

We are all mad here

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Introduction

If we are, it is because, somewhere, teetering on the brink of what is mad and what is not, there is to be found a strange substance called meaning. If you follow that which is completely sane for long enough, you will, eventually, reach the point of insanity: if you follow what is insane for as long as you can hold on to it, a kind of logic will emerge and you will find sanity strong enough to spread out your rug, to set your basket upon, and hang your hat off. You may depart in either direction, from whatever your starting point may be. Be warned, however, either way, it is an arduous journey, and you're likely to feel a little mad-angry along the way.

These two pieces, *Father-in-law's tongue* and *Mum?* take their starting points at different locations along the tension between madness and meaning. The protagonist in each piece encounters a crisis of orientation in the world they find themselves navigating. Each piece arises from sources which are, arguably, sane.

Piece: Father-in-law's tongue

Source: Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran by Gohar Homayounpour (2012, The MIT Press) and Chinatown (1974) directed by Roman Polanski

Background and Inspiration

The inspiration for this piece came from reading 'Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran' by Gohar

Homayounpour (2012, The MIT Press). She claims that in the Persian epic poem, the *Shahnameh*, (or 'King of Kings') Persian kings have a habit of killing their sons. She contrasts this with the Oedipus myth where the son kills the father. She posits that Persian culture might more readily accept castration than the Greek tradition.

This made me think of my own experience with the Iranian family I stayed with one time in Istanbul. Their fear of having the 'eye put on them' seemed much less of a joke than they pretended it to be. It was as if the threat of castration could come from anyone who might be envious of them. That envy might be expressed in the words of a neighbor, or it might be expressed in the glance of a complete stranger. To an ignorant Westerner, having to protect herself from a mystical threat in everyday encounters with the outside world in order to alleviate the anxiety of their host family, it all seemed just a little absurd.

Aside from seeking to avoid 'the eye' at any cost, the family spent a great deal of time telling hilarious, side-splitting jokes. I never understood the jokes, although I spent a long time trying to analyze them. It was only later, after having spent more time with Iranian people, that I began to crack the code of Iranian humor. I became familiar with Iranian humor, but only in translation.

I could never seem to integrate Iranian humor into my communications in quite the right way, and so

I decided to write a joke of it, structuring the narrative around a compilation of Iranian sayings and idioms.

Iranian sayings that I came to appreciate as the basis for shared mirth and laughter included things like, 'it might be a joke for you, but it's a memory for me,' and, 'the coin finally dropped in his/her/their telephone booth.' The joke about Karam suggests that Iranian humor holds something of an appreciation of the need for the subject to look towards the Other to establish an identity. I also added into the mix an interpretation of some of the mader idioms I've encountered in the English language, such as 'having enough room to swing a cat', 'being too big for your boots', and 'curiosity killed the cat.' I wanted to play on combining expressions like 'mother-tongue' and 'mother-in-law', the latter of which occupies a terrifying role in contemporary Australian jokes, noting as well, the curious lack of the mother-in-law's male counterpart as a figure to be feared and revered in Australian culture.

The piece was also inspired by Roman Polanski's 'Chinatown' (1974) which explores the symbolism of 'having one's eye put out' within the context of the Oedipus myth. It made me wonder about the possible link between 'putting out one's eyes', a recurring motif in Greek mythology, and the fear of 'having the eye put on oneself' that I encountered during my stay with my Iranian host family.

But above all else, it should be mad-funny, and if just one reader laughs, then even though I cannot see the laugh, I will be a happy writer.

Father-in-law's tongue

I met my wife's family in Turkey. For the first time, Sepita's mother, Sara, and her father, Noor, traveled beyond their home country, Iran. They brought with them their two younger daughters, and the desire that their son who had fled to Denmark a decade ago, might join us: in Turkey, he could see his family without surrendering two years of his life to the Iranian army. Alas, he could not make it, and there was only Noor and me.

And me? Well, I'm a New York Jew of Russian descent. I grew up anxious and without a father, and I studied law for long enough to know I'm not into first principles. I became a professional Sociologist, chasing tenured professorships - always short - across the globe until I met Sepita in Australia, and married. We lived happily with a ginger tabby cat in a Brisbane terrace house, right up until we boarded the plane

that took us away from all that was signified.

