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Hero Baby

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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“It would never occur to the sadist to find pleasure in other people’s pain if he had not himself first undergone the masochistic experience of a link between pain and pleasure.” - Theodor Reik¹

The practice of Sado-Masochism indicates a link between pleasure and pain as well as a link between submission and power. Power through submission is what interested me in the United States Navy Seals. Navy Seals have a reputation for being America's most elite warriors, exhibiting alpha-male dominance. Paradoxically, this is due to the submissiveness required by their rite of passage, Basic Underwater Demolition School, which is rumored to be the most demanding in the world. Recruits sign an unspoken contract to endure severe mental and physical stress for five months, while sleep and calorie deprived. They can quit at anytime by simply ringing a bell. The ability to walk away at any moment is equivalent to what is referred to in BDSM² as a safe word. That is what makes submission to this training comparable to “Subspace,”³ referencing the natural high that a submissive gets when being controlled. In his text, *Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze writes about the subversive power found in masochism, he explains that although the masochist appears to suffer from an overwhelming superego, the beating he endures actually mocks the superego and strengthens the ego.⁴

¹ Reik, Theodor. "THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MASOCHISM." *American Imago* 1, no. 1 (1939): 26-59. www.jstor.org/stable/26301144.

² “Sexual activity involving such practices as the use of physical restraints, the granting and relinquishing of control, and the infliction of pain” “BDSM.” *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster Inc., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/BDSM>. Accessed 2 December 2019.

³ “What Is Subspace? - Definition from Kinkly.” Kinkly.com. Accessed December 16, 2019. <https://www.kinkly.com/definition/1201/subspace-bdsm>.

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles, and Leopold Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism; an Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty. Together with the Entire Text of Venus in Furs*. New York: G. Braziller, 1971.

“In projecting the superego onto the beater, the masochist appears to externalize it merely in order to emphasize its derisory nature and make it serve the ends of the triumphant ego...The more power it (the superego) retains, the more this power appears derisory, a mere disguise for something else; the beater embodies the superego but only in an utterly derisory capacity, as one might display the hide of an animal or a trophy after the hunt. For in reality the superego is dead - not, however, as a result of an active negation but of a disavowal.”⁵

I was a small kid

Always the shortest in my class

When I was fifteen my body grew like the Texas midday heat

It seemed as if overnight I moved into a body that was nothing like
my own

Muscles began to bulge with little effort

And that wasn't the only thing

The thought of allowing it to grow to its full size terrified me

I was mostly able to control it

Whenever it grew to intimidate me I would pray

When that failed

I would work my body to exhaustion by swimming for miles in the lake

Trouble began at night

The monster would manipulate my dreams

The place where I couldn't resist it

Always the same dream for years

It began in different familiar places

⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, and Leopold Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism; an Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty. Together with the Entire Text of Venus in Furs*. New York: G. Braziller, 1971. Pg 43

Sometimes I'd be riding one of my horses on the old trail
Sometimes I'd be alone at the ranch
I'd feel like something bad was about to happen
I don't know why but I knew I was in a dangerous place
Something unknown was hiding
Waiting for me
Suddenly it would happen
I'd find myself enveloped by a big fleshy body
I never saw the entire being at once
The part I remember most were its eyes
Dark eyes
Filled with what felt like love
Sometimes I could see its chest or its hands
The thighs or its arms
They were soft
Yet thick strong and unyielding
Every part of my body was held firmly and at times squeezed
To the point when I thought I might be crushed
I don't know if this thing was good or evil
Sometimes it scared me
Sometimes I felt relieved
Safe even
This might sound crazy but I could almost feel the thing's body
merging with mine

I couldn't tell where it began and I ended
I was both myself and something bigger
I knew that inevitably it would destroy me but
At that point
I was so in love with it I didn't care
I surrendered myself to it
Giving in made me feel bigger
In the right way
I felt a surge of power and control
Purpose even
Finally my body would explode
I'd wake up to find myself wet and sticky between the legs
The monster was there, sleeping
Limp
Humble
I'm telling you this story now; but the shame I felt then was
unbearable
I would have to punish my body
Cleanse it with sweat and blood



Fig 1

According to Deleuze the superego can be found in the likeness of the father. The masochist overcomes the superego and therefore overcomes the father.⁶

“The subject atones for his resemblance to the father and the father’s likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the *humiliated father*. Hence the father is not so much the beater but the beaten. It is not a child, but a father that is being beaten”⁷

“When you learn something through pain you never forget. Your body is capable of knowing more than your feeble minds.”

