

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
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Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

**Outlaw Country**

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE  
FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

By

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Edmond,

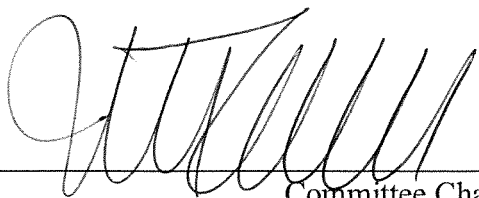
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A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Kalyn L. McAlister

TITLE: *Outlaw Country*

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PAGES:

*Outlaw Country* is a collection of poetry, prose poetry, flash fiction, short fiction, and short creative nonfiction that began as an exploration of the language our culture uses to talk about and describe women. My work was informed by the strong female writers who came before me. Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* began my interrogation of words and domestic spaces. Margaret Atwood's "The Female Body" built on Stein's work, adding narrative and irony through examining objects and rhetoric associated with women in a four-page collection of flash nonfiction and fiction. Flannery O'Connor's use of the grotesque and themes of domesticity, religion, sex, and gender are a major influence as well. Solmaz Sharif's collection *Look* coalesced my interests in examining rhetoric and the different contexts in which women exist. Other influences are Mary Ruefle, Sylvia Plath, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. I used Stein's technique of repetition and Atwood's irony through flipping context or making small changes to words. I borrowed Sharif's definition through rhetorical use, and O'Connor's humor. Figuring out how to organize these different genres, narratives, and techniques into a discernable and pleasing order for the reader was my greatest challenge. Through the writing process, *Outlaw Country* became a much more personal expression of my intersectionality as a woman, an expression that interrogates language, culture, gender, sex, age, domesticity, and place. Because of that, the order gradually moves from rhetorical questions about femininity and femaleness into increasingly personal answers to those questions. Ultimately, *Outlaw Country* is a description of the rhetorical space women inhabit, never able to attain culturally acceptable femininity. Since we are all dynamic, multi-dimensional people, all of us at some time or place (or for all of time and space) have been made to feel we are outlaws to our gender.

*Outlaw Country*

## **Section I : Prairie Plains**

A Boggy Depot Accent  
For my mother

Dirt roads that eat cars and women who fall from wagons lead to family reunions on the cemetery's cusp. Nights filled with ghost-story dares, or else taking deep gulping breaths perfumed by Pappy Tom's cherry tobacco while marveling at the jars lining Monnie's kitchen shelves, glass stained with centuries' old hard candies, rivaled only by her quilts, holier than any cathedral. Days filled catching crawdaddies in creeks cool as mercury, or else listening for the driveway bell at Daddy's service station. Children race Depression memories ingrained in the back of their hands, from the too-full shed of empty containers, across thistle-brush pastures, along those woman-eating roads, beyond the one stop sign to White White's lightless shack, where it used to serve buttered soda biscuits after a once-a-month horse trough bath. Now, it hangs open at the eyes and mouth, still mourning her.



## Handwashing v.1

"I'm taking your baby brother outside," she had said. "Finish and wash up!" Faded blue eyes, two-inch blond-childhood roots, and stone-washed denim holding a squirming white bundle against her Gap chest. I slid past her into the stall.

When I left my bathroom stall, a girl was on tiptoes, her tiny pink Sketchers lit up, heels suspended as a small hand reached for the faucet a full foot beyond outstretched fingertips. I looked around as she continued to struggle toward cleanliness. Her bright eyes, blond eyebrows and fine baby hairs aglow from the lights above the mirror, met my dark question marks in a silent plea. After looking around the empty bathroom one more time, I sighed and picked her up under the armpits as I wondered if the waist would have been better or worse.

She slipped her palms together, unaware of me. I narrated for her: "It's automatic, okay, soap, good—" She was too heavy to hold out at arms' length, so she was sandwiched between my body and the sink counter, us two sharing her weight, baby hairs tickling my chin. Her blond hair fell in a mass of ringlets down her back, spilling out from an outdated scrunchie, what I would have worn when I was her age more than two decades ago. "Okay rinse real quick. Nope, that's good enough!" I slid her back down and waved my hand for the paper towel.

I washed my own hands slowly, wetting, soaping, slipping, wringing over and over again as I watched the top of the blonde head disappear from the mirror. I rinsed, counting to ten slowly, then waived for the paper towel, then another. When I left the bathroom, no one was waiting for me.

## Disappearing Crown

Back then it was considered feminine. A dusting. Soft, bashful, the fullness of time. Coyness embodied, modesty in form. Marilyn's otherworldly glow. Frida's pampered beauty mark. A nimbus that enveloped the head who earned a woman's favor. If one were to unfold her dressing, layer by layer, received trust and tulip kiss, then they were royalty indeed. Solomon was no king before he grazed like a doe amongst the lilies; Elizabeth a queen stronger for her purse, velvet gold.

Was it Darwin who said it was unevolved, and Gillette unhygienic? Or was it Adam's first complaint after the fall? Woman must outstrip her animal roots, man must close the gap. Pelts and furs and smudges of the sublime beneath chins and under arms and on shins. Scrub, rip, tug, uproot, deforest, dilapidate, raze, demolish, expunge all traces of glory beneath the lambskin. Evolve into the Venus every Magdalene and Madonna must be. Or risk being found out.

Eggs<sup>i</sup>

Hard not soft not—strong. Not not soft. Made hard but soft and yellow and hot from cold wet soft. Cracked. Broken sun or not or yes on purpose just a different way. Always hot from cold alone or together.

Eggs

Snap, slap, soft, the trick and—almost broken, useless broken. Until. Just then. Bleeding viscous across muscle, tongue. Pristine, masticated.

Eggs

Hard soft. Want easy not hard but always hard. There's a trick. Serve cold in pieces. Thin on top. Broken up like the fish. Cold. Always cold. One and back again. Waiting. How to be prepared.

## Real Beaut<sup>ii</sup>

First year of graduate school, sixth year at the same university, twelve years out from a twelve-year lower education, half that long since leaving the service, four years into an unrequited love, and five since I'd last felt it. I had come home to the heartland, that place of mercurial weather and women. She sat behind me the first day of class. It was the beginning of love.

When I first saw her hair, falling from crown to hips, strands at her lips, I was smitten. My old bad habit fired up again. Every day, I looked forward to a glimpse of her as she walked in front of me to her seat in the back of the room, shimmering pyre flickering against her back.

I moved so I could be near her. She eyed me up and down for the first time as I sat, motioning as I did as if to ask her permission. Eyes narrowed, she shrugged. But a small smile plied at the corner of her lips where a wild strand of hair teased. She brushed it away.

I looked away and saw the classroom, like every other, like my high school's.

The day I turned sixteen, when school let out, I saw my dad in the parking lot next to a shiny new truck. My older sisters gave me hell for it. Dad hadn't been around when they turned sixteen, and they accused me of being his favorite. But they would only sell it and give the money to their deadbeat boyfriends or their diligent dealers.

I took my high school crush on the inaugural drive. That love lasted four years too. The beginning of my bad habit, maybe. It was a warm day for February, so we drove with the windows down. She brushed the hair away from her mouth, where it danced wildly as if as entranced as I was.

Now, looking at the classroom, I remembered that other school, and the senior prom I missed. My crush had asked me to skip it, hang out instead, too cool for school dances. And the look on my date's face the next day, when she came to my house, May wind whipping her tight ponytail that kept it out of her face. She had tears in her eyes and asked "Why?"

"A bad habit," I had responded.

I couldn't look at her then. She reminded me of my mom asking me why—my father would leave us. Of my sisters' bitterness at his present to me when he resurfaced years later with a new woman. Not new. We knew her. That was the beginning of my bad habit.

I turned to the girl beside me, hair covering half her face. "Had to get out of the front row. Terrible first-day seating mistake."

I felt the first flush of enchantment. I wanted to take her on a drive in the truck I no longer had, back to the old classrooms, back to my dad waiting for me in the parking lot.

She forced a tiny smile. Politely. There was a pause. “You never know, sitting next to me could be your worst mistake.” She spoke like a flame.

Silver Anniversary

my love is best when

his talent shines: pack boxes

plum clams, pick pockets

## The Trapper Husband<sup>iii</sup>

### DRY LEAVES

#### *His Word*

One gets into this business  
Trailing the scent of money  
Brittle bills attached to pelts and furs  
Little beasts that like honey

But another beast can be found oft  
Like a doe slaking its thirst  
On a gentle river, *shy, uncorseted*,  
Black eyes from which light burst

And this honey though of unskinned  
Pelt is not sold for money,  
Her earthy scent opens padded trails  
With but a bit of cunny.

### SARGASSO SEA

*Always*—I tell you they come—  
*Always* relentless and out from  
That industrial sweaty slum  
A wild animal will not succumb  
To threats and treats, all scum  
Compared to forest's changing plum  
Red, purple, black—sweet dumb  
Plenty outside command's outcome  
Yet dancing my steps to gentlest drum  
Beyond bending to hard and fast thrum.

### TILBURY TOWN

#### *His Word*

Her smile was dearer than pearls  
Hair black as a raven's wing  
Skin as warm as the clay earth  
Beneath her, as I her king

Harvested ripened orchard  
Hunted in my placid forest  
Bounding deer and flitting dun doves  
Paradise before out of forced

#### THE IMPULSE

He missed the warning,  
A single cloud,  
Though later he would declare  
“Not a sound!”

Snow slanted sidewise white,  
The teepee held,  
Checking his traps in prized solitude,  
From cold, quelled.

This time the tip of his nose,  
Though she found,  
Nature’s inconstant weather  
Took not a pound.

Then there was the bear,  
With a cub,  
No hill to run or tree to climb,  
Nor grip on club,

This time fauna received,  
A hide  
Thought not as valuable,  
As pride.



