

Becoming Moth
Jeremy Atherton Lin

I wish I was the type to do up my top button. This better me is as stealthy as a ninja or at least a hybrid sedan. He wears an inscrutable expression, his countenance distant and burnished, giving the impression of existing as his own portrait in Kodachrome. He looks held together rather than squeezed. In reality, when I fasten my top button I just look uneasy. There isn't enough in-between. I'm a joke delivered without the pause before punchline. I am knotted. I'm an engorged glans, desperate and purple, when I'd prefer to appear as a taciturn loner, assassin or scion, reading Clarice Lispector over a plate of raw blowfish. But that's just not me.

For a while, then, I wrestled at my own collar. Am I two buttons undone, or just one. The distinct lacunae grant two different physiognomies. Two open, I'm comfy. My face broadens as if stretching. But does that informality register as falsely cavalier? Like a businessman whose boot cut jeans trail on the ground over narrow shoes of Italian leather, his hairy wrist entangled in a braided bracelet from Bali. You know that guy, right. He tows a wheely suitcase always. I settle on one button undone. My features fall into place, *-ish*. The triangular vent seems to lift up like the beak of a gosling. Roland Barthes located the erotic quality of clothing at the places where the garment gapes. It's not just the glimpse of clavicle or small of the back; there is something in the act of getting changed: the interstitial awkwardness, the slight wrongness of a garment's unsettled drape, the misfit.

My father panics at the sight of a button, not a discreet mechanism as described above, but a stray left behind where it plunged to the floor, or oversized decorative ones that call attention to themselves ostentatiously. What you might consider garish, he finds outright obscene. He has koumpounophobia, a fear of buttons stemming from childhood trauma. I'll tell you about it another time. It's a sad story and as you'll agree by the end, he's been riddled with the condition unjustly. There's nothing of vanity about his position. And here I am, deliberating how many buttons should be undone. We interact with things each in our own way.

A famous line from Beau Brummell: *Do you call this thing a coat?* And Giorgio Agamben surmised that this witticism "is based on the assumption of a radical difference between an item of clothing and a 'thing', thanks to which a useful item like a coat, apparently so ordinary, is raised to an indescribable essence". I think of the gold jacket with the pyramid on the back worn by Roberta Glass in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Her character, suburban and repressed, had witnessed Susan, played by Madonna, hock the jacket at a punky shop called Love Saves the Day. *It used to be*

owned by Jimi Hendrix, in her sales pitch Susan had claimed. When Roberta adopts it for herself, she is transformed. What ensues is a madcap caper involving an international heist and wherein Roberta's identity is not merely mistaken by others but reassessed by herself. She leaves her routine life behind and takes a job as a magician's assistant. There's a kind of mystical vibe. The jacket isn't exactly bestowed with preternatural powers, but inhabiting the garment, Roberta becomes vibrant, able to liberate herself. At the time of the film's release, everyone wanted to be Madonna. But the questions raised are perennial: which is the costume, her new wardrobe or the former. The film dismantles notions of fixed identity. The desperation is a kind of longing. The seeking is not merely about the desired object, but the reach.

Last week, I rewatched the film *Jackie Brown*. There's a striking moment when the eponymous character glimpses herself in the mirror; eerily, the story seems to come to a standstill. Jackie is in a plush department store changing room. As a matter of survival, she's become a player who is about to cross her conspirators as well as her supposed allies from the police. She is both prepared and nervous on the verge of this series of illicit exchanges. She had walked into the Del Amo shopping mall wearing her flight attendant's uniform (for Cabal Air; in her forties with a prior, *the best job she could get, the worst job in the industry*). Blunt-blue and shoulder padded, it's a shroud of humiliation she manages to carry with dignity. She'd emerged from the changing room in a cool black suit, arms spread like a celebrity. Along with the sales assistant and the audience, she recognised it looks somehow perfect. *I think I like it. I'll take it...* Beneath the calm interaction, the stirring of dopamine.

Back in the changing room, Jackie is filmed from above, then in close-up as she catches her own image in the mirror – the heterotopia moment. This is followed by a grainy zoom, as if from her own perspective, advancing towards her mirrored self. The momentum that had been building – to the strains of Randy Crawford's "Street Life" – has given way to intermittence, to literal reflection. Is she reassessing the sequence of events, switching up her next manoeuvre? Rather, it seems the character is connecting with an innate sense of self. Is some 'true' identity revealed? For me, with a flush of melancholy, I perceive that she is discerning at once her new, suited self and at the same time the disappointed, uniformed version that walked in just previously. It's as if she can see through both facades; she is chimera, the result of happenstance and choices made hastily. She straddles past and future, acutely in the present, as if registering her being as nothing more than accumulated dust under an unfamiliar, flattering light. The room is pressurised as if its air has been forced out and propelled through the mall ventilation system. Through the sterile, muzak-scored corridors, through 2.6 million square feet, Jackie Brown's exhalation will glide, rustling patrons imperceptibly, turning the heads of only

feeds on the leaves from inside. White and brown blotch mines develop between leaf veins, giving the appearance of dying. The threat had been considered superficial but, as the moths' activity disrupts photosynthesis and lowers the tree's resilience against bleeding canker disease, scientists now fear that the horse chestnut could be wiped out within fifteen, even five, years. The thought of this English street without fallen conkers unnerves me.

