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Some things I left in Denver

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SOME THINGS I LEFT IN DENVER

A Thesis Presented To
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

By
Jenny Catlin
Spring 2018

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I Didn't Kill Eric Harris

Jacon Slausen told me to go fuck myself. He said I was a piece of shit and his face changed in a dark way, and I knew he was serious. We had been swinging our feet from the top bunk in a friend's bedroom, passing a bottle of Jim Beam back and forth. I'd said something about how the kids Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed at Columbine High School days earlier were probably dicks, probably jocks. I'd said something about how, maybe, those kids kind-of had it coming.

Jason was right. Of course, those kids didn't deserve what happened to them, not the ones who lost their lives or the ones who survived only to carry that day around in their pockets forever. At the time, though, I was conflicted. I wanted to see the massacre in a kind of binary that didn't exist. That still doesn't.

I didn't know Eric Harris, not in any consequential way. He and Dylan Klebold sometimes hung out at the Southwest Plaza Mall where I briefly worked as a survey taker when I was eighteen. The two of them would pace back and forth through the food court, those ridiculous trench coats billowing in the artificial breeze. I didn't particularly like Eric, but we talked sometimes; we were mostly civil. Eric and I played the same video games. We both liked industrial music. We had the same KMFDM t-shirt.

He flirted in the impotent way young, inexperienced boys did that always made me anxious—all freckles and pink cheeks and skinny nervous fingers. My friends teased me about it, said the Nazi boy wanted to fuck me.

I didn't kill Eric Harris. That seems obvious, seems like it should be absolutely clear, but it's not for me—or not exactly. The Columbine Massacre is part of the American lexicon, and it's common knowledge that Eric and Dylan turned the same shotguns they'd just slaughtered their classmates with to their own heads and pulled the triggers. I know that, but I still wonder what might have happened if I, myself, had been different.

In the months leading up to the Columbine Massacre, I was hanging out with a big, amorphous group of late-teen boys, some former Columbine students themselves, others, like me, were from no-name towns scattered throughout the foothills and mountains of Colorado. Most of those boys were SHARPS (skinheads against racial prejudice) and they had the kind of blood brother allegiance to one another that youth and poverty tend to foster. Me and those boys were grudgingly proud of our blue-collar roots. We all had calloused hands and bus passes. We all lived in sagging trailers or squatted in the grain silos out by the train tracks. We were high school dropouts and mechanics and maids who just made ends meet—we were old that way before we should have had to be.

We hated Eric and Dylan for being Nazis, sure, but we hated them more for being rich. At eighteen, it was easy for me to hate the rich, to hate the kids from Columbine High School. I'd spent the previous summer working as the maid for a number of Columbine parents, and the shame of scrubbing rich kids' shit stains off toilets ate through me like a stigmata. Eric and Dylan were of that world, the world of lush lawns and luxury Berber carpet. They wore expensive clothes, silly pleated pants and those idiotic coats. Dylan drove a BMW.

I thought my SHARPS friends were edgy and sexy and smart. They read Karl Marx and were enraged by the plight of the proletariat. Their skulls were bald and shiny, and their white

Hanes T-shirts, the cotton thin from repeated washings, stretched over their labor-broad chests. The bomber jackets they wore had belonged to their fathers.

Josh, a round kid with a few missing teeth and a handful of bad tattoos, worked with me at the mall survey place. We'd stand around for a while near the escalators, clipboards in hands, mumbling questions to shoppers: *Could you spare a minute for a quick survey? Do you drive an SUV? Have you recently had a hysterectomy?* Mostly, though, we'd sit on the concrete barrier out behind the mall smoking unfiltered Camels and mocking people as they got in and out of their cars, all those bourgeois bitches with their Gap bags filled to the brim and their daddy's credit cards.

Eric and Dylan were rich, but they were different than the girls with messy buns and gluttonous shopping bags. They were rich, but they were also posers, which was, by our code, far worse than being just rich. They stalked around, my friends and I thought, as if they were more like us than they were like the boys in tear-away track pants who laughed too loud and ogled the girls outside of Pac Sun, and it was for that that we harassed them. If Eric and Dylan showed up at the mall when my friends were there milling around in steel toed boots, suspenders flopping from the frayed waistbands of their button-fly 501's, my friends would make a scene, run them off. They'd tighten into a ball of people, stomping forward, chins pointed skyward, eyes staring down noses crooked from breaks.

I wouldn't have admitted it then, but I pitied Eric in his silly pleated pants and alligator polos, trying so hard, I thought, to look tough. He was so easily drained of cool as he and Dylan hurried out the gaping automatic doors while my friends laughed throatily behind them, making homophobic jokes, spitting loudly on the ground inside the mall's entrance. My friends would grab their dicks like cruelty and virility had a causal relationship.

I don't remember the extent of my involvement in it, all that puffed up aggression under the blinking florescent lights of The Yankee Candle Company. I imagine I mostly cheered them on, those boys with their scarred knuckles. I was anxious to impress them, and I'd hang from their thick necks like an ornament. In my memory now, Eric was small and ineffectual beside them.

I probably called Eric a poser, my go-to insult for anyone I saw as below my station. And I know I called him a freak. The chronology doesn't check out, but in my memory, I called Eric a freak the night before he and Dylan trained sawed-off shotguns on their classmates, murdering twelve of them, plus one teacher, and then taking their own lives. In the massive collection of information about the Columbine Massacre, nowhere does it suggest that Eric and Dylan could have been at the Southwest Plaza Mall the day before the killings. I've scrutinized the timeline of events, tried to wedge my memory into history, but it doesn't fit. Eric and Dylan went to McDonald's; they skipped creative writing class. They didn't go to the mall, but I still remember Eric there that day. Maybe I just want to build a monument of blame that can't exist. My memory of talking to Eric the day before the massacre is as true as the facts say it isn't.

I passed him in the dead space, the nether world between sets of automatic doors. It was past dark and sleeting outside—mean spring, Colorado-cold. I was on my way to eat Cheddar Bay biscuits at Red Lobster with a friend from my no-name hometown. Eric and I locked eyes, and I called him a freak. That's all. It was nothing. But, despite my hunger to impress cruel people, I wasn't typically the kind of bully who got off on other people's tears, and in that moment, between the gaping doors, I thought that Eric would cry. Something in his eyes changed when I said it, and I'm not sure why I thought he might cry, but my stomach turned, and I thought, *please don't cry*.

I had been mocking him, being sarcastic.

I didn't believe he was one, a freak that is. That was a word that belonged to people like me—people who'd had it branded on them and, because of that, had earned it. People who could no more escape it than their own flesh.

I was a weird kid. I'd always been a weird kid, never could fit in. By my first and only year of high school, I'd leaned into that weirdness. I drew big, inverted crosses below my eyes with black eyeliner and carried a copy of the *Satanic Bible* around my high school's halls. I worshiped bands with names like Christian Death in a town where God was law.

I went to a small, rural high school, maybe 400 students in all. When I walked through the halls, white cinderblock brick painted with giant blue paw prints, other kids would often throw themselves against the walls, chanting *burn the freak*. It was mostly just mean kids being dramatic and trying to fit in themselves, but some of them really hated me. Some of them were afraid of me, I think, which seems absurd. Despite my *Satanic Bible* and my death rock bands, I was a kid whose favorite outfit at the time was a black and red sequined bat costume I'd bought for a dollar at a thrift store in the city. I probably would have benefited from a little adult supervision and maybe a summer at theater camp, but back then I wasn't a threat to anyone besides, maybe, myself.

Sometimes, a teacher would join in, mumbling *freak* under his breath as I passed by. It seems impossible now, teachers doing this, and I don't know if it was the time or the place, but it happened. The fact of my freak-ness was indelible. Mr. Pence, the biology teacher, wouldn't allow me in his classroom. He cited concern that I'd steal the fetal pigs they used for 10th grade anatomy class. For what, I have no idea. My freshman year of high school, I was a semi-vegan; I had no use for a pig fetus. I guess he thought I might want it for Satan. In the 90's, in my little

Rocky Mountain town, families still glued themselves to repeats of Sally Jesse Raphaël and the Phil Donahue show; parents believed in black magic and Satanic Cults who stole Christian teenagers from their innocent slumber, and most of the folks in town thought I was part of one.

At the end of the school day I'd walk to my bus, nine long yellow busses from the school's exit, and kids would lean out the bus windows, cowboys and cheerleaders, and they'd spit on me. Not just plain spit, but long, hot arcs of Kodiak Brand chew spit. My bus ride was long, mine the last stop on the rural route, and I'd press my burning face against the little cold rectangle of window and pretend to listen to my broken Walkman while a collection of other people's spit, stinking of sweet mint, would drip sticky down my face and neck until my shirt absorbed it. I don't know, now, why I never wiped it off my face. I think I thought that acknowledging it would give my bullies some extra satisfaction, like if I didn't, they wouldn't know I even cared.

I'd never been favored by my peers, and by the time I was a teenager, it felt safer to incite their ridicule for those things I had a measure of control over—makeup, hair, and music—than for the ones I was born into.

I hadn't known we were poor until sixth grade, when a classmate's family drove past my mother and me walking along highway 285 in the snow, sacks of groceries in our hands. Our mountain town wasn't one that fostered a stroll to the grocery store. To walk there meant miles of precarious footing along the shoulder of a highway that was dangerous even to drive. To walk there meant you had no other choice. That classmate teased me relentlessly about it after spotting me, made jokes about spare changing out front of the liquor store, which we never had to do, and hitchhiking home, which we did.

Likewise, I hadn't known my dad was sick until third grade when my classmates found out he was in West Pines, a rehab and psychiatric facility in the city. I'm not sure where I thought he was (my parents weren't great at communicating that kind of information) but my peers told me it was a place for junkies. To be a junkie was a terrible sin in Nancy Reagan's drug-free America. Even though my dad was a drunk and not, at that time, on drugs, and even though he was bipolar and had PTSD from Vietnam, and was, I now know, a very sick and suffering man, the junkie information is what stuck to me in childhood. I was a weird, poor kid with a junkie dad, and that was plenty to make me stand out.

I was okay with being a freak; I probably even enjoyed it a bit, if I'm honest. It felt utterly inalienable, and freak is an albatross that still hangs around my neck, rests cold next to my heart under blazers and sensible button downs. When I was young, being a freak felt like both an affliction I was born with and a grace I earned. It was a torture and a salve. The word freak was used against me so often, it felt like an existence that belonged to me alone. People like Eric who seemed to want to adopt the identity, to co-opt a lifetime of other people's suffering, enraged me.

It wasn't that I alone was harassed for being different; friends of mine were faggots and dykes and fat-asses, sluts and whores. But I was a freak. That was mine.

Being a freak was, for a long time, the only thing I knew for sure about myself. The only person I've ever called a freak—for even now, late in my thirties, the word feels intimate—is Eric Harris. I wasn't, however, naming him as a comrade, wasn't seeing him as someone like me. I was making sure he knew he wasn't like me, hadn't earned what I had. He was a poser. A rich kid with a giant house and two parents. I was furious that he was trying to adopt the life of the misfit, of an outcast.

Of course, I didn't know Eric Harris. Not really.

Part of the thing is, though, that kids become what they're told they are. 18-year-old me was like a prophesy fulfilled. People told me I was a monster, and I became a kind of one. But unlike Eric, my hate turned mostly inward. My anger came packaged in hypodermic needles full of whatever anyone was offering. Eric and I listened to the same music, had the same edition of the *Anarchist's Cookbook* in our childhood bedrooms. We both made lists of who in the class of 1998 at our respective schools we thought deserved to die. But I've never liked guns; I reviled hate groups. I wanted to vanish, to be forgotten. Eric, it seems, wanted infamy.

I imagine that my rage, my alienation, looked a lot like his on the inside, that if that were something that could be vivisected and studied on a slide under one of those forbidden microscopes in Mr. Pence's classroom, the DNA of Eric's and my fury would be at least close cousins. But my dissention spoke in soft wrists sliced to ribbons, took the shape of mean, broken men who added to the scars on their knuckles with my teeth and eye sockets.

What I want now, I think, are answers to questions I'm not even sure how to ask. Why did Eric's rage turn outward, feast on others, while mine turned inward, insidious, like a tape worm? There are obvious differences, sure: socioeconomic status and gender, for starters--there have been only a few female mass shooters in the U.S. But those easy answers don't help me to name my own questions. The questions themselves are denser than a formula of gender and money. It's more complicated than erecting the straw man of mental illness, like we're prone to. I'm not like Eric Harris, not now, and probably not then—I certainly didn't think so and don't. But I'm also approaching middle age now.

The Columbine Massacre was almost twenty years ago. Since then, I've buried people I loved. I'm old enough to know that the fact of love alone is a revelation. Unlike Eric, I aged, and that's left me a very different person than the one who made lists of those who had wronged her.

I didn't get it at eighteen—death. Sure, I carved at the blue lines below the soft skin on my forearms. I drank gasoline, and I dreamed of some kind of non-existence as a way out of my pain, but I didn't get capital D, Death. At sixteen, at eighteen, I couldn't grasp permanence, didn't understand that death doesn't visit, it stays.

At eighteen, I was so hurt and so fucking angry, a lot of days I couldn't see even inches beyond my rage. Most kids are a weird kind of shape-shifter, more adaptable than anyone has a right to ask them to be. I didn't become the kind of monster that Eric did—the one with the sawed-off shotgun in their school cafeteria—but I'm not sure I couldn't have.

I filled notebooks with violent stories, some about my classmates. Like Eric and Dylan, I made lists of my dream victims; I thought about how I'd kill them. I had visceral fantasies about the people who hurt me, about hurting them back, but I did all that in a murky, sort-of-underwater way. My fantasies of murder manifested in the same space in my mind as the role-playing characters I invented, as vampires and cyborgs.

I left school for good near the end of my freshman year. Shortly before I left, in my freshman Physical Science class, the boy seated in the small desk in front of me grabbed my notebook from under my hand. He tossed it to another kid who tossed it to another kid in what started as a game of keep-away, annoying but pretty much harmless. But Mandy Dennison caught it. Instead of throwing my notebook to another girl, she opened it and started flipping through the pages—she started reading them. I don't remember what she read exactly, probably

some shitty poetry copied almost directly from Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, as was my habit at the time. But, what she read wasn't the point, of course. In her second-skin-tight Wrangler jeans, with her giant rhinestone belt buckle and her shiny frosted hair, Mandy read my poetry to them, to the people who hated me, and they laughed.

Mandy was standing in center of the middle row of desks, and I lunged at her from my desk in the corner. When I did, the homemade dress I was wearing caught in a crack of the blue plastic desk chair, and it tore at the seam I had poorly sewn. The whole dress was pulled from my body. I wasn't wearing any underwear, just a pair of those thin pantyhose that used to come in an egg; my mom gave me her old pairs when they had too many runs in them for her to wear to work anymore. I had on the one bra I owned. It was too big—dingy and no longer white. And Mandy kept reading.

I don't know how long I stood there, stunned and silent, my freak's armor, that stupid homemade dress, in a black satin pile in the desk chair, naked except for my fat and poverty, except for the legacy of my poor, drunk, long-gone daddy. But I stood there, and Mandy read, and everyone else laughed, and I thought, I will murder every single one of these cunts, and I meant it. My meaning it didn't last, obviously, but in that moment, the possibilities of my violence had to be as real as Eric's had once been.

I know I have no power over the past. I can't change what's already happened to me or anyone else. Still, guilty-feeling parts of me wonder if the world would be different if I'd said freak to Eric like he was an insider; if I'd have invoked it like an invitation; if I'd have taken him out back behind the mall by the dumpsters, pushed him back against the cold concrete barrier

where my friends and I swung our feet and smoked cigarettes, unbuttoned those awful pleated khakis and given him a blow job.

