

Giraffes

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Early in my working life, I was employed in an unusual factory. It is hard to describe what the factory made. It was a kind of collectible art that was already old.

It was through this physical labour on a production line that my understanding of labour and production took form, and I have often felt this to be a strange distinction in my subsequent work in places where my body hasn't mattered but where the physicality of the idea of labour has operated a metaphor without which my exertion wouldn't have existed. It was through this physical irrelevance that I began to wonder if it was on the production line that I came to be in a body at all. This took many years to synthesize as a conscious question, at the gym, around a gesture I made with a paper towel.

I had produced this towel from a dispenser and spritzed it in a deliberate, even pattern with a cleaner from an adjacent bracket in order to wipe down some equipment I had been using.

The wet drape of it summoned something that had lain dormant in my body's memory, and as I turned back towards the equipment, I laterally flipped the towel in half around my two opposing, extended index fingers. This was meaningful as an end in itself—though in this specific moment, my flip-fold was also the expression of wanting to have sex with another person in the facility, in whom I sensed the capacity to value and desire the confidence and skill with which I pivoted my body one hundred and eighty degrees while flipping a wet rag end onto end, perfectly, in a decisive movement.

In the factory a rag had been a vital tool, and its handling had the potential to define a person. Years later I was still defining myself through that movement.

My childhood had produced someone who was at odds with a body. Exchanging what it could do, for a wage, was an experiment through which I reproduced myself in a mold that helped me to understand the people who produced my childhood—people who were perhaps who they were because they had been less in control of these exchanges.

I studied art, but the factory job was *real* work, and I wasn't not making art. This was a joke I thought I was in on—because I made it—and yet I soon felt

productive in the way one can only feel productive from making a *product*. And I felt satisfied in the way one can feel satisfied to overwrite a complicated thing with something simple.

I had never felt much extrinsic pressure to stand out, but I had always hoped that there would eventually be something at which I would be naturally virtuosic, perhaps some sort of instrument or set of tools I could pick up that would animate me, that would extend my body beyond what it was and make sense of it. Making art was what I did most competently, but I would seize with the dread of exposing what it was I wanted to express. On the production line, I moved freely with the tools I used best to a rhythmic ongoingness that was intoxicating to someone with my inherited desire for stability. A non-threatening horizon formed from a vague notion of how long it would take, at my wage, to pay off my student debt, delimiting a before and an after in which I found possibility.

The pieces we manufactured were collectible and therefore equal in uniqueness. Their sameness came from a dimensionality in which they were each situated somewhere between a small pet and a trade paperback, from a proportionality to each other that enabled their arrangement in a grid in a foyer or wall niche, and—perhaps most importantly—from an overall aesthetic that denied their production in a contemporary factory. If they had ever belonged to a commodity circuit, all participants in the circuit were long dead. Like real antiques, they only became themselves when you saved them. Through this purchase, something essential and unique to you was expressed. They were only there because of you.

Only—they were only there because of *us*. That *we* brought them into being and *we* made them already-old charged the space where we did this with what didn't reconcile. It afforded us a dignity of common sense that came at the expense of our sense of time and place, a disorientation that was magnified by how unusual it was that the factory existed then and there, at a point in history when products like the ones we made were usually made elsewhere. Still, producing a thing that negated me was an absurdity in which I could live comfortably, by being simply conductive—the *how* freed from the *why*. I had wanted to extend beyond my body, and I did this as the extension and expression of the body of the factory.

Our production began in the dusty precinct of the factory's pouring department, where objects were cast out of plaster by a cohort of sturdy workers that were never

not in motion doing heavy and resistant tasks, one after the other. After setting, the objects were sprayed with an acrylic coating, to make them resemble porcelain, by a single worker in a special booth. This person had to have a long, strong, and perfectly regulated arm. Some of the objects would then be detailed with paint, decals, or metallic leaves by groups of specialized workers who worked under severe lights in tight, controlled positions that made them appear small—an appearance that had created a preference for hiring small people into those roles.

A stamper worked in isolation with a very toxic ink, in a tent that had the presence of a doghouse when it was not forgotten altogether. An imprecise stamp could not be corrected, so this task produced more spoilage than any other. The context never didn't provide a cause for dismissal, and as such it was a penal one—and yet the stamper was the only worker who determined their own breaks.

