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THE IMPRISONED RICHARD SIMMONS AND OTHER STORIES OF GROWING UP

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master in Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Danielle Buynak

May 2016

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MASTER'S THESIS

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THE IMPRISONED RICHARD SIMMONS

I sometimes forget that Richard Simmons was a nearly major part of my childhood. Because at the tender age of nine, I was a plus-sized elementary school kid with a mom who didn't know how to fix me.

Richard Simmons did. He knew how to make me feel like my cottage cheese body was a thing on the mend, like the windmill my arms made during The Association's "Windy" could flap around fast enough to helicopter me away from the blood taste in my mouth when I tried to run.

His breed of exercise was like nerdy synchronized dancing and Sweatin' to the Oldies 2 was the soundtrack of my life. I could match his moves with my awkward body, and his, my, group of on-screen peers didn't judge me as I side-stepped across the den when no one was home. I especially loved the intro and end, where Richard would toe point around the studio of his 30 closest dough-women friends while they clapped and cheered. I loved their

testimonials, the promise in how many pounds they'd each shed to Rockin' Robin, the way that they looked so free and comfortable with themselves. And so I started learning the women's names, started looking for them in his other videos: Tone and Sweat, Disco Sweat, Blast and Tone, Dance Your Pants Off. I watched Richard Simmons, fitness guru, fabulous motivator, celebrity personality, raise these women up out of their bodies. He made them feel important, and empowered, and loved, and that was his strategy. It wasn't just helping them reach fitness goals, it was his shining and weird empowerment that made Richard Simmons and these women my childhood idols. Their bodily freedom, I wanted it for myself.

They looked so good during "My Boyfriend's Back," those women, standing in rows behind Richard doing flirty little hand motions, little kicks. As a child I remember wondering if I'd ever even have a boyfriend to go away in the first place. But after watching, after learning the moves, I never had any doubt I'd be able to get him back if he did go anywhere. Us Richard Simmons women, or me and the overweight gaggle of girls in the videos, we could get a man and keep him. We could probably do anything.

So when I read the other day that Richard Simmons was being held captive in his own home – victim of a housekeeper using mind control to keep a leash on his finances, I thought, not Richard. Not all that energy and

positivity, my childhood pillar, prisoner in some Los Angeles mansion. And where had the women gone, all his friends? How had we let this happen?

Because while Richard Simmons has been hidden away from us, locked in his closet of sequins perhaps, we've gone on without him. Gained weight, doubted ourselves, felt stupid at the gym trying to make ourselves better or just trying not to pass out on the moving treadmill.

And though I never got in shape using his videos, I felt this freakish peace with myself during those summers when I'd pop *Sweating to the Oldies 2* in the VHS player and spend time with my friends. They weren't embarrassed doing the moves, and so I wasn't either. They were having fun and Richard was having fun and together all of our arms were raised doing the same dumb huge windmill rotations, all our armpits and sweat stains visible, Richard's afro-orange tufts, my own soft pits before the onslaught of puberty, and none of us caring.

Maybe Richard Simmons' alleged home imprisonment is just what we get for locking him up in ourselves – convincing ourselves that we have to be serious and composed all the time, only doing squats in secret in that back private room of our 24-hour mega gyms.

The Richard Simmons, who, on the front cover of *Star* magazine, looks grey and gaunt, sparkle gone from his eye, signature Afro deflated, is the Richard Simmons we deserve. Because when you lock something good and

free inside yourself, when you pretend it doesn't exist anymore, its powerful quads wither. It stops wearing sequin short shorts.

Truth is, I hadn't thought about Richard Simmons or the workout girls in years. I also haven't been happy with my body in years. And I'm not saying that the two are correlated, but there's probably some kind of self doubt that sneaks in when there's not someone yelling through a bulbous 90s TV set about how wonderful you are and how just this one grapevine means you're succeeding in loving yourself. And I felt implicated by the article, because I, like his real life friends perhaps, had let him slip from the public eye and from my daily concerns. Read: I'd locked up that dancing, confident, tubby little girl in the mansion of my adult self, adult body, no mind controlling housekeeper to blame.

The fight to free Richard Simmons begins somewhere within us and ends somewhere in a public space surrounded by smiling confident women wagging our arms and fingers, jiggling arm fat be damned, together, to the song "Big Girls Don't Cry." Because that past self, me and my workout video gal pals, the big girls, we danced and we did not cry.

We do now. For poor hostage Richard Simmons, alone in that big mansion, and for ourselves, who forgot that instead of crying we could just sweat that shit out.