I guess it feels like that was part of belonging when you didn't belong back then. Those SHARPS boys didn't have a lot, but they had me at their disposal. The only thing I had was myself and I offered that freely. As an adult, of course, I know that kind of thing would have maybe hurt me but would not have helped Eric, would not have helped the kids he killed. I know it would have made no difference. A mall parking lot blow job, as far as I know, has yet to prevent any massacres, but at least, maybe, I could have told myself I tried.

I'm not an ignorant person. I know, intellectually, that I have no culpability in the Columbine Massacre, but if I'm honest, some part of me thinks I could have stopped it, and that part of me feels guilty that I didn't try, feels responsible. And I know it's ridiculous and self-involved. How could I have intervened in something that didn't yet exist to me? I recognize these thoughts as akin to those of a megalomaniac, thinking I can have sweeping impact on events that didn't involve me. I also know that forensic psychologists have hypothesized that Eric Harris would have killed anyway, and if that's true, even if I had, somehow, intervened in that particular massacre, he would likely have just created another.

I think the idea is that he was born bad.

But, I don't believe in evil. I believe in nurture and trauma and mental illness. I don't believe in born bad or born broken. Still, I guess I've always worried that there might be some dark core of me. Nightmares have plagued me my whole life. Most of them are typical, predictable: things that make me afraid in my waking life as well. I've had nightmares about mutilations and murders and shadow people, but the nightmares that pin themselves to me for

weeks, like a scarlet letter, are different. The ones I fear the most are the ones in which I am the worst possible version of myself, the ones in which I am a person who hurts others.

In my early twenties, I dreamt I killed a woman with a firehose. In that funny way dreams have, I don't know where she came from—I hadn't seen her since childhood. In the dream, I stuck the nozzle of a firehose inside her body and turned it on. I stood over her, and she begged me to spare her. And I didn't. I've had a few dreams like this. I think of them as my murder dreams, and I fear them. I know other people who have these kinds of dreams, people with stick figure families stuck on minivan windows and people who put on scrubs and save lives for a living, but that doesn't reassure me. I know, rationally, these dreams aren't indicative that I might secretly be a murderer. Still, they worry me, these dreams, just their existence worries me. I want to be a person who truly can't imagine taking a life, but the truth is I can and have.

According to the autopsy report, one of Eric's victims, Kyle, died of perforating gunshot wounds to the head and neck, which means that Eric either shot him while he was running away or, like a lot of the other kids he killed that day, he shot Kyle while he was curled into a ball, in a fetal position. Peers described Kyle as a gentle giant. He was developmentally disabled and had been in public school for only half a year. Kyle's mom has said he was adjusting, said he was getting the hang of going to school. After reading his description, I caught myself thinking: *I would never have killed a kid with DD. Never.*

I know that I never would have hurt a kid with any kind of a disability, not in any way, not even at my most ethically murky; that knowledge doesn't reassure me much, though. How quickly I think it, how naturally it comes to mind, makes me wonder if that means that I might have hurt the other kids.

As we age, we get to know death on a first name basis. I've learned to feel and fear death's presence, but teenage me lived in a gauzy world of razor pain and fantasy. I think the first time I was complicit in the strategizing of another human's death was in middle school.

When I was twelve or thirteen, my best friends and I planned to run away to Seattle. It was 1992, and we wanted to start a grunge band. The band's name would be Mary Tap, and we made up a loopy logo that we doodled all over our Trapper Keepers. We called the Grayhound bus station and found out how much tickets from Denver to Seattle would cost and talked about the food we'd pack for the trip: fluffernutter sandwiches and crackers with Cheese Wiz.

We also talked, extensively, about killing one set of our parents. We talked about it as much as any other part of the imagined trip. We were going to pour antifreeze in their beer, somehow sneak it into the keg they kept in the refrigerator in lieu of food. It made me a little sick, all that murder talk, and of course, nothing concrete came of it. But I'm not at all convinced that I wouldn't have done it, just gone along with whatever my friends asked of me. Later, I'd find out those parents abused my friend in ways that made them as good of candidates for murder as anyone could be, and likely she really did want them dead. Knowing what I know now, I wouldn't blame her, but that didn't have anything to do with why, at twelve or thirteen, I might have tried to help her kill them. It was nothing noble for me; it would have been, mostly, because I had no idea what it meant to not be alive anymore.

There's a dumb party game question, something to the effect of: *if you could go back in time and kill Hitler, you know, keep him from killing all those innocent people, would you?* I wouldn't. Today, I wouldn't kill anyone, wouldn't knowingly hurt anyone, and I know that as well as I know anything about myself. I suspect that's the wrong answer though. I suspect I'm supposed to want to go back in time and kill the bad guy. I suspect that I'm supposed to believe

in a bad guy. But I don't. Not really. I wish I did. I think it would be simpler. But, wouldn't it be better if I could go back in time and stop Hitler from being Hitler in the first place?

I know there are volumes of information about the Columbine Massacre. There are books and movies and fan fiction. There are video games where you can reenact the killings from Eric and Dylan's perspectives. There's a virtually bottomless heap of websites and blogs. I haven't spent much time digging through any of it other than the timelines where I've tried to place myself. And honestly, it all makes me a little uneasy. The Columbine Massacre's presence as a pop culture phenomenon seems so absolute, I doubt people can remember, anymore, that it was all just human beings, and maybe that's part of why I've stayed away from it. I want always to remember that.

Most of what I know about the shootings I know from watching the news in the days that followed. I was sitting at my mom's kitchen table reading *Fight Club* when the coverage came on TV. It was a gray April day in 1999, a couple months before Eric and Dylan would have graduated, a few months shy of a year after I would have. It seemed like in almost all the footage that aired, the camera just panned back and forth over the school.

I only recently watched the security footage from the cafeteria, where most of the killing took place that day, for the first time. It's horrifying, but what's awful isn't the carnage. The film is grainy. The details are blurry. Any primetime crime drama is more graphic. What's terrible in the video is Eric and Dylan themselves, and it's not what's obvious. It's not the brutality. Our world's daily brutality has become almost infinitely more accessible since 1999.

It's been almost twenty years since I last saw Eric or Dylan in life or on video. When I pushed play on my laptop and watched that grainy footage, I felt like my heart stopped. It's been

so long since I'd seen them, and we were peers the last time I did, so I'd forgotten—they were kids.

They were just fucking kids.

The video I watched, and I'm sure there are many of them, was synched with audio from a 911 call made by one of the victims. In the video, Eric and Dylan pace around the by-then otherwise quiet room. In this part of the video, they're done with killing, and they're now debating when to pull the triggers on themselves, when, after they've stuffed the barrels of their shotguns in their own mouths, they'll pull the guns' triggers. They're deciding whether it's on three or after three. *One, two, three, bang? Or one, two, bang?* If anyone heard this isolated audio, heard it without the video or without their infamous names attached, you'd think they were little boys with Red Ryder BB Guns.

My aunt, a professor at a liberal arts college in Boston, gave a keynote speech at the Rocky Mountain Women's Symposium the weekend after the Columbine Massacre. I'd guess that there must have been a discussion about cancelling it, but for whatever reason, it went on. The whole weekend had the hushed reverence that exists only in the vacuum of space where the living brush against the dead. I didn't appreciate at the time what a radical act it was for my mother to bite her tongue, and she must have, about me wearing my Doc Marten boots, my spiked dog collar. For months after Columbine, Colorado shut down anything that could be associated even tangentially with Eric and Dylan. Marilyn Manson cancelled a show I had tickets to. Howard Stern was pulled from the local radio station. Changes were made to everything from school dress codes to paintball regulations. But neither my mom nor my aunt said a word about me wearing a black leather jacket and torn fishnets to a conference that took place practically in Columbine's backyard. The conference attendees were mostly educators, and while people must

have whispered about me, I don't remember anyone making me feel unwelcome. If anyone was suspicious of me, they didn't say anything.

I don't remember when or how I found out that Eric was one of the shooters at Columbine. I don't know if it was that gray day while I watched the news from my mom's kitchen table or if it was from a friend. It seems like I would remember that, like it would be important, but memory is funny that way, I guess. I do recall feeling like Eric had proven himself somehow, had proven that his hurts ran just as deep as my own, that whatever wrongs he had inside him ran deeper than anything else and had power. I remember being more shocked that he had done it than I was that it had happened at all.

Two decades later, I'm mortified that Eric is still the first thing that comes to mind whenever someone mentions Columbine. I'm not supposed to consider him a victim, I know, but when I think of Columbine, I also remember how sad his hazel eyes looked that night in the nether zone between the maws of the two automatic mall doors. I remember his blushing face, not as freckled in the photos as in my memory. I remember that we had the same favorite KMFDM song. I'm not supposed to think of him and Dylan as among the victims, but I do.

I never again mentioned anything about relating to Eric and Dylan, not after that night with Jason Slauson. I understand that it wasn't and isn't the okay way to think or feel, especially as we face the all too frequent slaughter of kids in American schools. I understand who the real victims were that day and all the days since. I do, and yet, I still have something akin to empathy for Eric and Dylan. It's not that exactly, though. I get, maybe, the origin or idea of the Columbine Massacre, but I don't get the action. I had lots of horrifying ideas, but I never got further than that, than ideas. So it's not empathy, exactly, that I have for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. The truth is, I don't know what word to use. Whatever word it is that I want to explain

how I feel about Columbine, about Eric Harris and my casual relationship to him, about my own violent fantasies and all the massacres that have happened in our schools since then, it won't surface. That word is going to sit inside my throat, my belly, like an immeasurably heavy stone.

A Man Who Once Made Me Feel Beautiful

I felt beautiful just sitting next to him, like a version of myself I'd never known existed, someone pretty and whole. I was hungry for beauty, to be it and to have it. I confused beauty with approval and approval with love and love with being okay in a world that scared me. In my twenties, I was a composite person, a rag doll stitched and molded together out of scraps of other people's traits, their particularities. Marcus' was beauty. We were a couple only briefly, so briefly, in fact, I doubt he ever even thinks of me now, but for a few months we performed the roles of paramours, intense and obsessed.

We used to spend late nights at a tiny, hip bar on Race Street, just down the road from the house Marcus shared with his brother and a roommate. We drank sophisticated, overpriced cocktails: Earl Gray Martinis and Chartreuse Margaritas. Marcus closed his eyes when he sipped his, breathed deep and chewed his thick bottom lip. His every movement was carnal. We'd drape ourselves over the coppertop bar, our elbows bent at matching right angles, our chins in our hands. We leaned close and whispered, as if we had secrets. We relished acting private in public, like it was a privilege for others to witness our secret confidences.

Under the dim bar light, convinced that everyone was watching us, I'd laugh like Marcus did, big and unafraid. Together, we laughed like people who had nothing in the world to be amused by and, because of it, were amused by everything. I basked in the sideway glances of strangers, their eyes lingering a moment too long on his square jaw, his thick forearm. He rolled his sleeves loosely to the elbow, exposing a thick cord of leather around his solid wrist, and he'd twist it between his finger, muscles flexing, thin black hair glinting against olive skin. I'd catch the hungry eyes of women on him, and smile: *this is mine; he is mine*. To me, because those

strangers wanted him, they wanted me too. When they saw him, I believed they saw me too. I was a void, an empty space waiting to be filled with others' approval, their witnessing. I ached for it, thought that just by being seen in the world, I could be saved.

The bar's owner wore a velvet stovepipe hat with a big brass buckle. He was long and lean, and when he knelt on the ground in front of us, taking our hands in his, his chunky, charcoal-colored dreadlocks dragged on the bar's bamboo floor. He'd ask us searching questions, and I savored his attention: *Where did you come from? Tell me about your art. Tell me about you.* He said the word "you" as though it were an invocation, as though the roles we played were meaningful.

I wanted to erase the lines between Marcus and me, wanted to blur us into a single organism, some amorphous being, just throbbing love and art and beauty. I thought we could do that, thought his body translated directly into all those things, that our bodies together were salvation from the ugly life I was living. I was voracious. I demanded attention, needed every eye in the room.

Marcus, though, was hungry too. We were Dionysian, drunken and feasting on our own bottomless egos, on our apple-cheeked cynicism. Vast swaths of my 20's were erased by booze and time. I remember little about standing next to my sister-in-law at my brother's wedding, but I can conjure the outfit I was wore in every memory I have of my time with Marcus.

When Marcus met me, I'd just started a job bartending at the Satire Lounge. The Satire was a bar from times mostly passed. An enormous neon arrow hung from its second floor, flashing and pointing at the heavy, oak front door. The Satire was a Denver bar, renowned, in part, for its famous clientele: Bob Dylan had played in the corner; Jack Kerouac had sat on its

red vinyl stools. It was also known for its bartenders. They were—we were—aesthetically beautiful. A Satire girl on your arm or in your bed was something of a status symbol in a certain, sad Denver circle. I'm not sure I knew it then, but men longed to possess us, and Marcus subsisted on possessing coveted things.

Bartending is, at its core, a performance. When I stepped behind the scarred wooden bar of The Satire, I assumed a new identity, something unrecognizable to the frightened and broken person I was. From bartenders, people, especially men, seek a sympathetic ear, and as such, I needed to do little more than laugh and sometimes brush a hand against an arm to win admirers. Admirers were important to me. I needed to be wanted. A bartender is never without the prying eyes of others, which suited me. Back then, I questioned my own existence when other people weren't seeing me.

I'd exaggerated my experience to get the job. I'd tended bar before, sure, but at dusty beer and wine joints and strip mall chains. During my first year at The Satire, every drink I made was a variation of a Manhattan because that's what I drank. When customers ordered complex or trendy drinks, Cosmos or Wagon Wheels, my hands would shake while I faked my way through it.

When I started, I was replacing a long, elegant woman with copper curls and delicate, freckled wrists. She'd been fired under dubious circumstances and was adored by the bar's regulars. As her replacement, it was ages before I could win their favor.

I don't remember who first christened me Fiona after the ogre in the children's movie *Shrek*, but the name stuck to me for years. Even in my glistening youth, I wasn't traditionally beautiful. I was short and squat and square. I had a rough, blond pixie cut that made my ears stand out on the side of my head like jug handles. The men who wanted me did so not because I

was sexy in the ways my coworkers were, not because my hair gleamed and my tits bounced along with the bar shakers. They wanted me because of the act I performed. My act was sexy, a little weird—wild and possibly dangerous. A certain type of man liked that. Marcus was one of those men at the time. I seemed game for anything, and if I thought it would make people like me. I was.

Standing next to the other bartenders, I felt like a different species. They seemed exceptional without trying. They didn't need to out drink the men or start fights with working girls to get noticed. Among them were a Denver Broncos cheerleader and a Polish Fredrick's of Hollywood Model. They were all taut bodies and luminous barrel curls that landed with a bounce on apple-shaped asses. I know now how that kind of beauty is—no less than my own charades were—crafted, and that beauty is often a tight tourniquet for deep, festering wounds. But those women seemed composed of confidence. When they laughed, it looked easy. The Satire's customers seemed to believe they were within reach, those beautiful bodies, and because of that, tips materialized easily from calloused hands that clenched foamy beers and vermouth-filled dry martinis.

The Satire wasn't a strip club, but it shared a core belief system with them: drinks were important, but attractive, seemingly available, women were paramount. We weren't supposed to talk about boyfriends and were discouraged from wearing wedding rings. Availability, or the illusion of it, was important. Beauty was an expectation.

I was wearing an ill-fitting maroon blouse with hip ruffles the night I met Marcus. It buttoned up the front, and, made for a smaller frame, the buttons across my chest refused to stay closed. The elderly Greek bar-owner believed that jeans were “for grape pickers,” and though no

one knew exactly what that meant, we all knew it translated into *don't wear them*. So, most nights I wore the same pair of black Dickies. I loved them because of how they made my ass look, but I loved them even more because they were a size four, and that seemed like an acceptable size to be. Even in hot weather, I wore black pleather boots, knee high with chunky heels.

