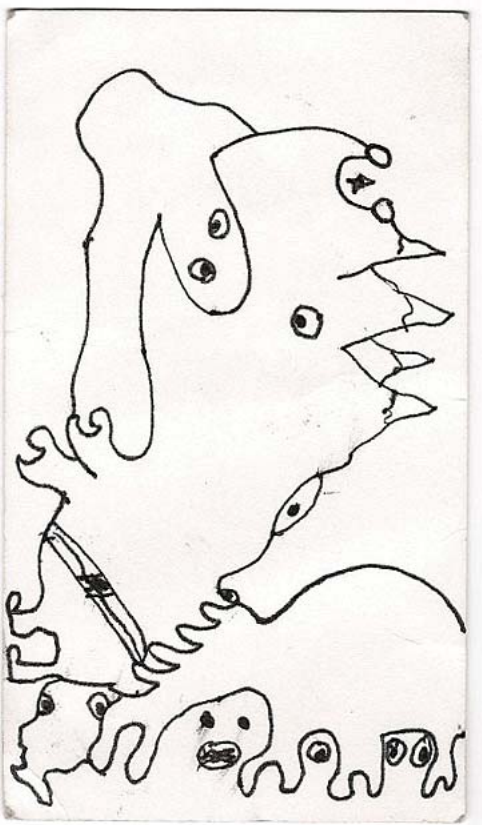


science
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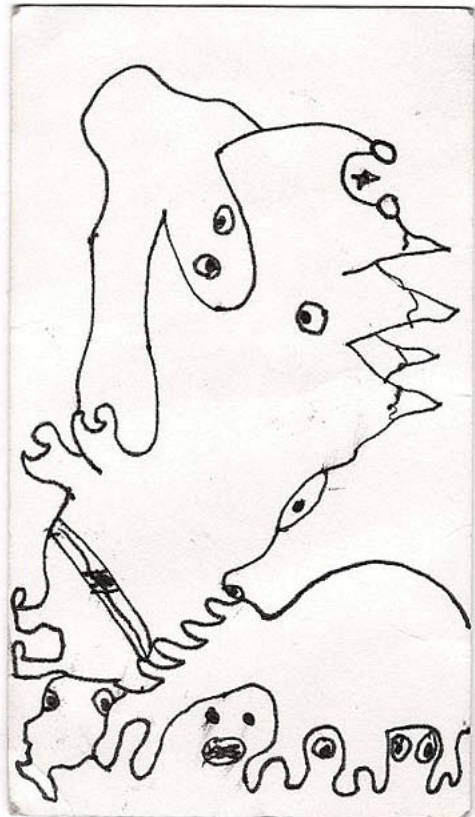


Ben Segal



Ben Segal

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Science Fiction Pornography is the 22nd edition of Chapbook Genius. Visit www.PublishingGenius.com for the archives.

Publishing Genius
2200 Maryland Ave C1
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Alternate versions of "Youth and Beauty," "The Pork Shunter's Fingers" and "The Future Accoutrements" appeared previously in *Abjective*, *Eyeshot* and *Ghost Island*, respectively.

Cover image by the author.

PG Chapbook Genius 022
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Before Bed

Our house is covered in tentacles.

It grew them from its doors and windows. It grew them overnight, on the hot wet night last summer. You know, the night when we (she and I) went to bed (together) and pretended the touching of skin during sleep was accidental.

They, those long clammy tentacles, they snake from the house and thicken.

She thought it was (is) my fault. She tells me she wishes she could blame someone else.

Outside, the weather is notable. Those tentacles languish there; we here.

There's something else that is wrong and unnerving.

So I'm cutting them. I'm mowing those tentacles. I'm bagging them and selling them to the school lunch program.

She's retiring, tired, inviting.

I tell her she ought to come quickly, which of course she does. I recline on the divan. She makes a few scissor snips and gathers her ribbons. They tie damp and warm on my skin. We aren't wearing clothes. Well, it's a mess here, and other reasons.

