DOCUMENT

UFD0052 Maggie Siebert

Cold Butter

A house is more than a home, it's a part of you. Suburban absurdity meets posthuman horror in Maggie Siebert's tale of an unusual episode in real estate

> At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability—a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to 'suspend' its flight.
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> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

I awake to the sound of someone opening my front door from the inside. I focus on the feet beating against my hardwood floor, waterlogged and separating from the baseboards. The vibration of each footfall grows distant, and I now know this is the sound of someone exiting me in the dead of night.

The part of me that sees best, that is still most of a human body, does not catch the person as they leave. In truth, I suppose there is no one to 'catch'. For the last 18 months, the two-story, four-bedroom, one-and-a-half bathroom domicile that grew from inside me has laid empty. And though looters occasionally pick through the trash strewn about the house for valuables, none of them stay for longer than a few minutes at a time.

My most-of-a-body is planted in the rightmost corner of the front yard. I have great difficulty turning my stiffened neck, restricting my vision to the garden beneath the guest bedroom window. I do not need to see to know the houses around me are barren. They radiate emptiness.

There are cracks in my foundation. I am not going to die — houses, after all, can't be said to live. But the possibility of a more pronounced collapse, one

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which ends with my outer walls lying heaped in the rubble and detritus left by tenants and their violence, feels final. I suspect I will not be repaired.

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I first complained to my husband about the persistent stitch in my side five years ago. It felt like a hard vise clamped on the sagging fat just above my hips, that spot he would not dare refer to as love handles. It was the kind of pain one experiences after running too far without practice, and was accompanied by a hardness in my muscles when it flared.

I told him I was worried it might be my appendix, or a tumor. He, the son of a nurse who fancied himself an honorary RN through osmosis, stood and gently felt my side with prodding fingertips.

'It feels hot', he said.

'It is hot', I said.

I ignored it when I could and restrained myself from worrying when I couldn't. Until, a week later, I woke up standing in the middle of an empty lot. It sat between two houses, both dilapidated but not quite destitute. The grass in the lot stood to the backs of my knees, thick weeds and dandelions ebbing in the night air. The cloud-drenched sky revealed no stars.

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In the weeks that followed I became very sick. It started with a dryness in my throat that soon traveled to my mouth. I drank water constantly, but still I felt as if my esophagus were caked in sticky glue. I ran a fever and found myself shivering violently in the bathroom often, trying to hack whatever was in my throat out into the toilet or, failing that, vomiting from the effort.

And every night I dreamed of the empty lot.

My husband was furious in the weeks that followed my sudden disappearance. We spoke only in passing, his contempt hardly disguised. An outside observer might expect concern for me would override such a response, but this was not my husband's way. He let his worries take precedence, and I needed that; it gave things a hierarchy, a structure I could follow and predict.

'Why won't you go to the doctor?' he asked again and again. When he picked me up at a bus stop at dawn following my somnambulistic episode, he tried to take me straight to the emergency room. I refused, and soon resorted to shouting him down until he drove us back home in silence. If he made appointments, I did not attend them. Once he threatened to drag me to the car. I locked myself in our bedroom.

And still, the heat in my side persisted. Jets of pain stabbed at me over and over, piercing the dull ache and sending me curling into a ball, my agony somewhat alleviated by hugging my knees. Several weeks into these changes it began to roil, a bubbling that I could place my hand over and feel.

Then, I began waking up out of bed. First it was the kitchen. Then, the living room. Soon I was on the front porch, and then the mailbox. I knew from the first night it happened that I was trying to get back to the vacant lot. My first visit germinated something in me. Instinct told me my circumstances would improve if I made it back.

But I feared my husband's reaction. On some level he knew I was sleepwalking again. The night I awoke on the porch he was standing behind me, calling my name from the front door. I paused, looking at the pale blue of the 5 a.m. sky, and then told him I couldn't sleep. He took my arm and told me to come

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back to bed. From then on, I caught him looking at me with growing contempt when he thought I was sleeping; no doubt the result of my refusal to seek help for my increasingly thoughtless behavior.

