

Spring 2018

# The body is a metaphor that eats

Rebecca C. Gonshak  
*Eastern Washington University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.ewu.edu/theses>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Gonshak, Rebecca C., "The body is a metaphor that eats" (2018). *EWU Masters Thesis Collection*. 503.  
<http://dc.ewu.edu/theses/503>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research and Creative Works at EWU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in EWU Masters Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of EWU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jotto@ewu.edu](mailto:jotto@ewu.edu).

# THE BODY IS A METAPHOR THAT EATS

---

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

---

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction Writing

---

By

Rebecca C. Gonshak

Spring 2018

THESIS OF REBECCA GONSHAK APPROVED BY

\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF CHAIR, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF MEMBER, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF MEMBER, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the Inland Northwest Center for Writers for giving me a home these past two years.

To my advisor, Natalie Kusz, for her brilliant insight and great patience, and for never telling me to just get over myself.

To Rachel Toor, for occasionally telling me to just get over myself when that was what I needed to hear, and for her insight, belief, and support.

To Chris Howell, for inspiring two of the essays in this collection, and for setting me free of reason.

To Sayantani Dasgupta, for inspiring me to write a self-portrait in apologies.

To Maura, Lea, and Bri for reading previous versions of these essays and giving invaluable feedback.

To Jenny, for being my nonfiction comrade since Day 1, for helping me survive my first quarter teaching comp, and for reading so much of my writing and being perceptive, honest, and kind.

To my mom and dad, for being my first and best writing teachers and a constant source of love and support. You're my favorite people.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgments.....   | iii |
| Stand-up Comedy Monologue.....                               | 1   |
| Hypnosis.....  | 7   |
| Leavenworth, WA.....   | 9   |
| A Hyggelig Christmas in 2017.....                            | 22  |
| Pilgrimage to Brooklyn.....                                  | 25  |
| Grab ‘Em By Their Fleshy Branches.....                       | 28  |
| Self-Portrait in Apologies.....                              | 29  |
| Mycelium.....  | 32  |
| Being Your Own Baby.....                                     | 37  |
| Our Language.....  | 43  |
| Becky Talks to Marc Maron in Her Head.....                   | 51  |
| I’m a Creep.....   | 56  |
| The Brain Is Full of Dark Matter and Inexplicable Light..... | 59  |
| Out of Place.....  | 68  |
| If I Ever Lose My Mouth.....                                 | 78  |
| Vita.....  | 80  |

## Stand-up Comedy Monologue

Hello Spokane! So this is my first time doing stand-up, but once when I was drunk I told a bartender he looked like a rapist. So don't worry, I know how to get at those uncomfortable truths.

I'm about to defend my MFA thesis... Yes, thank you. I'm scheduled to defend on June 1st. Very excited. I have big plans for after I graduate... (*brightly*) I'm going to commit suicide!

What? What else are you supposed to do with an MFA? I thought that was why they called it a terminal degree. You defend your thesis and then you return to the void from whence you came... It's still better than adjuncting.

I think a lot about bodily mutilation. But mostly metaphorical thoughts. Like I'll imagine cutting my wrists open and Pepperidge Farm goldfish spilling out. Except lately I've been watching a lot of the *Great British Baking Show*, so all my mutilation thoughts have been baking-related. Like I peel off the skin of my face and there's a cake underneath and I try to eat the cake but I don't have a mouth so it's just *nom nom nom nom*. (*claws at face*)

Do any of you guys watch *Love*, that Netflix show? So you know one of the main characters, Mickey, she's a sex and love addict. And after watching the show, I decided to take some online quizzes to see if I might be a sex and love addict. Because that sounded kinda cool. Like I know I'm not a "sex addict." Let's be honest, I hardly even masturbate. And I don't want to be a "love addict," because that just sounds pathetic. *Ohh, my boyfriend cheats on me but I can't leave him because I just love love so much*. Gross. But a sex and love addict, that seems plausible.

So I took a couple quizzes, and it turns out I do have many of the characteristics common in sex and love addiction. Not that I think I really *am* an “addict,” but you know, I have a lot of the characteristics...

After I took the quizzes I thought, maybe I could lean into those characteristics. Maybe use it as a pick-up line. Like if I see someone I’m attracted to at a party, I could just be like, “Hey, I have many of the characteristics common in sex and love addiction, and I’ve decided to *lean* into them.”

I tend to scare away men. And I get it, I do. I’m very awkward. I have this weird, lilting voice and I smile too much, with these big, crazy eyes. But the reason I act like that is just because I want you all to know I’m a nice girl. I’m a *nice* girl I’m a *nice girl* I’m not a bad girl! I’m not a bad girl! I’m a nice girl I’m a nice *girl*. But what happens is I look like a children’s puppet that’s just a ball of yarn with a big mouth being like, (*weird lilting voice*) ‘Hello boys and girls!’ Sometimes I’ll see a guy I’m attracted to and he seems interested for two seconds but then I start to talk and turn into the ball of yarn with the mouth, and I just see him back away slowly.

I just want to say to these men, “Look, I get it. I understand your concerns. I would be uncomfortable too if I could see myself from the outside. But maybe...fuck me? Just fuck me. See what happens! I become way more normal when you’ve been fucking me for a couple of weeks. I cry more, so there’s that. But no more of the smiley ‘Oh hello boys and girls!’ Just normal passive aggression.”

Do y’all wanna hear my saddest one-night-stand story? Okay, so it’s 9:30 pm on a Tuesday. Always a good start. And I’m in my pajamas, swiping Tinder. I match with this guy; he tells me he’s only in Spokane for one night. I tell him I find that very attractive because I have an *abandonment fetish*. So we’re talking about going out for a drink, but I’m like, Meh, I’m in my

pajamas. I really hate parking, just in general. You know what? Just come over! I trust you. I've seen four pictures of you. I can tell you're a good guy.

So he comes over, and it turns out he's the perfect man. He's twenty-seven-years-old; he just got his medical degree. In *Australia*. In undergrad he studied, like, neuroscience and ancient Phoenician history, something really cute and eclectic like that, because you know, he just has this thirst for knowledge. He's wearing this cute argyle sweater. He seems like he comes from money but in this really genteel way where he'd never do anything to make you feel inferior.

Anyway, around 10:15 we start making out. And he's a feminist, of course, so he's asking permission every step of the way. 10:30 we want to have sex but neither of us has a condom. So okay, here's where my 'characteristics of sex and love addiction' come in. I have this habit of, when I want to have sex and I don't have a condom, I'll just be like, "Well you'll pull out, right? You'll pull out. I met you an hour ago. I trust you. I can tell you're completely in control of your ejaculate."

But you know, he's a doctor, so women probably pull that all the time with him. Trying to get that sexy doctor sperm... So he says, "Let's go buy some condoms," and we go to a gas station and buy some condoms.

Around 11, we have sex. It's nothing to write home about, but you know, he's a *doctor*. 11:30, we cuddle. That's nice. About midnight, he asks me to drive him back to his hotel. So that, you know, he can sleep there by himself. So I do, and as I'm dropping him off, he says, "I might get my doctor's residency here and move to Spokane..."

To which I reply, "And then we'll get married!"

This took him aback for a second, but he's a gentleman, you know; he would've never

wanted me to feel bad about this experience, so he plays along. “Um yeah, and then we’ll have six kids and move to Florida.”

To which I say, “And we’ll convert to Judaism!”

But he’s like, “Oh, but then I’d have to get circumcised.” And with that he walked out of my life forever. And I drove home thinking, Husband material!

I like to treat one-night-stands like open adoptions. Like, I’ll let you live your life; I won’t interfere. Just let me friend you on Facebook, see pictures, see how you’re progressing. And then maybe in twenty years we’ll meet for coffee and fall in love...

Which happens a lot with adoption. Did you know that? I heard this podcast. Biological siblings, or even biological parents and children will meet for the first time after being separated their whole lives and and be sexually attracted to each other. It’s very common. It’s called genetic sexual attraction, or GSA. Which also stands for Girl Scouts of America or Gay Straight Alliance, depending on which extracurriculars you did in middle school.

What do you guys think about incest? Do you think it’s weird? I don’t. I think it’s fine. Intergenerational incest is a little weird, a little problematic, but having sex with your cousin? There’s nothing wrong with having sex with your cousin. People have been having sex with their cousins for millions of years, and we just decided it was weird in like, the twenties. I’m not even that attracted to any of my cousins, but I would fuck all of my cousins just to prove a point.

You don’t get many opportunities in this life to do something that society considers perverse but that doesn’t actually hurt anyone. You gotta take those opportunities when you can.

Honestly, I’m not even sure fucking my cousin would be perverse enough. What if I fucked my uncle? Like, I have this one uncle... He sent me a drunk Facebook message—I

assume he was drunk—saying, ‘If you weren’t my niece, I’d fall in love with you.’” And he’s a professional poker player, so lots of opportunity for perversity there.

The thing is, my mom wouldn’t even care. She’d just be like, “Oh yes, my brother, he’s always been a sensitive boy. I’m not surprised you two were drawn to each other.” And my daddy would just duck and cover under his Philip Roth biography, not even let it penetrate his consciousness.

So I shave my pussy sometimes. Any of you guys shave your pubic hair? ... Either way is fine. There’s no wrong answer. So I realized the main reason I keep shaving my pubic hair is that it gets to the point where the hair starts growing back so it’s not smooth but it’s not a full bush. And it starts to look like my dad’s chin.

It’s true. I just realized this. I was like, Why do I find it slightly disturbing to look down at my pussy? Oh, it’s my dad!

*(Looks down at crotch)* Umm, hey Daddy, how’s it going? Do you need me to help you use the computer? ... You’re right, Daddy, anti-Semitism is still a real problem in America. No Daddy, that does not mean you don’t have white privilege. You do have white privilege, Daddy! You do! You do have white privilege, Daddy!

I’m just kidding. My dad acknowledges his white privilege. He’s a good daddy! *(at crotch)* Good boy! Good daddy!

I’m not sure whether my pubic hair is turning gray or whether my pussy itself is just kind of gray. But it’s definitely a different generation from the rest of my body. My pussy is not a millennial... My pussy is very concerned about the death of the newspaper industry. And it does not know how to use a smartphone.

Were you ever told anything in your middle school sex ed class that just fucked you up for life? I remember my ninth grade sex ed teacher telling us that when people have sex, their bodies release oxytocin, which is the same hormone a mother's body releases to make her bond with her baby. So when teenagers have sex, they become chemically bonded to each other, and then when they break up, sometimes one of them gets really depressed and kills themselves. That's what she said. When I was fourteen and had never had sex, I thought this was very romantic, but now I find it super-disturbing. Like, am I chemically bonded to everyone I've had sex with? Am I a bereft mother with all these estranged children wandering the world? Will there always be a loss in my life, like there is for a parent who's lost a child? Except I've lost like . . . twenty children? What am I supposed to do with that? Kill myself? Or try to marry all of them? I don't want to marry everyone I've had sex with. I'm not gonna marry the guy who thought he voted for Gary Johnson but wasn't sure. Or the magician; I'm not going to be anybody's "lovely assistant." That ship has sailed.

I'm pretty sure the science doesn't work quite like that. I don't think I'm still chemically bonded to all those people. But I still think about that health teacher. This forty-year-old woman, who I'm guessing had probably had at least two sexual partners in her life, telling us that if we had sex, we would be so profoundly connected to the person that when they inevitably left us we'd want to kill ourselves. At least that's how I remember it.

## Hypnosis

(Recently I got the assignment in a poetry class to write a poem in a hypnotic state. So I got high on pot candy and wrote what came into my head. The lines in italics were written in a “trance.”)

*Oh the green lizards with eyes for yellow breasts. The fish in my dream. I thought we were two corporations. I had some other thought about arrow-fingers.* First we eat the candy, then M tries to hypnotize me. He tells me to sit facing him and focus on his finger, which he waves slowly back and forth. I’m immediately aroused and want to show him how well I can focus, how obedient I can be. *Why can’t the robots love me? Who is in the garbage den? No one will stop you if you are a bear.* He tells me to imagine the time when I was most afraid. I go to my parents’ basement with the piles of dirty laundry like little islands. I’m crouched, clutching the plastic fibers of the carpet, trying to become a pile of laundry, and the anguish of my immediate family rings out above me. I hear my sister stampede my parents’ bodies to one end of the living room, then the other. I know there is broken skin, maybe her hands around my mother’s neck. My sister is screaming with no language. My father is yelling “Fuck.” I’m afraid my sister will kill my parents. I’m afraid my father will kill my sister. M asks, “How scary is the scary place, on a scale of one to ten?” “Seven.”

*When you wish upon a lightbulb, summer gardens don’t freak out. Why is the majesty in the orange grove? You are not my father.* “Now remember a time when you felt completely safe. Go to that place.” I rise through the ceiling, drop onto the living room couch, into a man’s arms. We are watching the entire first season of *Stranger Things*, just sitting still from morning to night. It’s a glimpse of domesticity, what the future could be if I could sew another person into my blank brain. “Go back to the scary place, but take the feeling of the safe place with you. Take whoever is with you in the safe place down to the scary place.” So I bring the former love and the twenty-three-year-old self into the basement and get down on the floor with the eight-year-old girl, and we hide in thick currents of contentment, cozy death dreams. “How scary is the scary place now?” “Five.”

He sends me back to the safe place and tells me there is now a hot springs. “Feel the hot water embrace you. You see hundreds of stars in the black sky.” My former love is still with me. There’s a forest full of fireflies that flash on and off in sequence. My mouth spreads in dizzy wonder, as if he’s really given me fireflies. I’m seeing the trees and the light, but I’m also seeing my face from the outside. I hope M can tell that I’m pliable as hot metal, open as a river. I hope he likes that I feel peace because he tells me to, feel fear and then catharsis because he tells me to.

He tells me to go back to the scary place, and I tense my eyelids and press my lips together. He brings the hot springs into the scary place, the rocks, the steam, the stars, the former

love, the adult Becky who is not afraid of her father yelling “Fuck” or of her sister’s heavy hurting body. “How scary is the scary place now?” “Four.” He brings me back to the safe place to rest, then snaps his fingers. I open my eyes and lunge to kiss him on the mouth. We are still just beginning to know each other. I want him to keep telling me what to do, and he does.

*There’s a person who lives down in Texas... And he won’t live for long. He ain’t feelin too strong. He’s gettin along in a thong in Hong Kong. Won’t you kill me, brave inspector? You ain’t brave so brave no more.*

## Leavenworth, WA

Last summer, as I was walking from a coffee shop to the duplex I'd just moved into, a man with a deeply tanned face and a canvas backpack asked me for directions to Route 2. As I looked up directions on my phone, he asked, "Do you live outside?" I was wearing jeans that were ripped on purpose but looked ripped on accident and a big sweatshirt covered in homemade buttons, carrying a woven bag big enough to hold three days' worth of clothes. I said, "No, I don't," trying not to sound surprised or offended that he'd mistake me for homeless. I have a terrible sense of direction and am bad at reading maps, which embarrasses me, so I wasn't confident in the directions I gave him, and he seemed skeptical but still went the way I pointed.

