

New Fiction by Theadora Walsh: “Serious Deprivation”

written by Guest Contributor | July 19, 2017



[Photo Source: techcrunch.com]

Victoria, the case file said, was eighty-one at the time of her death. While I waited for photographs and video clips to download, I started inputting some of the written memories.

Here was a text message from her oldest friend, writing about how, when Victoria first immigrated, she used to try and boil every fruit and vegetable she came across. Pears, avocados, squash, nasturtium, she treated them all like potatoes. Here is a text message from Victoria's son, Peter, about how she used to hum along to the nightly news. As if she was hearing a song, reports of break-ins or forest fires or poisoned water sources, elicited harmonies. He remembered standing in the kitchen watching her as newscasters described the collapse of Tehran's oldest skyscraper. She sang along like a violin.

It was cold in my apartment so I put on gloves. Black gloves stained with raspberry jam. The sugar had condensed its section of the wool, retexturing the stain. I touched the tightened bit of fabric to my cheek every so often, whenever I needed a second to think about the content.

I opened a video clip. Victoria in front of a wooden house. Her hair looked tired of holding on to her head, it was moving farther and farther away from her eyebrows, thinning, turning white. A man, who moved as little as a cardboard cutout, was sitting behind her. The sky was very grey and the scene was framed in a careful square. Lying on her back in simple clothing, Victoria had all her limbs extended upwards from her torso. Like an upside-down table, she was very straight. Slowly, she would reach one hand towards her foot and then return it to its place above her shoulder, then her other hand would reach for the same foot, in repetition.

Fast forwarding, I saw her move through several different configurations. She let her arms fall and focused on her legs, she curved her back and practiced sit-ups, she slid onto her belly and stretched her stomach, she held herself in a plank position. The whole time she was stretching the man behind her is looking up and off to the left. You can tell he is alive because, though he

seems to be trying to hold perfectly still, his breathes give slight rhythm to his chest and lips. Speed up, he looks like he is vibrating.

It's been nine months since I started working at SIRIUS memory pods and I'm still waiting for the sense that I know what I'm doing. Maybe one day coding the sensory composites will feel like the movements of a butcher who has been cutting meat for decades. I'll know exactly where to insert my knife along sinews and muscles for the cleanest separations. I'd hope one day to have that kind of intuition about editing, that kind of thoughtfulness about slicing apart digital clips.

Every time I make a choice, I feel my fingers questioning my authority. The job demands that I produce decisions, but, the entire company seems like a prelude to a thought. The motto, "we keep you with us," is off-putting and vague. The services listed on the website, each matched to their own overly designed pictogram, range from "encounter fulfillment," to "customizations for hearing impaired." When I tell people what I do, it often sounds more like a guess than a definition:

"Have you heard of sensory deprivation chambers? They are these dark, silent spaces where you float until this sense of timelessness sets in? Well that state lets you drift through associations and memories the way a practiced meditation might. What we do is we guide you through this suspension to gravitate around a particular person. Legally, we can only offer this service for people who've died. So, it is kind of like a tombstone you can get inside of."

Doubt sat on my forehead as I selected a video of Victoria throwing slices of Wonder Bread into a small pond and set it to fade in and out of a weather report. I was told to remember that the movements have to feel more like associations than instructions. That sounds can, and should, be used to pull images together or to put space between one thought and the next.

Unable to focus any longer on the computer screen, I slid my unremarkable dark coat over my shoulders and stepped away from Victoria's digital silhouette. It's always odd to go out for the first time in the last moments of daylight. The sun blinds you, coming across the world with a fleeting intensity. I feel suspicious that people I pass outside somehow know I've spent all day alone. As if my lack of human contact was a bruise or scar strangers could see on my face.

