Foul Chutes: On the Archive Downriver

Sarah Minor

The house was exactly one hundred years older than my sister. It stood facing the river across from another white house where, in 1932, the LaRosa family installed the first laundry chute in Rockford, Illinois, long before our city was named the country's *third most miserable*. By the mid-'90s a highway ran between my family's ailing Victorian and its Mississippi tributary and for ten years we lived up there, where Brown's Road ended, where the street might have tipped over the hill and rushed across the stinking river if someone hadn't changed his mind. We wore kitchen-scissor bangs and liked to hang out at the dead end beside our porch—a bald gully stained with mulberries where we played at being orphaned, though we were far from it—past the broken curb where lost cars drew circles in the gravel. We preferred the dead end to our yard because it collected street trash and there we could sort out the best of it.

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As still happens in much of the world, the first method of washing clothes in colonial America was at the riverbank.

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My best friend Meg steadies her knee to make a step-up for my hiking boot. "Let's not get lost now," she says, the words tight with instant coffee and transgression. She looks past her shoulder into rural Mississippi and tips my bottom half over the chain link. I land askew, past the fence on a beveled slab of concrete that starts ringing hollowly. The sky is netted with branches; cold cement stretches out on either side. A little blood starts to pill at my kneecap as I sit up in what looks like the bowl of a doll-sized skate park. Its gray half-pipes rise no higher than my knees and dip irregularly along the rims. They make the same bizarre, undulating shape I've been tracing on my laptop screen for months. When I stand and follow the shape into the brush, the bowl balloons wider, like an amoeba. It takes three steps to walk into the rest of the abandoned Mississippi River Model, a miniature version of the watershed that the US Army Corps carved and abandoned here, outside Jackson, seventy years ago, and now Meg and I are officially trespassing.

In June of 1998, while he was renovating his home in St. Louis, Joseph Heathcott discovered a collection of trash in the cavity between his pantry and his laundry chute. It was a stack of paper scraps with sooty edges that were just beginning to stick and combine. There was a box of playing cards, a train ticket from Kansas, a receipt, a diary entry, and a laundry ticket. In "Reading the Accidental Archive," Heathcott wrote that from these materials he could read the tensions between the upward motivations and the limits to mobility of the early middle class families just four miles from the Mississippi.

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MINNESOTA

Cartographer and artist Denis Wood defines "shadowed spaces," as necessary places of refuge for deviant acts within every culture. Deviant acts, as Wood defines them, include a variety of common behaviors—everything from general "hanky-panky," to voting for the villainous party, to dumping toxic waste—similar only in that someone would prefer to keep each one hidden. Wood's shadowed spaces are edge areas "that thrive in the bottom of unworked quarries: they're the spaces underneath the bridges, spotted with guano…."

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If a river is the lifeline crease at the center of a hand, then a watershed is the palm and five fingers extending; it is impossible to describe the first phenomenon without the rest. A watershed funnels snowmelt on a slight decline. Before the river becomes a river, it is water threading wheat furrows, filling lots and flushing alleys before making its way, in many small batches, all the way down to a bank. When the river floods it ruins a city by erasing its edges—those barriers set up between the sewer and the roadway, the pasture and the school yard, a city's dump and its downtown market. A watershed makes lived spaces look, occasionally, in newspapers and on television, as if they were stewing in the river.

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In 1927, a long time before Meg and I drove together to Mississippi, after months of heavy snowfall that was followed by rain in Minnesota and Wisconsin, the Mississippi River flooded its watershed for 23,000 square miles. A decade earlier the lumber barons had cut away the great forests lining the banks, and industrial farming had drained the prairies, which for centuries had functioned like a sponge for river water. Without the root systems the new flood spread across the plains, scouring fields, reshaping valleys, and surrounding great hills where lone houses stood that would survive and someday be ours. Herbert Hoover called it "the greatest peacetime calamity" in America's history. That calamity inspired the Flood Control Act of '28, which called on the Army Corps of Engineers to "defend" America's citizens against their most central waterway. The Army Corps's first real solution would be a scale model of the entire Mississippi watershed built on two hundred acres, a portion of the real watershed, outside Jackson Mississippi.