My house was in the same direction, but I didn't want to walk with him, especially if my directions were wrong, so I loitered a couple minutes, looking at my phone. I ran into him again anyway a couple blocks down. He was studying the intersecting streets, confused and frustrated. He told me he hated cities. They were sprawling, and it took forever just to get out of them. We were in Spokane, a city of about 200,000 people, which isn't big, but I'm from Montana, so it seems big to me. I pulled out my phone's GPS again, but he still didn't believe my directions, and I didn't either really. I asked if he needed money, and he said, yeah, if I could. "I ran out of money a long time ago." I gave him a twenty-dollar bill. He was trying to get to Leavenworth, about three hundred miles west of Spokane. He had a construction job waiting for him and three days to get there. He didn't think he would make it in time. If he got there, they would pay him in cash. He didn't want to give money to the government, since they'd never done anything for him.

“I hate the government,” I said, which was true but vague. I felt like a white British lady clucking her tongue at the injustices of colonial rule in India. I didn’t want to say something leftish and empty, like how I thought it was shameful that there were people starving in the richest country in the world. I wanted him to know that I didn’t see his situation as his fault at all, but maybe that was denying him agency. Ultimately, his fate was his own. He wasn’t anyone’s to save.

I told him I lived just a few blocks from there and that I could drive him to Route 2. We walked back to my duplex, and he told me he was getting too old for this, that he’d been traveling for twenty years. He was forty. He asked how old I was.

“Twenty-four.”

“That’s all? You’ve got a long way to go.” I thought of life that way too, arduous, making the trek from birth to death. The endpoint didn’t scare me as much as everything in the middle. Though of course I had much less reason than he did to think that way. I’m very privileged. He must’ve been able to tell that just from the car I invited him into, which was newish and nice, though dented on one side due to my own carelessness. It was so much easier for me to get from one place to another, from one week to the next. He told me he had no one—no wife, no kids, no girlfriend. I asked if he was in touch with anyone in his family, and he said no. “I left home at thirteen. My mom was abusive. My dad was an alcoholic.” I suppose this was his side of the bargain when people picked him up, telling the story of his life.

I told him I’d only lived in Spokane a year, that I was here for school.

“By school, you mean college?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to do when you get out?”

“I’m not sure... I have a few ideas.”

“I thought when you go to college you already know what you’re going to do.”

I felt a bit defensive, the way I always do when people ask me this. “Well, I might go into teaching. I teach an English 101 class right now while I’m in graduate school. I want to be a writer. That’s my main goal.” He told me he’d considered writing a book about everything he’d experienced. I’d already decided I would drive him all the way to Leavenworth, but I waited to tell him until we were on the highway. It seemed like a strange thing to offer; I wasn’t sure how to explain my motives. If a friend asked me to drive them to a town three hours away, I’d probably say no.

I got lost trying to find US-Route 2, even with Google Maps. He seemed a bit anxious, like I might drive him in the complete wrong direction and strand him somewhere. I wanted him to know that I really was going to help him; I wasn’t going to be a well-meaning person who ended up doing more harm than good.

Once I found the highway, he asked how far I would take him, and I said I’d drive him all the way. “I don’t really have anything I need to do today, and why not?”

He seemed taken aback and studied me. This awkward, scruffily dressed girl, a rather bad driver. “You don’t usually do things like this, do you?”

“I’ve never done this before,” I said through an embarrassed laugh.

“Why me?” If I felt any sort of connection to him, now was the time to say so, but I didn’t. I said it had been a right place at the right time sort of thing. I had time to spare, and I didn’t mind driving, and I could tell that he was a nice guy who wouldn’t hurt me.

I think I have a good instinct for people, that I can tell quickly whether or not someone would hurt me. It's a skill I've used mostly in online dating. But it could well be that I've just been lucky and haven't crossed paths with many dangerous people.

I think he'd hoped I was drawn particularly to him, maybe even romantically. My impersonal answer might've been a disappointment. Everyone needs to be loved, and he wasn't, and I didn't want to give him love. He'd tried to cut the bullshit of small talk and find intimacy, but I'd brought us right back to small talk. I wouldn't have known how to be my real self with him even if I wanted to.

Part of me did want to. I wanted us to have a bonding experience that would change our lives forever. But I couldn't be my real self with someone who made me feel guilty. My desire to be kind only solidified the wall between us. Giving him a ride on a summer day when I had a full tank of gas and no obligations was easy enough, but I couldn't be anything to him besides polite.

"I don't think I asked your name," I said.

"James."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Becky."

Already I was thinking about how I would tell the story. I figured I should write down the details as soon as I could, but that I probably wouldn't be able to make something insightful out of it until I was old and wise.

I knew that I shouldn't brag about doing this, and that it would be hard to write about it without seeming like I was saying, "Look at what a good person I am." Or it could take the angle, "Look at how I think I'm such a good person, but really I'm a shitty person." Which wouldn't be better necessarily because I'd still be using someone else's suffering to say something about myself.

And I don't think I am a shitty person, really. I am privileged and can be very selfish, but I have a conscience and follow it maybe seventy percent of the time. I have a sense of empathy. I'm a human being, a product of my circumstances, not good or evil.

First we drove past the strip malls and mattress stores on the outskirts of Spokane. This was why he hated cities, he told me. They went on and on, and no one could tell that he was hitchhiking while he was still in the city limits. I asked how far he would walk in a day, if no one picked him up. "Forty miles," he said. "Twelve hours." You could only hitchhike on the smaller highways; it was illegal on the interstate. We took Route 2 all the way, even though I-90 would've been faster. I liked driving through the little towns. I pointed out an old-fashioned drive-in restaurant.

He said, "Yeah, we're going to see lots of strange stuff like that."

When we passed a field full of cows who were all lying down, I made a lame joke: "Lazy cows..."

"No, they're not lazy. They're bedding down. Everyone thinks cows are dumb, but they're really not. They know somehow when it's time to eat, when they should bed down. I don't know how they know that."

I like animals too. I told him my friend had just been to Yellowstone and the park ranger had told him all about the complex family dynamics of wolves, although I couldn't remember the details.

"Yeah, wolves are interesting. Each family group has the alpha male and alpha female." He told me he'd almost been attacked by three coyotes recently but had fended them off by holding up a blanket.

His body hurt. He'd broken his shoulder a few years ago falling off a thousand-foot cliff. He explained, "You lose all your energy living like this, and you never get it back." There were lots of long silences; eventually he fell asleep.

I played my favorite CD, this crusty folk singer from Missoula who I was obsessed with. I thought if this singer knew I'd played his CD while driving a traveler across the state of Washington, he might become attracted to me, but only if he found out about it indirectly, not if I bragged about it.

I thought about how this experience would probably benefit me more than him in the long run; I would make it into an anecdote and then forget about it. I wondered how I could help him in a more long-term way. Maybe we could write a book together about his life. I remember at an activism conference learning the philosophy, "Nothing about us without us," meaning if you're doing activism with an oppressed group, like the homeless, the people who are most impacted should be at the forefront and have decision-making power. I don't know if I'm ready for a project like that. It would probably fall apart. I've had so many ambitious ideas related to art and activism over the years, and I've never followed through on any of them. A few years ago, I was going to organize a collaborative theatre project with disabled people, and the family and friends of disabled people. We were going to write the project together, and everyone would contribute, even people who were non-verbal. We would have dance and movement portions. We would sit in a circle and express our experiences. And somehow this would turn into a play we would perform. But then I just didn't want to do it. It was too ambitious; I don't like collaborating. I don't like organizing groups of people. So I didn't.

We stopped at a Safeway, and I bought him two pre-made salads and a box of Cheez-Its. He'd pointed to the sign for the salads, "2/\$6.00" and said he didn't know what that meant. I

don't think he had trouble with basic math or anything. He had finished high school. But I suppose he had so few options when buying things that he didn't have "sign fluency." He probably very rarely had enough money to get two of anything. He asked a clerk where the Cheez-its were. I was a bit embarrassed because he was brash and loud and appeared homeless, but then it always makes me nervous to ask salespeople where things are. I wondered what people thought of the two of us in the store together, whether they thought I was homeless too.

At the register, the cashier asked how we were today, and I said, "Doing well. How are you?" Polite, soft-spoken, practiced. And he said, "Oh, same as always. Not good. Just trying to get by," loud again, and I was embarrassed. I hoped when I inserted my debit card in the chip reader the cashier could tell I didn't come from the same world as James, that I lived on the safe side of the margins.

In the parking lot, there was a car next to ours with a woman inside and two Chihuahuas in the backseat with their heads peeking out the window. "Can I pet your dogs?" he asked. He had to repeat the question before she said yes. I was already sitting in the car, sheepish. Maybe I'm only revealing my own insecurity here. I don't like talking to strangers. Something I've noticed is that poor people seem to talk to strangers more often than comfortable, middle-class people do. I always feel anxious at bus stops that someone will try to befriend me because I will not want to be rude, but I will also not want to get into a long conversation. Obviously, as someone who's been traveling for twenty years, he needs to talk to strangers—to get rides; to get money and directions. When he got back in the car he said, "You don't talk much, do you?"

"No, I've always been shy." It's true. In the car he ate both salads one after the other. I'd expected him to save one for later. But I didn't know the last time he'd eaten, and also he didn't have a fridge or anything and probably not much extra space in his backpack. And maybe it

didn't even occur to him to save a salad for later. I don't know. I hadn't had breakfast, but I was going to wait and look for a nice place to eat in Leavenworth.

He told me Leavenworth was a nice town. I said, "I'll have to explore while I'm there. It will be an adventure!" It was in the mountains, by a river. James said he always traveled to towns in the mountains, that he couldn't live anywhere else. I told him I'd grown up in Butte, Montana, a town on the east ridge of the Rockies. As we got closer to Leavenworth, the landscape became rugged and beautiful, winding through the sides of mesas and golden rock formations, lakes. "You can see now why I love the mountains, huh?" I didn't remind him that I was used to mountains, that we had mountains in common. Although these were different from the more triangular and fir-tree-lined mountains in Montana. They reminded me of the landscape where I'd backpacked in Utah with my high school English class.

He asked if I regretted driving him all this way, and I said no, not at all. I didn't, but I was getting tired. I didn't want him to see my moody side, how I get irritable over trivial things, even though my life is so comfortable. Also, my driving gets worse when I get tired; I stopped rather abruptly at a stoplight and apologized. I didn't want him to think I was going to kill him with my bad driving.

When we got to Leavenworth we stopped at another Safeway, and I wondered why this Safeway had a mural on the exterior wall of two children wearing lederhosen, and why the sign was in a fake "ye olde" font. When we drove farther into town, I realized that the whole town was pretending to be a Bavarian ski village, and every business had those ye olde signs and fake German architecture.

There was a Starbucks in the Safeway, which was one of the things that seemed weird to James but normal to me. I asked if he wanted to get some coffee, and he said, "Well this is a

Starbucks. If you want coffee, this is the best place to get it!" I ordered a 12-ounce drip coffee, and he just said he would get a black coffee. So the barista served us two 12-ounce coffees, but he said, "Is this a medium? I swear I said medium." The barista gave him a 16-ounce for no extra cost, and we exchanged a private smile as I thanked her, so she could see that I belonged to her world, not his. The world of people who know how to order at Starbucks. James put eight sugars in his coffee.

"They must think I'm a cowboy! You know coffee's bad when you have to put eight sugars in it." I smiled and nodded, drinking my coffee with no sugar.

At this point I wanted to be by myself again, and I wasn't sure where James wanted me to drop him off. I was giving polite hints rather than saying directly that I'd gotten him to Leavenworth and now I wanted to drop him off somewhere. I thought maybe he was intentionally ignoring my hints because he didn't want to part ways, but when I asked more directly, he said it was fine to drop him off anywhere, it didn't matter where. He would need to set up camp in the mountains soon, before it got cold.

He said he didn't like living this way, that he was really an inside person, even though he'd been living outside for twenty years. I wanted to ask what he would do, if he could get out of this life, but I didn't know how to word it tactfully. He'd told me on the drive that he'd thought about being a veterinarian once, but that took eight years. "I'm not going to spend eight years just to be a vet," he said, as if he hadn't just spent twenty years being a traveler.

He said I could come and rest with him by the river for a while before driving back, but I said no thanks. I'd thought on the drive about giving him my phone number in case he came through Spokane again, but when we got to Leavenworth I decided not to. I felt like I'd given enough, and I worried he might want me to be part of his life in a more long-term way. On the

drive I'd considered taking him out to lunch, but when I got there I decided I wanted to eat alone. I wondered if it would hurt his stomach to eat a lot in one day, when he wasn't used to it.

I dropped him off in a parking lot. He said I'd done so much for him already, but could he ask one more favor? I said yes. He asked if I had any more cash. I said yes, that I'd already planned to give him some more money. I gave him the rest of the cash I had in my wallet—four dollars and a lot of change. He got out and gathered his stuff, put the box of Cheez-its in his backpack. "I'm going to have to make these Cheez-its last a long time," he said quietly.

I shook his hand and said, "Best of luck." I meant this to be kind, but I think it sounded cold. He just frowned and said okay.

When I drove away, for a minute he was walking in the same direction I was driving, but now he was just a homeless person in Leavenworth, and I was a tourist doing whatever I wanted. James had said that tourists don't like travelers. "They have cars. They have money." Leavenworth seemed to exist purely to serve tourists. The downtown was a big shopping center, all in fake German architecture, with lots of fun little shops. I bought a pair of nesting doll earrings from a shop called Made in Russia. I bought a rhubarb quiche from a café. I bought a salted caramel cupcake. I bought an art print from a local fair. There were several places offering wine tastings, and I went to one, spending ten dollars to drink small portions of five wines. I wouldn't recommend going to a wine tasting by yourself. Drinking alone is more fun without an audience.

I drove home, which was more tedious than the drive to Leavenworth had been. If I'd anticipated how unpleasant six hours of driving would be, I might have hesitated before offering. Sometimes I make impulsive decisions because I don't anticipate the consequences until it's too

late to change my mind, but usually that's good for me because overall I'm too passive and cautious.