I bought a cup of coffee and found a bench to share with a small old man. When I sat down, he gestured to the Cantonese newspaper he had up on his tablet. Though I couldn't understand the characters, I scanned it appreciatively for photographs and advertisements. When I grew bored, my eyes sunk to the sidewalk in front of us, crowded with crumpled red papers that looked like fallen petals. They were firework remnants from the lunar new year celebration. The old man noticed my fallen gaze and shook the tablet lightly, reclaiming my attention. I fantasized about him starting to read to me, explaining the characters and translating the page.

The last time someone read to me was when SIRIUS had me hypnotized. Or,

SIRIUS forced me to spend an hour and a half with a man who kept readjusting his obvious toupee and trying to hypnotize me. Coders aren't allowed to enter the sensory deprivation pods manufactured by the company. Something about creative copy right protection for SIRIUS's designers, I think. But, because they want to be able to tell clients that everyone at the company empathizes with their experience, we undergo these mandatory annual hypnosis sessions.

William L Wilson, hypno-psychiatrist, showed me his certification from Palo Alto's center for the study of altered states before we began. He made it known that he was a professional, he even made me sign a waiver which stated I would not sue him for the consequences of any profound realizations I might have. Once we had gotten through this strange initiation, he had me sit down in the center of a circular rug. It was shag and colored like a fried egg, bleached white around a more weathered yellow.

He started to read, standing over me as I sat on bent knees. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Specifically, he read the chapter on hero/anti-hero Oedipa's stay in a hotel in the fictional San Narciso. As he read about a pseudo-beatles boy band crooning badly written anti-capitalist love songs and Oedipa getting thrown all around the room in a drunken stupor, I thought only about the time I held that book. I was very young, young enough that book stores still existed.

Pynchon's book spines were all thick on the shelves, like men who spread their knees apart on public transportation, all of them except *The Crying of Lot 49*. Slim, and barely big enough for its title, I was drawn to the runt. Off the shelf, it felt light in my hands. I was struck by a desire to destroy that tiny book.

When Wilson stopped reading, I stared at him expectantly. A second passed and then he squatted down in front of me and picked up at the next paragraph. With his hands on his knees, he began to sway back and forth like a metronome, reading the whole time. I felt very nervous about the way one's face should look while being hypnotized. Experimenting, I went slack jaw and then slightly cross eyed and for a moment I shut my eyes as if I'd fallen into a deep dark slumber.

It ended like this: smoothly Wilson reached into his pant pocket and took out a tape recorder. No longer swaying he put his mouth very close to my eyes. I could see his lips shaping every word he made. The "a" sounds sent his tongue dramatically to touch the roof of his mouth and "i" created a harsh rectangle out of his jaw. It took a second to realize, but the locus of sound had shifted. Though his lips were close, the words felt farther away. He'd switched on the tape recorder and started mouthing out Pynchon's sentences.

For a moment, I had felt a profound sensitivity towards his efforts. Then it passed and he stood up proudly, announced his intention to bill the company, and walked out of the room. Concentrated loneliness ran through my body. I felt like I had drunk a tiny potion labelled "isolation" that Alice had missed when she first fell down the rabbit's hole to Wonderland.

It was the same sense of strange abandonment that overwhelmed me when my

mother video chatted me in the evening. Though I knew she loved me, she approached intimacy like a gross but necessary service. So, it's always with an eerily straight forward tone that she delivers bad news.

"Luce. How are you?"

"I'm all right mom."

"Work is good?"

"Work is good enough. Sometimes I'm not sure exactly what it is I want."

"All young people feel that way."

"Yeah."

"Just make sure that you don't waste away searching for the perfect job. Pick something and do it well."

"Okay, thanks mom. I should actually get going, I'm meeting some friends." I lied.

"I have to tell you something."

I knew something was wrong.

"Your grandfather died last night. It had been really bad for the last few years. The cancer exhausted his body, he had become like an appendage of the bed."

"Oh." I felt like I needed to feel more to say more.

"How do you feel?"

"I mean, I didn't really know him."

"He was family though."

"I guess so."

"His DNA is folding and unfolding around the rhizomes in your body."

"Bye mom."

