

Consumption, or

An Autobiography of the Mechanical Portrait

Emily Shelton

Felix Lutwidge Gresham, aged eight and a quarter, with Charles Croft Gresham, his deceased father. 2 ¾ x 3 ¼", daguerrotype. Anonymous. Lyme Regis, 1853.

The girl reminds him of things he ate as a child, in secret. Of Porthluney Beach, that dim August in Cornwall, two months before his father finally drowned inside his own lungs, alert eyes turned lurid by McMunn's Elixir, body a limp, wrung rag. While his mother thumb-licked through *Fraser's* and his father dozed in the camp-chair beside her, black kerchief bound round his eyes to forbid migraine, young Felix stuffed handfuls of sand into his mouth. Even as a grown man, he would never forget the taste. There was no taste to forget – just the granular agony of grit, like masticating his own molars, the thick stickum in his throat all texture, all character, no sense.

The girl makes him think also of school that September, and those hours while other boys respired in their beds, and he ate paper: ink hot and peppery, unleavened pages flour, sand, and salt, whatever words he'd written as cool and unconscious as water. It bemuses him to recall such things, for there seems no good reason to have saved them, and why should this girl be the one to remind him? She seems to be little more than a reminder of her own self, wasting away in a deck-chair there on the spa lawn, red afghan drawn tight around what is left of her frame. Her skin is as white as her bones, insistent, it seems, on their right to be seen. He feels absurdly certain that if she just met his gaze, she'd know that it was this odd bit of remembering that nourished him as a child, not milk, not puddings of currants and paste. He wouldn't even have to say so. No, she'd see: the beach in his mouth, the lush aroma of mold, that October afternoon the portraitist visited the Greshams' sitting-room, clamped a brace on his neck, and placed Felix's hand on Father's wet wrist. And Mother's dry eyes, alert to progeniture, insensible to rot, or to terror. Or greed.

Make no mistake: he does not watch her because he wishes to recover some loss, or in order to grieve his youth, or indulge a low pang of nostalgia. There is no self in him that he wishes he'd been, and almost was, but never quite. He has lived to adulthood with ease. He has

even occasionally lived it with grace. And, like any respectable gentleman, he has heaped his plate with a consistently savory sampling of dissatisfaction. We may like him for this.

We could also, with good conscience, entertain for him other histories (those gently roiling dreams that make biographical bigamists of us all), but what distinguishes *this* Felix from other Felixes of his age is what he thinks, not what he thinks he wishes. For instance: here in Derbyshire, at the Matlock Baths, he suffers little the separation from his business – which, in itself, is nothing of interest to us – that most men in his position would find intolerable; years of exposure to the world, and all its resistable temptations, have earned him immunity from self-reproach. He does not even ply himself with the harmless delusion that he is there to recover at all. He is merely being agreeable, he agrees with himself, by being there. And the waters *are* lovely, the lawn tennis excellent, the musical entertainments unexpectedly delightful. Even the meals, he must admit, fail to disappoint. The doctors say there's no evidence of guilt in his system, but are generous with their optimism about the treatments he's receiving. Once he's home, they say without doubt, his wife should have no trouble conceiving.

His wife, you ask? Her name is Rachel. She already has one child, a son, Boone, seven years old, the product of a tragically brief first marriage and the sole reason that Felix is taking the waters at Matlock, not she. Eight months into her pregnancy her husband – a poet of some minor distinction and even more meager constitution – left her a widow; even more unfortunately, his untimely tubercular death had been his finest aesthetic achievement. Felix, a close second cousin to Rachel, stepped in at his mother and grandmother and great-aunt's behest, both to assist with her financial affairs as well as to shelter her from a locust-cloud of suitors. No one ever said so out loud, but she feared her admirers, and what she imagined they wanted from her – the attraction of a widow being precisely that she has been a wife, with little of the bride's bathetic virtue left to protect. Within a year Rachel and Felix were married, almost without realizing it. They already had the same surname; it seemed imperative, to be together. Felix would often reflect, in the years to come, that more families than not seem to refresh, rather than reproduce, themselves.