**PROLETARIAN PORTRAIT<sup>iv</sup>**

A rosy young cardiganed woman  
spectacles dangling

Her hair pulled back standing  
in line

Behind a cart full of writing  
utensils

Wallet in hand. *Looking  
intently into it*

She pulls out the Sunday insert  
to find coupons

That will help her

## Feminine Gifts

from me, house shoes for she, as close as I found to white  
clean, with a promise to buy a pumpkin spice latte—light  
on cash, so mini chocolate chip cookies made by sight  
and practiced feel, also nail polished named “My Chihuahua Bites”  
sharp next to legal’s dry shampoo, lipstick named by the land of Ice  
and a leather baby changing mat for her mite  
but the priestess gets candles that smell of camping under the pines  
called something woodsy and winsome like “campfire nights”  
for family, Memaw’s cinnamon rolls, sugar cookies iced,  
baked potato soup with bacon butter and chives  
on a golden entertainment set to serve those who dine  
not asked for but bought with my own dime  
before a game with hidden treasure to find  
books about pout trouts and cuddle fish, the undersea sublime

For me, a donut-scented pen and leaves  
lined notebook covered in seaweed-  
bound mermaids holding thoughts about the anxiety  
and sexual healing parallel between  
a real dog trainer and me  
wearing gloves in a chartreuse weave  
with a tiny white pom and big tooth tear on each  
thing she touches, even lip balm made at home and a story  
about wolves at night and their teeth  
that pop bubbles in bath and lotion, smells pretty as a peach  
packaged in a purse wide enough to fit a creed  
or rose-covered agenda with thorns on its sleeves  
tabs and bulleted lists and other time thieves  
but no scheduling a dogless lecture about living with grief  
followed by a rant about liberal media said in disbelief  
of *Time* and *Newsweek* cover scenes  
Hugh Hefner following the women who speak

I gave one last gift, neither hammer and nails  
nor a crowbar and splinters  
But a quiet, a soft puff of a question—  
that left us all warmer than previous winters

### There's No I in Threesome

She went to a concert in a stadium with vertigo-inducing stairs and seats, shuttle-tight. People floated the margins as “Last Living Souls” began playing, the first song in the set. Two boys slunk into her row. The first boy dipped his face close to hers in the swirling dark. She could see herself reflected in his helmet, distorted, small head with big eyes and giant chest. He informed the girl he had paid for that seat, satellite to her own, whose orbit she had been leaning into, a nice current of good will and cold air conditioning between her and the man next to her, who had moonwalked his way through the two openers. She righted herself, hips forward, shoulders back, ankles neatly tucked, ready for takeoff. The thighs on either side of her widened. She sighed. On the giant screen, a naked green man flashed. He steered a meteor into the moon. “Saturnz Barz” played. Hands, when they weren’t flung out to the thumping rhythm, sat at the junction of those thighs, so far apart the fingers didn’t even touch. Eyes on the man in the moon, she kept her knees pressed together and imagined Sally Ride piloting her challenge. She folded her arms away from her seatmates, fingers tapping the beat of “Rhinestone Eyes” on her skin, hugging into herself as hands on either side zoomed through the air around her, visitors intruding on her rock star-inhabited planet. A silver-dressed man appeared on stage, pumping his hips against the guitarists. Animated characters on screen mimicked his thrusts in kaleidoscope colors. It was minutes of limned gyrations before he finally sang, his bass whispering “Sex Murder Party” behind the verses. Nodding to the heavy beat, she let her left shoulder rest uneasily on bony clad in cotton, the right shoulder already tucked behind too-big plaid on the other side. Dancing to the finale, “We Got the Power,” their different rhythms jived upon her torso and legs, where friction heated jostling jean on jean on jean and—a meteor knocked into her orb from behind.

Twist & Shout

Little Richard is  
his favorite to play on  
the knobs and pedals

J. A.<sup>v</sup>  
In Memorandum

When James Anderson was first promoted, there were some nervous titters from the reporters at *The Present*. Comments about his ambition to be executive editor followed him during his tenure as Washington D.C. bureau chief.

Just three years ago, when his promotion was announced, Samantha Daniels, a political correspondent at the D.C. bureau, described his management style as “aggressive” and though careful not to disparage her new boss’s leadership, remarked that his tone could at times be “strident.” Now, after his firing, her comments are less veiled: “Anderson was an excellent reporter, but he set a high bar and aggressively held reporters to those unrealistically high standards. He could be condescending, dismissive, and frigid when he thought an article or a pitch wasn’t up to snuff.”

Her sentiments have been repeated by many. Elizabeth Pham, on the lifestyles desk, commented that he was known to play favorites—“especially up-and-coming male reporters”—under the guise of mentorship. Clearly, his management style lacked grace.

Yet, when Anderson was dismissed by *The Present* owner Gail Lieberman, many men and women protested that the decision to let him go was the wrong move—despite complaints that he could be difficult to work under.

Oswah Cheema, an investigative reporter, pointed to the number of Pulitzer prizes won under Anderson’s leadership—she among them. “He had high standards and could be opinionated about journalists’ work, yes, but he was an editor, and a good one at that. The number of Pulitzers and jump in online subscriptions prove it.”

She’s not wrong, under Anderson, *The Present* won eight Pulitzer Prizes. The struggling print paper saw a 15% jump in online subscriptions, and an increased focus on cohesion between online content and print.

And Anderson was determined to continue on that upward trajectory by bringing in a digital managing editor, equal to then managing editor and current executive editor Janet Du Bois. He had his eye on Mark Gilcrest, known for his digital savvy, he would focus on growing their on-line territory, which Anderson saw as essential to preserving *The Present*’s preeminent place in news journalism.

The wooing of Gilcrest began behind closed doors, with The Present Company C.E.O. Cindy Pierce’s and owner Gial Liberman’s stamp of approval. Gilcrest’s level of interest had to be determined, whether he would even consider moving from his current position with *The Knight* to a similar position at *The Present*. When it became apparent he was willing, Anderson supposedly began bringing managing editor Du Bois on board.

According to an e-mail sent from Anderson to Pierce, Anderson intended to tell Du Bois about the pending change and get her blessing. Gilcrest seconded this. “It was made apparent to me before I came to meet with top brass that everyone knew I was being offered the job and were on board,” Gilcrest said. “The only reason I went to lunch with Janet was so that I could ask her advice and make sure I wouldn’t be stepping on her toes in the new position. I wanted a good working relationship with her.”

The lunch is where things began to unravel. Gilcrest mentioned to Du Bois that the offer had already been made to him. Apparently, Du Bois had been under the impression that this was all just preliminary feelers and was shocked. The next day she went to the owner, Lieberman, and shared her frustrations about Anderson’s autocratic management style and mishandling of the hiring process.

The next day, Gail Lieberman announced to the newsroom that Anderson would no longer be serving as executive editor and that Du Bois would be taking the position. Anderson was not present, and no words of praise for his tenure were offered. The only reason given was a “need for change,” and some thinly veiled criticisms of his management style. The previous executive editor whom Anderson replaced, and who had been let go due to overseeing a false reporting scandal, received a warmer sendoff.

When asked for comment, Lieberman said it was a difficult decision with no good outcome. “We risked losing Janet [Du Bois], and we risked losing more than just her. It would have been a flood...”

That Lieberman and Pierce both signed off on Gilcrest’s hire is undeniable, and they don’t try to deny it. Anderson’s final fireable offense, then, was not informing and receiving a blessing from one of his staff members about a hiring decision.

When Du Bois spoke after Lieberman’s announcement, she praised Anderson’s skill as a reporter and said that she had learned much from his “ambition.” She ended by quoting one of her mentors, that “great editors can also be humane editors.”\*

\*Dean Baquet quoting John Carroll Auletta, Ken, “Why Jill Abramson Was Fired,” *The New Yorker*, 14 May 2014.

## **Section II: Ozark Plateau**

## Showdown at Robbers Caves

Beaver's Bend/ Roman Nose / Arbuckle Wilderness / Ouachita Falls / Quartz Mountain / Black Mesa

Only moss and scrub brush grow on these barren peaks, lonely but for flits of faithful dun quail about their secure nests. Not that the mounts are tall, though tall enough, but they are granite crags, bits of green and brown tucked in rocky fissures. Only trees with the deepest roots survive this Dustbowl-carved wilderness, slate angles and clay ground that moves as if living, breathing, impatient with squatters and stakeholders alike—bucking iron horses and irrigation, mourning the black bear, buffalo, and passenger pigeon. Horny toads cry blood when caught with hands untamed and lone cats scream their defiance desperate as hikers hurry back to four-door sedans at mountain's edge, the sky turning a punchbowl of colors through the red-dirt haze of this range.



## Handwashing v. 2

When I left the bathroom after my own ablutions, I saw the reunion, plump pink hand and worn lean.

Moments ago, she had slipped those plump pink palms together, unaware of me. I had narrated for her: “It’s automatic, okay, soap, good—” She was too heavy to hold out at arms’ length, so she was sandwiched between my body and the sink counter, us two sharing her weight, baby hairs tickling my chin. Her blond hair fell in a mass of ringlets down her back, spilling out from an outdated scrunchie, what I would have worn when I was her age more than two decades ago. “Okay rinse real quick. Nope, that’s good enough!” I slid her back down and waved my hand for the paper towel.

When I had left my bathroom stall, she had been on tiptoes, her tiny pink Sketchers lit up, heels suspended as a small hand reached for the faucet a full foot beyond outstretched fingertips. I had looked around as the girl continued to struggle toward the cleanliness her mother commanded before she left. Her bright eyes, blond eyebrows and flyaways aglow from the lights above the mirror, met my darting dark question marks in a silent plea. After looking around the empty bathroom one more time, I had sighed and picked her up under the armpits as I wondered if the waist would have been better or worse.

frumpy<sup>vi</sup>

Her mentor referred to her as “*mein mädchen,*” *my girl.*

Or else, *nicknamed her “Mutti,” or Mommy.* I clarified, derisive men.

Or else, she *cultivated a resolutely boring public persona.*

Or else, *the least motherly person you can imagine.*

Or else, easily digested.

Or else, a hairstyle that sells convertibles.

Or else, she doesn’t have children.

Or else, she is resolutely digestible.

Or else, Victor Victoria.

Or else, feet running away from her mouth.

Or else, stumbling. I clarified, *it was Shakespearean in its aggression and calculation. Her route to power is lined with the political cadavers of a dozen and a half of these princes.*

Or else, *she learned to cloak her purpose in a veil of blandness.*

Or else, invisible, enough that it got done.

Or else, my girl *seems to be gender neutral in a way.*

Or else, deafening whistles at a serene stump speech.

Or else, successors could backpedal.

Or else, *unflappability is one reason she is a woman.*

Or else, *effective and yet not appear threatening.*

Or else, they called her Mommy, but she had no children with the chemist.

Or else, she learned to cloak in blandness.

Or else, my girl is digested.

## Upon Jasper's Leaving

Hell sits behind your right ear and in the dimpled undersides of her white thighs, which shine sharp in the darkness. It is empty. The poet found purgatory in the cleft of the night sky and southern hemisphere, that depression between Easter Sunday and salvation. Beauty led him there. Heaven is also empty. I've glimpsed it in the indentations of moved furniture, bookshelf cavities, in between the uneven tempo of his breathing at night and the vacant goldmines. I imagine it in the caverns beneath the water and the chasm of twilight anticipation, in their concave hands and that one's rounded cheek. I look for it in my cups, holes, and hollows. But they, too, are empty fucks.

Eggs<sup>vii</sup>

Out of sight, holes to breathe, breathless, morgue, perishable but not alive, never alive, life-giving white no brown no not extra for brown, they want white fragility. Waiting. Cold.

Eggs

Runny bubbles milky white in purple green veins—not blue or red—not not white but always yellow jam hard in highways, no soft in the chambers, no avoid raw born transparent not not white running away.

Eggs

Scrambled wet not raw. Slimy shivers and salt, heart-in-mouth health. Best before noon or else French or else Asian or else thin and wet and hearty all the way down.

Eggs

Salty tipity top status, amongst bubbles, sips, nibbles, and predestination. Heady. Black pearls on insecure palates, sliding cold across wisdom scars, never meant for anywhere but inside.

