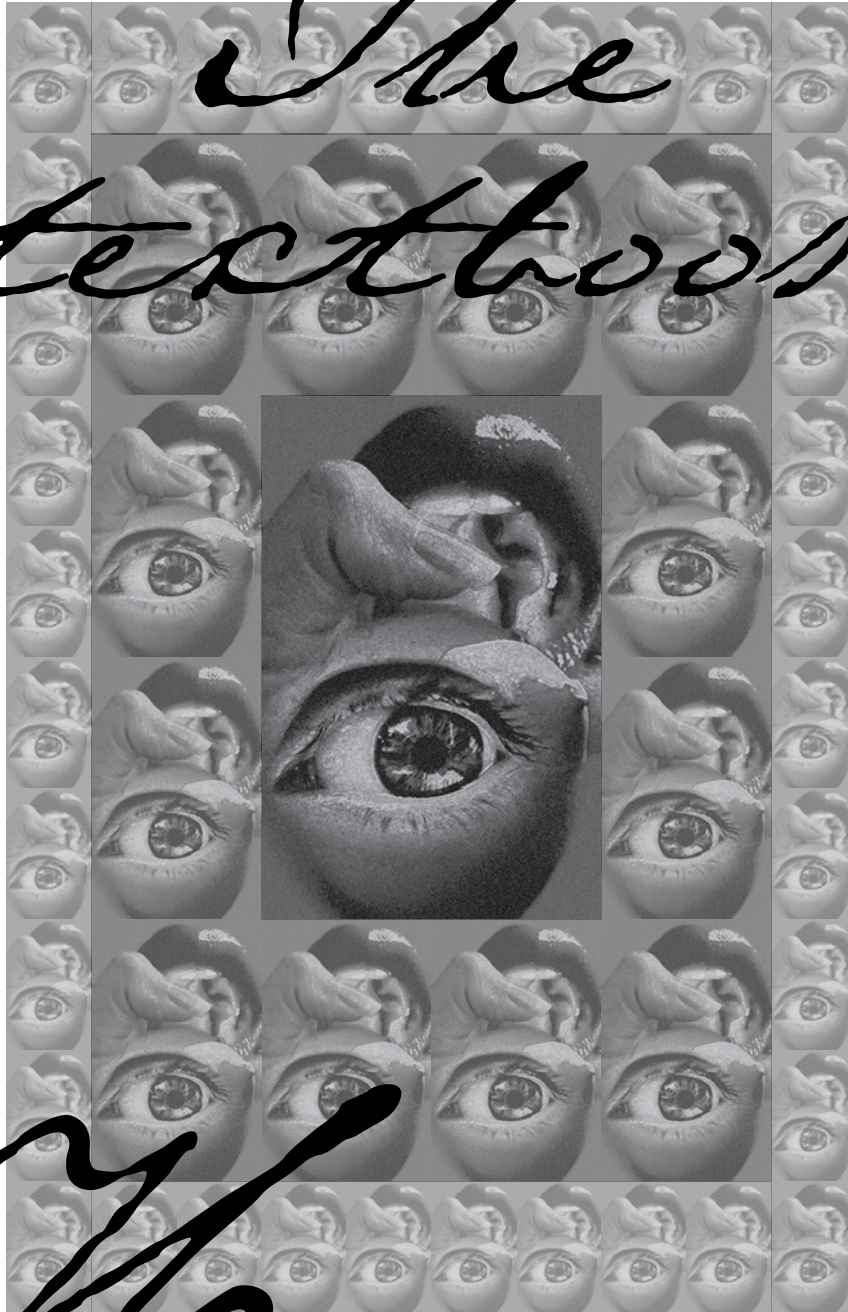


Siall Waterbright

The textbook



No

e materialised, body part by body part,
in the most odious fashion.