In the end, though, my body took me where it wanted to go.

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Before this all started—a year, maybe two—the news cycle was briefly dominated by the story of a man whose body merged with a coffee shop. Before they became entwined, the man was a neighborhood regular, often sitting on the patio reading westerns for most of the early afternoon.

The morning it happened he showed up and ordered his drink before bringing it to his usual spot. Once outdoors, though, he set the drink down and pressed himself face first against the glass facade. The staff noticed and thought it was some sort of joke. But soon he was pulling his shirt up to expose his chest and stomach, and they stopped thinking it was funny.

He was never rude or derogatory in any way, and so they initially thought he was having a stroke or experiencing the effects of dementia. In the time it took them to dial 911 for assistance, the skin on the man's torso began to ripple against the glass, as if he were suffering from indigestion. But as the edges splayed out like flattened putty and began to take up more space on the window, the staff grew very concerned.

Before long, his face flattened and his features smoothed. Like cold butter he smeared against the glass, blurring and streaking his form until it appeared the windows were made of him. Until someone got close enough to touch them and confirm that they really *were* made of him.

The building was condemned and the scientific community went ablaze with rationalizations. But in the end, it was one of those things we collectively

digested. Within six months the staff members were all dead, stricken with rare cancers in their faces and necks, leaving no one to give us a firsthand reminder. Their pictures sometimes haunted childrens' dreams, but little else. Occasionally someone would wonder, in amazement, 'Remember when...?' And everyone did, and it *was* absurd, and worth remembering, but we all had other things going on, too. It is often best to swallow events like these.

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When at last I returned to the lot, I knew I would not be leaving again. I awoke from my daze half a block away, the outer rim of the lawn at the edge of my vision. I did not break pace. I was determined as ever to get to the lot. With each step I took, the pain in my side lessened. It felt like a flood of circulation in a blood-starved limb.

About halfway across, I felt a violent urge to stop moving, accompanied by an almost complete cessation of pain. I attempted another step, but the pain was so sudden and blinding that I was forced to sit down.

When I did, the pain left again, and a comfortable, liquid warmth settled over my side, as well as the better part of my stomach and the rim of my groin. I was already making peace with the fact that I would not move from this spot. I decided to make myself comfortable, thanking whatever force made the physical torment end. Then, at once, I fell back into a deep sleep.

And when I woke up, a house filled the expanse of grass.

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The house was connected to me—not the other way around, an important distinction—by a thick, pliable appendage growing from my abdomen. It was, and is, hot and wet, like the flesh of an inner cheek, but pocked and dimpled with white spots. The transition between what I thought of as my normal body and the connecting limb was smooth; at times I could not tell where it began.

I avoided touching it for a time, but I soon realized this was untenable. Soon, tentative, I prodded at its contours, expecting pain, or discomfort, or even revulsion. But all I felt was a mild pleasurable sensation, like a hand brushing against a naked crotch.

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For the first few months after the house emerged from me, I didn't feel much of anything about it. Indeed, I have now come to suspect the process had some kind of narcotizing effect on me, placing me in a state of bizarre euphoria and total apathy. It took almost six months for me to realize I could bend the appendage without pain, and thus move freely within the space I was now confined. The knowledge did not excite me much.

It was clear on some level that I was in the grip of my fifteen minutes. The flashes of news photographers lit up my vision.

My husband came to see me. I don't know how many times. I have many images of him with me and my house committed to memory, but I don't know if they are from hundreds of visits or just one. I can see him calm, then hysterical; touching my head, grasping my hand; looking in my eyes, then at the house, then at the appendage.

And I can see him leaving.