## Only the Lonely

It's come to this. Two-lane backroads to Guthrie, Oklahoma. Empty as the zero in my age. Saturday morning before 8:00 a.m. empty. The air under my car as I gun it over the trainless tracks empty. Empty as the calories in the donuts I was driving thirty stupid miles, alone, to buy for yet another baby shower I was throwing. This lacking, the gaping emptiness opens wide in my chest caves in my throat whenever I tried to talk about it *trite, trite*, echoes in my mind. Was it the *o* in opiate I ached for, that *holy* water, that checklist with too many vacant boxes pulsing in my chest. Perhaps it was the *o* in endorphins, *omega* 3s, or *out* there, wherever I should have put myself. The *o* in long-distance, hostage, roommate, spouse. *O* as in scratch, zilch, goose egg. As in dogs and pounds and the last time they were touched by a hand they recognize. *O* as in the problem in the mirror. *O* as in the problem they say this isn't. *O*, problem! *O* as in bother. Never a bother. *O* the shape of my mouth. *O* the solitary spoon. *O* the soak in sole warmth. *O* bottle. *O* demons who swim. *O*, Tom. *O*, I can't even hear my sobs over the deafening *o*'s in my car on the way to Guthrie.

Rocky's Education

Taste buds, thumbpad whorls  
calluses, nose tip, finger's  
edge, shadow, breath, an—

## Undressed

Professional Business Attire for Men Consist of: Slacks, Dress Shirt, Jacket/Tie, Dress Shoes, Neatly Shaven.

Professional Business Attire for Women Consist of: Skirt (Length to the Knee), Dress Shirt and Jacket, Business Dress and Jacket, Appropriate Business Footwear.

No Tolerance Policy: Clothing which reveals excessive skin, shorts, ball caps, jeans, sneakers, sandals, and sunglasses etc.

She twisted one way and then another. Turning sideways, she examined her profile. Straightening her back and sucking in, she pressed her hands against her tummy. She took a picture with her phone and stared at it. The lighting was even worse in the picture. She looked in the mirror again, stepped closer, backed away. Was it the lighting or the mirror that was making her cellulite extra deep? Or was that reality, and her lighting and mirror at home were the real tricksters? She poked each of the dimples in her right thigh and had only begun on the left when a disembodied voice floated over the partition.

“Hey, Leigh, can you zip me up?”

The young woman curled her lip at the mirror one last time before opening the dressing room door and finding a bare back, ribs and knobby spine hunched over as hands searched blindly for the zipper. Kelly, Leigh’s skinniest friend. Leigh batted her friend’s hands away. “Stand up straight. Don’t want to catch a vertebrae in the zipper.” Once zipped in, Kelly turned, and the two women eyed each other.

“I don’t know for work, but it’s a really cute dress,” Kelly said first.

Leigh crossed her arms and made a show of eyeing Kelly’s paper-doll frame in the bandage dress. “Same.”

Kelly laughed and turned a few circles in the hall mirror. “Yeah, I’m not sure it’s anywhere appropriate, but I’ve always wanted try one on. I’m not the one who is buying clothes for an extra special, super big deal internship in Washington, D.C., though.”

Leigh turned back to the dressing room. As she undressed and re-dressed in another set of unfamiliar clothes, Kelly said, “You know, if you wear it with tights and a blazer, it could work.”

There was no way Leigh was buying the dress, but she wasn’t about to explain to her skinniest friend that it made her feel like a toad dressed up for a picnic. Kelly wouldn’t understand. Instead she said, “That much fabric in the middle of a D.C. summer? I have to walk like half a mile to and from work to the subway station.”

“When do you leave again? Also, help.”

Leigh opened the door to the familiar bony scene. “One month to get packed and buy a whole new wardrobe. I seriously only own jeans, t-shirts, and sundresses.” She finished zipping her friend up.

Kelly turned and made a face. “Too grandma. Why do you like florals so much? And if tights and a blazer are too hot, a cardigan and slacks will be a furnace.”

Leigh sighed and went back to her dressing room. Too hot to wear layers. Too hot to wear long sleeves. Too hot for clothes, according to her research. But the A/C was sure to be on full blast indoors. She could just bring a cardigan or a jacket with her every day.

But then she’d have to walk around sleeveless before and after work. She turned sideways and frowned at her arms. She wiggled them, watching the fat and muscle jiggle.

“You’re not doing something weird, are you?” Kelly asked.

“Definitely not,” Leigh answered just before catching movement in the mirror. Her friend’s head peered over the partition between the dressing rooms. “That shouldn’t be possible. They’re practically encouraging peepers.”

“Have you seen the giant spaces under the doors and between the door and frame? It would have to be one determined Tom to go over rather than under. Also, don’t change the subject.”

Leigh turned back to the mirror. “You only think it’s weird because you are like point oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh one percent of the female population who doesn’t have flab on her arms. Most women are self-conscious about their arms.”

“Doesn’t mean they should be. And your arms aren’t flabby.”

Leigh shrugged, unwilling to fight about it. “I think I’m over trying stuff on. You want to grab a drink?”

Shopping bag:

1. Exactly one white collared shirt, but Leigh was already considering taking it back because it gapped at the boobs and she’d have to pin it.

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“Turn around and let me see the back,” he commanded.

One week later, Leigh was feeling more optimistic. So far, this shopping trip was easier, but not yet any more successful. For hours now, Joe had marched her around stores, picking out clothes for her to try on, and then making a show of how nice they looked on her. Problem 1: they had different fashion styles. Problem 2: he seemed to think she was a size or two smaller than reality and was blind to muffin top.

“Dude, this is so short I can’t bend over. Don’t you think I will need to bend over



at the office?”

“That’s how you make friends,” he said with a pat on her bottom.

“Also, again, this is way too tight and it looks like something I would wear to cosplay Margot Tenenbaum.”

“First, we should all aspire to look like Margot Tenenbaum daily.”

Leigh rolled her eyes and went back into the dressing room as he continued.

“Second, straight girls don’t realize how easy they have it. Easier than anyone else. Stop with the self-consciousness bullshit and just wear clothes that show off your figure. Then maybe you could dump that loser—”

“Hey!” Leigh said, midway through shimmying out of the tiny dress.

“Why isn’t he here? You realize I’ve met him exactly once.”

Leigh cracked the door and peeked out, frowning at her friend. “Why would I make him come shopping with me? He’d be bored out of his skull.”

“*Why* do you subject me to it then?”

She laughed and closed the door. “You have better taste in clothes. That’s why. And because *you* called *me* about going shopping. I don’t know why you aren’t trying anything on.”

“Because, I blew all my shopping money in J. Crew, and you haven’t bought a single thing.”

“I just don’t fit effortlessly into everything I try on like you do.” Leigh reemerged in a skin-tight sweater with a sewed-in collar and cuffs over a too tight pencil skirt. She motioned to the outfit. “Seriously, this does not fit. And boys have it easier figuring out what is appropriate for work and what isn’t. Collared shirt. Check. Slacks. Check. People don’t even notice when you repeat clothes in the week as long as you switch up your tie.”

“That is *not* too tight. You look like Joan Holloway in a pencil skirt. You shouldn’t wear anything else. And men might have it easier, but we have it a lot more boring. Women are lucky because they can have style. You can wear your personality in your clothes. It’s much harder to do that as a man.”

Leigh turned and pointed to her back. “Look. Roll. Roll. Roll. I just want something that skims my problem areas. And it isn’t self-conscious bullshit. It’s dressing appropriately and in something flattering rather than sashaying around like a sausage. I look like the crazy chick from *Cry Baby*. All I need is pencil-thin eyebrows and smeared red lipstick.”

“That’s what I’m saying! She had the hottest boyfriend in the whole film. Well, other than Johnny Depp’s character. But *her* boyfriend was super tall and lean. We should all be so lucky.”

Leigh shook her head. "I need a drink"

Shopping bag:

1. One striped Lacrosse polo shirtdress (a size up from the one she had tried on).
2. Four pencil skirts, which Leigh left the tags on because they might be too tight for work. (How did one figure that out anyways? Why was there so much spandex in women's workwear?)

- - -

"Sorry in advance for the hair. I haven't shaved in like a week." Leigh stepped out into the hall wearing tennis shoes and a shorter-than-it-looked-on-the-hanger shift dress.

"How are your legs so firm? We're the same size and mine are pitted with cellulite!" Jenn sat in the lone decrepit chair in the mauve hall. She wouldn't be trying anything on. She swore by online shopping.

Leigh looked down at her thighs and the dimples looked back at her. "I'm not sure that you don't have body dysmorphia, Jenn. I definitely have cellulite, who doesn't, and you are definitely smaller than me."

"Not by much if I am. And you have this amazing hourglass figure."

Leigh turned so she could see her back in the mirror. And of course. Her greatest nemesis was there. One giant roll where her bra strap traversed her shoulder blades, and another below that, emphasized by her big bubble butt. She silently thanked her ancestors for her "amazing hourglass figure," and turned a frown on her friend.

"My figure would be a lot more amazing if I lost twenty pounds, all from my back. And it is incredibly hard to dress without my bosom or my ass spilling out one end or the other of any given outfit. Even when everything fits, it can be pornographic if the fabric pulls or stretches."

Leigh had never been this frustrated clothes shopping before. Sure, she wasn't a size two. But she fit into standard sizes. It shouldn't have been this hard to find a few shirts that didn't pull too tightly across her chest or plunge so low that her bra and most of her cleavage was exposed or see through (apparently transparent was in); pants that didn't pull tight across her ass and hips; or skirts that weren't either mini or full-length. Sarah, the third friend, emerged from a dressing room in black tights and a blousy shirt. She was the effortlessly chic bohemian type. Sarah eyed Leigh critically but didn't say anything, forcing Leigh to ask for her opinion.

Sarah shrugged. "If you like it, get it."

Leigh's eyes narrowed. This was what it felt like to be nonplussed. This feeling exactly. "If I liked it a lot, I would of course get it and not need an opinion. What I need to know is whether it looks professional enough for work or not."

Sarah frowned at Leigh's tone, but finally said, "I mean, yeah, it's professional." Leigh came to the conclusion that Sarah was the least helpful person on the planet and to never again include her in any decision-making process. She turned back to Jenn. "You're the lucky one. Pear-shaped girls have it the best. Your shoulders fit into things. I'm built like a linebacker and feel like the Hulk every time I try on a jacket. Your chest is small, so you can wear practically anything without needing to layer so that your cleavage doesn't show. And then you have this sexy ratio of hip to waist with these luscious legs."

"But we can't wear shorts or anything above the knee."

Leigh paused. She hadn't thought of that. When was the last time she'd seen someone pear-shaped wearing something short?

Sarah frowned at both of them. "What's the point in comparing body types? They're not even real. Pear, apple, carrot stick. Women are not a fruit salad. Everyone is shaped differently and equally."

Leigh rubbed her face. She was running out of time to buy clothes. And friends to shop with. Soon, she'd be forced to shop with her mother.

She pointed at Jenn. "I need you to be more critical. Tell me what exactly is good and what exactly is bad. And you," she pointed at Sarah, "I need to tell my anything at all. It's not as if I need a critique on my body. Just whether it's work appropriate and whether or not it's flattering. Can you both do that for me?"

Sarah opened her mouth and Leigh interrupted. "Bup, bup, bup, bup. I don't want to have an argument about feminism. I'm a feminist. I mostly love my body. But clothes do objectively, observably, scientifically either look good or bad on a person and we are all judged by our clothing. So spare me."

"Why do you care?" Sarah asked, arms crossed and she *still* didn't have cleavage above her blouse.

Leigh blinked. "What?"

"Why do you care what anyone else thinks about your clothes or body?"