Dad never taught us anything that didn’t hurt first. Just one of his many acts of love. He was trying to toughen us up, prepare us for the world. We’ve always been a God fearing family but he was the only man who could frighten the hell out of me. I think that’s just

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, and Leopold Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism; an Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty. Together with the Entire Text of Venus in Furs*. New York: G. Braziller, 1971. Pg 43

⁷ Ibid, 43

how he intended it, so that Morgan and I could handle anything and anyone else that came our way.

It was Morgan and I's sixth birthday and we woke up to the smell of freshly baked cake and simmering strawberries. Mom makes the best shortcake you could ever imagine. She must have made a deal with angels because I swear, I tasted pure heaven in that cake. She didn't want dad to take us out fishing before we had a bite but when he set his mind to something, there was no turning him around. The lake was only a short ride from the house. That day I rode Pride for the first time. He was a young unpredictable critter but I rode him then with the type of ease and balance that was more typical of Morgan. Dad rarely spoke to us but that morning we listened to him the entire ride as he addressed us in his signature, quiet, confident tone. We rode close together in order not to miss a word. Morgan's body, an exact mirror of my own, looked like a twig next to Dad's as his square solid bulk adjusted effortlessly to every movement of his horse. His brows were drawn fixed in a frown and his eyes shone bright through the shadow cast by the brim of his hat. The little wrinkles around his eyes curved up, almost as if smiling. His mouth remained thin and stoic. My stomach was tight, just as it always was when Dad gave me attention. In his calm easy manner there was a hidden sharpness that made me nervous.

"There are three types of people in this world, sons. Sheep, sheepdogs, and wolves." he explained, and then took one of his

characteristically long pauses. It wasn't unusual for a full minute to pass between sentences, leaving us thirsty for more. I let my fingers glide over the intricate tooled patterns adorning my saddle swell while making sure not to take my eyes off Dad. I enjoyed feeling the smooth leather next to the roughness of Pride's back. My finger grazing deep dips and long grooves, sharp cuts and gentle swoops that made up a pattern of flowers. Dad's voice immediately focused my attention.

"You boys don't have the privilege of being sheep. No one is going to shield you from the brutal reality of this life." We came up to the lake and he slowed his horse to a stop. The sun was just rising and the birds encouraged it enthusiastically. He continued,

"Wolves are everywhere, they are violent and aggressive. They'll easily take from you and others if given the chance. You won't always be able to spot them just by looks. But if you pay attention, evil eventually reveals itself."

Another long pause. We followed him to the end of the dock and waited as he stared out at the water. We didn't always understand what he said to us but he was a man whom a boy could believe in the simple knowing that what was beyond comprehension was still clean and solid and right.⁸ He continued,

⁸ Schaefer, Jack, and Robert Nott. *Shane*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017.

"Sheepdogs aren't afraid of wolves because they know how wolves think. Sheepdogs are aggressive, just like the wolves, but they use violence to *protect*."

It was the first day of December and unusually chilly. Standing close to dad's large body, I felt warm and important.

"Sheep fear the sheepdogs because they look too much like wolves." He knelt down so that his face was level with ours.

"You see, sheepdogs remind sheep that violence exists and they don't like to be reminded of that." I put my face close to dad's arm and took a deep breath through my nose. He smelled like fresh leather.

"Only when wolves come sniffing round their flock will sheep come crying to sheepdogs, begging for protection." Dad lifted me into his arms. I remember it being the first and only time he held me. I was high off the ground and close to his large chest. I felt smaller than ever yet as if I had the whole world beneath me. I wanted to curl up into an even smaller bundle of myself just to get closer.

"No one in this life will keep you safe. You need to understand that it's up to you alone." He squeezed my body for a few short moments. I heard Morgan speak in a tone that sounded just like Dad's but smaller,

"Marcus and I will be sheepdogs someday, Dad." Dad remained still and expressionless.

"Right?" He continued hopefully. "We'll kill the evil wolves!"

I was thinking that maybe I should also say something when Dad's grip loosened and my heart sank. I expected to be placed back on the ground. Before I knew what was happening, my body was no longer compact or even intact. The edges that separated me from the air seemed to dissolve. I hit the cold hard water before I could catch a breath and abruptly collapsed back into myself. I could see the sunlight shining through the water above me but my flailing limbs were useless in bringing me up to it. I let out the little air that was left in my lungs and my panic was replaced by comfort. I felt for a moment that I was back in my Dad's arms, safe in his grip.