After we hung up I sat down and waited to start having a feeling. I like myself most when my body seems like a vessel for my senses. All eyes and ears and lips, and no room for thoughts.

There is this exhausted loneliness I sometimes experience. Each time I feel it, I think a sibling to a past or future suffering has been born. Or, maybe, a new incarnation of a violent pain which has lived in me before, grown to maturity, then withered and died, is initiated. These circular expressions are more states of existence than thoughts or memories, like ghosts of myself.

Though I sat for a long time, staring at weeds that had cracked the pavement outside, nothing beyond these reflections on sadness surfaced. I couldn't force myself to feel the loss I craved. Maurice Ashkelon, my grandfather, was just like any other name on a case file.

A week later, I disturbed a package resting on my front door. It was early in the morning, so my movements were clumsy and weighed down with sleep. The letters in my name were written on the label with all 90 degree angles. The curves in my U and C had been forced into hard edges. I'd forgotten the way my mom did that. It always made me think that she associated my name with neon announcements in train stations or the first computer font.

I stabbed into the envelope's thick paper and dug my fingers into the incision to rip open an ugly wound. A book was born from the wreckage. An old book that had brown stains on the pages and smelled like a fallen tree decomposing. It was surprising and it was also an intrusion. It felt like an impolite demand on my time. Why had she sent me an actual book? Why hadn't she sent a scan and emailed it to me like a regular person?

I discovered a note on the floor, torn in two pieces.

LUCE,

This was your grandfather's journal. I thought you'd like to read it. He was a very unusual man who I would never be able to explain to you.

From mom.

It felt embarrassing to have become the owner of a book. Especially a book which contained neither instructional value or intrinsic beauty. Nothing more than a personal blog put to paper, a blog cut from nature waiting to become garbage.

A few spaces in the city, run by start-ups or design schools, still have used books. But even in those places, the books are only for decoration. They make all their money selling book themed clothing, virtual reality experiences in old libraries, and a very popular projection of a Victorian vitrine crowded with leather covers labeled with golden cursive.

Books used to be stored on shelves of wood. It seems so cruel, to cut apart a tree, dismantle it fiber by fiber, and then stack its broken parts together again. I thought about recycling my grandfather's journal so that the papers could change form again and become something more practical than a mound of personal reflections. Perhaps the reprocessed materials could be used to feed bacteria capable of fighting cancer. Or, the paper could be reconstituted as hard cardboard to support and protect endangered plants.

"Why do you exist," I demanded, scouring the book like it contained a genome sequence. As if there was a way of looking at it that would decode its intimacy, like the way scientists can find genes and character traits hidden in strings of AATTTTCCCGGGTTAAAC. Read, I reminded myself, you are supposed to read books.

On a random page, I began following blue lines left by my grandfather's frantic pen.

"Today Lara came by the studio. She wanted to talk about a sculpture she'd be showing in the fall, which direction it was supposed to face. What a stupid question. By the time she got over I was all flustered. How could I tell her in general which way to face the sculpture, what did she want me to say, North? South? To the left? Obviously, I would install it myself. I never let a piece find a place without my guidance. [the text was divided here by several meticulous diagrams of bullets, drawn with carefully proportioned shadows] Zipora had such terrible taste in friends. I hate myself for missing her like this. I hate her for leaving me in the ugly way she did."

I read the page again, struck by how flat it felt. It was like looking at a landscape and only seeing the lines between colors. The writing read just like the text messages or emails I make pod experiences with, not itself lucid or lifelike. Guilt waxed and waned in my consciousness as I continued to feel nothing about my grandfather's death.

Still slightly disgusted to be holding a book, I let it fall open from the spine. This page was numbered, the text sectioned into parts. It would have looked strangely formal if not for the fact that half of the words on the page had been halfheartedly crossed out

It said:

1. Whenever the city feels oppressive, too grey, I visit the public library's historical archives. It is my favorite illicit pleasure to take photographs of the files behind the librarian's back. I bring them home to create new indexes. I have a collection of photos on changed names registered at Ellis Island, I have another for each borough's zoo acquisitions and release forms. And I photographed every newspaper article on the city's 1939 world fair.