Now that they are apart, he can't help but think of her differently, and hopes with all the ingenuousness of a man who never imagined himself to have an imagination that this is not a betrayal. As he simmers in one of the hydropathic tubs or chews his pipe in the smoking-room, the pictures that surface of Rachel surprise him. It is night in them all. He and she are in their bedroom at home, and she is crying. Most likely about her husband; her first husband, that is. She often does this. Like the good friend he is, he murmurs words of comfort, bearing the full blast of her sadness against the taut sail of his chest, but before he can perceive the shift of mood

(if indeed there is any shift at all to perceive) her grief begins to mutate, with astonishing sleight-of-hand, into something new and yet quite similar. The desperate clutch of her fingers softens into long, relishing strokes, picking apart the buttons of his shirt as she bends to press her wet mouth to his nipple. Somehow he is moved onto his back – certainly he doesn't move for himself – and she climbs atop his body with limbs more fluid than flesh, with none of the firm, pristine resistance he knows in the daylight as *Rachel*. Right now, in their bed, she's not his wife, but a flame riding a wick: her husband is in there, he knows, but *which*, and *where*? Afterwards, she moves aside, presses her moist back to his arm, and goes to sleep.

As the bath boils, Felix squeezes his eyes shut to release the heat from his brain, and to summon her face. It is the sepia jewel inside an ivory cameo, every strand of her sleek black hair distinct in the pitiless monochrome, her dark eyes burning holes in the albumen. He mouths her name: Rachel Gresham. It feels like chewing. He wants to give her what she wants. She has been a good wife to him, beloved by his mother and grandmother and aunts and great-aunts, and admired by their neighbors and circle of friends. But he can't help but wonder – without any sense of entitlement to an answer – why she can't be satisfied with the child she has. Perhaps it's because that child is fat. (Not plump, with the appealing, well-fed gleam of the cherubim; but fat, overstuffed for a long winter that's never coming.) Shortly before he left for Derbyshire, Felix came upon the boy on the back stairs of their house, consuming a loaf of bread. The boy glared at him over the gnawed carcass, like a trapped rat. Felix never felt more unmanned. A father would know what to say; he was not one. "Boone," he asked helplessly, "does your mother know you're here?"

The boy tightened his fingers around the bread, as though refusing to share. "No," he said. "You do."

Sad: he's been trying so hard to fill her up, but the only thing that gets any bigger, it seems, is her son.

Rachel Peale Gresham, at Teer Rectory in Cambridge, 1879. Opal type, neutral tone. 2 3/8 x 2", oval. Vignetted portrait, mounted in a cameo, set in a velvet case.

The girl is everywhere: lying on a deck-chair in the sun, leaning against the pillar under the verandah, sitting alone at a corner table in the dining commons, in his brain when he wants to

know if he's cured. He can't tell her age, but supposes she's not much more than a child; he sees the tiny buds of new breasts under her thin gowns, and feels sad. How odd they look to him, how unnecessary. If a body wants to peel itself down to its innermost layer, why on earth wouldn't it pare those away first? It seems perverse, even cruel, for nature to keep marking her this way, when obviously it is her will to not be so marked. Somehow he knows without knowing – perhaps from her eyes, that are too pallid for fever, too bright for disease – that she is not ill in any recognizable sense. If the extremity of her condition were due to sickness, she'd be confined to her bed, which she is not. Her malady is personal, confidential. It is undisclosed, and he would like to know, as we do when we think that we cannot imagine.

Somehow he finds within him the audacity to ask one of the doctors about her. “Why, you would appreciate my discretion if ever I were asked about *you*,” the man replies, which Felix doesn't fully understand, apart from being aware that he has been chided, however obliquely. Two nurses – one lovely redhead with a wavering smile, and another, much older woman in a uniform that strains against her hips – assist the doctor in wrapping Felix in a wet, ice-cold sheet, packing him, as part of the cure, before his early-morning rubdown and douche. None of them generally shares a word during this routine, but the nurses don't seem surprised by his question. Perhaps, he thinks, they've heard it before.

“You haven't been drinking enough water,” the doctor says sullenly, as the nurses drape Felix with eiderdowns. He's been handled by several doctors during his stay, but this is the one he'd liked the most, without good reason – a fairly soft and artistic-looking young man, with a slow sort of walk which indicated to Felix a long series of disappointed wishes, perhaps a man with a vulgar wife at home, one who insisted on his taking a position that brought them more means, but a long, slow dwindling of his own self-regard. Or something like that.

“How do you know?” Felix asks, the cold starting to penetrate far beyond the nerves, to places he'd never been touched. He feels worried, suddenly. What is the doctor trying to say to him? That he has compromised his own cure by failing to stay strictly focused? He's swallowed as much water a day as he believes he can hold; is there truly more he can do?