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There are rumblings of disputes over the ownership of the land on which my house sits. I catch snatches of conversation from people in protective suits who come to survey the ground. They were taking soil samples, or perhaps scrapings of the house; its paint, its outer walls. I paid attention to none of it, and for the most part I was ignored. I recall little more than glances in my direction.

While at first I assumed they were government workers, perhaps EPA scientists, I have come to suspect they were sent by the people who eventually started inhabiting the house.

After what could have been one or twenty visits from the researchers, my house was entered for the first time. The front door opened with no reluctance; I could feel in my appendage that there was no lock, that anyone could have entered at any time. Once one person went inside, the flood began. Someone was sending interior decorators and bespoke furniture delivery men into the depths of the house. Someone was moving into my house.

It was weeks before anyone was actually living inside. But when the couple, a man and a woman in their 40s, went inside with their bags accompanied by a driver, it was like I was snapped out of my opioid haze.

And I began to feel everything.

Each footfall, each thud of a dropped suitcase. It all reverberated through the house, into my appendage and then, violently, into me. The sensation was not pain; it was a feeling I knew I was meant to feel. It was at once clear to me that this is what all houses experience. But no processing; just pure sensation.

The scraping of furniture against the floorboards. Nails hammering into walls, bending against sheetrock. Drills leaving gaping, bloodless holes. Curtains ripped open and closed. Doors slamming in their frames. Loud whirring machines that sent vibrations across whole rooms. The weight of picture frames and shelves. The weight of everything.

I could see nothing inside, save for a sliver of what looked like a guest bedroom through the window near my spot in the front yard. I was too low to the ground. Several times I tried to stand and get a better look, each time something would send me falling to my knees; the clatter of dishes in cupboards, or another one of their endless home improvement projects.

For a while, I spent some time thinking about what these people must be like. My house was modest, and they appeared quite wealthy. I wondered if this was their second or third house. I wondered if they were intellectuals, if they were drawn to the aberrance of the house's mere existence. And I wondered if they knew the house was going to kill them. They must have known about the coffee shop. Everyone in the world knew about the coffee shop.

If it was a novel experience they were seeking, they got what they were looking for.

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One night, some time later, a fire raged on my front lawn. An upturned hot plate and a flood of butane. The grass blackened. Almost 100 people in formalwear and protective face masks, watching from the sidewalk, helpless.

The couple sometimes held parties. At first they were small gatherings with other, similarly austere people. But when caterers in hazmat suits began arriving in white vans, carting trays of hors d'oeuvres and entrees, I had to prepare for what was likely to be an evening of unbearable discomfort.

The novelty of the house kept them busy for most of the evening. All night I felt people run their hands across the walls and knock on counters, as if they were searching for some sign of organic life. They must have been hoping for something possessed.

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It was the end of summer, and warm outside well into the night, so guests were served on the lawn, where big banquet tables were placed under a white tent. For once, I was seated in a position which enabled me to see many of the partygoers, and I caught their furtive glances in my direction many times throughout the first half of the evening.

I did not expect the glances to turn into anything more. But they did. I heard them discuss me, my relationship to the house, my appendage. Had the couple spoken to me since they moved in? They said no, they had not. People began to ask why. They said they hadn't thought of it. Some responded with laughter, but some started to become indignant. How could you just ignore him when you're tenants in his house?

But even as the conversation became more heated, still no one approached me. They talked about me and cast frequent glances in my direction, gesturing to me for emphasis. Then, after what felt like hours of back-and-forth, one guest stood, filled a glass with red wine, and stepped toward me.
'Would you like this?' he asked.

I took it from him, wordless.

'I hope you're enjoying the night', he said.

He returned to his seat, and in doing so seemed to have settled the matter of my agency. The conversation shifted back to other matters, and I was again forgotten.

I don't know when or how the serving table fell over. But when the burners hit the lawn, a blaze began much faster than I could have expected. It was a dry summer to be sure, but I still watched in amazement as a greater and greater patch of grass smoldered, then ignited. Alarmed, the guests leapt from their chairs and began fumbling with cell phones.

