The Fleshing Words

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THE FLESHING WORDS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Drama and Communications

by

Jesse Loren Flaws

B.A. University of California, Irvine  1994

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And finally, an endless thanks to Crystal, Jarrett and Caitlin who supported my decision to study abroad without them in Italy and in Spain, and for graciously sharing me with words.

Acknowledgement of Copyrighted Material

“Agosto Notturno” Ellipsis, University of New Orleans press 2004
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MY VOCABULARY DID THIS TO ME!

For me, poetry is a living connection to that which came before and that which is to come, a ghost made solid within space and beyond space. In itself it is a lineage and a history, made new through contemporary language. This project, written mainly in Europe, moved me to write the moments of language collapsing, moments of significance expanding, and moments where the word and object seemed alive and transcendent. *The Fleshing Words* is a compilation of inspiration, thought, and art. It is a cannibalization. For example in “Writing The Bones” I used specific lines from Larry Levis’ poem “Caravaggio: Swirl and Vortex” and created a new poem, a poem that led me to make new decisions about poetry. Also, in “What Babies Really Do” I used Bernadette Mayer’s poem of the same title, but instead of focusing on the moments of awareness outside of the body during pregnancy, as she did, I focused on the effects of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. It is a cannibalization of her work.

On the other hand, lyric poems like “Agosto Notturno” bring poetry back to an elevated state, which in turn elevates the reader. In that poem, I use the classic form of the nocturne to address the loss of love. I also employ the leitmotif of “dove sta memoria” which was used by Pound and Cavalcanti. This project is built on lyrical and narrative language holding the quiet moments of connection, the softer moments of isolation, the spiraling in of energy and the spiraling out. The poems are vortices of time and chance unfolding into words.

The collection is, further, a representation of my lineage and history as well as my travels. I think of Tennyson’s “Ulysses” who says, “I am a part of all that I have met.” I too am part of my encounters, intimate relationships like family and distant relationships with strangers. My father was a pianist, arranger, and perpetual student. “To Watch His Hands” is a
tribute to him. As a young adult I read Voltaire and wondered about possibility and fate. Faulkner’s stories had me smitten, especially their conceptual framework “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” I understood this to mean that humans mimic and repeat the stages of development from single cell, to complex system, to watery creature with pharyngeal gill slits, to a thing that creeps, cries, and eventually walks and names its world.

“A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” Browning’s sentiment sums up the beginning of my intellectual pursuits. My major was science before English, which led me to satisfy all the prerequisites of biology, botany, anatomy, and physiology before changing my major to English. I was fascinated by the physical world, by Tesla, Heisenberg, and even Tycho Brae. Initially, science was actually more appealing than poetry or prose: it seemed linked and linear, and only over time could I see its indeterminacy. Fortunately, after much coursework, I had to take an English class before transferring to the university. My teacher, Annette Lynch, bombarded me with poetry assignments, invited me to readings, and indulged my first efforts to write. She allowed me to bring my newborn daughter to class, and submitted one of my first poems, “Ena,” to Cal Poly Pomona’s writing competition where I won first place, money, and publication. It seemed simple. The nail in the science coffin was my parent’s insistence on a major that would lead to employment; I automatically went the other way. However, going the other way did not erase the past; instead, poetry became a forensic science of words. Just as Faulkner’s preoccupation with ontogeny demonstrated the inner cellular evolution unfolding in physical form, teleology, (another preoccupation of order) seemed to be the social story of that search for purpose. In teleology,
the search for evidence of being is based on the idea that the universe has a purpose. This assumes a connectedness and a plan.

This project made me look at connections, and poetry connects us with the unknown. Jack Spicer asserts in *Billy The Kid*: “Let us fake out a frontier – a poem somebody could hide in with a sheriff’s posse after him.” It could be that this poetry is a fake frontier for us to hide in. It could be that the connections are as real as that frontier. In a sense, connections can be the footsteps on the Metro following a pair of pointed shoes that lead to a bar with great beer on the side of a street where a building once fell on a butterfly. For every association made in my head, there were countless permutations that I didn’t make. It is a large frontier. In the end, I found the most important connections, whether random or deliberate, are the connections with others, with place, and with the self. These are the fleshing words that built the eyes that see the hands that wake in the yard that Jack built.
We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves.