We landed in Istanbul for ten days in a two bedroom flat with Septia's family from Iran.

Sara made tea and then retired to shower and change, and the rest of us squeezed into the lounge room, the windows closed against the cats of Istanbul.

My wife's family laughed almost as much as they talked, and the corners of their eyes crinkled.

I listened to my wife's voice, all the more beautiful in Persian.

Sepita, I could see, was pulled out of the reunion each time she turned towards me and translated her family to me. I really wished she wouldn't; I felt like her attention was divided between two different subjects.

I sat there, politely, drinking Persian tea, trying not to worry about the dental hygiene of my extended family as my in-laws placed whole, white sugar cubes between their front teeth and drank their tea, turning the sugar cubes into brown, melting lumps.

I drank my tea without, and looked politely at the floor, and I sweated in the Turkish heat.

Sara emerged, refreshed. She looked different without the hijab. Her hair was auburn, almost ginger, and it fell in soft, gentle, waves about her face.

She gave me a flirtatious look, and I blushed, and hurriedly returned to my tea.

She walked right up to where I sat on the couch - I was eye level with her crotch now - and I gulped at my tea and looked at the floor, and she pulled her trousers up to reveal her ankles.

The tea went down the wrong way, and I spluttered and coughed.

There was laughter all around.

The room started spinning.

Sepita's hand on my knee brought me gently back from mortification into the world of the living room.

'Mum says that your slippers are the same size as hers, but that your feet look so much bigger. She wonders if there is something wrong with her eyes.' Sepita said, her voice light and happy.

I saw that Sara was indeed wearing my slippers.

I saw with relief that she shuffled away from us and squeezed into her place beside her husband, and we all sat there in the living room full of foreign laughter and warmth.

When I was able to look up from the carpet, I sought somewhere neutral to rest my eyes. I saw that there was a cat outside on the narrow window-sill,

agitated and arched up against the glass.

'Poor thing, maybe it has been displaced,' I murmured.

Everyone looked at me, and Sepita spoke, translating me to her family.

Noor sprang off the couch, knocking his walking stick to the floor, and pushed open the window. The cat let out a yowl of self-preservation and swiped back. There was a battle. Noor, leaning precariously out of the window, had just enough room to fling the cat. The cat disappeared through the air.

Noor closed the window, and wiped his hands in disgust against his trousers.

Somewhere in the street below, hopefully a cat still lived.

The jet lag hit me soon after that, and I slept without regard for Turkish time. I dreamed. I was in a room I did not recognize, with an anxious cat I did not know. The walls of the room were orange. There was a hideous creature with three legs and a huge Cyclops-eye coming towards us.

I tried the door handle, but the door was locked.

'Use the key!' urged the cat.

I looked around for a key.

The creature was getting closer, and I could see the reflection of myself in its huge eye. Its teeth were brown and rotting.

'Where is the key?' I shouted.

'You have the key!' screamed the cat, 'Hurry!'

I realized I was gripping the key in my hand.

The creature descended on us.

Light pierced my eyes.

I woke disoriented, my heart pounding. The sun was pouring through the window and I had overheated. I managed to coordinate myself into the lounge room and onto the sofa beside Sepita. Noor was talking, everyone was listening, and of course, there was tea on the coffee table.

I think Sara poured me tea, or it might have been Sepita. Sara was still shuffling around in my slippers, and my wife, apparently, had taken to wearing my shirts.

Noor must be telling a story from the way everyone was listening to him, raptured. His voice went on and on, his audience hanging onto every word, and then it crescendoed into the final act.

Laughter.

Sepita collapsed beside me, and I'd never seen her laugh so much. She doubled over, fighting for breath. Just when she appeared to have recovered

herself, she was rendered helpless by a fresh tribulation of humor which wracked her whole, slender body.

I was both curious and concerned.

Sepita looked at me, but my countenance only seemed to add to the malady. Her affliction was contagious, and soon the whole Iranian family was helpless with laughter, but my wife was the worst of them.

It became clear that, although she was unresponsive, she wasn't dying. I picked up my saucer and teacup with one hand, and with my other, I drank my tea.

The cat was back on the window-sill. It had clearly survived the fall. It raised its forepaw and began to groom itself.

