The Tattooed Nun

Dominique Hecq

The body is the inscribed surface of events...

Michel Foucault

Kim curses Monday mornings, the coin laundry, her clothes. She hates the touch of fabrics, the smell of soaking dirt, the steam, the noise. She hates doing her washing in public: the sidewayglance, the gawk, the talk and tease of people. But above all, she hates unloading the clapped out washing-machine.

Kim swears. Her new drip-dry dress is torn. She knows it will leave her touchy for the rest of the day. She's nearly through, though. She runs her left hand over the basket and under the agitator to retrieve a bra. Then, out of the blue, the machine starts up in resonant urgency with the spin of its nearest neighbour. She thinks of a story where the buffoon character has most of his right hand taken off at this point. She chuckles, decides to leave her bra behind, picks up her basket, and makes for the door.

As it happens, Kim has had her own right hand taken off during a spree of train surfing. After her accident, she decided that the only thing for it was to take on a heroic persona. She thought of dressing up tough and exotic. She decided never to step out without a leather motorcycle jacket on, a black beret on her shaved head, and a cigarette hanging from her mouth. She took to hunching her shoulders, walking with one hand clenched in a forbidding fist and the other invisible, yet spread out, thing-like, defying the very possibility of a prosthesis. She developed a tic, too, like a badge of office, and so she behaved prissily in delicatessens and chose her imported bread and cheese with a finicky display of expertise. If denied the creme de la creme, she would stare at the shop-assistant, uncomprehending, turning her bottom lip inside-out.

As the corners of Kim's mouth became slacker and her head sank between her shoulders, so she pushed away the pain of memory together with the memory of friends. There were friends who had plans, like doing an MA, getting married, raising children, building or renovating a house; and friends who were procrastinating pains. There were friends, however, with a fascination with phantoms.

- What are friends for? some asked when Kim's mutilation was still fresh. And to find out, they went out to see her as she convalesced in the sun room.

They brought books and magazines, the odd records and videotapes. But most of all, they brought their witty conversation.

- Do you soak it often? asked Shaun, meaning the stump.

Kim sniffed and stared hard at the pile of paper towels by her wicker chair. She wriggled the fingers on her left hand, shut her eyes and realized that she couldn't feel them--the good ones. She was shocked when, looking for a passage to discuss with Shaun, she opened *The Phenomenology of Sensation* and saw, underlined in her pen: "My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization... likewise I do not hear myself as I hear others, the sonorous existence of my voice is for me as it were poorly exhibited; have rather an echo of its articulated existence, it vibrates through my head rather than outside."

- Do you feel pain in the hand still? asked Jayne.
- What do you mean? asked Kim back through a nose blow.
- Some people do. Some people say this pining for the lost member is something like what Eve must have felt when she was chucked out of paradise.

But Kim only chuckled at this and nursed her stump in the cup of her other hand. It felt light and hollow, husk-like. Rigid.

And yet Kim knew that if left to its own devices this mere object would move spontaneously in accordance with the movements of the rest of her body. This, she wanted to know nothing of. It was as though her phantom was an expression of nostalgia for the unity and wholeness of the all-powerful body, a kind of memorial to her missing member. Some superstitious thing. A ghostlike icon too primitive to take seriously.

All of a sudden, Kim began to rock her body back and forth with a murmur. Then she rocked her stump. The murmuring became louder and more rhythmical. It was as though she too, had become thing-like.

Jayne tried singing.

She checked herself.

She left.

This is when Kim chose her new wardrobe from the Opportunity Shop in High Street one Monday after her trip to the laundromat. She threw out all of her dresses--the drip-dry synthetics and the good cloth dresses with the matching shoes and handbags. She now had quite a collection of motorcycle corps overcoats and jackets. Leather, she said, is easy care, easy to wear. It keeps its shape.

Kim found her role increasingly compelling as time went past. She would sit once in a while and watch the sun glow down and then glint through the ruined palings outside her sun room, and she would think how foolish not to have done this earlier. She was about to ask herself if every fugitive on the street, cruising through on a motorcycle, or tucked up in a car, or even troubling people on a tram, was not in fact a voluntary exile from the index-linked home and hobby affiliation. She was about to think this through when her thoughts petered out of their own volition.

