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ah session

Helen Maston

AH: I have always felt it to be wrong. To have a shape ending at right angles to an extremity is somehow an abomination.

LIZ: When you say always, do you remember when you felt this way for the first time?

AH: There was a boy at school, very good at all sports, really good looking, this was in kindergarten. Everybody liked him. I was fat and couldn't run fast or climb on the monkey bars or anything like that. I would hang upside down on the bottom bar, my hair brushing the sand, my face red, until the blood beat so hard I would fall to the ground, almost in a faint. I would watch this boy on the top bars, climbing, swinging, holding with only one hand, and sometimes with only one leg, like a real monkey. He would swing like a pendulum, then let go and grab the next bar, like he was flying, you know.

LIZ: What about this boy, A. Did something happen?

AH: We'd all watch him, he had black hair, so black it was blue in the light. And so straight, that when he hung by his leg, and his hair dropped down, it was like a moving waterfall, only black. It swayed, it was so blunt at the ends, it was a waterfall cut off before it reached the rocks. Then he'd swing up, and the hair would arc about his head like a palm tree, then drop to rest. It was amazing. We were all mesmerised. We'd all stop and watch him, and he knew we were watching, but he acted like he was the only one. Like he was the only one on earth.

LIZ: I understand how he was something extraordinary for you and for others at the time, but this was when? When you were how old?

AH: I think I must have been just four, I think, four or five. We were all just below six, anyway, because then you go to primary school, don't you?

LIZ: Can you tell me about this boy, A?

AH: We were all outside, and he was swinging on the bars, really high, everyone watching, he was like a bird, his arms were out like wings and I wanted to be with him, I knew at that moment that I could do it. I knew I could climb to the highest rail, and I grabbed the rail the second from the ground. I had never even gone that far before, but just then I felt I could do it. I think it may have been that he had his arms out, I may have thought he was calling me, asking everyone to join him, I don't know, but just at that moment I felt strong and light and agile and not fat. That's it, you know, I didn't feel fat. I get on the rails, and I just keep climbing, then I look down. Everyone's watching me, just like they watch him, but I get this buzzing in my head, it's like a spinning, so I close my eyes and just grab the rail and stop. I'm frozen. Just frozen.

LIZ: You can't move. You're frightened?

AH: I don't know. Probably. But I'm frozen. And I start screaming. I can't stop myself. I can hear it like it's coming from a long way away, like it's not me. But it won't stop. And this boy at the top, he comes swinging down to touch me, to help me, I guess, and I grab him, hold him really tight, I cling so he can't move, can't get a hold on the bars and together we swing downward, and my legs aren't holding on, all I'm holding is this boy, it's like we swoop down, like an owl and a raven, we swoop, but we don't land like birds, we crash. He crashes first and I crash on top of him, and I open my eyes and see his body under me, he's okay. Then I see his leg up on the first bar, it's hit the bar on the way down, and he's smashed his ankle, it's like it's hanging loose from his leg, its swaying just like his hair used to sway when he hung upside down. And there's blood, and we're both just looking at the pool forming on the sand.

LIZ: What happened to the boy, A?

AH: He was away for ages. When he came back he was on crutches, and the leg of his long pants flapped, flapped just like a wounded bird. His foot was missing. I remember thinking, I did that. But he never said a thing. He just grabbed the bars, and leaned his crutches against them, and climbed right up. He could still hold on with his legs, he could still swing, he could still fly.

LIZ: What about you, A? Did you climb up?

AH: I never went near the bars again. I never even looked at him again. But I remember that was about the time I started looking at my foot and wondering what it was for.

LIZ: You need it to walk.

AH: But you see, you don't. You can be the same, better, without it. And how ugly. Look. The leg is straight, smooth, curved, then this sharp turn, this nobby thing, with horrible fat lumps on the end. And the lumps can't even live on their own, they have to have a casing, like a snail. They're like fat white snails with their heads sticking out. They are disgusting. Look at the veins, in the white skin. Look at the heel, course and round, the skin rough, the ankle, bones jutting. Just when you think the leg is swooping, it's cut off by the appendage. I can't bear it. I want it gone. I cannot live without it gone.

LIZ: How do you live now, A?

AH: I don't really live. I Work, I go to Work, but I know everyone looks at me, they think I'm disgusting. They think I'm fat and disgusting. I know they would talk to me if I didn't have this thing. I try to hide it. I wrap it in bandages, until it looks like a plaster cast, I have crutches, I don't even use it. I don't need it. I could live it you could just say yes, say I can have it off.

LIZ: It's not really up to me, A. I can assess you, but I can't actually force anyone to operate. What about before the accident, A, how did you feel about yourself then?

AH: You know, I've always disliked my extremities. I wrote a poem about them, when we were asked to write about something really important, and the best ones would go in the school magazine. They wouldn't publish mine, and the teacher even had a counsellor visit our house to talk with my parents, but nothing came of it. Perhaps if they had understood, they would have given me the operation then, and I wouldn't have had to try and do it myself. Do you want to hear it?

LIZ: Well, okay, A. But I would really like to know how you felt about yourself before the incident with the boy. Perhaps you can tell me later.

AH: Here it is then. I remember it by heart:

Oh run
Oh jump
Who has a stump
Instead of a leg.
I am unfortunate.
I shall have to pay
To dip my legs
In a bay
Full of acid.
And then they shall depart
I'll be a
Work of art
They'll have to carry me round in a cart.
Guess why?
No legs have I.

What do you think?