2. Verdigris is a chemical compound which can immediately alloy copper and bronze. It was invented in correlation with Jewish Palestine's debut pavilion in the 1939 Corona Park world's fair. The statues they featured; The Scholar, The Laborer, and The Toiler of the Soil, had prefabricated age. Immediate establishment.

3. A munitions ammunition factory. If I fail as a sculptor, I'll make bullets. Everyone needs bullets.

4. I think all the time of coating myself in verdigris now that Zipora's gone.

5. I want to die of old age but right now. I will approach choosing a cabin for my last few years like choosing a coffin. A box of wood in the middle of nowhere that my family can locate if they want to bring flowers.

I broke off. The paper was dry and abrasive, unpleasant to touch. The effort of reading felt like struggling to remember the name of a color one recognizes. What did my mom expect me to get from this journal? I pushed the arcane book aside and went back to my computer.

The dusty black of my screen when powered off always makes me sad. When I turned the device on, my familiar background picture sprung forward. Half dome, a mountain that looked like its face had slipped off, was from somewhere in California. Though the image had come preloaded on the device, it suited me perfectly. The stark geometric feature, which no one would draw if instructed to make a mountain, made me less anxious about being alone.

Time moves faster when I'm on the computer. Hours slip away, divided into a thousand tiny parts in which my attention dances from tab to tab, video to video, case file to case file, never dwelling long enough for a distressing thought. It is like therapy, to let the computer direct me through personally tailored links and feeds. In this meditative movement, some of what I read in the journal started to seep into my thoughts. It wasn't Maurice who made his way into my subconscious, but Zipora, this woman he seemed so desperate to possess.

I logged into the SIRIUS database and typed "Zipora" into a light blue rectangle that receives search inquiries. After the loading bar spent a few seconds extending itself, a number of names appeared. My eyes cut to the last on the list: Zipora Kartujinsky. We had made her a pod almost thirty years ago.

I clicked her name urgently and a spreadsheet took over the screen. Looking to the side of the rectangular intersections I scanned an index of qualifiers. Hair: Blonde, Height: 5'8", Age at Death: 47, Birthplace: Poland, Blood type: B-, Marital status: Single, Dependents: Yes.

A data entry from my grandfather demanded my attention. It was a photo file he had submitted for the creation of her pod. I clicked to load the image, but was stopped by a pop-up window.

It demanded: Are you sure you want to view this image? It has been re-formatted by SIRIUS to appear with image vitality foundation (ivf).

Yes, I clicked, with no idea what "ivf" meant.

A new window appeared with its own request: Login Credentials.

I realized I had never tried to look at materials for a pod I hadn't created myself. Rather than think harder about the restriction, I typed my supervisor's password into the box: BennyHana2001.

It took a while to load, but then a polaroid picture of my grandfather embracing a crudely formed statue was on my computer screen. With a hand placed tenderly on the figure's breast, Maurice was staring into its featureless face. The unfinished amalgam of cement and palm prints looked dead into the camera. Handwritten in my grandfather's now recognizable blue cursive, was a caption: "My Pygmalion, my statue brought to life by Zipora's defacement."

I don't know why, but I felt the photo, that sanguine caption, take over my thoughts and feelings. Perhaps, I was convincing myself, this photo had been taken after Zipora's death. Though I didn't know much about my grandfather, I

knew that he had lost this woman. Trying to practice empathy, an effort I hadn't undertaken in months, I forced myself to imagine clinging to the sculpture. Maybe if I were holding the sculpture with that same desperation, I could make Zipora exist in a solid and permanent way for him. A strong sense of desire seeped into me. Is this how I would meet my grandfather, through longing?

It was only a little bit later that I noticed words had been bluntly carved all over the statue. Squinting at the photograph, I couldn't make out any meaning from the chiseled letters. For myself, I decided that it was a love letter.