"Seriously. Don't do this to me. I'm like slowly dying because I can't find anything that looks good and is modest. Not because I'm trying to, I don't know, objectify myself. Or whatever it is you're implying. I'm simply trying to dress appropriately. That's it. Not for approval."

Sarah shook her head. "It is for approval. You want approval that you're dressed like a good little girl."

“Okay! No. No that isn’t it. Wanting to dress appropriately for a certain context is not the same as dressing for approval. And also, your entire argument assumes a male gaze I’m dressing for. Which is not true.”

Now Sarah looked nonplussed. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does! Jenn, do you think there’s anything wrong with dressing professionally for work?”

Jenn looked between the two friends, Leigh in her short shift dress, fists on hips and legs spread; Sarah in her baggy top and tights, arms crossed and jaw clenched. “I can see both sides of the argument.”

“Jesus Christ!” Leigh muttered and turned back to the dressing room. “I need a drink.”

“You’re being irrational, Leigh,” Sarah said from the other dressing room. “Dressing ‘appropriately’ necessitates someone who has a standard for what is ‘appropriate.’ So of course you are dressing for someone.”

“Yeah! My employers, who are sexless, faceless arbiters of a freaking dress code. And also, I want to be taken seriously and what you wear affects that. It *does*, regardless of whether it should or not.”

Back in their own clothes, the two women faced off in the hallway once more.

Jenn was conspicuously absent. “Look, I’m not saying that isn’t true,” Sarah said. “But I am saying that if you like the clothes, and it meets the dress code or whatever, then that’s enough. Stop worrying about secret messages it sends people because that’s their problem and you can’t please everyone.”

“I don’t want to please everyone. It’s not about pleasing. It’s about accurately representing myself in my clothing. It’s-it’s driving me crazy. I don’t even know. I’m probably overthinking it. I just want to be taken seriously. That’s all.”

The two women turned to find the missing third of their trio. Sarah hooked her arm through Leigh’s. “Have you thought about a uniform, like a mime wears all black? Oooh! I know! What about the suit from *Pulp Fiction*?”

Leigh smiled. “Jeff Goldblum’s suit in *The Fly*?”

“Haven’t seen it.”

Leigh shrugged. “I don’t know that I can suggest it.”

Shopping bag:

1. One black sports jacket two sizes too big so that it fit Leigh’s shoulders and would need to be tailored. Will be returned if tailor can’t alter it before Leigh leaves in two

weeks.

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“I just want to try on a few things. Please. I’ll be quick, I promise!”

Michael sighed. Longsuffering boyfriend sigh. Putout sigh. You owe me sigh.

“You know what? Just go somewhere else and I’ll meet up with you after if you’re going to be like that.”

“No, no,” he said magnanimously, taking the clothes she was holding with a flourish. “I am at my lady’s beck and call.”

Leigh frowned at her boyfriend of six months. She wasn’t entirely sure she even wanted him to see her try on clothes. She’d never shopped at this store before since it was all professional clothing. What if it ran small and she had to go up a size in everything?

That would be embarrassing.

He grinned at her. “So, uhm, since I’m being such a good boyfriend and all, can I pick some stuff out for you to try on?”

Leigh blushed. This was a sudden turn. It wasn’t as if the store were Victoria’s Secret or anything. The closest thing to underwear was a camisole. But it still felt—funny. She nodded, though, because she couldn’t think of a reason why he couldn’t pick out some clothes. Maybe he’d be better at it than everyone else thus far.

The first thing he picked out was an extra small. She had to replace it with the correct size and told herself to not be weird about it as she did so. Boys didn’t know anything about sizing. Hadn’t Joe proven that already?

They finally made it to the dressing room with far more clothes than Leigh intended to try on. Michael insisted the first thing she try on be his favorite. When she came out, he wrinkled his brow. “I thought it was a dress.”

Leigh smiled. “It’s a romper. And it’s awfully short.”

She moved to go back into the dressing room, acutely aware of her cellulite and the tightness of the romper in weird places because of her too-big butt, but Michael grabbed her hand and pushed her in front of the three-way mirror at the end of the hallway. She let her hands hang in front of her crotch in what she hoped was a relaxed, casual pose. She definitely had camel toe.

Reflected behind her she could see Michael eyeing her body, other women stepping out to show off their clothes, workers hanging up items that didn’t work, and loyal friends waiting to offer opinions. In other words, they were not alone. And then

Michael rubbed her bottom. "I like it," he said.

"Okay! So the next outfit!" she said brightly and turned, pivoting around him and leaping back into the dressing room. She locked it. "You know what? I think my blood sugar is getting dangerously low. Let's just go get something to drink."

With minimal arguing, she got Michael out of the women's clothing store and to a nearby liquor store. This whole thing was turning her into an alcoholic.

Shopping bag:

1. One box of condoms (minus one)
2. One bottle of Fireball whiskey (half-empty)
3. One pair of dirty underwear (cheaper than a romper she'd never wear out of the house)

- - -

"The problem is you have my deep ribcage, my mother's big bottom, and your father's mother's boobs. And I guess your father's shoulders." She laughed—just once. "You got his everything else too. Clothes just weren't made to fit women like you well. Avoid things without any stretch."

Leigh took the clothes her mother heaped in her arms without remark. What she was saying was true. This time, when Leigh left the dressing room, there were rapid-fire criticisms: "Too short. Too tight. Rolls. Too low. Too baggy. Leigh, do you not see the rolls?" In between outfits, her mother would fetch different sizes, usually a size up, and kept up a steady monologue. "You know, if you would just lose twenty pounds, you'd feel so much better and those rolls would disappear and you'd be two sizes smaller. What diet are you on? Are you going to the gym? You have a dog, don't you walk him? All I'm saying is, I want you to be healthy and live for a long time, healthily. You should have been born when bustles were in, when big butts were the style."

At one point, Leigh left the dressing room and no one was there. "Mom?"

"I'm in here! Saw something I liked." Her mother opened the dressing room door. She had donned a dress at least two sizes too big.

"Did they not have your size?"

"This is my size." Leigh's mother turned sideways to the mirror and pressed her hands against her abdomen, flattening the small tummy hidden beneath the excess fabric.

“No, it is not. What’s the point of being skinny if you’re still dressing yourself like you’re not?”

“Oh!” Her mother rolled her eyes. “I’m just not as comfortable wearing things as tight as you do.”

Leigh turned back to her dressing room. She probably had enough clothes by now. They weren’t particularly stylish, but they were at least work appropriate. “I’m ready when you are,” she called over the partition.

Shopping bag:

1. Two elbow-length cardigans, one black (for utility), one red (because it was “her color”).
2. Four tunic shirts in white, black, red, and gray.
3. One pair wide-legged black slacks.
4. One black dress two sizes too big that could be worn with a belt and “dressed up or down.”
5. Four nude cotton camisoles.
6. One pair black flats (“because heels are impractical”)

Second shopping bag:

1. One bottle of red
2. Two bottles of champagne
3. One bottle of orange juice
4. One magnet that read: “Dress for Success” with a picture of Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*

See More Glass

Clawing resurrects and  
responsibility stumbles  
out of the bedroom and into  
sometimes moonlight but  
more times blackness, pitch  
the demons taught me to see  
in the dark  
my four-year-old shadow  
filed down and rounded out  
stomach foremost  
looking for banana fish but only  
finding ghosts  
slipping around my limbs  
in and out of my hollows  
tying the bedclothes into  
knots of undoing and  
back again  
sweaty, thirty, solitary in the  
morning hurts  
heart



## Self-Portrait as Mosaic

I spill over walls, flashes like gems  
Here, a jubilee of food and people on the banks  
Of a wine river flowing  
Into a library of flowers with dogs  
Snuggled under a canopy of sheet music  
Building into a hospital room and a  
Newborn in the arms of a judge in black  
Robes with wine river swirling around feet  
And into a bath of books overflowing  
Into a classroom of bright eyes and sharp  
Pencil skirts that lead up ivory stairs  
Toward a vault of gifts, tightly wrapped  
In tile ribbons of color leading to  
A magnificent set of ears, unadorned  
But for ribbons flowing in rainbows of sound,  
Stories and hurts and Big Questions—  
I arrest people  
Draw them to their favorite image  
Favorite room  
The vault of presents, leaving some small token while  
Picking out a souvenir, gaping gouges in grout  
The sleeping dogs, accompanied by their four-legged  
Companions and most often, those marvelous  
Ears, where men, women, and children sit  
For hours, leaving their tales and needs  
And desires rarely visited, though the biggest  
Room by far, at the center of me  
The beginning and the end  
Lives an elephant, covered in tiled text  
Sage marble eyes and all-hearing ears  
Taking in the tokens, the tales, and the companions  
But when the elephant is visited,  
Their hands are cupped, empty—  
No words are spoken as the visitor prods  
The living mosaic  
And the elephant is starved

## Wheat Puffs

The honey he makes

soft comb, mortar, and pistil

savage artisan

## OBJECT LESSON<sup>viii</sup>

- May 15** I picked Susans up on the side of the expressway. I was driving, and then I was on the shoulder of the road. They reminded me of Mom, black eyed and florid. Down-to-earth in a bold way that suggested it was a different earth from yours. Their stems popped in ragged ends and left a mess of red dirt and watery green on the passenger seat. I was overheated from the work.
- (later) I should sever the rough ends. They're just not sitting pretty in the milk bottle. In the pictures I looked up of arrangements, the flowers are all stair stepped at an angle.
- (later) I must buy new scissors if I'm to continue the floristry. The pair I have are dull and further brutalized the stems. But the heads are still pretty all popped up, black eyes staring at the ceiling.
- May 18** The black-eyed Susans are mostly wilted, twisted petals falling to the table. Compared to the satisfaction of a pretty arrangement, the clean up leaves me wanting. Water scummed with decayed stems and all that pollen! I couldn't even get it to the trashcan without leaving a dusting of yellow and trail of tissue red.
- May 19** While I was at the store buying florist's scissors—that's what they're called, "florist's scissors," I suppose all their creativity is saved for arranging flowers—the most beautiful arrangement of Lilies and Roses caught my eye. Though, come to think of it, maybe the flowers carry the brunt of the creativity. God as the ultimate creative and all that.
- (later) I couldn't get the Lilies and Roses out of my head, so I went back and bought them. All I had to do was trim the stems. They were prearranged. It wasn't as satisfying as my blacked-eyed Susans.
- (later) While walking Jasper, I saw the prettiest knockout Rose bush in my neighbor's yard. Crimson petals. Charming.
- May 20** Rose petals seem to be bruising and crinkling rather than unfolding into pink petticoats. I blame the Lilies. They are overpowering. It smells like a funeral parlor in my house.
- May 21** I took Jasper on another walk by that Rose bush and then drove by it on my way to work. It is pretty in all light, all burgeoning boughs heavy with the bursting buds and wide-open blossoms, wanton in its unruly passion. My breath quickens just thinking of it.