In 1895, the *New York Times* reported that a janitor had discovered a small human skull near the opening to the chute in a West Forty-Sixth Street tenement house. The writer noted that the skull had "evidently been boiled at some time" and was believed to belong to Susie Martin, who had gone missing when her mother sent her out to gather coal, and whose body had been found near West Thirty-Ninth Street a few days before her disappearance, without its head.

WISCONSIN

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"Nothing disposes easily anymore," writes urban planner, Kevin Lynch, "our old poisons return to us." In the mid 70s, Lynch observed that modern suburbs were lacking in waste spaces. He encouraged the reclamation of derelict areas like rail yards, cattle grounds and flood plains—the places, he argued, that would become essential once vacancy was a thing of the past.

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In the summer of 1999, during the Tate Thames Dig, volunteers collected materials along the banks of the river Thames, at low tide, near the Tate galleries. The objects they found dated from as far back as the medieval period and as recently as that same year. They displayed items from this collection with care and reverence in a mahogany cabinet at the Tate until 2000. That year, a critic wrote that the Thames "can be considered to be a museum, containing a collection [...] sorted and classified according to the river's own internal physical dynamics. The nature of the river as a continuum is reflected in the undifferentiated material."

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When Albert Einstein's oldest son Hans had said that he wanted to study the movements of river water, Einstein asked him why he wanted to pursue something so difficult. And every time the US Army Corps built a new levee along the Mississippi, they flooded a city further down. Major Eugene Reybold saw their trial-and-error tactics approaching Memphis, and he suggested they try thinking of the river as a system rather than individual limbs. Soon the headlines reported "The colossal effigy of Old Man River," being built just outside of Jackson, where the Corps planned to "make little floods to help America protect herself against big ones." Their model Mississippi condensed all 1.4 million square miles of the watershed into two hundred acres. It took twenty-three years to complete. In bird's-eye photographs from the '50s, the model river looks like a root system carved in relief, its empty tendrils dividing the blunted brush. When the Army Corps flushed it with water, the model's tests predicted floods on the real Mississippi River to a matter of inches. But they took too long to finish, and just seven years after the model was complete its outbuildings, pumps, and paperwork were left to rot in Jackson in favor of digital models that could predict floods about half as accurately, but without a staff of engineers.

The first laundry chutes turns up in American newspapers and advertisements around 1880, an era that Mira Engler, "scholar of rejected landscapes," has called the time of "Diverting Waste to the Public." Engler says this era is marked by the early control of waste due to major discoveries, at long last, that linked waste to the spread of disease.

Florence Nightingale encouraged such divisions in public hospitals. She argued that laundry should never be processed near vulnerable patients. "Nothing answers so well as foul-linen shoots," Nightingale wrote, "These should be built in the wall. The best material for them is glazed earthenware piping that can be flushed with water."

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A week before spring break I booked the last room in Jackson, drove to Tennessee, and talked Meg into driving twelve more hours in gray weather to walk around an eight-mile gutter. Our friendship, built across trips like this one, began when one of us convinced the other to skip a class or shift and we both wound up deeply carsick. I always thought talking was easier in the car, but Meg preferred the quiet and the view. I drove. In Memphis she took a turn at the wheel and described that September, when she'd dated first a roadie and then a rhetorician, and got ordained on her back porch while holding a breakfast burrito and a joint. Two hours outside Jackson the western sky bruised itself green and then peach, and I heard tornado sirens for the first time since I was a kid. Our hotel was dressed like a midgrade hunting lodge with maple leaf carpet and a free cocktail hour—no whiskey, no limes. We took lemons and joined a set of Jesuits and a State Highway Patrol conference near the gas fire. The next morning we shared oversweet muffins with the business casuals and open carries. We crossed city limits in boots and neon tights.

Denis Wood wrote "Shadowed Spaces" as a response to Michael Sorkin's *Indefensible Space*, a book that examined American anxiety following increased surveillance after 9/11. But Wood really started writing about shadowed space because he was curious about objects that wound up in unsurveilled places. "Once you start looking for them, you find them all the time," Wood writes, "Discarded underpants:
white jockey shorts, about size 32. Jockey shorts exclusively. Invariably white. Never smaller than a 26, rarely larger than a 34." What truly inspired Denis Wood was his interest in lost underwear.