C.S. Lewis
To Watch His Hands

My father’s father
Trained his hands with sticks spread across thumb to pinky
To navigate a chord by six.

He played through the Depression,
Through rotten fruit bereft of bruises
Free from the backs of supermarkets,
Played through train jumping and seeing his brother
Lose his legs.

    Raymundo: God of the world on wheels
    Sticks and blood, sticks and blood.

Father played until his hands were blue and blood
Crept from his mouth like moths. Last Rites
In the Sanitarium, three times.
The man, shriveled tuberculin lungs,
Shook death, shook death because he heard music.

    Saint Cecilia with angels at the piano.
    Bone and blood, bone and blood.

He rose like Lazarus, tricked death, found he could grow to
Enter women like music and create rhythm in beats inside them.

    First Dolores, and great sadness.
    Then Alice, Margo, and Regina, my queen.
My father had a daily ritual of scales,
*Fortissimo throughout the house.*
To watch his hands, tender on ivory teeth.

In his ears he blasted Franz Liszt from the headphones while
Reading Goethe, his hands tuned to the metronome
For forty-five sustained minutes of daily Tch, tch, tchs.

He could not caress a child like the ivory, could not separate
The bruised imperfection of childhood to taste sweet moments
With his own.

My hands are his, sticks and blood tuned to the tch, tch of looms,
The rhythms of Schumann.

When cancer came it left his hands alone. There in the bed
Teaspoons of cold Morphine under his tongue
The liquid of absolution from my hands
To wake the moths of blood from his lungs again
To let them flutter his soul to a coast I have not seen

After the first hours of death
I slid my hands under the afghan that covered him.
His hands were quiet, no longer chattering like teeth
But warm under the blankets, and still
Unresponsive in death
The sticks, sticks, sticks.
Orphic Letters

Letter 1

A thousand and one times today I thought of you.
Purr at my hands,
My breasts rising like heat,
You, bearded, strong with need
All mouth, tongue, and hands.

What could I say today, that I wasn't delighted, that my body didn't wake to a
Calling for more, that a thousand and one times today I thought of you.
Send word that you are coming and I will walk out to meet you.

Letter 2

It was hard to call you-
Time falling
Bare and bear. Kids later, busy now
No plans and letting go, letting go--

Letter 3

I am undone, not by need,
But by the risk of need.
After a steady diet of crickets, I sing and call
But hide in the dark.

Letter 4

Missing is knowing in a vacuum.
A tumble of
Thistle, glob and glass.
Letter 5

Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but not
As good as looking-
Goethe knew the secret of curiosity,
The disappointment of being known.

Post Script

We called off everything, popcorn, dogs, candlelight.
Down at the mouth it was dry.

He was so afraid of me,
Me, softness and epiphany, strength and eclogue, I touched him and he rose to it.
Amazing need,
Need-based and conflicted, I left him like that.
Spring without the fruit.
The rind pulled back, the menace of seeds—

I had to go back to the place where graves are, my own name, my father's, the place that
buried me as a child.

Who will sign up to be no more than that? It is spring
And the smell of his shirt clings to the ground.
Perseid light returns
and with it, a misdirected gift in the form of a dead rat
at my door from cats,
then a hen dead after the egg cracked inside her

\[ E \text{ a lume spento. La vita spenta.}\]

Perseus’ light, an August shower that
returns love like dead fish to a baffled sea.
Tonight, cuttle fish fall like stars from the sky,
everywhere is barren ground.
Love swims like anchovetta.

\[ Dove \text{ sta memoria? Dove la luce?}\]

Perseid light falls in meteor showers--
Fragments of a legacy
burn-out before they hit the ground.

The hen and her gifts are gone,
The year of the rat is over.
\[ A \text{ cuttle fish, a girl, a bloodless heart.}\]
The Continuum

It was this way,
disconnecting her cables, then
analyzing the row of tubers grown in the yard...
She called them hearts,
said they came from the garden.