I went home and took a shower. The shower in my duplex feels delicious, like a massage. My duplex is almost embarrassingly nice, by grad school standards. High ceilings, washer/dryer, granite countertops. I try pretend that my life isn't bankrolled by my parents, but it's not hard to figure out that my \$900 a month teaching stipend wouldn't cover the rent on this place, school fees, bills, gas, and food. These expenses are partly covered by the few thousand dollars left in the trust fund my grandfather set up to pay for my college. I also have, in addition to my debit card, a credit card that my parents pay for, which I often use for groceries and gas. I keep it quiet that unlike most college-educated people my age, I don't have any student loan debt.

I thought about James setting up camp by the river and regretted not giving him my phone number. It probably wouldn't have caused me too much trouble, and it would've been kind, I think. It occurred to me that if I'd wanted to, I could've put him up in a hotel. Although maybe that would've made it harder for him to go back to the river the next day. Actually, it probably would've been nice for him, just to have a night of comfort, shelter, safety. To restore a little bit of the energy he kept losing and never getting back. But here I was, trying to decide what was best for him, when the world he'd been living in for the past twenty years was incomprehensible to me. It would've been so much harder for me to adjust to a life of traveling, hitchhiking, living among wild animals, scrambling for food and odd jobs, than it would be for him to adjust to Starbucks coffee and 2/\$6.00 salads.

I haven't picked up any hitchhikers since then. I dread passing them on the highway because I'll have that feeling that I could help and I don't want to. Not because I'm afraid of being raped and murdered. I don't know why, but I'm hardly ever afraid of being raped and

murdered. I just don't want to clear off the passenger seat of my car and make small talk. I like being alone in my bubble and singing along to my CD's. I'm nervous about the awkwardness of pulling over, what I would say. "Hey, do you need a ride?" I'm sure I would pick up a hitchhiker wrong. So I don't pick up hitchhikers because for a few moments I would feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, and this, to me, is worse than letting a stranger walk forty miles a day with a broken shoulder. If my life were not so comfortable, I would probably not try so hard to avoid moments of being slightly uncomfortable.

It's winter in Spokane now, and I often see people sleeping under bridges. I'm afraid of being put in situations where I'll have the chance to be brave or kind, and I won't be. I think people like me have numbed the empathy centers in our brains. To an extent it's a coping mechanism, but I think it causes us more pain in the long run, the guilt and the cognitive dissonance. We could help, and we don't, and every person we see suffering is as human as we are. In my defense, the human brain was never meant to worry about the wellbeing of seven billion people; we're only wired to protect our tribe, our village. But I don't even have a village. I don't do that much for the people in my life. I remember hearing that most of the homeless shelters in the country are run by churches, and I wonder why there aren't more secular liberal homeless shelters, if we are the ones who believe that no one should be homeless in this country, that everyone should have free healthcare and education. I think a lot of us Left-types have a sense of moral superiority because we believe the right things and vote for the better candidates, but we don't *do* anything. Some of the people who volunteer at those Christian homeless shelters must have voted for Trump, but they're still helping people more than I ever do. I believe that in order to end oppression privileged people must give up their privilege, or oppressed people must take it from them. I think my privilege will have to be taken away from me because I can't even

bring myself to take the bus most days. Sometimes I wonder whether I'd go willingly to the guillotine. Less often I wonder where James is now.

## A Hyggelig Christmas in 2017

On the day child-rapist Roy Moore was almost elected to Senate, I had a few people over to decorate Christmas cookies and drink vodka-spiked hot chocolate. I didn't time it that way intentionally, but since my friend wouldn't stop checking for election updates on his phone, the presence of Roy Moore seemed to loom over the house, like the North Wind forcing itself upon the window panes.

Not having a dining table or tablecloth, I'd thrown a wide scarf over a card table and lit my roommate's candle. I played Christmas music, using the phone-in-a-coffee-cup trick in lieu of a speaker. Before any of the guests had even arrived, I congratulated myself on the most *hyggelig* event I'd ever hosted.

*Hyggelig* is the adjective form of *hygge* (Pronounced: *HOO-gah*), a Danish word that loosely translates as a state of coziness, warmth, and contentment. I read *The Little Book of Hygge* by Meik Wiking in August, which is not a very *hyggelig* season—no use for cocoa and candles in ninety degree heat. I read it alone in bed, which is somewhat *hyggelig* but not as *hyggelig* as say, if I'd read it aloud to my closest friends and family.

Since I wasn't solidly *hyggelig* as I read, I daydreamed about the *hyggelig* experiences I could have if I somehow became Danish, emotionally and financially secure, a good cook, and a friend of Meik Wiking. Wiking describes a perfectly *hyggelig* experience in the book: sitting in a winter lodge with a few good friends, drinking mulled wine after they'd worn themselves out on the ski slopes. Someone asked if there was any way the evening could be more *hyggelig*, and someone else said yes, but only if it were blizzarding outside. It was easy enough to imagine

myself in the scene, but as an American I felt a little like Ebenezer Scrooge spying through a window as the Cratchit family celebrates a modest but love-rich Christmas dinner.

I studied the photo of Meik Wiking on the back cover. He looked handsome and healthy and very blond, cozy in his thick scarf. His bio said he was CEO of the Happiness Institute. I was suspicious... To me, the Happiness Institute sounds like a place that would design mind-control technology in a dystopian novel. And what kind of name is “Mike Viking” anyway? I wondered if he were even really Danish. I also wondered if he ever brought prostitutes up to his cabin and forced them to perform sadomasochistic acts, à la Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*.

There’s a reason there’s no *Danish Psycho*. Danes are ranked the happiest people in the world by several measures. I’ve heard that in Denmark there’s so little crime, mothers will leave their children in baby carriages on the sidewalk while they clean their houses. Wiking mentions that Denmark has universal healthcare, free college tuition, and a robust welfare state, which might contribute to their endemic happiness. Otherwise he avoids being overtly political in the book; he wants to help Americans bring hygge into their lives through candle-lighting, bread-baking, and dinner-party-throwing, not legislation.

At my Christmas cookie party, we didn’t have a blizzard, but in this political climate any gathering of friends feels like shelter from the storm. My friend announced that Doug Jones had won a narrow victory over Roy Moore, although sixty-eight percent of white voters had gone for Moore. My white friends and I (also white) talked about how black voters, especially black women voters, had saved our asses, how we white people were running this country into the ground, and as we talked we decorated cookies.

The pleasure of hygge depends on the inhospitable outside, warmth defined by cold, light by darkness. You enjoy your spiked cocoa or mulled wine more in a blizzard. Candles give off the brightest light in a dim room.

Since reading *The Little Book of Hygge*, I light candles like they're votives for my own inner peace. I light them before grading student papers or before watching *Archer* with a glass of red wine. I want my candles to elevate the ordinary and turn loafing into a celebration. Sometimes I stare at the little flickering lights and wonder if they're working any kind of magic.

I thought aloud to my friends how the most beautiful Christmases are sad. Like when you have no money for presents and your father is off fighting in the Civil War. (À la *Little Women*.) My friends didn't seem to get it, but I was trying to redeem the celebration of Christmas in the age of Trump, make it poignant.

I told a friend recently that all I wanted was a cozy life. He's a fellow millennial, and we have a lot of fears and longings in common. I used to say I wanted adventure, but these days I get more excited about the idea of moving close to home, marrying a man who makes at least \$60,000 a year plus benefits, getting a job that doesn't create a knot in my stomach, maybe in a library. I'd like to build a well-lit nest and gathering all the people I love inside it. It's not very American of me, but I prefer my joy a little sad, a little honest about its own fragility. I prefer the great outer darkness with a soft light burning within it, rather than bright, shining artificial light masking a deep darkness.

## Pilgrimage to Brooklyn

*“Sometimes I worry that I don't wanna get married as much as I want to be dipped in a vat of warm, rising bread dough.”*

-Maria Bamford

Close to Christmas last year I read *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* by Kate Bolick, and briefly imagined that I too might be able to move to New York, write for a famous magazine, live in a studio apartment decorated in Victorian furniture, date and fall in love periodically but never get married and never give up any part of myself to fit better into anyone else's life.

That same week, I had a one-night-stand with a freelance writer from Brooklyn, which seemed like a step toward that dream: 1) because he was a freelance writer from Brooklyn and 2) because he would never love me and never ask anything from me.

My mother babysits her friend's one-year-old every week. When my parents have the family over for dinner parties, Mom spends most of the party playing on the floor with the baby girl, showing her photos of dead family members and knick-knacks shaped like animals. I asked my mom recently if it would be okay with her if her only grandchild were my cat, who is very sweet and I think makes a very good grandchild. Mom replied, “Everything's okay if it has to be.”

As a child, future motherhood was one of my primary fantasies. When I was very young, the fantasy had a sadistic bent. My parents never punished me, and I found the idea of punishment fascinating, so I'd daydream about how I'd punish my future children. The most horrifying was what I called “hot water treatment.” I imagined holding my child's bare ass over the kitchen sink while scalding hot water poured from the faucet. I got over the sadism fantasies as I got older and started to imagine being the kind of mother my own mother was: gentle, easy-going, supportive, emanating the purest kind of love. I fantasized about dying for my children. Perhaps I would have complications in labor and the doctor would tell me that if I didn't terminate the pregnancy I would die, and I would choose to go through with the birth anyway. (I grew up Catholic.) I still sometimes daydream about lying in a hospital bed holding a newborn child in my arms. Just imagining it, I can almost bring myself to tears.

The wallpaper in my childhood bedroom is covered in hand-drawn-looking hearts and the word “Love” written over and over. I remember another kid seeing this wallpaper and saying, “You really love *love*, don't you?”

I'm exploring polyamory and find it difficult and interesting. I was briefly entangled with four different men, then it dropped down to zero, now it's about one and a half. The half is a friend

who I started having sex with, then we decided we would just be friends, then we decided we would be friends who have sex, and then we decided to just be friends again. He was very concerned that I would develop romantic feelings for him. It's true that the day after we slept together I imagined marrying him. He just seemed so sweet and gentle, like a sheepdog. I could imagine our children running like puppies through a field. Clean, blond puppies. Not that I told him this.

But he's more like a rabbit than a sheepdog: runs away if he thinks you're pursuing him. I guess he could sense my predatory nature. The thing is, I think about marrying all kinds of people. A few days after sleeping with the rabbit/sheepdog, I flirted openly with another friend and imagined marrying *him*. With this friend I could imagine having one or two serious, bespectacled children and being a Jewish intellectual couple. I am only a quarter Jewish, but I think he could make me more so.

It's overwhelming to let myself feel so liberally and broadly. I have had to cut back, tell a couple guys I just wanted to be friends. I'm more interested in safety than sex. I'm just casting a wide net.

Something that appealed to me about Kate Bolick's book is how she rejects safety and chooses freedom instead. She refuses to depend on a man either for her financial security or her happiness.

My mother, though she's a good writer and ambitious in her own way, has not earned a salary for thirty years. When I used to worry about the future as a child, she would remind me of the "lilies of the field" part of the Bible. How the lilies don't work or worry, but God takes care of them. I trusted that I was a lily and would be taken care of one way or another.

In the book, periods of loneliness make Kate Bolick stronger, more fully herself. I was briefly drawn to the idea of seeking out loneliness. I did this by seeking people who would leave me. Men like the freelance writer from Brooklyn who were "just passing through" my town, my pussy, my heart. They'd have to be people I felt like I could love, though, otherwise it wasn't interesting.

I'm considering taking a pilgrimage to Brooklyn, where a couple of my old one-night-stands now live. The freelance writer, and also a doctor-in-training who told me he might get his residency in Spokane but ended up moving to Brooklyn instead. I want to offer myself at the feet of my abandoners.

It's like how when I was dating my last boyfriend, back when I was monogamous, whenever he'd tell me about a friend who was having a baby, I'd joke in a pouty voice (both childlike and

feminine), “How come you won’t give me a baby?” And he’d laugh warmly and pull me to his chest because a part of each of us wanted to have a baby together while also knowing that would be a terrible idea. Maybe the part that wanted it was bigger in me than in him.

It’s like when I went to Scotland for a summer writing workshop in high school and wrote a poem about how I would like to be chained to the rocks so I never had to leave.

It’s like how I enjoy being tied up during sex.

When I read *Spinster* I thought, “You are changing again. You’re questioning what you always took for granted.” I was imagining a future where I was not married, had no children, and yet was still happy, still safe. I was also appreciating my present: single, untethered, frightened, free.

More than once when I’ve been about to have sex with a new person, when he’s asked if he should put on a condom, I’ve joked, “Unless you want to make a baby,” in a girly, teasing tone like it might be a real suggestion.

My first serious boyfriend wanted to marry me, and I wanted to fly away from him. I told him one night, “I want to taste people.” Still, when we had a pregnancy scare a few weeks before I left for college, part of me hoped I would really be pregnant so I could stay right in my hometown and be rooted and be loved.

I’m dating too many people; I want to focus all my attention on one. Two at the most.

There’s a man who doesn’t always respond to my texts but when he is with me says he still loves me and kisses me all over my body and calls me “baby.”

I sometimes call my cat “baby.” I never called anybody baby before the man.

Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby

I know my desires are not my own creation. I worry I dream too small, too “domestic,” like my mother, who doesn’t even get out of her pajamas some days. When I was a kid I said I would become president someday, just to prove I could be anything I wanted to be.

Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby

Love, love, love, love, love, love

### Grab 'Em By Their Fleshy Branches

At a strip club on a field trip for my human sexuality class, I bared my breasts and straddled a boy with a bird's chin, let him reach inside me right in front of the gender/women's studies majors. We had sex that night and he told me he always knew I was . . . *desperate's not the right word*, but *desperate* I embraced so completely, I wanted it tattooed on my thigh.

Another time I sent a Facebook message to a songwriter. *I have one of your songs stuck in my head, but mixed with "Griselda" by Michael Hurley and the Unholy Rounders, which is kind of similar thematically and melodically. Can I buy you coffee sometime? Sorry if I seem creepy.* He didn't respond. I've written other messages like that, to men I don't know. *You seem cool, and I'd like to be your friend*, but I'm not that interested in friends. All that talking and drinking coffee reminds me I don't have much to say and not much interest in other people. I'd rather we huddled like rabbits.

In the sex class I learned that women conflate their desire with their desire to be desirable. We're always subject and object at once. I thought I loved my body, but really I only love the smooth parts. When I masturbate, I imagine three men: one who fucks, one who touches, and one who instructs the other two on how to fuck and touch me. When I cum the men disappear, and I picture chubby blond women playing cellos.

Every time I listen to his album, I think he'll fall in love with me. I think anyone who really knows me will love me. *Becky*, I say, *you're just grasping at dicks*. It's like I'm falling down a well, and attached to the walls are all these men with their penises hanging out, and I'm just grasping at each one, trying to break my fall. I find this idea comforting because it's not about the men. There will always be more dicks; they just go on and on. It's about the well. And the well is obviously a vagina.

