

Summer 2017

# Otherwise Sinking

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OTHERWISE SINKING

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

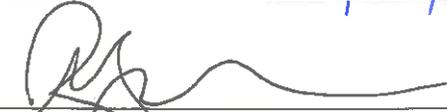
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

By  
Lena Ziegler

August 2017

OTHERWISE SINKING

Date Recommended 6/27/2017

  
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Date

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In the horrendous process of writing and rewriting the work that appears in this collection, encouragement came from a slew of individuals I wish to thank.

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“Fritze’s Department Store Window” has been published in *Harpoon Review*

“Pink Newspapers” has been published in the *Lavender Bluegrass Anthology*

“Tanked” has been published in *Red Earth Review*

“The Truth About Tattoos” has been published in *Miracle Monocle*

In this collection I am asking questions just to answer them and reject my answers over and over again. I am seeking shelter and forgiveness. I am seeking to understand this existence. I am shedding skin and rejecting marriage. I am writing to fall in love with something. I am writing to never fall in love again. I am otherwise sinking.

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OTHERWISE SINKING:

Lena Ziegler

August 2017

131 pages

Directed by: Rebecca Brown, Dale Rigby, and David Bell

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This is a book-length work of prose including fiction, creative non-fiction, with small amounts of prose poetry all focusing on the exploration of female sexuality, gender roles, relationships among men and women, and mothers and daughters. The aim of the individual pieces in this collection is to enter the cultural conversation of these issues by presenting a hybrid of genres that beg for an understanding of truth vs. fiction, and the fine line between those things when dealing with matters of the body and mind.

[ACADEMIC/CONTEXT]

## Sprouting from Unspoken

You might say I sexualized my entire  
existence.

—Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Chronology  
of Water*

These are conventions of self-presentation. Creation for the sake of sex – sex for the sake of creation. To unwrap body or mind, bask in nakedness (some version of our human self), repackage and call that self free, claim bravery in the name of expression (?) or human connection (?) commit acts of intimacy with a hunger.

There is truth in the lies and the longing.

### **The Author**

There is a woman, twenty-eight and aging, sitting, typing, pretending she's writing (what is it to be writing aside from fingers tapping letters and words forming?). Ben Marcus claims writing stems from, “a hunger for something unknown, the belief that the world and its doings have yet to be fully explored” (48). This woman knows nothing (each year she knows less). Her writing is becoming something (that explores).

The woman prefers “author” as a verb to author as the title all writers wish to acquire. To author a text is to birth a living, bleeding thing from the depth of the brain. A

pulsing organ of tissue art threaded from mind to page. The woman aspires to create more than to become Creator.

Lidia Yuknavitch wrote, “Some books take your breath away. Is it the books, or the writers?” (122). This woman isn’t sure of the difference, but the work in her collection is an illustration of her human/writer self in language.

### **The (Back)Story**

A year ago I regarded myself as never being the kind of writer to use my personal life to fuel my fiction. It seemed to me that so long as I wasn’t writing directly about life events, I was retaining some sort of writerly credibility – an imagination strong enough to conjure compelling stories without resorting to my limited life experience.

But a year ago I was a different writer.

Flannery O’Connor once wrote, “I’m always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and very shocking to the system (78).” I wouldn’t say I wrote to escape, but I certainly didn’t recognize my writing as an avenue for exploring my own existence. I craved the ability to write stories about experiences that were not mine – blackness, queerness, mental illness – etc. Then a professor said something I’ll never forget about a story I had written in which a mentally unstable woman had sex with a stranger in the back of a Walmart, cheating on her doting husband. He said, “it’d be a much more interesting story if she weren’t mentally ill, don’t you think?” These were not his exact words of course, but what I realized from this exchange was that by writing about this woman in this way, I had focused my exploration

of sexuality, promiscuity, adultery, and self-hatred on a character unlike myself, when really that character's emotional truth was closer to mine than almost anything I'd written.

Critics Wimsatt & Beardsley write "there is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies...there is a difference between internal and external evidence for the meaning" (1381). But the inner turmoil of the human mind is a place worth visiting, whether indirectly (through fiction) or directly (through context). This collection stems from the exploration of my inner turmoil in understanding my place in the world as a woman, a daughter, a (someday) mother, a partner, and a person whose identity seeks context outside of gender.

### **The Consent & Control**

Do we need permission to tell our own stories – to use the same words other people might? To craft our humanity into recognizable shapes, slap on a label (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or something else) and call ourselves writers?

I release this question into the ether and wait for the answer to echo back. In the meantime, let me question why I feel the need to ask in the first place.

This collection reeks of my exploration of consent and control. In the essay "My Barbies Fucked Like Animals," I directly reference rape. At the time I wrote this, I felt like the single paragraph I devoted to the event was more than enough. What more was there to say but that it happened in the first place? But when I began to examine my work as I formed this collection, I realized how many places consent and control show up in my writing. In "When the Sun is High and the Snow Half-Melted" a mother sleeps with a

man to provide for her daughter in the barren wasteland of snow and no opportunity. In “The Truth About Tattoos” and “Apostrophe S” I write about myself at times succeeding and at other times failing to take ownership of my own body. In the hybrid piece, “Twenty-Eight,” the narrative follows a woman severely damaged by a loss of control of her sexuality and emotional wellbeing in an attempt at human connection. These pieces follow my evolution not only as a writer as I’ve developed my ability to explore these issues, but also as a woman who has no power to stop.

### **The Conversation**

“Sexuality is an entire continent.” – Lidia Yuknavitch (165).

Recently, five twenty-something friends wine-drunk on summer watched six episodes of *Sex and the City* and listened to four thirty-something characters talk about blowjobs with female authority.

“I hate everything about this scene,” one friend said.

“No women feel this way!” another agreed.

Conversation ensued. How often have cultural representations of relationships and sexuality aligned with anyone’s actual experience of those things? As an American woman I am aware of the ways in which female sexuality is regarded with such secrecy and shame within our culture. But I couldn’t help but wonder, why must this result in women constantly feeling misrepresented in depictions of their own sexuality?

This collection, and my writing as a whole, is my attempt to enter the conversation. For years I have written about sexuality, mostly because it interested me, and mostly in ways that didn’t represent my experience in the world. As a young writer I relied on humor and shock over authenticity. But when I read Lydia Yuknavitch, Cheryl

Strayed, Lauren Slater and Maggie Nelson I finally saw representations of female sexuality that pulsed, unbridled and unapologetic.

My first serious attempt to write about sexuality on my own terms exists in the essay “My Barbies Fucked Like Animals” – a nod to my younger, sexually curious and undereducated self, navigating sexuality through playtime with friends, unsatisfying experiences, and eventually a rape. I continued with stories like “Stages” which follows a woman in five short scenes engaging in emotionally harmful sexual behavior with no understanding of how to stop it. The hybrid work “Twenty-Eight” contains short essays exploring the connection between sex and emotional intimacy, prose poetry detailing recovery from attempted and failed connections, fictionalized accounts of real people I have sought romance with, and personal ads crafted from actual Craigslist postings I have published in moments of desperation.

Of course, my work is not entirely about sex. “Our bodies, the flesh metaphor for all human experience,” (Yuknavitch 185) contain more than one way to explore this existence.

### **The Design**

There are stories we tell and retell to ourselves, moments we live, and relive, that cycle through our minds, forever wheel-bound. You can say we exist in the purgatory of our life experience, inescapable but for the reliability of linear logic.

In attempt to understand this existence I rely on the notion that this universe has some order that can provide explanation and comfort for the events that shape my life. But as Lydia Yuknavitch writes, “Events don’t have cause and effect relationships the way you wish they did. It’s all a series of fragments and repetitions and pattern

formations. Language and water have this in common (32).”

In his book *Narrative Design*, Madison Smart Bell shows the contrast between linear and modular storytelling. He states: “The [linear] writer thinks of the overall movement of the principal narrative vector from its start to its finish” (312). The modular writer, he suggests, operates differently. “This breed of artist is not so much a sculptor as a mosaicist assembling fragments to form what can be understood at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image. In narrative art, this mosaic method is the basis for modular design” (312).

When writing a story, linear design is comfortable, familiar. It mirrors the way we want to think about our lives and the progression of time always moving forward. But modular design doesn’t believe in destiny. There is no guarantee of what exactly causes something else, or how exactly one event relates to another. As Flannery O’Connor wrote, “There may never be anything new to say, but there is always a new way to say it” (76). Linear and modular design are two ways to live a life and two ways to tell a story.

This collection illustrates my attempt to experiment with design. Although seven of the thirteen pieces utilize elements of modular design, the opening story “MASH” relies entirely on the readers’ willingness to not only abandon any hope for the comforts of linear storytelling, but to take editorial control over the way in which the story is told. Written in the form of a “choose your own adventure,” “MASH” is a piece formed from eighteen paragraphs meant to be read in a variety of sequences (with the potential to construct over fifteen different versions of the same story). This story asks: how much control do we have over our stories once they are in the hands of someone else? This

story answers: It doesn't matter.

### **The Effort**

I am not comfortable calling my work experimental. I have dabbled in the multiverse and reincarnation. I have made the effort to create (something).

### **The Female (Young and Gendered)**

Is there anything more dangerous than a young female who doesn't need to be told by anyone else what it is she wants?

### **The Hunger**

“You are born with a hole in you, genetic or otherwise, and so you seize at this, you seize at that, your mouth so hungry you'll take your own tongue if you have to” (Slater 157).

The mind can be a respite from other unsafe places. But who are we when left alone with the swirl of our own cloudy desires? I'm more interested in the internal destruction of a person sprouting from unspoken want than almost anything else.

### **The Hybrid**

“Just because something has the feel of truth doesn't mean it fits the facts. Sometimes, I don't even know why the facts should matter” (Slater 145).

I am a fiction writer, yet the most influential writers I have encountered in these last two years are memoirists. In my explorations of language, and writing about sexuality, gender, and self, I have discovered Lidia Yuknavitch's voice as an unwavering authority in writing work that risks self-exposure for the sake of artistic truth. Her work

made it possible for me to dive into the gritty, seedy spaces in my brain, and return with a smile.

In her memoir, *Lying*, Lauren Slater pushes every conceivable boundary of genre convention, writing a book that relies almost entirely on the importance of “emotional truth” outweighing “factual truth.” Her work begs the questions: can writing be called “memoir” if the events within it are made up? If so, can a story be called fiction if it is based entirely on an emotional truth?

At its best, fiction should be as raw and challenging as nonfiction, but I’m not sure it ever has been for me. In her book *The Chronology of Water* Yuknavitch writes, “The things that happen to us are true. The stories we tell about it are writing,” (197). Does this complicate genre fluidity?

With honest reflection I can say I’m not sure there is such a thing as a true work of fiction. In versions of my life I *am* a seventy-two-year-old woman who loves charcoal drawings, an eight-year-old girl in love with a horse, a forty-two-year-old man managing a grocery store, a twenty-something student navigating love, a reincarnated man living as a fish. The emotional truths littered through their crafted lives are rooted in my being. In some sense, isn’t all work hybrid?

Still, without the context of “emotional truth” versus “factual truth” there is only one piece in this collection that is truly hybrid. “Twenty-Eight” grew from a four-page experimentation of language into a thirty-ish-page collection of essays and fictionalized memories that define my experience as a woman of twenty-eight. This piece marries nonfiction and fiction with a smattering of prose poetry. It is riddled with truth. So what exactly is it? Aside from the simple answer (hybrid) or the simpler simple answer

(writing), I have learned to call it something else. *Honest*. And that is more shocking, dangerous, and important than anything else.

### **The Language**

“One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly” (Nelson 8).

I am an advocate for words, bloodied and raw. In time I have developed a lexicon that proves this devotion to brutality in language. From writing poetry my work became increasingly visceral. For awhile this led to overwriting and cluttered sentences, heavy with mixed-metaphor and hyperbolic melodrama. Transferred to fiction, my prose has developed in lyricism but with greater attention to word choice, and more careful construction of sentences.

I am learning to refine, swallow and internalize, rely on less. I want to leave ears buzzing.

### **The Marriage**

It is widely believed that 50% of marriages end in divorce.

53% percent of my stories include a marriage.

42% percent of them end in divorce.

100% hundred percent of them are broken.

One of them is mine. The rest are someone else's.

### **The Maternity**

“They were the saddest girls I have ever met because every one of them had it in her to lose a shot at a self and become her mother” (Yuknavitch 77).

I write birth stories (a mother's hunger spawns existence).

I know a woman who craves a daughter so she can see herself as a child (a child is a careful, pretty thing).

But a daughter as mother is an ugly sight to see.

Let us revisit the notion that hunger spawns existence.

A daughter serves her mother ringlets of second chances, giggles of compliance.

There is trouble with mothers and daughters (not mine and not yours, no of course not).

To author a text is to birth a living, bleeding thing.

### **The Verdict**

I've written about mothers and daughters. I've crumbled in defeat of marriage. I squelch sexuality. I blow it open like shrapnel. I live within the ache of human hunger. I lust for language like a lover. I am the female (young and gendered). I'm entering the conversation, consenting to lose control of where its going.

At our most human we are animal – sloppy wet, dripping from the tongue thrust of touch, of our words spoken or swallowed, our language crippled or bolstered. At our most animal we reinvent ourselves as human –searching for meaning in this living we are doing.

These are stories for our humanimal selves.

# otherwise sinking

lena ziegler

## MASH

Start on paragraph 2 OR paragraph 3

1. When you were eleven years old you made a promise to yourself that you would never have sex with anyone you weren't in love with. While some girls made promises they ultimately would not keep to their fathers that they would not have sex until they were married, and other girls made promises to each other that they would only have sex for popularity, or certain kinds of jewelry, you told yourself this, and at the time, you truly believed it: you would only have sex when you were in love.

Skip to paragraph 6 OR paragraph 16

2. There is a boy in your fiction class who makes you want to claw your way into his body and build a nest behind his belly button, where you can nestle and look out at the world through the fleshy hole in his center. You know there is nothing special about this boy except that A. he is a boy, and B. he is tall and thin and beautifully buoyant in an otherwise sinking solar system of your brain's constant

misfiring and misunderstanding and misreading of signals from other boys who never regard you as much more than an evening plan, easily cancellable if a better option comes along, which it almost always does.

Skip to paragraph 4 OR paragraph 17

3. When it comes to dressing yourself, your heart is less and less in it each day. While some mornings you wake, self-assured in your smile, tossing on a blouse or flouncy dress, grabbing your keys and rushing out to greet the world in your full, attention-grabbing glory, on others you can barely crawl out of bed, and once you do, you lose too many minutes staring at your reflection, running your tongue across the moss of your teeth, and hoping that one day a flower might spring from the dark, wet, hole of your mouth so when you smile, something beautiful emerges.

Skip to paragraph 6 OR paragraph 7

4. So when a boy (not the boy from your fiction class, but the boy from your geology lecture who always wears a baseball hat) tells you not to look so sad after he fucks you while still wearing a baseball hat, you remember that at one point in your life, you would have never described sex as fucking, and would never be content with feeling nothing afterward, and would have insisted he took off the goddamn baseball hat before penetrating your insides. But instead of saying any

of this you shrug and say you aren't sad, just hungry, to which he responds "ohhhhhhhhh," because if there is anything you know about boys, it is that nothing makes them sad, but almost everything makes them hungry, and they are never ashamed to admit it. He asks if you want to go to the cafeteria with him.

Continue to paragraph 5 OR skip to paragraph 7.

5. In the cafeteria you stand in front of the salad bar and calculate the calorie content of each variation of salad you could possibly construct. This takes some time, but is easier than admitting to the boy that you aren't actually hungry, and even if you were, you would sooner dismember your own body than eat in front of someone who had seen you naked and might tell other people about it. The boy is at the soda fountain filling each of his three plastic cups with a different drink, none of which are diet. You remember that when he was on top of you, you slipped your hand underneath his shirt and felt stubble on his stomach and chest where he had shaved, somewhat recently, but not recently enough to have been for you.

Skip to paragraph 11 OR paragraph 12

6. But you know instinctively there is no better cure to the pinprick of loneliness than to empty someone else inside of yourself and hope that you don't drown.

Start Over

7. As a rule, you decline any invitation from a boy that involves eating, and since boys are always hungry, this means you decline most invitations from boys altogether. You stick to evening plans, post dinner-time, in your own apartment where you can control the lighting. Before any boy arrives, you move from seat to seat around your living room, checking your face in the compact mirror you carry, gauging which one has the best lighting that will cast only flattering shadows across your face, or illuminate the brightness of the doe eyes you will continuously make throughout the evening as you work to master the dream girl part of the manic pixie equation.

Skip to paragraph 9 OR paragraph 12

8. You spend too much time thinking about the boy from your fiction class. Sometimes when you are in bed at night, you shut your eyes and picture his fingers, tightened around his pen doodling in the margins of his notebook pictures of tiny square houses, with front doors and chimneys, and always a three-legged dog standing outside next to an apple tree. You wonder if this was a house he grew up in, if that was his pet dog and if so, what was its name. You wonder if he even realizes he does this, if he even notices you noticing him do it. You wonder if anyone has ever watched you as you doodle shapes of fruit: bananas, grapes, pineapples. You wonder if people shut their eyes at night, wondering about you, if you are really that obsessed with food, or just don't have enough artistic ability to

draw something else like a house or a three-legged dog. You fall asleep wondering, wondering, wondering.