- (later) I'm taking Jasper on a night walk, and I think I could probably cut a Rose without being seen. It is on the side of the house. But I was staring at it when he, the neighbor, took the trash out. He was wheeling the big army green bin forward out of the garage and told me "Good evening," but it went up on the end like it was a question. "Good evening?" like that. If he had just been wheeling it backward like normal people do, this wouldn't have happened.
- May 22** I walked on the other side of the street of the Rose bush this morning, to avoid suspicion. The petals shone with dew. I just had to drive by again as I left for work. The neighbor happened to be getting in his car. Did he see me?
- (later) I threw out the arrangement and got that disgusting Lily pollen on me. Their stamen (or is it the pistons? Pistils?) are just asking for it, jutting up and out of the spread freckled petals. I thought it was pretty at first, but it's actually very vulgar. The Lilies weren't dead yet, but they sure took all the bloom out of the Roses. I bought ribbon to hang and dry the arrangement, but these flowers aren't worth memorializing.
- May 23** I am walking a new route now, and I have discovered a veritable primrose path of flowers. It's just a street of green thumbs, two over, and one up. Technically, I think it is a different neighborhood, but these residential matters all run together.
- (later) I am taking my florist's scissors this time, and I've got Jasper in case anyone wonders what I'm doing. My dog's pooping, that's what I'm doing! No one will miss a couple of flowers in the morning.
- (later) Every time headlights illuminated me I was both pleased with the unintended aid in my undercover floristry and panicked at possible discovery. I will have to buy a very small and dim flashlight for future use. Something I can hold in my mouth since the other hands are busy with cuttings. I managed only a mess of Irises this outing. The gardener had planted a rainbow of colors, and I only made it home with three colors. I'll have to check on my walk tomorrow morning to see if my floral pillaging is noticeable.
- May 24** I will have to find another walking route. I hadn't remembered the Tulip bed in front of the Irises, and hadn't seen the smaller flowers in the dark. They appeared thoroughly trampled. And if that wasn't enough destruction, entire Iris stalks were missing all of their blooms, my midnight cuts obvious in the clear daylight. I ducked my head and hustled

out of the cul-de-sac. But I am thrilled with the arrangement I made, even after the hollow stems leaked all over my favorite down vest on the walk back home.

**May 26** Irises are already dying, their fuzzy tongues dropping, delicate frills crinkling. Where before there were purple, white, and orange burlesque dancers in the midst of a frolicking cancan, now they look like girls after a long night of dancing, wilted over tables and chairs. I threw them out in a pique. All that work for just two days' worth of beauty.

(later) I didn't even feel like taking Jasper on a walk, and now he's in a pique too. I can't get my neighbor's Rose bush out of my mind. Maybe I should plant my own flowers. Then I wouldn't need to arrange them in a vase. I could enjoy them all season.

**June 15** Flowers take a settling in period. Well, at least arranging flowers doesn't give you blisters. I mentioned this to Karla, and she said it doesn't make you dirty either, and I swear I blushed. It's good that I'm planting my own flowers. I did lots of research and soon I'll be able to look out on a bed of Lady's Slippers, Queen Anne's Lace, Daisies, Bleeding Hearts, Pansies, Lady's Mantle, Violets, Violas, and Heather. I can't wait.

**June 20** Next week I should have blooms and the land cover plants should have crept forward. Maybe I'll finally be able to use that ribbon I bought and dry some of my own flowers.

**June 30** The MiracleGro says to fertilize every other week, but I've been fertilizing every week. Is that why my flowers aren't growing taller, or am I overwatering? Not watering enough? If I guess wrong, then I risk doubling up on my mistake and killing all of the flowers.

**July 20** I yearn for a bouquet, but nothing is tall enough to cut for an arrangement, and I'm too tired from watering and weeding daily to go for a nighttime walk. Growing flowers is not all it is cracked up to be.

**October 27** We've had our first frost. To be honest, I don't feel that upset about the flowers dying. I could have laid a sheet over them. The temperature is supposed to climb once more, but none of my crop were big enough to harvest. Stem flowers, I've since learned, is what I need to plant in a Cutting Garden. But those bulbs are planted in March, which is a long ways away, and I've got the itch for flowers in this cool weather.

(later) I hadn't driven by my Rose bush in a while. In bloom.

**October 28** I finally did it, easy as stealing from the innocent. All it takes is a sip of luck and a bit of timing. I should have just walked up and cut a branch the first time I saw her. This morning, in the daylight, I snipped a few branches still heavy with blooms. And I had one of those what-do-you-call-thems... anyway, neighbors don't expect a person to steal flowers. I just hope that they aren't already frost bitten. I called into work because I realized, as I was cutting, that these don't have long enough stems. Bud vases is what I needed, but had to go to five stores before discovering a plethora at the dollar store. Should have started there. It was worth missing work. The trees are turning colors outside, and inside I've got a drop of crimson on every surface.

(later) They are pretty in every light.

**October 29** I woke up early, panicked that the Roses had died in the night, even though I stayed up late watching them and *know* that just a few hours isn't long enough for them to wilt completely. A couple of the more mature blooms are bruised around their skirts, but the tighter blooms and buds look as if they could still be attached to the branch. I'm tempted to call in and stay home with them again today. I shouldn't.

**November 1** Roses are still healthy, a few have opened up more, but I had to press the first of what I'm calling "my girls." She was fully bloomed for three days. I don't know that I could expect more than that, but I am still disappointed when I look at the empty bud vase. Apparently the flower has to stay pressed in between book pages for seven to ten days—so, an eternity. At least the telephone book is doing something more useful than taking up space.

(later) Another two girls folded while I was gone today. I added them to the phone book and lined the remaining girls up on the mantle and have curled up with Jasper in front of a roaring fire. The three empty bottles are positioned in the middle in remembrance.

**November 2** I woke up to all the buds drooping, their stem necks bent at a sickening angle. So I walked by the bush, and it is frost bitten to death. All that crimson turned to dried blood brown.

**November 3** Went to the store today and saw a delightful arrangement of Hazel and Mums. It's perfect weather for a long walk.

(later) Mums are easy to find in the neighborhood, still looking for a Hazel bush.

**November 4** There are several houses with Mums by the mailbox. Their perky plump

heads reaching out of round bushes reminds me of cheerleader pompoms. I wonder why they're called Mums but think that maybe it's a good sign that they can keep a secret.

**November 5** The rest of the girls died this morning. A couple were out of water, the bud vases not holding much. I've been distracted with my witch Hazel hunt. I tied them with a tiny velvet ribbon I bought just for them and washed the vases quickly before taking Jasper out for the morning walk. We're driving to a neighborhood down the road so I can explore more of the streets.

(later) Success! Spidery yellow orange next to a home that looks like a hobbit hole. I had taken the florist scissors I keep in my car on the walk with me. Six branches should be enough. I worked my way around the bush, and honestly, it needed a bit of pruning. That Hazel was out of control. I'm excited enough for my walk tonight that I considered calling in. But the Mums can wait.

(later) The neighbor came home while I was relieving her mailbox of its decoration. She parked in the garage and came out as I was walking away. I didn't look back to see if she followed me or checked my handiwork. My heart is still thumping. I didn't get as many Mums as I need for the arrangement. But I know of a house with a beautiful burnt orange color that will pair nicely with the yellow Hazel and purple Mums I already have. This might be my masterpiece arrangement. Hazel's willowy limbs and otherworldly flowers really elevate the aesthetic.

**November 6** The orange Mums were still there, but much fewer in number than I originally thought. Emboldened by past successes, I stole the whole plant. It was an odd thrill walking through the neighborhood in daylight with the pot. No one stopped me.

(later) I've posted a picture of the arrangement on Instagram and Facebook. I wonder if the neighbor will recognize her orange Mum.

**November 9** Sam complimented all my dried flowers and my fall arrangement. It was his first time at my house. I was nervous. He was feeling blue, so I suggested going on a walk.

**November 12** Mum Mum Mum Mum Mum...it's tuneless, mocking hum.

**November 28** The final frost was last night. The bears are hibernating.

(later) I'd ask for a greenhouse for Christmas.

(later) The Germans probably have a name for this feeling.



### **Section III: Red Beds Plains**



Touched

Darling arranged

An aromatic bouquet

My lonely eye wept

Birthdays in the late 2000s

Hello, Lonely  
Hello, from under the Mistletoe  
Hello, elastic waists  
Hello, popcorn for dinner  
Hello, Wednesdays at the WineBin  
Hello, nephews on weekends  
Hello, buying two presents for every couple I know  
Hello, one in return  
Hello, OKCupid  
Hello, saggy tits  
Hello, cat  
Hello, punchline  
Hello, being every kid's aunt  
Hello, no this seat isn't taken  
Hello, alarm to take cold medicine every four hours  
Hello, YouTube videos how to clean my gutters  
Hello, doctor, no one could look at this for me so I made an appointment  
Hello, slip-on dresses because I can't reach the zipper  
Hello, hair down there  
Hello, tax forms—still no dependents  
Hello, traveling with freedom and mace  
Hello, gravity blanket  
Hello, dildos  
Hello, mom as my eternal emergency contact

Goodbye going out in anything but  
Vanishing black

Abrasive<sup>x</sup>

She described herself as *“excited,” because of the history she was about to make.*

Or else, after the tail lights changed red to white, running was something only her mouth could do.

Or else, *she got mad when she watched television: “That’s because I’m a girl and there aren’t enough girl superheroes on TV.”*

Or else, *she wore a white dress and a black cardigan with white flowers and red trim. Her usually pale complexion glowed from summer sun, but there were deep, dark lines under her eyes.*

Or else, the history she was about to make were deep, dark lines under her eyes.

Or else, *many in the newsroom considered her to be intimidating and brusque;* I clarified, like a man: remote, talented, volcanic.

Or else, superheroes don’t wear black cardigans with white flowers and red trim.

Or else, *she promised she’d make them sick, “talking to all of you and listening to your ideas.”*

Or else, *not a few women cried the loss of a tingling mantle of merit.*

Or else, *people usually notice her voice, a nasal car honk.*

Or else, I clarified, she was excited to run the newsroom. History. She made them sick.

Or else, *her schoolteacher-like way of elongating words and drawing out the last word of each sentence is a subject of endless conversation and expert mimicry.*

Or else, *she had trained herself to limit the space between sentences so that it would be hard to interrupt her.*

Or else, *an attempt to not sound too New York.*

Or else, probably has something to do with trying to sound a bit like Bob Dylan.

Or else, she made them sick, in her black cardigan with white flowers and red trim and deep, dark lines.

Or else, her sister and mother have *the same unusual voice*.

Or else, her father pushed her to excel.

Or else, she thinks she's the smartest girl in the room.

Or else, *when Judy Garland died, she and a friend took a bus to the Frank Campbell funeral home to soak up the experience and observe celebrities*.

Or else, *women thought we were sellouts and wanted to be in the male world*.

Or else, I clarified, like a man: remote, talented, volcanic.

Or else, she is an artsy person with a cackle laugh.

Or else, she *always was a Rosalind in As You Like It*. I clarified, *an English flapper in Noël Coward's Hay Fever*.

Or else, *her squeaky voice, exaggerated walk, and batting eyes quickly become tiresome*.

Or else, she got mad when she watched t.v., volcanic.

Or else, *an exacting boss whose normal speaking voice was a shout*. I clarified, a man.

Or else, *if Thomas did lie, as the preponderance of evidence suggests, then his performance, and that of the Senate in confirming him, raises fundamental questions about the political process that placed him on the court*.

Or else, she made them sick thinking she was the smartest girl in the room.