Later, Marcus said that he thought I was flirting with him because I called him by his full name: Marcus instead of Mark. I learned customers' names from the credit cards they slid across the bar to paper clip to their green carbon-copy tabs. I called everyone by their full name: Jeffery, Joshua, Stephen. I probably was flirting though. I pretty much always was. I believed I had to work harder than the more attractive girls to be liked and make money. That meant biting my lip while listening to work stories, letting my fingers drag slow and long up the necks of Budweiser bottles.

I spent a lot of time with Marcus when he started coming into the bar—laughing at his jokes, asking him questions—but it wasn't because I wanted him, not at first. It was because he didn't know I was the replacement for the copper-haired girl, didn't care about the way I had no freckles over my disappointing cleavage. He was new and not poisoned against me.

At first, I thought he was the kind of geeky guy who didn't know how attractive he was, didn't know the way the ridges of muscle in his back showed through his thin linen shirts. He carried a sketchbook and doodled elaborate figures on cocktail napkins he'd slide across the bar to me, blushing; he'd dropped out of art school for a girl who broke his heart. Marcus didn't seem to have the rough edge of the Satire's regulars. He looked at the ground when he laughed, covered his mouth and smiled though thick fingers, even though his teeth were perfectly square and toothpaste-ad white. His knuckles were scarred, and his manners hinted at his farm-boy

upbringing, his Nebraska youth. I thought those minutiae were filled with meaning, and I think they were, but they were carefully crafted, not the accidental, clumsy kind of meaning I imagined. His geekiness was studied, no less than my own loping walk or my fake, throaty laugh.

From the beginning, our relationship was scripted. That first night, I could hear him talking about me, my legs, *my slow-Texas walk*. He leaned towards his roommate, said it was driving him crazy, that loping walk, which was me trying to seem sexy amid ingrown toenails and 12-hour shifts in heels on concrete. I loved being objectified by him, though, loved watching him watch me. I was hungry to be reduced to a sum of my parts, all lips and legs and blood-red nails. Later, he'd say I had perfect breasts. He'd say I reminded him of Marlene Dietrich because he knew I loved her, thought she was weird, like me.

The Satire's owner joked about his bartenders, said he always liked to have a work horse and a show pony. I wasn't the show pony, but Marcus's reduction of me to thighs and fingers and belly, to nothing but parts and their salacious functions, lightened the burden of being the work horse. The weight of his heavy gaze made everything behind that bar feel less like labor because under it, I was wanted.

I made an object of him too. It was easy. He was olive and flawless. He always had the perfect amount of midnight-colored stubble along his rigid jaw line, just rough enough to burn when he kissed me, and he kissed me hard, kissed me against brick buildings and under streetlights, like in a movie. He had the thick, square features of a 1950's leading man. I didn't ever find out if he was devastated that a knee injury had ended his stint as wide receiver for the Nebraska Cornhuskers, but he had the rigid body of a former player, broad and sinewy, thinning in a way that flattered him, his body the perfect sweet spot between athlete and addict.

I thought it was an accident that I'd overheard him talking about me, thought I'd heard something private, but nothing was accidental then. In the beginning, we both plotted everything. Our roles were more multidimensional than I knew, of course. Beneath our carefully constructed images, his bomber jacket and jet-black hair, my leather collar and feathered earrings, we were caricatures of ourselves: affected 20-somethings trying to fuck like porn stars and die young, kids too invested in image to revel in the oh-so-brief moment they lived in.

He slid his number to me on a thin white cocktail napkin with his credit card receipt. From that very first night Marcus called me baby-girl.

I dumped a kind man for him, one who called me by my name. The man I dumped had been raised by Seventh Day Adventists, and, something of a musical prodigy, he could play most anything by ear. He tended bar at a little sawdust-on-the-floor piano bar in my home-town in the mountains, and when I sat at the bar on his shifts, he'd sing Concrete Blonde songs to me in perfect pitch.

I broke up with him in a voicemail at 3 a.m. after a closing shift. That is was Valentine's Day and he was a man who did things like buy flowers and candy was an accident. When I got word through friends that he'd taken a week off work after the break up, I told Marcus, and we acted like we found it hilarious. We mocked him. It was weak, pathetic. I acted like I loved the idea of devastating someone that way, leaving wreckage in my wake. I suspect the thought that someone wanted me that much turned Marcus on. He wanted me more when others wanted me too. We were only about what others wanted.

Though we were both arrangeable, shape shifters for our audience, Marcus was more magnetic than I was. I molded myself to him, or my idea of him—we never knew more than the

fleshy dream we made of each other. I tried to be a pond for his Narcissus, to reflect what I conjured in him, his cool callousness.

What I didn't mention to Marcus about the kind man in the mountains was that at 28, he'd had sex only once before meeting me. Sex meant something to him that Marcus and I couldn't understand. I'd thought there was something powerful about fucking a man who shared his body so sparingly, but I didn't get that it mattered to him, that I was more than flesh and fingers to him. I didn't yet get that I could be more than that to anyone, even myself. I didn't tell Marcus that when the man had said he loved me, drunk at a Social Distortion show, I'd said: *I love you too*. I didn't explain that there were plans and promises I'd easily broken as soon as I found someone better suited to my image.

Marcus and I lived in the dark, woke up in the milky-dusk and played cards all night in our expensive underwear. We drank whiskey we couldn't afford out of Dixie cups and snorted fat lines of bad cocaine off CD cases.

In my mind, the months I spent with Marcus have sharp barbed edges. I wouldn't call what my mind has stored of that time memories, exactly. I know Marcus and I met at my bar in a freezing Denver February; we met and fucked and failed and maybe hurt each other a little along the way, but it's hard to feel anything nameable attached to any of that now. That knowledge is just a razor's edge. Remembering those nights feels destructive, like bloodletting. There's a subtle difference between knowing what happened and remembering it. My recollections of the time I spent with Marcus, while penetrating and lurid, are static.

I don't remember confessions or the slow unveilings of self that happened with other men. I don't remember whispered talk of Kentucky bluegrass childhood in the tangle of

bedsheets. No quiet admissions, explanations, or cracking-voice concessions to angry, unsatisfied fathers. I don't remember his heart beating beneath his broad tan chest or the way he stepped, still wet, from a shower. Did he shave in the mirror? Bite his cuticles? Chew with his mouth closed? Did I feel electric when he touched me, or cringe the way I can with most men? Marcus, for me, is two-dimensional, just a profile.

When I unfold the chronicle of our brief relationship, it rolls through my mind like a zoetrope, a collection of manicured, still images. Once I cast Marcus as an Adonis and a demon in my own story, but those roles have long since dissolved. What's left is a vacant collection of almost entirely physical traits that once added up to a kind of perfection. The Marcus I've drafted and redrafted over the years was a collage of carefully selected pictures, images of love and beauty that evolved into callous cruelty, none of which become the story of a fully-realized man.

I have a single movable memory of Marcus and me together. We ate a bag of mushrooms and locked ourselves in his small bedroom with a jug of Irish Whiskey. We adopted the roles of anarchy, of sex and chaos. We drank and fucked. We slow danced to the same Mars Volta song on repeat under multicolored Christmas lights Marcus had strung across his plaster ceiling. We splayed out on the carpet and scribbled out huge, sprawling poems. We dreamed up and drew out the characters for a comic book, characters based on Satire regulars, guys with names like Don't Shoot Bruce and Cab Driver Steve.

We slit our palms with his curved, camouflage hunting knife and took turns painting each other's bodies, took turns licking the blood off one another's sweat-slick skin. I wore nothing. I wore his massive, pinstriped work shirt. It smelled like iron and sandalwood soap. He wore pale blue jeans, tight at his thick thighs. They rode low on his hips. I loved the chiseled V above his low waistline, wrote whole futures in that olive-colored space.

We wore 72 hours of sleeplessness, cigarette burns and coagulated blood. I don't remember him showering for work, me leaving for my own small apartment. Even naked and covered in each other's blood and cum and sweat, it wasn't about us—about love or even the carnal joy of hallucinatory sex. It was about the performance. We were inhabiting roles for each other and our imagined public because even in the most intimate of our spaces there was always an imagined public.

The seams in my iconic-self were faulty, though. They split and tore when there was no one left to see me.

Many nights, nights when I didn't have the stage of the bar, when I didn't have Marcus's image to reflect or when we were away from the watchful eyes of others, I knew we were broken. Individually and as what I had willed into unity. I was prone to molding myself, body and mind, around the whims of others, but Marcus was flat, like me. We needed envious eyes to exist. Without that, we were lifeless and deflated.

I was like red phosphorus back then; I was highly reactive. I drank. I secreted away whiskey bottles in freezers and purses. I started losing control of my crafted persona, crying at the bar, forgetting to shower, begging for attention. I snuck drinks in the Satire's dilapidated bathroom, tipping rocks glasses to chapped lips in the graffitied stall, sitting on the toilet choking on Irish whiskey and my own suffocating failures. I passed out in the booth reserved for employees and woke up with my face plastered with sweat to the vinyl, thick mascara gathered in the caves of my eyes. I passed out on Marcus's kitchen floor, uninvited, waiting for him. I pissed myself in his bed. I thought drinking could save me, flesh out the woman I so longed to be, but instead it made me soft and sloppy, 3D but messy.

While I was slowly, involuntarily, surrendering my persona to alcohol and to sorrow, while I was being pulled apart along with the widening chasm between Marcus and me, Marcus was moving more deeply into gorgeous aloof cool, solidifying his image. On nights when there were no strangers at the bar to admire us, nights when I was working, nights when I was drunk and slipping into my own sloppy sadness, Marcus went to clubs. He went to clubs with cheap steaks and names like Shotgun Willie's and The Diamond Cabaret. His brother told me this after Marcus and I broke up, while I was eating mac and cheese from a paper cup in dirty underwear on my broken futon, while I was sniffing and surrounded by beer bottles half filled with cigarette butts.

I doubt Marcus ever folded sweaty bills into silky G-Strings riding high on toned tanned hips. I doubt he needed to. He was magnetic and magical. I'm sure he sat at the clubs' back bars, his square shoulders to the stage, the glare of the lights on his dark hair. I'd bet he covered his toothy, white smile with thick Nebraska knuckles. I bet when women with glittered bodies leaned close, their heavy silicone breasts pressing against his muscled shoulder, to hear his raspy laughter, I bet they noticed the way he rolled his black sleeves and the sharp line of his jaw. I bet they thought he was the kind of geeky guy who didn't know about his muscled shoulders or sharp jaw line.

As I felt Marcus pull away, I became animal, molten, operating on instinct—hot and viscous, unable to exercise control. I cried in public and fell, drunk, off bar stools, all raw emotion, fleshy and frail. I was all the parts of myself I'd worked so hard to hide from Marcus, from the world: insecure and needy. He grew ashamed of me, stumbling through the city streets behind him, heels in hands, tights and mascara run. I smeared my heavy eyeliner with the backs

of my clumsy hands while I sobbed and begged Marcus for more time, for attention. I piled snotty beverage napkins on swanky, cast-iron pub tables, crying, always drunk and crying, probably always pleading for another chance.

I thought I could transform, become a private person, a woman who sipped red wine and took bubble baths, a woman who ironed her man's work shirts and went home early. *I'm tired of drinking. I like to cook. I love you.* I told him. *I want to be better. I will be better. I can be better.* I begged. I scrubbed my apartment. I paid a fancy hair dresser to cut my hair into the pixie cut Marcus said he liked, and when I got in his car after the appointment, he covered his white teeth with thick fingers and said: *It's so short. You look like a boy.* But I didn't cry, just pulled the trucker hat he'd once said was sexy down over my eyes.

Marcus moved all his possessions into my newly scrubbed apartment, but he never came home once. He stacked his few belongings, pin-striped shirts and CD's, on the scabby wood floor of my place. He moved in on a warm, early May day, and I took the crosstown bus to the organic grocers, bought a bouquet of pink Gerbera Daisies I couldn't really afford. I bought and made stuffed chicken breasts from a recipe I'd found in a glossy women's magazine, one with a woman on the cover whose teeth were as square and white as Marcus's. I bought paper towels and a head of romaine and carefully dried lettuce leaves listening to Ray Charles cover songs in my small kitchen. I called my cousin in Oregon, a chef, and got a recipe for Caesar dressing. Caesar was Marcus's favorite. I wore a pair of panties that matched my only bra. I wore a pink and white striped apron from the Goodwill over it. I thought: *This is who I will be now. I will learn to live behind closed doors.*

I cooked and waited. I sat on my futon with my head in my hands in my matching bra and panties and waited. When I'd not heard his key in the lock by 10 pm, I snuck a sip of cheap

scotch from a bottle I hid in my freezer behind towers of diet TV dinners. By dawn, I was tripping through sheets of Denver-May rain. I was searching the streets for him. I found his white Jeep parked three blocks away. It was ludicrously close to my own apartment, but it was not at my apartment, not at our apartment where I'd left mismatched plates of cold food on the cheap coffee table.

I sobbed and slurred into his voicemail, and when it was full, I howled and begged to the endless ringtone. His Jeep was parked in front of a white Victorian home with shutters and window boxes. I pounded on the door, listening to peals of laughter from inside the dark house. I dug my fingers into my palms until my pounding fist bled watery pink in the rain. I found a rusty, bent nail in the yard and used it and the bottom of my boot to hammer a bloody note I'd written on a slip of receipt tape into the door's soft frame.

The note said, fuck you. It said, I'll die for you. It said I want us to become each other. I wore his XL Mars Volta T-shirt and my broken, knee-high boots. For weeks, my knees were covered in angry, magenta scabs from falling in the yard that was not mine, not ours, from crawling drunk across pavement in the rain.

Weeks later Marcus's brother told me that he'd found another girl, a dancer at Shotgun Willie's with enormous breasts. Her signature move was to fold herself between those giant breasts and bite at the crotch of her panties. His brother told me the three of them were inside the white Victorian that night, laughing at me. She and Marcus mocked me: how weak, how pathetic. I think his brother told me to try to spare me the embarrassment of barreling forward in the role of scorned woman, but I was beyond shame, beyond consolation.

I acted like a scorned woman in a made-for-TV movie, still an assemblage of poses, but increasingly sloppy and sad. I threw Marcus's things in my apartment complex's tiny square of

front yard. I threw out the CD's and crisply ironed shirts. I changed the locks on my door, but I never locked the new ones, hoping he'd change his mind and come back to me. I think I must have hoped this was the way to act: make noise, cause a scene, draw attention.

I called him. I called his friends. I told elaborate lies about STDs and imaginary pregnancies. I slurred long, wet promises about change and sobriety into the phone. I begged and promised so long into Marcus's voicemail that it emptied and filled and emptied and filled, until, eventually, it was a wrong number. I was in some sort of pain, but I was also tangled in the tragedy of it all, some part of me enjoying the high drama.

I did see Marcus again, once, saw his pale eyes through a 10-inch slit in the driver's side window of an iridescent Escalade. When we had first met, when I was still a size four image of a girl with perfect breasts, he'd given me a fancy cell phone, and he wanted it back. He called the bar phone, had my boss send me outside. He'd been wise to avoid me at home, where I sloshed around my house naked and drunk casting black spells in his name, casting *fuck you Marcus* into my permanent midnight. He'd come by late. He knew the bar would be busy, knew I'd have to hurry. He didn't park, didn't get out of the car or open the door, just inched the window down enough to stretch a thick arm through. Then he rolled up the window and pulled out onto the street, and some internal dam broke. I sobbed, dropped to my knees and cried in that carnal way that feels entirely physical, originating in the pit of the soul.

Some hex was broken. I was stuck with just myself. I'd been stripped of my performative armor. I collapsed, sober and sobbing on all fours. I should have gone inside to sling drinks to men who I didn't want but who I wanted to want me, who I would never be pretty enough for. I stayed there, cold asphalt against my palms and knees where holes had worn in my black size 4 Dickies, until my boss sent some regulars to hoist me up and carry me back inside.

I was lonely for a long time after that, but I'd been lonely before and with Marcus too. I was lonely in a room full of people and lonely alone with a book in my bed.