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Some say the earliest laundry chutes were fabric sleeves threaded between floors. Today a laundry chute is the open throat of an old house. Children are drawn to chutes because they invite fantastic dangers like falling *through* the home, as well as the taboos attached to personal stains. The apartment where I live has a linen chute that has long been painted shut, but I can press my ear against it to learn if the dryer in the basement is done. I hear a rushing sound in the chute even after the dark drum quits spinning—my ear a dry seashell sounding the tides of the house.

In 1916, the *New York Herald* reported that a patient at the Magdalen Asylum had slid "at a scorching speed" down a laundry chute that was ninety feet long and twenty-four inches wide. Women were sent to the Magdalen Asylum for behaviors like drinking and prostitution. Poor conditions there often drove patients to riot and throw themselves from windows into the neighboring quarry. Before 1916, no one had successfully escaped, but after sliding down the chute, Margaret Darcey fell twenty feet into the basement. She cut a screen, scaled the wall, and got away.

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I'm alone in the model with a skinned knee and Meg is calling down through the brush: "Baby girl? I can't see you!" She follows my head along the chain link until she finds a weak spot. I sit back on my heels and trace the bright moss lining a divot that would stretch a mile at full scale. Meg slides from the bank into the chilly shade. "Whoa," she says slowly. From this vantage the dried-out river model looks like a sci-fi set. Its curves and bluffs are meticulous but sit barren, like the face of a small, hot planet. We follow a shatter of Miller Lites into the main channel, between rubber tires and tangles of mesh that once stood in for the texture of marshes. The whole place is yellow and brown—"old gold," as my family says in Iowa. It's February, and the place is dry but sweet with the rot from water that collects in other seasons, and loud with birds the color of brambles calling out news of our arrival. Forty years after the Army Corps started digging, their model is still intact because precipitation can't ruin it and poison ivy moves too slow. When it rains here, water collects. After it was abandoned by engineers, the model moved onto a river's other purposes, to habitat and irrigation and the erosion of everything men put together. Above us, the silhouettes of sump pumps lean like rusty teakettles with switchboard lids, and the sky is netted with cold branches. On the drive we'd worried aloud for hours about getting lost, but as we hike further in the model directs us like a sunken path. All paths lead to the main channel. It's like walking along a fossil left by a centipede Godzilla would run from, but in the world of the river model it's us who are unfathomable. Here we walk like giant women up to our ankles in invisible currents. We keep our eyes down to skirt sharp islands and kick the trash aside.

IOWA

Denis Wood began finding lost under-pants in shadowed spaces while living in Worcester, Massa-chusetts. He said the project started almost by chance, while he and a colleague were tracing the edges of rivers, circling lakes and ponds across the city.

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Chute is simultaneously the action of falling, as in "a quick descent or a river rapid," and a funnel, conduit, or physical shaft itself, the same way that a river is both water and a shape in the land where liquid has carved widely. The Roman aqueducts functioned entirely through gutters angled on a slight decline. Chutes were perhaps the first shapes that humans built to pull waste from their hands to somewhere else. Like a chute for laundry, a river is waste material and also waste space.

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Meg is wearing Chacos with socks. She pries a brick from the floor of the model and tries to hand it to me without moving her feet. I wedge the soft rectangle into my backpack between our two canteens, a bag of pretzels, and a mini mace. Ahead, the channel curls past the trees like an entrail. To my left, in the patchy sun, Meg's temple is shiny where her hair is streaked silver in the comic-book manner I've come to envy. "It's coming in hot this year," she'd warned me a week ago, over the phone. I've seen bleary pictures of Meg during college in long dresses and plastic beads. Shiny black hair, the same small, careful hands. Her grays first showed up when we shared a lint trap, a gravel yard and a pair of brown flats back in Tucson, during the only years either of us have lived outside the watershed. Back then I slept in a square pink adobe facing the dry Rillito River and Meg shared the mother-in-law studio with our washing machine. Her house smelled like clean sweat, fabric softener, and the white smoke that filled her patio every morning. Two years and as many states later, she smells exactly the same way on a hike.

ILLINOIS

"In six weeks of casual encounter," he writes, "we came across a dozen pairs of pants, not looking for them just tripping over them." Wood was teaching a class on water.

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"How old is the Mississippi?" is a circular question because a river is both water and land. All rivers become rivers by extending their banks. The early Mississippi carried sediment that built this continent from bits of the places it had passed by, which is as good a metaphor as any I've heard for what America would someday become.