Maybe when Trump said, *Grab 'em by the pussy*, he really meant he was falling down a well and grasping at pussies all the way down. Are Trump and I falling down the same well, or do we each have our own? Will we meet at the bottom, me holding two handfuls of dicks, him a few clumps of pubic hair? I hope we'll crawl out the other side and grow into new people who don't need to grasp at pussies or dicks. We might still grasp at them, but we won't need to.

## **Self-Portrait in Apologies**

*After the Sara Levine essay of the same name*

### **To Barbie the hamster, for spanking you over and over because I had desires I didn't understand.**

I don't think I really got pleasure out of causing you pain. Deep down I identified with your position more than mine: I wanted to be the hamster. This was not a desire I knew how to make sense of at six years old, so I justified my actions with talk of "discipline," the kind of reasoning I'd learned from other kids' parents and a babysitter or two, though never from my own parents. I pretended I was hitting you for your own good, though I knew even then I was kidding myself. I felt guilty about hitting you (many times, as hard as I could with my little hands) for three years and eventually confessed it to a priest.

### **To my sixth grade frenemy, for punching you twice in the back.**

In my mind's eye, you're bent over a desk in an empty classroom, and I hit you so hard your chest knocks against the wood. But how did I have the arm strength for that? That would be more than bullying. It would be closer, in positioning, to rape. I had never hit anyone before except my hamster and myself (also when I was six, in secret, with a shoe). I remember a couple boys saw and laughed at both of us, but especially at you because you were even more unpopular than I was. You said, "It isn't funny. She could've broken my spine." But everyone thought you exaggerated and lied all the time, and maybe you did. Maybe you planted this image of a beating in my mind, and I didn't actually hurt you that much. You must've said something to provoke me, but I don't remember what. We should've been on the same team; we should've beat up the boys together.

### **To a former lover, for having sex with you while in an essay that I'd printed out and set on the nightstand, I'd written that you looked like a cross-eyed duck.**

The divide between what I said to your face and what I thought about you was maddening. I had to get the truth on paper. To justify it, I decided my writing was violent, that I was a sadist, and that I should just accept that about myself because I was too selfish to stop. You never read the essay. For your sake, I hope I never get anything published.

### **To another former lover, for being manipulative and passive aggressive when you didn't want to have sex with me.**

On the night before I left you to go to college out of state, you didn't want to have sex, and that made me angry. "I can't believe it's our last night together, and we're not even going to have sex," I said. So you went down on me; I knew you didn't want to, but I accepted as if it were an argument I had won. There were other times I pressured you to have sex when you didn't feel like it. Using passive aggression, eye-rolling, self-righteous indignation. Like a lot of women, I'd assumed that all the men I dated would want to have sex whenever I did. And when that wasn't the case with you, I got resentful, like you were withholding something I'd been promised ever since I started shaving my legs. Instead of talking to you about this, I just tried to make myself as pretty as I knew how to be, and when that didn't work, I thought I wasn't pretty enough or that you were an asshole. I apologized a year later, and you said, "It's not the worst thing that's ever happened to me." Not, as I'd hoped, "I don't remember you doing that." You remembered.

**To my best friend, for abandoning you when you were very drunk because I wanted to have sex with a man.**

You're a hard drunk to read, seemingly lucid until you fall to the floor. I shouldn't have left you with the bartender, especially since the last thing I slurred at him as I went with the other man—his roommate—was, "You look like a rapist." He wasn't a rapist, luckily, but I didn't know that for sure, and I left you there. I was also very drunk. But I was less drunk a couple hours later when the bartender yelled outside the roommate's bedroom door, "Your friend peed in my bed. She's passed out in her own urine, not caring about anything." I thought the not-rapist's bed was as good a place as any to let you sleep it off, so I didn't check on you. I wanted to stay in the man's bed. You never acted mad at me, but every few months I apologize again, that I sacrificed you for sex. By which I mean, sacrificed you so that *I* could have sex, although I also could've been sacrificing your body for sex, and if that had happened the whole world would be different. You would be different; I would have to change somehow too.

**To the bartender, for making you take care of my drunk best friend instead of doing it myself, and for saying you looked like a rapist.**

Sorry. And thanks. You don't really look like a rapist; you're an actor, and I get those two personality types mixed up. But you're a good man.

**To the man I had sex with the night I abandoned my friend, for never loving you purely.**

After our first night together, I fell in love with you, but not in a selfless way, not in a way that's particularly pure or kind. When I write about you, it's usually to make fun of how arrogant you are, or how you take so long in the bathroom. At best, I'll write about what great sex we used to have or how you made me feel safe and how I loved the smell of your sweat. But that's just because I miss you; it's not really art. A friend told me once that I reduce people to stories and

she didn't want me to do that to her, but I did anyway, because on the page it seems so innocent. I have spent so much of my life inside my own head. Who's to know if my words will ever have any kind of power? I can't say for sure that any of this is okay.

## Mycelium

Fungi are complete communicators, constantly passing signals back and forth through intricate root systems, like a big brain. They're probably more intelligent than humans, if you judge based on efficiency or wisdom or kindness. I wish my roots were connected to someone else's that way, but only because I hate speaking and like touch and dirt.

The four guys I've done shrooms with I've also had sex with. I've never had sex on shrooms; I worry it would feel like being invaded. But I've had sex because of shrooms, and I've been given shrooms because of sex, and the sex was sometimes a mistake, but the shrooms never were.

The most important was the second time I took shrooms, with a guy I called Mollusk Mark because he was a biology student and studied mussels he plucked out of a river basin. At first I thought I liked him because he knew who the Zapatistas were and sold me local eggs for \$2 a dozen, but I couldn't get over the thought that he looked like a cross-eyed duck. Like he had to pinch his face together to keep his glasses on.

When we were waiting for the shrooms to take effect, we lay on the couch and listened to a podcast called *Atoms, Motion, and the Void*. I don't remember anything about it except that it's very scary. We lay on the couch and rather than looking at his face I focused on his chest—that generic landscape where a man is just a man. I thought I knew what to expect from the shrooms because I'd done them before with a guy who grew them from a kit he bought on the internet, but those must have been weaker shrooms because that time all I did was crawl around on the floor and didn't even see very many colors, and this time I understood the whole universe and my place in it.

The internet-shrooms guy worked an office job but talked about quitting to play keyboard on the street. He wrote what he called “little jokes” and long descriptions of his dreams, which he emailed to me, though I wished he wouldn’t.

We’d swallowed the shrooms with lemon juice and watched a TV show ‘til I suddenly found myself on the floor, where he sank to my level and started making out with me. Closing my eyes I saw brown and green and imagined he was a jungle man.

Two years later, I graduated from college and had no idea how to keep being alive. He was living in Kentucky, and I asked if I could move into his house and be his sex slave. He’d have to give me a stipend, along with room and board. He said if he did that, I would have to do whatever he wanted and he wouldn’t care about my pleasure at all. This seemed fair enough. I feel bad for telling him he should pay to have sex with me. I suspect that deep down he wanted us to get married.

In normal life, I believe things. On shrooms, I understand things. On the important trip with Mollusk Mark, I understood that I was in a beehive. I imagined I was in a beehive, closed my eyes and saw the boxes of honey and the bees. I understood that I really *was* in a beehive, in some sense of the word “in.” I feel like I have to trust every revelation I’ve had on shrooms, otherwise it would invalidate the whole thing.

My body became a big ship full of little compartments, and there were people in all the little compartments. But they were not people I could rescue or kill or enslave, or else I didn’t care.

I got up to pee, and after that things got dicey. I sank to the floor and became afraid I was going to die. If not that night, then someday. I hadn’t known before that I was going to die, not really. I understood it now because in a way I was already dead. I had separated from my

personality when I'd become everything. I wasn't a woman or an American, I didn't have parents. I didn't care about writing. I didn't know how to drive a car. It was hard to imagine I'd ever get these things back.

One time I was the provider of shrooms for a man I wanted to have sex with, so that when things didn't work out romantically we could be friends, and he'd always feel connected to me.

On shrooms, I loved my future-friend as much as my own body. We didn't have sex until later, but we took off our shirts and play-acted our genders, kissing and holding each other. I was dressed as "woman," him as "man," but beyond our bodies we were one soul: I understood that then and will always believe it. And at the same time he could've been any man, and I could've been one soul with anyone. After the shrooms wore off, we had sex, but I realized after a couple weeks I didn't want to have sex with him anymore, so I didn't. We stayed friends for quite a while, but then he cut off ties with me abruptly. I've discovered that friendships that start with sex do not always end well.

When I'd taken shrooms with Mollusk Mark, I'd realized I was connected to everything in the universe. I could claim to be anything in the universe, and I wouldn't be wrong. "I am a donut," I'd said. "I know it might sound stupid later, but I never want to forget that I am a donut."

But I did not feel like I *was* Mollusk Mark. Or I did, and that is why I panicked. He hadn't spoken to anyone in his family in seven years. His father had sent him to a troubled youth camp in the Arizona desert, one of those places where they make teenagers lift tires over their heads. He'd started doing drugs at thirteen. I felt like he had led me down a dark path of too many drugs and no family and no love—I could not love him because he needed my love too

much. My parents could not find me in this new realm. My parents were not my parents anymore. Everything in the universe was somewhat mine, so nothing was *particularly* mine. This was how it would always be once I was dead, nothing that had been mine would be mine anymore. And this would happen very soon. I understood that I would never leave this place of un-love, even if later I thought I had left it.

Only one of the men I did shrooms with and had sex with I was actually in love with. He was fifteen years older than me, and on the first night we met, he told me he had an IQ of 160, and that he had LSD. Three weeks later we did LSD and a few months after that, shrooms.

Once we did a small dose of shrooms while hiking near the Ringing Rocks, a group of boulders which make a ringing sound when you hit them with a hammer. I spent a long time looking intently at clouds and moss. I looked at the line of mountains in the distance and thought I saw God. I told my love I'd asked God, "Why am I here?" And that she'd said, "So you can see how beautiful I am."

He is the one who gave me the shrooms that I gave to the future-friend, expecting me to take the whole dose alone, preferably after fasting for a day or two, and to plunge deep into my psyche to find whatever demons live in my compartments that make me cry a lot and need to take Prozac.

But I'm not sure there are any revelations to be found in me, or else I would've found them by now. I'm already too navel-gazey, too internal; what I wanted was connection. I have trouble feeling close to people without sex. Or even with sex, a lot of the time. But sex and shrooms together, now there's a way to break through your isolation, to become the self that is one with everything, that will always survive and so doesn't have to worry about surviving. When the future friend and I were on shrooms and held each other skin to skin, it seemed like

our atoms were eating and replacing one another's atoms, like whatever was mine was his, right down to the mitochondria. I wanted him to be happy; I wanted him to know that there was nothing to fear and nothing to want and nothing to do. I thought he probably knew that, since he was me, but I told him just to make sure, "There is nothing to fear and nothing to want and nothing to do."

## Being Your Own Baby

I'm a big fan of self-care: reading self-care tips on the internet; doing yoga and meditating and take hot baths and writing gratitude lists and using the term "self-care" to justify stupid choices I make like buying a \$16 notebook at a bookstore or spending \$35 to get my eyebrows threaded and my chin waxed. Sometimes, the constant echo of "self-care" that I see on my Facebook feed, in women's magazines and blogs, makes me think of that *Seinfeld* episode where Frank Costanza is supposed to say, "Serenity now," every time he gets angry, and by the end of the episode he's screaming, "SERENITY NOW!" Sometimes I feel like we're all screaming "SELF-CARE!" I do more yoga and meditating and therapy and being grateful these days than ever before, and I feel more nihilistic than ever before. I don't know what the solution is. Maybe we should all just kill ourselves.

### *Words of Affirmation*

People who write affirmations on Post-it notes and stick them on their bathroom mirrors, or who write lists of goals on whiteboards in their kitchens, always seem to me like they're screaming inside. The affirmations are usually broad and universal: "You are enough." "There is only one you." "You are beautiful, inside and out." The goals are usually specific and numerical. "Lose 5 pounds this month." "Read 12 books this year." I would think that specific words of affirmation would be more encouraging than universal ones. If I were to write one of those notes, I would probably write, "Sam said you have perfect boobs," not "You are enough," because everyone is enough, but not everyone has been told they have perfect boobs. I think they are kept vague because they are really public, not private, and specific words of affirmation seem narcissistic. Universal words of affirmation still have a narcissistic bent, I think, but it's

narcissism masquerading as spirituality. These little affirmations and goals and mantras which we display, seemingly incidentally, in our private/public spaces, are intended to project who we're striving to become—a more whole and balanced self. But to me they always say, “I am screaming inside.” I know I sound judgmental, but I have such strong opinions about this only because I've been seduced by self-care, and because I am a narcissist masquerading as a spiritual person, and because I am screaming inside. I often think about writing my own Post-it affirmations and sticking them to my own bathroom mirror. I've been thinking about writing one that says, “How does it feel to be alive today?” because it's important to remind yourself that you are alive. I have plenty of specific and realistic short-term goals which I write down in my planner and journal and think about sticking to my wall, but the thing about any little sentence that you come up with that seems in the moment like the perfect sentence to improve your life, whether that sentence is, “How does it feel to be alive today?” or “Let's lose 5 pounds this month,” is that as soon as you give it semi-permanent status on a wall, you realize what a flimsy thing it is, and that all little goals and mantras and beautiful sentences are flimsy things, that nothing you create in your mind and try to make permanent will actually save your life.

### *White Girl Yoga*

I'm not proud of the fact that I love, love, love the Yoga with Adriene series on Youtube. I feel like if white people want to do yoga (And more of us should. It can do wonders for mental and physical health.) we should at least have the decency to learn about the Hindu spiritual practices connected to yoga and perhaps seek out an Indian yoga teacher's Youtube channel instead of just latching onto the first person who pops up when you type “yoga videos” into Youtube: a pretty white woman from Austin, Texas with 3.4 million subscribers. But I love Adriene. She's funny and kind-seeming and occasionally makes musical theatre references, and

when she accidentally says something that could be taken as an innuendo, she says, “Heyo!” She’s become a character in my imagination, so I don’t want to find out what she’s *really* like. I think of her as a mentor and mother-figure, coming into my home a few days a week to teach me how to love myself.

The routines are repetitive and gentle and seem like they’re designed for middle-aged women with clinical depression and back problems. Sometimes even these routines seem too strenuous for me, so I search for Adriene’s especially gentle videos, like “Yoga for Anxiety,” “Yoga for Grief,” “Yoga for Bedtime,” “Yoga for When You Are Crying.” Adriene taught me that curling up in the fetal position can be yoga, and lying on the floor on your stomach can also be yoga. Massaging your feet is yoga. When Adriene and I massage our feet together, I feel like finding joy in this world is really quite simple. When we lie on our backs and grip our feet and rock back and forth like babies, I feel like my own baby and my own mother, and it’s all very silly and sweet.