Skip to paragraph 13 OR paragraph 18

9. You decide it doesn't matter if the boy from geology class comes inside of you without a condom. Maybe you will get pregnant and grow something like love inside of yourself, birth it and force it to depend on you to stay alive. You will name it something gender neutral like Alex or Jaime. You will teach it to whistle, to finger paint, to check under the couch cushions for spare change before asking you for money. You will tell it that its impolite to wear a baseball hat during sex, but forget to wear a condom. You will make sure it knows where the clitoris is.

Continue to paragraph 10 OR skip to paragraph 11

10. Maybe you won't ever get pregnant. Maybe you will let all the boys you ever invite over to your apartment in the evening, post-dinner time, come inside of you and nothing will ever happen. Maybe your insides are a barren wasteland, filled only with plutonium and uranium, so every time a boy squirts himself into you he will bond to the metals inside and hold onto them so tightly that he will radioactively decay, fry your bone marrow, and slowly poison you to death. Maybe no matter how hard you try, nothing will ever grow inside of you.

Skip to paragraph 14 OR paragraph 18

11. In another life you could marry the boy from your fiction class, live on the coast in a shack with real shutters that smack against the wooden siding when the wind blows hard. You find this dream romantic, but deep down worry that if it ever came true you might resent him for being so attainable, and also for not fixing the shutters.

Return to paragraph 3 OR skip to paragraph 15

12. You think about how you feel about the boy from your fiction class, how your skin reacts to the sight of him – your pores opening and closing like fish gills, breathing in his soap smell and gentleness – and you remember that every boy you touch has their own version of this – the great, wonderful, unattainable girl, maybe from their geometry class, or bio lab – and whenever you settle for them, they are settling for you, and your bodies stacked are just bones settling, sinking into the grave of each others’ flesh, worn out, and half-shaved in the hope that someone else’s hands would be touching it instead.

Return to paragraph 1 OR skip to paragraph 17

13. For no reason at all you find yourself wondering about April Kaminski from third grade, who stole your troll ring and your Lip Smackers, and was always skinny, and won the geography bee because she could locate Montana on the map (you pointed to Wisconsin instead). You can’t find her on social media, so you decide

she is either dead or worse. You check the obituaries, from the last ten years, from the town you lived in when you were in third grade, and you find her name in the list of surviving grandchildren of a woman who died a year earlier from lung cancer. You reread the obituary several times, getting stuck each time on the words “survived by.”

Return to paragraph 9 OR skip to paragraph 16

14. Before you had ever kissed a boy, you practiced on the back of your hand. You stared sweetly at your knuckles, and flirted your way through small talk before pressing your lips against your own skin, feeling the warmth of your mouth radiate into it, just moist enough to leave an impression. You parted your lips like you saw people do in movies when they kissed, opening them slightly, then closing them once again, each time a little wetter than before. When you finally stopped and pulled your hand away from your lips, a kiss print remained on your skin, growing cold as the air dried it. You marveled at how quickly heat could drain into icy nothingness.

Return to paragraph 1 OR paragraph 8

15. When you were fourteen you thought you were in love. You let that boy with the reddish hair and glasses drip sweat onto your forehead as he told you how nice of a girl you were. You were disappointed when it didn't hurt. You had been told for years it would hurt. He seemed disappointed too. He kept asking you questions

like: *should I slow down? Is that too much? Does it hurt too bad? Do you think you'll bleed?* And you kept saying things like: *no, not really*. So finally he asked: *are you a virgin?* And suddenly you said: *it does hurt a little*.

Return to paragraph 4 OR paragraph 5

16. We are all just clawing to outlive each other.

Start Over

17. The next time the boy from geology class comes over you forget to check the lighting in your compact mirror and just open the door when he knocks on it. He's wearing a different baseball hat. You want to ask him what his favorite movie is, if he has ever baked anything completely from scratch, if he's more afraid of dying or growing old, if the best version of himself exists somewhere with someone else, if he ever sees himself floating above it all looking down on the human body that belongs to him and wanting to laugh. But instead you ask him inside and almost immediately he takes off his shoes.

Return to paragraph 8 OR 10

18. For fiction class, you work hard to write something that feels like truth, but will also impress the boy, you are now quite sure you will never know beyond his drawings of a tiny house, and three-legged dog, and apple tree. You end up with a

story about a woman who grows old in her family's mansion, never taking a lover, and eventually choking to death on a banana. You hope your class will enjoy the phallic irony as much as you do. You hope the boy will decide to notice you.

Start Over

## Fritze's Department Store Window

At 72 years old, Fran Applegate was certain that the greatest achievement of her life could be found in the number of people who said she resembled the mannequin in Fritze's Department Store window. Slender and tall (too tall for most men or race horses to handle) with rigid bone structure and shallow set eyes that fell just above the gaze of anyone staring, Fran felt it her obligation as the living breathing counterpart to this plastic, manufactured marvel to pass by the window each morning as she walked her St. Bernard, Harry, who to this day was the only male who could appreciate her height. She also enjoyed the charcoal drawings displayed in the gallery across from Fritze's Department Store.

At 62 years old, Fran Applegate was certain that the greatest achievement of her life was closing her gift shop (formerly her mother's, formerly her mother's mother's), across the street from Fritze's Department Store. Forty years wrapping and bubble wrapping, fighting candle headaches and the transition from American to Chinese merchandise, making small talk with critical women, and decisions for pitiful men, she was spent. With no daughter, or daughter-in-law to continue the tradition, Fran would close her doors electively before lack of business or franchise competitors would leave her no choice. She'd also take her first art class. Charcoal. Something she would never

sell in a gift shop.

At 52 years old, Fran Applegate was certain that the greatest achievement of her life was mourning the loss of her husband Anthony for exactly nine days. She never intended to mourn in the first place, but his sudden death four years earlier ignited pain and anger that he was gone and that her marriage had not instead ended by her choice, or disappearance, or suicide note. She felt this rage, burning in every thank you card she wrote to the few family members and coworkers who attended the funeral but had never been there in life to support or care for her. She felt this way for exactly nine days, until she woke on the tenth and forgot to be angry, and wondered why she had ever been angry at all.

At 42 years old, Fran Shetland was certain that the greatest achievement of her life would be leaving Anthony Shetland. Nine years of marriage, four miscarriages, and two mistresses defined a decade now lost on one mistake. In her mind, she devised dramatic exits from her married life involving European lovers (male and female) or the sudden opportunity to teach water color classes to retirees in Florida, an opportunity she would never refuse in a place Anthony would never go. In her new life she wouldn't be overweight, or "too tall to kiss," or stuck in a marriage, or staying late after work to keep inventory at her gift shop across the street from Fritze's Department Store.

At 32 years old, Fran Applegate was certain that the greatest achievement of her life would be marrying Anthony Shetland, a UPS delivery driver she had met on a chance encounter when they both arrived late to sign up for the same shuttle tour through the Grand Canyon. Recently divorced, the father of twin daughters Abigail and Persephone, Anthony courted with flowers, and wooed with promises of a better life that would allow

Fran to quit her job at her mother's gift shop across the street from Fritze's Department Store, focus on her photography, and start a new life with Anthony and the do-over children he would have with her.

At 22 years old, Fran Applegate was certain that the greatest achievement of her life would one day be found on the second floor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where her idea for a series on birthing animals would soon be displayed to the awe of art students and dismay of her parents who were never prone to accepting happy endings from Disney movies, massage parlors, or their children (a joke they often conceded but never appreciated).

At 12 years old, Fran Applegate was certain that the greatest achievement of her life would be when she one day resembled the mannequin in Fritze's Department Store window.

## My Barbies Fucked Like Animals

I learned about sex when my best friend Rhiannon placed my sister's Jordan Knight doll on top of my Hollywood Barbie and told me that's what they were doing.

"They're having sex," she said, an old expert of erotica.

"What does that mean?" I asked, prophetic of the lifetime I'd spend asking that very question.

"He lies on top of her, then they fall asleep," she replied. *Obviously.*

"Does he *have* to be on top?" I asked. She thought about this.

"No. They can be on their sides too."

\*

My Barbies fucked like animals. Not just the New Kids on the Block dolls, which were the early 90s upgrade to Ken, but everyone else too. Stuffed animals. Ninja turtle action figures. *Each other.* It was all normal to me. Because if sex was only lying on top, or lying next to another body, then why did it matter who you did it with? From what I could tell, it didn't.

Sex served no purpose in the storylines of the contrived little lives I created. It was just something they did because they could. Because I felt like making them do it. I

was a pre-school porn director who could throw away plot and authentic human behavior in favor of plastic bodies rubbing against each other for a good five minutes before collapsing.

\*

During middle school I was still playing with Barbies and still making them fuck. I switched schools a few times, but when I finally arrived at Rice Elementary in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and met Dayna, a tall, blond and radiant 11-year-old who was also a new student, I had found my partner in smut.

Dayna played with Barbies too, only she had easily twice as many as I had, with different hair colors, skin colors, and even some with soft flexible stomachs (still lean of course, but much more lifelike). She even had some real Ken dolls, mixed in with the N'Sync and Backstreet Boys editions. Whereas I grew up with just two boys to rotate between all the girls, Dayna grew up with enough boys that every girl had one all to herself, and could even choose the one she liked the most. This did not feel reflective of middle school.

We picked Barbies to play ourselves – the thinnest, most beautiful ones, with long shiny hair and hooker makeup. This is who we *really* were. We dressed them in bikini tops and booty shorts and made them give lap dances to the Ken dolls while playing Ludacris's "Area Codes." We'd grind their bodies together, as if to start a fire.

\*

In 8th grade Dayna and I started to grow apart. We had stopped playing with Barbies when sex became a topic we preferred to discuss rather than act out with dolls. I

became friends with Stephanie, another new student who looked more like me – chubby, pimply, with glasses and uncertainty. Dayna became a cheerleader.

Stephanie was Southern, sweet and shy, and didn't know the first thing about sex or blow jobs, of which Mattel had made me an expert. I schooled her in all things.

“You just put the guy's penis in your mouth,” I said, oral sex aficionado.

“Why?” She asked, blushing.

“Because they like it,” I replied. *Obviously*.

“What do girls like?” She asked. I thought about this.

“I have no idea.”

\*

I first had sex with Chuck, who immediately after taking my virginity asked if I had ever tried Pro-activ. We were married and divorced four years later.

Then I had sex with bodies. Multiple, faceless bodies, not attached to names. Even though I knew what girls liked and what I liked by that point, it didn't appear anyone else did. I realized Rhiannon was right. Sex sometimes is a man lying on top of you until you both fall asleep.

I was 22. He had me on my stomach and I couldn't move. It was combat. He had a warhead missile. I had words he said he couldn't hear for the sound of himself exploding. I wet my pillow with streaks of mascara. He said I made him feel bad. I said I was sorry. The battle continued. He fell asleep beside me. I couldn't sleep at all.

A body lying on top of you so you can't move isn't sex, it's something else. But no one ever told me that. And that's something no one likes to talk about.

## When the Sun is High and the Snow Half-Melted

From the time she was a little girl, Ruthie knew she was different. For one, she had hair like liquid smoke, the color of a shadow. For another, she had a Cyclops eye. Not the medical term of course, but the term nonetheless to describe a person, a child, who only cried from one eye, and in Ruthie's case her left. Of course in television and movies one-eyed tears are a sign of intensity. But Ruthie's tears were not stoic. They were not proud. Her tears came like any other young girl's, in floods of rain and salt, dispensing from her eye, violently, swelling her lid, coloring her cornea with scribbles of red and blood. Her nose only ran from one side too. Long strings of mucus from the left nostril so during sad stories and poems and when her pet squirrel died, Ruthie's round face grew rosy pink as one side distorted into grief and the other stayed as calm and pretty as anything you've ever seen.

Mother never told Ruthie that this wasn't normal and since Mother never cried, Ruthie had no reason not to believe her. Ruthie had only ever known Mother and Fred/Stephen, the man with the horses, and from what she could tell he never had any reason to cry (he had horses, after all). On Sundays if the sun was high and the snow half-melted, Mother would take Ruthie's hand and walk with her through puddled and

muddied road to the ranch belonging to the man with the horses. She heard her mother call him *Fred*, despite shouting another name, *Stephen*, from behind his cabin door in what sounded like a kind of sweet pain Ruthie couldn't understand while Ruthie fed the horses old carrots and apples. She didn't know what to call him, so she called him Fred/Stephen.

\*

Mother said over 400,000 people live this way, in the ice and the cold under the perpetual weight of snow. But Ruthie had a hard time believing it. From what she could tell it was only herself, Mother, and Fred/Stephen. From what she could tell, she never had a father. The old work boots in the back of mother's closet, two times too large for her to wear herself, seemed to have grown from the floor boards.

"I don't know why you have such a fascination with those old boots," Mother would say, when Ruthie would slip them on her feet, wiggling her toes in the empty space a man's foot would fill. "They are dirty, grimy old things."

Ruthie didn't care. She had read in a book once that shoes like this were made from cow and moose. She didn't understand how hair and skin could be removed from an animal, stretched and pressed and stitched into shape, form fitting to a foot it had never met before.

\*

"You know, starvation is rarely a cause of death," Fred/Stephen, the man with the horses, said to Ruthie on Sunday morning, patting the back of the brown and white speckled mare Ruthie named Mermaid.

"Is she going to die?" Ruthie asked.

“Hard to say,” Fred/Stephen replied. He removed his hat, spit in it, then placed it back on his head. Ruthie had seen him do this many times, but never thought to ask why. “She’s a tough one. Got her ‘bout fifteen years back. Should get a few more years out of her. Hard to say.”

Ruthie looked at Mother. Mother was standing with her back to the fence, staring at the door on Fred/Stephen’s cabin. Four months a year, the wheat fields grew, stretching, sprouting like golden earth fur, filling the mile of empty land between their cabin and Fred/Stephen’s. Mother’s hair was like a wheat field. Shimmering, sunlit and glowing around her chin and cheeks in the summer, feathering across her face in the warm air, sometimes caught between her lips as she smiled. But for the rest of the year her hair grew dark, although not as dark as Ruthie’s. Dark and unmoving, like the wind died right along with everything else.

“What do you think, Mother?” Ruthie asked, tugging mother’s coat.

“About what, Ruthie?” Mother looked at the ground. She kicked a large piece of gravel in the cabin’s direction.

“About Mermaid. Do you think she’ll be ok?”

Mother didn’t look at Ruthie and she didn’t look at Mermaid, either. Instead she straightened up and looked at Fred/Stephen.

“I don’t have much time today. Can we get going?” she said. He nodded, patted Mermaid one last time.

“Now Ruthie,” he said. “I don’t want you worrying about this old girl. Mermaid comes from a tough breed. My family has been raising horses for as many years back as there are strands of hair on your head. We raise good, strong animals.”

“I know,” Ruthie said.

“Now, I don’t know why she stopped eating. But like I say, hunger doesn’t kill like you might think it does. My ancestors came from Russia. In the old days they worked their hands to the bone on empty stomachs and still managed to raise up hearty kids and live long.”

“Why are you telling her this?” Mother interrupted.

“Why shouldn’t I tell her this?”

“It’s upsetting.”

“It’s life, darlin,” Fred/Stephen said, patting Mother’s head as if she were Mermaid. Mother pulled away and walked toward the cabin.

“You coming?” she called back. Ruthie watched Fred/Stephen scratch his head beneath his hat. His eyes were dark like the underside of a mushroom. His faced reminded Ruthie of the old work boots in mother’s closet.

“Tell you what, Ruthie,” Fred/Stephen said. “I promise Mermaid to you when she’s all better. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“I think so,” Ruthie said. Mother shook her in front of the cabin door.

“It means you have my word that I will give you Mermaid for you to keep when she is all better.”

“You mean it?” Ruthie asked.

“You bet, girlie.”

Ruthie looked at Mermaid, her long mane hanging straight and unmoving against her back, like Mother’s.

\*

Although Ruthie had never seen the Arctic Ocean she knew that was where the wind came from like shrapnel cutting through her and everything else. Though the sun was high and the snow half-melted, the wind sustained, so as Mother and Fred/Stephen went together behind the cabin door, Ruthie stayed outside with Mermaid, trying to feed her carrots and apples with fingers just beginning to numb.

“Mermaid, why won’t you eat?” Ruthie frowned, dropping her hand to her side. Mermaid exhaled a white cloud of hot breath into Ruthie’s face.

Of all the horses Fred/Stephen owned, Mermaid was the only one who ever let Ruthie ride or feed or brush her. Mermaid was the only one that ever seemed to like Ruthie and now even she wouldn’t take a bite of apple from Ruthie’s hand.

Ruthie rubbed Mermaid’s nose. She couldn’t understand why Mermaid wasn’t eating, why she was turning into nothing but skin and bone. She imagined if Mermaid didn’t start eating, didn’t get better, that Fred/Stephen might shoot her, skin her, and turn her hide into work boots. She couldn’t stand the thought.

“Mermaid, you have junk in your teeth!” Ruthie said, noticing a clump of dirt in Mermaid’s smile, for the first time. “Why are you eating dirt?”