'It's a Iranian joke,' said Sepita finally. I waited patiently for the last of the giggles to leave her system. 'You won't find this funny: you've got to be Iranian.' I gave my wife an exasperated look, 'Try me,' I said. 'It's a joke about Lurs: not even most Iranians would understand it.'

'Darling. There's only so long a man can endure his ignorance of the jokes happening around him!'

Sepita wiped her eyes.

'So there was this man called Karam and he was a Lur and he lived in a village. He'd lived in this little house in this little village his whole life. He was a beekeeper, wait...'

Sepita turned and asked her mother for clarification. Sara replied, and apparently Karam's occupation warranted serious discourse.

I put down the saucer and waited patiently for my joke. I was determined to get it.

'So Karam was a beekeeper, and anyway - actually, I'm not sure that matters.'

'Wait,' I said exasperated, 'you and your Mum just had a five minute discussion about the occupation of the protagonist, and it doesn't matter?'

Sepita grinned and shook her head. 'Karam is Mum's Uncle -'

'Wait, is this a joke or a story?'

'Both,' was the answer.

I picked up my cup and saucer again.

'Karam is Mum's Uncle, and he is a beekeeper and he lives in a village, but the rest of it is made up... or maybe someone in the family just put Karam into this joke, which is even funnier...'

I examined the saucer and waited.

'Karam and his family got a new house in a new village. One day Karam went out for a walk. He walked to the old village to visit his friends, and then

he walked back to the new village where he lived. But he couldn't find his house...'

I nodded, following.

'He looked and he looked, but he couldn't find it. Finally he knocked on the door of a house which he thought might be his. A neighbor answered.

Karam said 'Is this my house?'

The neighbor said 'No, Karam, this is not your house.'

The neighbor pointed down the street and he said 'This house is Karam's house', and then he -'

'But my wife was freshly afflicted by laughter.

I waited.

'...the neighbor said 'This house is Karam's house,'

I nodded, willing her to get on with it.

'...and he took Karam by the arm and he said 'And this is Karam.'

'Sepita pushed her fist up against her nose to hold in the laughter, but her body was wracked with it again.

I waited for Sepita to continue.

She didn't. '

And that's it, that's the joke.'

'...right.

' Outside, the cat flicked its ears and looked away.

'You see, it's a joke about Lurs... they are kind of old-fashioned, and they can't really cope with the modern world.'

'I see,' I said, not seeing at all, 'This is a joke I cannot easily analyze.

'I felt a despondency settle over the living room.

The family was assembling- or trying to - for an excursion to the Hagia Sophia. Sepita was dressed in big, roomy clothing, a scarf draped across her head. I was worried she might disappear altogether into the folds of tradition.

We couldn't quite seem to move out of the apartment. For some reason we were all arriving into the tiny living room, patting down our pockets or rummaging through our bags, and realizing we'd forgotten something - a wallet, a key, a phone, a scarf - and stumbling back over each other to our bedrooms to retrieve the thing we lacked.

Finally, we shuffled like a slow moving eddy out the front door, onto the tiny landing, and down the echoing stairwell, out into the city where the West came up against the East.

The Hagia Sophia was huge and ancient and full

of modern tourists in long clothing. The tour guide spoke English, but with a thick Irish accent. It was exhausting. At an opportune moment, Sara retired from the mosque to a cafe, complaining of sore feet and fatigue. She urged us to continue with our tourism while she waited. I watched in amazement the volley of invitation and refusal that ensued. Noor and Sepita and her two sisters appeared to be offering to stay with Sara, while Sara was adamant that we must not divert our sightseeing on her behalf. The united front between Noor and his daughters, and between sister and sister, took an alarming turn when, in a confusion of shifting alliances, they turned against each other. From their gestures and animated tones, I gathered that each was arguing that the others should continue on tour while the speaker - and those in the speaker's alliance if they had one at that point - should claim the exclusive right to stay with the mother in repose. At the point when Noor's extravagant sweeping gestures extended to me, I timidly spoke up.

'Um, Sepita? What's going on?'

Sepita looked at me in surprise, and it was as if she realized she'd forgotten something.

'Tarof', she said, finally, 'I never told you about the Iranian Tarof.'

She readjusted her scarf which had slipped from her head.

Noor glanced at me and muttered something which was clearly intended to evade translation.