Then it was time.
To erase all the crayon drawings of rectangular houses
with parallelogram roofs
along right triangles and small squares of chimneys which
grew circuitous smoke like love folding back on itself.

She was difficult from birth, and this way,
disconnecting the cables, we were ready
to put her tuber under the ground.
What Babies Really Do

...Often when I am happy a fear comes over me—
not fear that the joy will end, but fear that circumstances
beyond my control and unexpected will arise to prevent me
from ever feeling joy again

by Bernadette Mayer

I

Meconium, splash of darkness on the rocks, frail hiccup of astounding courage
repeated and defeated the late breakfast and early midnight

Ghost cloud dripping into polyester pants with cotton linings like bread lines during the Great
Depression and melancholia after two dried crackers in the earliest morn

I have eaten Milan and swallowed the Congo.
This growing thing with palpable flesh.

Wailing seas, wailing silences, floating into and kicking,
Raising the knee, belly stretched Djembe Djembe--

Late days in throbs if on the back, throbs if on the feet, throbs and leaks the leaky goop of plugs
Water and wailing walls and the wall of transition.

Hate, hating everyone and the inescapable train of push, no wait, push,
The thin lip splitting into splitting into hot poker

Elbows flared into knees and shoulder blades breaking through the pelvis
That was once a gift.

Opened and reopened, inserted and reinserted with deftness of what babies really do when they
are calling from the other side to become seed.
Fat butterball turkey plucked and wailing with cranium unfolding that shows
Meconium was the answer of hiccup defeated at 2 AM,
Now wailing into wee exhaustion little
Cowbird of future teenager flesh

Profoundly screaming and competing as the new snot producing, meconium stained,
Head hungry hiccup. On a good day, day care and moments of sleep and caffeine
Alternating like breath between waves of narcolepsy.

II

Cold, cold, isolating cold, the chill divide down the middle of the mad bed
Who seeded and has not sod the gray gift, hot poker
Again, again.

Knocking in the night of dreams swimming in blood screaming in
Blood, screaming darkness filled my lungs and I was alone hearing you
but couldn’t see you or break free.

Hush child someday you will be a man but first there is earwax to wrangle, and Dr. Seuss’ One
fish, Two fish, Red fish, Blue Fish swimming in Cat Hat play with the child of moose horns and
duck feet

The lost child of Neverland always reaching back
Craning forward, lost in a sea of report card measurement, checkmate and
Somber blues seeping into the tulle fog morning fashion. He is

Suicidal but passes on the roulette. Mother, now in the closet with the 38 in her mouth
Dreaming of silence, but he is hooting and
Needs toilet paper for his ass prank nose earwax.
He needs braces and an inhaler splitting breath, she needs glasses and help with her autism, which is actually algebra trying to become poetry of signs.

III

Recover, uncover the lonely in cold without sheets. Kick, kick like birth, kick into the underbelly moist and sliced like fish. Wrap in newspaper, the one fish gash, the one eyed head stare.

She is beautiful, rosebud cupid lips, and arrows from the deep brown eyes. Cut out, and laid on fresh cut drum belly. Hearing, not seeing, I was paper to swaddle the eye of her. They rolled her away, unable to lift

My head, move arms, flail like fish-cry.
24 pale hours. Cried like Superman must have cried propped in his electric corset.

This chance. Two hours of pushing ball of heft, tear and silence, too secret to sound. My edelweiss, my buttercup. She could speak at three weeks, whisper and question like a Man-child.

The laboring again at home with water gushing a salty fountain, an hour, a push, a silent pumpkinseed. Head shaped from the journey, then sleep and hunger.

Blue baby,
Baby Blue,
In the room the crib slept, waiting like a mountain cave.
IV

Go willingly to inject the Euthabarb
Into the veins of cats,
Into the hearts of recalcitrant dogs that do not die after the first injection.
Clean blood, vomit and parvovirus bowels to buy a blanket and a bonnet.

Farm beans, corn and search cushions for coins. Sweep the floor in infinite circles. Say Hackle berry, because you remember that it was once in your mouth and isn’t now-
For it was nothing. They are beautiful!

The stretch marks that groove your belly with sandstorms will become silvery like the silver of sardines swimming to vast unknown equations.
Writing The Bones

For Larry Levis

I.

