

PARTICIPATION

A Novel

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The only pressing reason for changing a theory is disagreement with facts.

—Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*

I can't position, I can't assure anyone of their ethical well-being.

Take this engine, the clerk says. You are living your electric life.

—Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk*

ONE

TWO GROUPS

I never made it to Love, and now I hear it's defunct.

Anti-Love meets regularly, though attendance is spotty. At least I've done most of the readings.

Love, by contrast, will be a recuperation project.

Anti-Love is not, to be fair, billed as *Anti-Love*. It's billed variously as resistance, revolt, revolution. Sometimes it's billed (tentatively or defiantly) as *Self-Love*.

Love bills itself as itself, eponymous and proud.

Without the beginning of the story, it's enough to know that there is a drafty corner apartment, an all-night bodega out the window, a playground across from the bodega, quiet at night. There is an abundance of emotion—enough years, enough fucks and near-fucks and pseudo-fucks, enough expectations unanswered because unheard or unsaid—and it is that abundance that is known: a partial knowing, as excess is always, paradoxically, partial.

Without the beginning of the story, it is insufficient but still necessary to have a picture of the surround: not only the bodega and the playground, but the news reports filtering up from the apartment below. The news reports appearing at the top right of the screen, a stack of small explosions, almost registering, then, compulsively, swiped away.

There is a stack of books—on a coffee table, for example. An archive of future attention, or else a morgue.

Love isn't defunct, exactly. It's been reduced to a virtual form of itself. Flesh into type, an assembly turned list. I enter it, when I enter it, through a screen.

Don't be fooled by the present tense, the future tense, when they occur, which they will. This is a story about the past. It's already over.

When I say that the story is over, I mean that a merger has happened, which is not to say an acquisition. (This is a story about two groups.) I am also insisting on the safety of storytelling, to protect myself, and you, from a certain pain.

Story is a safe emergency.

One of the members of Anti-Love is a psychoanalyst, a fact rarely mentioned in our meetings, though the language of this fact—*safe emergency*—edges in. The psychoanalyst is from Buenos Aires, where an hour of therapy can cost the same as a burger; as a result, a large portion of the population is in treatment.

We absorb such unverifiable facts from conversation, and they become a part of us, they become us.

(Without the beginning, it is also necessary to have a picture of the second surround, some 150 miles away: a table in a room that is open to the public, dirty floor, a radiator that leaks. A village view out the window: gas station, neon lights, small mountain just behind.)

How are we to know who started things? At its peak there were ten of us in Anti-Love; we'd sit around the improvised wooden table,

peer at one another over mugs of coffee or of beer. The idea for the group came from me, I've been told, though I remember it as always having been there. Not always, in the strict sense. It appeared when I needed it: an acquired taste. Tonight I met a man who was beautiful and tall, who wore capitalism like a well-fitting suit. Anti-Love recognized him, shone a light. For example.

Love was different. You wonder if I have a story to tell. I was invited to Love. The way salt is invited to the early-winter road.

I was invited and I said Yes, I said Send me the syllabus, I said I am only partially fluent in your language. I was told I was welcome nonetheless. Meanwhile, the neighbors were setting each other on fire. California was also burning—actually burning. The neighbors, aflame, sat on their stoops, extracting the burrowed tick of love from one another's skin.

It's everywhere in the news reports—swipe, swipe.

You don't have to believe me, but you can.