I hated Marcus for years, credited deep, festering wounds to him. But the truth was they existed long before he ever sat down at the Satire. I stuffed my self-loathing and suffering into the months we spent together, blaming him for not living up to what I thought he had promised me: some sheen, some way out of my pain, some imagined life. I blamed him for not being able to make me what I wanted to be: confident, beautiful, lovable. It wasn't him though, of course. It never was.

Marcus was probably an asshole and certainly a womanizer, but he only had whatever power over me I handed to him. Looking back now, I don't know what he thought of me. Maybe he wasn't even aware we were acting, though that seems unlikely. He was probably wounded like me. We look for ourselves in others, but I don't know if he was a complicated man. I think, back then, I was only capable of looking at myself.

That time, those months with Marcus, seemed so formative for a long time, but I don't even remember the name of the town where he grew up. What I remember is the slope of his back and his thick hair between my fingers. I remember his dark skin and pale eyes. I remember the way I thought people looked at me when we were together and how intoxicating it was, all that envy.

The owner of the bar Marcus and I hung out at took Polaroids of his customers and pinned them to the walls of the bar--they were all over the blond wood. Though he snapped photos of anyone who would let him, he had ours enlarged. He had a little shrine to a dead

celebrity behind the bar, and he hung our enormous photo over it. In the picture, Marcus and I both wear black. We're slouched against each other making eye contact. He has my hand in his, and it looks tiny. We are affecting love. We were, I see now, both achingly beautiful. In the picture we look like we are savoring each another, but if I had to guess, I'd bet that we were fighting. My eyes are glossy, the way they'd get after too much whiskey. He was probably asking me not to drink. I was probably demanding he be more than he could for me. We were both probably happy to know that someone really was watching.

A Place I Didn't Try to Die in Los Angeles

The motel is permanently closed now. When I punch *Nutel Motel Los Angeles* into my laptop's keyboard, Google feeds me archived newspaper clips along with a few photos of its iconic red sign and a couple Yelp reviews. A page deep into Google images, I find a missing persons flyer with the grainy image of a shitty butterfly tattoo on pale skin. The picture of the tattoo is also a picture of the thigh of a woman found rotting between mattresses in the motel thirty-three years ago. I say rotting, but I guess that's just an assumption. Above the picture of the shitty tattoo is a computer-generated image of the woman, of what she might have looked like: short hair, bad eyebrows, crooked lips. There is no grainy picture of Jane Doe's face to match the tattoo, only the crooked-lipped rendering, and so I assume she was either pretty decayed or beaten beyond recognition by the time she was found—that she was rotten or had rotten things done to her or, probably, both.

The motel had a string of names over the years, but while I was there, it was the Nutel. I still don't know the proper pronunciation, whether it was New-Tell or Nutt-ell. I just called it the Nut. It was a squat, L-shaped building near the corner of 3rd Ave and Alvarado Street in Los Angeles, sitting cattycorner to MacArthur Park. Rooms there rented by the night, hour, week, or month. It was \$695 a month, and I don't know how much for the hour, day, or week.

Although the motel was flanked on either side by *lavanderias*, it never smelled like my home on a Sunday, never like detergent or fabric softener. Instead, the halls were always thick with the stench of piss and Top-Ramen, the air ammonia-heavy with their odors.

Jane Doe's missing persons' flyer says she was maybe white, maybe Hispanic; maybe 15, maybe 23. Her corpse wore a blue and white necklace. A pair of earrings was found near the

body. I wonder if she took the earrings off herself. Maybe they were important; maybe she set them carefully on the square brown nightstand with the wobbly leg next to the bed, making sure they didn't roll off.

Somewhere there's photo of me sitting cross-legged on a mauve bedspread, the kind of sateen texture and puke-pink color they stopped making in the 90's. In the picture, I'm wearing a gray cotton dress with a scoop neck. My tits look great—young and round. I'm thin. My Dollar-Tree red lips are smiling around the barrel of a Glock 19 9 mm. I liked the feel of that gun in my hand, cold and heavy. I liked the metal taste of its barrel between my teeth, like the copper pennies I used to suck on as a kid, like blood.

I wasn't planning to die in that moment, that gun in my mouth, but I wasn't actively planning not to die either. The distinction is narrow, but for a person like me, it's a good idea to actively plan not to die. It doesn't always come naturally, not dying. I make snap decisions, have irrational sadnesses.

In my head, I named the Nut's manager Not-Carol because at the time I thought she was like a woman back home who'd taken care of me in my 20's, an old boss with bottle-red hair and more patience for me than I'd earned. Not-Carol and real Carol probably didn't actually have much in common, though, except the long, skinny cigarettes that seemed to dangle from both their age-spotted hands perennially. Maybe they only shared the same kind of hard lives that led to managing motels and bars into their 60's, but I morphed the chrome-haired manager into the shape of some recognizable ally, likely for no other reason than that I was trying to build a shelter in the wilderness. Back then I spent a lot of time alone in the wild looking for lodging.

By the time I moved to L.A., I'd worked in bars and strip clubs all over Denver. I knew which people would protect your car while you warmed it up in the winter, which ones would slit your throat for a 20 rock. I knew by name the pimps and the homeless men with heartbreaking backstories. Denver, even its worst blocks, was familiar and felt small and homey. Los Angeles didn't seem to work in blocks at all—it felt impossibly flat and large, like a place where I could never find my footing.

There were places I tried to die in Los Angeles: the Santa Monica Pier drunk before dawn; the subway platform at Universal City Station; a studio apartment with plank-board floors off Wilshire Blvd. But never at the Nut Motel, not on purpose.

I spent most of my time there just trying to pass the hours, waiting for an unnamable something. I'd hum old punk songs, The Germs and Circle Jerks a comfort in the alien landscape. I had a book of large print crossword puzzles, and I'd solve the book, erase my answers and start over again.

My room at the Nut had a long rectangle of a window that looked out over a bodega and the roof of the motel's garage. Razor wire circled the roof, but someone had clipped the wire in spots and residents could still access it from the outside stairs. In the goldenrod sun of the Los Angeles evening, I'd stare through that window at the mostly nothing out there, watching an obstructed square of shuffling shadows in the small alley that ran between the Nut and the building next door.

Sometimes a few people would gather on the Nut's rooftop to bullshit and smoke blunts, and I'd press my face close to the window screen trying to absorb the intoxicating singsong of laughter, the cloying, sweet smell of blueberry blunt wraps.

Once, around dusk, a man beat a woman so hard that blood erupted from her face like in a movie. I'd seen fights, of course, even some pretty brutal ones, fights that left permanent damage in their wake, but I'd never seen anything like that geyser of blood. There wasn't much I thought I could do. I'm not prone to calling police, and even if I were, the Nut wasn't the kind of place I'd call them from. Instead, I just averted my eyes and secretly noted how glad I was not to be her, noted that I didn't want to try to die there, in that room or on the razor-wire-circled roof of the Nut motel. I guess I counted my blessings as best I knew how at the time.

On Saturday mornings when the Alvarado Street market was in full swing, when the steep sidewalks spilled bodies into the street, when the brassy accordion-polka of mariachi music danced the *zapateado* over the neighborhood, the thin rectangle of window would rattle in its aluminum frame. Those sweaty Saturdays, the sweet-corn smell of a hundred *abuelas'* tamales mingled with knock-off perfume and saturated the whole neighborhood. So on Saturday mornings, the halls of the Nut smelled like that too, like bodies spilling into the street and tamales and fake Chanel No. 5. They smelled like a home that wasn't my own, like somebody else's history.

Like me, I think most people came and went from the Nut, but it had its fair share of long-timers. A few residents had installed little window-sized air conditioners or satellite dishes in their rooms.

Some hot November afternoon, I had to inch by two EMT's having an animated argument about the Lakers point game in the second-floor hallway. I stood in front of the door to room 285, my room, and watched them, young and completely alive, gesturing wildly over the corpse of some poor dead fuck, laid out and zipped-up on a gurney between them.

The Los Angeles County Coroner's Office pours the bony remains of around 1,500 unclaimed bodies into mass graves in the L.A. and Boyle Height's Cemeteries every year. At first, that number sounds huge, sounds vast and impossible. But if you've ever known that if you died, your body taking with it whatever you are inside, no one would look for it in the Los Angeles County Morgue, then that number sounds smaller. Or, if you've ever known no one would come for your body at all, or even known that people might actively hide it—drive it out to the desert or stuff it between moldy mattresses—then 1,500 unclaimed bodies sounds like 1; it sounds like your body; it sounds like a black plastic bag plenty small enough to fit inside.

I wished that afternoon that I could reach between those bickering EMT's in their starchy blue uniforms, wished I could unzip the cheap black plastic and slip my hand inside, rest it on the swell of belly that used to be flesh. I wished I could lean down to those unhearing ears and whisper: *goodbye and good luck, neighbor; maybe the next trails will be happier ones.*

My heart sank when the tiny ad I'd followed in the back of a weekly circular—one that boasted: Nutel Motel! Color TV!—turned out to be false, and I wondered about the cost of a satellite dish every time I saw one of the little black discs sticking out of the building's adobe. I was longing for a home in a place, a city, that could never be one to me, and I thought that TV would be a companion. Without it, I had only the space of my brain, fly-trap sticky with the past.

What I'd left in Denver, in part, was a man with an infectious laugh, a dog with ears that dragged the ground, and an apartment with a soft bed and clean sheets. I'd left a job with tips that paid my bills and a collection of people I ate big bowls of Pho with on Wednesday mornings.

I'd wanted to marry that man with the infectious laugh, too, had hatched a plan with him, drunk at some Vegas bar. He was a person who'd wait for me when I walked through dark parking lots at night, just to be sure I got somewhere safe.

My life in Denver had made me mostly happy and that man had too, but I'd hidden monsters under that soft bed with clean sheets and their bony fingers kept grasping at my wrists and ankles in dark and lonely 4:00 ams. At that time, I think I thought I could outrun them. So they were part of what I thought I'd left in Denver, those spindly-fingered, bed monsters.

In L.A., my thoughts were loud, ugly creatures. I was hungry for a distraction; I was hungry in general. Broke and hoping for a miracle, I'd spent five dollars at the Jon's across the street from the Nut on two loaves of gummy, expired white bread, a bottle of store-brand yellow mustard, and a large pack of American cheese slices. Like a sad drunk girl's Hanukkah, I guess I was hoping the supplies would stretch past their possibilities, last days longer than they should. With fifteen slices per loaf, thirty slices in all, I allotted myself a single slice of bread with a slice of cheese and a little stripe of mustard every day. In the morning, as I assembled my sandwich, my hands would shake in expectation and appetite while I separated the cellophane wrapper from the neon orange cheese. Besides piss and Top Ramen and, on Saturdays, tamales and cheap perfume and spilling humanity, my room smelled like the vinegar sting of cheap yellow mustard. But I was eating, trying not to starve myself into a soggy death.

Like Jane Doe with her shitty butterfly, if I died in that baby-shit-brown room, during that hot November—5'2" tall, 145 pounds, almost surely white, almost surely not Hispanic, long past 15, past 23—there wouldn't have been anyone to identify my body. Alive, my phone didn't ring. I'd already worn through the concern of everyone I had known. People didn't look for me; no one would have even known to know I was missing. I'd wanted to get off the radar, and I'd gotten my wish.

If I had drunk myself into a slow slide—first unconscious, then coma and death—I wonder how rotten I would have been before someone found me. I wonder which stage of death my poor, unwanted corpse would have been in. Eventually someone would have come banging on the door of room 285, looking for rent money. Someone would have noticed the smell.

I imagined yielding to death like that back then, though, slipping into the warm arms of booze, letting it have me. But I didn't actually try to surrender. Not then, not at that time. Back then I was still fighting. Still, I wonder if there would have been a flier, like Jane Doe's. One that said I wore a necklace, a little aluminum heart engraved with the words: *I don't exist when you don't see me.*

Room 285 was on the west end of the second floor, and leaving it was a challenge no matter which of the three exits I used. I didn't have much to do, was accountable to no one, responsible for nothing, so it was easy to group my meager tasks together, leaving and returning only once a day, but every time I opened my door, my palms sweat. I'd grind my teeth. I'd cross my arms tight across my chest, hoping to protect myself not only from the entire, terrifying outside world with its horns and sirens and loud, melodic Spanish, but also against the potential obstacles between me and that scary outside.

There was a set of concrete stairs that led from the second floor to 3rd Ave, just past a disarmed fire exit. Right outside the exit door was a small alcove that seemed to act as a home to a woman named Star who mumbled ceaselessly into a bundle of blankets she cradled like a newborn. I don't know why I know her name. Maybe I was drunk and sociable some night; maybe I asked; maybe it was uttered in the halls. Star was a large woman. She seemed immovable and was always draped in heavy layers of fabric: blankets and canvas tarps. When I would start down the short set of stairs, she'd block them with that large body of hers and jab her meaty palm towards me, opening and closing it in a pantomime of *gimme*. She wanted what the Stars of the world always seem to want: money, booze, a cigarette. Once I tried to hand her a half a slice of my chewy, expired white bread, and she just flipped her palm over, dumping my offering on the concrete. She kept working her chubby hand until I fished a Bronco 100 out of my bag for her.

I wanted the same things the Stars of the world did, and I counted the hours between cigarettes and sips from the plastic pint of Popov Vodka I kept in my purse; I didn't have much to share, and cigarettes and booze were my most valuable possessions. I suspect Star was harmless and that most residents ignored her, but I felt like an easy mark, and any time I saw that meaty palm, I relented.

I'd flirted with homelessness throughout my teens and twenties. In Denver, I'd slept in a late model Honda parked on side streets and in well-lit parking lots. I'd learned to be crafty about meals, gathering day-old pastries from coffee shops and waiting till the organic grocers threw out the boxes of produce too ugly for the wealthy to eat. I never went hungry, and I knew how to wash my hair and body in a rotating series of public restrooms without arousing suspicion from snooping clerks, knew which gas stations had the best smelling soaps. I knew that if I drove out

past Tower Road, near the airport, there was a 24-hour truck stop managed by a woman with a crimson bindi and bracelets that made music when she used the barcode scanner. Her showers were sparkling, and the long-haul truck drivers kept to their own shower stalls. In Denver I'd known those things, so I never felt lonely, never really felt without a home.

In L.A., I was generally desperate to hold onto anything I had. When I needed to leave my room, I had to balance that desperation with my abject fear of the inside stairwell. Even though it was usually vacant, I had to convince myself to walk down the hallway and turn into the enclosed, heavily-tagged stair corridor. On my first day at the Nut, as I was bringing my things to my room (a cast-iron pan and a few shiny, black Hefty bags of clothes and books), I'd been cornered on the landing in the stairwell by a group of lanky men with long arms and deep-blue, faded face tattoos. I was day drunk and shaky on my feet in that strange city. I'd guess those men assumed a drunk white woman alone in the stairwell of the Nutel Motel with a couple Hefty bags clenched in her fists wasn't going to make trouble, even in the middle of the day. If they did, they'd have guessed right. It wasn't as much that I didn't want to be found as much as I knew no one was looking. I'd converted friends into enemies, and I knew I'd crossed some invisible line, moved to a place where women like me wound up immortalized on discarded Jane Doe flyers.

Those young men didn't physically hurt me, didn't do much of anything, really—breathed heavy, cognac and Swisher Sweets too close to my clamped-closed mouth. One guy cupped my chin in his long thin fingers and brushed chapped lips against my neck while the others made a show of pawing at my crotch and sticking their rough hands down the back of my jeans, moaning dramatically as they grabbed handfuls of my ass—fumbling and gesturing like

school boys, which, in an alternate universe, they might well have been, but in the stairwell of the Nut motel they were menacing.

I stared at the concrete landing and kept my mouth shut tight, didn't move a muscle or make a sound. I could see the outline of the ribbed-rubber handle of a 9mm pressing against a white t-shirt, and I knew I didn't want to end up rotting between mattresses upstairs. That L-shaped outline made that fate feel touchable, close. Other than fear, I was unhurt, and I suppose fear was the whole point, anyway.

