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STEVEN KEATON

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STEVEN KEATON

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BA, English, Creative Writing, University of Colorado, 2008

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Master’s of Fine Arts

Department of English
2014
This thesis entitled:
STEVEN KEATON
written by Michael Glen Gross
has been approved for the Department of English

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Julie Carr

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Ruth Ellen Kocher

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Kirk Ambrose

Date __________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
The contemporary self is repeatedly divided and subdivided with new and newer kinds of mediation in a so-called Age of Information. And yet, because a predictable, singular self is fundamental to economic and cultural systems, the human consciousness is at odds with itself, desperately trying to reconcile two oppositional forces: one insisting on a diffuse, liquid persona; the other on a hierarchical soul that looks suspiciously like it’s straight out of the Enlightenment. STEVEN KEATON explores the boundaries of that troubled self, the construction of those tenuous boundaries, and the many ways in which identity is regularly ruptured and destabilized. Through a persistent interrogation of proper names, these poems, essays, stories, and fragments deploy a lexicon of words that allegedly refer to the kinds of objects that we expect to be familiar and domestic. But because the very medium in which we “call-up” those objects is subject to changing systems of meaning, which themselves are subject to the many voices and consciousnesses in attendance, the previously mundane objects unexpectedly deform their appearances and identities. The medium and the message are conflated, revealing how genders warp, sounds become houses, water is suddenly meat-like, and our names aren’t our names anymore. STEVEN KEATON utters a world where our selfhood, and everything we sense and know to be cut up into its most essential material --whatever that is-- and then formed into something that merely echoes the shape of the soul.
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I divide what I know. There’s what I am and what I’ve forgotten. Between the two I go.

-Fernando Pessoa

There must be, somewhere, primordial figures whose bodies are nothing but their image. If one could see them one would discover the link between matter and thought, what Being consists of.

-Gustave Flaubert
Revelation of the Soul
Steven Keaton
The hair I touch in the absence of his face is my sexual partner. We've drowned all our children in water that seemed so life-like; we've grown old in what can only be described as an alley. I toss flares up & over, hoping there's a great mirror beyond. But no light ever comes back to us. Not even light depicting things as a series of repeating dots.

*Steven Keaton*
My daughter is a series of repeating body parts, Jennifer is just what she’s called. The part of her that is her face is her reproductive organs, so people only look at her in private. When I’m not pretending to be her dad, I’m trying to imagine Jennifer as something more than what she is, an impossible task. The most recognizable attribute of Jennifer’s body is that it’s see-through like a glass of water. If you look long enough at the light streaming through, her consciousness will weave into yours, you’ll see her thinking of a desert where there are brains, and you’ll both think of something full of shadows.
The ghosts inside us look like Steven Keaton’s mouth. When two bodies sex, the mouths inside like to discuss the circumstances leading to them being ghosts. Their discussion is necessarily casual & ends when the well runs dry. The well is exactly as deep as wide the mouth is, so these conversations are *a priori*. Needless to say, we killed Steven Keaton: one ghost for every stab & each of us had a stab. But who knows what the stabs sounded like, nothing sounds like anything anymore: if you hear the garage door opening, it sounds like people laughing if coming home from work sounded like lawn mower engines.
His brain is always wondering who his family is. When he openly inquires, the question is sonically deformed, and he sounds like nothing more than a mammal making mammal sounds.
The Mom

When she talks it feels like houses crowning out of her mouth; her face eats silently while we’re crushed with weight. I want to look at her but because the limits of my imagination were reached before I was born, what I see instead is a another version of her, wet skinned, hair matted to face

inside the second mouth is shiny
insides like motor oil
or honey
Overlapping Facts

Born in 1982, something about them is male, neither is an actor, neither looks alike, but are familiar, both think of each other as a part of the other that the other is acting like.

One might have a vagina because I’ve never seen otherwise, the other is pure penis, but what is a penis but a big ol’ clitoris, which is why they both think about things at the same time, like a glass of water, an ice cold drink, but one is thinking of a lake, the other lakes, but that’s the same thing, because when I say Steven Keaton I’m talking about the other Steven Keaton, the Michael Gross Steven Keaton.
Situational Comedies

Oops, one of my daughter’s friends is married and pregnant.

He buys and sells stock on paper for a school project. He does so well, he decides to buy and sell for real, using his parent’s stock account. Things go well until they don’t. That’s the margin of error.