After, she sits on my chest and sews me back up. She asks me about last night and I tell her about pounding. She'd stayed in and watched a movie. After all, there's something to be said for domesticity.

Science Fiction Pornography

stories by Ben Segal

| | |
|----|---|
| 03 | The Future Accoutrements |
| 05 | It Was a Bad Year Except for the Sex |
| 09 | The Pork Shunters Fingers |
| 13 | Sexual Encounter as Degenerations |
| 15 | Interests |
| 17 | Youth and Beauty |
| 21 | Biography, After Research |
| 23 | Slice Up Your Face, but Leave Those Ribbons Hanging |
| 25 | After Bed |

Slice Up Your Face, but Leave Those Ribbons Hanging

You know, when that man said ‘beef curtains’, the first thing I thought of was Francis Bacon. I told him “I don’t think those are curtains at all.” What he said was “Fag.”

So I didn’t expect to be fast friends or friendly even. I didn’t expect him to repeatedly ask me to pound his fist, which means to push my own against his. Well, apparently the interlocking of knuckles is some kind of magic.

We pursued our own ends in the same closed space. The lighting was poor. We pounded hard, repeatedly. We failed in our goals. Maybe not him, but I certainly did.

So I came home and saw she’d sent me the bouquet of razors, neatly tied. The card is what said it, “Slice up your face, but leave those ribbons hanging. I want to come over and tie your wrists and ankles with them.” Twenty minutes later my face looks like bloody tentacles, venetian skin blinds, pale beef curtains. I think about the pounding man and his euphemisms, his smooth skin, the naturalness of his graphic t-shirt.

3)

Afterwards, before now but afterwards, what happened was not so hard to see.

4)

The house they live in is as old as he is. She's younger, slightly.

She's in the leather chair. They don't have much skin left between them, so they like to sit in the skin of others.

5)

I didn't ask him about that. She wanted to volunteer it. I wouldn't listen and could see too much of her veins.

The Future Accoutrements

1)

There are Sylvia, Gabby, Alfred, all naked, back-rubbing. There is a long and telescoping tentacle capped with a prosthetic silicon hand. This is the time of full-body electrolysis and well-trimmed nails. The nails on these people are short and rounded.

The tentacle is steel. It comes in 6-inch segments of steel and comes out of the ceiling. It comes down from the ceiling and kneads its fingers into the muscular knots that these people make in themselves. This is a distressing room and what Sylvia thinks is this is a distressing room. Sylvia tends to pronounce her soft 'i's as hard 'e's.

2)

You and Sylvia have made a kind of bond or alliance that is based on mutual distrust and carnal attraction. You are carrying your mother's name into the skin of her back because otherwise forgetting is too easy.

There's no sign of Gabby or Alfred. It's only you and Sylvia and the hand tentacle. Sylvia is stretched out and faced down. She's the next thing for

you to clean and disinfect in a long series of objects for cleansing and disinfection.

3)

Gabby's spreading out fingers on the skin of your chest. Sylvia's staring at you and hating you or (and) the hurt in her back. Sylvia is a better person than you are. Sylvia is snipping off your toes and screwing in tiny metal replacement tentacles.

Biography, After Research

1)

The oldest man I know is the oldest man we know, is the oldest man or woman any of us know; is so old, we know.

I feed him food. Free scraps + stolen vitamins keep him well preserved.

He says you can only die if you pay for things. Which is to say, his life isn't spent.

2)

He loved her so he sloughed off her skin with that lufa and that pumice stone.

They were in the volcanic hot spring. They were wearing bathing suits that fit them.

She was asking for it, literally. She was saying those words through her little mouth.

It Was a Bad Year Except for the Sex

Gold teeth sat on the clean countertop. They weren't hers, but she popped them in. Her regular enamel ones hid behind the gold so she could have teeth rows. In this way and others, she was like a shark.

She was happy with her pretty gold teeth. She liked smiling now that her mouth shone. Her dress was pretty also. Her mouth and dress were pretty.