For the rest of my time there, I scurried up and down those stairs like a shifty packrat, clutching my bag to my chest and holding my breath. There was an old service elevator as well, but I had an idea of how long it would take to get help if I got stuck in there with another group of lanky guys who stashed pistols in their waistbands. I didn't know how long I could hold my breath and stay silent. I never took that elevator. Not once.

There's a kind of alone that only exists in cities as large as Los Angeles. To be alone among four million people is staggering. That dumbfounding loneliness is at the center of all my memories of the Nut, and I was physically alone most of the time. I remember going to the bodega for tall boys of Bud Light alone; pulling the scratchy mauve bedspread over my head while someone with a booming voice pounded on the door of my room, calling for Julio, alone; washing my socks in the bathroom sink, hanging them to dry over the mildewed shower rod alone; counting change for cheap cigarettes alone; scouring want ads alone. I did all this alone, but I had checked into the motel with a boy named Cameron.

It's hard to remember what I thought at the time, what I'd hoped for or expected leaving Denver with Cameron. I was drinking hard and was so sad. I think I thought I could drown all

those hurts, memories of my face pressed into car upholstery while men grunted behind me; memories of crawling through damp alleys, close to home but too fucked up to get there; memories of all the broken bones and scabby knees and the trail of wreckage I always left in my wake. Maybe I thought I could bury shame in distance, thought that shoveling miles on top of my regrets would, somehow, absolve me.

Cameron was nearly ten years my junior and was being swallowed by his own griefs. He was leaving Denver to check into an exclusive rehab nestled in the Malibu hills. I tagged along, though I don't remember making the plan to, don't even know if he ever really invited me.

I was so provincial, when I'd first heard "Malibu." I confused it with Maui and thought he was going to Hawaii. It must have looked like I left that man I'd once wanted to marry for Cameron, left the dog with the droopy ears and the friends I shared Pho with on Wednesdays, just for some guy. And, maybe that there is some truth there, but I think it was just leaving--period. That's how it seems now, anyway.

If someone asked me how all that happened, *I don't know* would be the only honest answer. I was in Denver, and then I wasn't.

Denver was the only place I'd ever called home, and my exit was like an amputation—fast but brutal. I still feel the phantom pains of that home I don't live in, still feel the raw nerves of leaving. To me, rehab was a golden ticket, though, and Cameron had one. I'd been some shade of addicted since I was a child, cycling through drugs until I landed on and committed to booze. I'd watched TV shows where people went to fancy rehabs and did yoga and got therapy and got sober, and I thought that's what I could be like. I thought some formula could make me a person with a second chance, thought rehab could be some kind of answer, was sure that getting sober would solve everything and that I needed rehab to do it.

But I wasn't going to rehab. I guess I didn't think much about not having my own golden ticket, didn't think about having no money or friends or plans, didn't, I guess, realize that I wasn't even sure which freeway to take into Los Angeles until I was sitting in a cheap motel outside of Barstow with a map splayed out on the bedspread.

I told Cameron about the lanky boys on the stairs, about their searching hands. He'd been upstairs drinking little vodka shooters and watching a Simpsons DVD on the laptop I'd brought with me, which would end up broken in a drunken fight hours later.

I told him, and he said: *what the fuck do you want me to do?* And I said: *nothing*. And I said: *I was just warning you that they had guns*, which wasn't entirely true, that I was just warning him. I don't know *what the fuck* I would have wanted him to do about it, but I wanted something, even if it was just sympathy. I shut the particleboard bathroom door and sobbed over the rust-stained sink thinking about the 1017 miles of bridges I'd burned, about how I'd left no way to get back to Denver, to get home, about how Cameron would leave for rehab in two days and I'd be alone in the Nut Motel, nothing but lanky guys and searching hands and a few dollars to my name. I thought about how I didn't want to die there, but I wasn't sure how to plan not to.

As promised, two days later, on November 5th, Cameron checked into rehab. It was my 31st birthday and L.A. was warm and golden the way it can be in early November. I dropped him off with his mother, a woman I'd never met before who was kind to me even though I must have seemed like one of Bukowski's women: shaking and sick, stinking of booze, looking all of my 31 years next to his 24, feeling all of my poverty next to his affluence. I'd tried to dress nicely, hoping to impress her, I guess, but my gray dress had a stain over the breast and showed too much cleavage; the hem was unraveling, and I picked at it behind swimming eyes all through Cameron's rehab check-in.

The chasm between Cameron and I was vast that day. After a woman with enormous silicone breasts wearing a pink dress made of fabric that looked softer than anything I'd ever touched led him to his suite, I climbed into the Toyota Carola I barely knew how to drive and rode the clutch south on the 101 freeway in the hot traffic glare of a Los Angeles Friday afternoon.

That night, the night of my 31st birthday, I drank beneath the Nut's scratchy bedsheets. I swallowed syrupy vodka from a plastic jug Cameron had left for me, saying: *It's your birthday and it's like my rebirthday*, and when he said it, I'd smiled and stutter-slurred: *happy birthday to us*.

That night, I called the man I'd left in Denver. Hunting for what, I don't know. Sympathy? Companionship? Some kind of retardant to stop the fire that seemed to follow me from consuming everything? The man said: *I can't talk to you; you can't call me for this*. And, of course, he was right. I could have spent my birthday anywhere; I didn't have to be that kind of sad. I'd chosen to drink alone under bleach-stinking sheets in a baby-shit brown room at the Nut.

Although I was in many ways at the mercy of my own madness back then, I had made choices. That night I curled into a ball and cried till dawn, then cried through the morning until I sobered up enough to decide not to die there, when dying seemed like the most natural choice. I gathered up the empty bottles and scurried down the inside stairwell to get rid of them, went across the street to Jon's grocery to buy lunch with the rolls of quarters I'd secreted away in my purse since Denver. I didn't cry again for years.

I lived in that alone space for a long time, probably still spend my nights there. I don't know that my lonely memories of the Nut would have been any less so had Cameron stayed with me. That solitary city was in my bones back then, and I don't think he or anyone else could have penetrated it.

So, Cameron went to rehab and didn't get sober, and neither did I, at least not for a few more years. But I didn't die there in the Nut motel, didn't even try to. There are only two stories for a woman in a place like the Nut. It's either a place of passing through, like it was for me. Or it's a place where you stay, whether it's on the outside stairwell opening and closing a filthy, meaty palm or between the mattresses, earrings left on the nightstand. Stories of the Nut, and all the places indistinguishable from it, are stories of never meant to be for when we feel like we aren't meant to be either. I lived, though. I am not the only woman to land at the Nut or all the places like it scattered across the country: women pinning hopes to a wagon that doesn't have room for them, just running like hell from some variation of violation and heartache. Women like me are a dime a dozen, and a lot of us end up on fleers, but I didn't, not at the Nut motel.

Flesh Like an Apology

I've always been a ghostly tenant in my body. It's been like a room I've haunted but never felt I belonged in. I was a cerebral kid, living inside my mind as though it were entirely separate from my body, and my body was full of limitations. My earliest memories are foggy, seem to exist under water, and they're of my mother holding my little feet in her enormous hands, stretching and twisting my chubby legs to what felt like their breaking point, exercises I must have hated, which were meant to correct a minor birth defect—bilateral club feet. I stomped into the ambulating world in heavy, white orthopedic high-top shoes. I guess they were supposed to fix my flat square feet, my lurching gate. They did, mostly, but as an adult, I don't go barefoot. I carefully tuck my thick feet under blankets, hide them from lovers. If you look closely, you can tell I still walk with my toes at awkward angles, that I lack coordination.

I was seventeen in 1997. That summer, the Rocky Mountains were wet and muddy. Huge, theatrical thunderstorms rolled over the bald peaks every afternoon. I spent a lot of time that summer trying to talk my friends into amputating my pinky finger. My circle at the time was one of mostly swaggering young men, young men in camouflage shorts with shaved heads who owned compound bows and relaxed in the evening by cleaning their guns. Every one of them said they would cut my finger off, right at the knuckle like I asked, but at some point, they all backed down. I think even they got a little creeped out when they realized I wasn't just joking.

I thought I loved a boy that rainy summer. He and I would stay up high on speed and acid for days, hiking in the sparse mountain woods and daydreaming up worlds where we were more consequential than we were in our own. We'd pretend we were Micky and Mallory Knox, the love-struck murderers in *Natural Born Killers*. I thought he was fearless, that boy, and it would

have thrilled me at the time had he been able to cut my finger off, and he almost did. He sharpened a bowie knife and held it over the blue flame of his Coleman stove. We thought the heat would cauterize the wound. I showed him where to draw a line above my bottom knuckle with a sharpie. I scrunched my eyes closed and braced my summer-colored hand on his mom's picnic table, balling my three remaining fingers up against the table's edge, waiting. I think he held his breath for a minute too, the afternoon's predictable thunder moving through the mountains, but he couldn't do it, said: *I just can't do it Jenny. I'm sorry.* And he vanished into his parents' house. I know we were both disappointed.

Maybe he was hoping I would flinch. I wouldn't have, even though I was afraid the knife wouldn't make the clean cut I imagined. I'd helped butcher an elk once, knew bone was hard to cut through. I knew that if the knife didn't find just the right connecting spot between finger and joint, I might have to saw it off myself, and while the thought of a clean, swift amputation thrilled me, the thought of a dangling half-amputated finger was horrifying. Still, I know I wouldn't have balked. Had that boy, tan as rawhide, said: *how about the whole hand?* I think I would have said: *fuck, yes.* I think I would have said: *more.*

I can't now imagine what my end game was. I'm not sure I had one. I said I wanted to know what phantom pain felt like, and that was, probably, partially true, but I think, maybe, what I really wanted to do was to pinpoint the difference between phantom pain and all the other ghostly disconnects I had with my body. Growing up, it wasn't so much that I couldn't feel bodily sensations—I didn't have a nerve disorder or any other medical condition that prohibited feeling—but my brain and body seemed to exist in different dimensions. When I fell, I could never tell if I was hurt until I looked to see. I'd slip from a tire swing or lose control of my Strawberry Shortcake bicycle and feel fine until I spotted blood seeping from my knee or my

tooth on the dusty road, till I wiped my hand across my mouth and my hand came away crimson. Only then did I feel the hurt.

When I was five, I was attacked by a neighbor's Doberman. I don't remember much about it, except that the neighbor kids had to beat the dog with snow shovels to get him off me. I remember being confused, later, in the doctor's office, while my father and the man-doctor stood over me, praising me for being so brave while I got stitched up. I knew the stitches hurt or were supposed to, but there wasn't any blood; the open hole in my thigh had been well cleaned and no longer looked like pain. I was fascinated by watching the man pull the wiry, black thread through the skin of my leg with a needle, like fabric. I became obsessed with the correlation: skin and cloth.

I had agonies, and they were brutal ones that felt impossible to bear, but they were all specters, buried in my gut with no blood or bone to explicate the pain. The hurt was physical, as real as any injury, but I couldn't find a way to explain it. I couldn't see it, couldn't locate the source. I think as I got older, I believed that if I had that, had the open festering wound, the exposed bone and missing digits, I might understand something about those other agonies, the ones that curled me into the fetal position in the black loneliness of four a.m., every inch of my body in perfect physical condition.

Maybe because my brain and my body felt so separate, I took criticisms of my physique literally. Most of what I knew about it had come from outside sources. I didn't know I was fat until someone told me. That part of me was spawned by three little boys in my second grade PE class. Angel Vigil, Hans Cook, Bobby Simms. As I made my slow way across the balance beam, my clumsy square feet not designed for delicate tasks, the boys begged me not to break the

beam, not to cost them their turns. Surely there were sneers in their young voices, but all I heard then was desperation. I'd long known ways in which my body was wrong, but until then, I'd not known it was wrong in that particular way, so big it could be destructive. I believed them, believed I might snap the fabric-covered plank right in half, and my clumsy feet made it hard to hurry, so I stood, precariously, on my toes and froze. I thought that if I could if could get higher, I'd be lighter, so I reached my arms to the sky and had to be lifted off the beam by the teacher. My royal blue sweat pants were pulled high over my big-little belly, the rope of drawstring too tight to tie in a bow.

Maybe because I didn't occupy my body in any visceral sense, didn't really know if something felt good or bad, didn't really know if I had a headache or a bad tooth—maybe because other people's ideas of my body were so easily imprinted on me—for a long time, sex was mostly transactional.

As an adolescent, I was never nervous-kissed in a middle school hallway amid a cloud of Malibu Mist. No fumbling boy ever inched a cracked-dry hand toward me in a dark movie theater, our friends giggling a few rows back. I had read about first dates and kisses and making out in parked cars in the Christopher Pike books I devoured in my top bunk bed late at night. I wanted those adolescent things, those dry hands and chapped lips, never mind that those books always ended in horror. I wrote sprawling diary entries about red-headed boys who clutched Arthur C. Clark books to their skinny-boy chests. But what I wanted wasn't really their mouths or fingers—it was their approval. I wanted them to see my round belly, my square feet and keep looking anyway.

I tried to mirror the actions of sexuality. I painted my lips cherry red because a glossy girl's magazine said people listened to red lips, and I thought if people heard me, they might see past what I knew was an inadequate, incompetent body. I thought there might be good things trapped inside it. I scoured those magazine pages for ways to lose weight, to grow my frizzy hair long, to be pretty, because I was sure that's what was missing from me and my body—prettiness. I thought prettiness was something I would feel like the tickly relief I got from picking a scab.

In middle school, my best friend used to watch porn through the fuzz of a scrambled satellite signal. She was obsessed with it. She'd describe the ways it made her feel, all the physical sensations, and I didn't get it. I occasionally watched it with her, and all I felt were a thousand new ways to be insufficient. There was no tingling in my belly, no shortness of breath, just thin thighs and impossibly round breasts and my own body round and flat in all the wrong ways. I didn't feel shame for watching, just for not being like the moaning, two dimensional women on TV.

I fervently believed in my physical inadequacy, my massive body, my club feet. I knew that the indignity of living in my body was a verity—infallibly correct, an exercise in the variations of shame. It would be years before I learned that there was any other way to feel about any body, especially my own. I suppose I had a grasp on the ideas of lust and want from book pages and friend's childish descriptions, but the only desire I experienced originated in that same phantom space as agony. It had nothing to do with sexuality. I wanted those skinny boys because I longed for the heady drug of being wanted back.

If my body spoke to me at all back then, I couldn't hear it.

I don't remember any corporeal details about my first sexual experience, which happened to be sex. I was thirteen or fourteen. What I do remember is a dingy twin mattress on the floor, multicolored stains spreading across it like a watermark. I remember tight-weave, blue industrial carpet and DJ Keoke's repetitive beats playing in another room, the bass loud enough to rattle the mirror in the gold medicine cabinet someone had pulled from the wall and left on the floor.

I remember a man's misspelled name in inky blue old English lettering on the side of a stubbly skull, a disembodied voice telling me to clean myself up. A dirty beach towel with faded palm trees.

Later, a contemptuous friend would ask: *did you at least use a condom?* I lied and said yes. It hadn't hurt like the books said it would, and I didn't bleed. I was the only one who had known I was a virgin.

For years after that, men inhabited that ever most symbolic part of my body—my vagina, my pussy, my cunt. A long and complicated string of men, as particular to me as a strand of DNA. One of them had a fat swastika tattooed over his Adam's apple. His neck was thin and covered in angry, red razor burn. The divots in his windpipe were so visible I could count them while he fucked my body, and I watched the square arms of the swastika flex with the ropy tendons in his thin throat. A product of generations of Jewish diaspora, I remember thinking *he wants to destroy me; he wants to erase my whole lineage*. It felt like he wanted to fuck me into oblivion, until there was no body left, until there was no one left at all.

For decades I said that my body--given, rented, and traded to others--meant power, meant possession and control. Now, I doubt my own sincerity. I'm not sure sex didn't, instead, just expand the distance between me and my body, disassociate me farther from it, and I don't know

what power exists in that. Sex, though bodily in practice, drove me further into my own mind. My body felt nothing.