After detailing, the product came to the finishing department where I worked. It was the work of finishing to make the objects timeworn. Because we did not have time itself, we ravaged the objects with other tools and materials to impart on them their characteristic stains, fades, and corruptions, and their appearance of having been pieced back together or riddled with fine fissures as though liable to shatter. We did our work on large, wheeled tables—on which we conveyed the product to different facilities designed both for the application of our various treatments and for compliance with the regulations protecting us from the effects of those treatments on our bodies.

No one kind of body distinguished finishers, but it was a common aspect of our bodies that they were generally outsized and outweighed by everything in the environment, as though we had inherited the space from another type of worker whose disappearance went unexplained. Sufficient force required us to build up steam, to be spring-loaded, or to already be in motion.

The focal length of the body's movements was alternately widening and narrowing. Broad, sweeping gestures gave way to brisk, impatient agitations with a rag or a brush, intersewn with more delicate, focused movements—small, accented gestures and flicks of the wrist. Loud interludes occurred as objects were flipped onto their other sides. Then there was a defiant thrusting or a defeated lurching or a sometimes-possible joyous abandonment with which a table would be conveyed to the next specialized workstation, or away to the shipping department. Tables were difficult to move without some kind of emotional impetus.

We sometimes talked. This required us to pull down the respirators we wore to protect us from the organic vapour of the finishes we used. We talked about what

we were reading and watching and cooking and what we were planning to do after work that day, and when we quit. We talked about where we were at in life and in our relationships. We also browbeat each other's techniques, gossiped about workers who were not present, derided management, and argued savagely about what music to play on a small, pointless stereo. But our deepest awareness of each other was through movement.

Who people were could be sensed in the carefulness or the insouciance with which they handled what they were making, which would emerge against a secondary axis of ease and unease. Movement was intrinsic to any feeling one felt about a coworker, because it was their movement that signaled their presence in the far reaches of the room, through spattered panels, or in the sensitive interstices around a set of uncomfortable goggles.

How someone flip-folded their rag with a wet snap, or daubed their work carefully and earnestly, or held an object like it was a baby animal while fixing a flaw, or scowled above a mist conjured from a vigorous set of gestures with a spray can, or shifted their weight to a compelling time signature as they operated the paint sprayer, or tore open a set of curtains melodramatically, or oversteered and released their three-hundred-pound table so it curved—as though of its own volition—around the tent that the *homo sacer*-like figure of the stamper resided within, or balletically side-stepped that oversteered table, could be extremely erotic or repulsive.

A coworker came over to my house to have sex. We had shared some ideas verbally, but their allure was a loose, painterly confidence and a characteristic way they had of flipping the objects around to work on their other sides: two at a time, and with air. I was doing my best work in the vicinity of this person, losing myself but also feeling entirely self-possessed in the rhythm with which I did the things I knew how to do—like stepping around a table and delivering just the right amount of stain to each part of it, in perfectly landed spiral flicks with a brush that I held by the very end of its handle. It felt only natural that this feeling would translate to a more improvisatory setting.

What instead came naturally was something that I was unable to accept was only the result of my limited knowledge of the conventions of sexuality between adults. It would take time to come to terms with the abrupt ending I imposed on our encounter, and to understand that what had attracted me to this person was in fact the obstacle: their ease. What came easily, and had never not come easily, to this person stood in the way of a shared understanding of what doing a thing, of *being able* to do that thing, and being able *to decide* to do that thing, could mean.

I coopted my coworker's air-flip even after they were promoted and suggested I quit because it was too awkward then sanctioned me to my least favourite work when I didn't quit. I had already worked at the factory long enough to recognize the kind of ambition that I had only to outlast. Until then I would enjoy what could please me in itself, like this style of flip, which allowed me to let the thing I was responsible for out of my grip for just a moment.

Some bodies were less at ease, and I began to notice those bodies more. Our sick days were unpaid, so all of us at one time or another would come to work sick and try to assume the presence of a dead plant or something else natural to that setting that was stationary. Other bodies moved slowly, unevenly, or in a stiff, incremental way that evoked an exoskeleton; the inability to move the top and bottom of the body independently of one another without pain was a common side effect of steering heavy, rolling things. Braces proliferated—around the waist and knees and especially on the wrists, and what had been flicks of those wrists had to now be interpreted through larger movements of the arm and shoulder. My joints made new, unnerving noises I couldn't unhear. This was a job that, when you did it for a long time, could change the body permanently.