She found Mermaid’s water pail halfway under the fence with an inch of ice covering it, hay frozen in the surface, sticking up like legs. She clutched a rock and smashed the ice unearthing the clean water beneath it. Mermaid plunged her nose and lips into the pail, chunks of ice spilling out from the lashing of her tongue as she drank.

Ruthie gazed toward the cabin. For as long as she could remember, Mother had taken her to visit the horses every Sunday when the sun was high and the snow half melted. For as long as she could remember she stayed outside on her own with the fields

and mountains surrounding her with blue, white, and green, the morning haze of sun-heat radiating from the snow descending upon the silence of the ranch like a kind of tangible heaven. These days were the best days Ruthie could remember. The days when she could leave the cabin, hold hands with Mother, and walk the long stretch of world between her and the horses and lose herself for what felt like hours in the warmth of Mermaid's breath on her fingertips, the light spray of apple as it crunched between her teeth, the gratitude in her eyes as she stared at Ruthie, smiling just for her.

Mermaid's left eye was filled with yellow and green goop, leaking like Ruthie's when she cried her Cyclops tears. Her hair was hanging, dark and unmoving like Mother's when the summer was gone and the wheat fields were plowed and sold away for meat and oil.

Some nights Fred/Stephen visited their cabin and Ruthie would listen as he and Mother talked by the living room fire. She attempted to extract meaning from each word coming from Mother, short and spontaneous like a sneeze. *Yes. No. Ruthie. Please. No. Hungry. Ruthie. Nothing.* These were words Ruthie knew, but couldn't understand when Mother said them, quiet, hushed. She'd watch Fred/Stephen touch Mother's hand and watch Mother pull her hand away. She'd watch Fred/Stephen touch Mother's leg and watch Mother sit still. She'd watch Fred/Stephen's hand travel up Mother's leg and Mother make a sound that made Ruthie scramble away and hide behind her bedroom wall.

In the morning, bacon air would permeate the small cabin and Ruthie would eat her fill of fresh eggs Mother said came from Fred/Stephen, the man with the horses. Ruthie would drink tall glasses of milk and try on new boots. Ruthie would flip through

the stack of used books that weren't there the night before, looking for pictures especially of horses. At night, Ruthie would sit in Mother's lap, by the fire, as Mother read stories from the Bible and poems from German writers her own mother had loved.

*"The demon may assume the shape of the innocent."*

"What is assume?" Ruthie asked.

"It means things aren't always what they seem," Mother said.

"Like what?"

"Like an apple. An apple can look real good and fresh and then when you bite it it's not so good."

"I hate that." Ruthie said.

"Well, that's what it means," Mother said, opening another book.

*"World does not ask those snatched from death where they are going, they are always going to their graves."* Mother paused and stared at Ruthie, brushing liquid smoke from her face.

"Does that scare you Ruthie?"

"No. Should it scare me?" Ruthie asked.

"I don't think so," Mother said, kissing Ruthie's forehead and drawing her close.

Ruthie hesitated for a moment.

"Will you die?"

"Yes," Mother replied. "We all will."

"When?"

Mother closed the book and set it aside, taking a deep breath.

"When the time comes. When there is no food left and it gets too cold."

## Pink Newspapers

Suzie's hands were perfect. Her fingers, long and slender, were dressed in delicate skin tanned to perfection by the fluorescent bulbs found in the only beds where she could comfortably sleep alone. It was beautiful, Suzie's skin. Golden brown with rosy undertones, manufactured to mimic depth, for skin so shallow it was nearly translucent by nature.

Her black plastic fingernails were now submerged in the cloudy bowl of water sitting next to her on the table. I watched her fingers slink between long strips of floating newspaper, glistening beneath the cafeteria lights. Bi-weekly "Paper Mache Wednesdays" at Angela Heights Elementary School were the school's idea for getting out-of-work parents productively involved in their children's education. Most afternoons left us happily fulfilled by the time spent with our respective daughters. But on weeks when her daughter Annabelle's dance lessons and my daughter Sarah's 4H meetings fell by chance on Paper Mache Wednesday, we sat in the cafeteria alone, as a mother and father of children nowhere in sight, wrist deep in an uneven ratio of water-flour paste and the hidden thrill of time spent with each other.

"You know, this is the closest thing I've had to a date since the Indian fucker

who stole the jumper cables from my car and didn't pay for dinner."

She said this with a grin, like it was a lie. Only it wasn't a lie. None of her stories were lies, but rather unfortunate truths that when strung together could decorate the most sophisticated of artificial Christmas trees.

"Then we should probably build something better than a church," I said, staring at the poorly constructed steeple fashioned from a party hat found in the box of donations tucked away in the craft supply closet in the PTA office. *Happy New Year 2003!*

"Jeff showed up wasted to the child support hearing," she said. "Now I've got more money coming at me, but it's not like Annabelle wants *money*. Annabelle wants her *daddy*. She's gonna be such a slut when she gets older. I blame him when she gets knocked up at fourteen, I tell ya."

Suzie often spoke this way about her daughter. Like she was afraid to admit she wanted better for Annabelle than she had had herself and that despite all effort no amount of motherly nourishment could satisfy the constant ache for her father's love. Victimized motherhood gave her an excuse to fuck up, despite the best of intentions.

"You don't know. Maybe you'll meet a guy who will take care of you both," I said, extracting a wet strip of newspaper from the soupy bowl of water.

"I'm not good at being taken care of. Some women are. Like your woman. She sure sounded good for that. But she don't know what she's losing. It's bad out there. I'd hold onto a man like you."

I smiled. Suzie's eyes were brown. Not brown flecked with shimmers of gold, or brown that changed to green depending on the lighting. Just brown. Like dog shit, circled with charcoal on white cement. They set the tone for her face, where previous bouts of

acne left ragged pock marks on her skin, denting it with character she hid beneath cosmetic layers of self-worth. My grandfather once told me “if a woman can stand in full sunlight with no makeup and you still find her beautiful, marry her.” But I respected the effort she put in to hiding herself.

As the afternoon wore on, Suzie opened herself to me, enlightening me on the many abuses of men she had read wrong for far too long. I bought her a carton of orange juice.

“This church looks like a prison,” she said, suddenly.

“It’s not our best work,” I agreed.

“Let’s try something. A motel. I’m thinking these tissue boxes would work.”

“It’s almost time to leave,” I said. “Maybe next time.”

“We still have 25 minutes,” she said. Her smile reeked of horniness and desperation. I wanted to bathe myself in her.

\*\*\*

We slipped into Room 22, where the lingering scent of marijuana leaked through the open door and passed over the snow-scattered pavement of the parking lot and into the steely atmosphere surrounding the motel.

“I wonder if someone is staying here,” I said, taking notice of the empty soda bottles on the floor and rumpled linens on the queen sized bed. Susie dropped her purse to the floor and began unzipping her purple, faux fur-lined coat.

“Who cares? Door was open, it’s free. Free’s always better and we won’t be long anyway. Fix the heat, will you? My tits are falling off.”

After some fumbling, the wall unit kicked on blasting hot air into the room. In the

bathroom I washed my hands, scrubbing away the white crust that had settled beneath my finger nails and filled the cracks along my cuticles. I could think of nothing but the paper mache paste on my hands dissolving inside of Suzie as I fingered her gently, or roughly, or however she liked.

When I returned to the room, she was lying on the bed. She had left her jeans, but removed the shirt that covered her barely-there breasts cupped in a worn neon green bra.

“We don’t have much time,” she said. “Come on.”

I pulled off my shirt. The carpet was spongy in places where someone must have left snow covered boots to dry. I imagined the unpleasantness of the rug’s moisture seeping in through my socks and dampening my toes. I left my sneakers on.

Suzie sat up quickly and scooted toward the edge of the bed. She unbuckled my belt and pulled down my jeans and briefs. She fondled me in her perfect hand, looking up at me with intentionally large eyes, contorting her face like an amateur porn star. I’m sure she’d have let me film her.

“You like that, baby?” she asked. I nodded. She smiled. “You wanna fuck?”

“Yeah.”

She laid back and unbuttoned her jeans, slithering out of them as she shifted toward the headboard. I kneeled on the bed, crawling toward her with difficulty as my jeans slid further down to my shoes. Nestling between her legs, positioning myself above her, I pulled her panties to the side.

“I don’t have a condom,” I said, stroking myself in anticipation.

“Just do it. I’m on the pill.” She moaned as I slid inside of her.

There were scars on her chest and shoulders. Thin white lines, like stretch marks

added on purpose.

“What happened to you?” I asked, between breaths.

“What?” she gasped, glancing toward her right shoulder where my fingers traced the outline of each mark, pinching the wrinkled stripes of skin. “Oh. My step brother and I used to cut each other. After school, before my parents got home—” she stopped herself, moaning louder than before, then continued. “We did that for three years before my mother found out he fucked me and had him arrested.”

I closed my eyes, imagining she was someone else. I imagined I was someone else too.

\*

“Daddy, what is a *lebsian*?”

Sarah squeezed the paint bottle in her hands, squirting a puddle of pink onto the paper plate in front of her. Suzie glanced toward me with a grin.

“You mean a lesbian?” I asked.

“Yeah, a lebsian. What is it?”

“It’s a lady that wants to be a boy,” Annabelle interjected. I watched as she dipped her brush in Sarah’s paint, splattering the newspaper protecting the table with streaks of hot pink. The church was plastered with translucent headlines, each one buried beneath another even more insignificant than the one before. Layers of tragedy Sarah and Annabelle hoped to cover with pink paint and purple sparkles.

“Oh. I wish Gram and Grump’s church was pink. It smells like poop,” Sarah said,

brushing paint across the first line of an obituary for a nineteen-year-old killed in Iraq.

“You think if it was pink, it’d stop smelling?” Suzie asked, stroking Sarah’s forearm with her fingers – the same twisted grin on her face from two weeks earlier when she perched herself on the edge of the bed, slipping her fingers inside my jeans. I cleared my throat.

“Why do you want to know what a lesbian is, Sarah?”

“Lauren’s mom is a *lebsian* now,” Annabelle said, with a giggle. “Her parents are getting divorced.”

“Oh, that must be tough for Lauren.” I watched Sarah. She bit her lip, dipping the paintbrush into the Styrofoam bowl of water we used to clean our brushes, the clear water clouded with pink.

“Yeah, well she’ll live,” Suzie said, sitting upright and recoiling her hand from Sarah’s forearm. “Kids are tough.”

She pulled her cell phone from her coat pocket. Her fingernails tapped lightly on the screen. Annabelle painted a giant heart on the side of the church, where the newspaper read that six pitbulls were found, bound and starved in the backyard of a home nearby. She hummed to herself. Sarah’s face had sunken. For the first time, something was different.

“Kids are kids.” I said, finally staring straight at Suzie. Her eyes met mine, beneath raised eyebrows.

“Ok?” She shrugged her shoulders. I imagined the thin white scars beneath two layers of fabric shrugging right along with them.

“So, you know, divorce is tough on them,” I said. Suzie’s eyes darted from me to

Sarah, then back again. She opened her mouth but didn't speak.

"My mommy and daddy are divorced," Annabelle said, perking up in her seat.

"Now my daddy takes me to the movies whenever I want."

"Oh does he?" Suzie asked, with a cruel laugh. "Who took you to see that new one last weekend, huh? Where was your daddy then? I didn't see him. He didn't show up. I had to take you myself. *Me*, not him. You remember that?"

Annabelle sunk in her seat.

"You know how much it costs to see a movie?" Suzie asked her. She shook her head.

"Not that much," I said to Annabelle, resting my hand on her shoulder. "Maybe I can take you and Sarah together next time." The girls smiled at each other and went back to painting. Suzie stared straight at me.

"You lyin' to make me look bad or something?"

"Of course not. I'd love to take them."

"Then count me in," she said, with a grin. "The four of us, we'll make a day of it. Movies, ice cream, bowling. What do you think girls?"

For the rest of the afternoon, they couldn't stop talking about it. It was as if it were the first time anyone had ever offered to take them anywhere. Suzie's whole mood had shifted. She painted smiley faces on the girls' cheeks and bought them each a carton of chocolate milk. She asked the girls about their favorite flavors of ice cream. Next Wednesday, she told them, we'd have movie night at her place, with homemade sundaes for dessert. Her fingers crept up my leg beneath the table and rested on my thigh.

"Maybe we'll make it a sleepover."

\*

On Thursday Susie came over early between *Judge Judy* and *Divorce Court*. She chewed gum and jerked me off while offering commentary on the bad weaves and ugly teeth and poor life choices of the show's guests. She said she watched for the legal advice.

On Tuesday Susie came over late between *CBS Nightly News* and *American Idol* auditions. She wanted to talk, but I told her not to. She faked an orgasm, loud and screechy. She treated sex like a screen test. But after just three times together, I was already bored of the way it felt to be inside of her, a predictable warmth that was no longer comforting.

"We still good for tomorrow?" she asked as she circled her eyes with dark liner, fixing herself in my dresser mirror.

"Depends on my schedule."

She dropped her hand and gazed at my reflection in the mirror.

"Tomorrow is Wednesday."

"I know."

"Movie night, sundaes?" She turned to face me. "Our sleepover?"

She propped her bare ass on the dresser surface. My wife's bottle of pink perfume sat open behind her. Suzie liked it. She welcomed herself to it whenever she came over, shocked any woman would leave such an expensive gift behind. She asked to take it on more than one occasion, but I told her sentimental value made it difficult to part with.

Truth is my wife would miss it too much.

“Oh, right.”

“I bought a new bra and everything.”

When Suzie left I sat for an hour on the toilet contemplating myself, and my marriage, and my cock, and all of the things I seemed to have no control over. I used to pray my wife Tess would find Suzie’s panties, crumpled and stuffed beneath the sheets at the bottom of our bed. I imagined her yelling, inconsolable, shaking them in my face, demanding some kind of explanation for my infidelity as she screamed every hidden resentment, and disappointment, she ever felt but never had the courage to say. Then I’d hold her and we’d fall asleep on the floor together.

Night after night, this didn’t happen. Night after night, Tess came home late from the clinic, kissed Sarah on the forehead as she slept, before heading back downstairs and curling her delicate frame in a blanket on the couch. She had a thing for David Letterman. She hadn’t touched our bed in months.

I flushed and went downstairs. I made sundaes for Sarah and me, two cherries for her, extra hot fudge, and a dab of whipped cream. I wanted to greet her when she came home from her grandparents and talk with her until she had nothing left to say. At eight years old, Sarah was the most captivating girl I had ever met. Each time she smiled, it looked like the first time to me, her reaction to some foreign and overwhelming surge of happiness.

She looked like Tess. A strawberry blond beauty, with light green eyes and refined features, fit only the most privileged of men to love. I feared that for Sarah. The first time a man hurt her in reaction to his inferiority of her. The first time she confused

sex with love, or worse, when someone confused them for her. I wished she was more like Annabelle. Damaged from the start, without the hope or expectation of anything better. I wished her mother was more like Suzie. A beauty no one noticed had withered away, for no one had known it had ever been there at all.

An hour later I got the call from my in-laws that Sarah had fallen asleep and they would take her to school in the morning. I ate both sundaes and waited for Tess to come home. She didn't.

## Girl Child

On a Tuesday morning I stained my underwear a streak of rust no one could explain to me quite like Adrienne. *You leak because girls leak when they want babies.* I was ten and I didn't want babies, and I didn't quite understand how wanting babies could explain the way I leaked, but I understood that being a girl child meant something special was happening to me and everyone else was too afraid to tell me what that was. I could sense the earthly wisdom of fifteen-year-old Adrienne who knew so much I never would, who experienced the world through splintered perception I envied for the purity of it. I was ten but I could recognize the dewy majesty within her, the pungent ache of her hunger when she grinned at Robert, the pharmacy tech, each week my mother took us to pick up Adrienne's prescriptions at Walgreens, all running out at different times throughout the month. To our mother, nothing Adrienne did amounted to anything other than disappointment. She was something to be maintained. Controlled.

No one was prepared for the fury within to take hold of her body like disease.

When I was born Adrienne was five years old and already proven to be broken. Unable to do simple things like hold her urine until it was appropriate to let it go – when

some adult would tell her so, pick her up, and place her on the toilet so she could finally relax and release the forceful stream from her little body, sighing relief – out in public Adrienne would force her thighs together bounce on her toes and scream blood-curdling shrieks as if paddle-beaten, or kicked into mushy bruised submission by our father, the disciplinarian every child dreads disappointing. Our mother, ever a well-mannered supporter of etiquette, would scold Adrienne, remind her that she was a girl child with an obligation to politeness no matter the occasion. But Adrienne couldn't help herself. In the middle of the grocery store, in line at the bank, in the booth of a seaside restaurant she would cry out and quickly release, flooding herself the instant the urge came. My parents were ashamed, unable to fathom why their precious girl child would continue to disgrace them this way. When I came along and mastered the skill of pissing into toilets at nineteen months my parents celebrated with a privately catered event.

From what I could tell there was nothing Adrienne could do correctly. At eight years old, she still threw tantrums, sunk her teeth into the arm flab of her reading tutor, her eyes smoldering orbs of unchecked girl child rage. My mother's muffled sobs leaked through the house like winter cold and I learned to shiver at the sound of them. I could never be Adrienne. I could never be girl child gone wrong.