In Mississippi shipping culture on the, "sounding calls" were the vocal signals a deckhand sang back to his pilot to announce the depth of the water approaching the bow. "Twain" is the measure of two fathoms, and "mark twain," the sounding call for twelve feet deep. Mark Twain, born Samuel Clemens, worked as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi in his youth and later wrote about learning to read the river like a text: "There never was so wonderful a book written by man."

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Garbage, too, is contents and container. Calling something "the trash" defines nontrash areas by contrast. And shadowed spaces are those in- betweens where repulsive and attractive places meet for a tryst. So every garbologist is, in fact, a curator, even if he imagines otherwise. Because even a digger with a strong stomach chooses something to discard, and that choosing is a story, though not often the story our garbologist believes he's come here to tell.

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Scholar Ariella Azoulay argues that modern photography has featured many kinds of brutality from war but has left out any images of rape, perhaps because photographers have failed to document it or because the documentation of rape is somehow more restricting than capturing other suffering. In "Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of Rape?" Azoulay claims that because we lack examples in our archives and in cultural memory, photography has contributed to a widespread inability to recognize the reality of sexual violence.

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The Mississippi flood of ’27 drowned over a thousand people, but the exact numbers are unknown because in official records, for example, the deaths of black Americans were not counted.

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Seeing us coming down the street, someone once called Meg and I “Christmas in the summer.” Meg, a pear on legs, me a square piece of jerky. I didn’t want to be Christmas, so I said, to Meg, “You do say ‘honkey-tonk’ and mean it.” “Yeah,” Meg said, “and you eat ketchup with a spoon.” Mornings in Tucson she would bang the screen door between the yard and my kitchen, where she’d heat coffee, steal milk and a mug, and tease whichever cat was feeling uptight. The deal was that Meg taught me about how weed cures a hangover, and I didn’t tell about who came or went out the back gate in the dark. She liked men who worked with their hands and liked to say so. Meg hunted me down when I left t-shirts in the wash for so long that they dried together like a round, empty skin, and I taught her to use rubbing alcohol to pry cactus spines from her knees without breaking them. We made different messes. I knew Meg liked someone when she gave them a nickname that she could pronounce with an affected twang, but she only called me “baby” and then my first name. By afternoon she’d be on the edge of my bed with a hand on my back saying “rise and shine.” I’d moved with her into the pink house during the hottest part of that summer, out of a condo six blocks south, after a strange pair of underwear had shown up in my clean laundry. They’d gotten tangled in the bed sheets like something snagged by a current, and afterward my high school sweetheart moved in with his colleague and her baby across town. I threw away her pants.

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A plaque at the Mark Twain Overlook in Muscatine, Iowa, thanks the writer for remembering Muscatine’s sunsets. “The sunrises are also said to be exceedingly fine,” Twain wrote, “I do not know.” Twain is a local legend and a personal hero to my grandmother, who read *Life on the Mississippi* from her house on a river bluff marking the eastern edge of Iowa. My mother’s first memory: the sound of a river barge’s horn.

When my parents divorced my sister and I left Brown’s hill and moved to Iowa with my mother. This is how we grew up half way on both sides of the river. We crossed the bridge on alternating weekends, belted into my mother’s Jeep. The barges riding high and empty, or low and full of trash. Each passage a trade, a burden, a boundary. Each a new shade of homecoming.

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Garbology was first coined in 1971, by A.J. Weberman, during a time when he was regularly sifting through Bob Dylan’s trash. Weberman excavated the songwriter’s street cans for years, looking for clues to the meaning of obscure lyrics. “All these years I’ve been looking for some kind of code sheet,” said Weberman, known as the most unpleasant of Dylan’s dogged fans. “I’m looking for a Rosetta stone to understand Dylan.”

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Denis Wood writes that shadowed spaces also shelter acts that might be labeled “felonious.”