Or else, *a great team leader, a loyal friend, someone you'd want in the trenches with you*. I clarified, *her team was high standards*.

Or else, *he routinely cut her off at the daily page-one meeting to bark into the telephone that her story ideas were lame*. I clarified, *she was not dynamic enough and lacked glitz*.

Or else, she made them sick, a nasal car honk, something to do with Bob Dylan.

Or else, *she has such a bee in her bonnet.*

Or else, she described herself as excited to make them sick.

Or else, *she could be short with people, curtly cutting them off in mid-sentence.* I clarified, *egotistical.*

Or else, *she wanted to walk home, no longer running.*

Or else, *cloth-covered green couch with a dog pillow, a Persian rug that would cover part of the carpet, a shelf of books, a Yankees baseball cap, and pictures of Babe Ruth, Keith Richards, and E. B. White and his Westie.*

Or else, *their advocate.* I clarified, *'Oh, God, another party!'*

Or else, *she plays favorites.*

Or else, *shrewd with people upstairs.*

Or else, she promised to bat eyes, exaggerate walk, and cackle laugh. Historic.

Or else, *she knew before she did the puppy diaries that she would get a lot of grief.*

Or else, *a small earthquake of a meeting.* I clarified, volcanic.

Or else, *so much of her negativity is unintended.*

Or else, she is an artsy person routinely cut off.

Or else, her voice.

Or else, *probing is seen as criticism.*

Or else, *a small tattoo on her right shoulder that replicates an old subway token.*

Or else, she made them sick with batting eyes in her volcanic cardigan and car honk voice.

Eggs<sup>xi</sup>

Hot to cold. Frozen. Check for bounce, pinkness, youth, vitality. Not pink. Of course not. That's just the chicken in your head. Or else spoiled. Or else lost. Or else mature. Or else eaten.

Eggs

Wait last. First crystals, not crystals, not not crystals metallic glinting, gentle gentle bubbles clear stringy not not color before balling beading and now—faster til it's felt, building clouds to touch hands.



## Origin

I am a red clay woman—cracking in the dead of summer, expanding, crinkling across my dusty surface, seeming to crumble under hot rays, spreading against your foundation, underground pressure only to—

step back

contract in your winters that leave me cold, reaching deep into my ancient graves strewn with bones and beads and the dead's fossil tears and bunion feet. You thought that pressure was tearing you down but you see now—

all embrace holding you together.

I am a red clay woman muddying all the waters with my dust, my—  
fingerprints all over those that move through or dare to come into me, out of me, attempt to fill me in with something other than my red clay self but I contaminate, I pollute—I add my blood to all that water. This is *mine*. I am here, unmovable. Changeable but unbreakable.

I am a red clay woman—my mountains are not large but my hills compete with math and knolls and categorization. Called Black Mesa, but I'm covered in blushing quartz, shy rose rocks—sandstone romantic soft but hardened in my blooming.

## My Portnoy Complaint

So I was riding the bus home after work. You've seen what I wear to work, yeah? I don't dress cute, like made up at all. I'm not wearing makeup. My hair's under a hat. I'm wearing faded black Old Navy pants, filthy Vans, and a shapeless Friday's shirt. I'm basically a clean-faced, goth Pat. No gender signifiers whatsoever. If I wore gloves and kept my head down, people wouldn't be able to tell I was human at all. I could be a collection of stacked rats wearing clothes. I'm just another aborted food worker, who once was human and is now the form of collective sleepless nights given shape by a thin skin of food smells and grease.

Okay, okay, so this day, I'm exhausted. I worked a double and didn't even go home in the hour in between. It was a difficult decision between eating Friday's food, other mall food, or sleeping. A choice that has reduced me to tears more often than boys, grades, or drama. I've been on my feet all day in the kitchen. Because, customers are way worse than bus people. My waitress friends wear wedding rings and stuff to try and avoid grabbers and gabbers, but it doesn't work. I'll work for minimum wage and no tips rather than deal with cocks or geoses, thank you very much.

So I get on the bus. It takes about twenty minutes to get home. It's cold. I'm wearing just a hoody because there's no place to put a coat in the kitchen—as if people don't work there and the food prepares itself...which now that I'm thinking about it isn't too far off for Friday's, where everything pretty much comes pre-prepared—And the bus is *always* cold because it costs too much to run the heat, I guess. Or as punishment for being poor enough to ride the bus. So when I leave the kitchen, it feels good, but by the time the bus comes, I'm in full body shivers mode. I sort of stutter up the stairs and curl up in a window seat on an empty row. There's hardly ever anyone on the bus that time of night. Just a couple of other restaurant workers like me, usually, older than me though, like in their sixties not sixteen. Tonight's no different, except one kind of older, kinda cute guy in the very back. He's wearing a pea coat, and nailing it. *Hello, sailor.*

I'm sitting there, all curled up, my eyes closed, shivering, thinking about what if that guy thought I was cute. He looked like he could be in college, but he's on the bus so...probably not that big of a catch. I ride the bus, but that's because I'm saving up for a car because my mom can't buy me one. So maybe he's in the same situation, but ten years older, which is sad. But he's cute. I don't know, so I'm imagining him asking me out when I sort of—how do I explain it? The air shifts or it is noticeably warmer on my left side. So I wait, thinking, like, did I will this to happen? Is he asking me out? How will I respond?

I sit there thinking those questions, and then I'm like, "Are you an idiot, Alex? You don't even know if there is a human next to you for sure." So I like crack one eye just a bit to confirm or deny because I'm not sure I'm ready or willing to enter into a conversation with a carless twenty-something man, or maybe I really want to but I'm just making excuses. So I crack one eye and see a knee, almost touching me, and the other knee is out of view. It's a nice, square knee. It's sort of...trembling. Like not a lot, but some. Maybe he's as cold as I am. Maybe we can share body warmth. I close my eye, hope he doesn't notice my blush, and kinda pretend I'm snuggling down into my hoodie

so that my hair covers my face, and then covertly look again. This time at his face, because that's how my head reangled. He is looking down at my lap, I think, where my hands are tucked in between my crossed legs for warmth. Again, it sort of seems like he's trembling—he looks really intense and I can tell he's breathing deeply. Not hard, but maybe hard. I don't know. He wasn't out of breath. But it wasn't normal breathing.

So I snuggle down again. And I'm thinking, *what in the world is going on?* He doesn't seem to want to talk to me. He is creeping me way out. When I snuggle down, I sort of move my body more away from him, imaginary invitation to share warmth rescinded, and take my hands out from between my legs. In case I needed them, I guess. I don't know what I was thinking. I just knew I was uncomfortable and I didn't understand what was happening. So I crack my eyes after repositioning...and he is totally, his—he's slumped down and...he's, he's practicing his long stroke. Or the short stroke. I've never seen a penis in person before. I'm not sure whether he deserves body shaming or not.

Yeah, so this rando bus guy moved to sit next to me and jerk off looking at part of my body or something. And I'm not—I'm not even remotely sexual or pretty or anything after working twelve hours in the kitchen. My shapeless black clothes are covered in food, almost the same as if I rolled out of a restaurant's garbage dumpster. And I'm just sitting there, eyes clenched shut, willing him to just finish, and dreading him finishing, because is he going to spray it on me? What will I do? What should I do? So instead I start imagining that he's got some sort of Garbage Pail Kid fetish. Like he had his childhood sexual awakening to Sewer Sue, and when he saw me, he couldn't hold it in.

I don't even know what happened after that. I kept my eyes firmly shut, and I was really trying not to hear or feel anything. And a bus is super loud, so I just waited. And then it was my stop, and when I opened my eyes, he wasn't next to me anymore. So I just stood up, kept looking forward and left.

“You can open your eyes now,” she said. “On a scale of one to four, how are your feelings of anxiety now?”

## Canyon Full of Dust<sup>xii</sup>

### I

In that June in the heart of Oklahoma  
The buzzing of the locusts grew still one afternoon  
And in the evening *summer hued* the prairie

*And made one think of rosy fruit  
And gilded tumblers. Homey red  
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine*

Of plains, which like flat land lay.  
*Who then, in that native state  
Out of the light evolved the moving buds*

*Who, then, evolved the sandstone-buds from the clay  
Diffusing lust in that bowl of dust?  
C'était mon âme, mon enfant, mon bijou.*

The sandstone-buds bloomed far below the dust  
*And moved, as blooms move, in the undulating red  
And in its dusty sunset, while the hue*

*Of heaven in antique reflection rolled  
Round those dunes. And sometimes the earth  
Poured brilliant rose on the glinting red.*

### II

In that June in the heart of Oklahoma  
The buzzing of the locusts grew still one afternoon  
And in the evening lush purple *streaked* the prairie

*And made one think of chicken wire fruit  
And cut crystal tumblers. A sham-like red  
Capped summer-seeming on the tense machine*

Of plains, which in judgmental flatness lay.  
*Who then, beheld the rising of the dust  
That strode submerged in the Biblical humidity,*

*Who saw the mortal massives of the blooms  
Of sandstone moving within the clay floor?  
C'était ma sœur de la terre, ma vie, mon or.*

The crickets sang loudly as the windy wings  
Buzz-buzzed *it in the darkened* clay-blooms.  
The crickets grew still. And then purple sky spread

*Its gilt pendentives on the earth  
And the macabre of the dust-classrooms  
In an enormous undulation fled.*

### III

In that June in the heart of Oklahoma  
The buzzing of the locusts grew still one afternoon  
*And a pale silver patterned on the prairie*

*And made one think of fragrant fruit  
And sweating tumblers. A thirsty red,  
Split in anticipation, held the tranced machine*

Of plains, as a drought holds and holds.  
*Who seeing silver-pink petals of red blooms  
Unfolding upon the earth, feeling sure*

Of the pollen with the honey spurge, heard, then,  
The earth *unfolding in the sunken* dust?  
*Oh ! C'était mon extase et mon amour.*

*So deeply sunken were they that the shouds,  
The shrouding shadows, made the petals black  
Until the rolling heaven made them red,*

A red beyond the blushing rose,  
*And smiting the crevasses of the leaves*  
Overwhelmed the earth with a ruby red.

Spinsters

I filled in the hole in my thorax

layered on my

e x o s k e l e t o n

and slept

with eight legs

crossed over my

heart

Ways I've been Molested:

The Homeland card isle  
In front of a crowd of homeless and then  
In my car  
Outside my car  
In a bar named the Sidecar  
Outside a bar  
While doing the Cupid Shuffle  
While holding hands  
While looking for my Uber  
While making eye contact  
While avoiding eye contact  
In my periphery  
In a park  
On a date  
At work  
After a wedding  
In a school hall  
Out with friends  
At a party  
By a friend  
By a stranger  
By a strange friend  
By a friend's friend  
While sober  
While drunk  
While distracted  
While tired  
While anticipating and actively avoiding  
While waiting to present  
While teaching  
While dancing  
While saying goodbye  
—there weren't party favors

Outlaw Country [2001]

The sign reads “Welcome to Outlaw Country.” My father’s country. His father’s country. I had always thought it ironic that my grandfather was the chief of police in Marlow, home of the outlaws. He would have had his hands full. But from stories I’ve heard, he was more like the king of the outlaws, driving through buildings and playing pranks on war buddies and my dad when he was my age—uneasy twelve. That was a long time ago, though it was recent enough in small-town memory that it had gotten my cousins who lived there out of a few speeding tickets. The drive there was boring. The town was boring. A real Mayberry as my dad always said. He liked to think of his childhood in terms of *The Andy Griffith Show*, though Andy didn’t have PTSD or breed quarter horses.