I looked at Sepita quizzically.

She shrugged her shoulders and said simply, 'This is Tarof.'

I was suddenly distracted by an intense itch. When I turned my hand over in examination, I discovered a nasty rash. It stretched across my palm from the crevice between the start of my thumb and first finger, to just before the base of my baby finger.

Sepita noticed me looking at myself, and demanded to look too.

Her entire family demanded to look, and I became a specimen of Iranian dermatological speculation.

'We must go to a doctor,' said Sepita firmly.

Noor pushed in and peered at me, and he shook his head gravily and spoke in solemn tones.

'What did he say!' I demanded to know.

'He said that somebody put the eye on you.'

'Put the eye on me?!' I exclaimed.

Sepita nodded seriously, 'Father says that he saw a man yesterday gazing at you with jealousy on his face because you have a beautiful wife. That jealous

man put the eye on you.'

I snatched my palm back with its crawling skin, and shoved it into my pocket.

The GP said in concerned tones that she had never before seen a corruption like mine, and she referred me to a dermatologist who referred me to another dermatologist. I felt like I was on tour of the private medical suites of Istanbul. I was on tour without a translator: Sepita could not speak Turkish.

'Ah,' said the second dermatologist, who looked to be of a great age.

I held my breath.

'I have seen this before,' he said in English.

I nearly wept because this man could understand me.

'This rash is caused by nickel.'

'Nickel?' I asked.

The doctor looked up from my hand, which he was holding in his. He regarded me over the rim of his glasses, as if contemplating my retardation.

'Perhaps you have been holding a key in your hand,' he said slowly.

Nickel? A key? In my hand?

I was about to shake my head, and then I remembered.

'Only in my dream,' I said.

He shrugged, 'Yes, sometimes it happens that way too.'

I stood in the bathroom and Sepita applied the prescribed dermatological ointment to my rash, but it seemed that I'd become public property. Despite my protestations, I was pulled into the living room by the very hand that was wounded for a public dressing.

'The doctor said it was from holding nickel keys in my hand,' I explained. 'He said nothing about the eye,' I added, giving Noor an angry look.

Sepita, holding my hand in hers and applying the gauze and tape, translated me to her family once again.

Noor stepped up to me, talking, and grinning.

'What,' I said to Sepita, 'did he say this time?'

Sepita carefully applied the last of the tape around my hand, and gave me my hand back.

She crumpled up the plastic packaging of the sterile dressing, and looked around for a bin.

'He said he'd never seen a man look so terrified at the mention of the eye before,' she called back over her shoulder as she headed for the kitchen.

I felt my face turn red, and my vision retreated from Noor's grinning face to some tiny spot within me.

'It's a joke for you,' I muttered, 'but it's a memory for me.'

Noor let out a burst of laughter, louder and more bell-like than any laughter I'd ever heard. I felt the thud of his arm crash about my shoulders, and I felt the warmth of his body, shaking uncontrollably against mine. He shook and he shook, and he collapsed, weeping into my arms.

'Ah, son,' he said finally, when he could speak, 'that's a good one.'

'You speak English?' I demanded of the scoundrel in my arms.

Noor surrendered the responsibility of keeping himself upright to me all over again, and when he climbed up my arms to speak again, it was all Persian to me.

I looked at Sepita, who had returned to the living room, helplessly.

She shrugged and pulled a face. She looked as surprised as I was. 'He said that your coin finally dropped in the telephone booth.'

Outside on the roof, the cat looked in with curiosity.

Title: Mum?

Source: Chapter 12 From Image to Signifier In Pleasure and Reality in Formations of the Unconscious Book V by Jacques Lacan (1957-1958)

Mum?

Jacques was suddenly awake. Some painful pressure had occurred either in his head, or on it. The sensation had wrenched him from his sleep, but now it was gone. As he drew breath, he realized that there was a substance covering his face, as if a tent had fallen down upon him. Before he could ponder, however, how he came to be camping, the pressure against his head returned. He went to shout out, only the substance, all around his face, invaded his mouth as soon as he opened it. His panic and confusion crescendoed, and he tried to swim upwards towards the surface. His arms, however, were tied down. Terror seized him. He felt some horror squeezing and pushing against him. There was something animal about the pressure. He was gripped by the sudden, mad thought that he was inside the stomach of an animal. He felt the contraction of the beast against him - the beast's stomach.

