



ANNE DE
MARCKEN
IT LASTS
FOREVER
AND THEN
IT'S OVER

WINNER OF
THE NOVEL PRIZE



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Other books by Anne de Marcken

The Accident: An Account

ANNE DE MARCKEN

IT LASTS FOREVER
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FICTION



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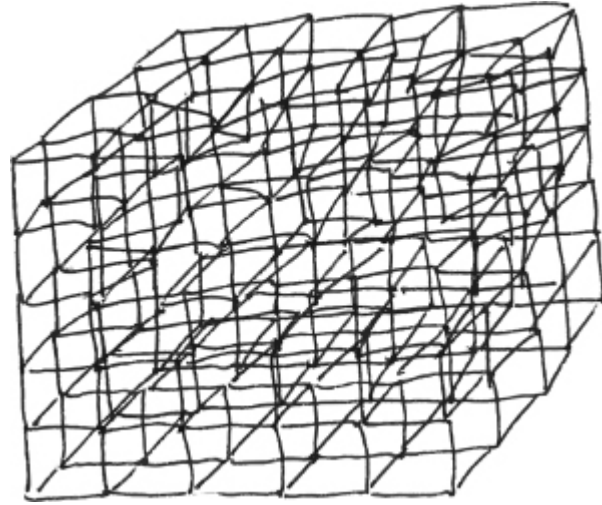
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Without you, that indefinite, promiscuous, and expansive pronoun, we are wrecked and we fall.

Judith Butler

For M



Part 1

We're stories telling stories, nothing.

Fernando Pessoa

I lost my left arm today. It came off clean at the shoulder. Janice 2 picked it up and brought it back to the hotel. I would have thought it would affect my balance more than it has. It is like getting a haircut. The air moving differently around the remaining parts of me. Also by turns a sense of newness and lessness – free me, undead me, don't look at me.

Isn't it strange that I never knew a single living Janice and now I know three?

—

I stay in bed all day. If I lie on my right side, I can keep the arm balanced as if it is still part of me. Or I can pretend it is your arm and that you are in bed with me. I think about how we used to take a blanket into the dunes and wrap up together. Wake with sand in our hair and in the corners of our eyes. Sound of the ocean big as the sky. I miss sleep. I miss you.

—

Mitchem says I'm in denial. That I am depressed because I am indulging in a sense of loss instead of wonder. 'Embrace your new existence,' he says. I picture myself trying to do this with one arm.

When I was alive, I imagined something redemptive about the end of the world. I thought it would be a kind of purification. Or at least a simplification. Rectification through reduction. I could picture the empty cities, the reclaimed land.

That was the future. This is now.

The end of the world looks exactly the way you remember. Don't try to picture the apocalypse. Everything is the same.

Mitchem says it is important to do small, ordinary tasks when you're depressed. That even if I don't do anything else all day, I should make the bed. This morning he came in and opened the curtains. He stood over me, that half-moon head of his backlit by the window. He picked up the arm from where it was lying on the floor and held it out like something I needed to account for. He said, 'You've experienced a significant loss.' He said, 'It isn't just your arm.' He said, 'You're grieving your life.' Since he broke off his penis he's Mr. Wisdom. When he left, I closed the curtains again. A glow creeps under my room door from the hallway where the lights are always on.

—

Yesterday Mitchem preached in the lobby. Today he set up on the roof. He stands on a side table from one of the rooms. Afterward I saw Bob following him around wearing a rain poncho like the one Mitchem wears. Uh oh.

—

Tried to make a harness for the arm. It is too heavy. Dead weight. Ha ha.

—

Found a shirt today with cuffs that button. It is red. I stuffed in the arm and buttoned myself in with it. The fit isn't good. The arm slides down bare up to the elbow and flops forward in my way. Like the dislocated limb of a mannequin. It gets turned around in the sleeve and elbows me in the side. It is strange to see it like this. My hand. My wrist. The fingernails.