My grandfather, as far as I know, is the only person who ever made my mother cry—and on multiple occasions too. She’s in the front seat, her should-be-trademarked bun peaking over the seat back. She’s got that visor on again, the one with a hibiscus print in absurd colors, camouflaged by her fluffy bangs that I can’t decide whether they date her or exist outside of any year because they never were a trend. They’re just her. My mother. Something that never changes. Both frustrating and comforting. Like Marlow. She wasn’t from Marlow though. She was from an even smaller Oklahoma town.

Anyway, she’s wearing the visor because she’s working on the house. I’m supposed to help. I count things as father drives: seven Braums since Oklahoma City, two hundred thirty-six hay bales, one roadrunner, too many semis, only Texas and Oklahoma license plates.

Finally, we pull into the gravel drive, and I jump out to open the gate. It isn’t a very long driveway to the house, but Papa Lloyd breeds expensive quarter horses and likes the extra security. From the porch, his border collie barks. Its name is either Buddy, Baxter, or Buster. My grandfather seemed to call him whatever B-name that is on the tip of his tongue in the moment. I let the old Suburban continue down to the house, closing the gate behind, and slip into the garden there at the end of the drive. It’s overgrown. My grandfather can no longer plant, but some fruits and veggies reappear every year anyway, their seeds growing in the remains of the fruit before them, rooting and sprouting in the rotting carcasses. I spot the light and dark green stripes I was looking for. The watermelons needed another month before they would be ready to eat. I didn’t much care for any of the other plants and leave them unexamined.

As I approach the Suburban through the trees separating the garden from the drive, I hear my parents arguing. The tipoff: My father says, “Well, honey.” And then follows a sound of exasperation that’s neither a huff nor a sigh nor a scoff, but some bastard of all three.

I stop, a red cedar’s needles tickling my collar. There is a long pause. No doubt my mother’s piercing blue eyes are glaring out from underneath that ridiculous visor. She could be intimidating in anything.

All I hear is the sound of car doors slamming and footsteps through already summer-browned grass. I wait until I hear the porch’s screen door squeak and slam



before taking off down the gravel drive toward the peeling blue barn at the bottom of the hill that the house sits on top of. Baxter-Buddy-Buster follows, nipping at my heels. I haven't been doused in Deet, so I resist the urge to slip between wire fencing and cut through the pasture. Chiggers liked my panty line best of all, and I'd learned that lesson good and well when I was a little kid. From his stall, Hercules watches my approach. I can hear Duchess from the other side of the barn, where she and her mother—Red—are housed. Papa's herd is considerably thinner since his quadruple bypass surgery eight years before. I wave to Herc but don't stop to give him a scratch. He's a mean son of a bitch and as big as his name suggests. He and Papa used to be a match, until the last time the horse bucked him off while he was in the midst of a heart attack. Now he doesn't ride anymore.

I'm almost to the barn entrance when I hear my mother's voice call. I turn to look. If she hasn't spotted me, then I feel safe continuing on. But if— She stands at the turn in the drive, hands on angular hips. She's Chickasaw and German, solidly built even though lean, an interesting mix of angles and soft curves. But her voice is all angles. I come obediently.

"Your father is leaving with Papa for the doctor. Come tell him what you want to eat before they go and then help me in the garage." She turned back to the house before I was within twenty feet of her.

Duncan, a neighbor town with a hospital, Braums, and Walmart. It might possibly also be the location of a hellmouth judging from the amount of murders and suicides. My father had left me at that Braums one time when I was five. Made it all the way back with my two brothers to my grandfather's farm a half hour away before realizing. I stood outside the burger joint crying and telling concerned strangers in cowboy boots and Stetsons that I was fine, thank you for asking. He still hasn't lived it down.

When I walk in, my grandfather winks a bright blue eye at me. They aren't like my mom's steel blue. They are twinkly cornflower, full of mischief. He is attempting to get out of his recliner.

"Dad!" my own father exclaims. "Use the button. We bought this so you wouldn't fall getting up." He presses the button on the chair's arm and it slowly labors upward with a mechanical hum. My grandfather winks at me again as he waits for the chair to gently push him to his feet. We share a smile. Papa Lloyd refuses to use a cane or a walker, but he didn't say no to an overstuffed chair. He didn't have to use the buttons when we weren't around.

My mother is already back in the garage doing laundry. I feel a pinch on my conscience. But this isn't kid's work in my opinion. I would rather shovel manure or polish the saddle my grandfather had bought me years ago than fold or vacuum or, the worst, dusting.

I tell my father my order and then go to my mother in the garage under my father's hazel gaze. I get my eyes from him.

"Shut the door," she tells me. I do and she sighs before returning to scrubbing a pair of Wranglers in a bucket, her red acrylic nails appearing and disappearing as she works the fabric in the sudsy brown water. I wrinkle my nose at the unidentifiable smell, all mixed in with the floral soap.

“Leigh,” she says, “I need you to look for a bigger bucket or wash pan.”

“Why,” I say because her voice is sharp and accusing.

“Because, I don’t want to be here all day doing laundry and there are multiple things that need to soak. Now—” an invisible exclamation mark followed the word—  
“just do what I say.”

I frown as I leave the garage. “Bitch,” I whisper under my breath.

I love my grandfather’s farm, but I hate looking for things. There’s a cobweb or three in every corner, and nothing was ever cleaned in between our occasional visits. I scan the kitchen and decide I’m brave enough to look in the cabinet under the sink. There’s a mouse trap with a mouse in it. I close the doors so my mother won’t see and remind myself to tell my father when he returns. I walk to the master bedroom, where my grandfather stopped sleeping. It is pink. His ex must have decorated it before she left him, her two babies, and town for good in 1958. No bucket in there. Through the open door I check the bedroom he now sleeps in. There’s a box of unopened Depends in the corner. I blink at the green box; it remains where it is. I frown and close the door behind me.

After checking outside around the house, I head back down to the barn. I briefly think about grabbing some produce from the kitchen for Duchess and her mother, but it is unlikely my grandfather has any, and besides, I feel a new urgency to find what my mother is looking for.

## **Section IV: Gypsum Valley Hills**

## The Lululemon Question

What I want to know is if I practice yoga, really dedicate, will I be able to finger myself. Like not just the tip, a full finger inside, to the last knuckle, a couple, several. An entire fist, if I paced myself and really stretched before and after. What about my tongue on my nipples, those lauded berries of mammary? Clitoris? Peel back my own purple-veined petals. Will I be able to run a finger shivery down my spine or cup an apple cheek and give a good-natured squeeze, a promise of more to come? And then deliver. Will shaving be a breeze and self-pedicures a cinch? How about zipping up my dresses or getting out of a too-tight shirt? Will my contortions allow me to look at that weird bump on my back, or stretch to scratch the itch right below my bra strap—no a little up, to the left, the other left? When I get a line of zits beneath my sports bra from all this yoga sweat, will I be able to pop my own bacne? Will I be able to give myself back massages after a fight with my parents or whisper in my ear when I least expect it? Can I give myself risqué pets when no one's looking and forehead kisses goodnight? Will I be able to wrap my arms around myself front to back, listening to my own heartbeat echo itself, a dialogued monologue—or from back to front, spooning at night, a reassuring weight inciting night sweats, the type ghosts and spooks of all kinds fear most? Will I be able to rest my head on my own shoulder, when I've been on my feet all day, when someone yells at me, when I yelled at someone else, when my dog dies, when I'm spun out, when I'm at the movies, when on public transportation, when I brim with affection, when I need to close my eyes for just a second, be hidden from the buzzing stinging world, and just exist with my heart on my sleeve.

## Trigger Warning

A rash of painless nerves before,  
Bible heavy on my tongue, lips waxed shut  
    Throat crawling tight with dread, things unsaid—  
    Don't touch me, please

It was a minor irritation, a bump  
Not even on my heart  
    No tears shed, no words spread  
    Years ago, an old hair beneath the skin

You didn't touch me  
    Don't touch me  
    I'm scared and  
    Sore

Yet he hasn't touched me,  
All fever dreams and fantasies  
    Mirrored dark eyes, reflecting and refracting back my desires  
    I'm paralyzed, blind, a heart racing in the dark

Through the Paces

Nothing so pleasing

As boy in first head-long rush

Save man in slow march

## Laughing Matters

I did a violent thing. I laughed. When she told me that they jizzed in girls' car handles in high school, I laughed in disbelief. My friend told me it never happened to her, but it did happen to Sherry and Linda.

I said, "Well, Sherry, yeah, but Linda? What did she ever do to deserve jizz in her car handle?"

I was violently uncomfortable.

"I never knew," I said

My friend nodded. She said, "They called me DSL when we were in high school. I was the captain of the cross-country team, so I thought it was just a cool nickname about how fast I was. Like fast dial up."

Seeing that I still didn't understand, my friend explained, "DSL—Dick Sucking Lips. Adam told me at the high school reunion. Ten years later and I still thought it was just a nickname about how fast I could run."

She laughed violently, softly. Turned her head away because I was staring at her lips.

"If I had known—" I started to say.

"I know."

Boys did this to girls' car door handles ten years ago at OCS in Edmond, Oklahoma—Oklahoma Christian School. And if it happened before wi-fi, you can bet it's happening now. And if it makes you uncomfortable, welcome to my headspace.

Now, Sherry and Linda aren't their real names—the girls whose handles were jizzed in. No one names their kids that anymore. But Sherry, such a slutty name, right? Maybe it's the way you have to move your lips to say it: "Sherry." A dick sucking name. It's something you should seriously consider when naming your daughters. Make sure it isn't a slutty name and pray to whatever god or energy you believe in that nothing about her anatomy, at least that shows when clothed, looks like a receptacle for a penis or sperm. Thanks to dial up and wifi, though, we can't do anything about the fact that they know what's beneath the clothes and what it's capable of taking.

Receiving would be a better word.

This isn't just high school boys being boys—a baseless excuse that, I assume, presupposes something that happens to a person before they turn eighteen doesn't have long lasting effects in the future.

The first time I non-consensually received attention was in my senior year of college. I guess I was lucky. I hadn't yet become a feminist. A coworker who was a friend casually reached over and grabbed my pussy—I put it in these terms because we should all be familiar with and comfortable with this kind of locker room talk, right? And I want to give the audience a break if they're tense from the previous jizz story or if they named their daughter Sherry and are having feelings of regret.

I don't remember what I did after that. Nothing. Walked away. It wasn't violent.

Maybe some people need the context to make a judgment call about whether I was to blame or not for this nonconsensual contact. It wasn't at a party, I hadn't been drinking, and neither had he. I had not flirted with him. In fact, he was in the process of coming out of the closet, so it didn't seem like I should be wary of this friend at all. And yet, while we looked at birthday cards for another coworker in the Homeland grocery store, he casually reached over, palming me over my knee-length khaki shorts. Maybe it was the amount of leg I was showing. I do have great calves.