The next thing I remember is waking up bundled, warm in my parent's bed. I knew Morgan was sleeping on his back next to me because I could hear his slow raspy breath and smell its staleness. My mother was screaming and crying in the kitchen; hers was the only voice I heard. I knew it was pointed at Dad. She had followed us out to the lake to bring some cake. From what I could gather, after Dad threw me in the water, Morgan jumped in after. He was able to grab my limp body but never made it back to the dock before he went under as well. Neither of us knew how to swim yet. If Mom hadn't been there to pull us out, would Dad have let us drown?

We went back to the lake the next day and everyday after that. We soon became the best swimmers in town. Neighbors would pay us to retrieve things that they lost at the bottom of the lake and when that became too easy we would do it with our eyes closed.

Today I leave for my first deployment and can't help but think about what Dad gave us on our sixth birthday. It's because of him that Morgan and I are now a part of the most elite team of sheepdogs in the world, the U.S. Navy Seals. Afghanistan seems so far away. I guess sometimes sheepdogs need to seek out wolves in their own caves before they even get a chance to hurt the flocks back home. I just pray, if there's any sheep over there, they'll know I'm not a wolf.

In Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman's book, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace* he divides people into three categories: Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs.⁹ This paradigm functions based on the assumption that everyone will always know and agree upon who falls in which category. Every society makes room for violence to occur. The most common justification is *protection*. It can be argued that every violent act can be considered an act of protection. Through a variety of mediums, including painting, sculpture, and video, I have been questioning the myth of the *paternal-protector*.

Growing up in America, I've been bombarded by heroic militarism and seeped in the romance of patriotism. My symptomatic desire for a *paternal-protector* as a form of security conflicts with the violent reality caused by its mythic power, iconized by the masculine ideals of the American cowboy. In "The American Western" Stephen McVeigh writes that the 1902 novel written by Owen Wister, *The Virginian*, embodied the belief that the code of the West should be the code of America.¹⁰ The image of America, defined by Western novels and later Westerns in

⁹ Grossman, Dave, and Loren W. Christensen. *On Combat: the Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*. Millstadt, IL: Warrior Science Pub., 2008.

¹⁰ McVeigh, Stephen. *The American Western*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. Pg 76

cinema, is that of the reluctant, yet skillfully violent man with a good heart. In *The American Western*, referring to the 1949 novel, *Shane*, McVeigh writes that “the novel offered a means of thinking about violence and leadership that would resonate in American political culture in the coming decades.”¹¹ *Shane* is written from the perspective of a young boy named Bob. When *Shane* randomly appears in their life, Bob along with his mother and father immediately fall in love with him and see him as their masculine ideal.¹² Embodying the archetype of paternal-protector, *Shane*, “Similar to the sheriff, Kane, in *High Noon*, is not quick to temper or violence, but when it is called for, he is amply prepared.”¹³

Taken from the Western Novel, *Shane*:

“But there is something about him. Something underneath the gentleness...

Something...” mom’s voice trailed away.

“Mysterious?” suggested father.

“Yes, of course. Mysterious. But more than that. Dangerous.”

“He’s dangerous all right.” Father said it in a musing way. Then he chuckled. “But not to us, my dear... in fact, I don’t think you ever had a safer man in your house.”¹⁴

Stephen McVeigh writes that “this contradictory mix of characteristics is a succinct evocation of the expected qualities of Cold War heroic leadership, the danger/safety paradigm being an especially useful way of thinking about the man with a finger on the atomic button.”¹⁵ Later in the novel, Bob, as an adult recounts “I would see the man and the weapon welded in the one

¹¹ McVeigh, Stephen. *The American Western*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. pg77

¹² Schaefer, Jack, and Robert Nott. *Shane*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017.

¹³ McVeigh, Stephen. *The American Western*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

¹⁴ Schaefer, Jack, and Robert Nott. *Shane*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017.

¹⁵ McVeigh, Stephen. *The American Western*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

indivisible deadliness. I would see the man and the tool, a good man and a good tool, doing what had to be done.”¹⁶

Inherent in desire for protection is a desire for violence. Metabolising this dissonance my work examines American Western military culture through the lense of relationship dynamics. This examination exposes the bond between violent national fealty and the desire for personal security and intimacy. Our father and mother figures are the first experience we have with love and protection, defining how we give and receive love as adults and the ways in which we feel secure.

“The masochist would start by wishing to take the place of the father and steal his potency (the sadistic stage); a feeling of guilt would then arise, and with it the fear of castration, leading him to renounce the active aim and take the place of the mother in soliciting the father’s love. But in order to avoid the new onset of guilt and castration fear, to which the passive role arises, he would replace the desire to be loved by the father with the “desire to be beaten,” which not only represents a lesser form of punishment, but is a substitute for the love relationship itself.”