A break-in prompts Steven and his wife to invest in a gun to protect their home. Have gun, will unravel.
Conditional Comedy

The man who stole mom’s social security number right after he was sure to contribute to the biological conditions that led to the accumulation of cells that took the form of my form. He used her federal identifier to get several credit cards, purchase things from places like JC Penny’s, and then returned those items in other stores for cash.
Michael Gross
I want you
to know what
my social security
number is
it's
If you knew me, you’d know
I don’t talk this way
& I don’t look like this either.
now let’s enter
this knowledge
between us
it's in error that a poem talks about knowledge:
as wrong as a house that actually looks constructed
& someone made of every kind of genitalia
Something about me imagines
the restoration of an apartment complex as less
difficult than living in it again,

where the wall colors are the same
as the walls & the boy’s face that did it
looks like what he did.
Our brains are mouths & one of us puts our face into the other’s face who puts the face into the others’ on accident.

While we’re like this let’s try to imagine a glass of water in a room we’re in.
you might think of kitchens
but each thought is only a shape
of the thing it’s thinking of:

we’re not in the midst of trees, the same
things behind us as in front of us
The only way to describe this place is to outline where my bones would be in my shadow on the ceiling; I can’t even imagine what flesh feels like.
together we will live on in other bodies with other names
just as we always have

after me [us]
me us
meus
mouse
or *muse*
press your genitals against
the outside world is water
when you say things out loud they come inside for a visit
stay awhile, set up camp, put down, domesticize your thoughts into pulp, rub the pulp between your tits, have courage, pulp is your pulp, inverse your stomach, inspect yourself, hell dissect your body, you’re inside your own atmosphere, the air you made
the air you make
the air you made
the air made
you
Have Gun, Will Unravel
the only ones,
we raise her face
by the door,
how to get god
we’ve been robbed
that's their job
to think the silver's gone
now everybody stays important,
no one was the only thing
dead in their own
assigned seats
come to order
we destroy your light on,
take steps to
where you are and who you're with
at all times, motion
organizing
to keep him
buying
it took them
six months to say
the world is changing
had we been home
we’re just here to look
at the department

what are the different kinds
I never held before

_a part of me wants_
_what you’re holding_
forget about
the bullets in yours,
you haven't even had dinner yet

I wouldn't let you see it,
absolutely never
come over here and sit down

if there were no such things
if someone prefer
I thought
mothballs were bad
six times one
of the tires is low

sleeping all the way over
not in bed

your ability to fall asleep
going down
stop where you
get the light
to death
if spoken
I went to get it, I opened the drawer,
I even picked it up, I just couldn't do it,
I was someone
the minute
I said keep searching
us
Margin of Error
I grow light
at the market

let's hear things

my father gave us for
prowlers at the door
yeah that's right
collateral turnover
genetic everything
we have

wife's every body doing
what I asked the spirit to see
you broke us to give us

our faces

some guy I spend

a day that’s final

you have faith

that could be the agnostics lounge

this is wonderful

why all these rooms have connecting doors
I sense that there's more

you lied to us, you went behind our backs, you pretended you were me and you spent money that wasn't yours

cover it with the beginning, no movies, no dates

and no tv
I am the major investor in an underwater video company in the Philippines. They probably have a picture of me in one of their huts with the caption “our founder.”
Oops
still prison
[inaudible]
it's a serious statement

you think ruining our atmosphere
is nice to see someone treasure
our bodies ourselves
some countries don't eat sleep
I'm sure you'll hear all about morning
this thing I mean, think little girl used
know the same age
the same class in the same crowd

I'm her
let out of
the house
half kids
sexually
sound
between
the open
sure, I want to know more
I just don't want her
to do more pretty late
[inaudible]
your mother
movies for you

you went to the other night

I don't think you should
go some money

you got our
in case she calls
your mother is very
I you her
[sound like I knew her]
Situational Comedies
Episode 1

Setting: inside a snowstorm at night

[we see nothing but blowing snow perforated with occasional darkness]

Character 1 (unable to see or hear character 2): I was planning on killing [inaudible].
Character 2 (in the fetal position inside character 1): You need to know: I’m your father.
Character 1: Instead I’ve called you into being…
Character 2: Necessarily, you’re my son. So I should name you…
Character 1 & 2 (at the same time, still not hearing each other): Michael Gross

[the heat of the combined utterance is like the sun]

[the snow slowly dissipates & we see the form of a family holding hands take shape; the family walks toward us & bows]

[audience laughs]
Episode 2

Setting: house

[we see a house from the outside & the camera --and our gaze-- flies toward it; we burst through a wall & pass through an unrecognizable room into another room; camera pans over the details of the room & you realize it’s your house, well not exactly your house, but the amalgamation of all the houses you’ve ever had mail delivered to; you think, “it’s like a gross body of everyone I’ve ever loved”; camera pans back out to full view of a living room]

Michael Gross is reading the newspaper on the same couch where you had your first orgasm, whistling.

Michael J. Fox still has a disease, though it’s only genetic.