She awoke to find she had been sleeping on an arm. No princess, she was unaware of its presence until she opened her eyes and saw it, or more precisely, its hand, protruding from under her ribcage. The arm was self-contained, rounded near the shoulder not with a wound or a stump but with a tight covering of unmarked, healthy skin. The hand, fingers in a relaxed curve, demonstrated no compulsion to grip her, thank goodness. Although warm, it was nerveless and flaccid. When she recovered her composure, she was able to poke and examine the arm without provoking any response.

The arm lay on her bed in the well left by her body, its ruddy skin paling at the wrist and palm, the forearm embellished lightly by sparse hair. A pulse beat in the wrist. Well-muscled and lean, the arm ended with fingernails trim and square; the whorls of its fingertips put her in mind of the faint crenulations on a sea shell. It repulsed her as deeply as a bug.

Eventually, having stared at the arm from her perch on the edge of the bed while she drank two cups of sweetened coffee, she picked it up, holding it at bicep and wrist—she was afraid to touch the palm—and put it in her clothes closet, having cleared the top shelf for the purpose. The arm was quite heavy. She initially wrapped it in a pillowcase, but under the fabric it seemed less predictable, so she left it uncovered on the bare shelf, shut the door and determined to go on with her day.

She returned from work hoping, of course, that the arm had dematerialised as smartly as it had materialised, and nursed the same hope the following morning, but in both instances was disappointed. The arm lay where she left it during the day, placid and unmoving, but somehow preserved; she had a horror of it rotting, and thought illogically and briefly of putting it in the freezer, or on the porch with the plants, but it seemed to be self-maintaining. When she woke in the morning, it was back in her bed, as she each subsequent morning found it: crouched under her waist or draped over her hip or stretched along her side.

Disposal was impossible. She had no garden to bury it in, and any attempt, she felt sure, to dump it in parkland or a river, or the garbage, would lead to discovery and questions she would be unable to answer. Eating it was out of the question, and anyway, it was alive, if sleeping,

how could she kill it? A question not only ethical but practical: the arm lacked visible means of life support and thus the ability to be deprived of it.

Not many days passed before her awakening found her attended by not only the arm but a foot, high arched and mildly calloused, and, a few days later, a knee. The following weeks were an education in the absurdities of the anatomy: the knee, for example, a precise object when labelled using medical terminology—patella, ligament—became meaningless when not bounded by thigh and calf; cheek and belly, arriving at wide intervals, were more nonsensical still. She was grateful, over this period as at few others, not to have a lover. The body parts, which were all consistent with one another in scale and skin tone, were innocuous—neither rancid nor demanding, requiring neither food nor refrigeration, making no sound or independent movement—and her sense of shame helped her overcome any revulsion or terror she felt.

The scrotum, when it arrived, arranged against her buttock with the soft inert quality of a glove, excited a feeling in her something like compassion. She sat up and prodded it, and watched the slip of one testicle over the other; leveraged by the elastic *vas deferens*—she had started reading anatomy books—the egg-shaped organs seemed almost independently animate. She settled them, vulnerable to her touch as nestlings, on the now-crowded shelf of her closet with great care; their warm, particular odour filled her with tenderness.

The body pieces, as they arrived, were not symmetrical; the left arm arrived complete from shoulder to hand, while the right hand, wrist and forearm, elbow, upper arm and shoulder arrived independently of one another. When she tried to find a principle of division, it seemed only that the parts represented nomenclatural distinctions. A snore arrived, as loud and ripe as an elephant's, and the occasional fart, but nothing as inelegant as a spleen or an adenoid; nothing messy and interior. The collection was large enough now to exert a gravity, pulling her limbs and his into a confused *mélange*, from which she would disentangle herself on waking. She was grateful that, though accumulating and, as it were, filling in the gaps, the body parts showed no inclination to aggregate; had they assembled themselves

into one, there was no way she could lift them, let alone fit them into her closet.