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“It’s almost magical sometimes,” Wood writes, “how you can be, what? not two months older than your lover, but you’re an adult and your lover’s a minor and somehow THAT is no longer fooling around but a felony rap and a different life—not that anyon’d ever bring charges, except sometimes they do…”

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By now Meg and I have been walking a fake, dry river through the woods for an hour with no sign of an end. During the seven years the model was rushing with test floods, each shrunken city had its own upright sign, but in its current state I can't tell if we're in Memphis or Dubuque. Some of the tires are the size of a model city, and others have hosted small fires. Meg bends over the channel, tracing the billowing rim. The edge waves crazily to mimic bluffs and undulating drag—unique in every section of the model. It's shaped like the tunnel of an unstoppable wood borer. I realize this odd waveform might be the reason I came here in the first place. I confess this to Meg, who is trying to pry off a piece of it. "It looks like a language," she says, gritting her teeth. Meg's a poet, but it does. Like a signature from mouth to delta, or the delta waves of a long-sleeping brain. Everywhere we look the floor is carved with slender arcs and ribbons that scallop the bottom and sign the water's texture. Every scrawl, a note written from the engineers to the test waters, versions of shorthand for "riverbank."

In February of 2001, A.J. Weberman was sentenced for money laundering; as part of the investigation, federal agents discovered evidence against him by searching thorough his trash. "The garbologer was garbologized," said Weberman, "I was hoisted on my own petard."

MISSOURI

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As best I can remember, I've never thrown a piece of clothing into the trash that wasn't an undergarment, that wasn't stained or holey underwear or a bra of the kind Meg would describe as "dead," its underwire freed and stabbing at the secret place that is sometimes armpit and sometimes breast. Susan Griffin writes, "Whatever lies within the confines of the feminine province is defined *sui generis* as either trivial or obscene (as in housework, or lovemaking) and as such not fit for public discourse." Women's underwear serves as fetish this way because of its proximity and therefore likening to the body. Scholar Tracy Davis describes women's stockings similarly, as an early sexual garment that served as "the indexical sign of her skin."

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In 1996, almost twenty years after writing "In Defense of Indefensible Spaces," Denis Wood plead guilty to "crimes against nature" and forcibly taking "indecent liberties with a minor" on "more than one-hundred occasions," after which he was "sentenced to six years in prison."

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Stuffed along sideyards, listing near worn footpaths and oily banks, the underwear I find is never the kind Wood has categorized. Neither thin hipped nor white, almost always made for those categorized as "women." Always cotton and a pattern not fine enough for a child, nor so lacey as to be revoltingly called "panties" (when there are so many better words). They're the type of item that I once lost in college, drunk and outdoors in the middle of the night without a proximate or familiar indoor space to visit with the man who walked beside me. They were the same pair of underwear I discovered the next morning, soaking in a gray street gutter, where I recognized the garment for what it had become—trash—and abandoned it.

KENTUCKY

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Before moving to Tucson, Meg was her hometown's favorite waitress during high school in rural Tennessee. She quickly learned about the ratio between lipstick and tips, and that summer her mother kicked her out of the house. That August, along a different tributary, I started work on a cleaning crew for a leasing company in Iowa. The job taught me how to strip an oven without breathing Easy-Off, about which part of a rat decays first (eyes), how to clean a stubborn toilet ring with Windex and a toothbrush, and why the dustpan is the last item in the rig you'd want to lick. My company was famous for cheating its party-school tenants and working-class staff, and during my second year it became popular for residents to shit in their showers just before moving out. That summer we discovered two apartments where the tenants had been processing meth using the Jacuzzi tub in their master bath. The nicest place had pipe burns on the toilet seat, a freezer with three types of organic vegetables, and a medicine cabinet full of bras and underwear with their tags still intact. "No sticky fingers," said our crew leader, but by the end of the day he watched as each cleaner took her pick.

In 1950, following the death of Georgia Tann, newspapers revealed that rampant abuse had taken place at the Tennessee Children's Home Society she headed. Among the grisly tales that surfaced was the frequent punishment of dangling children down the laundry chute from ropes tied to their wrists.

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Drawers. Intimates. Tap pants. Skivvies.

In the 17th century women's underclothes were "aired" rather than washed, and women often wore the same corsets for decades, until they rotted off.

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"There is a pornography of waste," writes Kevin Lynch, "just as there is a pornography of sex and of death. Slideshows about Roman ruins usually include a few of the seats in Roman latrines. We are fascinated to see a building torn down. The abandoned houses in our inner cities are one of the most powerful images of the American metropolis."