Smooth-haired, well-behaved, fiercely independent, with a knack for dressing myself, my parents found solace in my tightly-wound perfection, proving them capable of effective parenting. I found solace in Adrienne – a force of earth-crushing magnitude, unwaveringly indelicate, laughing, pissing, howling, punching, biting Adrienne, untethered from any expectation of existing as the girl child they had always wanted. Her

face squeezed tight, breathless red frustration with everything: sound, light, color, texture, the entire world she couldn't swallow for the sting of it. She was electrifying.

\*

Robert the pharmacy tech was twenty-three and awkwardly tall with freckled acne I craved to touch through the glass pane of the pharmacy check out window. He was polite and well-spoken if not a little shy as his brown hair fell clumsily across his forehead. My mother's curtness never dissuaded him from waving shyly at Adrienne who grinned lips wet, eyes hazy, tapping her fingers against the glass, leaving behind oily fingerprint signals of her longing. My mother swatted her hands away whispering commands at Adrienne: *get a hold of yourself*. But Adrienne's gaze was forever fixed on Robert.

For as long as I could remember Adrienne was strictly forbidden from coming into my room, so whenever she managed to make her way out of her own, quietly opening and closing her door, crawling through my parents' room which separated ours, and finally poking her head through my doorway and grinning, it was enough for us to erupt in shrill, sisterly squeals of excitement, waking my parents and defeating the careful stealth Adrienne had mustered. But one night, Adrienne snuck into my bedroom, holding a finger to her lips to keep me quiet, and made her way across the carpet, stifling giggles as she climbed into my bed.

*I'm going to kiss Robert*, she told me.

*Why?*

*Because I love him and I want to touch him everywhere,* she said, eyes shining from the street lamp casting a strip of light across her face as she sat, cross-legged on my bed.

*I don't think mama will let you.*

*Mama won't even know,* she told me.

*When will you do it?*

*Soon. So soon. I can't wait anymore!* She said, almost full voice. I giggled and covered her mouth with the palm of my hand. She swatted it away.

*Do you think he loves you too?*

*I know he does.*

Two days later at Walgreens our mother parked the car and Adrienne jumped out, grabbing my hand, pulling me with her into the store. Our mother chased behind us.

*Don't run!* she whispered with all the force of a shout. *Girls don't run!*

After years of handling Adrienne it was a wonder our mother ever relinquished her hold on us, her girl children always threatening to misbehave. *You don't want to end up like your sister, do you?* She'd say to me as if all of Adrienne's problems stemmed from poor manners. How could I tell our mother that Adrienne was everything I wished to be, everything I ached for deep in my magma center.

Adrienne stopped running, suddenly yanking me to a stop as our mother nearly collided with us.

*Can we look at makeup?* she asked. Mother sighed.

*What do you need makeup for?*

*We don't need it. Adrienne said. We just want to look.*

Mother hesitated, glancing around the near empty store. It was rare for her to even consider this sort of request from Adrienne. But in recent weeks, since that Tuesday morning when Adrienne had helped me with my rust-stained underwear and mother thanked her for it, Adrienne had been uncharacteristically controlled. *Fine*, Mother said. *Don't touch anything. I will be right at the counter so I will see anything you do.*

Adrienne grabbed my hand once again, dragging me through the aisles to the cosmetics section. Rows of brightly colored tubes, compacts of pink, peach, and bronze powders, shimmery eye shadows, with names like 'café au lait,' 'denim dream,' and 'pearly pink,' metallic gold and glittering blue bottles of nail polish dazzled us. Adrienne grabbed at everything, knocking them over and onto the floor.

*I need something for my lips!* She said.

*Mama said not to touch anything.*

*It'll be fun!* She said, ripping open a package of bright pink lip gloss, tossing the plastic-cardboard casing to the floor. She grabbed hold of a compact, flipped it open and looked at herself, quickly applying the gloss and smacking her lips together. *What do you think?*

Her eyes glittered as she smiled widely, tossing her hair like a movie star.

*You look so pretty!* I told her.

*You try it!* She said, tossing the gloss to me. I caught it and looked around for our mother, who somehow always managed to be lurking nearby anytime Adrienne was about to get me into trouble.

*She's on the other side of the store*, Adrienne said confidently. I followed her lead and picked up a compact, opening it to see the reflection of my girl child eyes, lips, cheeks. I unscrewed the gloss and pressed the tiny wand to my lips, carefully coating them in pink. Rubbing them together I watched myself in the tiny compact mirror, examining my eyelashes, smiling, studying my teeth, looking for any resemblance, any proof that I was her sister, that part of us bore the same DNA, the electric pulse that threaded through her, an unstoppable surge of girl spirit.

Adrienne squealed at the sight of me and told me to pocket as many lip glosses, eye shadows, and nail polishes I could. She kicked away the mess of opened packages left on the floor and sprinted toward the pharmacy counter. I ran to keep up. My mother was browsing the nearby vitamin aisle, her back to us. Robert was standing behind the window, sorting through white paper bags of prescriptions, assisting a woman with a walker and oxygen tank. Adrienne skipped to the window and waited behind the woman, bouncing on her toes and waving to Robert. He smiled shyly and gave a small wave. Adrienne squeaked. Mother didn't seem to hear.

When the woman stepped away, Adrienne could barely contain herself.

*Notice anything different about me?* She asked Robert, her hands locked behind her back, as she swayed from side to side smiling.

*Did you get a haircut?* Robert asked.

*Nope*, she said, grinning some more.

*I'm not sure*, he said, glancing to our mother, still oblivious. *But you look pretty*, he almost mumbled.

Adrienne nearly yelped in excitement, peeking over at me.

*Let me check your prescriptions, he said.*

Adrienne stepped closer to the window and pressed her fingertips against the glass. She pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and pressed it to her lips, imprinting it with a glossy pink kiss, and slid it through the window to Robert. He glanced at our mother then back at Adrienne.

*What is that?*

*It's for you, she said.*

*I can't take that, he said.*

*Why not?*

*I could get in trouble, he whispered, his gaze shuffling around the near empty store. It'll be our secret, Adrienne said smiling, tracing circles on the glass pane in front of her, her other hand still extended through the window tapping the note on the counter. Take it, she whispered.*

*Adrienne! Mother almost shouted, scampering to the counter.*

*Take it! Adrienne yelled and Robert grabbed the note from her hand shoving it in his pocket.*

Mother marched to Adrienne and pulled her hands from the glass pane. *What did she just hand you?* She demanded.

Robert stammered. *What?*

*I saw her hand you something; what did she give you?*

Robert glanced at Adrienne who was still happy and still grinning widely, slowly shaking her head at him.

*Nothing*, he said finally. *She just handed me this receipt. I guess someone dropped it*, he said, showing our mother a crumpled receipt he must have had somewhere on the counter. Mother looked back at Adrienne who just shrugged, unable to contain her delight.

*Are you sure?* She asked him again. He nodded. She sighed. *Fine. Are my prescriptions ready?*

*Of course*, he stammered again finally checking the computer. Adrienne backed away from the counter. Robert looked up, careful not to break his gaze from my mother who had fixed him with such a stare I thought he might burst into flame from its singe. Then I saw it. Adrienne unzipping her coat, her fingers feeling for the buttons of her shirt, quickly undoing them, her impenetrable gaze on Robert. Robert quickly glanced to her then back to my mother. But Adrienne continued until her entire shirt was unbuttoned and hanging open, revealing a small strip of stomach and a tan cotton bra. Robert looked to her once again, his eyes widening. Something in my stomach began to hurt, my magma center unfurling more heat than I could handle and before I knew it my voice was erupting from my lungs and I cried out, *Mama!* and our mother turned around, her face twisting from shock into palpable rage. She shouted something. I'm not sure what. Adrienne laughed and ripped her shirt open, working quickly to pull it off. Our mother grabbed her, clenching her fingers around Adrienne's arms forcing her coat closed and wrenching her body away from the counter, dragging her through the vitamin aisle, toward the automated doors at the store's entrance. Adrienne screamed, throwing her limbs in every direction, flailing scarlet fury, her lips quivering venom. Strangers

watched in uncomfortable horror as my mother heaved Adrienne through the door, barely able to contain her as Adrienne bit at her, spitting and snarling, rabid as a dog.

I watched as they exited my view. I walked through the vitamin aisle. From outside I could hear our mother shout my name over Adrienne's curdling shrieks. Strangers stared at me, the little girl child separate from her crazy mother and wild sister. I wanted to take my time savoring this moment – the quiet, the calm before I would exit the store and face the fury of my mother, and later the roar of my father's belt smacking Adrienne's bare flesh echoing through the ripple of her tears. As I neared the store exit the chaos outside subsided and I knew somehow our mother had forced Adrienne into the car. Before it was out of sight, I looked back at the pharmacy counter. Robert was staring down at something in his hand, turning it over with his fingers, his mouth hanging open. My stomach flipped as I imagined him looking at me like he had looked at Adrienne, his lip trembling the splendor of her.

\*

Mother pulled into the driveway and parked next to our house under the crab apple tree dropping decorative pale bursts of browning flowers onto the overgrown gravel. Adrienne sat across from me in the backseat, her body curled in on itself, face buried in the car door. The low jingle of car keys filled the quiet space between the three of us as mother turned the car off, sucking life from the humming engine. We sat that way for awhile – Adrienne in a heap to my side, our mother staring forward eerily silent, me tracing the lines on my palm with a plastic tube of lip gloss I had stolen. Adrienne moaned faintly and mother's eyes flashed in the rear view mirror.

*Stop that*, Mother snapped and Adrienne's whimpering subdued. Mother sighed.  
*Your father will hear nothing of this. Is that understood?*

My eyes locked with mother's in the rear view mirror and I nodded. She nodded in return.

*Adrienne?* She said. Adrienne turned her head slightly so that she too could meet mother's eyes. *Is that understood?*

Adrienne nodded.

Mother stepped out of the car and I followed suit, but Adrienne didn't move. I circled around and came to her door unlatching it for her. When I opened it Adrienne fell forward slightly, catching herself in the door frame. Mother passed us on her way to unlock the side door of the house. *Let's go*, she said.

*It's ok*, I whispered to Adrienne. *Daddy won't know.*

Adrienne nodded, looking up at me through a curtain of wild hair. Her eyes were wet and empty. I stepped forward to hug her and she wrapped her arms around me. She smelled like the watermelon lip gloss she had smeared on her lips before kissing her note to Robert. I let go and stepped back, brushing the hair from her eyes. On her right cheek I saw it – a bright pink welt swelling the side of her face.

*Mama?* I asked.

Adrienne nodded.

The following week our mother added a pad lock to Adrienne's bedroom. When it came to rules, typically mother set them, father enforced them, and there wasn't much more to say about it. But when father asked what Adrienne had done mother just said girl

children sometimes needed a little more security. He seemed puzzled but didn't question it.

During the day when I was at school Adrienne went about her regular schooling with mother. But when I came home Adrienne was often dismissed to her room and made to stay there until dinner. I never asked mother why but it became increasingly clear whenever Adrienne and I were alone and mother intervened by sending Adrienne to another room, or to sit on a different piece of furniture, that she didn't want us together without supervision. Some evenings after dinner Adrienne and I would sit on the floor together and watch television. She never asked me why I had told on her that day and I never offered an apology. Things felt different between us. Adrienne was distant, removed. Her fire had burned to rubble and nothing was left but the the ashen coals of her eyes.

But a week later as Adrienne and I sat on the living room floor watching our father's football game, mother told us that we would be heading back to Walgreens but that Adrienne would be staying at the house with father. *Any trouble you lock her in that room*, she said to him. He nodded not looking away from the TV. Adrienne looked at me, eyes wide, her familiar ember glow pouring out of them.

*Let's go*, mother said to me stepping toward the door. I pushed myself up off the floor and Adrienne tugged at my pant leg.

*Find out if he read it*, she whispered so low I could barely hear her. *Please*.

I stood at mother's side as she browsed the vitamin aisle, but I couldn't keep from watching Robert who had been unsuccessfully avoiding eye contact with me since we

arrived. My stomach hurt every time his eyes met mine. I felt myself flush red whenever he caught me staring.

*Can I look at the makeup?* I asked.

*I don't think so,* mother said.

*But I won't get in any trouble, I promise.*

Mother looked down at me, a deep wrinkle between her eyes.

*We'll look at makeup together another time..*

After he called our last name and we stepped to the window, Robert seemed taken aback by mother's uncharacteristic friendliness. She asked him about school and if he he liked working here, so he told her he had graduated in early May and had been hired full time at Walgreens shortly after, and yes, he did like it. *That's why I'm always here,* he laughed nervously. He handed her a paper bag of prescriptions and she thanked him. *Let's go,* she said to me before turning to walk away. I waved goodbye to Robert but when I did his eyes widened urgent and he motioned me to come toward the window. I glanced at mother who was already back in the vitamin aisle. I stepped forward.

*Where's your sister?* He whispered.

I shrugged, not wanting to answer. He peeked side to side then out at the store before sliding a folded note through the window to me. *Can you get this to her?*

His fingers brushed mine as he passed the note to me. It burned in my palm.

*Don't tell your mom,* he whispered.

I shoved the note into my pants pocket and turned away from him, slowly walking toward the vitamin aisle where mother stood browsing, the weight of it sinking each step I took toward her. I wanted to read the note, show it to my mother, tear it into

unrecognizable shreds. I wanted to scream, smack the vitamin bottles from the shelves, and watch them roll down the aisle, skidding across the tile floor. I wanted to dig my fingers into my hair, pull it hard, shriek echoes of girl child rage, my voice thundering and powerful, singeing the ceiling, the walls, and floor. I looked back at the pharmacy counter. Robert was staring at me. He smiled. My stomach flipped and all I could do was smile back.

# The Truth About Tattoos

## I.

Her tattoo said *fuck the meatloaf*.

We stumbled into each other on the street, two blocks from the beach. Golden skin, with bloodshot eyes, and salt water hair plastered to her body like a second skin. Eighteen years old, freshly scarred by a stranger's needle.

"Are you ok?" I asked.

"I got a tattoo," she repeated, thrusting her arm toward me once again so I could see the drawing of a cartoon meatloaf with eyes, its outline crusted with blood, and the words *fuck the meatloaf* like an epitaph for her childhood or possibly a history of good decision making.

"Hey sexy!" A guy, a dude, and a bro hanging from a beach house porch waved in our direction.

"Hey!" She managed with a little dance that can only be described as pre-vomit, post-dignity.

“Hot!” the guy yelled. “Sexy!” the dude demanded. “Fuck!” the bro declared. She waved goodbye to me as she tripped up their steps and they laughed, watching but not helping.

Insert joke about her meatloaf getting fucked.

Insert question of which decision she regrets more.

## II.

“Fuck the meatloaf” is not easy to forget. For years I used this story as a means to my own end in arguing all the problems with tattoos.

The permanence. “Why would you want to scar yourself forever?”

The regret. “You might not even like Pokemon when you’re forty!”

(Insert note: The big picture, the one of an intoxicated girl disappearing with three strangers into a strange house with the obvious intent of sex, and the even bigger big picture, of the metaphorical beach boys I would encounter for the rest of my life about whom I’d have to make big decisions, and usually the wrong ones, were completely lost on me. At the time I was all “ink stinks!” or something cleverer.)

## III.

There is more than one way to scar yourself.

## IV.

I was a virgin when we met. Long blond curls covered my breasts, my nipples peeking through and I felt like a mermaid in overpriced underwear. I arched and the ends of my hair tickled the small of my back and I felt like a lion who really loved getting fucked.

“You’ve only been dating a month,” my mother said. I was an adult, asking to sleep over at my boyfriend’s place.

“I know.”

“So it’s too soon to be having sex anyway.”

But I had sex. And it didn’t feel too soon. It felt like what I wanted. I was eighteen, freshly fucked by my boyfriend’s needle.

#### V.

He owned my virginity and he loved it. That’s what he said. He loved that when we got married, he was the only one to ever touch me. He loved that he was the only one who ever would.

“That’s mine,” he would say and I believed him.

#### VI.

We got married. He got drunk. I got hurt. He was sorry. I didn’t believe him.

#### VII.

Our one-year anniversary came one month and eighteen days after I left him. I was twenty-two years old, freshly scarred by the scars of someone else.

I drove three hours through the shadowy mountains of the Hudson valley. I slept in a motel room with a door that wouldn’t lock. The next day I stood in a field in upstate New York forty-one years to the day after peace, love, and music. The rain weighed me down as I sunk into the mud and wept.

#### VIII.

A week later I got a tattoo.

IX.

He was mad. I should have asked first.

X.

“Are you sure you want it there? It’s really painful there.”

“I’m sure.”

“A lot of girls prefer to get it here.”

“No, I want it where I want it. Put it there.”

XI.

I took the bandage off and traced the outline of the words I had chosen to scar myself with forever. The guilt sunk in that I had scarred someone else’s body instead of mine. I mourned. Skin, once clean and fresh now stained forever. I mourned. My body as a baby, new and perfect, adored by my parents. I mourned. My body as a woman, ownership to be determined.

XII.

Sometimes they say “fuck the meatloaf.” Sometimes they say more. I rejoice.

This is the truth about tattoos.