Like anything that required effort not to think about, the body drove her to creative acts of distraction. Although not close to her family—she felt distanced by the things she thought they would never appreciate about her—she volunteered to help prepare her niece’s birthday party. Deflecting the usual questions about her home life, she started to hum, as she stood on a chair hanging crêpe paper and balloons.

‘You’ve gotta love somebody, you’ve gotta LOVE somebody.’ Her voice had always been quite tuneless. The image of an actress known to be approaching divorce from her fourth husband flickered past on television.

‘I really do not think beige goes with silver jewellery,’ her mother said. She was sorting the pink and the purple from packets of assorted balloons with the grim expression of someone threading a needle. ‘Warmer tones soften older skin.’

Her sister, who refused to wear a wedding ring, straightened the seams of her fawn suit and asked, ‘Don’t you think drinking adds years to a face?’

Her mother sniffed. ‘Depends on who’s doing the drinking.’ The discarded white, green, blue and black balloons lay on the floor like empty skins. ‘What do you think?’

They both looked up at her. She was uncomfortably aware she should not have chosen to wear a skirt.

‘You’ve gotta love somebody, you’ve gotta love somebody.’

‘It’s *someone*. Love *someone*.’

Her chief response to the body parts was similar to the one she would have had to some secret prosthesis—false breasts or a wig—a vague concern that no one else know, combined with a pragmatism that kept her latent repulsion locked away as securely as each limb and rib of this other. The closest she allowed herself to come to thinking about the body was to wonder, in a dispirited way, if elements small enough to escape her notice, like eyelashes, might arrive and be missed.

She experienced anxiety about the prospective arrival of mouth, eyes and the penis. The character of her anxiety about each of these ele-

ments differed; would the mouth, she wondered, in an idly intellectual fashion, be bounded by tongue and lips? If not, would she be unable to recognise it? The penis she feared explicitly to find inside her, a thought that provoked horror. She reminded herself of the benignity of the parts that had arrived so far, and their apparent incapacity to act. Even if the penis were to arrive rampant, as the language of courtly love so delightfully put it, and within her, she would still, if the trend held true, find it inactive and she would be capable of removing and dealing with it. She wondered, examining her thoughts, if she would treat the penis with the same instinct toward preservation as the other bits. She could almost imagine destroying it, and her practical fears about being discovered didn't seem to apply to something, really, so small and boneless; any residual traces would surely be able to be explained away as easily as a nosebleed.

She wondered about the hostility—no, hostility wasn't the word, defensiveness—aroused by imagining this gristly object. She tried to think of it as an artefact of pleasure—a shelf lower down in her closet held two dildos and a vibrator—and concluded that the unasked for presence of this thing, this human—for she was convinced that, once complete, the parts would assemble into a living man—was tolerable, if repellent ('survivable' was the word closest to the truth), to her as long as she could maintain some sense of her own integrity.

The arrival of the eyes was something that filled her with trepidation. Even one eye, unlidded, would signal the end of her ability to treat the body as something incapable of responding to her decisions. The intruder, she couldn't delude herself, was specifically about her—as far as she knew, no one else was subjected to this inundation of another, body part by body part; although making no specific advances, each finger and toe came for her—but so far it was in every particle passive, and by extension, accepting. The eye, she felt, would bring the possibility of judgement. To an eye, to the instrument not of her pleasure but someone else's, she feared being inadequate. She was grateful when successive visitations brought only an ear, chin, a tongue—awkward to hold—a thigh and the right hand.

Would she regret not having tried harder to think of a way to dis-

pose of the body parts, or to stop them from coming? She regretted it already, she thought, as she threw away another pair of shoes to make room in the closet. She started seeing a psychologist. Six months had passed, and not much remained to be delivered of the body—an ear, the skull, forehead and scalp, one cheek and the nose, the throat, back, one shoulder and a shin, the mouth, eyes and penis. She wanted to be prepared.

‘I have been having disturbing dreams,’ she said. ‘In them, I am always outside a burning house. Something I need is inside. Sometimes it is a book. Sometimes it is a dog, or a cat. Once it was a baby, my baby.’ The psychologist shifted, looking bored. She sensed she had been too successful in trying to render her neuroses commonplace.