Your mom comes in cleaning. She’s neither dead nor alive.

-- Mom
-- Your mother is busy now
-- Mom, what are you doing
-- Don’t make me stop reading the newspaper
-- I believe there’s a cure for this genetic disorder
-- Mo—
-- You made me stop reading the newspaper

[audience laughs]
Episode 3

Setting: inside me, in this little gap of space between organs; everything is saturated with blood, as would be expected, and there’s only so much air to breathe.

[the wet landscape of the interior human, maybe the footage of a surgery; we hear the muffled sounds of speech coming from Michael Gross, as if from inside of a swimming pool]

Character 1 (gasp): Please help.
Please, I don’t have much time
(still gasping)
There’s only so much air to breathe

MG: You made me stop reading the newspaper.

[muffled, the audience laughs]
Episode 4

[we see a man going about his business]

[like a second exposure, we see his body overlaid with a woman; both are semi transparent, both are performing the same movements & gestures]

[over their bodies, a third body, maybe another woman]

[something else appears over them, hard to make out]

[someone has set a camera facing the audience, and what it captured is projected & overlaid]

[everyone whose image is overlaid is put into the service of echoing the man’s behavior]

[the camera zooms out, but there’s nothing to zoom out of, so it keeps zooming, and it looks like the visual of warp speed in Star Trek]

[we’re entombed in an ever expanding, impossibly formless mass of fat]

[audio makes the sound of laughter]
Episode 5

Setting: the set of Family Ties

[what we see makes us unsure if we’re seeing the set of Family Ties the 80s American TV sitcom, or the invisible things that bind family members to each other, and families to families, people to non-people, material to the immaterial, etc.]

Michael Gross: Hi.
Michael Gross (looking around): Hi.
Michael Gross: We share the same name.
Michael Gross: But I’m Steven Keaton.
Mike: I know, but we’re the same person.
Steven Keaton: I’m Steven Keaton, which is factually different from Michael Gross.
MG: But between us two is this place where our overlapping qualities are hard to ignore.
MG: Like a Venn Diagram.
MG: I don’t follow.
MG: Each Venn Diagram is an iteration of the other.
MG: Every Venn Diagram is a way of organizing lists of information.
M: Imagine a list of every Venn Diagram out there.
M: Lists are linear.
M: Lexicons are lists.
m: We share very similar lexicons
m: We do [inflection makes it hard to tell if this is a question or statement]

-- our bodies belong to lexicons
-- each point on a circle is equidistant to the center
-- there are things that call our bodies into an order other than the order of the list
-- multiple orders
-- same dataset, run-through with different orders
-- in some orders, two points are the same
-- in others, those two points are different

you must know which order is which
so many orders, like knives
halving meat
into smaller meat
until it
it’s pure

meat

[audience laughs]
Essays
Light is basically fat attaching itself to bones, which is why we can see bones. When I say bones I think that anything material might be a bone upon which light builds a body.

Take for example air
or those who live on the moon.

There’s no such thing as a vacuum
because either it’s coursed through with
light or with bones. And suddenly from nothing, something.

After years of studying this,
I stopped being able to tell
which was which; anything
--even absence itself--
became
Self Machines

My throat is shaped like the night
in the middle of which is a machine
I can hear but never quite locate.
When I think I’m silent with another soul
is when it sounds its loudest.
I imagine you too
are formless lard
no one has ever seen, like a cloud
in a moonless sky
casting no shadow in every direction:
black between your cells
black between blood
like a great ocean
mechanism
Nighttime

The sales clerks inside me are genitals
hired to wander between my systems, folding
two-dimensional fabric into something a leg
can go into. When the cars & trains have taken
away all my customers, they’ve taken away
all my love, and insects, like black smoke,
fill the atmosphere.
On My Many Houses

House 1. I’m not cute when I say we didn’t live anywhere those years; I lived in the exact shape of space my body made at any given moment.

House 2. In the government housing we weren’t technically creek side. I remember being transfixed by a red dust on the bright white windowsill that overlooked 7 Eleven. My mom was horrified at those millions of baby spiders.

House 3. The yard was dry dirt & its two trees rained their own bones. Repeatedly I’d gather the sticks and jam them into the ground equal distant from one another. I figured the living organism would recognize what was obviously its own, and reconstitute it back into its systems. When asked, I said I was growing forests.