### *Meditation*

Every time I do yoga, I meditate for twenty minutes afterward. If Adriene is my yoga mom, my meditation dad is Joseph Goldstein, whose guided meditations and lectures are also available on Youtube, though he’s been teaching Buddhist principles since the sixties. The first guided meditation I did was the Meditation for No-Self. Within this were three, three-minute meditations. The first was to open myself up to sounds and try to identify what it is that’s *knowing* the sound. (You can’t.) Even though there’s no “knower,” the sounds are being known. The second was to wait for thoughts to appear and try to get to the nature of what a thought actually is. (Thoughts have no substance at all.) The third was to notice bodily sensations and imagine them as points of feeling, separate from a physical body. Goldstein tells me the body is

just a metaphor for a collection of sensations being felt. There is no head, no neck, no shoulders, no back, no arms, no legs, no feet. At first, I found this disturbing. Especially the idea that there were no feet. I think feet are the sweetest and most childish part of the body, and when I take the time to care for my feet I feel like I'm releasing some of the pain that's buried deep inside me.

I struggled with being disillusioned of my belief that I had feet, but I was pretty sure he was right. I'm pretty sure everything is an illusion, including the body. But how do I reconcile this philosophy with the Yoga with Adriene videos, where I roll around on the floor and tell myself I am a squishy animal baby who deserves to be loved?

In another Joseph Goldstein video, he invited me to use the mantra, "There is a body," if that was useful to me. That was confusing. I'd taken him at his word that there was no body, and then he told me to believe in my body again. I think this is one of those paradoxes where two seemingly contradictory ideas are true at once. There is a body, and there isn't one.

### *Comfort Objects*

I've always gotten very attached to certain non-living things. One of my favorite objects is a stuffed rabbit I've had since I was five and still sleep with every night, sometimes even if there is a man in my bed. Another is my fidget cube: a palm-sized plastic toy with buttons and switches, designed to keep the hands busy so the mind can focus and relax. I found out about fidget cubes from my other Youtube "guru," Jessica McCabe, who created the How to ADHD series. I bought the cube to help with ADHD, but it's a more dramatic help with my social anxiety. Just gripping it in my hand seems to slow my heartbeat, make the world feel less overwhelming. I always carry it with me at parties even though I don't find it as satisfying to fidget with any more, since I dropped it on concrete and a few of the buttons broke off. I'll often just hold it in one hand while I'm actually fidgeting with something else. I'll arrange hardened

candle wax into designs or peel the labels off beer bottles, or stack the salt shaker on top of the pepper and pretend this is how they have sex.

Tearing labels off beer bottles is my go-to. I rip them into shreds and roll the shreds into spools and arrange the spools in a nest on the table. Recently I did this and a friend who was sitting at the table with me tried to contribute to my nest by adding a couple balls of lint from her sweater, which made me very upset. My nest of paper spools had been a way to escape the over-stimulus of the crowd by ducking into this little private world I could control, and she'd invaded that world with her lint. I knew it wasn't her fault that she didn't understand how crucial it was for me to have some small environment to manipulate, and how important it was that this environment be mine alone. That it was a way to escape the world while still being in the world.

### *Metaphors*

Sometimes I imagine my wrists are filled with Pepperidge Farm goldfish. There's a children's doll with a hollow rubber stomach that you are supposed to fill with snack food and pretend the doll has indigestion. Then you play doctor by emptying out the doll's stomach (and eating the snack food). I discovered this doll while I was babysitting a kid, and now I imagine sometimes that if I slit open my wrists, cheddar goldfish would pour out and the insides of my wrists would be clean, hollow rubber. I find this idea kind of soothing, the idea of being neatly dismembered, removing the troublesome parts of myself without mess or violence. Sometimes I think about cutting off my head or removing my stomach. I imagine the dismembered, clean plastic pieces of me floating in space, no longer burdened by gravity.

I think all self-care activities are about being your own parent, or your own child, or both. By setting little goals for yourself, you imitate the structure of your childhood, when grown-ups controlled your routine. I tell myself to go to bed early and eat more vegetables. I also chew on

my hair and on the sleeves of my shirts; on my nails and the skin of my hand. Like a baby, I find it soothing to put things in my mouth.

Sometimes when I am really anxious, I think about eating glass bottles. Consumption is a very important metaphor for the human race, I think. If you could eat the world, the world would become part of you, and it would no longer seem foreign or unmanageable. This is connected, I think, to consumerism. And to the skimpy black dresses I buy online to look like a femme fatale. And to my desire to possess every beautiful thing. And to cultural appropriation. And to being afraid of other people's identities. And to the desire save your own life combined with the fear of understanding anything that is Not You because that would feel like alienation, and you want the opposite of that. Your fragile and destructive and lovely body is probably just a metaphor, but it's a metaphor that eats.

## Our Language

If you are teaching freshman composition and you tell your students you're a grad student, they will have less respect for you. Whether this is a good or a bad thing is debatable. If you're a leftist, you might believe it's good for your students to know you're not an absolute authority, that you're a student, like them, and you're still learning, and you don't know everything. But if you're twenty-five and female and mild-mannered, your students probably don't see you as an absolute authority anyway, and they probably already assume you don't know everything. It's quite possible they don't think you know much of anything and see you as an authority only in the most technical sense of the word. Weakening your position further with a principle of "honesty" and "vulnerability" might jeopardize your credibility.

Still, the more comfortable I get with teaching, (I've been doing it for two years now, the duration of my time in grad school) the more honest I get, the more often I wear tennis shoes to class, the more I curse and make jokes, the more I say things in class like "Fuckin' magnets, how do they work?" and am disappointed when my students don't get the reference. I believe that my vulnerability is powerful, even though my students don't always see it that way. One comment I got on my student evaluations: "Becky is educated and helpful, but as a current student herself, she is not very experienced as a teacher. However, that will come in time." Even though it annoyed me that the student would use my honesty against me, the comment was rather reassuring and sweet. "Experience will come in time." It's the kind of zen mantra I repeat to myself when I'm having panic attacks in the car. "Just be patient, my child."

I got a less sweet review from a student on the Rate My Professor website. The student wrote, "Half the articles we read were sexist. Yes, women can be sexist too," (Referring, I would

guess, to the Jean Kilbourne article we read about sexual objectification in advertising) and that “this was her first time teaching English 201, and it showed.”

I’m betting the student who wrote this was the older man I taught fall quarter who had gone back to school after being laid off from a factory job he’d had for many years. The complaints in the review were similar to complaints he’d written on the class discussion board, although I think on the discussion board he’d written in all-caps, or at least the tone was of someone writing in all-caps.

When I read the review, I yelled at the computer screen, “Oh fuck you. It’s not my fault your job was moved to Mexico.” Half real frustration, half a joke I was making to feel better about myself. He’d told me once that my job would be moved to Mexico too, soon enough. Poorly paid Mexican teachers would teach American students via Skype how to write academic essays. I wanted to tell him that it would be hard to find teachers anywhere you could pay worse than grad students, and that anyway, I wasn’t sure I would keep teaching after grad school. I might end up working at Trader Joe’s or somewhere, feeling privately superior to customers I’ll be sure are underestimating my intelligence.

I thought, as I was reading this review, that he should’ve had more empathy for me, for a young woman doing something difficult for the first time. I’m young enough to be his daughter! I thought. An old fashioned thing to think, almost chivalric.

On the Rate My Professor website, it says above the comment box: “It’s your turn to grade Professor\_\_\_\_\_” It’s a power reversal. I was the professor, the one with the power, and he, by writing the review, was taking his power back. But because I didn’t feel powerful and being around older men always makes me feel my young woman-ness, it felt like an unfair

attack. Although ultimately not that painful because, at least in this moment of our lives, I *was* the powerful one and felt more sorry for him than anything.

I'm sometimes afraid of my students as a group. I'll get this sick feeling while driving to campus, imagining my students—who this quarter are mostly male, athletic, and seem a little hostile to English classes—and wondering what I would do if they all just decided to gang-rape me. I know this is completely irrational. None of my students has ever threatened or intimidated me in any way. Besides, I always have a few friendly, enthusiastic students who sit in the front of the class, and I'm sure one of them would run for help if something like that happened.

My fear of people gets worse when my general anxiety is high, as it's been lately. I notice I've been flinching a lot more than normal. Yesterday a woman said, "Excuse me," to me in what sounded like an indignant tone as we maneuvered past each other in the hall, and I pulled my shoulders up to my ears and ducked my head like a turtle as I said, "I'm sorry." Sometimes I think I act like a kid who gets beaten at home.

Which is why, I think, teaching is so good for me. Everyday I must navigate some small conflict and speak with authority, and usually, as long as I've prepared fairly well and my mental state is balanced, I leave class feeling strong and capable.

Is my teaching good for my students? That's a different question. I said in class recently that I'd just realized that the composition curriculum wasn't very good. I was probably the last comp teacher to realize this. I'd been naive about the nobility of what we were doing, preached the importance of fostering civil discourse and critical thinking and media literacy, and thought that our curriculum actually encouraged these skills. It probably took me so long to realize the textbook was condescending and formulaic because I hadn't really bothered to read it before. Mostly what I taught from the textbook were the numbered lists printed in blue boxes in each

chapter: “4 different models of thesis statements”; “3 types of argumentative claims”; “4 steps to rhetorically analyzing an article.” After going over these steps, I’d usually ask, “So why is this important?” and after getting blank stares, I’d say something about critical thinking and how it was important that they be able to evaluate the messages they receive. It was important to be able to tell a claim of fact from a claim of value because when analyzing a claim of fact, you needed to investigate whether what they were claiming as a “fact” was really a fact, and when analyzing a claim of value, you needed to decide whether the writer’s value was the same as your value. Although I’m not sure how useful this really is. Actually I’m pretty sure it’s not useful. When I’m interpreting claims in the things I read, I don’t stop to ask whether they’re claims of fact, claims of value, or claims of policy. Many fit into more than one category anyway. I just respond to the claims themselves using the knowledge, beliefs, and values I have, doing some research if I’m interested enough.

I also had finally realized how absurd it is that we teach them to write in genres that only academics write and read. A “literature review,” a “rhetorical analysis.” I’m not sure *anyone* writes rhetorical analyses except for composition students. Can you really teach people to think more critically while you’re also teaching them that the key to their success is that they follow the requirements on the assignment sheet? I know I’m not the first person to ask these questions. I’m probably the last person in my department to have asked these questions. But our supervisor is so kind and has such clear socialist leanings, and he made me believe that it was possible to encourage rebellion and obedience at the same time, that we could find room for creativity within the strictures of the university system, and that we could encourage our students to do the same.

In our pedagogical theory class, when we were preparing to teach Composition 2 for the first time, graduate student instructors had to do the same three assignments we would teach our students: a rhetorical analysis, a literature review, and an argument, which we'd then combine into one complete research paper. I suppose this is sort of like how cops in training have to experience what it's like to be tased before they're allowed to tase other people.

For the class, I wrote a rambling, somewhat defiant, and poorly edited paper on the benefits of non-assertive rhetoric over the more commonly taught, argumentative style of rhetoric. I tried to model what I was talking about by incorporating personal experience into the paper and using an informal tone, not trying to hide the fact that I was young, female, and not always certain that what I thought was correct. In the paper I planned a new kind of writing assignment where students would do investigative research and write about that research and write about their experience doing that research and reflect on their personal identities in relation to the thing they were researching, and where they didn't need to come to any definitive conclusions. I think I managed to work meditation and nature walks into the essay as well. My idea was vague, and I made no attempt to implement it when I actually taught Composition 2, although I still encourage students to relate personal experience to their academic subjects, and I tell my students that I want them to be creative at least once per class.

The day I told my students that I'd realized the composition curriculum wasn't that great but that I had to teach it anyway, (Not that anyone really checks. It's more of a panopticon effect.) I told them they could still find room for creativity within these assignments, that they should find a research topic they're really passionate about. I told them that if I were a student in the class, I'd probably research something connected to stand-up comedy.

I drove home turning the phrase “critical thinking” over in my mind. I squinted at the road signs, the billboards, the store fronts. Was I examining everything critically? What was I overlooking? How could I possibly notice what I was overlooking, since I was overlooking it? Did my students really think less critically than I did, or did we just find different subjects worth scrutinizing, and did we come to different conclusions after performing our analyses?

“I am an elitist prick,” I said aloud to myself on the drive home. Or maybe I said “classist fuck.” Either way, I benefit from a power structure that rewards people who can write clearly and professionally in standard American English and punishes those who cannot. And I am reinforcing this power structure with the way I teach and the way I grade. I can be an easy grader and let people pass my class with no better writing skills than they walked in with, or I can be a tough grader and fail students for not mastering arbitrary rules of punctuation and sentence structure, making them more likely to fail out of college altogether. Either way, I’m reinforcing a status quo where I have power and they do not.

I walk around feeling smarter than other people because I possess a couple, very limited skills: I can read and interpret fairly complex texts written in English, and I can write pretty well (also only in English). And yet I’m totally ignorant in most other ways. I have only a surface knowledge of my own government’s dealings and almost no knowledge of most other countries’ governments. I don’t know much about the wars we’re involved in. I believe in climate change but couldn’t describe how it works. I don’t know how to fix or build anything. I don’t know the names of most of the parts of my body, or how they function.

I would like to stop being an elitist prick, but I also wouldn’t like that because being one gives me a feeling of power. It lets me feel like because I can write, I possess a kind of magic,

and like that magic is an innate characteristic in me, not just a skill I acquired by having English professors for parents and going to an expensive liberal arts college paid for by my grandfather.

As I was sitting on my patio writing the first draft of this essay in a notebook, my next-door neighbor came up to me, walking his two dogs, and said, “How come you always look like you just got kicked in the leg?”

I said, “I’m just writing,” in a tone that was meant to sound polite enough while still conveying what a stupid question I thought that was, but he just looked at me blankly.

I wanted him to . . . not understand my world, my special kind of magic, but at least to see that I *had* a world that he couldn’t access or understand.

When I write, I turn inward and don’t exist for the external world. I am communicating with others, but only with future others. It shouldn’t matter when I’m writing whether my facial expression looks friendly. When I’m writing, my focus isn’t on men I don’t really know passing on the sidewalk. It’s on the ideas and images and turns of phrase I’m extracting from my subconscious. It’s a sacred, meditative process.

When he walked away, after I’d shaken off my annoyance and gotten back to writing, I wished he would come back. I wanted him to see me engrossed in my own mind. Rapidly putting thoughts onto the page, occasionally looking up and staring into the middle distance, brow furrowed, not friendly, not feminine, not existing for him. Existing, I guess, in opposition to him, or at least to my idea of him.

