

Macushla Robinson →

Skin hunger

I am alarmed by everything which appears to alter the Image. I am, therefore, alarmed by the other's fatigue: it is the cruelest of all rival objects. How to combat exhaustion? I can see that the other, exhausted, tears off a fragment of this fatigue *in order to give it to me*. But what am I to do with this bundle of fatigue set down before me? What does this gift mean? *Leave me alone? Take care of me?* No one answers, for what is given is precisely *what does not answer*.

– Roland Barthes

When we switched to online teaching I felt the age-gap grow wider.

Students half listening, pupils flickering across a gamut of open tabs, fingers scrolling. Their faces reveal more than they could know – softening and hardening on screen. One student's video is always turned off, and I can hear that she is laying down by the tenor of her voice. Others exchange messages, and I can see the rhythm of their exchange from the way that they smile to themselves in relay, one and then the other. Students with poor connections disappear and send frantic emails—kicked out of the meeting—logging back in—giving up—please send me a recording.

The Sisyphean task of holding a conversation.

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In the first few weeks, a face I don't recognize appears on screen. I find the button to eject him from the meeting. From one of the darkened boxes, the sounds of porn ricochet into the room, a man's voice screaming *you-fat-dumb-bitch* while

she fake-cums.

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A student sends a note at the end of the semester. *The best thing about this has been seeing the inside of other people's houses.* Teaching should be hospitable, I know, but I miss closing the door behind me when I get home.

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The zoom meeting, we are told, has adverse psychological effects. Technical glitches heighten our already acute sense of isolation. The New York Times tells us that “The problem is that the way the video images are digitally encoded and decoded, altered and adjusted, patched and synthesized introduces all kinds of artifacts: blocking, freezing, blurring, jerkiness and out-of-sync audio.” (Kate Murphy, April 29)

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The stop-motion of your facial expressions no longer aligns with your words, and your words themselves are chopped up and interwoven with digital silences. I feel enraged, as though your digital stutter is just another way of leaving me behind.

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Despite giving us an image to gaze upon, somehow the video conference lacks the intimacy of the telephone. We no longer cradle the phone between head and shoulder. In 1999 someone wrote that this gesture could be fatal; a French psychiatrist who spent more than an hour with a phone between his left ear and shoulder ruptured his carotid artery.

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The quiet liveliness of skin on skin; silence that is not a glitch but a fulness.

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Yet the voice still touches. When we speak, the air vibrates. Our voices are the sonic register of the diaphragm expanding and contracting, pulling in and pushing out, the esophagus pinching and squeezing, the jaw and tongue modulating our exhalations, making breath into language.

That vibration is picked up, encoded, relayed, decoded. No longer a continuous stream of words, our speech is divided into data ‘packets’ which only get sorted out at the other end. The other end of what? From tower to tower to undersea cable and back again, slung through concrete data bunkers in the desert, re-assembled. How many transmutations until we don’t recognize each other?

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Nevertheless, your reassembled voice tells me you’re still breathing.

It tells me you’re exhausted. Barthes lamented the exhaustion on the other end of the phone—“that *almost nothing* of the loved and distant voice”—the fade out. Now we fade in, returning each other’s calls, without much to say but *I’m exhausted. Can’t you hear how exhausted I am?*

Barthes: *Nothing more lacerating than a voice at once beloved and exhausted.*

There is fatigue in talking at all, chasing after half-finished sentences: backtracking—disconnecting—this isn’t working—let me hang up and call you again. Can you hear me?

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All I want, if I am lonely, is to be alone.