

M. Kerlan – On Being Full of Spiders

I first meet myself in a field of spring flowers, limp limbs outstretched over grass and dirt. They have a shaven head and a close-mouthed smile, but they look happy—like they can breathe with their whole chest.

For a moment I am startled as something skips across my foot, tendrils hovering above my sunlit flesh before blinking out of sight on a thread of silk. A hand—my hand—reaches at my naked ankles, shooing the lingering touch of the invisible spider. Fingertips touch the stubble of my shin in passing and then return; blades of grass stand tall at my circumference, an outline painted in plant. For a moment, I wish I were a seed on a lawn so that I could grow thick green hairs all over, filling in the plot of my own body on the earth.

Never had I desired to take up so much space before, but it does not last long. When I open my eyes, I am alone—I think I am alone. The spider follows me home, nestled in the cuff of my jeans. It evades me for weeks, until I notice the silk.

A web glistens in the corner of the bathroom ceiling. *Urban legend says you'll swallow eight spiders in your lifetime*, I think to myself, feeling small. I sit wet and naked in my bathtub, the showerhead spraying against the plastic curtains. I have been spending a lot of time in my porcelain cradle, feeling unwelcome in my own frame, watching beads of mist collect in the web above and disappear again into the hot air.

The drain is clogged with clumps of silk. It is not immediately recognizable—only when the minutes stack up and the water spills upward and around my knees, all-consuming. After a

half-hour I find myself adrift, soap suds smothering my waistline. The web billows over my head as I crank the faucet knobs quiet, the grime of the water seeping, slurping toward the drain.

I rise from the tub to stand wet and naked before the bathroom mirror, which severs my body from my shoulders down. I comb strands of slick hair neatly behind my ears, concealing them behind the width of my neck. The reflection is obscured by the mist as I narrow my eyes. The person in the mirror is inscrutable and androgynous, lacking and holding everything at once.

“What are you?” I ask, floating somewhere outside myself.

Eyes narrowed, the mouth in the mirror opens, a spider exposed on its tongue.

“What are you?” I ask again, the words cast from my lips with urgent spit. I pull a towel from a nail in the wall and up over my chest, leaving my reflection empty as I slide to the floor. The web continues to collect droplets; it listens silently while I cry, not recognizing myself, feeling real loss for the first time.

One spider soon becomes a dozen. I spend an afternoon tantalized by phantom sensations, scanning desperately for passageways into my apartment: the crevices in the old, uneven window frames; the gap beneath the bottom edge of the front door; the cracks of dust-cloaked vents in the ceiling. My partner arrives home to my frenzied paranoia—a towel shoved under the doorframe, the person he loves balanced precariously on a stool in the living room, hands wrung around a vent sealed in rust.

“Can I help?” he asks, looking uncertain of the task at hand.

“I think I’m crazy,” I say. “I’m seeing things. Thinking things. I’m worried I have spiders in my stomach.” I step down from the stool, burrowing my head into his chest.

He looks up to the ceiling, the unmoving vent. “You think they’re getting in that way?”

“I think they live inside me,” I say, unmoving. I tell him about the grass, and the clogged drain, and the tongue in the mirror.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Okay,” he says. “That’s okay. Let’s just—let’s see what we can do.” He pulls away, holding me for a moment at arm’s length and then stepping away, off toward the bathroom. “C’mere,” he calls, followed by the clunk of his hands rummaging through the cabinet.

I sit on the edge of the toilet seat while he stands over my shoulder, electric razor in-hand, the hum of its shears sounding something like relief. Scraps of hair collect at the stitches of my t-shirt collar, then slip from my shoulders to land at my feet.

He leaves the bathroom in search of a broom and I stand to face the mirror, running my fingertips over my head. For a moment I lock eyes with myself—a self that I recognize—and smile, my lips closed just enough to keep the spider from spilling out onto my tongue.