Smoke has settled down in the sound. Sunrises and sets have been dull and angry. The full moon dark red. Even inside the hotel it is hazy. Exit signs are dim irony at the ends of the long hallways. Wildfire, back-burn, blitz. Any way you look at it, a blaze we set.

Mitchem preached on the roof again tonight. Only the undead can truly understand the meaning of life, he said. There is no meaning, he said. Bob was there. He seems to have been promoted. Now he carries the side table around and stands nearby when Mitchem is up there. Which comes first, a believer or a religion? Others are showing up now, too. I can't describe how strange it is. Someone puts her hands up in the air and then the others do it. Someone moans, and the others moan. You can see how this will go. There is talk of a revival.

—

That's another thing – most of us can't remember who we are... were...are. We are character actors to ourselves – people we recognise but can't name.

It really bothers some of the hotel guests. They always have the troubled, distracted look of a person trying to remember something simple. They are attracted to one another. They sit together saying one name after another hoping if they hear their own name they will know it. They write names on the walls, in the elevator, on the air exchange unit on the roof, in the dust the dust that covers everything. You can take a name for yourself. You can leave one for someone else. But why choose the name Janice when someone else is already using it? And who chooses the name Bob? Carlos says that names are the most commonplace ritual. 'Little prayers,' he says, that connect us to each other and to humanity. He tells me a story: When he was a boy he had a favorite toy. A small truck. Like the truck on his family's farm. He kept it in his pocket all the time. It was metal with moving wheels made of hard black rubber and open spaces instead of a windshield and windows. It was green, but in many places the paint was worn off to dull grey metal. As he walked along, he would take the truck out of his pocket and drive it down the length of railings, on walls. He drove it along his own body – up his arm, across his face, loving the feel of the wheels. He made a system of roads in the flower patch behind his house. In secret he made a tiny paper version of himself that he put inside. He made up stories about where he was

going. He put grass in the back and pretended he and his father were taking hay to the cattle the way they did in real life, but in his imagination he got to drive. He was eight the year his brother was born and his mother died. He wrapped up the truck in a sock and buried it. For a long time he didn't remember the truck. He still doesn't remember where he buried it. But he knows it is there and so is the time before everything changed. He says this is how our names work.

'But your name isn't Carlos,' I say.

'Carlos is the name I have given my name,' he says.

'You seem like a Carlos,' I say.

—

I haven't asked, but I think Marguerite is not Marguerite's real name. It is the kind of name you pick for French class. Mine was Genevieve. I remember that, but not my actual name. I don't miss my name and I haven't bothered to replace it. I miss your name. I'm sorry, but I have forgotten it, too. I don't look for it on the walls. The thought that I might read it and pass it by, just go on to the next name, is terrible. Like meeting you in another life and failing to recognise you.

—

Marguerite has grey hair that she wears in two long braids wrapped around her head in a kind of crown into which she has stuck things. Feathers. A pencil. Twist-ties. A Barbie arm. I tell her about Anton and the original QB and the way you drove like your dad. She lets me go on and on. I think she is busy with her own ideas.

Some hotel guests are better storytellers than others. Some are funny. Some had more interesting lives. Remember their lives better than others. Make things up. Sometimes we get on a topic and just list things. First jobs. Home. Parents. Food. A guest called Blake tells the same story over and over.

It isn't even a story, really, about stealing a pack of grape bubblegum. Another called Alison remembers all the lines from *Moonstruck*.

Somebody tell a joke.

Is that man praying?

You'll eat it bloody to feed your blood.

Yesterday she said to me, *'Where's my hand? Where's my bride?'*

I worry that I am getting other guests' stories mixed up with my own. Did I like strawberry ice cream? Did I grow a zucchini the size of Ed's leg? Did I have a green toy truck?

If I ever remember your name, how will I know it was really your name?

I said that I found the red shirt. I mean that I took it off the body of a man I killed and ate. I don't tell you about the killing. The eating. I protect myself from what you will think. You who are dead.