There was a discredited theory of evolution, predating the theory of natural selection, that I had learned about in high school Biology, that I preferred for the possibility I felt from its wrongheadedness. It was illustrated in my textbook with a figure of giraffes who, in two panes—a before and an after—strained their necks towards the high foliage of an acacia tree. The *before* giraffes had short, thick necks, and the *after* giraffes had necks attenuated to reach leaves with more ease. They were the same giraffes. They had evolved within the span of their own lifetimes and would pass their differences on.

The giraffes had the unreadable expression of an animal that is not at the top of the food chain—an animal that, when it observes you directly, does not face you—an expression that asked questions. What was an adaptation and what was an injury? On what did that depend? And aren't there so many things in life to which we are drawn, that we think we need to live, that actually *prevent* our thriving? In a world that doesn't just take or leave us, what is our responsibility as bodies? What is sovereignty, and what is sacrifice?

These were questions that pain had the potential to answer, if only what pain was didn't hang in the balance of what the answers were. Still, that a being as beautiful and odd as a giraffe might not necessarily have evolved in its own best interests, but might instead be the expression of an inheritance of best guesses, was stirring.

I would think of the giraffes as the weight of my respirator bent my gaze down towards my work. Familiarity and agitation constantly duelled in my cervical spine, each holding the other to blame, and I would wonder if what I was feeling wasn't pain so much as irreconcilability. My rhomboid muscles contracted into a more acute form of this paradox when I would reach for the objects that were furthest away on my table.

I found myself in an odd position in the spray booth one day. Some of my fingers could no longer operate of their own accord, and I had to use my non-dominant hand to hold down a finger from my dominant hand onto the nozzle of a spray can in order to deploy a mist of Varathane. A coworker happened upon me and laughed. I too laughed when I imagined myself in their eyes. But I also felt, about my body, what one feels when they see an ant carrying a dead ant.

Having never gotten worse at doing anything I had gotten good at, I was constitutionally confused. I only knew how to try harder, and this made my problems worsen. Then, an inducement came from a two-part spray treatment that was introduced to treat a new series of pieces in the collection. I wasn't sure which part I reacted to: the solution that contained a latent heavy metal or the catalyst that brought its metallic properties forth. I became immobilized by the concentration required to overcome the desire to tear myself out of my histamine-engorged skin. In the end, it was the body of the factory from which I emerged.

I took a job that had been described to me as “answering a phone,” but I was pleasantly surprised that it entailed relating to people and judging complex situations to coordinate the solutions to problems. To be gainfully employed making something—problems—go away felt restorative, *magical* even, and drew upon a body of ideas and values that was desperate to be called to action. Still, I developed a recurring nightmare about the phone that I now had to answer. This phone would appear, its *bold* light blinking brightly, and I would realize with horror that I had left someone hanging, waiting for an answer. With each recurrence, the horror amplified on itself—because it was still the same person left hanging. I was somehow on both ends of this line. The dreams slowly subsided in the time it took to process that I would not return to the factory. I paid off my student debt, which concurred with an increase in my rent.

A truck collided with my bicycle, which I was riding home from an overtime shift. The person driving the truck was on the job, delivering pallets, and turning a corner that I was not turning. The pallets—which were not all contained by the same restraint but tied together as groups, one group to another, with an unobvious arrangement of bungee cords—loomed over my body as I lay in it on the curb, as if considering me, before settling back into their intended configuration. The driver was standing beside their truck with fearful eyes: “This is exactly why I waited till now, because I didn’t want this to happen!” I did not immediately realize this referred to the late hour and did not need to be a riddle.

The driver’s insurance paid for a physiotherapist who, with each visit, would add more exercises to a list of therapeutic exercises that I had to do for the rest of my life. The exercises had names like *Dead Bug*, *Happy Baby*, and *Idiot’s Shoe-Tie* that lent them a kind of collectability.

I became a member of a community centre gym, and this restored to me a predictable setting where my body would do the thinking and would know what to do. I *paid* to do this labour, and I did it for my own purposes. The execution of my *Dead Bugs* felt full of a value that could accumulate.

