

Jenine Marsh

*Swamp Water*

Text for *Dear Stranger*, two person exhibition with Lindsay Lawson and Jenine Marsh, at Entrée Gallery, Bergen Norway 2017.

She called three phone numbers. She did this every day. The numbers were conjured in the way of wiggling fingers in an improvised screen tap dance. The first rang and rang thirty-one times before she ended the call. The second went immediately to voicemail. The third was answered on the second ring. The voice said, "Hello, who's this?" Her number was blocked. She replied only "Hello" and let a pause spread like a stain until she heard an intake of breath and hung up. Her arm hair was all on end, her fingers quivered and her breathing was like hot bellows.

Later when she went walking to work she would meet eyes with ten people. Just ten, exactly. Her walk was forty-five minutes on a busy street so she could be selective. Without looking she would notice them and try to get a sense of them through their stride, dress and activity. If they were on their phone or fucked up on something she wouldn't bother. It wasn't about the challenge. When she and they were almost shoulder-to-shoulder she would look up and see if they would look or were looking. Almost every time they would or were.

In the evening she sat at the bar, elbow-to-elbow with the others. She kept her eyes on her cocktail, a Swamp Water. The glass was cold in her hand, and the maraschino cherry stained the dirty-water coloured mix with its sticky blood. What would it be to be as transparent as this glass? Skin like an albino tree frog, guts seen colourful and cartoony through the crystal belly? The heart would bob wet and red as a cherry, and purple intestines would coil here like a worried snake. And what would it be to be this hand here, holding this glass? Like a starfish, five-fingered and blind, living in and digging out an existence from salty black mud. A starfish regurgitates its insides to eat. It feels its way, digesting externally.

When she got home she took out paper and a red pen. The letter began "I don't know you". She crossed that out and wrote, "you don't know me", and then waited for the rest to come. There wasn't much more to it; the letter had no body, it was all intro, chopped off with a vague but optimistic "hope the feeling's mutual." No return address or name. She folded the letter into an origami frog and hopped it out of her window. The street below was quiet. She and the receiving stranger would make contact, but there would be no further exchange, only this one isolated incident of a paper frog. She and it and them, they and it and her. She notices red ink smeared on her palm. "We are like swamp water", she thinks; "clearest at the surface."