“I can see,” the man says, wiping his hands on a towel.

The older nurse leaves the room – she's gained weight recently, Felix can tell; she hasn't yet noticed, perhaps, or she'd have let out her dress – and the pretty red-haired one busies herself with some instruments in a cabinet. Perhaps she's preparing for his douche – an ascending douche, the kind he must take lying down. He rather likes those.

Then they leave him alone, for thirty minutes or so, as he bakes in his frigid wrappings, staring at the ceiling. It's cruel to be left that way, with only the brain as entertainment. He has

no choice but to resume the line of thought he'd been following when he came in here, and asked the doctor about her, and was rebuffed, and reproached. He makes believe that he is outside, on the lawn, and she is sitting in her usual place, with an unopened book. Looking at her, sometimes, he has to close one eye, for he has the sense that he's never seeing just her. Sometimes Rachel is there, reading Mrs. Henry Wood, dipping her finger in custard; sometimes his father on a bed of crushed green, face withered as a baked apple; sometimes Boone with his rat-cheeks, lips thick with crumbs. It's frustrating to Felix: the girl isn't a girl so much as a series of pictures, and she isn't in any of them. He must be firm with himself, he sees now. If he's not, then she and his wife and not-son and father will merge, quite irrevocably, like clouds, and that is unacceptable. Daguerrotypes are not corpses, and starving girls are neither hungry wives nor fat boys nor dead men. Their skin is in no way like paper, or petals, or even an onion. It may be ghostly as guncotton, at times, or water flushed with iodine. Even a glasshouse slick with salt and mercury and egg white. Like silver nitrate; a reaction to light. But no more.

We might ask what, in fact, Felix expects from the object of his fixation, but that would be predicated, I'm afraid, on a misconception most grave. There is no expectation at work in this thing, whatever *it* is; there's no future to the drive that afflicts him, no change of tense in sight, and if there were, he'd be assured of relief. If he knew, for instance, that he'd find her later that morning, alone in the verandah, in one of her deck chairs, he would never have spent the time that he did thinking of her. He wouldn't have devoted his brain to her face while the taciturn, weak-footed doctor administered his warm saline enema; instead, the sensation would have had hold of him totally, and so would the outrage, and so would the shame. When he returns home, he'd have thought, how could he face anyone again? Was he only being prepared for a final humiliation – a failure more terrible than any he'd had a right to expect? And what would happen then – to him, to Rachel, her boy – to any of them? Did they have a fate?

When he does find the girl that morning, in her chair on the verandah, she is reading a book. To be precise, she is most pointedly *not* reading it, but staring at its cover, which is blue and gilt-scrolled, and devoid of any recognizable script. Fortuitously enough, no one else happens to be about, though Felix doesn't expect that unusual circumstance to last long, and loiters only a moment by the door to the solarium, telling himself that a closer look is all he can have, all he will get. He'll allow himself to linger only a moment; then he will pass right by. But

before he can even finish his first round of self-recrimination – hasn't he had enough? – she says, without looking up from the book she's not reading, "You don't look sick."

"I don't?" he says, as if he's her. It's what he would have said, if he had planned to speak, which he hadn't. "Oh, but..." He can't explain; he realizes, suddenly, that he doesn't want her to know anything about him at all.

She looks up now. "Are you sick?"

"Oh, no," he says, with some urgency. This is one thing he *would* like to be clear, and he finds himself smiling, as if to reassure her. It's sickening to him, actually, how automatically the smile comes, relieving him of the burden of honesty. "I am a doctor."

He expects this revelation to impress her – it impresses him how quickly the lie comes to his mouth – but she merely looks back at her book.

"Not here," he says quickly, and takes a step toward her. "At home. In London. I'm not employed here. No!"

She puts the book aside with a sigh. "You're a doctor *and* a patient?"

He shakes his head. He's beside her now, lowering himself to the deck chair immediately next to hers. She looks different close up, though it's difficult to say how, exactly: her face is so hard, so angular, that light doesn't seem to know where to fall, and the shadows we depend on to give shape to expression find with her no place to rest.

"You're not a patient, not a doctor. Not a doctor here." Something moves her lips. "That," she says, with a silvery edge, "sounds interesting."

"Allow me to explain," he says, encouraged by the grin in her voice, and glances over his shoulder. "At the moment I am engaged in study. Shall I tell you a bit about it?"