My rule used to be that I would not eat what I was not willing to kill. I said to meat eaters, 'If I get hungry enough, I might be willing to kill a cow.' It was a pragmatic morality. Which is not morality. A naturopath told me that based on my blood type I ought to eat meat. What was her name? Well I'm a meat-eater now. And I could fill a book with what I didn't know about hunger.

In truth the rule had to do with the degree to which I was able to ignore the expression of an individual animal's will to live, which was directly related to how effectively that animal communicated to me both its individuality and its suffering. When I steamed a pot of little Manila clams, the indications of their existential crises – I think it is going too far to say fear – were generalised and inscrutable enough that I could overlook them. Conceal from myself the fact and ramifications of my actions.

I cared less for the man in the red shirt than a clam. It was strange, though, to undress him. Intimate. To unbutton the shirt. To take his arms from their sleeves. Like undressing a sleeping child. Awkward. Tender. His freckled skin. The hollow of his diaphragm. His nipples. There was a purple

scar on the inside of one arm – long and thin like the burn I once got with a curling iron.

I don't like to use the word flesh because it sounds too essential or universal. Like he and I are part of something bigger – actors in roles originated in dark prehistory and that will be inherited and inhabited by other actors. Neither the actor nor the role quite whole or answerable for any actions. That is what ritual does. It excuses us. Comforts us. Places us in a context so vast and ineffable we can confuse it with truth because it is impersonal and because it has a lineage and because it extends all the way – but only – to the limits of what we can conceive.

Better to say I ate his leg but left his foot. His bones were pinkish blue.

—

Marguerite, Carlos and I went swimming in the sound today. Wading, really, but all the way in. We can walk right in and under. I had dreams of this when I was a kid, that I was walking around on the bottom and breathing in the ocean like it was thick air. It is the jellyfish time. They pulsed around us like a galaxy of pale, daytime moons. Maybe Mitchem is right about beauty. He says it persists because it was one of the few real things. Beauty. Dreams. Boredom. Hunger. More than anything, hunger.

—

Perhaps the chief difference between me now and me then is my tolerance for terror. I think this has to be related to the abstraction of pain. Physical pain. Emotional pain. The pain of others. My own. The flinch is there still. And I think the pain itself is there somewhere. But it is locked up. Locked up in a tiny, invisible, apocalypse-proof kernel. The tiny translucent egg of a subatomic insect laid at the center of each of us. When we're gone, if we're ever gone, this is what will remain of us. Fossilised pain. Not carbon. There will be a pain stratum where all the pain will settle. Pain shale. Pain veins.

Quartzly ligatures made of tears, sighs, sobs, moans, terrible screams. Maybe when there are no more living, pain will have real value. Pain inflation will drive a pain market. There will be pain panners like gold panners, shaking out the suffering. Pain frackers. Pain centrifuges. We will build a giant pain collider to crack open its secret structure and release the tiny, lace-winged gasp of our lost humanity. Humanity. That word.

Maybe we kill the living to get at their pain. Or our own.

—

I was thinking about golems. I was thinking that I am like a golem. I feel more like earth now than like an animal. Mud and sticks and rags that look and act something like a live thing. And I thought: But really I'm more like an owl pellet. A bony, furry, coughed-up turd that walks and talks. But then it wasn't just a joke to myself. It became an idea. A middle-of-the-night idea. All my ideas now are middle-of-the-night ideas. Perfectly lucid and perfectly flawed. I am having a very long sleepless night. Exactly the opposite of the endless sleep that is death. I had the idea that I'd make myself a new arm. An owl pellet arm. Mud and hair. I pretended to wake you up and tell you. I said out loud: 'Don't let me forget – owl pellets.'