That ought to be enough.

Like so many things this is sex, sex, sex-based. There is an undercurrent of violence also. There are some knives sheering skin from bone, a few hollow-tip bullets shrapneling through the bodies of children, some knuckles crashing into imploding jaws. The street below the apartment building with all of this is cruel and bloodied. That's the background or the milieu. That's the contrast to the softness of their bodies and movement.

She knew this one secret, which was how to go crawl into his quiet bedroom while Thomas was fast asleep and then curl herself into his crevices. The secret was he knew exactly what she was doing. It only stayed a secret for so long.

Up in the apartment, Thomas's tongue caught between her rows of teeth. The catalog of ensuing liquids was too extensive to recount. Her name was Irene and by morning she was gone.

* * *

This was the year of the Child Wars. Thomas and Irene were fucking in secret. On the street, the children hid behind barricades and savaged each other. This was a brutal and bad year. The next year would be the year of the Kindly Urquates and it couldn't come fast enough.

Thomas stretched out in his bed, aroused, waiting out the bad year. Irene was sending him dirty text messages and they were all true. Irene was becoming more and more like a shark. She'd found another set of gold teeth. This time they were inlaid with diamonds. She added them to her mouth, smiled, and shone and sparkled. She texted Thomas: "Every time I hear a child dying it has me wanting you with my mouth."

* * *

Night came and went, again and again, as it does. It was September. Irene taught her incoming students exactly what it said in the Pre-Calculus book. Thomas realized he hadn't been clothed since late spring. Thomas was independently wealthy and didn't need to work. Irene had fewer and fewer students every week.

Thomas waited out her school days until Irene could return and hold him. She straddled him and they listened for the screaming of her students. It was surprisingly rhythmic. "That sounds like Jonathan." she would say. Or: "That sounds like Tiffany." And usually she was right. And the sex was good for both of them.

* * *

"Merry Christmas."

"Oh, thank you. Merry Christmas to you also."

I smile and close the door. We should have given them something. Now we are indebted. I will have to buy chocolate covered pretzels and wrap them in cellophane and place them in our neighbor's mailbox.

Upstairs, my wife is calling to me to ask who was at the door. I tell her what happened and she agrees about the pretzels and cellophane. She also tells me to throw away the bonemeal paste. She tells me it is disgusting and we don't know where the bones come from. She's right, so I seal the lid tightly and lay it on the top of the garbage in our kitchen trash can.

When night comes though, I can't sleep and the lights are on in our neighbor's house. I can see their silhouettes cast against their window shades. I think I can see our neighbors' daughter dancing. I can see a form moving and I imagine it is her. It's hard to tell what is happening exactly. My wife is sleeping soundly in her usual nightgown. I think about waking her and pointing out the figures in the window next-door, but instead I go to the trash can in the kitchen and take out the little tub marked "For Faces."

I take off the lid and can smell the paste. It smells strong. Like someone is slowly cooking a pot of stew. I scoop out a large gob of the paste with my index and middle fingers and leave the tub on the tiled island in kitchen. Of course the thing to do next is to go back upstairs and tuck myself into bed and gently massage the bonemeal paste into the skin of my wife's sleeping face.

"This is very good lemonade. Mother and Father never make their own."

I can hear her mother and father grinding the bones in the concrete pit behind the fence between our houses.

"Where do you get your bones? For the paste I mean, not the bones in your body. I know where those are from."

Our neighbors' daughter sips on her straw and looks at me with both eyes.

"Different places. The same places as other bones I suppose." She crosses her legs and continues on the lemonade until it is empty and then she calls me over to retrieve my glass. We both say, "Thank you," which may or may not mean anything.

*

Our neighbors are all youthful and beautiful. We hear them all of the time, driving home in pick-up trucks loaded down with bones, pulling into their gravel driveway at all hours of the night. I still don't know where they go for the bones. My wife thinks I am too nosy and should just leave them be. I think she is afraid of what might happen if I find out too much.