She doesn't answer right away; perhaps she doesn't want to present the appearance of wanting anything, even an explanation. The prospect of listening – the one delicacy, perhaps, she's never been offered – seems to hold some mild appeal. "If you like," she says. "I'm a bit tired."

"I'm visiting the baths as part of my research, but only for a short time. I return to England next Monday week."

She draws her lips over her teeth in thought, or something like it.

"Research," she says. "Research."

He likes the way she savors the word. It *is* a good word, he reflects: substantial, meaty. It suggests volume; it tastes pleasantly of starch.

"My subject," he says, "is tuberculosis. In young women."

Her eyes flare, and his pulse quickens with fear. “Well,” she says, “I don’t have *that*.” She says it as though she were brushing aside a gift. *I already have that!*

“May I ask then what is it you do have?”

“Yes, you may.”

“But will you answer?”

The laugh she doesn’t give him ripples across her face. “I *don’t* have everything,” she said. “I don’t have cancer or the tapeworm or TB. I don’t even have my monthlies. I never have, not once, and I’m sixteen years old.” She has said all of this before.

“But you can’t be well,” he says. “That’s not normal.”

“The priest says I’m a miracle. The doctors, too. They’ve never seen a girl like me before. I’ve had all the cures. This is my fourth summer here. There’s nothing they can do.”

“But how...”

“I can feel my spine through my stomach.”

A slice goes through him. “No. My dear, that’s not possible.” He knows that, for her, it is, and is furious with her for making him want to hear more. He can’t be the first to receive such confessions; he doesn’t matter to her one bit. Perhaps there is no matter *of* him to matter *to* her.

“You should be afraid of dying,” he says, reproachfully.

She tucks her hair behind her ears. “I’m not sick,” she says. “Why should I be afraid?” Her mouth gives a wry twist, as though she can taste his displeasure. “You know, you can pretend I’ve got tuberculosis, if that makes for better material.”

“Material?”

“For your research.”

The way she says the word, he fears that she sees through him – not that he isn’t a doctor by profession, because he could very well be, but that his interest is unfocused, self-centered in the worst way, grasping at some pretense to objectivity that is meant merely to disarm her. Really, his motive is unknown, even to him. He doesn’t want to know. That is his motive.

“Has anyone taken your picture?” he asks.

She looks at him strangely. In fact, it’s the first thing he’s said that appears to surprise her, and at that moment he knows their encounter is close to an end. Soon he will never see her again, and panic churns in his belly. What was it he wanted, originally? What can he hope to get? He looks hard at her face; he wants to save some of it for later.

“Here, you mean?” she asks him.

“To show you what you look like. Have they?”

She doesn't reply, but he feels she has answered. A door opens behind him, and he hears the crackle of skirts.

"Come, Anna," says the nurse. "Time for beef tea and crackers."

He watches the woman, thin and pale herself, help the girl out of her chair, down the verandah, around the corner. He follows them with his gaze, and feels lightened, exhilarated. She is gone, but he is inside her now. His eyes are a speculum, in some raw, tender part.

Plate 234.	<i>Melancholia attonita.</i>	<i>Calotype, tableau clinique.</i>
Plate 235.	<i>Megalomania.</i>	<i>Calotype, tableau clinique.</i>
Plate 236.	<i>Intense vanity.</i>	<i>Calotype, tableau clinique.</i>

Felix spends a wretched night, plagued by questions that may not need to be asked. Should he seek her out again, just one more time, or leave well enough alone? What can he hope for now? He will be leaving soon, in any case – he told the girl the truth about that – and feels he should be clear, at least, about what he hopes for, knowing full well that hope doesn't even enter into it. He wants to be able to tell someone else about her, to describe her fully, to give them a picture in their own minds of the curiosity he'd witnessed, this absurd girl who had no body, who had *only* a body, at whom you couldn't help but stare, who had nothing *to* stare at. He imagined giving his wife this picture. He would so like to do that. But he couldn't expect more from the girl, in order to make that picture complete. If he were to take anything of her away with him, perhaps there would be nothing left.

I saw the most unusual thing while I was taking the waters. Actually, it wasn't a thing at all, but a person, a young girl, the most unusual young girl you've ever seen in your life. I don't know quite how to describe her. You may have seen her in your nightmares. She looked to be starving to death, like a prisoner of war, or a crow with one wing, but this girl wasn't sick, not sick in any of the senses we know. I never did find out what was the matter with her. But if you can picture what want looks like, what want would look like if it were a picture, you will see her, I assure you. I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid that I can't be more specific than that. Please forgive me.