Meg and I hear voices above us and we drop into the model on our elbows and knees. Someone is sitting with one boot outside a pickup on the slope. I mouth "trespassing," and Meg pulls off her red hoodie. We crawl around the bend, moving between panels of light that turn the bricks into gold foil as the voices disperse behind us. It's already late afternoon. The model here is cluttered with trash: styrofoam and soda bottles and so many tires crowded together that I think they must be here for some game or agenda. Meg stands up, hands to knees and stage-whispers: "This is like the same shit from the real river, dried out." I nod, prying a splinter from my thumb. So much trash that no one would choose his pen name for a sight of the bottom.

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A watershed is sometimes called a catchment. In city-planning terms the word *catchment* also describes the area served by one hospital, one fire department, one voting site, or one dump.

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The dead end by our old house in Illinois was special in a second way because it was the place where I first met boys outside of school, three cousins who had found a perfect hideout by following their street uphill until it ended at a river view. They all wore rattails and had learned to run on their heels in shoes that were too big. They traded beads and a shiny hubcap for a perfect glass forty-ounce that I'd stripped of its label with dish soap and a sponge. This was the year when a friend had told me that sex was when a boy and a girl get into bed together, *and then she lets him pee in her underpants*. It was the oldest one, the tallest cousin, who I let slip a hand up my shirt when he asked. We stood facing each other between the berry bushes long before my chest could warrant a bra. It was late fall and his fingers were so cold that I jumped. He laughed, and I did, and then we ran away in two directions.

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Underlace. Linen. Small clothes.

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In response to Azoulay's article, Canadian artist Sharon Sliwinski published a photograph of a stack of new, clean underwear ready to be handed out to patients at a rape clinic after theirs has been taken, forever, as evidence.

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There must be laundry chutes, or the material that once defined them, lying crumpled and stacked in dumps. Surely chutes also lie at the bottom of rivers below bricks and copper piping. Regarding trash and its destinations, one problem seems to be the idea of flushing—waste pulled from hands—that a river itself is both a direction and material for taking trash *away*.

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Though the US Army Corps officially built the Mississippi River Basin Model, most pieces were designed and built by an Italian or German prisoner of war, many of them handpicked engineers.

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ARKANSAS

City planner Kevin Lynch, who died before Chernobyl, Exxon- Valdez, and Deepwater Horizon, advocated for the creation of "urban wildernesses," vital margins where children could find adventure and freedom from control. In the mid- '70s Lynch wrote his "Waste Cactopias," depictions of dystopic landscapes of the future:

"The inhabited buildings slowly extrude their continuous ribbons of compressed garbage and trash. The ribbons fall onto the cargo belts that move steadily toward the high ridges at the city boundary[…] Truant children play in these jungles too, and deplorable accidents are common."

Meg came with me to Mississippi to see a place I couldn't fathom, no matter what we Google-imaged in advance. But with my feet in the state of Mississippi, I'm still surprised at the basic facts—that the Mississippi is the deepest part of a *basin*, that a watershed is antithetical to a *river city*. That the people who live there, the descendants of water, even the unfamous ones I come from, claim this very river for what they take out of it (street names, shipping, shellfish) but never what they put back in (farm waste, tires, diluted shit). In the model I realize that I first learned the river ran *down* and that the cities it ran to were tinged with a type of afterward—places that accepted our runoff. Because in regional America, " downriver" is a type of extending margin, a relative shadowed space.

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MISSISSIPPI

Short shirts. Knickers. Little Pants. Unders.

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Wood doesn't often address women or their deviances. But because historically women's work, done skillfully, remained invisible, and because the histories of many people were kept preserved by women, Wood must not have much to go by. And what from their archive is worth reviving? The best we've got are samples of tedious needlework, the well-preserved garments that others wore proudly enough. The best we have are the concentric depressions where stains were scrubbed from the tablecloth.

Denis Wood's best guess was that the discarded underwear he found in were the evidence of masturbatory acts hidden from the mothers who sort dirty clothes. "Fear of the laundry," Wood writes: "Fear of the wives and the mothers, the normative eyes with the normative hands that normatively do the wash, carefully screening each pair of pants for comely stains— Can anyone believe this of the laundress of a small hotel?" Wood asks, "Of a harried mother? [...] But such is the lens of paranoia our deviance presents our souls to use—and yet who knows? Perhaps there *are* such guardians of the norms."

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What is obscene is unwelcome because it has no proper audience and should be either hidden or eradicated. The materials specific to waste spaces have historically been deemed irrelevant based on their proximity to people who are also considered trivial, trash.