He was being digested!

He passed out of consciousness.

Jacques came to when searing pain ripped through his lungs. He screamed and screamed and screamed. As his terror subsided, he noticed how cold he was. The pressure against his body had gone, and in its absence; searing, icy cold. It was like he'd fallen into nothingness, except he wasn't falling: it was worse, like being in the grip of something cold, and hard. He went on screaming. He had the sensation of being whisked through air. When he tried to open his eyes, the light was painfully bright, and nothing would come into focus. Pressure against his body again, and then, suddenly, something warm, familiar against his face. Something found its way inside his mouth, and, in the most natural way, he began to suck. Euphoria flooded his system.

The terror gone, he found warmth, pressing in around him, and filling him. Jacques discovered with pleasure, his mouth, and, not long after, his stomach. As he noted the feelings in his body - nay, as he came to know his body from the feelings - he followed his awareness up from his stomach, upwards, to his mouth, which was warm and sucking. He understood then, that by some sequence of bizarre events, he was sucking at a woman's breast. In a flash he understood the impossible: he was an infant, and he'd just been born.

He passed out again.

When he came to for the second time, everything he was able to perceive about his situation filled him with terror and panic. Before he could make sense of anything, however, he was overcome by sudden fatigue, and he fell asleep. When Jacques woke - he had no idea how much time had passed - he was seized by a desire to feed. He screamed until the nipple was pushed into his mouth, and he fell to the task of feeding.

How was any of this possible? He was a fully developed adult in his sixties, about to give a series of lectures to the Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes, and he was the owner of a French Bulldog called Justine. How could he also be an infant suckling at the breast of a woman?

Jacques didn't have long to explore his thoughts: his consciousness was alternatively frozen by terror, then plugged up and stupified by milk, and then overcome by fatigue. The single greatest pleasure came from the first defecation: it was an absolute relief to have his awareness taken beyond his stomach, which was either too full, or terrifyingly not full enough. His awareness swept in as the involuntary contractions

of his lower digestive tract betrayed the whereabouts of his body, and incredibly, its limits as the system performed its first evacuation. His awareness spread beyond his digestive tract: he could feel sensations and textures against his skin too. It took him some time to discover his arms and his legs, and when he did, they were entirely unpredictable. This was a body over which he had no control.

The instinctual drives that dominated his newborn body - eating, defecating and sleeping - were impossible to ignore and all-consuming. Mum was the entire world. There was her breast, her arms and hands, her body. In time, he discovered her voice: a comforting stratosphere through which the boundaries of the world extended beyond what this infant's body could sense through touch, and beyond the depths and distances that the infant's unfocused eyes could probe. It took some time to adjust to the mess that the perceptual system made of light, but, sound, rich as it was with the words of Mum, was instant. The only frustration was the nonsense syllables that were spoken in his presence, on account of him being a baby. That Jacques had the ability to think was obvious - well, to him anyway - but the body that encased his brain - *was it even his brain?* - was hell-bent on survival, and he was a powerless passenger. The thoughts were his, the body was not, and experience was something that they wrestled with between them.

He began, hour by hour, day by day, to distinguish between his own terror and that of the infant whose body and brain he was trapped within. The infant was 'Melanie' judging by the frequency with which this word was crooned in his - or in *their* - presence, and Melanie was born to a family that was not French, but rather, Austrian, judging from the Viennese German spoken by the blurry images above him.

Melanie lived in a state of abject terror.

'Oh Melanie! Will you stop!' he thought with exasperation, as his thoughts were wrenched, once again into Melanie's fear and hunger. 'It's just the sensation of hunger! You're not dying!'

Melanie's hunger, however, once it started, would only ever grow into an imperious demand for satisfaction that grew against a background fear of starvation and abandonment. Melanie's desperate, unrelenting terror was exhausting.

Jacques was overcome with anger. 'She'll feed you! You'll not starve!' he shouted in his thoughts, 'Spare a thought for me, you selfish brat: my whole

life's been destroyed and I can't even think about it!

Melanie fell dead silent. She stopped moving. Mum noticed, and she cried and snatched Melanie up, and Melanie was reassured by her presence and her ministrations, and she stirred back to life.