—

I've already told you this story, but I'll tell you again. When I was little and my mum was working at the corral, I spent all day as a horse. I ate molasses covered oats from the grain bin. I drank from the water troughs. When I ran I was galloping. I'd look along the edge of the forest for two sticks just the right length and hold them in my hands for front legs. The sticks helped me see myself, feel myself, as a horse. It is my human shape that allows me to see myself, feel myself, as a human. Without the arm, it is that much harder. If you were here, you would tell me that you would have fallen in love with

me no matter when we met. Even when I was a horse, you would say. Even now, you would say. Even now you would fall in love with me.

—

I miss the way we retold each other the same stories as if we'd just remembered them. And the way we'd play along, asking questions to get at the details we already knew. I think it was so we would still recognise each other even as we changed. Like a snake is the same snake even after shedding its old skin. But now we are just the stories. You. Me. All of us. Just the raspy husk of ourselves. Mitchem says this is another way we're superior – because we are, at the same time, creator and creation.

—

It is not precisely accurate to say that nothing has changed. It's all farther along. And it is quieter. And the quiet is emptier. At night, walking the streets, it is especially noticeable. You can hear things settling, the way an old house settles. Creaking and popping. Some buildings are tilting into the fill on which they were built. Walls buckle. Doors get wedged shut. Sometimes a window will suddenly crack. That bone on bone sound. Or the glass falls out of its frame. You notice eventually that the hollow look of the storefronts is due to the fact their windows have all broken out. In places, the layers of asphalt have split and slipped to reveal the old brick pavement. It makes me nostalgic for something I never knew.

Also, the moon is always full.

—

So I went down to the waterfront with the arm and I was sitting with it on the thin strip of beach between the water and the grass where the geese graze

and poop. A dog shows up and sniffs around the arm. Then he does the dog thing – goes weak in the shoulder and starts rolling on the arm. I am so outraged. I stand up and I yell at him. I pick up the arm and hit him with it and I'm yelling, 'Bad dog. No. No.' Ridiculous. 'Get out of here. Go home.' Dead serious even though I'm holding my arm like it's a salami and pointing it at him. And he has that look on his face – ashamed of his weakness but determined to do it again if he gets the chance. It's the smell, I suppose. Irresistible.

Which raises the question of decomposition. And the bigger question of what and how consolidated or generally distributed is my animating force. Has the part of me that was associated with my arm died? Will it also decompose? Why is my arm dead while I am undead?

On my way back to the hotel, I found a dead crow in the street.

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There is more to say about the crow, but I don't know how to say it. I don't know why it is hard. Like a confession. How do you confess? I kept the crow. I have it now. I wanted it. Not to eat. But terribly. I wanted it. Not sexually, but like that. It was that powerful. And terrible-seeming. The moment you realise you want something that is not yours. The moment you let yourself have it. I took it to my room and lay down on top of it, the crow. I just lay there with it under my chest. If I were living, my heart would have been pounding right where the crow was pressed between me and the carpet. I keep thinking about its black feathers. Its thin legs and clenched feet. I'm thinking about them now. I want to hold the crow in both hands and I only have the one and that seems like the whole truth of everything.

—

Today we burned the arm. We lashed together a raft and set it on there. We put Janice 2's pinkie on too. In a little tinder nest. We set fire to them at dusk and shoved them off into the sound like heroes. Goodbye arm. Goodbye pinkie. Mitchem said a few words for the departed. We disagree about ritual. He says ritual is fundamental. I don't ask what he did to honour the memory of his penis.

Afterward I pretend-smoked one of Carlos's cigarettes. I used to smoke a Bic pen waiting for the school bus on cold mornings. Then I pretended my breath was smoke. Now I pretend my breath is breath.

—

I carved out a space for the crow. Inside. Up under my ribs. I wrapped it in a sleeve of the red shirt and put it up in there. Little red mummy. I have a crow inside me and no one can know. I can feel it all the time. It is like the entire night sky and all the stars and every beautiful sound you can imagine. It is like being too excited to sleep. It is like being twelve years old and stripping off my clothes outside in the rain. Savage. Girl. Suddenly awake to the deviance available in every ordinary moment. The possibilities of my current situation had not occurred to me before now. The freedom. There is a crow in my chest.