I know that he must have his own world that I can’t access. I can’t read the subtext of other people—I don’t mean the subtext of what they say but the subtext of who they are—just like my students have trouble picking up on the subtext of the articles we discuss. I tend to write

my own subtext onto people, who I imagine them to be under the surface. It's certainly wrong, but it's still satisfying and gives me a sense of mastery over what I perceive.

I think, at least the neighbor and I have dogs in common; that's a world we can both access.

My relationship with reading and writing is one world, one language—in the metaphorical sense—and I hold it sacred. But I know it's just one language among many.

When I try to teach students “my language,” I'm not just trying to teach them to write better and read more closely. I'm also trying to impart my values. I know that teachers are not supposed to say that, but I think most of us secretly want to influence what our students believe. Taking writing seriously, appreciating when it's beautiful, resisting the way it's been systematized and reduced to something purely functional, is a political act. It is against capitalism, against authority. Again, I know I'm not the first person to say this. When I say I want my students to question what they have been taught, what I really want them to question is capitalism, America, the president, the military, whiteness, patriarchy, but what they usually end up questioning is me. Maybe that's a start.

About halfway through every class I teach, I start to regret the way I've structured the course and feel bad about everything I've done and everything it's too late to change, and I start to fantasize about what I will do differently the next time I teach. But this quarter, for the first time, I'm teaching composition without knowing when or if I'll ever teach it again. In this moment, I want to teach comp again. I want to get better at teaching this language. I believe in my own potential to make freshman comp a radical thing.

### Becky Talks to Marc Maron in Her Head

Becky read an essay she was kind of proud of at an open mic recently, hoping this would be the night she'd reveal herself to be the Real Thing. Right now there wasn't much external evidence that she was. She hadn't even been published, really. She didn't submit her work very often, because she hardly ever finished what she started, and sometimes she didn't even start.

She thought the next time she told someone she was a writer, and they asked her if she was published, she would say, "No, I'm still incubating." She liked that idea of herself as a writer, privately developing inside a shell, from which sooner or later she would emerge, a fully formed talent, and finally be visible to the world.

Becky's parents were writers who hadn't published much. Her dad had published an academic book—which her mother had edited every word of—and gotten depressed when almost no one read it. Her mom had written a memoir and two novels, but none of her books had been published. Becky thought her mother's problem was lack of persistence, rather than lack of talent.

When Becky was fourteen or so she told her mom that whenever she wrote a first draft, she thought it was brilliant, but then she revised it a couple times and started to feel like every word was shit. Her mother said this was the moment she sensed Becky was the Real Thing. Apparently it was a Real Thing thing to say. More recently when the three of them were together, her mother had said, "You're the real thing, Beck." And her father had said, "We're *all* the Real Thing." Becky didn't want to have anxiety about whether she was the Real Thing when she was her parents' age. She wanted everyone to know by then that she was.

Of course, for some people to be the Real Thing, there must be other people who are not the Real Thing. The vast majority of people who think they are the Real Thing must not be, in order for the Real Thing to mean anything. And so, in order for Becky to reveal herself at the open mic as the Real Thing, everyone else had better not be. Or at most there could be one other person who was, ideally a cute guy she could hook up with and indirectly absorb his Real Thingness. Hopefully it would not be another woman, particularly not an attractive young woman with social confidence and a hip, supportive friend group. This woman who was the Real Thing would only detract from Becky's own Real Thingness, although perhaps if this other woman recognized that Becky was the Real Thing and took an interest in Becky (friendly or perhaps romantic), this woman could add to Becky's Real Thingness as well.

The essay she read at the open mic was titled, "Self-Portrait in Apologies," and in it she confessed to some of the worst things she'd ever done, although she didn't think any of them were that bad. She was sure that none of them were unforgivable. In fact, she felt like she was a better person than most because she owned up to the ways she'd hurt people.

The open mic audience was supportive, but Becky felt that the applause for her piece wasn't quite as effusive as for everyone else. It seemed like they hesitated before applauding for her, like they weren't sure if they should condone this kind of behavior. She wondered if they were afraid of her. She thought of a line she wanted to say someday in an interview if she got famous, although she worried it would sound pretentious: "People wouldn't accept my vulnerability until I'd mastered craft. They just thought I was crazy."

Sometimes when she was stinging with a sense of being misunderstood and rejected, she would talk to Marc Maron in her head. She liked to imagine that someday she would be interviewed by him on the *WTF* Podcast, joining the esteemed ranks of comedians, writers,

actors, Bruce Springsteen, Barack Obama, who had all been interviewed on the podcast. She started her conversations with Marc Maron almost subconsciously, acting her part aloud while walking the dog or getting dressed. Then she'd realize she was doing it and scold herself for living in a fantasy. Knowing that she should be using her imagination to plan the books and plays and essays that could actually get her the praise she wanted, rather than imagining the same conversation over and over. When she was a kid, daydreaming about the future had been one of her favorite pastimes, but as an adult, these fantasies seemed less acceptable, more pathetic.

But Becky would sometimes stick up for herself, saying these conversations with Marc Maron were a harmless coping mechanism for her anxiety and self-esteem issues. It was a very human thing to do, maybe the basis of storytelling itself: imagining a future in which everything turned out okay. She would take the embarrassments of the present and imagine a future in which she'd learned from them, grown into the person she'd always wanted to be.

Becky debated herself so much that she thought she could write a sitcom just between different aspects of her internal monologue.

An imaginary conversation with Marc Maron might go like this:

MARC: So you write a lot about social anxiety and your own awkwardness, and generally, you're very self-deprecating as a writer. Lot of self-loathing going on in your book. And I'm a self-loathing guy too, so I get that. But when I read your work, even though it's so funny and so artfully done, I can't help but want to tell you, "Why do you hate yourself so much? You don't need to do that." I'm sitting across from you, and I see this beautiful young woman who's brilliant and funny and charming, and I just want you to love yourself more.

BECKY: Geez, thank you, Marc. You know, I feel the same way when I watch your stand-up. I've always been a big fan of yours.

MARC: Ah, that's sweet. This is just turning into a big love-fest here on *WTF*.

BECKY: \*laughs\* But seriously, yeah, I love myself. I do. But I guess I've always found shame to be really fertile ground to write from. I've always had a lot of shame, and eventually I learned how to use it, to make it into art.

MARC: What I've always admired about your writing is you admit to things that a lot of people feel but most people are afraid to talk about.

BECKY: Yeah, I guess that's the first lesson I learned as a writer. To be honest and not be afraid of looking bad. I had this writing professor who warned me to be careful not to cross the line from introspection into narcissism. She said that so many young women she taught wrote essays that were just "Look at my va-jay-jay! Look at my va-jay-jay!" She always said "va-jay-jay" instead of "vagina," which I thought was odd. But I knew that if I worried too much about crossing that line, it would paralyze me. I needed to trust myself that if I did cross that boundary into narcissism, I'd have the self-awareness to pull myself back. So I wrote an essay about my vagina and showed it to this professor, and she liked it. She said that the way I was writing about my vagina was different from most vagina essays. I was using my vagina as a starting point to talk about something universal.

MARC: Oh yeah, the vagina essay in your book is hilarious! And yet also really sad.

Becky had to remind herself that Marc Maron hadn't called her brave or claimed to have loved a book she hadn't written. That Marc Maron didn't know who she was and almost certainly never would. She knew that logically, but she didn't believe it. She saw herself as a future famous person, and if this fantasy had been definitively ripped from her, if some emissary from the future had come and told her that she would never get a book published and that for the rest of her life, everyone would see her as just an ordinary person, it would've been very hard for

her to go on living. She was still young enough to convince herself she had lots of time and anything could happen, but eventually she'd have to let go of these delusions. At least if she didn't become famous, which she thought she would, so she wasn't really worried.

## I'm a Creep

In my junior year of college I found out that my next door neighbor, a beautiful girl who wore witchy makeup and managed our school radio station, and whom I'd never had a conversation with, called me her creepy neighbor behind my back. It reminded me of the kid in fifth grade who'd referred to me as "the creepy girl who sings." Or the boy I adored my sophomore year of college who told his friends, who were later overheard by my less popular friend, that I was way too into him and kind of creepy. When I found out about this, I sent him an email telling him that I would leave him alone from then on and to just relax. That I wasn't going to leave my underwear on his doorstep or anything like that. Which was also probably a creepy thing to say.

"Awkward" I'll accept as a simple statement of fact, but "creepy" hurts. It suggests a weak but sadistic being who does bad things to the vulnerable. A creepy person will sneak into your bedroom while you sleep or prey on your children or small animals. As awkward as I am, I try not to be creepy. I try not to make other people feel as uncomfortable as I usually do.

I don't know how to hold my body in the presence of others. How much to smile, when to make eye contact and when to look away, where to fix my gaze when I do look away. In middle school, I had an embarrassing habit of staring at girls' breasts, which supported the theory that I was a lesbian. I'm straight, but to this day I have to coach myself when talking to women: "Don't look at her breasts, don't look at her breasts."

I am weird in a couple different ways. It's the combination of my different kinds of weirdness that makes me creepy. Most of the time, I am very quiet. I am polite; I seem wholesome. However, when I am feeling less inhibited, if I'm in a group of people I feel

comfortable with or I've had a couple drinks or I simply feel like I have something to prove, I will try to be provocative, use the word "cunt" as much as I can, make jokes about men who are not gay having sex with other men who are not gay. I speak too loudly. I make jokes about killing myself. The thing is, when I'm saying these things I don't seem like the kind of person who is comfortable saying provocative things; I seem like a shy, wholesome girl yelling "cunt" and telling straight men to have sex with each other and saying she wants to commit suicide. I feel like an Amish girl during Rumspringa.

I often want to stop strangers on the street and explain that I mean them no harm, and that if I seem hostile or rude it's unintentional. I guess people don't actually see me as a hostile, dangerous person. That's not what they mean when they call me creepy. I don't seem like someone who would shoot up a school or molest a kid. For one thing, I'm a girl. So when applied to me, creepy takes on almost a supernatural connotation. I must seem... not like a witch. That would be sexy. More like a troll. I sometimes want to crawl into a troll cave and not be looked at.

But also, I perform my weirdness and dare people to love me anyway. Like once at a party I walked away from the crowd and lay face-down on the carpet. This was my own private joke. But no one reacted, so I just stood back up and rejoined the party. In group conversations, I wait quietly for opportunities to insert a one-liner. For example, after listening for a few minutes to some University of Idaho students talking about their school art magazine, I asked, "Do people submit art made from potatoes?" I had planned the line for about three minutes before saying it. They laughed a little, the conversation continued, and I fell silent again.

A creative writing professor told me once that the voice I evoked in my writing was that of a "marvelously harmless stranger." Which is kind of dubious as a compliment, but at the time

I was proud to claim my marvelous harmlessness. Sure, I was a stranger, out of place even among nerds and hipsters, but I was harmless, which is the opposite of creepy.

I am kind of creepy. When I am in other people's houses while they're not there, I sometimes snoop through their bedrooms and read their diaries. I'm a pervert. I'm a masochist and a sadist and I tell the men I have sex with that I am just looking for someone to be my mother so I can crawl back into the womb and never hurt anyone and never be hurt. And I tell the men I have sex with that I want to eat glass bottles and I want to hurt myself in front of them so that they'll be my mother. And I write cruel things about the men I have sex with and say that my art is an act of violence and I embrace that, that I am a cruel person and my purpose in life is not to be good. I guess I indulge these parts of myself because I have always been creepy and I can't pretend that I'm not, even for a minute, so why not explore that aspect of myself like any other quirk. I don't, of course, wish to be normal. I think I must be somewhat special since people are always letting me know how strange I am, even when I'm not trying to be. I just want to be accepted, or embraced, or adored, or worshipped. Some combination of those things. I want what everybody wants.

## The Brain Is Full of Dark Matter and Inexplicable Light

I realized I had ADHD—or maybe *decided* I had it, I'm not always sure which—a few days after graduating from college, while packing up the bedroom which hadn't been clean even once in the entire year I'd slept in it. I'd considered the idea before, but as I shoved papers, books, clothes, action figures, pretty rocks, and other accessories of an impractical life into boxes, I suddenly felt certain. I stopped packing and looked up the Wikipedia page for ADHD. I thought the description for ADHD inattentive type fit me like a glove: frequent daydreaming, being “easily confused,” losing things, being disorganized and messy and forgetful, overlooking seemingly obvious details, clumsiness and poor coordination, the ability to “hyperfocus,” which is to focus so intensely on one task that you're totally unaware of anything else around you.

As soon as I was sure I had ADHD, I was sure that my dad did too, more severely than I did. My aunt had once told him she thought he had it, and he'd resented this, as anyone would resent being diagnosed with a brain disorder by a relative. My dad and I hadn't known then about ADHD inattentive type and how it differs from the more well-known hyperactive type. Neither of us are the type of people who can't sit still or who never stop talking. Dad is a calm, quiet man who reads for hours every day. He also recently tried to cook frozen chicken in the oven while it was still in the plastic bag. We are both passionate about and good at a few things and fearful of and resistant to any new task. A few things that make my father and I nervous: unfamiliar coffee makers, driving, computers, math, working in the service industry, and missed social cues.

There's exhilaration in claiming a new label. I've always known I was shy, but when it finally occurred to me to match my shyness with the phrase Social Anxiety Disorder, it felt for the first time like it wasn't my fault. My brain just worked a little differently from “neurotypical

brains.” I was in college and had begun to romanticize mental illness as something that made people special and garnered sympathy. It seemed like mental illness often went along with creative brilliance and harbored hidden advantages like sensitivity and empathy. Merely being awkward, timid, spacey, messy, and incompetent garnered no sympathy and implied no advantages. Having social anxiety disorder and ADHD inattentive type suggested that I was both disadvantaged and gifted, and that both aspects could win me attention.

On the day of my self-diagnosis I wrote a long Facebook status announcing that I had ADHD. I dredged up all the concrete examples I could think of for times when my brain had worked differently and caused me troubles: being put in the “slow” group in second grade because I couldn’t cut a straight line with scissors; getting detention several times in elementary school because I kept forgetting to get my tests signed by my parents; failing my driving test because it hadn’t occurred to me to look over my shoulder (or even in the rearview mirror) while driving in reverse; hitting several parked cars in the first few years after getting my license; going to the college my mother had researched and recommended for me because I was so overwhelmed by all the choices I couldn’t and wouldn’t do the research myself; chopping cilantro on a metal counter when I worked at a Mexican restaurant because I couldn’t find a cutting board; being told by a coworker at the restaurant that I needed to pay *way* more attention, even though I was trying as hard as I could to pay attention to everything I needed to pay attention to.