Because, you see, we don't know where the bones come from. I don't just mean that we don't know their provenance. We don't even know what kind of animal they are from.

*

Outside it is too cold for lemonade now because it is Christmas time. Our neighbors' daughter is standing on our front steps ringing our doorbell. She is just holding her finger down against the button and waiting for us to answer. She is holding in her smooth open hand a small plastic tub of paste on the exterior of which is neatly hand-lettered the phrase, "For Faces."

She stares at me without saying anything at first. I take the tub from her hands and lift the lid slightly. The paste is well mixed and has an even consistency, but I can see the flecks of bone studding it like those exfoliating micro-beads in my apricot facial scrub.

Once, in the morning before school, Irene scoured the street and found a set of false teeth in the mouth of a dead little boy. She wiped them off on the hem of her pretty skirt and slid them in in front of the others. These teeth were a little chipped, but they gleamed like cut glass.

Her remaining students huddled in factions, wore flak jackets and helmets. They sniped at each other between problem sets. The announcement came one day during lunch. There would be no further classes until the year was out. Irene hurried back to Thomas and was atop him by mid-afternoon.

So they got to touch out the rest of the year without the distractions of employment. It was a bad year, but they'd both had worse.

Youth and Beauty

Our neighbors take the bonemeal from the powder of crushed up bones and mix it with brine and a small amount of lard, then they grind it all into a paste that they spread on their faces and the faces of their children. Our neighbors and their children wear the bonemeal paste under their eyes the way athletes do to deflect the glare of stadium lights.

They have a daughter who must be nearly 18 now and is very pretty. She likes to watch us when we bathe the dog in the backyard or weed the weeds in the vegetable garden. She sits still on a very tall chair that lifts her above the fence between our houses. She tells us things.

“We like the bonemeal paste because it seeps proteins into our skin to keep us youthful and beautiful. Look at my mother. She is stunning.”

“What are you doing up on the very tall chair?”

“I’m hoping you’ll offer me something to drink. I’m oh so thirsty.”

I give her a lemonade. She gives me a wink and produces a thin plastic straw from the breast pocket of her overalls.

The Pork Shunter's Fingers

1) The Thorough Description of Several Years

She shunted along the pork cube down past her position on the inspection trough. Nothing was green, nothing was crawling. Nothing ever was, so the cubes greased their own way down, past the shunting women and into packaging.

Her name was Margaret and she worked as the last shunting woman in the quality inspection line, which meant that all the green or crawling things had already been alerted on and redirected well before any product ever reached her at the Final Approval station. So she passed on the slippery meat, silently, cube by cube with the flat end of a metal prod. Nobody talked much at the plant, and Margaret didn't even do hellos. Proximity had never struck her as a very good reason for closeness. Still, nobody disliked her. She came to work, didn't hold up the line, bore a familiarity that was pleasant although prone to fading.

Pork shunting was Margaret's job and thus a large part of her identity. Her home life consisted of a sloping and darkening set of untidy rooms, a small collection of known communicants, a boyfriend who went in and

out of phase. She persisted in a schedule of shuntings and homeward retreats. Years massed on and around her person just slowly enough that no one was ever alarmed.

2) *The Magic That Happened*

One day, Margaret realized that her fingers could regenerate. This was during one of her boyfriend's more visible periods. He was at foldable the card table, waiting. Margaret was chopping stewables. She took off her whole index finger with one sure, clean motion.

The things to notice first were the pain and the spreading of blood across her cutting board. Her boyfriend was good to her then. He did the right things in the right order. He found her gauze and medical tape, wrapped the stub and finger separately, and then ushered her to his car. During the drive to the hospital, Margaret's boyfriend spoke mainly about the excellent prognosis for finger reattachments. He was very confident or feigned confidence. He spoke surely as he drove.