Truth is, I didn't really understand the corporeal world. Sometimes, on a magical night, I could link to carnality through drugs, my body and brain brushing against each other in the dark. Even then, though, it was fleeting. When I was high, there was a moment so brief that if I didn't concentrate I'd miss it when I could feel myself living inside my skin; a somatic second when I let go the grip of my teeth on the leather belt of a make-shift tourniquet, a second when the watery-meth raced from the crook of my elbow to my heart when I was nothing but my own electric, ecstatic flesh. It was a flash though, nothing more. In seconds, my consciousness was ejected from that sensual place, plunged back into the cold consciousness of my brain, all racing thoughts and complicated insecurities.

Drugs changed my relationship to my body, though. They were not a solution, but certainly a catalyst. In the early 90's, before they were the subject of much public scrutiny, methamphetamines were magical. Unlike heroin, you don't need to cook meth to inject it. You just mix meth with a little water. Before I shot up, I'd dump the iridescent powder into a tablespoon and marvel at it. Before I pushed an arc of warm water through the syringe; before I used the rubber plunger to mix the two, before I tore a tiny scrap from a cigarette filter to suck the mixture through—clean, I believed, of impurities—I'd hold the spoon to the light. Twisting the handle back and forth in my fingers, I'd watch the light glint off the pearly flakes. Back then I believed drugs were mystical; I guess parts of me still do. Those rainbows in soup spoons helped me start to reconcile the distance between my brain and my body, to understand that the blood I heard rushing in my ears originated in the pounding organ beneath my rib cage.

Understanding the ebbs and flows of getting high helped me connect with my own bloody, throbbing organs.

Drugs also made me feel kind-of beautiful, gave my body part of that pretty it longed for. There's a false confidence that comes from the psychological effects of drugs, especially uppers, like meth, but that's not what I'm talking about. Drugs made other people see me as beautiful. Fat seemed to melt off my pudgy body. When I ran into people I hadn't seen in a while, they'd often smile and gasp. They'd hold their hands out parallel to one another, like it was a template I'd finally become small enough to fit inside. *You look amazing*, they'd say. Men looked at me differently, looked at me the way I'd only seen them look at my friends—girls with heavy breasts and deep cavities near their collar bones. No one seemed to notice the plantain-colored bruises that nestled in the crooks of my elbows or the scabs at the corners of my mouth. Being thin, and the acceptance that seemed to come with it, made me feel a little beautiful, made me hate my body a little less, and although that didn't reconcile the distance between my body and my brain, it was a start.

Sometimes, when I was high, I'd dance, not caring so much about all the ways my feet couldn't move, the way my thighs rubbed and sweat pooled in the small of my not-small-enough back. I didn't do it well, but to dance and make grace of an ungraceful form was a gift I'd never known and in that lived a profound, if temporary, joy.

Drugs gave me beauty, and they also gave me frailty. Weakness is one of our most bodily sensations. To ask your body to complete a task and find it unable is carnal at a base, survivalist level. I feel inability far more profoundly than I do ability.

I quit injecting meth quite by accident. The people I'd affixed myself to grew weary of the way I'd click my tongue ring against my teeth for hours, the way I'd rock in the corner

folding and unfolding pages of the same book of Leonard Cohen poems, always insisting that they listen to this line or that one.

After I moved back into my mom's seafoam-green trailer, when I tried to take a shower, I'd find my thin legs unnervingly shaky. I'd sit cross-legged on the bottom of her shallow, mauve-colored bathtub and turn the faucet to the far right, the incorrectly-installed hot side. I'd let the scalding water rush over my skinny shoulders. I couldn't lift my arms above my head for more than a few seconds, so I had to prop my elbows on the side of the tub and bend my neck low to rub pearly Suave shampoo through my hair. I felt my body's inability to perform its basic chores with unnerving profundity.

It was July when I moved back in with my mom. I was sixteen, and I was freezing that whole summer. I'd lie under piles of quilts on her velveteen couch. It was cream colored with burnt orange images of pheasants and cornucopias scattered at odd angles. Some days I was too tired to do more than count the pheasants. I ate box after box of cheese pizza rolls. Whole days would pass, it seems to me now, where I would do little else than shuffle back and forth to the microwave heating those little cardboard-like squares. I was weary and weak, and that forced me to feel my body, to acknowledge it and follow its command for, perhaps, the first time in my life. The fatigue was inside me like a parasite. My brain was muddy, thick with the fog of detox, but my body was entirely alive with exhaustion.

I was so naive then about the body, about my body, that I mistook withdrawal for mono, and the pediatrician I still saw told me to rest and drink lots of fluids.

When I was nineteen, I had sex with a boy with a small birth defect—a dent in his ribcage, a concave space large enough to cradle both my balled fists. I liked him. He was funny

and broken and hurt, and at sixteen he still wore teal bands on his braces. He was also, briefly, my drug-dealer. I liked him for all those reasons, but it was that little cave in his ribs I liked the best. We only had sex once, but it was sweet and soft, and I think we both felt our sweet-soft ages for the night. I spent most of the night faking sleep, my fists balled and warm in the hollow of his dented ribs.

When I was twenty-five, I was briefly infatuated with a Paralympic soccer player. An aura of gossamer blond hair surrounded his head, and he made me laugh, laugh as much as anyone I've known before or since. He bartended at a comedy club with brick walls and tiny, wobbly tables. He was born with Cerebral Palsy and because he walked with a lilt and there was a cramped-seeming tightness in his wrists, I assumed he'd be happy to have anyone want to share his body, even me. But unlike me, that man lived in his own body, saw its lilt and lurches as something other than hinderances. When I invited him back to my apartment, both a little drunk after his bar shift some cold Denver Tuesday, he made it clear, and in no uncertain terms, that he knew his body deserved a better companion than the vacant space I offered, my body having been used as tool and a trade but rarely as something to be shared, rarely as something I had agency over.

Unlike drugs, alcohol reinforced the barrier between my body and me, and I drank a lot. I wasn't uniquely drunk the last time I found myself in detox. I had fallen down a short flight of stairs outside a pizza joint. I must have smashed my face on the wooden handrail. As I understand it, I was bleeding enough to cause concern, but the man who was with me when I fell had warrants for his arrest and was terrified of the police he knew would be inside the emergency room. He pushed me out of the passenger side of my car with his foot, and I fell, fleshy and

bloody, to the asphalt in front of the gaping automatic doors. Someone sewed my eyebrow closed and transferred me to a detox in the suburbs I'd been to a handful of times before, never voluntarily.

That particular suburban detox held patients until their blood alcohol levels reached 0. At night, an orderly would walk up and down the rows of plastic-mattress-covered cots once an hour checking patients' vitals and blood alcohol levels. I was always uniformly blacked-out when I was brought into detox, but in the morning, I always wanted to know what I'd checked in at, if for no other reason than so I could know how long I'd be there. That morning, a blonde nurse with knuckle tattoos told me I'd checked in at .45. I'm a little surprised they even let me leave the hospital like that, though maybe they transferred me later, after it had dropped a bit. It's impossible to know, now. I'm not sure that those kinds of medical records are kept. What I do know, and what I knew even then, was that .45 is bad. Really bad. Even uncaring about my body and bent on destruction as I was, I knew that those levels killed people, and I very suddenly knew that I did not want to die. At .45, people went to bed and never woke up. They slipped into comas and never came back.

That wasn't the last time I drank, far from it. It wasn't even the last time I drank like that. I kept hurting my body that way for ten more years. It was, though, the first time I was afraid of losing my body, the first time I understood on a bone-deep level that losing my body would mean losing everything inside it, including my consciousness, which had to be me. It sounds stupidly simple: if your body dies, you die with it. I'd always known that intellectually, of course, but knowing that I had brushed so near to death, even in a blackout, made it tangible, visceral.

My body came into this world a little damaged, and I heaped abuse onto it. The disconnect I felt between my physical being and my cerebral one let me chase drugs, sex, abuse, and booze in ways I don't think I could have otherwise. It wasn't so much that I didn't care about my body as much as it was that I couldn't conceive of such a strange thing, a body.

Aging makes it hard to ignore your physical being. Like the weakness of withdrawal commanded my attention as a child, my body occasionally demands that I recognize it for its shortcomings now. My knees are mangled from years of stilettos. They ache on cold days. Sometimes in the middle of the night, when I've grown stiff in the stillness of sleep, I have to walk sideways down my stairs to get to the bathroom, have to clutch the railing not to fall. The bones and joints in my hands and fingers ache; a real pain lives in the pinky finger still attached to its knuckle. Sobriety makes me aware too, makes me build relationships with the blood in my veins and all my inside bits. I've taken to covering myself in tattoos, and it feels like hanging drapes in an apartment that I've lived in for a while but that has never quite felt like home.

Recently I held the hand of someone I love while he lay in a hospital bed, his body victim of both circumstances and the choices he made, most of his choices the same as mine. I watched all the blood and fluids move in and out of him for days, wishing his body well, wondering where his consciousness was, glad it didn't seem to be in that room. Later, when he was home on his sofa playing video games, we talked about our bodies, how hard it's been to learn to hear them. I know this affliction isn't mine alone but that doesn't uncomplicate it.

The line between my brain and my body blurs more every day. I know when I'm hungry. When I think about that person I love, now in his own home, I know the tightness in my chest, the subtle shifting feeling in my belly, is love or something like it. I think about his ropey arms,

his dark hair, and recognize the symptoms of desire, the tightness and tingling, so absent in my youth. And maybe that's where my brain and body really collide, those feelings.

When I say my heart is breaking, and I often do, it's because it feels as though it is, and even though I know it's a turn of phrase, the pain in my chest hurts like a breaking thing. My emotions are the most physical thing about me, and I'm only starting to understand that now. I feel sorrow in all my extremities, joy in my teeth and fingertips. Maybe the lack of connection between my body and brain wasn't something innate in me but something I learned, a sensitive kid's survival tools.

When I was young, I'd bend my spine into a question mark, crossing my arms and legs, twisting my fingers into knots. I tried to fold my skin into something other than me, like origami. I wore my muscles, bones, and flesh like an apology I was trapped in, like something I couldn't walk away from.

Today, I carry around a little canvas bag in my purse. I call it my steady bag, and that's what I use it for—to steady myself. It's full of miscellany that makes me feel my body, releases my consciousness from the panicky circles it often gets caught in, makes me instead notice the sensations of my skin and nerves. The contents change every time I find a new gimmick, but I always have an Olba's menthol inhaler, some sour candy, a peppermint and lavender rollerball I run over the back of my neck, tingly lip gloss and a heavy, green, heart-shaped stone with the word *resist* carved into it. I hold the stone in my hand and rub my thumb over the heart's depression, counting my own heart beats as they slow.

A Letter to a Man I Thought Was Vanishing

I got my nails done at some salon-dive the other day, and the elderly woman who did them was watching Nascar. I remember you loving Nascar more than anything. I haven't watched in years, and I searched the leader board for any sign of Jr. or even Jeff Gordon, but I guess they've both retired. It's been a while since you sat next to me at the Lion's Lair watching the tiny TV, explaining the points chase, explaining the flags.

The only time I ever remember feeling like I could learn to be in love with you the way you wanted was sitting on those duct-taped vinyl stools, eating hot dogs and holding hands late one Thanksgiving night.

I don't know, Shorts, where you are now, not really. I hope you've found some kind of home, some peace. A few years ago, Stick's girl called me while I was still living in Los Angeles and said you were sick, said it was bad, said you were asking for me. I think it was pancreatitis that time. She said she thought I should know. I don't know what she wanted me to do, what you wanted me to do, asking for me like that. Did you think I'd get on a plane and fly home to Denver to save you?

I've tried to look you up online, but you've been a ghost, frozen in time. The photos I've found have been decades old: you holding a "For Sale" sign and sitting next to a cat carcass I think you found in a dumpster; you in your leather jacket, falling into the bar and flipping off the camera, skateboard in your other hand.

*

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music, I conjure your face under sleeping bags and hoods in the park, your breath steamy puffs in the cold. Even though it's not you, can't be you, I look too closely every time, stumbling into strange men's spaces.

When we were young, we'd pose, pretending to be bigger and braver than we were, pretending we weren't scared of the streets, pretending we welcomed violence, welcomed our fates. Shorts, I think we had bad idols. We fell for people who died young, people who hurt each other recklessly, people who treated their bodies like they were a pinky-swear, something unbreakable. Back then, I don't think we knew that making it over the hump of youth was the whole goddamn point. I don't think we knew the loans we took out against our poor, pink organs, our not-yet brittle bones, would be the debts we'd die with, the debts we'd die for.

I remember Wheezus telling me the story of the day you bobbed away in the Pacific. You told me the same story, of course, but in your version LBRO was the best punk rock band of all times. In your version, you punctuated the way the band got kicked off stage at the Viper Room for making jokes about the corpse of River Phoenix by including just how punk rock you thought that was. In Wheezus's version, he and the rest of band were five minutes out from drawing straws to see who had to notify your mom of your death when you came strolling up the beach eating a hot dog, framed by the Malibu sun, a shit-eating grin on your likely still fully-toothed mouth.

I found a picture of that a while back, your face when it had all its teeth. Even in the years we spent as a couple, I never thought you were handsome, but I was wrong. You were.

*

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: back before we stuck the dull edge of our grief into the soft soil so often we became horticulturists of sorrows, before we'd laid flowers on so many graves that spring started to smell like a funeral, we were storm chasers, me and you, sprinting into danger, holding hands. Shorts McGraw, you ran into that tornado so long it swallowed you. You became a part of the storm.

I found a new picture of you online recently. It looks professional, part of an editorial series, maybe on the faces of old-Denver or something. It's black and white, so it's hard to tell for sure, but your ginger beard looks like it's finally going gray. Your eyes look too sad, the way they did that night at the Continental Club when you got pepper sprayed. I hope it's a trick of the camera. It still makes a ball in my belly to see your eyes so sad. I hope they never got that way to stay.

I say I don't know where you are, but that's not entirely true. I could easily find you. I'm sitting at a table that doesn't belong to me in this city that no longer does either, only blocks from that bar where you used to get so mad at me and Dicky for playing trivia games you were rotten at. The bar's probably gone now, converted into some artisanal place with \$15 IPA's, but I bet I could still find you here. I bet I could find you shuffling along the no-longer-crooked sidewalks in hand-me-down Vans, your backpack full of trinkets: Evel Knievel belt buckles and melted army men.

Carla sent me a message a couple months ago. I guess she's back behind that bar where I worked for years. She said you were there, still looking for me. When I asked her how you looked, she said good. She said you still drank, but not like you used to, and I don't trust it.

Don't know what that means. So I know I could find you if I looked, but I can't come finding you or any other lost boys past their youths anymore.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: Shorts McGraw you looked up to grizzled men, Dale Earnhardt and Roddy Piper—your own craggy dad—for so long you became one yourself. When we met, I thought it was charming, you banging that stupid tin cup against the bar top, begging for change: *see the troll, pay the toll*, you'd chant. But you became that too, and your chance for change evaporated until you had no choice but to beg for it, and by then it was too late. Your shoulder blades, hardened into angel wings, were getting sharper every year.

You rarely spent nights at home, mine or anyone else's. It seemed like you needed to be near chaos, like you fed on it. I know what it means to say something is in the blood; I think the scream of stock cars and the vibration of crowded punk bars was in yours, the reverberation of poorly tuned guitars. But, I remember you stayed in with me my first night at that apartment off Sante Fe, the one with the 7-Up colored kitchen, the lemon and lime colored walls, one of which I'd later push you through in a midnight-drunken brawl, leaving a gaping hole I covered with a Mexican flag. I don't remember how you talked me into sleeping in the closet that night. I was probably just happy to have company. I think you'd lived in a lot of them by then, closets that is. You said you liked small spaces, cocoons, you called them.