Today "white trash" refers to places like farm canals and junkyards. Places like hollers (which I used to imageine like a horizontal throat). Places like Iowa and Tennessee and Mississippi. The phrase also indicates people who live in thrown-away places. People differentiated from their white counterparts in that, in the minds of the speakers, they don't require a modifier.

Before the flood of '27, many free black farm laborers migrated to the delta to become sharecroppers during the cotton boom. There, they were typically given the lowest lying land along the river and contracts that forbade them from leaving during the crop cycle.

Wood describes how shadowed spaces provide important refuge for behaviors that require safety, like early sex acts between young men. His point is not only that the places and the people a culture devalues often align, but that each tells something about the other.

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The tree line hinges open. Ahead, a metal walkway strides the river and extends to a rusty platform on the slope. Everything past the banks is caged in chain link, with us stuck inside a shape like an arena. Meg offers her knee. She pushes one hand against the bridge graffiti and the other against my butt. Later, I'll recognize this place in footage of the original flood tests. Here is the tower where engineers stood with clipboards and hardhats as their shadows dilated, watching to see what happened if they closed this set of levees or the other, measuring waterlines by centimeters.

"Hey!" Meg yells from below and moons me from under the bridge. Her butt looks exactly like the "peach" emoji I favor. I take her photo and she waits a minute before pulling up her tights. "Make it good, now," she says over her shoulder, glancing to either side. We haven't needed to say aloud that it's not the authorities we worry about running across out here. How free we are in a place with so many edges. A tiny landscape measured by careful hands, so far from polite spaces. Here is a place designed to be scrutinized. Now, as usual, we know we are what there is to see.

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After Mississippi, I began asking women I knew about lost underwear. Where do they see it and where do they think it comes from? I asked relatives and students and mentors and friends. Trans women and white and black girls and chicks from big cities and townships. Some were mothers, some had mothers, others not. One friend told me later that soon after we had met, I had given myself away as not-a-mother when I confessed that I did not know how to use bleach. Like these stories, the land that funnles water from Mississippi mouth to delta has never belonged to me, but the banks I've treaded do belong to them.

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Now there is my own underwear tied up in someone's sheets. An old pair lost to the drain. There are soggy underpants lining the rivers. Briefs, Wood says, at the banks. There are panties sold in bulk bags and on individual, transparent hangers. And there's a woman I love who wears smoke and detergent like a signature, whose life was bookended at nineteen when an acquaintance lifted her up on a washing machine, half-conscious, after a home football game, and left a dent where the back of her head met the cabinets.

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"They see so well," writes Denis Wood, "they of the normative eyes: where can we hide, we of deviant behavior?"

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In *Hitman: Absolution*, a third-person video game released in 2012, players are assigned targets and complete levels once their target is killed. If successful, a player is invited to store the body of their victim in "body containers" throughout each level, including closets, manholes, outhouses, and laundry chutes.

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In 2009, the body of a forty-six-year-old Domincan -born cleaning woman was found, bound with duct tape, in the air duct of a Rector Street high rise in upper Manhattan.

LOUISIANA

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In 2015 a twety-six-year-old white legal secretary was found dead at the bottom of the D Casino's hotel laundry chute. Authorities eventually ruled "No Foul Play," but never concluded how she fell fifteen stories down the chute.

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"What I register as women's underwear," "almost always designed for women," "overly female," "the decorative kind sold to girls," "what I recognize as 'women's' by color," "high femme," "hanging in trees along ski lifts," "in trees around a frat house," "I guess when I see women's underwear, I'm more inclined to think that they were left for bad reasons, and when I see men's or children's I think of an accident or maybe a prank," "I imagine the worst," "it's off-putting, I wonder about the potential violence. Or the potential pleasure, though it seems less likely to me," "there's something insidious about a woman's underwear on a street in this city," "in my mind the story is usually that there was some kind of late-night sex act that got disrupted, or sometimes it goes to thinking about prostitution and a woman fleeing to avoid the cops or to get out of a bad situation," "my reaction to them is fear and sadness. They represent some form of sexual violence," "always wet, as if washed up," "when I see underwear in public I get a flash of anxiety—certain that I'm witnessing the aftermath. I tend to tamp that flash as quickly as possible by imagining other possible stories: they fell out of someone's trash bag on the way to the alley," "there is also a very real feeling of being the witness to a crime," "I feel a small sadness, or maybe it's more like empathy. I think about the tenderness with which mothers treat their children. The proximity of motherhood," "I think of thrift store underwear, the challenge of keeping growing children clothed and the way my reaction to all bodily processes has shifted since I've had my own kids," "two years ago this would have really freaked me out (why would a little girl be without her underpants in a public park??) But now, as the busy hot-mess of a mom I've become, I just assumed that some parent dropped them while changing their kid into a swimsuit," "then, as I always do when I find unconventional trash in my environment, I wonder who it is in the world that picks it up and throws it away. Who will put everything back to normal? Not me."