“The skeleton says so much,” he says.
Fondling a scapula,
Rubbing the inner curve with
his forefinger, not looking, but pausing
    his finger at every jag.

He says the man was powerful
He can see where the biceps were attached and can
Imagine
This man was capable of throwing his dog
    Out a window.

When Levis writes of Caravaggio
In the painted head of Goliath,
    *He is boated, decapitated, empurpled...*
    Offering up himself like the portrait,
To die before one dies and keep painting-

You know he has lived that
    very moment when

You paint yourself into the face of the dead because
You have already died and
You can talk about it with authority
As if you had swum in 1991
    into the swift river of the Carolina wood.
II.

In a poem he could show you
   A cut mark on a bone, fourteen years after the body was buried.
He could exhume the fragments and say,
   “See the cut mark,” and I did.
   “There’s a diagonal bend on each transverse process,”
and it was.

He could place the sharp cuts of a
Knife, right where he wanted a breath—
   Right at the exact spot where his mother stood
At the moment when Kennedy was killed and
The news blared over the store radio while she shopped at Whitefront.

He could tell by the prosody of the line that she
   Was there buying a radio for her bedside table which would
Sit there until he was done with his puberty—
   its rapid division
   its multiplication
   its hardening bones.

He could tell then that his body would give out,
   Just as it was giving up its boyish form.
III.

He could look at the bones like a scientist
and say, “This skeleton says so much.
Look at the pelvis,
it was cracked, then healed.
It carried children. Look
At the nose, it’s been broken. Look at the spiral twist
of the spinal column, it carried a lopsided load.”

He could see the head of Caravaggio, hacked off
from the cervical vertebra,
Eyes half open in a dream. But was it him?

Larry, Larry light to carry framed in the blackness of trees.

IV.

It was not enough to tell of his friend
and the landmine that broke him
into fragments. He could describe the neutrinos
which pierced the fleshy parts of the boy five years before
his death, when he would go over to Levis’ house and
his mother would play the new radio on the table
draped with the spider-web doily embroidered by Great Aunt No One
above the laminated wood.

He was like this
his words.
He could offer himself up in the peach face of Goliath.
He could swim loudly
    and explain things as if
    You were deaf and bleary eyed.
    He would half-close his eyes and wave his
peppery bangs back over his forehead, then
whisper, like he whispers now,

“This is about absence, and it is not.
    This is no one’s story,”
And most of his face would tense,
    His eyes half open in a dream.
1

Spain
I detest you
A dog stare
Cold indifference

El Colón stands over the city
Over olive trees and pigeon shit
Over the tortured feet of women

His left hand points
to his Americas

His legs spread
Like suckling pig.
Underneath Colón
Reinando Alfonso XII,
Marble Madonna,
Mute molded angels.

Starbuck’s litter
claims the ground

Keep your fashions
  Transparent moth threads
Keep the leather
  Throats of rutting bulls

Colón’s dream of beauty ends
The gypsy aria
Rolling silence in the distance.
Went down the hole
Through the loam damp worm space
Underground
Down
Down
World with no end
Jesús
Falling in me falling on me
Falling and
Relentless falling
A bead eye into the dirt lash
Into the nostril loam
Over the fur and down down
Deep into the animal
Dark leviathan
Dark swallowed
Past the lips
I died a bit today
Knew my way

In Pompeii, ash filled the space that was woman.
I am emptied
of all that is grass.
El Enigma Sin Fin

Because the mountain has
Forehead,
It becomes self-portrait

Because the guitar is
Fruit,
The branch swims like fish

Because the mouth is
Pawn,
The tongue is severed pomegranate

Darkness emerges a
Black horse with curved foreleg
Where voice, called Dawn
Floats on a glass cloud
The conference of
Quantum Solids and Liquids drones on in Trento
As if science had not heard poets speak
The slithering of space inside the solid being.

The smoke in El Gijón
spreads its legs everywhere in curls—
The midwife air.
Out of Duende
retracting and thrusting
The sheathes of being have been balled out

I dug
an
L shaped
Pit.
The
dead
offer snakes not secrets.
Where is Hermes Trismegistus and the man with the golden nose who came after?