I feel sometimes like ADHD will kill me. That I’ll die (or kill someone else) in a car accident because of all the times I’ve almost swerved into the passing lane and not noticed the car next to me. Or I worry that since I was too incompetent for the job at the Mexican restaurant (a restaurant that never even got very busy), I will be too incompetent for any job and will never

be able to support myself. Or that because I am so overwhelmed by all the researching and choosing and applying that taking adult opportunities requires, I simply will not choose and will instead move back in with my parents, as I did once already—for a year after college.

But then again, I've gotten better at driving, the way a person gets better at pretty much anything she consistently does. And I've had several jobs that I've done fine at, in some ways better than average. I'm in grad school now, and after grad school I will probably find some other opportunity and do just fine, the way middle-class white girls who do well on standardized tests and get good grades in school tend to do just fine.

Sometimes I don't feel like anyone really believes I have ADHD, not even me. Not my parents, or my friends, or even the psychiatrist who prescribes me Adderall.

I went to a psychiatrist for the first time the summer after graduating college, seeking an ADHD diagnosis, but more importantly, diagnosis and medication for anxiety and depression, since I'd become pretty severely depressed after graduating college and moving back into my childhood bedroom. She asked me just a few questions about ADHD. Not enough, I now think, to definitively diagnose me. And I don't think she was satisfied with my answers. She asked if I'd had trouble completing assignments in school, and I said sometimes, but I'd always been able to compensate and get good grades. She asked if I had trouble focusing on reading, and I said occasionally, but usually I was able to read just fine. She pursed her lips, as if I were a horse without enough sense to walk through the gate she'd opened for me. Later I'd think I ought to have explained to her, "Yes, I did well in school. I memorized well and wrote well and read a lot and did what I was told and wasn't terribly social. But I'm not *in* school anymore, and now there's no one else to structure my time, and I don't know how to do it myself, and I don't feel like I *can* do it. I didn't need extra help with school, but I need extra help with life: managing

money and finding and keeping a job and driving safely. And also I'm a writer, and I want to reach the height of my potential, but I've never finished anything I've written in my entire life. Not a short story or a personal essay or a play. I write a draft or two and then put it aside for later. I've never produced anything I'm proud of. This may not matter to you or to the world, but it matters to me."

I didn't ask for ADHD medication then, and the psychiatrist didn't recommend it. Anxiety and depression were bigger concerns, so I was prescribed an antidepressant, which helped. I applied to Master of Fine Arts programs, got into a couple, joined one. Being back in the structure of school pulled me out of my rut; it was an environment I'd always done well in.

Teaching for the first time as a graduate student instructor overwhelmed and terrified me at first. One day in my first quarter of teaching, I said to my students in class, "Sorry I'm so scattered. I have ADHD, and it's not medicated." Impulsivity is another symptom of ADHD, and I've often impulsively said things to my students that were probably unprofessional, too honest, too self-deprecating.

In the summer after my first year of grad school, I decided to seek medication for ADHD. One of my writing professors had lectured me several times that I wasn't working hard enough, that I wouldn't get through this program if I didn't take it more seriously. I asked my psychiatrist for an Adderall prescription, and she agreed easily, even though on the piece of paper she gave me after the session that listed my diagnoses, ADHD wasn't listed, only social anxiety disorder, general anxiety disorder, and one episode of major depression.

My prescribed dose was originally twenty milligrams a day, and I was told to build up to that slowly. I never did end up taking the full dose. At first I took five milligrams in the morning, five in the afternoon, and it felt, for just the first few days, like a revelation. Like before I'd had

tunnel vision, unaware of anything except the few minor details my focus landed on, and now I could take in the whole landscape, could really *see* the mountains, the sky, the houses of my little Montana town, all at once. Also, for the first few days, I thought that Adderall had cured my social anxiety. I was able to walk through a crowd of people and not feel like I stood out as particularly weird, awkward, and embarrassing. I thought Adderall was going to transform my social life: I'd be able to date so many more boys now. I would have so many more friends.

After a few days, the effect felt much less dramatic. That feeling of expanded vision left me and my awkwardness and self-consciousness seemed to come back, leaving only the more prosaic effects of increased energy, mood, and ability to focus for longer on a less-than-stimulating task. I started to worry that Adderall was increasing my anxiety over time, as I'd heard it might, and that it was making my heart race, so I started taking Adderall only "as needed."

Now I take it sometimes to write when I don't feel like it, to make grading papers more tolerable, to feel a bit more alert and confident while teaching, and to stay calm and content while driving long distances. I consider it a public safety measure to take Adderall before driving from the city where I go to grad school to the town where my parents live because most of my most egregious driving errors are committed during moments of panic. I worry I'm going to miss my exit so I panic and veer into the exit lane without checking that it's clear, or I'm trying to parallel park and realize someone on the sidewalk is watching me and suddenly forget whether I should turn the steering wheel left or right while driving in reverse. It makes me wonder whether, no matter how real or serious my ADHD may be, the deeper problem is how panicked I get over small errors. (They say that most car accidents are caused not by the initial error but by over-correcting. You veer too far to the left and then panic and veer *way* too far to the right.) One day

at the Mexican restaurant my manager said to me, “You just need to stay calm. You do fine when you stay calm.” Perhaps I would not be such a screw-up if I were not so anxious about what a screw-up I was. Perhaps I am not really *that* much of a screw-up at all.

Recently I watched the Netflix documentary, *Take Your Pills*, about the over-prescription of ADHD medication in American society today. I came into the film skeptical; I’d watched a video by Jessica McCabe, creator the Youtube channel How to ADHD, critiquing the film for lumping together Adderall abuse with prescribed, legitimate use and for perpetuating stereotypes that “Adderall is basically meth” and that taking it would turn you into a jet-powered, soulless efficiency-robot. The documentary did perpetuate these stereotypes and contributed, I think, to the stigma I’d felt since self-diagnosing with ADHD, but I also found a lot of it persuasive. Without my conscious decision, the film changed the frequency with which I take Adderall: from about every other day to closer to once a week.

*Take Your Pills* reminded me how depressing it is that what’s been called the “defining drug of our time” doesn’t expand our minds like psychedelics did in the sixties (and still do today, for some of us) but instead makes us more efficient workers. I’m a sucker for that dystopian anti-capitalist narrative. Sure, I’m not working on Wall Street, but I do teach students how to write academic papers in Standard American English at a state university, I’m also a consumer, and I’m trying to find a way to support myself within the capitalist system. Perhaps my disorder—if that’s what it is—could be revolutionary. Perhaps instead of trying to be a well-oiled cog in the machine, I should be a wrench in the gears, although I don’t know what that means, practically. Work for a corporation but do so incompetently enough that I’m actually contributing to the downfall of capitalism? My struggles with organization and discipline don’t make me great at organizing unions or protests. I’ve heard that much of mental illness is a

reaction to living in an unwell society, and I believe that, but I still have to live here. Like everyone else, I need to decide on my own definition of success, but even if my definition differs from other people's, it will still take a degree of discipline to achieve it.

Even though I sometimes doubt my own ADHD label, I never doubt that having the vocabulary of the ADHD diagnosis and seeking out the resources available to adults with ADHD helps me improve my life. Things like writing out a to-do list with a counselor during finals week, doing yoga and meditating, consuming Jessica McCabe's videos on ADHD success strategies as quickly as she can produce them, keeping a day planner, and yes, taking a small dose of Adderall as needed, have all helped me to be productive, to feel in control, to stay more or less "on track."

I needed to identify ADHD as my special problem before I could take deliberate steps to manage it. Maybe it's narcissism on my part, but if I'd simply accepted that I struggle with time management, organization, motivation, and focus "just like everybody else," I don't think I would've taken as much interest in working on these problems.

A few times in the past couple weeks I've considered taking Adderall to write or teach and then decided not to. I've been about as productive without it as with it. Perhaps Adderall was simply the catalyst I needed to establish the right routines, develop the self-confidence, adopt the right coping strategies, and now that I have the routines, the confidence, and the strategies, I don't need the drug.

The effect of five milligrams of Adderall has gotten so subtle I thought it might no longer be working at all, and my slight increase in productivity while taking it might be purely psychosomatic. So a couple of days ago, I tried taking ten. At first it felt great. Adderall got me

high again, just like it did the first few times taking it. I felt irrationally excited to go talk to mildly resentful college freshmen about thesis statements.

When I got to class, I could hardly articulate thoughts; I jumbled words. However, my handwriting on the board was neater than usual. The brain is weird. Why would my handwriting be so neat when I felt too intoxicated to form coherent sentences? I let the class out early and spent the next hour sitting on the campus lawn, texting and eating a bagel, two tasks which demanded my entire attention.

The fear that I would become addicted to Adderall—that I would need to take a larger and larger dose to get the same effect—turned out to be unfounded. Five milligrams is a help; ten is a hindrance. And five milligrams a day is really a ridiculously low dose of Adderall. Many people are prescribed sixty. I wonder whether the fact that my brain is only helped by such a small amount of the drug means that I probably don't have ADHD, or simply that my brain is very sensitive to drugs.

I think about how so many diagnoses for cognitive disorders, from autism to depression to ADHD, are merely a collection of symptoms. They are an expert's best guess at what is wrong, a guess that's always being revised. In the documentary, I learned that what came to be known as ADHD was first called Mild Brain Damage. I relate to this label. I feel mildly damaged. I can give a few concrete examples of times I displayed characteristic ADHD symptoms, but the real problem is harder to explain. I just feel like things that are easy for other people are not for me, and that it has always been obvious—both to me and to other people—that I was a little “off,” although no one ever told me I was, except sometimes to frame it as a moral defect. That I wasn't paying enough attention, that I had no common sense, that I wasn't working hard enough. And other people didn't tell me these things as often as I told them to

myself. And even though I've been able to do pretty well so far, with a lot of thanks to the financial and emotional support of my parents and all the other privileges I enjoy, I worry that I'm not reaching my "true potential," whatever that means. I feel like Normal is a club to which I was never permitted access until I tried to celebrate my difference, and then people tried to drag me to Normal kicking and screaming. Not by actually telling me, "You don't have ADHD," but through the general discourse of whether ADHD is even a real thing or whether we *all* have ADHD thanks to smartphones and TV, a societal conversation that I take very personally. I don't know if I really need Adderall—probably not—but I do think that I need the shorthand of "ADHD" as an identifier, and I need the community and the resources. I'd like to hold onto my quiet belief that I may be "broken," but I'm also special, that my limitations come with gifts, that I'm not "neurotypical," but really, who would want to be? I know that no one is really neurotypical. Everyone has something that sets them apart. Yet I feel the need to distinguish myself from the "everyone." It's the arrogance of people who have always felt like outsiders. We'd like to think that, unbeknownst to society, we're superheroes.

## Out of Place

Butte, Montana is an old red-brick town on a hill. Butte, Montana had the last operating brothel in the country, the Dumas, which closed in 1982. Butte, Montana once produced one-sixth of the world's copper. Butte, Montana is the birthplace of Evel Knievel. Butte, Montana has the largest Irish-American population, per capita, in the country. Larger than Boston's. Butte is "home" to the largest superfund site in the country: the Berkeley Pit, an abandoned open pit mine, which is now a toxic lake. Last year, thousands of geese landed on the Berkeley Pit and died. Certain hip people who are not originally from Butte but found themselves here a few years ago say that Butte has an other-dimensional counterpart called Buttetropolis. A stand-up comic named Dark Sevier, who was in a few episodes of *Saved By the Bell* and is now the emcee of the weekly open mic at the Silver Dollar Saloon, is known as the mayor of Buttetropolis. Dark wrote once in the local arts magazine that there are two types of people who live in Butte: Butteians (*BEW-shuns*) and Butteants (*BEW-tunts*). Butteians are people who were born in Butte and whose parents and grandparents were born in Butte; Butteants are people who moved here from elsewhere and claimed this place as their home. Butteians are notoriously suspicious of Butteants. I was born in Butte, but my parents moved here from elsewhere, so I'm technically a Butteant. Dark is a Butteant. Olivia Everett, who runs the Imagine Butte Resource Center (the local artists' hub, which hosts readings and gallery shows) is a Butteian. Don Andrews and Brian Boyd, the two men who started the Butte's first international film festival in 2016, are Butteants. Butteants tend to find Butte more interesting than Butteians do. Don likes to say that there's a story for every brick in Butte, and there are a lot of bricks in Butte.

A lot of Butteants have stories about going on cross-country road trips looking for somewhere to start a new chapter in their lives, arriving in Butte and realizing, “This is the place.” Don and Brian have a story like this. They drove to Butte from Portland, Oregon, in search of a place to shoot a web series thriller called *Winnebago Man*. Don was going to write and direct it, and Brian was going to star in it. They only planned to stay in Butte a few days, and then probably to head down to New Mexico.

Don realized after a couple days in Butte that it would be the perfect place for a film festival. He’d worked previously on the Portland Film Festival. In Butte’s historic district, there’s a beautiful historic theater called the Mother Lode, a historic Presbyterian church-turned-theater called the Covellite, another historic church-turned-concert-venue called Mountain View Music Hall, and the local college, Montana Tech, all within walking distance of each other. Also, Butte seemed like a place film directors ought to know about. It was the perfect place to film: no need to get a permit or block off streets. Depending on the block you were filming on, you could shoot a film set in the Gilded Age or the Wild West or the ‘50s.

Don and Brian got a gig bartending at the Silver Dollar Saloon in exchange for living in the loft above the bar rent-free, and soon after that, Don started planning for the first annual Covellite International Film Festival.

I drove to Butte from Spokane, where I was going to school, in September of 2017, for the second year of the festival. I walked into the red-carpeted lobby of the Mother Lode Theater, where filmmakers stood around networking and waiting for the first screening to start. I saw some familiar people wearing volunteer t-shirts, but I was my typical antisocial self and didn’t talk to anyone. The only person I wanted to see was Don, whom I had dated pretty seriously for a while.

The lineup was truly international. There was a Bosnian documentary about war veterans in a biker gang helping each other recover from PTSD, an experimental Indian film with a circular narrative and only one actor, a documentary about the Canadian synchronized swimming team. Like the first year of the festival, filmmakers flew to Butte from all over the world. For some of them, Butte was their very first experience of America. And they seemed, for the most part, charmed. My favorites were three high school kids, each from a different country of origin, who had flown from China for the screening of their short film, which they'd made as a senior project at their international school.

The feature film the first night was *Charged*, a documentary about a man in Livingston, Montana, Eduardo Garcia, who was electrocuted after poking a dead bear in an electrified barrel. He didn't die but lost his arm and got testicular cancer. He became kind of an inspirational figure. He learned to cook with his prosthetic arm and started his own restaurant. He went on TV talk shows where he was called the Bionic Chef.

