

FACTS

It is a frightful fact that one body can contain another. Herman thinks of all the ways it is happening already within him, how his life is attuned to the insidious other self that lies dormant,
 waiting to begin his final transformation.

OFFICE CHAIRS

Herman sits next to Antoinette, who sits opposite the doctor.

Between them is a desk

so large they tilt forward to listen. *It's not safe for you to continue,*

the doctor is saying. *The burden is too great.*

Herman rests his arms against the corner of the desk, guarding
the tender parts of himself.

The doctor is bald and his scalp winks at them like a phantom star
where it catches the light.

I can always get another doctor, says Antoinette.

Herman's chair is high-backed,

ergonomic and puzzled out for someone else's body. It moves with squeaking
reproach on the black carpet squares.

It won't change the facts, says the doctor.

A large strip of light

in the ceiling hums above them. Behind them, the examination table
is covered in a pristine length of paper.

It reminds Herman of a child's painting before the first handprint
has been committed.

You're trying to stop me having a baby, says Antoinette.

I'm prioritising your health.

Herman struggles on the too-high seat to wheel his chair closer to Antoinette,
flailing for balance

as he propels himself with the tips of his toes. He places his hand on Antoinette's knee.

She looks down at it,

this half-limp, half-beautiful thing that sits now on her lap like a snared rat.

Nettie, he whispers. *Nettie.*

Her shoulders slacken at the sound of his voice.

We can get through this, Herman says.

Antoinette leans in, digging her face into Herman's armpit. The doctor pushes
a box of tissues

across the desk with the point of his pen. Antoinette grabs two handfuls
and blows her nose.

Nettie, it's time to go home. Herman fetches their bags and they leave, clumped in the inextricable knot of marriage.

FRIDAY NIGHT TAKE-AWAY

They take turns choosing. Herman is rather partial to the local Thai restaurant.

Antoinette cycles through

the Italian, Indian, and Vietnamese places the next suburb across.

Over dinner

Herman and Antoinette talk about their children,

the children they are planning:

what they will call them, who they will be, how they will raise them.

They commit to doing a better job

than their parents. By this, Herman suspects, they each mean something different.

Antoinette had a happy childhood,

full of sunshine and hope for the future. Herman thinks Antoinette will

give their kids everything she had and more.

Herman's most vivid childhood memory, by contrast, is red. He recalls the way it filled the world when he hid behind his eyelids.

But his red guard failed to protect him from the bruising grip of his father.

He makes a mental list

of what else was passed down to him:

–How to be invisible.

–How to conceal a bruise.

–How to clean a house.

–How to keep from falling off the edge of hunger.

–That being invisible is impossible.

What Herman means by better is less of the genetic inheritance he fears within himself.

CURTAINS

Herman returns home with Antoinette on the Friday of the doctor's news.

The day is bright.

Light blunders through the red curtains, embarrassing the walls of the lounge room with a sanguine tint.

Antoinette hasn't said a word since they left the doctor's office.

Herman takes no consolation

in the sounds that jostle and elbow through the thin walls of their apartment.

He hears their neighbour on the phone, the restrained hum of his monologue;

the shrill cries of bugs worshipping the pre-noon sun;

the squeals and laughter

of children playing in the back lane. Antoinette sits in the dark, unmoved even by the sudden ferocity of a ball

slapping their back fence. She looks up at him, blinded by the heartbreak,

wrapped in crepe bandage and sheltering from a world that cascades slow,

like chilled molasses, upon those already drowning.

I'll make us a cup of tea, says Herman.

BAGUETTES

In the kitchen, Herman saws down the middle of a bread stick
with the cold precision

of serrated steel, digs his fingers in and spreads its halves
like a dissected mouse, disembowelling

the soft white innards and forcing fistfuls between his teeth.

The click of the kettle boiled

draws Herman back, back into those unresolved things that perhaps
dishevelling his brunch

took him some way toward solving.