The gym was a space full of people who were all in some kind of dialogue with themselves about their bodies, each propelled by a unique set of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to interact with objects and equipment that stood in for other things, individuals, and relativities in the world outside of the gym. Looking around, it seemed probable that some of these dialogues were not healthy—inasmuch as one can judge a maladaptation from an adaptation when someone only becomes who they are through it. There is a suspension of judgement one can enter into that provides a natural indemnity against other judgement, and I entered into it. I found a profound sense of communion—even with the gymgoers who were annoying.

It was in fact the most annoying gymgoers who I found the most fascinating—those whose approaches were expressed through the extremes of exertion and endurance as a kind of loud factory production in which the equipment they operated was manufacturing their own exceptional bodies. This seemed to both conquer and reproduce something at the same time, and that we might *all* have a freedom that hung in the balance of figuring out what that was made them impossible to ignore. That they performed made them seem the most different from me, but then—there was my flip-fold of my paper towel.

My flip-fold was masterful on a different register, and it was performed for a select audience—that other gymgoer. We encountered each other constantly in the

same set of spaces, and a comedy was developing between us that had the potential to span many genres of comedy. Its premise was that we had all of the same injuries, and that we were likely receiving treatment from the same physiotherapist.

Without dialogue, we established sequences of moving around one another so as not to collide or crush parts of each other underfoot, and we began to furnish each other with foam rollers and stability balls at the moments we knew the other needed them. We developed a range of acknowledging looks with which we identified each other's exercises and agreed not to say their names aloud, as though in reference to a silent conversation we were having about the hilarious relentlessness of the forces that hold human dignity under siege. Inevitably I began imagining hot sex with this person in the lateral coital alignment position and in other positions recommended and developed by sex researchers for injured people. We would choose them without having to explain their purpose or how to get into them and would choose them by preference when we no longer needed them. This part of the relationship remained speculative in order to preserve the assurance of a space that made it possible.

I had thought this was a space where a person came to do one of two things: to change one's body or to protect that body against change. But there was something else that was possible—which was to find the body's terms with which it could accept what can't be helped. These movements were the least easy, and I knew I had the most to learn from the gymgoers who made them. They were not all older than me.

I now knew more about how—through the constant reminder of most of the things in the world—the possibility of an other less painful or more compliant body can reside within your current body, and how what you feel can be in suspension between the two. This made possible the body from which I would remember this one, a body that would come to be in an increasing agonism with its surroundings as it fell out of the fit it had fallen into by default. These shifts were already underway in my temperament, and the potential for a perverse kind of thriving had begun to be revealed. It seemed that the trick was to be at odds with the world, but not to be at odds with the body. I felt drawn towards the people who could teach me.

I asked the gym staff to take down a poster that said *You Earn Your Body*, and they agreed with me its message was not right. Another poster that said *You Deserve Your Body* was more elusive to us in the expanded economy of what is deserved versus what is earned. To what body did the eyes of this voice that knows what you deserve belong?

Indebted as it was to so much untraceable production, this poster accumulated the work of *many* bodies—ending with the community centre worker who found

its image online and brought it forth from an office inkjet. I found my coexistence with this second poster by deciding its words were most compelling when they came from no body at all.

I learned through former coworkers about a number of complaints against my former employer. Pieces in customers' collections had been shattering in the hotter climates of the southern United States, where they are popular home decor. Pourers working under the factory's quota system had been adding excess water to their plaster, which made it set faster but also made it brittle. This had perhaps gone on for years.

I now work in an office, in a school—the same school where I studied art—which recently relocated to the district where the factory still is. Developers have secured the surrounding area as investment property. What beneath us feels like solid ground was once a tidal flat sustaining another kind of life, including the lives of people from whom the land was stolen. This was not so long ago as to precede the history of the bodies of everyone we have known. What that theft made happen is still in motion all around us, creating an always-new landscape in which we wonder what thriving is. Thriving is what it is my job to help the people who study at the school do. We can only make our best guesses at what that looks like. Rents and tuition are rising, and the work that is available to them to pay these costs is always asking for more risks—asking on the premise of the capacity of bodies to regenerate, whether or not those bodies are theirs.

I feel for them a fury that is perhaps also a correct response, delayed and displaced, about a place of work for which I still feel an affection, having found my own body there. Wherever the truth of my feeling lies, it does satisfy me that the things we made, that—wherever they are—are only there because of us, are going to explode.