‘Sometimes I am a child in my dreams. Sometimes I am wearing my nightgown. Sometimes I am wearing nothing.’

‘Last night I dreamt I was inside the house. The heat was unbearable and the smoke made my eyes sting.’

‘I am afraid I am going to dream I am on fire.’

The psychologist referred her to a doctor, for sleeping pills. It was true she was becoming insomniac, falling asleep easily in a clean, well-made bed but waking early to find herself no longer alone. She had tried, naturally, sleeping on the sofa, and even the floor, but the body followed her there, and she was too afraid of the consequences to try sleeping in someone else’s house, or a motel.

When she met a man at an office party she would have liked to take home, she began to seriously question her sanity, her reactions seemed to her so inconsistent. But how could she prefer one set of arms, one chin, to another? Every detail of the stranger’s body was familiar to her, now; the parabola of each hair on the calf, the folds in the belly, the gradation from tan to pale along the length of the upper arm. It was a familiarity that brought no understanding.

She went back to the psychologist.

‘Now I dream I am underwater. I am wearing chains. I try to wriggle them off, but I can’t. The light is receding; I am sinking.’

‘In my dreams, I swim down to myself, for rescue. As I draw close to the self in chains, she mouths “No,” and when she does, I clamp my lips

over hers and blow. Her eyes stay open, but she keeps saying “No”.

The skin of her inner thigh beneath her hand was soft and pliant; she felt sorry for herself, so incapable of excitation. The marks on the torso and leg of the stranger’s body where she burnt it with a knife held over a flame rebuked her. An earlier burn, applied to the arm, had caused it to snap like a crayfish, but the scar was healing at about the same rate she would expect from a wound on a regular person.

She experimented with laying the body parts out beside her in bed. It was difficult to arrange them into anything satisfactory: the larger number of intervals on one side made the body asymmetrical, and the pieces lay there like badly broken gingerbread.

She couldn’t sleep, and when daylight came she found the penis. It was not in her, but softly gripped by the limp hand of the arm she had first discovered beneath her. She began to cry.

When the first eye arrived, staring at her from the pillow, she tried holding the fingers of the right hand to her lips, to her breast, but could not bring herself to do so. The eye didn’t blink or move but gazed fixedly at her. When she moved out of its range of sight its immovable stare made her feel guilty and disappointing.

When the whole of him was there, the pieces did not, as she had expected, finally coalesce into a single being, active and capable of speech. Both eyes regarded her from the pillow, surrounded by the other elements of the face like so many objects spilled from a handbag. The penis was back in the left hand, and showed every indication of being aroused and complacent in its expectation of pleasure. The elements of the body lay as dormant and loosely related to one another as objects in a memory house.

She knelt on the bed, beside all this jumbled humanity. Snot ran into her mouth. ‘What am I supposed to do?’ she shouted. The ears made no change. Their tiny hairs stayed stiffly at attention. The eyes didn’t blink. She picked one eye up and tried to close her fingers over it but her hand wasn’t big enough. She slipped it into her mouth. The eye had the texture and the warmth of a newly boiled egg. She pressed it to her soft palate and swallowed, sobbing. The other eye watched with no change in expression.

She swallowed that eye next, and then the tongue. But when she tried to crunch through the cartilage of the nose, her gorge rose, and she had to run to the bathroom. She had treasured a short-lived hope that this was to be her task, to assimilate and reconstitute the body in the bag of her own skin, but there was no way she could recover the eyes, the tongue, no way to fit the six-foot length of him in. No possibility of resurrection.

Siall Waterbright was born in Denver, Colorado when Nixon was President, and moved to Australia when Whitlam was Prime Minister. Siall lives and works in Brisbane, and is completing doctoral research in creative writing. 'The textbook' is Siall's second publication in a journal with an ISSN.