I'd been without a home of my own for a while by then. I hardly owned a thing. We slept under a pile of blankets I'd collected crashing on couches and floors, friend's stained quilts, the old comforters their dogs slept on. Still, I felt as rich as I ever have that night in the closet with you beneath those dirty blankets. I wonder now if you remember how we sat up smoking all

night and didn't touch a drop of booze, maybe the only time in our relationship or friendship that we didn't.

Back then, I could never relax, couldn't be satisfied, was always moving, never contented, but I was that night, listening to you tell me stories in the dark, your cigarette's ember making trails while you did. I didn't mind listening, again, to the one about the time you did too much meth with that punk icon and rode around in his Austin cab all night, mad on the drugs and each other.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: I don't know if you'll leave a legacy, Shorts, not really. I used to worry that you'd use up all your legend by forty and get stuck paying dues for the rest of your years, however many or few of them were left. Now I wonder if you haven't been paying those dues all along. Shorts McGraw, I wonder now if you weren't born with those shabby wings.

I know everyone assumed you were called Shorts because you were short, only 5'2", which I know because we were the exact same height, even though you always said 5'6". I know you wanted to be tough, to be a punk rock badass, but most of the time you were more like adorable. I loved the way you explained your name, how it had nothing to do with being a little dude. I still imagine the jig you did when you told the story, your fingers splayed like jazz hands: *they call me Shorts McGraw because I'm always a little short—short on time, short on money.* And you were that, of course, always late, even though you never had anything to do, always caging for a free beer, a couple bucks.

If I ever knew where McGraw came from, I don't remember. It fit you, even though your given surname was German, all full of W's pronounced like V's. There were moments when you seemed like Irish folklore, like something prone to mischief and gold-hoarding—the way you'd squint your eyes around that smashed nose and point, the way you wiggled when you danced.

A different ex, one who did become my friend, told me not long ago that you were at his bar, that you were looking for me. He gave me your number, held onto mine. I thought about calling or sending a message then, like I have so many other times, but I remembered how you used to be. I remembered the week I spent in Vegas with that same ex, how you called all night, how you filled my voicemail and how even that man, the patient one, grew weary with you, how even I did.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: I tell stories about you now to kids who are the age we used to be. They don't get it though. They narrow their eyes and don't get you or us or the way things were back then. I walk away deflated, from those kids and our stories. I guess that's what aging is, especially for folks like us who leaned so hard into furious youth, who were always Colt 45's at the figure eight track and blowing lines with the band in whatever passed as backstage. Aging as a slow deflation into irrelevance, maybe the worst fate for neon fuckers like us.

I used to tell the story about the kid you pissed on at the second Modern Drunkard Convention. It wasn't my story. I wasn't there. I always was a bit of a hanger-on in that in-crowd. Still, I was proud of that story. It made me happy to be with you in ways I can't even

locate now, ways I've lost access to in age and sobriety. I haven't told that one in a while. Its glitter has worn off. It's harder now to see the magic in you pissing on some poor kid at a urinal.

I now more understand that kid himself, so damn eager to please, when he told you that getting pissed on by Shorts McGraw was like being blessed by the Pope, how he had your poster back home, wherever that was—I imagine some sleepy Midwestern state. I get how he wanted to impress you, paying your bar-tab, buying you Bloody Mary's. Of course, in the story, you told him: *kid you need to find another idol*. But, these days, I get how much he did need to find someone else to admire.

Brianna called me a few years ago, and she was asking for a favor, but she also said you were dying, said you couldn't recognize faces anymore. I was heartbroken, bent myself into a ball and sobbed all night. In the morning, I called Josh, messaged Keno, wanted to be told Brianna was a junkie and not to be trusted, and that was true, but your slide, your loss of the ground note was also true, they both said.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: after I fucked the guy who owned the hipster pizza shop, I remember you at my back door, crying. You were crying in the rain like a Hank Williams song, saying my name over and over, making it three syllables: Je-nnnn-eee. I didn't answer, but I guess you know that. I don't remember if I was crying too. I must have been; it seems so sad now. I kept whispering: *just go away Shorts*, and I don't know if that was what was best for you or not, but it was for me. I'm sorry.

I know people always say things were cool before they were cool. It's a pop culture cliché. But you were. A true punk rocker, I know your DIY was of necessity. I love cooking

now. I think you gave me that. I know now that homeless kids and couch surfers seem to always know how to cook, some kind of compensation for leaving filthy socks in the sink and drinking the cooking sherry, some domestic rent, I guess. But, I remember standing over the stove with you, you teaching me the “thumb test” for steak—medium rare should feel like the fatty pad at the base of your thumb. I never have a kitchen now that’s not stocked with Old Bay. I don’t make crab legs or seafood-boil that often, but I like to know I can. I don’t know why you, raised in a landlocked mountain resort town, knew your way around seafood so well, but you did.

That’s one of the stories I sometimes tell about you, that I knew a guy who was a snowboarding pioneer. I tell people I dated a guy who made his own snowboards in his childhood garage. I don’t tell them that you were sponsored, that you could have been pro. I don’t even know, now, if that’s true or part of the legend—yours or mine.

I still can’t sew, not nearly as well as you. I never bought a sewing machine, let alone learned how to use one.

I stumbled across a video of you the other day, some band with a washboard player playing a song called “The Legend of Shorts McGraw.” You were in the front row. You looked good, even though you had a Fu Manchu, and you know I’ve always hated those. But it was recent, and you looked healthy and I started to wonder why I wasted so much worry on you.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: I had trouble turning you away. Maybe that’s why I never could contact you after I left, even when I thought you were vanishing. You always got all sweet and hangdog with apology. You were hard to love, but I did, even if I couldn’t do it in the ways you wanted. You were harder not to love, though. People tried. I tried, but somehow you always made your way back into people’s hearts.

*

Do you remember how much you took, though? On some days, and for a long while after we split, it felt like you took everything—wrecked my car, took my money, took all the time I spent waiting for you, all the times when you never showed up. Do you remember that Christmas Eve? I waited all night for you dressed in some little Mrs. Claus lingerie, a plate of perfect medium-rare steaks going cold on the coffee table. When you finally came home, Colorado sun breaking the Christmas morning dark, you said: *but Melon was at the bar*, like that would explain it all. I haven't dressed up like that, in anything sexy, since. But I kept on staying there too. Kept on handing you my keys, my money. Kept up with things like that long after we broke up, after you moved out.

Mikey told me it was my fault for expecting you to be different, and I was pissed at him, but he was right. You were, as advertised, a man at home in the waves, while I've spend I lifetime looking for my moorings. I wanted you to be like me: fucked, but desperately trying to get un-fucked. Throughout our lives, we're told that people don't change, and I don't believe that. People do change; we do it all the time; but we don't change for each other, even though that seems like the best reason to do it.

A handful of men later, I finally landed on an abuser; it was bound to happen. When he drank, and we fought—as we inevitably would—he'd scream at me: *fuck you. Go back to Denver. Go back to Shorts McGraw*. And I never understood why he said it, didn't get what he meant. But now I can see how much space you took up, even after I was gone.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: there was a time when I never worried about anyone, when I didn't believe in undertow or riptides. But even after I came to see how

dearly people I cared about paid for the choices they made, and I spent my nights wringing my hands and sobbing into the grief I was bracing myself for, I didn't worry about you. I thought you were mystical. But I was dumb. That was before I learned that magic, even yours, doesn't work that way, doesn't mean immortal, doesn't mean you can fly with those sharp and broken wings.

The night I dragged you and Stick to see Willy Vlautin read from *Northline* wasn't the last time I saw you, couldn't have been, I don't think. I didn't leave town for months after, and we must have hung out again, but that's where I place you in my memory. I doubt you'd ever been to a reading before, and I doubt you've been since, so maybe you didn't know how rude it could have been that we stumbled in late and drunk. I say could have been, because the author was talking, right as we sat down, about how he had to move on from people like us—the toothless, addicted masses. I was uncomfortable, felt cartoonish and stupid, but I think you were proud. That was the biggest difference between us, you wore it all like an honor and I never could get out from under it.

I heard later that you read the book I'd let you keep after the signing—*Motel Life*, Vlautin's first—not that I had a choice after he signed it: *Speed, Booze, and Pills, Good luck always, Shorts McGraw*. I heard that Stick read it too, that sad quiet book about brothers. I heard Stick tattooed the phone cord from the book's cover on your forearm and that he did the same to himself, so you two would be like blood brothers. I think it's the only book you ever read cover to cover, unless something's changed. Maybe, you wanted your moorings too. Maybe that's why you always had to keep so busy, so loud, so in the middle of things.

I've been back around town lately, had lunch with Davey. I asked about you, like I always do when I see someone from the old crew. He said you were good. Said you were the best he'd ever seen, that you had a job at a Conoco and had finally grown tired of being the mascot, the punchline. And I don't know what happened, don't know if you really knocked at death's door, don't know if you're better, don't and won't know why. Even if you are better.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: I am with you in Vegas, where you're just another face on the streets.

In the absence of Nascar and punk rock music: it's past March now, and I didn't call you for your birthday, and I won't call you next March either. I will, though, get a tiny number eight tattooed on my middle finger, not for Dale Earnhardt Sr.'s car, but for you, for always remembering you.

Dear Henry

Dear Henry,

Is it strange to hear from me now, after all this time? I guess we talk, sure, surface stuff, why you like the new Lupe Fiasco song, why I think Childish Gambino is overrated.

I'm not writing you now to tell you I'm better, but I am, finally, better.

I want to explain about the leaving, why I left, at least as far as I understand it myself, and I'm not sure I ever will understand completely. I never told you the truth. Hell, I never told anyone the truth, and part of that truth I hid is that when I left you, left everything, I didn't even know why I was doing it. I didn't dare stop for even one second to think about it. I think I'd returned to some animal instincts, and I just felt like I had to run. I just knew I was in danger.

I don't even know enough to know if I was running to or away. I think I thought I was scampering toward something different, toward a city full of angels, thought I was casting my eyes to the land under which my dead idols lay buried: Bukowski and Fante. I thought I was running away to promises I wouldn't have admitted I believed in anyway. But the promises and the land and the angels weren't it. Looking back, now, I wasn't even running away, exactly. I felt like I just had to keep moving, like if I stopped and looked at the mess I had made, it might kill me, might take you with me. I still believe it might have. I don't regret leaving.

But, like I said, I'm better. I can't say cured. That's a heavy word full of lies, but I'm sober, and I'm taking medication and paying a blond woman with an office above a coffee shop to listen to me complain once a week. I've been excavating, digging around in the past. I waited a long time to do it, especially this part, the *us* part where I was shit, and I hurt you. That part has laid there in my past like a grave. I didn't want to disturb it, haven't wanted to look at what I've

done. I wish it was all about regret for hurting you, but it's also about avoiding what I've lost. You've been near the bottom of my list not because you weren't important but because you were.

It's not so much that there are things I think you should know—you might even be better off without them, without me entirely—but there are things I need to say, even if I say them just to the gaping void. Henry, you can throw this letter away. I wouldn't blame you. I've always been selfish this way, saying the things I think I need to say, even if they're not the things people need to hear, not the things you need to hear.

I've said I'm sorry. I've said it aloud and alone in the dark and typed it, and I've said it to your sleeping body. I've said it to you, and you've been Mr. Silver Lining, like you've always been prone to. You've said you never blamed me, said we were too young, too drunk, too punk, that we were too much of a good thing, and after you said that, I cried in my car for an hour. Because that's how you were, a man who didn't blame me, even when it was my fault. You were always trying to let me off the hook even when, like this one, it's a hook that's grown into my tissue and become part of me.

So I'm not writing to say I'm sorry. That sorry is a pin in a bone I'd fall apart without. But, I want to tell you that I never blamed you either. I want to burn whole mountains of sweet grass and wave them over that part of our shared past, emancipate us both from not knowing, from having no reasons, a void canvas where the only thing we can both see is my black, burnt, breadcrumb trail.

A week, maybe, before I left; a week, maybe, before I stood under that bar's neon, the bar's office phone in my sweaty hand, half-drunk during my day shift and told you, *I'm going to*

Los Angeles, I'm leaving, I went to a wake for one of my regulars. He drank Budweiser bottles and had a salt and pepper beard that he kept neatly trimmed. He came into the bar late on Friday nights wearing faded Hawaiian print shirts and dad jeans held up with a woven leather belt, the kind that was popular when we were kids. In the winter, he wore white turtlenecks under his shirts. He was innocuous, didn't stand out much, but was one of the staple characters that gathered at the north end of the bar by the Jagermeister machine.

When my boss told me he was dead, that he'd had a massive heart attack on some job site, I didn't much care except in that way that I care when anyone dies younger than they should. I cared in a *what a shame* sort of way.

I skipped his funeral but went to his wake, not out of respect, but because it was a social event and an excuse to get day drunk on a Wednesday. By then I was looking for any excuses I could find to be passed out by dusk, reasons to wake up at 11 pm with shaky hands and chapped lips, with eyes dry as parchment. Looking for ways to explain to both of us why it was always you at work and me at the bar. I meant to be good to you, meant not to take you for granted. That's gotta be hard to believe, I know, but it's true.

So, Henry, that day I was wasted again. I was hanging out with the rest of the guys who gathered there at the north end of the bar by the Jagermeister machine, the regulars, most of whom I called friends. Those men felt like home to me back then. They felt like a safe space, but I've always been bad at finding safe spaces, running toward the tree line when the rainclouds roll in, thinking that high ground is where you find shelter. Looking back now, I think there were bad men in that group. We never really knew each other, me and those guys, beyond the reach of the bar, beyond war stories and racist jokes and shared rounds of shots.

I don't think they were predators, those guys, or at least not most of them. I don't think they meant to hurt me or anyone else for that matter. But that space was just a space of hurt, a whole universe of it. I trusted them and that was the bullseye on my back. I was a blackout girl, I'm sure you remember. I was like silly putty. Those men could imprint themselves on me, like newsprint, but by morning, their images would be gone. I'd be left just a little grayer, a little dingier. A new set of sweaty palms could flex and fold me, erase the inky stains they'd left on me.

You didn't like them, did you Henry, those men in the corner of the bar? You never said so, but I remember you scrunching your face up, narrowing your eyes the way you do, like Scrooge McDuck, when I mentioned them. You'd make that noise in your throat, like you were choking on your own low opinion of them. Maybe you bit your tongue to spare my feelings, which doesn't sound right, but who knows? You were always a better judge of character than I was, but you kept your heart in your ribs where it belonged, rather than waving it, beating and bloody, making a mess all over the streets, like I did.

I envied that about you, even if I never said it; I envied that, even drunk, you never went spilling yourself all over the place, not like I did—whispering secrets to strangers for the price of a room temperature beer.

So, that late August day—it was gray, so muggy my hair stuck to my neck while I smoked cigarettes outside the bar—I was drunk at midday. I was drunk and feeling a little bit pretty, and those were the worst days, the ones that started with promise, like I might not drink too much, like I might not spend all my tips, might wake up in my own pajamas in my own bed,

our bed, in our apartment where we belonged. The worst days were always the ones that started out promising to be better than the last one.

And that wet-gray August day was a wake, sure, but death didn't color anything for me back then. Everything was a nod in death's direction, anyway, every shot, every line of shitty cocaine felt like it was, maybe, the last.

Everyone at the memorial was drunk, I'm sure, but I'm also sure I was the drunkest. I know you remember. I was always the drunkest one in the room, always had to be dragged home early. Do you remember the rings of bruises on my biceps, the old-avocado-colored chains of other people's fingerprints that lined my body? I remember you wincing, sometimes, when I showed you all the bruises I collected under other people's fingers.