Three years ago, Marcus Luttrell, former Navy Seal and subject of the contemporary war movie, *Lone Survivor*, became the axis of my work. Popularly depicted as impenetrable, I was drawn to Marcus because, after watching extensive footage of him, his nature revealed the “Hero Baby.” *Hero Baby* is an archetype I identified hidden within the traditional *paternal-protector* archetype. Joseph Campbell writes that “The hero is the man of self-achieved submission.” The *Hero Baby* is the result of a disciplined, lethal body, volunteering submission and servitude to a greater system in return for acceptance, security and nurturing love. The Hero Baby shares similar desires to Simon de Beauvoir’s “serious person,” an adult who wants to see the adult

¹⁶Schaefer, Jack, and Robert Nott. *Shane*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017.

world as much ordered and safe as they imagined it to be when they were children. “*Serious People* turn themselves into children, wanting nothing more than definitions to learn and rules to obey... They thus require some external authority that can provide such definitions and such rules and that can guarantee that these definitions and rules will remain unchanging and absolute.”

Carl Jung describes the archetype of the *child* in his book, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*,

“The child can represent an incomplete synthesis of personality. The personality (viz., the “self”) is still in the plural stage, i.e., an ego may be present, but it cannot experience its wholeness within the framework of its own personality, only within the community of the family, tribe, or nation; it is still in the stage of unconscious identification with the plurality of the group.”

This need to experience the self through the community, tribe, or nation, is what initially drives the Hero Baby to volunteer service. The Hero Baby emerges again at the end of the hero’s journey when beaten and broken, in need of nurturing. Jung writes,

“The child is *renatus in novam infantiam*. It is both the beginning and the end, an initial and a terminal creature... Psychologically speaking, this means that the “child” symbolizes the preconscious and the post-conscious essence of man. His preconscious essence is the unconscious state of earliest childhood; his post-conscious essence is the anticipation by analogy of life after death. In this idea the all embracing nature of psychic wholeness is expressed.”

Our first experience of life is in the warm watery world of the womb. Navy Seal candidates must embrace that fluid state again in the second phase of BUDS. Where once there was comfort, as an adult the water can trigger primordial fear. “The last bit of air leaving your lungs. It was pretty stressful knowing that your next inhalation would be nothing but water if you decided to do so” reminisces Darren McBurnett, retired Navy Seal. This phase called, Drown

Proofing, is one of the most infamous rounds of BUDS training. Recruits jump into a nine foot deep pool with hands tied behind their back and feet tied at the ankles. Only by submitting to their lack of movement do they regain control and are able to manage the small movements and calm breaths necessary to survive. “Drown Proof” is a piece I made using leather tooling on a half-cow hide. A floating man is depicted in the fetal position, with hands and feet bound. He is the icon of the *Hero Baby*.



Fig 2

Like the *Hero Baby*, horses are trained from being potentially dangerous forces to willing and obedient laborers. As a mark of their submission, they are bridled into ornate saddles, which the cowboy prepares for them. Leather tooling is the craft of decorating the horse's bondage regalia, and significantly, uses the skin of other domesticated beasts as material. I've used the technique of leather tooling to make objects that draw subtle parallels between different modes of domestication and militarization.



Fig 3

Sianne Ngai writes that “...in its exaggerated passivity, and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”¹⁷ *Smush Face (Hero Baby)* plays with the desire evoked for a body as commodity, such as those in the sex industry and combat service. This project is composed of a series of videos that show the body’s elasticity through a repeated action of facial manipulation.

¹⁷ Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

In one video, you see the face of a normatively attractive young man being manipulated, as the romantic pop song *Hero* by Enrique Iglesias, is sung a cappella in another man's "baby voice." The viewer sees from the hands' point of view as they are burdened with the uneasiness of intimately confronting another's body. The face withstands disfiguration and rough use, continuing to rebound without visible wear. This exercise requires the face to concede control as it withstands aggressive affection. Ngai defines the crucial aspect of what we call cuteness as, "The ability of the object to withstand the violence of domestication."¹⁸ This combination of tough resilience with pliable responsiveness characterizes a certain kind of commodifiable and domesticated body.



Fig 4

¹⁸ Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

The soft contours of the leather sandbags in “We No Longer Need to Think of What to Do With Life” suggests a pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others. Standing in an infantry line formation, they confront the viewer with a potential offensive energy while remaining strong and steady in their stance. One bag stands apart from the ranks in a position of leadership. I refer to this bag as “Old Salty,” because he is time and battle worn. As the leader of the group, he has lost his freshness and has more to lose. Open and vulnerable, the viewer gets to glimpse inside Old Salty and the promise of freedom that he fights for is revealed on his skin.



Fig 5



Fig 6

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