In the passenger seat was where she learned that her fingers regenerated. By the time they'd pulled into the hospital parking lot, Margaret had a whole new finger. She flexed it, swirled it in the air. It was perfect and without pain. Her boyfriend turned his car around and headed back to her house. The whole drive he was shaking his head. Margaret took her old, severed finger and threw it out the window to a stray dog. It made them both a little happier.

Next there were weeks of keen experimentation and the improvisation of new routines. Margaret learned the secrets of self-butchery. She calculated the exact speed of her regenerations, how best to staunch her bleeding, the proper dosage of local anesthetics. Tips of fingers and whole digits mounted in her kitchen compost. The garbage swelled with bloodied gauze.

Interests

That shit that came out of me—if hung together for feet, dick-thick and winding. This was after coffee, before I got ahead of myself.

Ok, so picture this: A room the size and shape of a walk-in freezer, that in fact was once a walk-in freezer. There were slabs of meat there once. Now there is a faded blue sofa and a girlfriend made of wooden sticks. David collected up her parts in the state game preserve.

This is desired women: constructed with care and specialty adhesives, sitting pretty in the old meat locker. Tara says David is a fucktard, which is a neologism that combines 'retard' and 'fuck'. Tara is not the wooden girlfriend on whom David's skin catches over vigorous exertions or rubbings.

Tara is also not me, who is (am?) post-toilet and across from her. The table between us is made of wood that has been certified as sustainable. I am saying something about abjection being more than a metaphor, being a condition even—a being-shit. Tara is actually interested in David. David likes to say his girlfriend is a model.

Because David is bright and talented and has strong cheekbones is why she is interested in him. Me, my interests are obvious.

At the pork plant, Margaret began to shave herself into the shunting trough. She'd think to bloody up the meat a bit or sometimes bury a shard of nail and bone. They say that people taste just like pigs, maybe a little sweeter. After Margaret, the pork cubes slid into automated packaging. No one would ever notice. Margaret took off a series of knuckles, left them like buttons against the meat.

She was bolder in the bathroom and wrote blood messages across the stalls. She planted thumbs upright in public gardens. Other than that, her life was mostly the same as before. She still didn't say very much, still prodded the safest end of the meat line. It wasn't like anything was actually better.

3) Another Thing Margaret Would Do, and Something She Couldn't

Margaret also had a domestic use for her fingers. With her sharpest blade ready on the bed stand, Margaret and her boyfriend would undress and get into position. She would work a finger up inside of him as far as it would go, cut it off at the base and keep pushing. She'd get it to lodge inside for a few minutes, then it would bleed out and deflate and her boyfriend would dump bones.

While she gauzed up her gaps and applied her anesthetic, he'd scrub those little phalanges clean and stack them in the shoe box he kept under the bed. On days when Margaret was gone, he would plug himself up with the bones and then sit through the afternoon game shows that played on the living room TV.

The last afternoon, she came home to her boyfriend. He was on the faux-leather reclining chair, bone-stuffed and totally still. Margaret laid him out, stomach down, ready. She buried herself in ten fingers deep and they waited for regrowth. This was a new and braver try than ever. Margaret took off her whole arm at the shoulder and bled and bled. It wasn't going to come back.

Her boyfriend picked himself up and tried to do right. What he did was he gauzed her shut and buckled her into the passenger's seat of his car. But Margaret just lost too much blood.

Her boyfriend pulled to a stop on the side of the road. His asshole was her mausoleum.

Sexual Encounter As Degenerations

All I wanted was some kind of break, but when she said 'Your place or mine?' of course I followed her back to her apartment. This apartment was a kind of long and thin room that continued into another room that had been fitted as a kitchen.

I desired everything, which I understood as an aporia or an opening of space, but I traded it for a room and a warm girl and an adjoining room in the kind of a place to which one can append the term "railroad."

Totally, a sort of chasm or canyon: I swapped it out or filled it with longing.

It's like, imagine a pit and then imagine a girl in fancy dark-wash jeans asking for a few minutes of your hand. Well of course you'd just put that pit in your stomach and dive into her bed instead.