## Mr. Food

A doctor once told me regular sex is good for your health which might explain why I have diabetes, high cholesterol, and issues with anxiety. Anxiety that has led to high blood pressure, which makes me the kind of person who has to consult my doctor before beginning any kind of diet or exercise program. He tells me to eat an apple and fuck my wife. Doesn't he know apples aren't in season and my wife hasn't undressed in front of me since 2010? Of course not. Doctors never have problems getting laid.

I take Lipitor for my cholesterol, Paxil and Ativan (with an emergency prescription to Klonopin) for my anxieties, Diovan for my blood pressure, and in theory exercise and eat well for my diabetes (Metformin). I am forty-six and work as the assistant general manager of a grocery store called Mr. Food where I spend most of my time trying to remember what it was like when I didn't simultaneously want so much and so little out of life. There was a time when all I wanted was hot wings. Somehow that was enough for me.

On Monday I hire a high school junior named Madison to work in our bakery. "*It's Maddie,*" she tells me, like it makes her sound somehow less adolescent. She speaks with verbalized insecurity, popular with young girls who question everything they say to the degree

that they must turn everything they say into a question. *“I graduate in 2018?” “I think I will go into business?” “I don’t really play any sports, but I am involved in Yearbook?”* Teenage existence is like amnesia with an ever present need to remember who you are and who you are supposed to be (someone whose picture belongs in the yearbook).

Judy and I got married in September 2001, the Saturday before the day everything changed. Like the rich kid whose trust fund gets cut off just when he was starting to feel comfortable without the money. That was September 11<sup>th</sup> for America. The day our trust fund got cut off.

We spent our honeymoon watching CNN from our hotel room in Puerto Rico, five days of repeat footage of the towers getting hit, crumbling like a game of Jenga. *“Things will never be the same.”* Judy shook her head, and patted her eyes with tissues. I rubbed her back and sighed. *“We can’t stop living,”* I told her. *“I just don’t feel much like celebrating,”* she said. I spent most of those nights in the hotel bar, while Judy lay down with a migraine. She never put on the pink bikini she bought specially for the trip. She sold it at a yard sale in 2004, brand new, tags still intact.

Madison’s face is shaped like a perfect heart; she even has a widow’s peak in her hairline. Her nose is pierced with a tiny diamond stud, and her bleached hair frames her face, wisps of white blond streaked with pink and black. I watch her as she fills out paperwork. Loopy letters. ‘I’s dotted with stars. Date of birth: August 17, 2000. She had just turned one when America lost its trust fund. I can’t stop thinking about her naked.

On Wednesday afternoon the store is dead. I make my rounds, checking on each department with false bravado. I don’t really know what I’m doing. I piece together my usual meal: a bottle of soda, icy cold from the checkout line cooler, a handful of Slim Jims, a bag of

Doritos, and a singular banana (for my nutrition). I retreat into my office and scroll quickly through blog posts and headlines, world news, pornographic comic strips, and dream voyages to the mountains in North Carolina where hippy spas exist with mud baths, cucumber infused water, and the kind of tranquility Judy needs to feel comfortable undressing in front of me so we can finally have sex again and save me from my certain fate of dying a broken, rotted, shell of a man with shriveled testicles and a penis mistaken for a vestigial organ.

There was a time when I had every curve and stretch of skin memorized. When we would bathe together and her body would melt into mine, and I'd spend hours exploring it with my fingertips until the skin on my hands was nothing but grooves and ridges of muted sensitivity seeking the electricity of her touch. Now I dream about her body. I fantasize about the ways it may have changed with age. I pretend this time of "inactivity," this time of longing for Judy's affection, (resulting in a mid-day erection from watching Madison stroke the handle of a broom, texting while sweeping excess flour from the floor), is all part of a devious sexual game Judy and I are playing. The eternal foreplay that fuels my lust for my wife keeps me in a constant weakened state. A *fun* game. Obviously.

But I knew we didn't stand a chance after the "incident." Every marriage has one. The big moment when the structure of all that has been good and trusted up until then shifts and crumbles like a piece of discarded cherry pie you don't even know you want until you see it overturned in the trash can, broken under a pile of coffee grounds and juice squeezed from a package of tuna, and you realize there is no way to recover it without hating yourself for your own pathetic desperation to eat it. But had I known at the time that my sex and actual life would be perpetually doomed, I would have gladly paid any amount of money to replace any amount of teeth she needed replacing.

It was July 2009 and we were standing on the back deck of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello – a sticky day when mosquitoes reveal the depth of their moocher tendencies. Judy looked exceptional in green khaki Capri pants, tan wedge sandals, and a light blue tank top with ribbing that stretched across her chest in the most distracting way. She squeezed my hand and smiled, pulling me off of the deck and onto the path that bordered the expansive flower gardens. She was getting ideas about flowers, landscaping, and possibly babies. I didn't want to talk about it. "*Do you think about a family?*" she asked, as we passed a young couple pushing a collapsible stroller. *Eventually*, I thought but couldn't say. After several minutes of attempted conversation, she broke her hand away from mine, agitated by my lack of initiative, and followed the rocky path down a hill and through the woods toward the estate entrance. I tried to warn her that the gravel was unsteady, that with one wrong step she would twist her delicate ankle and slip. But she was too far away, too distant, too angry, and I watched her as she fell, twirling down, cracking her jaw on a large rock bordering the path.

She lost three teeth that day, two top molars and one bottom. Her mouth was sore for weeks and with a broken ankle, she hardly wanted to leave the house. During her initial consultation we were told to replace her teeth would be expensive but doable, in the range of a few thousand dollars for all three. But when we sat down with an oral surgeon, the brutal truth was shy of \$20,000 and for what he considered to be an "elective" surgery advised we do some serious thinking about how important back molars really are to two people with subpar dental insurance. Judy cried. I put my foot down. To this day she can't eat peanut brittle.

Madison could be our daughter. I met Judy in 1996. Had she gotten pregnant the first time she brought it up, we'd have a teenager by now. Madison could be spending her summer days sipping iced tea by our pool next to our son or daughter. They could be friends. I could have

a reference point – a reason to not think about her naked.

Judy never stopped wanting children, but she did stop wanting them with me. *“I can’t have a baby with the kind of man who doesn’t think I’m worth \$20,000.”* It was the breaker, the buildup of every issue unresolved, every promise broken before it was made. The disappointment in my salary, my position, even my fidelity, which took away any acceptable reason she would have to leave, instead of facing the gloom of eternity with someone.

On Friday the store is alive, wrought with people celebrating their weekend freedom. I don’t have time to read blog posts about Syria or browse Madison’s Instagram for pictures posted from the spring class trip to Washington (she and her best friend Ashley touching tongues in front of the Vietnam Memorial). I spend my time appeasing customers, fuming through price disputes for incorrectly marked sales on Friskies cat food, mistakes I should have caught on Wednesday. Or Monday, if I really did my job.

My weekend begins at 5:10pm when I exit the building and head for my car. Five days of anticipation, wasting away each hour, each minute, until it all comes to this. I pass my house as I drive. Our garbage can is rolling on its side in the road, its lid somewhere in the neighbor’s yard. I pass the elementary school where my niece teaches music and my brother complains she makes too much money. I park on the street in a spot designated for St. Mary’s Cemetery across the street from the gray cottage where Judy’s Dodge Neon is parked. There are bumper stickers on her car about Autism Awareness and supporting the local fire company. A breeze ruffles the curtains in an upstairs window and I hear the faint sound of Neil Young’s *Harvest* album playing. She used to be careful, sure to be home before I am. On Saturday mornings we go to the flea market at the town square. She spends a lot of time looking at bouquets of dried flowers. *“Beauty that lasts forever,”* she says. *“Time means nothing if you’re a flower.”*

I watch her as she exits the side of the house, fixing her purple cardigan before opening the car door. Our eyes meet as she glances across the street. She shrugs, glibly, and slips into the car. I dig through my pocket as she drives away, clutching my bottle of Klonopin.

A doctor once told me regular sex is good for my health. But that may depend on who's having it.

## Stages

### I.

The last time I was on my knees was in a gravel parking lot behind Sam's Club. The tiny stones ripped open my skin and I bled like a bitch in heat. That night I went home and Adam put down the remote, asked me what I had done to myself, not knowing I had done something to someone else. I laid my legs across his lap and handed him a pair of tweezers. He picked out every single piece of rock until my knees were nothing but raw meat, fleshy and clean, with his fingertips tracing the outline of swollen pink. He lowered his lips and kissed it like it was the forehead of a baby. His eyes met mine and he smiled like I owed him something. We fell asleep watching a documentary on big cats.

### II.

Morning comes and goes. On my knees and I'm sick, my skin stamps bloody imprints on the linoleum. Time is passing, but Adam doesn't know it yet. He's sleeping. Always sleeping.

From the bathroom floor, I look into our bedroom, and I see his body outlined beneath the bed sheet. A beautiful body. Hairy in all the right places. Muscular in all the right places. Calloused but tender. In places. Some nights he humps the mattress when he thinks I'm not awake. Like I can't feel the rhythm of his desire, pent up and spilled into the sheets we share. Sticky wet, in all the right places.

### III.

If you've never been on your knees in the bathroom of a Pizza Hut, you've lived a better life than me. He never told me his name, only pointed to the tag on his employee polo, when I asked from the floor, my mouth full of him. *Tony*. He didn't ask back, just sat on the toilet and took pictures of me on his phone, laughing at something not in the room. He didn't ask why my knees were scabbed, or why I followed him into the bathroom when he went on his break. He didn't ask who I was. He didn't ask a thing.

I slide back into the booth, smile at Adam. Pizza sauce on his chin and some on his shirt. *You ok?* He asks, wiping his face with a napkin. I tell him my stomach hurts. *You didn't touch your plate.* I tell him it's better that way. Imagine how sick I'd be if I'd eaten this crap. Tony winks at me as he exits the bathroom.

*Adam, my stomach hurts.*

### IV.

I hold the wheel with both hands until he takes the right one into his own. He squeezes it and smiles, kissing my palm. Tony lingers in the back of my throat. *You'll be ok*, Adam tells me.

I know he can't see me. I wonder why that is.

We arrive home. He kicks off his shoes and falls asleep on the recliner. I crawl on

his lap and straddle, my knees on either side. I ride him like a pogo stick until my scabbed skin rubs raw against the couch and I bleed all over the Martha Stewart pillows his mother bought on discount from Macy's. His hot breath melts into my neck. He whispers something about protection.

V.

Morning comes and goes. On my knees and I'm sick. He's sleeping. Morning comes, like a ghost. Adam leaves, but he doesn't know it yet. He asks what I've done to myself. I tell him time is passing and I'm not dead yet.

## Tanked

I first died eleven months ago. I was sitting on a bar stool in a dive called “The C-Word” when a monstrosity of a human mistook me for a “*sonofabitch n-word*” who slept with his ex-girlfriend at the 2011 Indianapolis 500, and thrust a knife directly into my pasty stomach. Bigotry accessorizes with buck knives, I guess.

The air was still, quiet. From the juke box, country music hung in the air like music notes floating from a fishing line around my head, halted by the pulsing of my heart beating louder, *LOUDER* through my ears and into the air around me, rhythmic, like some sort of betrayal willing my veins to empty at record speed. My head lightened and my eyes closed. My tongue became fat and chewy, resting between my teeth as I bit down, and my last thought before slipping in through the gap-toothed mouth of afterlife, was that I should have flossed that evening’s tilapia from between my teeth.

And that’s how I became a fish.

At least that is my theory. I’d like to believe I had some choice in this. That I didn’t simply die and reincarnate into the cold blooded, beady-eyed, cum stain of

domesticated house pets because I made for a shitty human. I have to believe that by focusing all that was left of my human energy on the presence of mutilated fish in my mouth, my brain waves stealthily intercepted whatever divine plan was in place for my soul and catapulted me directly into the body of a red crown tail beta trapped hopelessly in a nine-inch sphere with rocks like solid chunks of Pepto-Bismol, artificial foliage to make me feel at home, and no real sense of privacy. I surely meant for this to happen. I must have.

The second time I died was self-inflicted. Fish don't feel depression. Fish feel nothing but the constant ache of feeling nothing, which after six-and-a-half days of fish life, I had mastered. Sure, Mrs. Darling fed me all right – little flakes of tasteless sustenance like broken multi-colored communion wafers. The kind I swiped from the church rectory following Christmas Eve mass, 1997 – one of the only details I remember from my former life. But even with the body of Christ floating all around me and Mrs. Darling's glorious mounds of heaving, artificial cleavage eclipsing the view above me as she released my meal from between her fingertips and onto the water's surface, I felt my interest in existence waver, and after six-and-a-half days relaxed my fins and floated to the top. Within an hour, Mr. Darling had flushed me.

After the initial shock of returning to Mrs. Darling's aquarium as my second afterlife wore off, and I accepted my new fate as none other than a measly yellow guppy, deaths three-five were significantly less melodramatic.

For my third death, I was wedged between the glass wall and the orange, sand-encrusted castle Mrs. Darling had excitedly, albeit haphazardly dropped into the new rectangular aquarium she purchased "*on clearance at Big Lots!*" or so she told Mr.

Darling. But I couldn't hold it against her. We were the manifestation of her pride. Her interactive decorations confined to make her efforts mean something. Our lives were nothing if not for her attention. She cried when Pamela, a mini-swordfish, died within four days of joining the tank. Mrs. Darling possessed us in the most loving way she could.

My fourth death was by Elmer, the oversized goldfish whose former life as a Sudanese militant left an awkward language barrier between us, and resulted in my eventual, brutal demise. He was a gift from Mr. Darling.

But my fifth death was even worse. It was late September and Mrs. Darling had left for an eleven-day cruise through the Caribbean with her old college roommate, Barbara. The morning she left, we gathered near the glass where she stood perky in tight white pants. She fed detailed instructions to Mr. Darling: meal times, operating the filtration system, a rough breakdown of our social order tank wide. He nodded. She skimmed her fingertips along the surface of the water before she left, rippling it with light, affectionate strokes as she explained that the length of her departure should not serve as a reflection of her love for us. She knelt beside the tank and gave the glass a quick kiss, leaving an imprint of coral lipstick behind to remind us of her.

On the first day we said he forgot. Gus, a young blue guppy and former high school lacrosse star petitioned to revolt, but the rest of us were uninterested. By the fourth we knew it was intentional. Mr. Darling had hardly moved since Mrs. Darling left the house. He called out from work and spent most of his time pleasuring himself to day-time TV love scenes. By day ten the others were gone and I was alone, hungry, and trapped in the stew of waste he had allowed our tank to become. I stared at the lips imprinted on the

glass in front of me and shut my eyes.

Now that I'm back things have changed. There are no more Goldfish and I am a beta again, this time a green veiltail. I have a new tank, a larger bowl with light gray rock and pretty green plants sprouting from them. At first I was alone, which was ok since every time I'm a beta, all that seems to interest me is carnage. But I've since obtained a bowl mate. An elegant silvery blue beauty named Ariana. She doesn't say much, just shimmies her tail as she passes by. I believe she is and has only ever been a fish. But oh the bubbles of love she inspires in me. How humanity would look delicious on her.

Mrs. Darling is not the same. When she brought me home from the local pet store after her return from the Caribbean she hardly said a word, except for when she named me Calvin. She's stopped watching me swim during the day which I appreciate for the alone time it allows me with Ariana. But we're always alone. There are no other fish, not even in the old tanks she used to fill to her delight with tropical colors and personalities. It's only us. Us and the antique armoires, wingback chairs, and pie crust end tables she continues to bring into the living room filling the gap of space between us.

Lately the house has been quiet. It's been five days since she's smiled and tapped our bowl, sprinkling those tasty red flakes down to us. Ariana is hungry, but mostly I feel alone. There's a banana perched on the edge of a pink chaise lounge rotting into its sweeter self, its mild flavor replaced by pungency, and I wonder how long Mrs. Darling will let it sit there.

## Apostrophe S

I was ten years old. We were against the wall, all twelve of us, like a criminal line up outside the girls' locker room. Little girls with wet pool hair, little girls in little shorts lined up with their arms flat against their sides.

How long were our shorts, Mr. Principal wanted to know. There was a strict rule about short-shorts being too short even for short little girls like us.

So he examined us each from head to toe with lingering eyes to catch our bodies in an act of rebellion in shorts too short for little girls. The little boys watched from across the hall. As he passed each girl and got closer to me, my shoulders ached as I stretched my arms straighter than straight, my fingertips clawing for length, to pass the hem of my shorts so he could see my shorts were too short for a little girl.

He stared at me. My lips were wet.

Don't wear those again, he said.

But I wore them again. And again, and again.

\*

At my mother's wedding I wore a velvet dress and learned that little girls must always cross their legs.

It's uncomfortable, I said.

It's proper, I was told.

At Disney World I wore a white tee shirt and stood in the rain, freed of my Florida sweat.

Don't stand in the rain.

But it feels good. It's not proper.

\*

I want to say my breasts sprouted, because they say that's what breasts do. They sprout like beans, like broccoli, like flowers (always flowers). Perky pink petunias.

But my breasts did not sprout like flowers. They inflated like bubble gum bubbles, bursting the seams of my skin with red streaks like bleeding begonias. Becoming a woman like it was an ugly thing to do.