In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe wrote:

Why do I turn once again to writing? Beloved, you must not ask such a question. For the truth is I have nothing to tell you, All the same, your dear hands will hold this note.

I've played an audio recording of that quote to myself many times, used it often in my pod constructions. It was these words, I decided, she had left as a message to my grandfather. The effect was something like a piece of symphony music, dozens of different orchestral parts all making one coherent sound: I am thinking of you.

When it was finished, the menial and precise work of engraving, she might have wrapped her arms around the statue. Maybe she ran her palm over the nape of the figure's neck, scarred by her words. Resting her cheek on the statue's breast, she'd breathed lovingly onto the cold lifeless form. Her lips, painted the fuchsia of a foxglove's flower, followed her exhalation and kissed the statue. For a moment, it came to life, radiating a question: will you remember me?

I fantasized that she notices me gaping at her melancholy with such aplomb. She returns my gaze, almost-not-quite smiling. In that fantastical instant, recognition and non-recognition torment me. I can picture her perfectly until doubt intrudes, and I lose everything I'd edited together. One moment she is wearing a fur around her neck, the next a turtleneck, from one angle her hair is white blonde, from another it's almost red, eyes are ringed by wrinkles, a blink, they are like a doe's. The more of her I knew, the more an asymptotic sense of closeness injured me.

Every Tuesday I'm supposed to meet with the other designers at SIRIUS's office. The interior is pristine and lit by a special shade of fluorescent that is supposed to increase productivity. Designed to look like an up-scale hospital, I normally feel like a visitor, searching for a patient I never find. Most weeks, it is the only time I physically see anyone.

I called in sick. Family emergency. Ungracefully, I accepted sympathy from my supervisor. While she made words like loss and sorry and care, I made plans like sneak and take and deserve. I couldn't say why the only person who compelled me was less than a ghost. But, the force of my feelings was decisive: I had to get into Zipora's pod.

Despite strict rules banning designers from entering the deprivation pod quarters, it was easy to slip unnoticed through the office. The only break in my normal office routine was turning left at the heavy hospital doors printed with the word SERVICES. The waiting room was crowded with people who looked caught up in dreams. I lied to the front desk employee and fingered my identification tag until she waved me on with lackluster.

Moving quickly through the waiting room, I put on a white terry-cloth robe and a pair of white terry-cloth slippers. I noticed that the heels of my feet were cracked and dry, lines ran through my flesh the same white terry-cloth color.

Without pause to consider the course of my actions, I strode to the deprivation tanks like a born-again to the river, about to be baptized and cleaned. Visions of my grandfather's faceless statue called to me like sirens.

I typed my supervisor's password into the pod's control system and, after agreeing to a few terms and conditions about "ivf," configured it to bring me Zipora. The force of my compulsion was confusing. My mind was moving with perfect intention, the insecurity that usually made my actions awkward and stilted had vanished before such convicted purpose. As I slid the heavy black leather off the tank and put my feet into the buoyant water, I felt like I was being embraced for the first time in years.

In the black waters of the pod, before sound and image, my mind dove into visions of Zipora. I imagined my surreal affection turning time around on itself and we were both in the ocean on an oppressively lovely day. We moved up and down with the surf and laughed at her children on the shore, who couldn't swim. When the children strayed too far down the beach, she'd glance at them with disposed inertia. She was very beautiful.

Caught up in her blissfully empty gaze, I licked her cheek. Only to, seconds later, spit up salt water and the flavor of tears. She wrapped her hand around my neck, smiling as her tight grip

imprinted purple finger marks on my cold skin. Her blonde hair gleaned in the saturated blue and yellow of a beach's perfect temperature. Something was happening. For the first time, I felt that I could hold the image, the vitality, of another person.