As he rehearses his fatuous anecdote, Rachel develops against the black, above him, on the ceiling, exquisitely etched in shadow. In the miniature he carries wherever he goes, she is just the same – a collodion positive set on lavender linen, seated, one elbow on the table beside her, hand poised just under her ear. Her dark taffeta dress is sleek, lambent, austere, her skin white as ether would look, if you could look at it. She likes this picture of herself; she has told him so. But the real picture shimmers beneath it, where she is naked, and her face raw from weeping, pendulous breasts rocking above him, eyes shut in miserable pleasure. This picture doesn't belong to him, either. It belongs to no one. It has never been taken.

“You're not a doctor. You're a patient, like me.”

He is leaning against a pillar on the verandah, waiting for the nurse to take him to his next treatment, comfortably stuffed from his tea, ready to accept the mineral onslaught of his afternoon bath. He hadn't even been thinking of the girl at that moment, but was wondering about Boone, who rarely crossed his mind. The boy would turn eight years old next week, the very day after Felix's return. Perhaps by then, Felix mused, he'd be someone's brother, without any of them even knowing it yet. But that would mean hoping, and, no, he has no hope.

When he hears her voice, he turns around, so surprised he doesn't even smile. She's standing there on her own, which seems impossible. She is all eyes.

“I'm sorry, I...” He doesn't know what to do, but, mercifully, she decides for him, and walks to the end of the verandah, holding his gaze meaningfully. When she reaches the corner, she nods to one side, then turns and disappears.

He waits for a moment. This isn't happening to him; he hadn't thought of it first, hadn't even imagined. It's like something out of a novel – no, not even that. Figures like hers have no place in fiction, certainly. He looks around him. No one is about, and this is, above all, an opportunity – for what he's not sure, but an opportunity, nonetheless. How can he waste something so ripe? He follows her.

She hasn't gone far; she's just around the corner, leaning against the wall, wrapped, as usual, in her red afghan. He steps toward her, stomach crawling. “I shouldn't have said what I did,” he says. “I know. I'm most awfully sorry.”

She shakes her head quickly, as if she doesn't want him to speak. She's looking straight at him, lips parted, without meeting his eyes, which he finds discomfiting. It's the look of someone distracted, but she's not distracted. She is present.

“I shouldn’t have lied,” he goes on, “but I meant no harm, no disrespect. I only wanted...”

“You’ve been eating,” she interrupts. “Egg and salmon sandwiches. At least three of them, maybe four.”

This brings him up short. How could she possibly know that? He had taken tea alone in his room that day. Had everyone had the same sandwiches for their tea? No, that was highly improbable; he’d awoken with a taste for them – something he couldn’t remember having had in years, maybe ever – and requested them especially. “You couldn’t have seen me,” he says.

Her eyes glimmer, and she reaches for the lapels of his robe. He feels the gesture all the way through his system, from tonsils to bowels. Wrapping her fingers around the thin fabric, she pulls him close.

“Please,” she says, “open your mouth.”

He begins to tremble, trapped by her eyes and their stark command. Is this, after all, what he wanted? Was this the end he never had in sight – an encounter such as this, with her, in private? How could his mind keep such a secret from itself? Does she really feel as he does? If she experiences no hunger, is there anything she feels? Wearied, humiliated, by what he doesn’t know, he parts his lips and moves his face into hers, waiting for the touch of her lips. One thing, though – he keeps his eyes open; this he must see. And with a slight upturn of her chin, the girl raises her face and presses her nose to his mouth, inhaling deeply. Her face is closed. It looks just like bliss.

There is nothing to be thought at first. He moves his hands to the small of her back, then lets them glide over the hard blades of her shoulders, finally coming to rest on her neck, where he holds her in place, right where she wants to be. Now he closes his eyes. As the girl – as Anna – feeds on him, Felix drops back into emptiness, a dim, intimate emptiness that he can taste plainly on his tongue. It’s bitter; it’s leaden; it has a resinous, regretful tang. He knows what it is – the flavor of want, long denied, now coming up like bile. Back home, where his return is most hungrily awaited, where he can’t be sure he has any more to give, he will have this, at least, to suck on. He will have this. His wife can go on gorging on misery; her little boy can continue to hide biscuits in his cuffs; their unborn children can scream for the milk they’ll never get. He will have this, and he will lock it in his own secret cabinet, alongside everything else he hasn’t seen, and saved. The barely savored, the perfectly indigestible.