In 2016, a fifty-eight-year old black woman was found dead in the laundry chute in her home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Police considered her death suspicious, but eventually ruled it accidental.

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In 2006, the most radioactive object ever discovered by Scotland Yard was found at the base of a hotel laundry chute. The towel was eventually sent to a US nuclear waste facility, on consign-ment.

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Discarded underpants arrived just once at my dead end in Illinois. Sometimes at night, cars would park there with their engines off and their headlights pointed at the empty space above the river. The pants I found one afternoon were made of shiny elastic and strangely thin on both sides. I had never seen a thong before. The only thing I thought to do was to bury them in the snow using the toe of my purple boot. After that they disappeared, maybe when my mother picked them up or the plow that piled drifts beside the house came to scoop the mess away.

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Wastewater and women have historically done the cleaning up—though primarily women of color have done the cleaning up for white women. Not in the same ways as water does, not with the same waste. But the bodies of cleaners, like their places, often enough end up downriver.

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Smalls. Pretties. Scanties. All the hands allowed to press themselves against our lining. And underwear, a sign of the skin and what's below it. Places where women read in their waste that time is cyclical and not a straight descent. Like how sometimes, you'll find older, more brilliant leaves dying slowly against the wet of the ground beneath hundreds gone brown and crisp above them.

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Wood: "Any space can be shadowed, if the time is right."

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The observation tower above the Mississippi River Basin Model has four levels laced with sagging metal stairs that form a double Z. Meg stays below to photograph the graffiti. In the distance stands the enormous water tower I see lurking at the back of the old operational footage. I notice how thoroughly the undergrowth has clotted the model and how, from up here, I can't make out anything behind us or ahead. Brown bottles and green glass litter the corners of the platform, stuck with wet leaves. On my way back down, a pair of stained underpants, yellow or yellowed by rust, dangle above the river from a railing like some kind of flag. Then a single sneaker. A graying Ace bandage. Evening is soaking up the short end of the sky. Meg helps me down again and we raise our hoods and agree to turn back in twenty minutes.

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Today in Muscatine, Iowa, my grandmother is helping to spearhead the reintroduction of Higgins Eyes mussles, once native to the Mississippi that runs past her house. River mussles filter moving water. Each spring my grandmother watches as divers wade into the dark waters and drop new Higgins shells along the riverbed, each tagged with a black dot of glue. Together the new mussles will work like a tiny sieve, cleaning not the water that comes to the city, but water the residents won't see again. The new mussles clean the water that the city sends downstream.

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As a kid I'd believed the rumor that a girl could get pregnant from swallowing semen—in one end and out the other. The body—by now, you must admit—an original kind of chute, a foul channel. And the end of that canal, somehow integral. Its relationship to gravity the reason for the garments some of us turn over at common boundaries. The word they teach us is *discharge*, but most women I know say they believed something was going wrong with them downriver for the first few years. That dense, quotidian material, sign of health and fecundity, and the colors of panties—red, and black, pink, and cream.

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Shreddies. Drains. Unmentionables. The organ-like smell of the places where dead leaves touch.

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At the end is the delta. Small cleats stand up evenly from the riverbed like points mapping a grid. No sump pumps. The river model dilates until it's all ruffled edge and knotted tributary and nowhere smooth to walk. It looks like the cracked patio of some failed regime, and in the center sits a sun-bleached folding chair, as if someone had been using it for that purpose. Meg holds out both arms and spins; here we're the right size again. It's taken us two hours to walk from the spot where she rolled me in over the fence and our canteens are both empty. Meg laughs as I pull my tights below my knees and squat over a shallow ribbon that a careful hand carved into this model before our mothers were born. She takes my picture. The current leaves me and divides into several channels, the way it will across the delta.