sit back, reconsider the sheen and texture of that hair: remove this scalp, try a new one. Pale yellow this time, finer than black. They coil and braid, stroke and life, twist and crop into perfection. And between the final products, the hairdos that rise up defying logic and gravity, there are flashes of haunting whiteness. Of porcelain and plastic scalps suddenly vulnerable, bared to the world.

These heads, numbering as many as the people in this classroom of hair styling at this small cosmetology school with chairs so straight, carpets so faded, and walls so white it could be anywhere at all, are carried as one might carry children or priceless beings. (Busts, really, smooth and white down to the shock of abbreviated shoulders,) the settle for most of their lives within a cool shrine of mirrors and stools, swivel chairs and floral-scented offerings (creams, balms, lotions; rosehip and pomegranate salves). There is something in the regard with which their caretakers bend over them, in the weak-tea light of earliest mornings, that seems ancient and intimate all at once. (That cast of light which makes everything profound.) This is the look of devotion, of worship. This is the look, shared between sleep-bleared eyes and plastic ones, of one form of purity.

as beautiful:

Here, heads bob under lights and the beat of well-hidden speakers: brown, black, blonde, ginger, red, a violent violet flourish at the end of the rainbow. (Purple G23.) Here, dragons fly, and Grim Reapers too; here roses bloom beneath Jesus's weeping crown of thorns.

Here, they all come together: the thorns and the petals and the metal and the bone, and what emerges is-

(Here is the tattoo parlor to which Anisha has come today for her third stenciling. She considers Celtic knots, the whorl of a serpentine tail. I do my best not to shudder as I stand beside her because here, heads wait beneath needles that, though three inches long and no thicker than spaghetti, hang with all the ponderous poise of Damocles' sword.)

Here, the burly man in the corner turns suddenly towards me. His left side was harsh and chiseled, corded and bearded; his right is an oilspill rainbow of colors and curves, the skin of his neck pulsing smooth and vibrant and vulnerable. DARLENE, his one true love, has traced her inky touch (crimson, green, indigo) down his jawline from ear to chin in Gothic curlicue. Now that he has realized that she isn't the One, it will take only a few more minutes, a few hundred dollars, one sleepless night to erase DARLENE and then that tender chink between skull and vertebra will be wiped as smooth again as the day he was born.

(Some-not quite on the day perhaps, but maybe the week or the month of, after skin has learned the touch of sun but before it has lost the softness of being stretched over unknit skull-some forget smoothness early. Theirs is interrupted by the marks, geometric and perfect, of the human brand.)

Anisha is flipping through pages of smaller tattoos. She asks me what I think. There are interwoven circles for love and clovers for luck and small stars that kiss the cheekbones like wishes.

(Anisha is one of those who says, My Body is My Temple. Decorate it. Honor what gods you will: Venus, goddess of beauty, which the Romans tongue called *forma*; *kitsune*, the vulpine shape-shifters who craft from toes to tip; Amelia Earhart; Amelia Bloomer; Lady Liberty.)

Anisha says,

-beautiful?

as props:

Michael Jackson was a true entertainer, easily remembered through the shifting stages of his long career by a series of dazzling accoutrements: there were the frizzy Afros of his childhood Jackson Five days, the sleek suits of the moonwalk era, the top hat and gloves that marked a retreat into his own private Neverland. Yet out of all that we remember of Michael Jackson, what will stay vibrant long after the photographs lose their hues is that most famous of stage props: his own face.

Michael Jackson's face achieved a shocking whiteness that brought to mind Greek theater masks (tragic? comic?) and mannequin heads. Michael Jackson's face was sculpted, though by the haunted visage of which Muse we might never guess; chipped at relentlessly as if in search of the fine core of bone-white marble within. Darker dust swept, discarded. Until he grinned at last (tragic? comic? or does it all lie in which way you turn?), his dreams realized, his beauty achieved: the skull had swallowed the head, turned it inside out. The skull had become the man and, in 2009, the man has become the skull.

I wonder which picture they used at his funeral, which of his faces was him.

And I wonder now, too late for Michael Jackson, about the 19th-century psychograph machine still sitting in the Science Museum of Minnesota 2,000 miles from where the once and now future King of Pop lies becoming dust, becoming dirt, becoming, one day deep in the earth's roiling mantle, stone. Igneous, perhaps; if lucky, metamorphic and hard; maybe even marble. I wonder too late where, that cage-like psychograph whirring, it might have pressed its metal fingertips to that bone-white head and found the place the phrenologists of 1883 and 1939 would have labeled "Vanity" and where they would have labeled "Insanity" and where they would have labeled "Self esteem" and "Destructiveness" and "Hope." I wonder if it would find the telltale bump here, the malformed curve there. And I wonder how bright *he* gleamed in the fluorescent light of the hospital (of science, of speculation) and of the bathroom after the morning ritual, showered and pigmentless and rearranged, water dripping from the planes of his newly unfurled head.