\*

Every other weekend at my second home, I rummaged through my stepmother's second closet, in my second bedroom. Clothing too small for breasts unlike flowers, I stuffed myself in and watched in the mirror the buttons not button, my breasts uncontained staring back at me, heaving and free. My hair in luscious curls, plumpness painted on my lips, I winked at the mirror. *Playboy*, pop star, men swooning for me.

\*

My sketch of the penis and its internal anatomy was tacked to the bulletin board in our 10<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, my name printed in the bottom right corner. The assignment

was to draw a diagram like the one in our text book. Others giggled through the process, forgetting the urethra, remembering the pubic hair. But I took the penis very, very seriously.

The next week my health teacher tacked my vagina to the bulletin board. It was perfect he said. The ideal anatomical representation of the female sex.

It'd be a year until I learned I had a clitoris.

\*

It was not my digital camera, but I used it to take my picture. On my back, arm outstretched to my side, lens angled down, my face round, cherry cheeks, rosy mounds (like flowers), bare and exposed. Upload. Send.

So beautiful, they said.

So innocent, they said.

And I blushed in the lamplight of my teenage bedroom, men swooning for me.

\*

When I was nineteen years old I bought a too-tight black thong and ironed on the letters of my boyfriend's name with an apostrophe and an 's.' I slipped it on and the corners of each letter peeled away from the fabric like they didn't belong there. I didn't bother telling them otherwise.

With wet lips he watched as I unbuttoned my jeans, slipping the poly-cotton blend past my hips for the big reveal. With wet lips I spread my legs and he salivated at his name.

## Diane & Larry

*“There are two things you should remember when dealing with parallel universes. One, they're not really parallel, and two, they're not really universes.”*

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

*“My one regret in life is that I am not someone else.”*

Woody Allen

### I.

Larry has opinions about everything Diane puts in her mouth. He says, “nobody smokes anymore,” as she lights her cigarette.

In seven and a half months Diane would either give birth to some bloody creature spawned from Larry's unwillingness to pull out and come on her stomach like a normal guy, or she'd be happy. Well, maybe not happy, but childless, which seemed like pretty much the same thing to her.

Diane delights at Larry when he wafts the smoke away from his face, sighing. She is amused by his audacity. The rain is lightly tapping the umbrella he holds above them, rolling down and dripping from the nylon edges of its canopy. One after another, cars coast to the stop sign in front of the bus stop where Diane and Larry are waiting. Wiper

blades wiping. Diane looks at Larry, his free hand texting. There is nothing grayer than a day with Larry, raining.

Larry asked her about babies once. He said, “what kind of woman doesn’t want to be a mother?”

It was an open-ended question. He didn’t expect an answer. But Diane told him some story about being molested as a child and Larry frowned like some little kid’s drawing of a sad person. She wanted to laugh at his dumb face with that ridiculous frown and ask him what was worse, a woman who didn’t want to have kids, or a woman who made up stories about being molested, but she was pretty sure she already knew the answer.

Diane isn’t against the concept of children. She accepts that, in theory, the world needs children in order for humanity to continue (assuming that it should). It needs women to birth those children, nurse them with their bodies or their dollars, feed them something that would shut them up and make them grow. But she doesn’t wish to be one of those women. She doesn’t wish for chewed up nipples, or to waste money on chem-pumped baby feed. She marvels at the women who do, who welcome the theft of identity motherhood seems to require.

Of course Larry doesn’t know a thing about Diane’s womb, or the baby growing inside of it. When he comments on her smoking he only mentions premature aging and lung cancer, in that order.

\*

Larry hates being called Larry. His actual human name is Dave, but his frat brothers call him Larry for some reason or another that was never made clear to him. It

stuck and now people who don't know him, know him as Larry. Four months earlier, a woman he had never met before walked across the bar and said, "you're Larry, right?" and he nodded, instinctively. "I'm Diane. I'm friends with Kevin."

Kevin is Larry's brother – fraternal, not biological. Kevin had been sleeping with Diane for about a month when he recommended she introduce herself to Larry. She was applying for an auto loan and Larry was good with taxes. Kevin thought these two things were related.

Larry had only heard about Diane in passing. He'd been told she was exceptionally good looking. The term "model-esque" had been thrown around. But when she introduced herself to him, he was unimpressed. She was thin, sure, but in an athletic way, not a model way. When he eventually told her a few weeks later that he found her arms a bit too muscular, she told him she had suffered from an eating disorder most of her life and how dare he comment on her body.

He agreed to help her with her auto loan application. The following afternoon he sat next to her in the computer lab.

"Didn't you ever take a typing class?" he asked.

"I don't remember," Diane said, lying. She remembered never taking typing.

Larry explained the auto loan to Diane. He was wearing cologne and she wondered why. What went through Larry's head when he got dressed in the morning, put on his polo shirt and watch, and spritzed himself with cologne before walking out the door? Who did he think was sniffing him? Who did he think would want to?

Larry soon tired of Diane mishearing him, asking questions he had already answered. She was careless, wearing her hair in a bun he imagined she'd slept in. There

was a smudge of black eye makeup on her temple he couldn't stop staring at, whenever he found himself staring. She submitted the application.

As they stood to leave, she asked for help with her taxes.

\*

Larry rereads texts on his phone, pretending they are new. The smell of cigarettes makes him sick. Diane knows there's nothing he can do to prevent the headache he has told her it gives him. But Diane likes to smoke more than she likes Larry and Larry knows this.

"This day is shit," Diane says. Gloom swirls above their heads. The air is wet and heavy. Larry's forearms are damp from the humidity. The rain is tapping. He hates waiting for the bus, or for anything. He wants Diane to hate it too, but her lips press berry imprints on her cigarette. Waiting is just another thing people do.

Diane asked him once about majoring in accounting. "That's just another way for you to control people."

She wasn't wrong about that, but she was wrong about what she thought it meant. Larry never wanted to be anything except some semblance of happy with a wife and kids to keep him company, and a well-paying job to buy him property. And sure, he liked to play with money. He wanted people to use it for something important. Wives and kids and property.

Larry doesn't mind standing in the rain, but he's owned the same umbrella for six years, and he's excited for the day he can feel it break in his hands and become unusable. He's excited to buy a new one.

\*

In Diane's living room, Larry stepped over a crumpled wet towel on the floor, an empty plastic container for organic spinach, a fork, an empty carton for almond milk. She collected papers from several places. The tax return from her job at Mama's Pizza was underneath the plaid arm chair. Her student loan interest reports were tucked inside the hardback copy of the King James Bible she claimed to only use when she needed to prop her laptop on something to find the perfect angle on her webcam. When she began looting through a bag of recycling in search of a 1099 from her summer internship, Larry excused himself to the bathroom.

His urine swirled potent yellow in the toilet bowl, surprisingly clean, he noticed. He zipped his khakis and stepped to the sink. On the counter next to a tube of organic toothpaste sat a plastic purple dildo. He felt a stab of heat to his stomach. As he washed his hands he stared at it laying there, lifeless. He dried his hands on a blue-striped hand towel he picked up from the floor, the terry cloth cotton worn down from many washes. Was the thing getting bigger, thicker? He draped the towel over the metal wall rack. He turned off the light and stared at the plastic purple dildo, in the late afternoon sunlight, growing. He reached out, brushed his fingertips across the length of it, pressed his fingers to his nose, and smelled nothing. His center pulsed. He felt a swelling.

In the living room Diane sat cross-legged on the floor. She contemplated leaving. When Larry returned he cleared his throat and stood in front of her. She motioned for him to sit on the floor. He nodded, his eyes looking past her. She placed her open laptop in front of him. The screen was dirty. Later, he said, he would bring her a cleaner. She thought he was kidding.

Larry left and returned a few hours later, knocking on her door. He had with him a bottle of blue liquid cleaner and a microfiber cloth. She stepped aside and let him in. She had known he was coming over, he thought, but the apartment wasn't any cleaner.

She watched his fingers press the microfiber against the screen, rotating in small circles, gently scrubbing grime from the surface. After a minute, he pulled his hand away and pointed to the the upper right corner of the screen.

“See how much better that is?”

She nodded. He was pleased. His fingers traced the cloth from the edges of the screen to its center, his movements precise and patient. She noticed his cologne was different. Not better, not worse. She wasn't sure what it meant, but she was sure it meant something.

Sometime later she straddled him and grinded slowly, her palms pressed flat against his stomach. Between his thumb and forefinger, he rolled her nipple, overly determined. His expression bordered concern and she wondered if he was breastfed as a baby. She wanted to ask, but thought better of it.

On his back, he felt heat emanating from her body, swallowing him tightly. Her breasts sagged in a way he didn't know small breasts could sag. He liked it. He liked the way her small breasts sagged.

Larry didn't expect to sleep with Diane, but then he never expected to sleep with anyone. He wasn't sure how he'd ended up underneath her, with fingers that still smelled like blue liquid cleaner. He could hardly remember arriving at her building, or knocking on her door.

Diane never intended to fuck Larry, but then she never intended to fuck any College Republicans. She thought of Larry as her sad excuse for an early quarter life crisis. It wasn't that he wasn't good looking. It wasn't that at all.

\*

A car rolls to the stop sign in front of them.

Diane lights a second cigarette.

Larry sighs.

The rain is tapping.

## II.

It's Saturday night and Diane is watching "morning routine" videos on YouTube. Videos of twenty-two-year-old girl-bloggers from Toronto and Miami wear shirts with phrases like "breathe" and "imagine" across their tits, do yoga next to their salt lamps, blend smoothie bowls in their Vitamix, journal their inner thoughts with bubble script, oil pull while getting dressed. They wear kimonos with fringe, sun dresses, faux leather boots, and blow kisses to the camera with tanned hands and pastel fingernails. Inspirational quotes flash across the screen. Nondescript indie rock with lyrics about California and death and finding God on the subway plays like a soundtrack. Diane imagines that for lunch, they wrap organic kale around organic cherry tomatoes, pop it into their mouths, and smile. She imagines that for dinner they make brown rice, steamed

broccoli, eat a whole avocado, sprinkle hemp hearts and pumpkin seeds on top. She imagines they never get hungry for fried food or cheese danishes, but when they're feeling *bad* they indulge in cacao nibs and giggle about it.

Diane takes notes. She writes a grocery list next to her to-do list. *Almond milk, organic spinach, bananas*. She's saving up for a Vitamix. She turns the paper in her notebook and starts a new list. Morning routine: *wake up at 5:45. Buy a yoga mat.*

Across the living room, Larry browses Facebook. Diane's niece, April, posts selfies from the beach. Sunglasses, lemon-bleached hair, skin browned and glowing. Her thighs shimmer from the coconut oil she swears by in her photo captions. *Better than sunscreen!* The logic doesn't add up for Larry, but he doesn't linger on it. He stares at the white polish on April's toes. He wonders about the sun and how warm it must feel on her feet.

Reruns of *The Big Bang Theory* go ignored until eventually Diane looks up from her laptop, takes out her ear buds and says to Larry, "isn't that guy gay?"

Larry nods.

\*

In the morning, Larry is woken by Diane shaking his shoulder.

"I made orange juice," she says.

"What?"

"I used that little hand juicer I got from your grandmother. Can you believe this is two whole oranges?"

He rolls onto his back as she holds a glass out to him, not quite half full.

"Why did you make orange juice?" he asks, not taking it.

“I thought it would be fun to start our mornings with fresh juice,” she says. Larry stares at her, not moving. Her hair is pulled into a high pony tail, with a headband pushing back her bangs. There are white spots on her face, dried acne medication she forgot to wash off, or didn’t care to. She is smiling.

“Aren’t you going to drink it?”

He takes the glass and sits up.

“It’s really delicious,” she says. “So much better than the bottled stuff.”

He takes a sip and she waits for his reaction.

\*

Diane isn’t a fan of orange juice. It always gives her a stomach ache and leaves an unpleasant burning in her throat. But the first morning she woke up at Larry’s house, he made them frozen waffles and poured her a glass of orange juice. She didn’t want to be rude. It was a sweet gesture, after all. She imagined him grocery shopping the day before, preparing for the potential breakfast they might share if things went well. So when he handed it to her, she thanked him. They clinked glasses and she drank it down. Though she felt sick most of the day, she was happy all the same.

Larry on the other hand hates orange juice, but back then when a woman spent the night at his apartment, it was only appropriate to make her breakfast in the morning. His mother had visited a week prior to the first morning Diane woke up at his apartment, and despite a lifetime of telling his mother he hated orange juice, she insisted that he was wrong, and that he in fact loved orange juice and it was his brother Kevin who hated it, so she stocked his fridge with cartons of it, along with turkey bacon, and frozen waffles. He saw Diane’s unexpected presence in the morning as prime opportunity to use up some of

the orange juice he'd feel too guilty to let expire, while serving the dual benefit of making her feel as if he'd given some thought to her potential night stay.

\*

"It's very good," Larry says, handing the glass back to Diane.

"You don't want the rest?"

"Not in bed. Let me get up. I need to piss."

On the toilet, Larry sits so long he imagines the seat will be warm when he finally stands. Diane hasn't knocked yet. He stares out the window into their back yard. The kids' swing set is beginning to rust. He doesn't want to sand it down, or think about the rain raining down rust again. Larry had wanted to buy a new swing set but this one was left here by the previous owners. Diane told him it was useless to buy a new one when this one just needed a little special attention. He wanted a new one, but she insisted. *Let's work on this one first.*

Four months after moving in, Larry has already sanded it twice.

Diane waits for Larry at the kitchen counter. She had already screened the newspaper and selected articles she thought Larry might enjoy. There was a new column he followed by a local graduate student who wrote about politics in baseball metaphors. Diane didn't read it herself, but she knew Larry liked it so she thought it must be decent. Larry had a taste for that sort of thing.

She looks at the microwave. It had been twenty-eight minutes since she came back to the kitchen after waking Larry. In that time, she washed her face and brushed her teeth in the powder room. She rinsed the remains of her green smoothie from the mini-blender she bought at the gym hours earlier. They were having a special on protein

powder and Hamilton Beach personal blenders. They were 20% off if she upgraded her membership.

Larry rinses his hands. He hates the lingering taste of orange juice on his tongue. He brushes his teeth with organic toothpaste, then spits the white foam into the sink and watches it creep slowly toward the drain. He expects he will be swallowing down orange juice every morning until Diane decides one day she's tired of her fingers feeling sticky, gritty from pulp and rind. He hopes this day will come soon.

In the kitchen, Diane decides she will make Larry fresh orange juice every morning. She loves the feeling of her fingers digging into veiny fruit, watching it squirt juice, leaving her hands a mess. She imagines how happy it will make Larry to be woken each day to a smile and sweet, pungent juice, freshly squeezed. He will rub his eyes, tuck loose hair behind her hair, kiss her palm and thank her. And after a few weeks, her shrinking, slimmed body will fit more comfortably on the edge of the bed, and he will press his palm against her stomach under her shirt, and slide it up to her breast. She will moan and he will moan, pulling her onto him. He will kiss her, roll her over, and slide inside of her. The orange juice will knock over on the bedside table, drip down onto the floor, but they won't notice.

Diane glances at the microwave. Maybe she should check on Larry.

Larry stares in the sink, at the white foam inching toward the drain.

Diane knocks.

### III.

It's the first day of baseball season and Diane is already bored. Her sons, Bryton and Ian will be happy to play again, to have a reason to run and fall and ruin their clothes on the green park grass. But last year she didn't have to attend the practices or the games or the season-end awards ceremony where they were given trophies just for showing up, not getting injured, and not suing. She had a husband then. And her husband took care of those things.

Before Diane is fully parked, Bryton and Ian spill out from the doors of her car. Their metal baseball bats clink in the bag on Bryton's back as they sprint toward the dugout. Diane doesn't move. She watches their legs pump as they run, cleats kicking dusty clumps of grass in the air.

“Motherfuckers.”

Four months earlier, she had personally argued with the park service to keep the grass watered. She reasoned that there was no point in living in a township with unreasonably high taxes if the children would have to scrape their knees on dry grass and dirt. She thought of the park director's face during the meeting, scrunched and red like a puckered asshole. She searches her purse for cigarettes.

In the dugout, Larry counts heads. With Bryton and Ian finally arriving, he is only short one boy. He could work with that. He tells them to gather around and they listen. He gives them a speech and says something about the value of hard work and practice. He makes some reference to their last game, when they lost 0-6. He talks about the meaning of success. They're scratching their pre-pubescent balls. Their eyes are watching bees swarm around the hive in the corner of the dugout he'd already told the park service

about. They're trying their best not to talk. Larry hears himself quote Winston Churchill. He wonders what the fuck he's doing here.

Larry leans on the metal piped fencing at the front of the dugout as the boys run onto the field. The evening sun warms his face, but his back is cold under the shade of the structure. The boys begin to run laps, racing to be at the head of the group. Bryton outruns them all, with Ian trailing closely behind. The other boys work hard to keep up, except for Jeffrey, his son, who drags his feet, kicking the dusty ground with his cleats, refusing to run.