The most interesting part of the story was his relationship with the ex-girlfriend who took care of him all through his recovery even though they'd broken up. She came off as a bit too self-sacrificing in the film, so the director probed into what *her* dream was. Turns out, her dream was to be a stand-up comic. The film included a clip of her taking the stage at a comedy open mic, with Eduardo in the audience, but the audio switched to voiceover when she actually started her routine, which made me wonder about the quality of her act.

The ex-girlfriend, Jennifer Jane, came onstage for the Q & A that Brian led after the film, along with one of the producers and some of the people involved in the short films that had screened before the feature. She seemed awkward on-stage, standing oddly with one leg crossed over the other, long thin legs in high-heeled boots. She didn't seem like someone who should be

shy at a Butte, Montana festival. She and Eduardo had travelled the world together surfing and rock climbing. She had posed nude for his photographs in outlandish scenarios—on top of cliffs and draped in dead animal skins. But she seemed reluctant to talk and let the producer answer all the questions about *Charged*. I wished Brian would do more to draw her out. She was the only woman on the stage, and not only was she a star of the documentary but also the director of *The Joy of Funerals*, one of the short films that played before *Charged*.

She only answered one question, about the inspiration for *The Joy of Funerals*. She said that people often came up to her and said, “You have such an interesting life. I don’t.” And that surprised her because she thought your life is what you make it. And that’s the message of *The Joy of Funerals*: that your life is what you make it. I’ve long had a more deterministic, “We’re all doomed by our circumstances and free will is an illusion,” perspective on life, but there were a lot of people in Butte who seemed a testament to the “Your life is what you make it” motto.

Like Dark, who grew up in a religious cult in Oklahoma and moved at eighteen to LA and then Hawaii and now Butte, doing comedy and making art—sculptures and photographs—usually accompanied by a big, gentle dog named Tulsa.

Or Don, a vasectomy baby, the eighth child of an ironworker, who broke his body in the Air Force all through his twenties, moved to Portland and went to film school, then came to Butte and started a film festival and later a film studio.

During the Q & A, I noted that film people seem more inclined to comment than to ask questions. Someone in the audience who I assumed was a director said to the *Charged* producer, “You’ve documented the transformation of the human spirit, which is incredibly hard to do.” I wrote in my notebook, *Filmmakers are creepy*.

After the film I went to the after-party, which was at a wine bar. I hadn't picked up my VIP pass yet, and the man working the door almost didn't let me in—a friend of Don's had to vouch for me. The friend was a cool, "LA person" with cool LA hair. He'd told me once that he'd been a "cabana boy" for an old gay millionaire in Beverly Hills, and if he'd been gay himself, he probably could've made a career just out of hanging around rich old men. "She knows Don *very* well," he told the man working the door. I was a little proud I'd gotten the chance to prove I was part of the in-crowd, even if the only reason I was part of the in-crowd is because I'd slept with someone for a year, even if the in-crowd was only in Butte, Montana.

The friend and his two polyamorous LA girlfriends and I were awkwardly hanging around the wine bar before the other filmmakers showed up. They admired the weird architecture of the chandeliers: each chandelier was connected by a rope and pulley system, like something you'd see on a boat. I said, "They're powered by an old man on a bicycle," since I'm very shy and awkward and I wanted them to know that I have a mind and a sense of humor. The joke didn't really land.

The two girlfriends might've seemed, at first glance, like accessories to the LA filmmaker. But they're LA filmmakers too. One is an actress and the other worked on props, although I think she was mostly there to keep her girlfriend company. They seemed out of place in Butte because they're LA people. I'm certainly not an LA person, but I also don't feel like a Butte person. I feel out of place in Butte because I don't belong anywhere else, but I don't seem to belong there either.

Don and the other festival-goers eventually showed up at the party, and I alternated between standing next to Don and a listening to the musician, a blues singer from St. Louis. He wore a medallioned red silk shirt and at one point grabbed his big belly and said, "I call these

abs. Most people call it the Buddha.” Because I didn’t want to mingle, I was the most attentive listener in the audience. He talked directly to me from the stage, saying he could tell from looking into my eyes that I was in love. Near the end of the set, he invited me onstage to sing “My Girl,” which I did.

Don was in the other room mingling and didn’t hear me sing, which was fine because it wasn’t in my key. When I joined him again, he introduced me to the *Charged* producer as a “Covellite Film Festival alum,” because a short film I wrote and acted in was in the festival last year. He wanted me to treat the festival as a networking opportunity and not self-deprecate.

“No nepotism involved, of course,” I joked.

Don said, “I would’ve liked the film even if I wasn’t sleeping with you.”

I was embarrassed that he brought up sex to this producer, this unfamiliar man my father’s age. I’m fifteen years younger than Don, and that’s part of my out-of-placeness. Sometimes when I used to go to parties with him and his friends, I’d feel like a kid sitting at the grownups’ table. Once I spent an entire dinner party talking to Don’s friends’ five-year-old daughter, and after we left I told him I was glad there’d been another kid for me to play with.

A couple glasses of wine deep, I did something rather brave, at least for me: I went up to the two polyamorous girlfriends and Dark Sevier, mayor of Buttetropolis, and tried to join their conversation. Dark was telling the women that when he was twenty-three, he’d once stood in front of an intergalactic council who had offered him the chance to cross over into another dimension. He’d considered it, but Earth pleaded with him, “You’re leaving? Who’s going to move the couch?” (Mimicking the voice of a stereotypical Jewish mother.) And so reluctantly he stayed to perform his filial duties to Mother Earth. We were all too hip and open-minded to ask

the obvious questions. Was he on drugs? Was he in the psych ward? Did he *really* believe he'd been offered the chance to leave this dimension?

Instead, the girlfriend-props-mistress shared her own encounters with the other side, how sometimes she had out-of-body experiences and found her spirit walking down the hall. She didn't know where she was going, but she figured one of these days she'd get there, to that other place.

Dark turned to me and asked, "How are you?" which meant a lot to me because Dark and I hung out in the same places a lot, and he almost never acknowledged me. Feeling myself finally *seen* by the mayor of Buttetropolis, I lit up and tried to think, How *was* I? What was new and interesting in my life? I told him I'd just gotten a cat and pulled up my Instagram account on my phone to show him a picture.

The next day I met Don's mother. Her luggage had gotten lost, and she'd had to wash her clothes in the hotel sink. "Now I know how those poor refugees feel," she joked.

On the last night, while I was waiting for the awards ceremony to start, I sat in the audience by myself and read a book about writing poetry. I heard someone say, "We're smothered by history." I don't know if they were talking about Butte, but it seemed like the perfect way to describe Butte. A lot of people say that we're stuck in the past, the mining boom-days, and that Buttians are more interested in re-hashing that history than in building anything new here.

One of the award-winning documentaries was about an American's experience teaching poetry in an all-girls orphanage in Chile. In the Q & A afterward, the producer of the film said he'd been despairing about the state of the country since Trump got elected, but seeing a place

like Butte gave him hope. We had a real community here. We were building things. We didn't look like every other place in America.

I crashed the stage at the end of the awards ceremony to give Don and Brian bamboo plants, which were supposed to be a thank you gesture for all their hard work. While I was up there I asked to borrow Brian's microphone so I could to thank them for putting the festival together. It probably seemed a little inappropriate, too clumsy a gesture to have flown at Sundance or Cannes, but Don and Brian thought it was sweet. As we hugged onstage, Brian whispered that he knew it wasn't an easy thing for me to do, making a bold gesture like that. Don kissed me on the forehead and said, "My rebellious girlfriend," which surprised me because he didn't call me "girlfriend" anymore.

It's now March of 2018, and I saw Don and Brian just last night. They no longer live in a loft above the Silver Dollar. They bought an abandoned building in the historic part of town for \$1,000, in an arrangement with the city that they would renovate it. They are trying to turn it into the headquarters for the Covellite Film Studio, which has already produced a film: a narrative feature film about immigration called *Brown*, now in post-production.

When they bought it, the building had no running water or electricity, and workers had to wear a mask when they went inside to avoid breathing in pigeon shit. A few months later, when Don and Brian first moved into the building, they slept on hammocks, cooked on a hot plate, and washed themselves with wet wipes. But now, several of the rooms are quite comfortable. There's a fully functional kitchen and bathroom, three bedrooms, and a living room with a woodstove.

Don's newest idea is for the Covellite Film Network, which will be a film streaming service like Netflix, showing independent films from the festival, along with interviews with the filmmakers and an instant chat feature where viewers will be able to ask the filmmakers

questions in real time. Don is planning to take a month off work after the next festival, in September, but he's been saying that for two years.

I asked my mother once whether she thought Don was crazy, taking on all these ambitious projects. She said, "Well, he's actually *doing* the things. If he just talked about starting a film festival and nothing ever happened, that might make him crazy." But I still think Don might be slightly crazy, or at least obsessed. The reason we're no longer together is that he's completely consumed by his work. But I still love him, a little bit. For a brief time he made me really excited about Butte, thinking that we might be at the beginning of a cultural renaissance.

In this particular moment of being in town for spring break, writing this essay at my favorite coffee shop, which is owned by a guy who also runs a small press, I have the thought: Butte feels more and more to me like the land of the dead.

This is partly a depressed moment, partly the oddness of coming home and feeling more like a visitor each time I come, partly being with my parents, the people I feel closest and most similar to, and absorbing the pain I know they are dealing with. Going home has started to feel like a solemn occasion, like the place where I was born is the place that will kill me.

From the arsenic-laced dust of Butte's abandoned mineshafts I came into this world; to the Berkeley Pit I shall return.

Many of my friends who grew up in Butte and still live here feel similarly.

The Butteants do not. They chose this place. They're blowing weird energy into this town.

Like Carson Becker, who runs the Clark Chateau, a cultural center that hosts plays and readings. Or Isabel Campos, a literature professor who runs a foreign film series at the college.

Or Clark Grant, who started the community radio station, one of Butte's most successful new projects: they recently got a grant to produce their own journalistic segments for the station.

Fun fact: Butte's community radio station, KBMF, has a sister station in Nongoma, South Africa, run by a Zulu prince. Three of the Zulu radio DJ's came to Butte last summer and stayed for six weeks, getting the whole Butte experience, the Fourth of July fireworks display, Evel Knievel Days, the Folk Festival. A director from LA filmed a documentary of the Zulus' visit, and Don was one of the producers.

I tell these things to people who don't know about Butte and expect them to be more intrigued. Butte is an odd place, a "thin place," an interdimensional portal. And yet when I'm here, I tend to get depressed. When Don and I were dating, he'd introduce me to all the people who were building new things in Butte, and I'd get shy and silent, hang on his arm like I used to hang onto my mother's leg as a child.

Now I'm single and gradually coming into my own socially, and I'm realizing that if anywhere can accept my strangeness, my out-of-placeness, it's this town. So many odd characters have been embraced in this place: the last madam of the Dumas Brothel, who shot her husband; Shoestring Annie, a local legend whose legacy, from what I gather, was being mentally ill and harassing miners into buying shoelaces; Stevie, a mentally disabled man you could always see around town, offering to shine your shoes. These people didn't fit in, but they were as much Butte as anything could be Butte, so why couldn't I be Butte as well? Not that I'm planning to settle in Butte, but if I did, I think I could build something there that was genuine and truly mine, even if it were only a life.

## If I Ever Lose My Mouth

Things that are red to me: the inside of a mouth, the number nine, and my mother. When nine became my mother, I sat at a plastic desk and could only think in interpersonal relationships. If I craved something bloody or sacred, I settled for the desire to mate for life and birth babies.

Six is nine's daughter. I didn't know about the sex act. Britney Spears pink, nothing in her but lust and the shy slope of a neck. When I was a kid I thought math was stupid, and Mom said, "I like numbers. I think they're cute." By the time I had my mother's mouth, she'd turned to air, to kief, mandala, the Buddha lying down.

My sister got her first period at 9, a year after she stopped wearing diapers. She used to bang her head, bite, bleed, leave scars on her own temple, my mother's hands, once a babysitter's neck. She loved to swing, to balance on high beams, and to be naked, taking off her clothes in the mall, the backyard, the park. So my mother dressed her in overalls—harder to remove. She looked just like I would if I were older and heavy and had a bowl cut and a green bean stuck to my shirt. Of all the songs our mother sang to us, "Moonshadow" by Cat Stevens was her favorite. She'd request it by name. *MooShauw. MooShauw.*

When I was twenty, my mother read me a play she'd written about her pens. Each color ink a different character. The red pen had the most ink because it was least loved. The purple pen was running out of ink and about to die, and the red pen envied its love-death. Mom started crying as she read this. She's a good writer and not crazy. When my sister died, Mom wanted us to grieve as a family, but Dad and I were either bottled up or empty. I'm not sure which.

While meditating I found a skinny fish in my throat. I saw the maroon of my eyelids and between them an undulating line, propelled upward by light and breath. I later bragged to the man who's far away, "You have a dragon in your chest. Now I have a skinny fish." Back when we were dating, whenever I cried he would tell me to meditate, so now I meditate daily out of spite. At the root, my hips get heavy. I sink my toes into the mineshafts of my youth. At the throat, I'm pure as mama's kief and can sing in her voice.

A week after the skinny fish my mom sent me a video about the chakras, and I learned about Kundalini swimming up to Shiva. "Kinda like my fish," I told the man. I'm a Pisces. He takes a long time to respond to my texts. "The throat chakra is the gateway to understanding, and the heart chakra opens you up to the world," he said. "That's why I define love as trying to fully understand an aspect of something." The root chakra, the one that grounds you to the earth, is red. I didn't respond to his text, a gentle form of revenge.

On the phone with my parents, Mom says she finds mandalas extremely sexy, but maybe she's the only one. "We should let you go. I'm making your father uncomfortable." I think I understand what she means: the roundness, the tightly woven patterns, ready to burst, the promiscuous intermingling of colors. And probably something else I don't understand. Something to do with the kief, or the grief, or something more mysterious. In the video, Anodea Judith tells me a lotus is blooming from the top of my head, but her voice is so spandex blond that I don't believe her.

My mom once told me I have two presences: one is quirky and sweet, like the actress, Zooey Deschanel. The other (mostly when I wear red) is erotic. I think I'm turning into my mother—my six flipping over. For now I'm just rocking on my back. I'm her mirror, reflecting red, the most violent color. I'm a very dangerous person.

## VITA

Author: Rebecca C. Gonshak

Place of Birth: Butte, Montana

Undergraduate Schools Attended: Knox College

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of Arts, 2015, Knox College

Honors and Awards: Graduate Assistantship, Composition Department, 2016-2018, Eastern Washington University

Graduated Magna Cum Laude, Knox College, 2015

Professional

Experience: Assistant Managing Editor, Willow Springs Magazine, Spokane, Washington, 2017-2018