He is Tycho Brahe
Who knew the Olympic Mons of Mars
    the lava that grew from center to
    out to collapse
    the teleologic function of heat and space
while dueling, badly.
The lopped nostrils crushed on the ground.
13

Bodies hurled by bodies
at Granada

Gypsy cave, a hand,
slashed wind waiting
to break.

14

Llorona,
Llorar

The mountains are weeping
In rivers

The river cries to the lady
The stars cry light to the ground.
This is how it’s always been
the eyes of the dead now closed
in the statues of Colón. I cannot hate you;
to hate you is to loathe myself.
Greasy Chorizo, anchovies
a brace of ice-cold beer.

Red blouse on the body
a red blouse.
Storks’ nests in Avila trees
angels’ loft, twigs,
winged grace,
The fleshing words warm
on the sticks of being.
17

I started smoking
you started
bleeding       We both
let death into loneliness
I wish you would write

18

Max’s Solitary Conjugal Trees are here
Burled wood rolling into bubbles of dreams.
That sun fills
The outside of a hat
The unstated preamble to park bench politics
  mumble of refrigerators
  mistaken for silence

It is this
Segovia
that brings me to hear
the space between trees
The Arabs are gone
buildings lament
  in mosaic tattoo
I expect flesh to float
into words,
press against this, comfort this,
laugh at this,
put that of the trees into
ah or oh or no
Not that, but here

Exact change floats in parenthesis
of daily rate. This is
more than that.
These sounds
   Totem salad of sighs
   Shouting give, forgive
and I am sorry.
That sun
fills stone staircases
rock turrets
the voice of prophetic virgins
the bronze balls of oversized horses

Granite walls
machine drills
clanging hammers
vibrating concrete of man-sweat
the black tap of heeled shoes
a yellow sundress.
Red nipples of bathers
transfixed tongues
of flowers,
this dawn,
    a beggar’s hand.
That sun negates the underground
Where Metro man mumbles
A prayer, a crucifix
The breathy vowel
lazy lid eye lisp

Here I walk out, unsure if I am walking out,
If I am walking.
If my face
is the pock
marked cheek that no one will look upon.

Salida,
and I go
not being
seen by
the child, her ice-cream, a small black dog,
the women with pointed shoes and
asymmetrical skirts,
The here that I am no longer
Sit with Goya, deaf and alone
in the destruction of a country—
A dog's head adrift in sand.
I have eaten Costa Rica
Four fingers remain from a yellow hand
Behind two fat black figs, a sycamore
Leaf palmate and dusky.
Beyond this is a door
It is the door of Nieto
Come to accuse.
It is the door reflecting the window
Behind me that is Madrid.
One hundred and four and smoky.
Blossom ends advertise sweetness.
Las Meninas yellow, delightful and waiting.
That the same moon still rises
out of the broken Coliseum.

_Buona sera Romani._

That the Trevi fountain sings!

---

At the Borghese, Giovanni Bautista is the same
face that holds the severed Goliath.
Caravaggio’s prediction to fate
A spider’s stratagem.
The legs and wing remain
steadfast and strong without the head of war.

Dante,
I found your tomb in Ravenna,
Mosaics, marble and Roman urns,
Viruti et Honori above your head. I come to this,
to break bread with words--
always eating the dead.
“My Vocabulary did this to me” are the words that Jack Spicer purportedly said to Robin Blaser explaining why he was dying as a correlation to betraying his own rule of not looking back at his work before completion. Thematically, looking back is based on Orpheus looking back to Eurydice as they are exiting Hades. When he looks back he loses her forever. Looking back is a leitmotif for Spicer. The story can be found in: Orpheus in Vancouver or, The Radio That Told Me About the Death of Jack Spicer by Kreg Hasegawa.

**Billy The Kid**, by Jack Spicer was printed in limited edition by Enkido Surrogate Press, 1959.

...”We are born helpless”.... from The Weight of Glory, C.S. Lewis William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan 1949

“Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but not as good as looking” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Similar to Einstein’s “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” This usage also refers to “knowing” someone in the Biblical sense.