Twice during this period of discovery and adjustment Kim was called in for an

interview at Centrelink. Each time before setting off, she would bloody a bandage and tie it over her healed, now quite smooth and sanitary, stump. Then she would flourish freely this piece of fresh butchery under the nose of the man or woman explaining to her how to qualify for the New Start Allowance. All Kim wanted, was to avoid work. In her mind, she was working hard enough for a period of inertia closer at hand.

On her way back to her terrace by the creek, on the little knoll surrounded by new grasslands, it struck her that if she bought a pair of binoculars, she could sit in her sun room with her back to her bookshelves and watch a turtle take an hour and a half to cross fifty feet of slimy water. She stopped at Cash Converters and hurried home with her purchase.

From her post, Kim watched the heads of children go down the steps and down below the flags and plastic bags, drain the puddles at the bottom of the creek, then walk upstream, sticking rocks in the mud, poking at dead ducklings, and disappear past the bridge. So, Kim watched. And she watched the same heads rise again a little further on, the faces a little less enthralled as the feet got closer to their hide-out: an old washtub camouflaged in the undergrowth. Kim watched, but lost sight of the children. She would have liked to have seen their smiles a little less successfully faked.

One day, just before Easter, Kim came home with her shopping bag full of bread and cheese. As she got to her letter box, she saw the controlled contours of a nun standing at her door.

- Hello Kim, said the nun, massaging her hands together, may I come in?

Kim pushed her stump against the door, uneasy at the ring of the "may I." The door gave way.

So, Kim thought, there was once a thing called memory; and there is still a thing called conversation. Or is it the other way around? Damn you, woman.

Kim felt struck with panic. To give herself time to think, she sat down on the chair next to the telephone and nursed her stump. To forget about memory she tipped her head back and rolled her eyes at the intruder.

- Kim, said the nun, I'm not going to mince my words. I know you'll understand.

Kim thought of babbling or jabbering in her own head not to hear anything.

- Kim, I want you to come back with me to the convent, or at least give them a ring and ask for Sister Leonie. She collapsed yesterday and is expected to pass away soon. She was conscious for a couple of hours afterwards and she asked for you. I wrote down the address and the phone number. I'm leaving it here. Ask for Mother Superior.

Placing the piece of paper on Kim's lap, the nun whisked her body away and made for the door.

- One has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God, Kim said. She paused, then laughed. I must have read this somewhere. In some hopeless magazine. I can see it. A thing floating in the background. Then the body corporate mark, like a tattoo. What was that again? A dishwasher? Dryer? Washing machine? Can't remember.

CAN'T RE...

## MEMBER CANNOT KNOT CANNOT INVENT WILL NOT DISMEMBER

Somehow Kim has managed to get hold of a baguette and here she is, stomping down High Street, avoiding the cracks in the paving slabs and gnawing at the corner of her baguette. A gull swoops low and shits on her beret. She trips on a brick and her bread goes flying from her grasp.

- Want a hand? asks a red-faced man.

In return, she gives him the stiff middle-finger.

A woman with a see-through spotted head scarf stops and stoops. She returns the baguette, tucking it into the groove between Kim's arm and upper body. In doing so, she touches the stump once, briefly, without disgust. Though she gives Kim back her bread there is something hard and accusing about her. She inhales deliberately and marches away.

Kim throws her baguette at her feet. She is shaking with spite.

- You stupid interfering bitch. Just as I was almost there! Couldn't you just watch me do it?

The woman stares, shrugs her shoulders, turns around and crosses over to Bakers & Sons's.

Kim's words give way to sobs that work through her body for a few minutes. Tears seem to revive a whole anterior life. A life cut in colours, like a dream. She blows her nose, clenches her good hand in a forbidding fist, and stomps her feet on the baguette. She checks her mother's address at the convent on St Georges Road and, out of the blue, remembers that the quote about the prosthetic God is from Freud. As if to cap off a nightmare of a day, her mother of a severed hand has begun to throb.