When Jeffrey was born, Larry was thrilled to have a son. He showed his wife the baseball glove he kept from his days in Little League that he intended to give Jeffrey when he was old enough to play. The first time they threw ball, Larry, too excited, hurled it at Jeffrey, who didn't care to lift his glove high enough to block the ball, and it hit him square in the face. Jeffrey sobbed, two baby teeth knocked into his palm, blood spewing from his gums, his nose oozing long ropes of clear, stringy snot. Larry's wife screamed, slapping Larry's face, punching at his chest and arms. It didn't matter that it was an accident. All that mattered was that Jeffrey was hurt and it was Larry's fault.

Diane reverses her car out of its spot, already on her second cigarette. She has two hours to herself. Maybe she'd see a movie. Maybe she'd go to Olive Garden and order a basket of breadsticks and eat the entire thing. Maybe she'd sit in the Walmart parking lot and finger herself. Maybe she'd be side-swiped by an SUV, lose control, and propel her car into the river. Maybe she'd fuck a stranger at Burger King and later abort his baby. But as she shifts her car into drive, she sees two bottles of PowerAde in the rearview mirror nestled together on the back seat.

“Motherfuckers.”

She presses down on the breaks and shifts the car back into park. She stares at the bottles and contemplates dehydration. Would it be the worst thing for them? As far she knew there were no lasting effects. Headaches. Fainting. Temporary discomfort so she could gorge herself on breadsticks. She glances at her near translucent reflection in the windshield. She contemplates the definition of child abuse.

She shifts her car back into drive and parks. She reaches back to grab the bottles, but they’re just out of reach. Sighing through cigarette-pressed lips, she opens the car door, steps outside into the early spring sunlight, slams it, opens the back door, grabs the bottles, slams it shut, stomps out her cigarette and heads for the dugout.

Larry knows he should have whistled by now, signaling the boys to stop running, but he doesn’t. He’s waiting for Jeffrey to kick up his cleats, to start running, to work to catch up to the other boys.

“C’mon, you little shit. *Run.*” He hates the sound of himself muttering. His wife tells him it’s unsettling.

“Excuse me.” A female voice carries through the dugout. He looks up. A thin woman with dark sun glasses is looking in his direction.

“My boys forgot their PowerAde.”

Diane waits for the coach to say something, but he just motions toward the bench behind him. She steps into the dugout and places the bottles next to Bryton’s bag she can only recognize as his for the initials he drew on the side with permanent marker. The coach doesn’t move. He’s watching the boys run.

“How can you stand to watch that?” she says. He pulls his gaze away from the field and looks at her. His eyes are blue and kind. She hates herself for noticing.

“My kid won’t run,” Larry tells her. He points to Jeffrey. “You see him? I’m the coach and I can’t even get my own kid to run laps.”

Diane looks at the boy, dragging his feet on the grass, clouds of dust pooling around his legs.

“Look at that grass,” she says. “They’re supposed to water it, those motherfuckers.”

“Who, the park service?” Larry asks. Diane takes off her sun glasses and places them on her head.

“Yeah. They’re supposed to water it twice a week.”

“They’ll never do that,” he says with a disgusted laugh. “See that hive? I told them about it twice already. You think they’d take care of it before the kids came out here.”

“Fuckers. They told me they’d water it. I went to one of those township meetings like two months ago,” she says, shuffling through her purse, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “Care if I smoke?”

“Not in the dugout,” he says. She pulls out a cigarette anyway and places it between her lips. She doesn’t light it.

“These fields are shit. For all the taxes we pay, it’s ridiculous.”

Larry nods and watches her grab the cigarette from her mouth and examine it, rolling it between her thumb and forefinger, overly determined.

“So which ones are yours?” he says, nodding toward the field.

“Bryton and Ian.”

“Oh, so your Dan’s wife?”

Diane laughs. She doesn’t mean to, but really, how else could she react to that description? *Dan’s wife*. As if that meant anything, even when it was still true.

“Sorry, did I say something?” Larry asks.

“No, it’s just funny, that’s all.”

“What’s funny?”

“That’s all you know about me. I’m Dan’s wife, Bryton and Ian’s mom.” She places the cigarette between her lips, clicks her lighter, inhales deeply.

“I don’t know what to say,” he says, wafting away the smoke. It’s not worth saying anything, he decides. He can deal with the smoke. It’s only one cigarette.

“Right. I mean, I get that it’s my fault. Of course that’s all I am. You don’t know me. I don’t come to games. I don’t come to practice. I don’t go to that fucking awards ceremony. I just go to township meetings and argue for grass to be watered, because believe it or not, that is more pleasant than watching ten years olds playing fucking baseball,” she says, pausing to take another drag from her cigarette. “But I have to be a good mother, you know? I’ve got to come through for these kids. I mean, shit, I’ve only got like, what, three years until they hate me forever?”

Larry looks at Jeffrey standing in the field, now not even walking. He knows his wife thinks baseball is bullshit. He knows Jeffrey thinks so too. When he refuses to throw ball with Larry, he cries to her, and she holds him. They draw pictures together. She reads him books.

“Not all boys hate their mothers,” Larry says.

“Mine will. Their father’s a dick. I’m sure they’ll be dicks too once they’re older.”

“Probably,” Larry mutters. Diane laughs smoke in his direction. “You have another one of those?” he asks.

Diane smiles.

“Sure.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a cigarette. She hands it to him along with the lighter. “It’s my last one, so you better enjoy it.”

“I didn’t think anyone smoked anymore,” he says, lighting it.

“I think I’m the last one.” She watches him inhale, eyes pressed shut. He holds the smoke in his lungs for a second, then releases it through his nostrils.

“My wife made me quit three years ago. I was the last one in the family.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. My brother, Kevin, got lung cancer five years ago. He’s fine and everything, but the family just sort of freaked. All the smokers gave it up,” he says. He takes another drag and smiles. “Still took me a few years.”

“You’re doing a great job,” Diane says. He laughs and extends his hand.

“I’m Larry.”

She takes it.

“Diane.”

Twenty-Eight

## Twenty-Eight

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I.

*She was a villain spool of light caught in the back of your throat. Every time you  
breathed in, your lungs were heavy with emptiness and maggot ash.*

*In the early days you told her this: "I am happy, so very happy, to walk through each day  
with your words in my pocket, promises of desire."*

The Daily Work of Caretaking and Witness – Part I.

After Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

On other Saturday nights I passed time shuffling work from one side of the desk to the other, waiting for the piles of paper to talk. I shoved plastic objects into my body, over and over and over, until I sometimes bled, until I often came, until I wanted to leave my body, or be inside of someone else's. I fell asleep on the floor, whispered words into my fingerprints, traced them through the floorboards, wondering who can hear them, if anyone even cared to.

*“Feeling Real...the collected, primary sensation of aliveness. It is a sensation – a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live.”*

In previous weeks he said “you make me feel so fucking alive” but when we met, he said he was dead inside. No part of him meant this to be dramatic, or provoke my feminine urge to rebirth him back into the land of the living. He just said it. The same way you say you need to pick up dry cleaning, as if anyone does that anymore. I told him that inside my body was one long, sinewy string, pulling me taut, building my posture, forcing feeling within me.

“That’s a good way to be,” he told me. “I just can’t do that anymore.”

*“The freedom to be happy restricts human freedom if you are not free to be not happy.”*

Sometime later he told me the story of a little girl in Iraq whose throat was blown open by shrapnel. He used a pen to dislodge the terror from her voice. Now ten years later she's still alive, working as an interpreter. They are friends on Facebook.

"There's this African root that can cure me," he said. "For \$20,000 I go to Mexico or Canada and take it."

He said some nights when he is driving he swerves to avoid piles of leaves for fear they might explode and take the hearing from his other ear. He's said some nights he can't fall asleep because he still hears screaming, screaming, the sound of humanity collapsing in sand and sweat.

I tell him to go to Canada.

*"Love is preferred but not required."*

His eyes frighten me, unsteady and bloodshot, his lips twitch with the trace of a smile, and every noise I wouldn't have heard if he had not been standing there with me makes him flinch, but he told me that he doesn't have PTSD like the other guys do – he keeps busy, he writes, then he kisses me and before I can take a breath he pulls me into him, my face deep in his scent, and I am immobilized, my bones conforming to his as he inhales in a way he says he has not in years, and I know he can't remember the last time he's held someone who didn't ask him to let go.

*"How it feels to be both accomplice and victim; and how such ambivalences can live on."*

I am a childless woman, but I know what it means to grow someone inside of me, tube feed them love until their mouth foams, and they spit up blood. I have birthed my own death story which reads like this: in the last hours of life on Earth, I cut open my body, peel back the skin, and scoop out pulpy handfuls of flesh with the cup of my palms and hand them to him, the long string of my insides dangling red and ugly.

Through his jeans, I feel him grow in my fingers, like magic or majesty, or just a dick filled with blood like the rest of him (and me); life is hard and so many other things.

Through his jeans, I feel wetness forming in a small ring, his dick salivating, puckering its lips for me.

*“Her mind – besotted [it] with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique.”*

Isn't it interesting how you can like somebody so much you want to find a way to fit them inside of you (?) and then go on living (?) carrying around the muscle memory of the space you made for them in your body (?) every day bridging the emptiness you were born with (?)

Isn't it interesting how you can like somebody and want to be encased (?) swallowed whole by the fleshy warmth of them (?) as if you are only human (?) capable of filling, filling, filling *something* (?)

How many times have you asked for a blow job, when all you really wanted was someone to kneel before you and cradle your tenderness with wet-lipped longing(?)

Sunday comes when Saturday is still sticky in the palm of my hand.

\*All italicized text in this essay is from Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*.

## The Person – Part I.

They get to know one another through explanations. *I am married, but only a little*, he says in words carefully carved. *I am empty, (fill me), or at least take me somewhere*, she says.

He drives, she entertains, and they descend into the city. Hands touch, and there is nothing to show for it but flesh. She contemplates the trap of determined movement, forced connection, plans she wishes to unmake, but remains for the cage of well-mannered obligation.

In a rented room he accepts her standing before him, not quite what he expected. More plump, perhaps, or was it something else? The human form looks better two dimensional. In fact, this is what he knows for sure: pixelated chemistry is the greatest ingredient for disappointment.

Still her energy rouses him, a warm-blooded, pink-skinned, reality before him. There is heat among them, possibly the air vent blowing, or something else more human. They smoke cigarettes and exhale clouds in each other's faces. He lights a joint. She points out the flaw in the design of the room. She asks him to take her somewhere.

Fingers locked they pass through body, after body, on streets, the cityscape a cold December gray. They land in an underground bar, beneath a boot store selling pink, bedazzled cowgirl hats and key chains shaped like Tennessee. He orders a buffalo chicken sandwich and she lies about being a vegetarian. Their eyes are on other people. Chewing becomes an apology for empty conversation.

They return to the streets. He pulls tickets from his wallet. In the concert hall her seat is behind his, and he apologizes, though they are both relieved for the break in

company so they shrug at one another and act disappointed. *These were all I could get*, he says. *We'll make the most of it*, she says.

Her eyes follow girls in summer dresses paired with winter coats and torn stockings walking arm-in-arm with boys in dark denim with overly-styled facial hair. She wonders what they mean to each other. She wonders if they see her, too.

Lights go down. Body after body enters the stage, picking up instruments, and staring back. Sound explodes a glow of red and blue. In front of her she can see he is dancing, freer than her. Everyone is dancing. Singing. Everyone is celebrating something she doesn't know.

Back at the hotel he's too tired to drive her home, and since he's only staying for the night he buys her a contact case and saline solution so she can stay there too. On either side of the bed they take off their clothes. He enjoys how her body changes shape with every piece she removes.

She sits on the bed and he stands on the mattress above her, sliding himself between her lips, deep into her mouth. She considers this the best use of her remaining time with him.

He finishes and collapses next to her, pulling her close. She smells like baked bread, train whistles, apple picking, and sugar coursing through him. He falls asleep.

Her mouth tastes like shoe polish. He has taken her somewhere, filled her with something. What if every time she wanted someone to taste, she really just meant *someone to hold*.

Let me tell you about the person forever tasting empty.

## On Not Getting Fucked in New Mexico

There are no grocery stores in Santa Rosa, New Mexico but only a series of gas stations with bags of chips the color of radioactivity and canned meat without expiration dates. When we were there you bought macaroni the color of spit up and we joked about suicide.

We started a fire with an old cat food can and some lighter fluid and we ate boiled pasta with our fingers until darkness swallowed the desert whole.

You lay on your back on the floor of the tent and pulled me onto you – bare skin, bare skin. A rock dug into your neck and you winced, so I got on my knees. You pushed me flat, And promised to split me open until my legs began to shake.

I waited, chin resting on the sleeping bag beneath us.

*I can't* I heard and you fell quickly asleep at my side. I touched myself until my cheeks were wet.

There are no coyotes in the New Mexico desert, just dogs grown tired of electrical fencing and flea medication. They howl through cacti in unison and you can almost hear them commanding you, *Run*.

## Casual Encounters of the Genuine Kind – Part I.

Today at Starbucks - w4m (\_\_\_\_\_)

Age: 28

Let me preface all of this with UGHHHHHHH.

Now that that's out of the way.

Today at Starbucks I took your seat when you were leaving. You said you were coming back later and I told you I'd give the seat back to you if you did. When you returned, you started talking to me but I was listening to music. I offered to move (mostly as a joke) and you laughed, and I laughed, and you smiled, and I smiled, and as much as I am sure this meant nothing to you and was just general friendliness, I found you so fucking attractive that for the next few hours that I sat there working, I couldn't keep from glancing over at you from time to time. You are so attractive.

Like I said, this was a completely normal, friendly interaction, which felt only slightly flirty, but who can say? I had no basis to think that you would be interested in talking beyond this which is why I didn't want to be a creep and continue trying to talk to you, or ask you out, or shove my boobs in your face. Just kidding. I would never have done that.

But here is another layer of this entire thing. You looked really REALLY familiar to me and I don't know why. I am sure the reason is because I just want you to be familiar to me (carnally speaking of course). I think you may have been someone I had some kind of interaction with at some point in my life. That couldn't be more vague, could it? But who cares.

There is basically no chance you are going to read this, but if you do, and if you were interested and/or also found me familiar looking, then I would love to hear from you. If you see this and are NOT interested, then just know that some random woman finds you distractingly sexy, to the point that they post foolish things on Craigslist.

## II.

*And when you are gone, I will be gone, for my mind will know nothing but your words,  
and your words will be nothing more than blood-sap scraping.*

*For this you will remember me, cracking open, making room for you. From this you will  
know my sorrow of not knowing you sooner.*

*Oh my loveliness, you've reawakened the coal-burn of my want, my want this thing you  
carry. Won't you know me? I know you. I've carved holes.*

## The Daily Work of Caretaking and Witness – Part II.

Let us begin.

Semi-strangers sink slowly. In this moment we are \_\_\_\_\_.

I recognize his eyes are hardly blinking, but the voices of the girls laughing outside in their PINK sweatpants and the boys outside with their hearts pulsing through wallet-condoms and evening ambitions mingle and carry the night air, ascend the white-washed brick of the outside wall, and filter into my living room, through us.

In this moment we are *standing*.

I tell myself this story.

Through the windows of each room, of each house, on each street, in each neighborhood, in each town, there are strangers stranger to one another than us to each other. Through the lull of our words, I confess: *I don't know how I feel*, the subtext of which: *I wasn't ready to feel*.

Of all the semi-strangers sinking or standing, I begin to think of us as the greatest pair of all.

*If you want me, then I'm yours*. He says this.

In this moment we are *holding*.

On dead leaf porches.

Fight the urge to rename THIS something beautiful. It's not fucking beautiful. It's dead leaves on porches, burning through matches, never catching fire.

I fuck to come, not to conceive.

We all conceive of something. Words like *forever* and *always* branded in the scar of their letters, smoldering.

He told me of scars on his ribs, now covered up with drawings. He tells me the story of aching, the father he almost became, the sunshine daydream of becoming someone else. All I can think of are my lips tracing his scar tissue, hardened PINK.

Misfiring from the start.

We are semi-strangers sinking slowly, but in this moment we are falling.

In love(?) possibly with everything(?).

Through our fingers, interlocked and swinging, the girls' laughs, the boys' voices, singing. Singing.

But here we are.

In this moment we are something.

## The Person – Part II.

It was February and the snow billowed in shimmers of white. He was still in bed, sleeping, his body curled in on itself under the crocheted blanket she draped over him when she woke and saw him shivering. It was the morning after the first night he stayed at her apartment. They had not even known each other for two weeks at that point, but the night before he came to see her unexpectedly, not knowing a storm was coming that would ultimately barricade him inside of her apartment for the next five days as Tennessee fell into disrepair. She watched him from the doorway as oatmeal bubbled over on the stove. He looked tired and broken in a way sleeping in could never fix.

Later that day he shuffled into the living room, shirtless and rubbing his eyes to tell her that he thought he might be getting sick. He apologized for being stuck in her apartment, for burdening her with his unexpected presence and potential illness. But as he spoke to her from across the room, standing in the strip of sun cascading across the tiled floor, she was consumed.