Euthabarb is the name of the barbiturate injected into animals for euthanasia.

“Writing The Bones” was published in the New Virginia Review, volume 11, 2001 under the title “Writing The Bones for Larry after Winter in North Carolina”. This poem borrows from “Caravaggio: Swirl and Vortex” and “Self Portrait with Radio” from The Widening Spell of the Leaves.

El Colón is Cristóbal Colón, the Spanish spelling of Christopher Columbus. Suckling Pig is the English translation for Cochinillo al Horno or roast suckling pig: 21 days of mother’s milk, then roasted. This dish was made most famous by El Mesón de Candido in Segovia.

Reinando Alfonso XII was King of Spain. He commissioned the monument to Colón in Madrid. Starbuck’s, U.S. coffee swilling magnate and reference to Melville’s Moby Dick.

El Enigma Sin Fin is a surrealist painting by Salvador Dali displayed at the Prado Musuem.
Pg. 24 The conference of Quantum Solids and Liquids was held in Trento, Summer 2004. El Gijón is one of the oldest restaurants in Madrid, and the place where I did a lot of writing.

Pg. 25 “Ell square pitkin,” from The Cantos of Ezra Pound and book XI of The Odyssey where Odysseus speaks to the dead and specifically the blind Tiresias of Thebes. Where Orpheus goes into the underworld to bring back the Eurydice, Odysseus goes to seek knowledge.

Pg. 26 Hermes Trismegistus- From Middle Ages, attributed with writing Hermetica, famous for philosophy, magic, and specifically alchemy. His dates are a mystery and made mythic. Tycho Brahe-1546-1601, Danish astronomer, fine-tuned the Copernicus model. Along with Kepler, he believed earth was center of the universe. Her purportedly lost part of nose in a duel and is said to have worn a golden nose replacement adhered with glue. My father had a dinner game where he gave clues to famous philosophers or scientists; these two were some of his favorites to retell.

Pg. 26 There is a cave at Granada where gypsies were hurled to their deaths. Llorona, The weeping woman, dashed her own children into a river and killed herself. At night she howls and cries for her children in hopes of snatching new ones. Like Medea, she contains pride, power, and suffering. She is universally feared and pitied in Hispanic culture. She remains a strong image from my childhood.

Pg. 29 Max Ernst painted Solitary Conjugal Trees about 1941 which is currently displayed at the Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid.

Pg. 33 Goya’s The dog on a Leash, was painted 3 years before his death in 1828. Displayed at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, is one of his “black paintings.” This section also refers to “The Dream of Reason,” a play by Buero Vallejo, which was first performed in Madrid.

Pg. 34 Las Meninas, by Diego Velasquez, was painted in 1656 and is currently displayed at Museo del Prado, also Las Meninas, the play by the same title by Buero Vallejo, was based on the painting and Velasquez’s life.

Pg. 36 Caravaggio painted John the Baptist and David or David with the Head of Goliath, about 1610, which is on display at the Borghese in Italy. He used the same model for David as is used in Juan Bautista or John the Baptist. Also, “Caravaggio: Swirl and Vortex,” by Larry Levis is an ekphrasis poem that asserts that the face of Goliath is Caravaggio’s prediction of his own death. See: The Widening Spell of the Leaves University of Pittsburg Press.

Pg. 37 The statue with legs and wing is a statue standing across from Roman Forum. Ravenna, Italy is the resting place of Dante and my final destination before returning home, summer, 2004.
VITA

Jesse Loren was born in Glendale, California, currently resides near the Bay area with her three children and teaches literature and journalism at Vanden High School. She is a guest columnist for The Winters Express. While attending college, Jesse worked as a Veterinary Technician, a bookseller, a research assistant, a performance artist, and co-president of U.C. Irvine’s Cooperative Organic Gardens. She has also worked as a California Poets in The Schools teacher and guest poet for CSU Long Beach Young Writers’ Program. She earned her B.A. from the University of California at Irvine, her teaching credential from Chapman University and has attended Warren Wilson College in North Carolina and California State University of Sacramento before completing her M.F.A. from the University of New Orleans. Her poetry can be found in Faultline Magazine, The New Virginia Review, and Ellipsis.