Jacques was reeling: Melanie had felt his anger like an attack!

'Melanie?' he whispered gently in his thoughts, 'Little Melanie? I'm sorry!'

Melanie let out a low, mournful cry and refused the breast.

'Oh, Melanie, it's okay, we're only a little bit sad!' Jacques urged.

Jacques felt the despair rolling over him; the exact despair that he was trying to prevent. He felt relief when Melanie, utterly exhausted from the fight to stay alive, lapsed them both into sleep.

How to escape from this body? His - Melanie's - body was useless, weak and unresponsive. It was also female. He'd tried to control the movement of their limbs, but to little avail: he needed Melanie to kick and wriggle around and develop neural connections: even then, he didn't know how much he'd have control over their movement. As it was, Melanie was still struggling to focus her eyes on an object placed directly in front of his face. Even after she could walk and talk, she'd be a toddler - how long would that take? Two years?

He imagined the incredulous adults staring down at him -

Him? Or was it her? Their could be only one sex: them.

He imagined the incredulous adults at their great heights staring down at them as they told their story -

Damn it, he was a him, and she was a she. There would be no "they"!

Melanie, who was apparently fascinated by the patterns and colors that played out in their perception of the empty air in front of their face, coughed and spluttered.

The impossibility of his story would surely be given credibility by the obvious intelligence that he'd be able to demonstrate in his articulation of words - it would not take him long to learn German - but what would they do; give him an associate professorship and a driver's license? Probably they'd give him a pediatric nurse, or worse, a psychologist.

His colleagues, his patients, the clinic, dear Justine ... what had happened to them all?... What had they made of his sudden absence? Had he died suddenly? Maybe, by some glitch in the system of life

and death and the allocation of consciousness, he'd been flung into the brain of the body who was coming into life just as he - or his body - was dying -

Oh stop it! It's not a joke!

...Or maybe nobody had died at all; maybe something had happened to cause a direct swap of consciousness.

Absurd!

Jacques felt a surge of anger at the thought of Melanie's mind inhabiting his body, making a disaster of his life, and damaging his reputation.

Melanie let out a thin wail.

Jacques was plunged into grief for the life he had lost.

Melanie kicked their arms and legs desperately. Jacques felt Melanie's distress beside his own.

Stop thinking like this!

But thinking is the only thing we have left!

He was overcome with rage. He felt the sudden urge to smash or break something.

Melanie stopped sucking and fell silent.

The withdrawal of Melanie's drive burst into Jacques' consciousness.

'Oh Melanie! I'm sorry!'

Mum's gentle hand found Melanie's forehead and began stroking it. She murmured tones of encouragement.

'Oh Melanie! Please don't worry, little Melanie. Don't worry about my words, just keep sucking.'

He kept thinking encouraging thoughts, and Mum kept stroking their head, and Melanie was soothed and returned to feeding. Jacques felt as if Mum's hand were his own stroking Melanie's little head. It was comforting to comfort Melanie. Strangely enough, he mused in the aftermath of his own panic and grief, the thought being seen - him: a grown man with a reputation - acting under the directive of Melanie's infantile mind worried him more than the thought of being trapped in an infant's life.

'It's a pity all this didn't happen earlier: then I might have written to the great man himself' Jacques would have smiled to himself if there was any connection at all between his thoughts and the mouth of the body he was in.

'I wonder what Freud would have made of a letter from a baby?'

'That it was written by a psychotic?'

Melanie spluttered at Mum's breast.

Mum! Mum's face hovered above as she changed Melanie's nappy. Jacques tried so hard to see her

through Melanie's blurry vision. She finished the nappy change and her face came close: long, brown hair framed a face with brown eyes and black eyebrows and a mouth. The details were frustratingly absent. He could tell that her blurry face was smiling and he was overcome with a rush of contentment. So was Melanie: when Mum's face hovered close to their own, Melanie felt calm.

Jacques longed for the time when their body would grow into something more like the human form he was used to - some bipedal action would be great. He found himself dreaming about walking and talking, and starting an early learning program. With his intelligence, they would excel. They'd run rings around the other students!

He was overcome by shame: a sixty three year old man gaining satisfaction at the thought of beating babies at the German alphabet.

He needed to get out of this life, and back into his own.