The miner moth transforms itself and in doing so alters the street. The butterfly is the preferred symbol of metamorphosis – goal-oriented, towards a more brilliant self. The butterfly becomes icon. The moth is a whirlwind, oscillatory. It is a creature of becoming, attempting this path or that while blindly following the light, an instinct both clever and foolish, sensible and otherworldly. Vladimir Nabokov wrote in *Speak, Memory* of the glorious manner in which both butterflies and moths fashion more of themselves than strictly required by survival. A moth that resembles a wasp, he points out, behaves waspishly. When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only does it become leaflike, "but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in". Nabokov writes, "I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception."

those few gifted observers of their surroundings. And here in this room, carpeted, serene, Jackie, so often walking, sits. She is in the in-between.

The novelist Rose Tremain coined the adage *life is not a dress rehearsal*. But that's what it feels like to me. And all those hours backstage, at the mirror titivating. I conjure Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developing their concept of becoming, or *devenir*. Becoming, they write, is not "a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification". It may be dynamism without teleology. Whereas a transformation implies a resolution, a distinct new entity, *becoming* suggests boundless possibility: "Each individual is an infinite multiplicity." I am thinking about the freckles on the face of James Charles, the first male CoverGirl since that cosmetics company's founding in 1961. He's seventeen, which is when you are meant to be deciding who you want to be. But James Charles already gets it – that the *whoness* can be fluid, pluralistic, vary constantly. He paints lightning storms across his brow, a bumblebee on his lip, constellations down his neck. He becomes ouija board, half-molten, a rabbit. The joy that emanates from his Instagram account is extroverted; his selfies look out to the world even as the camera is pointed at himself. (He also sings.) Everything is an experiment. We talk freely about the narcissism of *kids these days* but underestimate the ways in which the young are moving past selfhood altogether, becoming new kinds of beings.

I have often considered moths to be underrated butterflies: matte, less flashy, more neurotic, no less mystifying. Their transformation is not as impressive because the result is less dazzling. They unnerve in their frantic propulsion towards light bulbs – desperately seeking the celestial compass of the moon. Waylaid, they pothole, get in a flap in your face. We worry that small dusty ones could be *Tineola bisselliella* – the dreaded clothes moth. Transformation may be magical but we don't like it occurring to squiggly larvae within our sweater's weave. And then the resultant holes, an unwelcome reminder that things fall apart. The sincere or devout amongst us may perceive this destruction as a warning against attachment to material things. A Biblical passage (Matt. 6:19-21): "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be."

The other evening, I spotted a small moth on the wall and said to J., *that might be a clothes one*. I terminated its existence with a pinch. A friend once reasoned, they're basically just flying dust. J. said, *it might actually be the kind that's eating our horse chestnut trees*. The street we live on is lined with wonderful examples of this species. The horse chestnut has been in the UK since the 1600s, known for dropping conkers – funny little auguries of autumn coming. Conkers are like aliens of the seasons. The caterpillar of the horse chestnut leaf-miner

I am full of tiny punctures. I've got a couple of leftover pricks in my lobes from a youth decorated with small earrings. I've always felt porous. Things impale me with ease: a shard of shale in the palm of my hand once; another time, a toothpick in the sole of my foot. I once mentioned my porosity to the writer Wayne Koestenbaum. He exclaimed: *you have five thousand vaginas!* I took it as a compliment. How can we produce without receiving.

I'm thinking now of Blinky Palermo. The artist took his name from a gangster's sobriquet. He made work, simple at first glance, that absorbed the vocabulary of previous creators and, in his own words, kept open "as many expressive options for myself as possible". It was Joseph Beuys who described the artist's *porosity*. In 2011, Peter Schjeldahl wrote a *New Yorker* piece on the value of this sensibility. He considers Palermo's porosity "a tremendous distinction" and calls the artist "a cosmopolitan escort of the imagination". Schjeldahl reckons, "This rare characteristic partly explains his neglect in America, where a national bent for proprietary branding can confuse a signature look with quality."

I don't wear button-up shirts very often these days. This solves the conundrum; I pull a crewneck on instead. Autumn is here, anyway. I bring out sweaters and hope no new moth holes have appeared. But I did find myself dressed in a shirt the other day, and to my surprise, I let two buttons undone; I found the triangulation of lilac undershirt this revealed to be satisfying. I changed my signature, slightly. Such brief gestures: small acts of rebellion against selfhood, against the tyranny of identity. There's pleasure in the forgery.