Or maybe it wasn't sexual at all. For him. Or maybe it was. I don't know how much he matters in this scenario. He doesn't have an excuse. There is no excuse. Why do we keep making excuses for them?

When I told my mom, she asked whether I told him "no" or had told him off. When I told my mom's sister, she demanded I report it to administration. I did neither. I didn't think the administration needed to know what was happening to my vagina. I've since become more comfortable talking about it. I have had to. I have been forced to. Because too often our response when we hear of little red flags is to excuse it, to make a joke because we are uncomfortable, to ignore it. Me too. I do those things too. But then I correct myself. Because I have been sexually harassed and molested too. Me too. I have suffered from and acted out violence. Me too.



Eggs<sup>xiii</sup>

Placed not carefully so hidden so obviously hidden—first doused then hidden for touching, cracking colorful porcelain breaks or else spoiling under spring waves.

Eggs

White first nothingness an anticipation of something to come or a squawk hard pecking and soft not soft but warm almost hot the heat first but no the warm white waiting room first round not anticipation but promise not not the grain dead rivers of safe from red from all but white and brown and sound of mom and mother or else alone before becoming the one or else alone with the one.

Eggs

Cocooned within safe eight, surrounded by not white, not alive, not not alive, waiting safe, fuzzy sticky hungry safety until—

## She Says She's a People Pleaser

Fleas, Snackwells, the relief of a walnut tree's shade, I tacky with flea powder and sweat, eating low-calorie devil's food from redeemed green boxes, not yet in a bra, escaping Great Aunt Kay's beauty day black-and-whites behind film smudged by loneliness, a full fridge of food past-due. Told only to eat from the green boxes, cakes in cellophane body bags. The pack of taken-in strays wait for the crumbs.

Career day in kindergarten, I in tights thick white with elephant skin knees, black flats sensible with pinstriped babyblue and her 80s glasses—she was her own occupation.

She had to argue me out. I locked up I against WeightWatchers + Bible, deliver me, I prayed, as she pressed her lips on the opposite oak side, eyes rolling at preteen angst.

I watched. Half a slice of cheese, one slice of turkey, a red bell pepper dipped in hummus, eight almonds—menopause, she says, not like you, she says, size twelve, she says.

Wait until her growth spurt, she had laughed, but we're still waiting.

## Isolation in Kitchen Exoskeleton

What am I?

An event reminder

a Facebook birthday

a ping on your calendar

I throw your

parties to celebrate your big moments so I can be

included

can be more important than

just a guest

I'm penciled into

your schedule,

a happy text unexpectedly and a

date set into the future.

I babysit your kids when you

go out,

and they bequeath me

"Aunt."

I house sit when you're out of town,

dog sit when the in-laws come

for the holidays.

I record your memories and share

your highlights.

You are glad

you have me,

how lucky you are.

I have events that are stories

we catch up on, that go

uncelebrated,

unremarked.

I tell my day

in texts and

social media posts,

unseen and untold people

like and

comment.

I live on a shoestring,

and you roll your eyes.

## In the Freezer Section

A palm on the back of the head, steady pressure and a working throat with a sensitive gag reflex for shitty clichés and diabetic feet shuffling through Wal-Mart in plastic sandals into blacktops wet with spaces faded and shopping carts abandoned, all cockeyed wheels—thank God for complimentary wet wipes I think while eyeing your pussy toes and Little Debbie snacks, swallowing convulsively, choking on my-dad-has-the-sugars, part of my medical transcript, in the clipboard, failing in diet, my patient portal, just waiting for one of those cysts to pop, so jealous of the round eggs they infiltrate, gum, impede, mimic by—plop—and so much pain—crying curled in bathwater pink pain—sopping with it. Text pictures to my friend, naming the fetus, digging through, looking for molars of my absorbed twin—naked except for the giant floral panties Mom bought because all my underwear are too small for crisis. Too dirty. Stinking of before when I was wet with creativity—staining fabric with desire—the *need* to fill where now there is a—  
Palm, persistent pressure.

### Replaced by Delicate and Tender<sup>xiv</sup>

When Helen is no longer desired  
and “All Greece hates  
the still eyes in the white face”  
for “remembering past enchantments<sup>1</sup>,”  
and Cupid’s reign has come to a foregone conclusion,  
“rooting erotic garbage...  
among wild oats  
sown in mucous-membrane<sup>2</sup>,”  
the classics of romance be forgotten.  
Good riddance cries Eurydice!  
“If you had let me rest with the dead,  
I had forgot you  
and the past.<sup>3</sup>”  
Greek ideals, bodies in motion, replaced  
by “virginal to the bellows  
of experience—  
the skin sack<sup>4</sup>” of the Madonna  
whose pure fruitfulness was  
such a “wanton duality”  
“bleach to the pure  
white wickedness of pain<sup>5</sup>.”  
Sainthood morphed into nudes,  
“shedding our petty pruderies  
from slit eyes; we sidle up  
to Nature — — — that irate pornographer<sup>6</sup>,”  
petals upon petals adorn

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<sup>1</sup> “Helen” by H. D. The first and second stanzas read: “All Greece hates / the still eyes in the white face, / the lustre as of olives / where she stands, / and the white hands. / All Greece reviles / the wan face when she smiles, / hating it deeper still / when it grows wan and white, / remembering past enchantments and past ills.”

<sup>2</sup> “Songs to Joannes” by Mina Loy. The first stanza of section one reads: “Spawn of Fantasies / Silting the appraisable / Pig Cupid his rosy snout / Rooting erotic garbage / ‘Once upon a time’ / Pulls a weed white star-topped / Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane.”

<sup>3</sup> “Eurydice” by H. D. The last stanza for the first section of this poem reads: “If you had let me wait / I had grown from listlessness / into peace— / if you had let me rest with the dead, / I had forgot you / and the past.”

<sup>4</sup> “Songs to Joannes” by Mina Loy. The last stanza of section one reads: “I must live in my lantern / Trimming subliminal flicker / Virginal to the bellows / Of Experience / Coloured glass.” Then begins section two: “The skin-sack / In which a wanton duality / Packed / All the completions of my infructuous impulses / Something the shape of a man.”

<sup>5</sup> “Songs to Joannes” by Mina Loy. Section twenty-three reads: “Laughter in solution / Stars in a stare / Irredeemable pledges / Of pubescent consummations / Rot / To the recurrent moon / Bleach / To the pure white / Wickedness of pain.”

<sup>6</sup> “Songs to Joannes” by Mina Loy. Section twenty-six reads: “Shedding our petty pruderies / From slit eyes / / We sidle up / To Nature / — — — that irate pornographer.”

“the strange experience of beauty;  
 and each fresh wave of consciousness  
 is poison<sup>7</sup>,”  
 killing the virgin queen with the reverse harem—  
 she says, “Men are monopolists  
 of ‘stars, garters, buttons  
 and other shining baubles.<sup>8</sup>”  
 Another monarch in her place,  
 “She thrust her breath against the stubborn coal,  
 Bringing to bear upon its hilt the whole  
 Of her still body...there sprang a little blaze...<sup>9</sup>”  
 and sweet Adam had his Eve once more,  
 “constrained in speak of the serpent—  
 she snakeskin in the history of politeness  
 not to be returned to again—<sup>10</sup>,”  
 Then there came a terrible ripping,  
 toppling “a statuette of ivory on ivory,  
 the logical last touch<sup>11</sup>,”  
 “and feathers are strewn<sup>12</sup>.”  
 It is a kind of grappling, a forgetting for  
 “learned from earliest youth am I  
 in loveliness, and cannot so erase  
 its letters from my mind.<sup>13</sup>”

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<sup>7</sup> “Marriage” by Marianne Moore. Lines 35-41 read: “Below the incandescent stars / below the incandescent fruit, / the strange experience of beauty; / its existence is too much; / it tears one to pieces / and each fresh wave of consciousness / is poison.”

<sup>8</sup> “Marriage” by Marianne Moore. Lines 200-204 read: “She says, ‘Men are monopolists / of stars, garters, buttons / and other shining baubles’ -- / unfit to be the guardians / of another person’s happiness.”

<sup>9</sup> “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree” by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Lines 10-14 of section four read: “She thrust her breath against the stubborn coal, / Brining to bear upon its hilt the whole / Of her still body...there sprang a little blaze... / A pack of hounds, the flam swept up the flue!— / And the blue night stood flattened against the window, staring through.”

<sup>10</sup> “Marriage” by Marianne Moore. Lines 56-60 read: “constrained in speaking of the serpent— / that shed snakeskin in the history of politeness / not to be returned to again— / that invaluable accident exonerating Adam.”

<sup>11</sup> “Marriage” by Marianne Moore. Lines 237-242 read: “She loves herself so much, / she cannot see herself enough— / a statuette of ivory on ivory, / the logical last touch / to an expansive splendor / earned as wages for work done:”

<sup>12</sup> “Songs to Joannes” by Mina Loy. Section ten reads: “Shuttle-cock and battle-door / A little pink-love / And feathers are strewn.”

<sup>13</sup> “Love Is Not Blind” by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Lines 5-7 read: “...Learned from earliest youth am I / In loveliness, and cannot so erase / Its letters from my mind...”

But letters once learned, can be  
reshaped into “let her be let her be let her be to be to  
be shy let her be to be let her be to be let her try. Let  
her try let her try to be let her try to be let her be  
shy...”

“Never to be what he said<sup>14</sup>.”

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<sup>14</sup> “Patriarchal Poetry” by Gertrude Stein.

## Picher's Complaint

My body is Big Sky Country, livid sunsets, purple bruised scarlet and blushing peaches, turned sickly green and puffy when fronts collide over my prairies that have seen white schooners and red-necked sooners and native tears who soaked my red clay lands that crack and expand in Indian summers, meant to be enjoyed in lakes men carved from my belly, chest, and thighs: Lake Thunderbird, Lake Tenkiller, Lake Texoma, murky with my blood, drained leaving me heaving beneath the expanse of blue sky, wind sweeping across Quartz Mountains, through the Arbuckles, buffeting Black Mesa—red cedars, that insidious species blowing in my constant dialogue—ever warning of weather to come. Red River rivalries distract from cross-timbered scars—scraped so deep, crushing my bones to a fine toxic dust, settling white against my red dirt, walkways neat and clean for the ghosts that remain.



## Influences

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- <sup>i</sup> Gertrude Stein  
<sup>ii</sup> Yasunari Kawabata  
<sup>iii</sup> Robert Frost  
<sup>iv</sup> William Carlos Williams  
<sup>v</sup> “Why Jill Abramson Was Fired,” by Ken Auletta, *The New Yorker*, 14 May 2014.  
<sup>vi</sup> “The World’s Most Powerful Woman Won’t Call Herself a Feminist,” by Susan Chira, *The New York Times*, 16 September 2017.  
<sup>vii</sup> Gertrude Stein  
<sup>viii</sup> Mary Ruefle  
<sup>ix</sup> Bob Hicok  
<sup>x</sup> “Changing Times,” by Ken Auletta, *The New Yorker*, 24 October 2011.  
<sup>xi</sup> Gertrude Stein  
<sup>xii</sup> Wallace Stevens  
<sup>xiii</sup> Gertrude Stein  
<sup>xiv</sup> Marianne Moore