Soon, everyone was outside my field of vision. I could only see the roar of orange and feel the heat against my back. My appendage seemed to recoil against the smoke, like it had irritated nostrils.

The fire was blackening the exterior of the house on the right side by the time the fire department came. The heat in my body was swelling to a horrible climax. As the paint singed away I felt my own skin bubbling and blistering. The explosion of cold water against the outer wall left my flesh feeling ragged and heavy. My appendage contorted and became stiff. I grasped and shook it; it relaxed a little.

The guests stood for a while, watching the smoke drift into the night air. After some time, I saw the couple from the corner of my eye, stepping toward the front porch to survey the damage. The husband reached out to touch the dark wall, but his wife stopped him, saying he would burn himself. He agreed.

They turned and looked at me.

I looked back.

We said nothing.

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A month later, the couple were still living in the house. There were no repairs done to the exterior of my house. The black wall was a new scar for me to wear.

I only saw them once before they died. One afternoon, a grey Mercedes van pulled up to the sidewalk. After a minute or two, the husband opened the front door and stepped outside. I was only afforded a glimpse, but it was enough. I saw him pushing his wife in a wheelchair, her entire body covered by a sheet. She was alive and moaning beneath it. Her shape seemed wrong, somehow, but I could not determine why.

His problems were much more apparent; an enormous goiter, veiny and calloused against his neck. He pushed her to the van and momentarily fell to his knees when he made it to the huge doors. The driver ran out and helped him to his feet, but he waved him off. He said he would come to the hospital later that afternoon, that he needed to rest. I heard all this and imagined the look of the tumor against his jaw and wondered if it hurt to speak. I hoped it did.

A week later an ambulance was taking him away from the house, its lights off.

I reached up to my own neck and felt four hard lumps along my jawline.

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A lot of time passed. How much, I don't know. The growths in my neck swelled and made my face appear distended and warped. I was dying, and nothing could be more clear.

And then, last night, my appendage fell off.

I could feel it rotting the more my tumors grew. Whatever cancer was destroying my body was destroying my connection to the house, too. Its cheek-like smoothness now felt sticky and thick, like fresh caulk. I ran my hands over it as if to soothe it. It trembled and whimpered at my touch.

What had once been so full of life now looked like a wasp's nest, an annoyance to be disposed of

And after some time, perhaps weeks, perhaps months, I felt it breaking away from my abdomen, exposing layers of my own wet, diseased flesh. Seeing plainly how diseased I was just below the surface made me panic, and I pulled the rest of the appendage's mouth away from me to get the full picture.

When it was fully severed, though, I felt a great flash inside my skull and fell on my back, beset by unbelievable pain. I writhed there for hours before drifting into unconsciousness.

Upon awakening, though, I had a renewed sense of clarity. I felt, for the first time in so long, almost nothing. My connection to the house was severed. I was going to die because of it, but I was liberated because of it, too. I looked around and saw the husk of my appendage, dried and hanging limp from the side of the house. What had once been so full of life now looked like a wasp's nest, an annoyance to be disposed of. I prodded at it with my foot.

A face flashed through my thoughts: my husband's. Then, a memory:

I am coming home from work. I am tired, angry from the commute, and hungry. My husband and I had just fought the night before and had not spoken all day. I expected more of his cold shoulder when I returned, and so I took my time getting out of my car and walking to the front door. I grasp the handle, bracing myself for a night of discomfort. It feels like an eternity before I can finally twist it. But when I do, I see my husband standing there, eyes red like he's been crying. I step through the entryway and he embraces me. He says he's sorry and I say I'm sorry too. I wrap my arms around him and we stand there, holding each other. Then he laughs, kisses me on the forehead, and tells me he wants to order takeout tonight. I tell him that's a good idea and we walk toward the living room.

I step onto the porch. I face the front door and grasp the handle. Then, an eternity later, I step inside for the first and last time.