From the shore, I could hear her children crying, "Mom we need you. Mom we are hungry! Mom we need you to come and feed us." They went on yelling but I ignored them because Zipora had her hands less than a centimeter from my cheeks. My body started to curve involuntarily. A rope through my torso was getting tighter and tighter. The material of her simple black swimsuit was getting thinner and thinner, almost gone. I could feel her. She was touching me. Somehow, Zipora had pulled me from this life into the life she inhabits.

A pure white light blinded me. Total, all encompassing, warm light. I was dead. It was certain.

My eyes started to burn from painful exposure. Thousands of nerves contracted from the rude brightness. I realized I couldn't be dead when I felt severe anxiety about my eyeball's vitreous keeping form. My entire optic disk had a disk-shaped stain. I tried to blink it off but it was burned into my vision.

As if I was wiping dust off my eyes, figures started to emerge in my damaged line of sight. It was the security guard, whose name I never remembered, beaming down on me with a flashlight. Next to him I saw my supervisor shaking her head back and forth with anger.

"Luce." She made my name sound like an accusation.

"Oh," that was all I said.

"You will be escorted to my office and then off the perimeter, permanently."

"Oh," my mind was trying to get back to the place I had been ripped from. It felt like the anxiety of a morning when you wake up sure you'd been dreaming, but unable to recollect a thing.

"Put on your robe."

"Oh. Okay."

My supervisor overcompensated for her office's lack of personality with a ridiculous number of plants. I sat down on a hard-plastic chair and signed a non-disclosure agreement about my time in the pod. I was fired, my capacity for intimacy, depleted. All the desire, all the knowledge I'd hallucinated, collapsed. I didn't know Zipora.

Before I left my supervisor gave me a conspiratorial look.

"Luce, it is very important that you try and forget the experience. Don't cling to the interactions you had with person you visited. It will be hard, now that you've been exposed, but you have to do it. You will never be allowed back to SIRIUS, not even as a client, so just forget. And remember, though people in the pod appear life-like, they are dead."

"Oh," I told her one last time.

Back home, I sat naked on the side of my bathtub. Before a backdrop of dulling yellow tiles, I tried to have the feeling that I was alive. If only I could spend just another hour in the pod. Spend just a little bit of time fully stimulated, fully satisfied.

Two bags of Epsom salt went into the bath water to soothe it into buoyancy. They spilled a texture across the tub's floor.

I lowered myself into the water with my grandfather's journal pressed to my chest. I thought about turpentine. A fluid made from the resin siphoned out of live trees. Turpentine, a nice word. The name comes from a tree, the terebinth, which is a close relative of the pistachio. Maybe turning the journal into a fluid would release a solvent like turpentine. If the journal

did that, it might be able to dissolve me.

My cheeks got cold so I went beneath the warm bath water. When I surfaced, pieces of paper clung to my neck and forehead. My body was hued blue from the ink bleeding into the water. My fingers traced the cartilage between my cheeks, the nose which one day would reveal no bone. I passed my hand over my eyes and a note stuck to my palm: "Zipora hates fluorescents."

I felt mocked by the fragments of the book, my grandfather's muted presence. As I floated in the bath, which was quickly becoming dense with expanding paper, a thought kept swimming through my mind. I'd quiet it as soon as it came up, but the notion persisted.

Unbecoming, that's what the thought was, unbecoming. Dissolving, splicing, editing, switching tabs, until everything was pure associations instead of composites. Until it was guided deprivation instead of walks to the coffee shop. Until it was Zipora in the water instead of my grandfather's blue cursive on the shore. I let a little bit of bath water and a scrap of dissolving paper float into my mouth. Maybe soon all this won't be so physical.



Theadora Walsh is a writer and video artist who lives in Oakland. Currently, she works as an editorial assistant for the Electronic Literature Directory. Her writing has been published in *Apogee*, *Inpatient Press*, *After Image*, *Electronic Book Review*, *Unbag*, and others. Visual poetry has been presented at Baby Castles in New York and the Bibliowicz Gallery in Ithaca. She's writing a book about work and preparing to start an MFA in digital literature at Brown University.