Kyle took me home the night of the wake. Creepy-Kyle who used to lean against the bar and lick his lips, fat like garden slugs. When he came into the bar on my shifts, I dropped his beers quickly, tried to wait until he wasn't paying attention, tried to avoid his calloused fingers wrapping themselves over mine. All the bartenders dreaded him, his seemingly pupil-less eyes scanning the length of you, lingering too long. Even though the night of the wake ended in darkness, without memory, like nights always did, I know Kyle took me home. It wasn't just because when I called Kelly, she said: *I fucking told them not to let that bastard take you.*

I know it was Kyle because when I came to, I found four out of six of a pack of Stella's on the kitchen counter next to a mostly full bottle of Jagermeister. Stella and Jagermeister were his drinks. I would have never bought those. Those were drinks I think he left so I'd know he was there.

I tried to hide it from you, Henry, but I'm sure you knew that I was a girl who got taken, passed from one set of hands to another. None of those nights belong on your conscience, of course. I know when you weren't working, you were with me. You couldn't always be sure that the hands I got passed to were yours. I know you tried. You tried more than I did, more than I earned.

I don't know what happened that night. I don't remember getting in Kyle's red sports car or stopping at the liquor store on Broadway where we must have bought the drinks.

I came to among those banker's boxes full of shitty remaindered books: old hardcopies of Michael Crichton and James Patterson novels that neither of us ever read.

We were hoarding books then. But you know that, you got stuck with them when I left. Maybe I was the only one doing it in the first place, collecting all those books, thinking I could open a store, thinking I could change our lives that way. How complicit were you in my compulsions? Looking back, you seem so measured, like I asked too much of you, like I demanded you make me happy. It worked, though, in its way. Not my asking, necessarily, but you made me the closest approximation of happy someone wired like me could get living the way I was. I was full of cross-circuits and malfunctions back then. I guess I still am, but Henry, the wiring acts up less when I don't marinate it in booze and shame.

Do you remember that 80's toy, the stuffed animal that could be folded entirely into itself? I used to imagine myself like that. When I'd wake up at 4 a.m., another day smeared black across my memory, I'd imagine myself unhitching the skin on my back, imagine wrapping myself up in it, disappearing into my own flesh. I used to reach for you in the dark. I'd stretch my fingers through the fine, dark hairs on your rising and falling chest. I'd rest my head on your

bony shoulder and count the beats of your heart until sleep pulled me under. I don't mean to make it sound like it was all bad for me back then. It wasn't. Sometimes there was your beating heart in the dark, Henry, and that was heaven.

But I don't remember that night, any of the things I know must have happened: getting out of the car, walking down that long dark sidewalk to our back door. I don't remember fumbling with my key in the lock, don't know if I managed it myself or if Kyle did it for me, if his rough hands pulled our house key from my clumsy fingers. I don't remember our dog; was she there the whole time? What I do remember is Kyle's black turtleneck, his red ball cap, but he always wore that, like a uniform. I don't know if I remember those things from that night or from all the other nights.

You weren't home from work yet when I came to, but it was dark. So, it was after eight but before eleven. It was midweek, a Wednesday, I think, so you wouldn't have been working past eleven; you were still at the pizza place on 6th Ave.

When I found my purse, I found my phone full of messages and voicemails from you. I don't remember their contents, just their existence. Did you know something was wrong? Had I failed, again, to show up somewhere I'd promised to be? Maybe it was one of those warm late summer nights when the staff of your restaurant gathered on the patio after close and drank icy beers with chunks of lime under the white globe lights.

I had magical nights there, Henry, drinking with you and your friends, temporarily safe from myself and malicious hands.

But I don't remember the night of the wake or your voice on those messages, don't know if you sounded anxious or annoyed. Maybe you remember? But I don't know why that one night

would have been anything special to you. Just another night of me breaking promises, sobbing and drunk on our floor.

I don't know if I actually lost consciousness, if I closed my eyes and left or if I stayed on autopilot, a prisoner of my whiskey-addled hippocampus, but I came to among those bankers' boxes, my jeans pulled to my ankles. They were tight at the ankle and had been turned inside out and were all stuck around my feet. Someone had been in a hurry to pull my pants off, and I don't think it was me. I loved those jeans, the stonewashed ones, and even drunk, I think I would have been more careful with them, even if I wasn't careful with myself. I'd worn a red and black embroidered corset top. The eye hooks were torn, leaving a tidy line of holes and stringy fabric in their wake. My bra, a black one with too much padding, was ripped in the back. I inched my jeans over my ankles and stuffed them in a ball in my armoire. The bra and corset I threw in the trash can in the backyard, embarrassed that I'd worn them in the first place, especially to a wake. I was embarrassed that I'd ever felt pretty in my whole life.

When the hot water in the shower ran down my shoulders, I felt the scratches on my back where impatient fingers couldn't manage the hook on my too padded bra, from where the sharp edge had been tugged back and forth across my spine in frustration. I knew this small injury, a familiar one. It was a death by a thousand cuts.

Whether truly passed out or just blacked out, I reentered my body as it was flat on the orange kitchen linoleum. My face was pressed against the mobile dishwasher at an angle that hurt my neck and left ridges on my cheek. I didn't find the knot on my skull until I tried to massage shampoo into my sweaty scalp. It felt big, but what was one more bump on my braille-skull back then? I tripped; I fell; I got pushed. You know how beat-up I always was. That the bump existed doesn't mean Kyle did it. It doesn't mean he shoved my clumsy body backwards

onto our orange linoleum. It doesn't mean I was unconscious, doesn't mean he smacked my head against the door of his red sports car while he was dragging me down that dark sidewalk and into our house.

The back door was open. Dollar bills, probably whatever tips I'd not spent at the bar, were scattered across the kitchen floor. Remember how many sad, single dollars I brought home from those shitty dayshifts? How we'd stash them in the giant cherry jar I'd taken from work? How we joked about it being our savings account? How that wasn't even really a joke? Do you remember that snowy morning when we counted all those bills and were both amazed at how many we'd collected?

I didn't know I was bleeding until after I'd thrown away my corset and bra, after I'd gathered all those bills up off the floor. When I peed, it burnt the way it does after a great night or a terrible one, the way that only means rough. Whatever night I'd had, it wasn't great. When I peed, I found more bills, bloody singles stuck roughly inside my body. They were wadded, crumpled. Whatever had happened, whatever message he was sending, Kyle had not even taken the time to roll the single dollars. My worth to him far was less than that of a line of cheap coke sucked off the back of a bar bathroom toilet tank.

Almost ten years later, I'm still not saying rape about that night. I'm not saying rape about a lot of nights like that one. Often, I became unrecognizable when I was drunk. When I'd wake up with you, when we'd make love hungover and stay tangled in the sheets until one of us had to work, when you'd tell me stories about what I'd done the previous night, you were always talking about a stranger—a cruel, loud woman who seemed so foreign to the frightened unwell

girl I was. That hot August night, all those other nights, I don't know what I did. Maybe I was passed out. Maybe I was bleeding, my head on the floor, my face pressed against the dishwasher. Maybe I said okay, or yes, or please. The truth is that night, like so many others, is a guess. My memory is a blank page. I didn't live in this violated body back then; what happened to it was of little consequence to me. I spent so much time absent from it. I left it unprotected for the taking. I know you blacked out too sometimes, but I'm not sure it was the same, not sure you did it so completely.

The night of the wake, I pulled the bills from my body and wrapped them in toilet paper, hid them at the bottom of the bathroom trash, a secret shame, my whole body a secret shame. I didn't add them to our giant cherry jar.

I felt desperate to scrub the stale beer smell of the bar off my flesh, the cologne from my hair. Back then, I still thought I could scrub those things off, thought they were only scents.

Do you remember that awful coffee scrub I bought at the plant store on 6th down the street from Don's Mixed Drinks? It left the shower filthy but smelled so good. That night, I used the whole mason jar of it, and when it ran out, I used shampoo and then the bar of soap that sat by the sink. I thought if I could scrub hard enough I could erase it all, could hide it all from you. I knew then that what we had was fragile. I was so afraid to break it, and I thought for a minute I could protect it once every inch of my skin was furious pink and abraded. Henry, you were my good thing, and every inch of my skin was a betrayal.

Looking back now, I don't think you'd have thought I betrayed you. Maybe you wouldn't have narrowed your eyes at me, disgusted. Maybe you wouldn't have packed your things and left, wouldn't have packed your work clothes and books and left me. You were never jealous, never tried to possess me.

Is my memory playing tricks on me or were you good? It's hard to remember what it felt like to believe in that kind of good. And it doesn't matter now anyway, if you'd have I thought I broke our fragile thing. I didn't give you a chance to decide, and I've had some rough days since then. Maybe because of them I've canonized you. Maybe you would have been the one to do the leaving. Maybe you'd have been the one to run. Maybe you would have turned and said *whore*, that Scrooge McDuck look on your face, while you shut that same back door.

I'm not saying that one night was exactly why I left. I'll never really know why, I don't think. But, it wasn't just that man in his black turtleneck, my own bad tips stuffed inside me. I'm not saying in their absence we would have been fine. We weren't; I wasn't, wouldn't be for years. I don't know if I'm fine now, but then I was just Jenny-One-Too-Many. I ushered in my own bad luck, made a joke of misfortune in the daylight. Kyle was just one of so many ghosts I hid from back then.

The Saturday after the wake, as I counted my till and got ready to switch shifts with the night girl, Kyle came in wearing that same fucking turtleneck. He winked and patted the barstool next to him, motioning for me to sit, and the part that made me hate myself the most was that I did. I sat with him and the men in that corner, like I always had, like I always did, like I didn't know what else to do, which I didn't. I didn't know how to unzip my crawling flesh and walk away. I didn't know how to quit drinking, to be honest, to stop hurting myself, to stop hurting you, to stop crushing everything I ever loved.

Henry, I wonder how much you knew back then. Our opposing weekend shifts meant we lived in different worlds. Remember how upset I was when I got moved to dayshifts? I knew it would change us. I knew it meant I'd always be drunk by the time you were halfway through your shift—work the only thing that ever kept me sober. Did you know about those men, Henry? About all the broken things in me? Could you have known it and liked me anyway?

I woke up every day surprised to find you there, still next to me under the sticky-summer sheets. I meant to hide it all so well. I tried to bury all that black not knowing, tried to be okay with it, tried to act like it was all part of the party. Looking back, I wonder if you knew more about it than I did. I only knew the sinking stone in my gut and the brand of shame that still hasn't, and maybe won't ever, totally vanish.

I took my first out, Henry. That's all it was. I left Denver, left that fucking bar, left our little apartment and all those hoarded books. I left you. I left with that young drunk kid. You know all that part, but he wasn't why I left, that poor kid. It wasn't Kyle in his turtleneck or all those other men or the day shifts. Maybe I'm just a runner. I don't know anything but leaving, so that's what I did. I didn't know how to do anything else, Henry, and I'm sorry. But you know that too, know all about all my sorriest-sorries. I'll keep messaging them to you, texting them. Maybe someday say it to you: *I'm so fucking sorry*. Maybe I'll never stop saying it. I don't know.

Half a decade after I left, I studied myself in a tiny medicine cabinet mirror. I was picking crusted blood from my swollen eye. My fractured eye socket the brand of another bad man's hand. I let myself think of you then for a just a second, let myself remember your warm, tan skin, your steady beating heart. I thought about how much I demanded of you. How much I asked of

your flesh and that constant beating heart, how I tried to stretch it wide enough to somehow hide my own hurt inside, as if your heart weren't already full of your own hurts. You can't outrun your demons, Henry, but you know that.

For all those things I don't remember, I remember that last time I saw you before I left. I remember it as well as anything. It was late, the morning side of the night. I'd walked through the rain, and Denver was that hollow way it gets in the aftermath of a 4 a.m. storm, all tire tread on wet pavement and streetlights reflecting off 6th ave. When I got to what had been our home, you were in your work clothes, the black button down we'd bought for Angie's wedding. You were fetal-folded into yourself, your caramel skin darker against that silver velvet of what had been our couch. That same bottle of Kyle's Jagermeister lay uncapped, sideways on the monstrosity of a coffee table I'd bought at the vintage store, the impossibly heavy one with all the gears and mechanisms inside.

The entire upended contents of our life vaporized in the space it took to drain a bottle of gross liquor, and I stood over you and touched your face and whispered sorry, whispered: *I'm so sorry Henry*. I could barely look at you then, and I can barely think of it now, your closed eyes and black hair and that fucking bottle of Kyle's liquor. Especially now, I can't think of it, hundreds of miles away and nearly a decade between then and now, and I'm here trying to rewrite my place in our shared history.

I'm not sure why I say this now, why I say it today, after all these years. Maybe I just want to speak into the gaping void between us, between your body and mine: *I don't mean to*

*suggest that we loved each other the best; we can't keep track of each fallen robin. I just remember you well. That's all. I don't even think of you that often. ***

I won't say love anymore. It's a long time ago.

Cheers,

Some kind of Broken June.

** An adaptation from Leonard Cohen's "Chelsea Hotel"

Jennifer Catlin

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Education

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|---|-----------|
| MFA Creative Writing: Non-Fiction Eastern Washington University, Cheney WA | June 2018 |
| BA English: Literature Eastern Washington University, Cheney WA | June 2016 |

Presentations

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| “Boundaries in Community Education: Trauma Informed Teaching” Lecture: Writers in the Community Training Series | October 2017 |
| “Differentiated Education in the Corrections Classroom: A Model for All Students” Presentation, Visitor’s Series, Airway Heights Corrections Center | May 2017 |
| “Multimedia Storytelling: an introduction to craft” Lecture, Recovery Cafe | January 2018 |
| “Tutoring in the Trauma Effected Classroom” Presentation, Spokane Community College Tutoring Services | March 2016 |

Academic Positions

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| Student Director Writers in the Community | June 2017-June 2018 |
| Creative Writing Instructor Airway Heights Corrections Center | October 2016 – June 2018 |
| Humanities Area Lead: Tutoring Services Spokane Community College | October 2014-August 2016 |
| Distance and E-Tutor Western E-Tutoring Consortium | December 2014-June 2016 |

Instructor of Record
Eastern Washington University

September 2016-June 2017

English Tutor III/ESL Tutor
Los Angeles City College

January 2012-June 2014

Teaching Experience

Creative Writing Instructor
Airway Heights Corrections Center

October 2016 – June 2018

Researched and implemented best practices for education in corrections environments. Developed course content focused on storytelling modes and mediums using demographic-sensitive literature to model craft and technique,

English Composition 201
Eastern Washington University

Spring 2017

Created lesson plans and assignments focusing on advanced research methods, academic writing, and rhetorical and cultural analysis. Conferenced with students to support their progress in the course and academic goals.

English Composition 101
Eastern Washington University

Fall 2016-Winter 2017

Created lesson plans and assignments focusing on the writing process, creative and academic writing genres, critical analysis of texts, and the rhetorical situation. Conferenced with students individually concerning their progress in the course and their goals for their overall college experience.

Professional Service

Nonfiction Editor

June 2017-June 2018

Willow Springs Magazine, Eastern Washington University

Grant Writer
GetLit! Festival, Eastern Washington University

September 2016-June 2017

Grants Intern and Volunteer Coordinator
Spokane Arts

June 2017-June 2018

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| Interviewer | January –July 2017 |
| The Swamp | |
| Festival Assistant | January-June 2018 |
| GetLit! Festival, Eastern Washington University | |

Administrative Experience

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|--|---------------------|
| Nonfiction Editor | June 2017-June2018 |
| <i>Willow Springs Magazine</i> , Eastern Washington University | |
| Student Director Writers in the Community | June 2017-June 2018 |
| Grants Intern and Volunteer Coordinator Spokane Arts | June 2017-June2018 |

Professional Writing Experience

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|---|--------------------|
| Grants Intern and Volunteer Coordinator Spokane Arts | June 2017-June2018 |
| Editor-In-Chief Scissors & Spackle | May 2011-May 2014 |

Honors and Awards

| | |
|---|--------------------------|
| English Composition Graduate Service Appointment Eastern Washington University | September 2016-June 2018 |
| The Colton-Huston Scholarship | September 2015-June 2016 |

Eastern Washington University

The Ralph Tieje Scholarship
Eastern Washington University

September 2014-June 2016

Certifications

CRLA Level I

January 2016