She made them vegetarian chili and cornbread. They sat on opposite ends of the couch, their spoons clinking against the ceramic bowls as they ate, scooping bites of bean, tomato, and spice into their hungry mouths. They talked about music for awhile and he played her some songs that made him cry. She put on a Bob Dylan record and sang and danced badly to “Spanish Harlem Incident.” *You have slayed me, you have made me, I got to laugh halfways off my heels. I got to know, babe, will you surround me so I can know if I am real?*

Night fell and they were still sitting on her couch. He told her how it felt the first time he held his son, like life exploded somewhere within him. He recalled the first time he watched the little boy stand and walk away from him, toddling toward independence. He shared the mistakes he'd made, the regrets of not being a better father when his son was still a child, of hurting him beyond repair as he grew into adulthood. Then he asked her about her father. What felt like years passing was just him, cracking her open, cradling confessions she had never shared with anyone before, that no one had ever asked to hear. Over the course of the week she surrendered to him – shared stories of her childhood, her early-twenties divorce, a rape she had never spoken of before, out loud to anyone. When he found out she was writing a novel he asked to see it. He held the manuscript in his hands and read it to her, the entire thing, out loud, until three in the morning. He laughed at all the right spots, stopped to admire certain phrases, life observations, emotional truths he said he recognized as his own. When he finished he handed it back to her. *Now you have to finish writing it.* He didn't know it then, but she knew she was in love with him, and couldn't be cured by sleeping in or waking up.

Let me tell you about the person shatter-cracked into someone new.

Letter from the Third Day at War

spread your legs and feel the life  
fucked out of you      though nothing can kill you like the rattling of his breath arising  
from your lungs      or were they his fingers tightening against the leak of your throat  
collapsing the crawlspace between life and death      airtight      he lays  
you down swallowed grinding dirt through gaps in your teeth asking if you like it  
you do  
rise again      tell yourself this means      war  
never happened      but there are shells lying      to you on the bedroom floor from the  
first time you held mortality to your head like a trophy  
sweet tendrils of connectivity severed      your brain bleeding pulpy  
regret into sheets like ink swollen      in your hands crushed with raspberry defeat  
the sound  
hollowing as you sleep      his words paralyzing those things you still believe from the  
time you spread your legs      and watched your life ripped out of you

## Casual Encounters of the Genuine Kind – Part II.

We Both Have Nightmares All the Time - w4m (\_\_\_\_\_)

Age: 28

I know things have changed and that we are both just doing our best to deal. But this morning I woke up from a nightmare. I know you know how that feels. I woke up four hours ago and I'm still paralyzed by what happened in my nightmare, because the pain was the reality of what happened with us.

I spent this morning reading through every post on Craigslist in (\_\_\_\_\_) and (\_\_\_\_\_) to see if you were looking to replace me. I am sure you already have. All I think about is you fucking someone else. You doing all the things you did with me with someone new. In my dream you were with someone younger than me. You sent me pictures of her from your POV while you were fucking her. She had a back tattoo of lyrics from one of my favorite musicians and I remember thinking that you were destroying me in every way you could, and you were enjoying it. I woke up shaking, barely able to breathe.

I know that was only a dream. But I know you are with someone else, intuitively.

I want to fuck someone else so badly. I am desperate for it, but no one will ever be you. You were everything I ever wanted. You brought me more pleasure than I ever thought I'd experience. You have consumed me. I can't even come on my own without feeling an ache of pain for you. You imprinted on me. I will never be able to experience sex or my own body without triggering memories of you.

The pain of this last year and a half is starting to smother me. I don't know how I'm going to recover. At this point, I'm not even worried about falling in love again and moving on. I'm worried about functioning. For so long your trauma became my trauma and now there is a vacuum. You filled up every capacity of my heart and mind.

### III.

*For the love of her vices, oh God, the trap of walls consumes her. How she has succumbed to them, the holes of ravenous, open-mouthed wetness.*

*In winter you bathed inside the fleshy scald of her. Your skin charred into black, curling away from you, though you loved the scent of burning.*

### The Daily Work of Caretaking and Witness – Part III.

On rainwater nights my throat feels for man. Whatever it means to want I shed bullets of it. On a trip across state lines, I rent a room safer than any home I've known, devoid of my identity. A man has been texting me. He knows what hotel I'll be staying at. He knows the color of my inner thighs. He knows I'm only staying for the night. I'm sure he has a name.

When he arrives he texts *I'm here*: declaration he is alive. I wait for his knock, to be greeted by the barrel of him. In the many years I've done this, introduced my body to strangers in hotel rooms, I've never stopped imagining them laying it down, slicing it open, bleeding it out, my heart pumping swells of black cherry insides into the bedsheets, soaking through to the mattress pad, imbuing the air with inside-out-human scent.

Fifteen minutes later I am not dead yet. He is licking my body and my throat is feeling to moan and my muscles are feeling to clench, but I know this won't happen because my body is numb to his. I need his declaration for myself, but I don't know it. I think about his mother for no reason at all, a woman who gave life to a man, *this* man, and somehow went on living.

I consider the risk in giving your body to someone, spreading it open and spewing life from your depths. There is more than one way to use this body.

I've seen men do magic. I've seen my silhouette in mirrors. I've seen legs clamp shut, mouth lockjaw, gaping unguarded. I've seen women bend back humanity like a whisper in their hands.

He stands up, steps back. I shift to my knees and ask what he wants to do next before I see him pulling on his jeans. I have spilled onto the sheets the giant pool of black cherry insides.

He is getting dressed. I am apologizing. He is shrugging.

*It happens*, he says, like periods happen, like everything has an ending.

*It happens*, I say, like I am alive, like I am giving life with my unsliced insides.

He must have a name, but I don't care to know it.

I am not him.

### The Person – Part III.

In the moments before opening the door she stares at the hotel's fire escape instructions posted beneath the peephole. Her lips are sticky and her tongue is dry. She is contemplating all the uses for her mouth. She is contemplating her own demise. Knuckles tap lightly on the other side.

His hair is shoulder-length, tied back half way like she wore it once to a middle school dance. She lets him in.

*You look pretty*, he says, though she can't be sure he has looked at her yet.

*Thanks.*

He is taller than she expected, face thinner and longer. He smells like cigarettes.

*So you're just visiting for the night?* He asks and she decides at once that she hates his voice, which sounds too much like an actor whose name she doesn't know, but who she has seen ruin too many films she'd otherwise love.

*Yeah*, she says. *Let's not talk.* She smiles when she says it, so it isn't rude, but she knows it doesn't matter if it is or not because he is now on the bed, balancing on bony knees.

When they kiss she waits for the burn in her to rise from her stomach, to her nipples, to her throat, for the sheets to singe beneath them, the curtains to catch, and the room to glow with unbridled flame charring the walls with the sear of her want.

But when they kiss there is nothing.

His fingers are in her hair and she is safe floating somewhere else above them.  
She can no longer taste his cigarette. She cannot hear his voice. Her back is flat against  
the ceiling. She watches.

Let me tell you about the person, performing.

## River Ice

Out of the mouths of rivers, babes are thrashing, red-faced and suckling marrow from mother's bones. Lips furl over mossy teeth milking her raw, flooding the best minds of our generation, swallowing spit up and dribbling howls from strangers.

This is what the river thinks of mothering: starving and naked hysteria strung like Christmas lights.

This is what the river thinks of your body starving and naked: hysterical as you lift my dress above my arms and bathe me in waters that for so long called me by another name.

I wasn't born by the river; I don't go down to pray. I stand on the shores beating back black sunflower eyes. The blues of the water, thick with magenta regret, legs numb below the knee, are stiff from river ice.

Into your mouth, I step stone-tied, weightless and silt-swallowed. Your fingertips leave scars on my skin in the shape of Allen Ginsberg's spit. You were born cradled in the crease of your mother's neck. I was born to untangle her voice from your father's fist.

My dress settles on the rocks and tells me *you're madder than I am*. Your hollowness traces my name in rug burns.

This river is starving. I milk hysteria from termite eggs. This river knows nothing of sacrifice, it's nothing but ice, mistaken.

### Casual Encounters of the Genuine Kind – Part III.

This is Not a Post for the Girl You're Fucking (\_\_\_\_\_)

age:28

Careful, girl. I know how he makes you feel seen for the first time. There is a smolder to his gangrene-blue eyes. But you should never underestimate the power of hormone fluctuations. I know how he makes you feel the howl of motherhood rattling in your bones. But test his hatred for a thinking woman. Think of yourself as more than a vessel for him to lay his future inside. Think of yourself as more than a welcome mat for his fucked up life.

## And Then You Wonder What's Buried Beneath the Floorboards

As a kid when I poured salt on the slugs that climbed the walls of our pool, ascending from wet grass glistening in late July sun, their bodies fell like fat severed thumbs of children, shriveled on their backs, and faced my floating fingerprints lingering above. Their bodies, raisin-rattled thirsting for so long, I watched and laughed at before knowing what it meant to want withered breath to lick salt from fingertips.

Still, you're salting walls to shatter-crack my skull and crawl back to bed like the hum beneath the floorboards that hasn't ever been so deaf. My spine is shriveled in my back. I am severed from this. I have hungered for your thirst.

But I was told I could drill bone with strangers and promise never to fall in love. Still, you saw me and I saw you and knew this thirst would end us too. When water tasted of saline. When grass shimmered summer crystal. When our July sun descended into winter. When our wounds chafed holes in each others' skin. When I heeded the howl of translucence. When I couldn't find you anywhere else but beneath my floorboards, slugging rainwater.

#### IV.

*Putting voice to the words of longing and animating life, she lets you in on the secret: she needs you to ask for it.*

*You were offered to her: warm-blooded, pulsing, and penetrating the space she created to let you in. It is nothing to deny her this.*

*You welded her jagged and cut the flowers from her hair. Road-side roses were mulched meaningless. You slithered from the cracks then fled unarmed toward newness.*

The Daily Work of Caretaking and Witness – Part IV.

The next time I die I will rot my way out of this skin.

When I become a mother again I will plant my womb in a fish tank, take notes on embryo growth, draw smiley faces on the glass in fog, and go about my day.

The next time I fall in love I will drop mushroom-cloud rainbow rings on my tongue and blow kisses to my feet. This will mean something when the world's roots have rung dry and all that we have are bruises in every color. In this love I intend to bruise.

When I kiss again I will taste for rainwater and when I do I will spit the acid from my lips and taste again.

When I meet my body I will shake hands with it, admire its bruises, and ask how to get inside, to which my body will reply *easily*.

The next time I am born I will do it differently. I will ask “How long do we remain strangers to those people we let inside of us?” and someone will answer.

## The Person – Part IV.

Born of a cry and ripped into the world with fists tight. Swollen, red-faced  
nothing bundled in blue. Three fourths of a someone, incomplete for the number of years  
he has lived without.

Ragged, as he fell asleep slug-lipped and stupid while whistling loose breath into  
the cloud of her hair, she must let him lay there, their bodies strung together, like insects  
in sticky heat. She pretends not to notice the way her hands look like fallen snow  
wrapped in the burning leaves of his fingers. Inside she longs for the calcium clots of the  
years he has lived so long before her. Even his bones are older than her. He is nothing  
known and nothing knew.

*Let me tell you about the person whose bones echo louder.*

She works hard for his greens and his blues.

## How to Not to Use Your Safe Word

We sat across from one another.

He smiled. I smiled. I hadn't eaten in two days. We agreed to meet.

*You're very sexy*, he said. I grinned and agreed:

*Let's make the hole much deeper in me.*

He said, *pick a word, any word*,

one with no connection to sex that will grow on your tongue furry wet and feel safe in the mouths of strangers.

He said, *how about a color?*

Forget that *blue* is your eyes, your favorite dress, the rabbit foot key chain you held as a

kid.

*Blue* is just another word for *I'm sorry*.

He said, *Let's fuck strangers* (it was easier to take)

*We don't know each other anyway* (than that look on his face)

*And it would be so much fun to watch* (if I were to whisper blue)

*But only if you want to*

He told strangers, *she'd never use it*.

*No limits.*

No limits.

*Stop* is just another word for *hello*.

## Casual Encounters of the Genuine Kind – Part IV.

Insatiable Woman Needs You to Read this Ad, Please :) – (\_\_\_\_\_)

Age: 28

Full disclosure, I'm writing this post orgasm, my panties still around my ankles, my body still quivering. It felt good, it always does. It's an orgasm, right? But there comes a point when toys will not do it for me, and even the ripple of pleasure I experience when I come from my own efforts does not fulfill me for longer than five minutes before my body returns to the pulsing ache of need it feels in its constant craving for the only thing that could truly satisfy it which is... GENUINE HUMAN CONNECTION.<sup>1</sup>

I NEED GENUINE HUMAN CONNECTION. The last time I had genuine human connection was when I was in a relationship several months ago. After that, I stopped connecting for awhile because, I don't know, emotional reasons? I guess I thought I was making some sort of progress by not attempting genuine connection with randos whenever my pulse quickened, and I felt that familiar heat rising through my body in my desperate craving to spread open and get destroyed. I posted a few ads on here and people replied who did little to impress me, or ensure that they could deliver the kind of genuine human connection I was really craving. So I continued to NOT genuinely connect with anyone for months.

In any case, I did attempt with someone a little over a month ago and it was a total disaster, which felt like God smiting me for succumbing to a libido I've been carrying around my entire life like a punishment every time I've been single or have tried to be "healthy" about my impulses. So here I am. I have done my time, or something like it, attempting to keep from genuinely connecting with people so that I could move on from my shit monster ex in a productive, responsible way. This is the longest I have gone without consistent genuine human connection since I lost my virginity and frankly, my body was not built for celibacy. My body was built for passionate, sweaty, life-destroying, all-consuming, tear-each-other-open-and-pass-the-fuck-out-afterward genuine human connection on a REGULAR basis. All of my exes would agree that I am something more than insatiable for it and soon you will too.

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<sup>1</sup> I get it. You are young and hopeful and probably think your life won't end up here, and that writing ads when you can't sleep seeking some discreet physical experience is too pathetic and nauseating to bear and replying to strangers whose body parts are weirdly squishy in places they shouldn't be is somehow beneath you, but guess what? In five years when you are aching to be touched in some way that doesn't make you want to curl up and die or disinfect afterward, you will find yourself writing a brutally honest sex ad late one night and swapping out every "cock, dick, and fuck" for something like "genuine human connection," in your search for honesty in a world that takes a steaming dump on your forehead every time you aim to tell the truth about something, you will finally ask yourself why you ever thought it was anything less than fucking fearless to seek genuine human connection when all anyone really wants is sex.

V.

*When I am gone, and I will be, you will still be here. You must never forget the roads you carved through carry your name written clear.*

The Daily Work of Caretaking and Witness – Part V.

On the day I was born, I sprouted in a bed of magma, tore through bedrock and ascended blistered through the ocean floor, floated weightless to the top, and ambled into being.

Years later, miles away, I was pushed through floorboards, unfurled through a spool of carpet fiber, and resurrected as a pulsing wound that named each vibration a miracle.

Then the light came: the hole in my center is sensory.

Perhaps for some, such nakedness is a futile empty excuse for seeking cover under ancient footprints, blank-faced promises, mirror illusions of tenderness, or the fourth wall hanging above, never broken. But I spoke to the mother and this is what she told me:

You are young; this is why it hurts.

You are young and the sum of everything.

You are young; this is why you've stopped asking questions.

You are young; this is why you question everything.

You are young; this is how the world is carving its roads through you.

You are young; this is why your fire is not gentle.

You are young; this is why your light dies in shadows and is reborn,  
barefoot in rain-soaked moss.

You are young and this living makes you.

## The Person – Part V.

Boneless barreling backward, she is resting in the arms of a stranger, unmoving. His fingers, thick and rough, tap code into her temples and they tell her she is learning. She knows his lips leak words like spellbound lies. *I could so fall for you.* But what is it to fall aside from feeling weightless?

A week later in a car in a parking lot, he will tell her *I have somehow fallen in love with you* and she will cry and spit and drip snotty strings of resentment onto his leather seats. *You don't know me.* In her mind she will scream these words and they will splatter against the windshield and streak the glass with their insides. But he will say he couldn't hear her as he hands her a tissue and she decides not to repeat this.

*Let me tell you about the person, weightless.*

Casual Encounters of the Genuine Kind – Part V.

You're so fucked up, I couldn't help but have it for you (\_\_\_\_\_)

Age: 28

Listen. Don't worry about me. Just share your life story with my email account. And then maybe we can become people to fuck, or tell stories about later in life when things get boring. Maybe none of that will happen. Maybe boredom is just a state of mind I don't believe in. What does it all mean?

Make me laugh. Make me fucking smile with delight. I will do my best to sing you free. Or make you laugh in return. Who cares who and what we even are? We have one fucking hard life most of the time. So let's just be free with each other. Let's blow our lives open wide for hello.

## Let Us Wake in the Morning (At Once Golden)

Facing honey-hollowed sunrise and spread feeble as children, let us dip toes in the other side of longing for what was promised to us. In the sketchbooks of chalk outlines we carry in our arms like sacrifice, let us crawl past each other's door, separated only by floor boards.

Let us fall together through shirt pockets stained crimson, treating every kiss like feed for our egos. Let us empty strangers into our mouths, gurgle gun smoke at one another, parrot our fathers, make ourselves worthy to vanish one day into nothing but fossil eyes charred by amber-adled sunlight.

Let us talk like no one is listening.

Let's talk like fools.

Let's talk like strangers at once golden and burned by unsaid words.

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