When Mum's beautiful face came close to theirs, Jacques tried to signal to Mum: he did his best to show her who he really was.

Mum smiled at him.

'My darling,' she crooned in her Viennese accent.

She kissed him gently on the forehead, and placed them back in the cot. Jacques was filled with black rage: he hated Mum then. The rage transported him out of their body into some dark place within himself.

When he came back into himself, Melanie was screaming. They opened their eyes and he perceived Mum's anxious face above them.

It was only some time later that Jacques realized that he'd been able to perceive Mum's face for the first time in some detail. She had a small scar in her left eyebrow, and three moles in a line above her top lip, in the place that a mustache would be, if she were a man.

One day morning, as they lay kicking on the changing table, he felt the morning sun upon his head and on his torso. It would have been nice if only it didn't hurt his eyes. Mum raised their body, and when she took away the warm nappy, the air on their freshly wiped bottom caused Melanie to pause. Mum swept a new nappy under their bottom, and the new nappy was on and the cold air was gone before Melanie could cry.

'My beautiful Melanie,' Mum said in her lyrical voice, laying them back down in the cot, 'Mother is sad; you grow so quickly!'

Every day we are getting older.

Jacques imagined their future. When they were twenty, he'd be eighty-three... He wouldn't fit! He'd be too old for their body! Would he still have the same mental capacity at eighty-three that he did now? What caused a mind to falter? What caused executive function - attention, working memory and processing speed - to slow down and fail?

Melanie stirred and began to cry.

Was it simply that the brain decayed like all physical and biological structures? In which case, the limiting structure of his conscious acumen would be the new brain itself, not his spirit. He felt a wave of relief wash over him.

Melanie settled back down, making sucking motions with his little mouth.

Jacques, however, disturbed by the thought of his own mortality being out of sync with the life force of the body he was in, couldn't quite settle.

He suddenly wondered if Melanie's brain could be developing a second mind.

Melanie became irritable. She waved their arms, she screwed up their eyes and began to cry. Jacques found himself listening so hard that it hurt. He was listening for another person. How could Melanie *not* be developing a mind? Her little body was all the time, growing and sensing the world, perceiving it. How could she not be beginning to interpret it? Were there two minds within this body already?

Two unconsciousnesses residing in the one body! And one in German, too!

He felt panic.

Melanie kicked and screamed.

They were Melanie's demands that were driving this machine, not his. He was a back-seat driver. The division between himself and Melanie was not an easy one.

My existence jeopardizes Melanie's. It would be better if I didn't exist.

Jacques became consumed with self-hatred. The apparent impossibility of suicide when one is trapped within the body of an infant became the false foundation upon which Jacques indulged his most narcissistic fantasies of self-annihilation. He forgot all about Melanie and Mum.

The coldness on his chest shocked him. He became aware of a strange new presence hovering over him, causing the coldness on their chest. The hands that probed him were big, coarse, rough. The cold air that swept in with the unveiling of their body

was nothing compared with the icy coldness of a single spot on his chest.

- *The words, German of course, and male!*

The stethoscope: his father - Melanie's father - was a doctor.

'Father, I am freezing!'

Father, can you hear me, through your stethoscope?

But Father wasn't looking for him: father was seeking the girl-child.

'Little Melanie?' Jacques called out desperately, searching for the girl his father wanted.

But Melanie's drives had become so small, and she had retreated to some part of their body so far away that it was hard for Jacques to find her. It dawned on Jacques that Melanie could not tell the difference between hatred that took Jacques as its object and hatred that took herself as its object: he was killing Melanie with his thoughts.

Jacques was dragged from his post self-annihilation insights, and something deep within him directed all of his desire towards keeping the child

he was within alive. He sought, and when he found her, he saw himself taking himself into his arms and holding them.

Melanie began feeding happily.

But how could she be feeding, because Mum was not holding them?

Mum was standing next to Dad, hovering over Melanie's still little body, touching her, but not feeding her: Mum's torso was too far away from them for them to be feeding.

How was it that Melanie was feeding when there was no breast?

She was hallucinating the breast that was not there.

Then, Jacques committed himself to the imaginary life.

Postscript

If madness comes our way, be it from within or from without, we really only have one obligation, and that is to make meaning out of it. The rest is surely a joke.