House 4. Junk would fall off the train, and the open field next to the duplex became a sort of illegal landfill for the neighborhood. Where the scraps came from didn’t matter to me; that these indescribable mechanical things were now mine, that they just appeared in the field like deer herd, was amazing enough. I’d accumulate heaps of industry in every season, and rearrange it into human forms. When I settled on the right shape, I’d tape it together. I didn’t believe I was creating a human, or a friend. These were another kind of organism in our shape only. Their consciousness, I believed, was all together apart from mine. They had an intelligence endowed to them by the circumstances that led to their formation: what the robot was made of determined what it was able to know, how it was able to talk.
Blighted Ovum

My daughter isn’t Jessica, we just call her that until she accumulates organs like money & we can’t not pay attention anymore.

Her systems sew together a version of the sky no one likes not even birds full of nerves.

I admit I love Jessica when I imagine her,

but she keeps diving into a summer pool to come out the other side.
Untitled

As long as there are lakes with fish in them
there are glasses of water with meat in them
The least controversial object I can think of is a glass of water. And by controversial I mean divisible. When I’m alone I like to sit in a room where a glass of water rests on a table; I try to fit as many people inside as I can, so many that our skins rupture and our consciousnesses overlap. I keep cramming despite the pleas to stop, I keep adding bodies until we break down into our most basic molecular essence, I keep going until we’re a meat paste --that is until when we talk, I talk.
Meat Recognition

Material is nothing without a process. The characteristics of plastic, for example, vary dramatically depending on where and how the raw material is applied during the formation. The same material can be used to create a bag, a solid container, or a woven textile.

When we ask what are the kinds of objects with which we are acquainted, I see a color or hear a noise; I have direct acquaintance with the color or the noise. The difference between a disposable water bottle and carpeting is so distinct that one could not make the material connection without some foreknowledge of the manufacturing process.

Mechanical systems prevent waste of nutritious meat and avoid the repetitive motion that would be required to perform close trimming by hand. This information is generally, if not always, complex, which is particularly obvious in the case of sight: nothing I see is mine. But I see them so intently and am so dispersed in them that every thought I think makes me into someone else.

But suppose we want the appearance of the human body. Pictorial structures can represent quite generic objects. For example, the individual parts can be a blob of some color and orientation --this type has been popular in face detection. The same can be used to sense a bag.

Although the process isn’t the product, all ingredients, including nutritional information, must be stated on the product’s label. Since every dispersed facet is another sliver of being, I break my soul into pieces and into various persons. In the car industry the fake leather is made out of polyurethane.

The basic idea was to represent an object by a collection of parts arranged in a deformable configuration. Our descriptions of visual appearance are suitable for recognition problems. Like fake leather, it depends on the molding and how you present it. In fact, when I speak of a cognitive relation here, I mean the summit of being conscious.

I do not suppose the physical object is complex, but that it contains faces and human bodies and locates the corresponding objects in novel images. In addition to awareness of the above particulars, we have also what may be called awareness of universals, which is called conceiving.
If all things are but slivers of the universal intelligence, then let me be my parts, scattered and divergent. Whether it is possible to be aware of this complex without being aware of its constituents is not known. In the house the house is all house and self-consciousness cannot be regarded as throwing light on whether we can know what’s really in that body.

What we really wish to preserve in that chicken is the nugget, the dualism of subject and object because it’s a fundamental fact concerning cognition. Hence I need a subject which is acquainted.

What’s really in that chicken? isn’t the question we should ask, then, but instead what is our acquaintance with chicken nuggets? Meat from a chicken, actually. It’s that simple. Chicken nuggets are in fact usually made of the same meat that you see. Other boneless meat, from the legs and thighs, for example, could be added. The meat might be enhanced, then formed.

The human body as a whole is unnecessary because protein is extracted with salt and phosphate, then breast or thigh meat is ground or chopped and then easily formed into a shape. The question of the nature of self is too large, and too slightly connected with our subject, to be argued at length here. It is not important for our present purposes, and I shall therefore not discuss it further.
END NOTES

“Situational Comedies” text from *Family Ties* sitcom episode summaries.

“Have Gun, Will Unravel” section and text from the lines spoken by Michael Gross --the actor playing Steven Keaton-- in the corresponding *Family Ties* episode.

“Margin of Error” section and text from the lines spoken by Michael Gross --the actor playing Steven Keaton-- in the corresponding *Family Ties* episode.

“Oops” section and text from the lines spoken by Michael Gross --the actor playing Steven Keaton-- in the corresponding *Family Ties* episode.

“Meat Recognition” is almost entirely constituted of fragments from the following:

1. “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”, *Mysticism and Logic*, Bertrand Russell
2. “The Soul With Boundaries”, *Songbook*, Fernando Pessoa
3. *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Susan Howe
4. Educational literature from the National Chicken Council
5. “Pictorial Structures for Object Recognition” from the Artificial Intelligence Lab, MIT & Computer Science Dept., Cornell University, Pedro Felzenszwalb & Daniel Huttenlocher
BIBLIOGRAPHY


