

*A Tapeworm without a Gut*

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Somewhere, out there, drifts a tapeworm without a gut. Can you imagine a more tragic biography?

There is this louse that takes the place of the tongue of a fish — squats firm on the tongue of the host — shuffles in between the cheeks, and makes itself at home. When in Rome, etc. *Cymothoa exigua*, the diminutive isopod, primordial in appearance (like woodlouse crossed with a fat langoustine), is the only known parasite that functionally replacing a host organ.

Arriving at first as an egg in the gills, *C. exigua* outgrows its natal home and migrates towards the mouth. Possibly, this very good nature makes *C. Exigua* a disingenuous parasite. (a lousy linguist, but what ambition: the thrill of the informed palate.) The bug sucks, supplants, and inhabits, introducing itself to the mouth in place of the native tongue which it has secretly drained of blood. The fish is left largely unharmed, somewhat augmented. The louse is a homemaker; the uninvited guest becomes the unexpected host.

What is charming about the *C. exigua*, I think, is its lack of shame. Having volunteered its labours uninvited, it takes its place within the Californian snapper's suitably capacious maw, and there it stays, already fat and always expectant. Having produced a dependency, the louse sits and tends to the rhythms of its new life with the officious zeal of librarians and civil servants, functionally satisfied with its sedentary vocation. Taking pity on on the relative physical agility and cognitive adaptability of more "progressive" strains, the louse meditates on the joys of everyday nurture, and ordinary devotion.

Sometimes, an entire family moves in. If there are two males inhabiting the fish, one of the males might become a female prior to maturation, to make for a more oedipal setup. The parasite is a companion organ. Following in the tradition of Theseus' ship, Locke's sock, Lincoln's axe (i.e. the machine whose parts have be replaced x number of times), the tongue-eating louse is a folk pharmacologist. It draws on the mimetic tradition of the bovine flatworm, *Taenia saginata*, whose wide, porous skin is all mouth at once, in its emulation of the intestine, or *Sacculina carcini*, the clutch-like barnacle that play-acts the egg sacs of Atlantic crabs. And what if they were to turn up, all at once, a true assemblage, mammalian, larval, vertebrate and mollusk. These twisted pairs and triplets are subjective, contingent upon any number of lotteries for their success (do you spawn in the host, the shit, or the lab?). But their dependencies — if the shoe fits — dramatise the illusion of resolution, or any animal thing ever being resolved. Again: is there anything more tragic than a tapeworm without a gut?

When the host fish dies (there are eight known species that invite the parasite), after some time, the louse will detach itself from the tongue stub, leave the oral cavity, and can then be seen clinging to its head or body. externally. Eventually, it must let go. Another lost cause. *It is not fully known what then happens to the parasite in the wild.*

Following Michel Serres, the parasite is a mode of hospitality, a way of relating to the world as a guest or a stranger, fitting it not quite like a glove. The parasitical invitation refuses exchange value, rejecting the commensuration of a transactional ethics. Instead, it rubs the channel raw, in squeaks and sweats, opening out of a limit. Given the noisy, indiscrete natures of oceans, the tongue-eating louse (masculine noun: *le parasite*, interference) finds that all systems gape open, mouths for living in. This is a live broadcast. The parasite encounters the network noisily interferes with its channels. How do we think the network thinks? On a good day, a knotted rat-king of optical nerves, or a web of tangential relations. Or else, various liquidities: ocean, flood, cloud. At some point, the aqueous metaphor became too tangible and abstract all at once, formal vectors laid over a rasterised grid, tending drunkenly towards inertia. Inert, as in “lacking the strength and ability to move”, or “chemically inactive”; lacking in chemistry, as in “the complex emotional or psychological attraction or interaction”. The act of drowning — draining, or jamming, for that matter — makes no attempt at a such an exchange.

Amnion, data bank, loam. Less an envelope, more a membrane, a sieve that is also a dam. The drowning metaphor favours the empirical and emotional force of immersion, pooling and spluttering, like that early scene in the Matrix, where the quicksilver coats Keanu’s arms, up his neck and plunges down his bony craw, reduced to the snake-rib of a prehistoric vertebrate. The lamprey, itself an excellent parasitic specimen, spends its life in saltwater, hitching onto unsuspecting pikes, before returning to the river in search of the spawning point, where it expires. Moore’s law becomes increasingly suspect for a notable absence of friction, heat, and dust (except, perhaps, certain threads of petro-eroticism); as does its attendant brittle aesthetics.

Conversely, the spores disperses in a fine, sticky mist, getting by on brownian motion. Dissipations drift, latching and breaching. These words press out of my mouth and worm their way into yours, itching for a tongue to hold onto. Prehension by way of tiny hooks on the underbelly. The interspecies mantra for living *with* might also be posed as a condition of digging *in*. In-take, in-formation, in-human. Never greedy, but lonely, as you too would be. Because we pool our resources does not mean we understand our agendas: but we trust them to develop as I bleeds in to We.

When the SARS outbreak hit Hong Kong in 2003, it was the ventilation shafts plumbing the city's dense residential blocks which transported the virus, beginning in the Amoy Gardens complex and eventually spreading to over a thousand cases. Residents of the floors at the middle and upper levels in building E were at a significantly higher risk than residents on lower floors; this finding is consistent with a rising plume of contaminated warm air in the air shaft generated from a middle-level apartment unit. Dinner guests were chaperoned and mutated through the infrastructure of domesticity; a co-mingling of living signals (those who eat alongside us).

There are parasites and there are parasites. After all, half of all animals have a parasitic phase. The pejorative connotations of the term is, seemingly, a particularly individualistic trait. Ambivalent to the quid pro quo of the the petit-bourgeois, the interloper is a filthy autocrat, opening up the way to new systems. If we think of the parasite as a design schema, the communication only begins when the originary dialogue has been resolved. In the parasitical relation, the feeding party cuts through the circle diametrically, eats into the circle, drains it of its rotundity, its repetitious self-preservation, its singular geometry, its centrifugal drone. It accelerates the process; a dirty sight, but it keeps us from the autoerotic careers of circles and spirals.

The channel extrudes, determining mouthshape, and mouthfeel. An aberrant phrase worms its way into your palm, and beaks itself into the epidermis. The opening of "route" already carries inside it a rupture: derived from the Latin, *via rupta*, "a way broken open". One critter's tear is another critter's passage. The parasite breaks way for logistical sleights of hand, architectural appropriations, inside the insides of creatures unfolded, dough un-kneaded. Not recycled into the fold of production, but a selfless process of loss, habitation and nurture, as well as the emergent contours of a lossy counter-production. It is both eminently naturalising, that is, *creative*, and denaturalising, as in the unmaking and ungrowing of a world in its own buzz-eyed image.