MOMENTS OF BEING MOTHERED

1. Boob Job

At sixteen, my mother offers me a boob job. That or a sweet sixteen party, my choice. She's half kidding, half serious, and under the impression that the kind thing to do is give me options just in case. Just in case my boobs never come in, in case I don't take after her side of the family, in case I feel bad about them.

My mom has double, possibly triple Ds. She's always worn the same brand of bra, outdated, with five rows of hooks in the back that transform her boobs into cones. I have Bs, sometimes As. Sometimes I don't even wear a bra.

At sixteen, I look up breast growth patterns on the internet, trying to figure out if I'm doomed or if one day they might come in and are just late to the party. I find out they can grow until you're 22, so at sixteen, I choose not to have a boob job.

2. Removing the Mole

By the time I'm thirteen, I've decided the brown circle on the side of my face is definitely a beauty mark and not a mole. And when my mother asks if I want to get it removed, the first time she asks, I say no. The second time, she takes me to the dermatologist.

The doctor turns my face to the side and tries to figure out if the mole is raised more than it should be. He shines a penlight on it to see if it's the right color brown, right shape, has a tail.

"Looks fine," he says. "But I can take it off if you want."

I look at my mom and she looks at me. I tell her I'll think about it. We go home and she asks me a few days later if I've decided. Then a month later. Eventually, she stops asking.

It's strange how an imperfection can be – mine so clearly a part of me, of my face. And it's not that she thought it was ugly or needed to be gone, as much as she thought I'd be self-conscious about something that made me different, something so visible.

My mom had a mole removed from her eyebrow when she was younger. Her mother had insisted.

3. Body Suit

My mom has this leotard thing, oxidized blood-red body suit and matching wrap skirt thing, that she tries to get me to wear. She pulls it out of the closet and I tuck my soft eleven-year-old self into it.

It's made for a woman's body. Low dipping v-neck. Skirt made to hug a natural, defined waist. Opaque crepe over satin. A little bit sexy – but not too much. Too much for a child.

It fits me in that I can get my body into it, but that's all. These things are not made for little girls. And I wonder what she's thinking: me in elementary school, too-heavy for my height, wide where she would have been narrow. Me with my brown hair cut too short. Me with my round, round face.

4. Wedding Gown

It won't zip around my ribcage, my mother's wedding dress. I'm a junior in high school. When she got married, she was 26.

And I'm not sure why she pulls it out of my sister's closet for me to try anyway, but I do, wanting it to fit, wanting to see myself as her. At my worst, I think she does it because she gets some cruel satisfaction out of having been smaller than me — I think she's so proud of what she used to look like, that she would secretly revel in her wedding gown, stuck on my hips.

At my best, I think she must want it to zip, because there's something about passing clothing down to your daughter that makes you feel like you've armed her with something.

In any case, she tells people it doesn't fit me, and makes sure to point out that it's a size six – pre-vanity sizing, unaltered.

I would never wear it for my wedding anyway, I think.

5. Eleanor Roosevelt

In fourth grade I give a speech as a famous historical figure. The assignment is to commit, dress up like them, speak like they would have.

I check out every book the library has on Eleanor Roosevelt and immerse myself in becoming the warrior woman. Her first name was really Anna. She had a mind for the service of others. She thought of herself as the ugly duckling, felt often like she didn't belong. I know her before I read about her, or feel like I do. In any case, I feel a quiet pull to Eleanor Roosevelt when my classmates are giving speeches as musicians, celebrities.

When I tell my mom about having to be Eleanor Roosevelt, she prints out articles from the Internet about her early life, about her time as the first lady and gives them to me when I exhaust the books. This is one side of my mother.

When it comes time to work on my costume, my mom and I stand for hours in her office, scrolling through pictures of Eleanor, her teeth, her bouffant, her mouth, sometimes pursed.

“You know, she’s not much to look at,” my mom says.

“You could have picked someone better looking to want to be.”

This is her other side, my mother, surface-level and judgmental. Like boiling a monolith, a historical figure, down to her physical aspects put her on an accessible plane. Like my mother has to compete.

6. Lingerie

I stand in the room over the garage, waiting for the rumble of the garage door to slam in to the concrete and stop. Then I go into my parents’ room and pull open my mom’s drawer, second one from the top on the left. Under her underwear drawer. Above her sock drawer. Where she keeps her nighties.

I don’t know it then, but the gorgeous satin ball gowns I try on in secret are my mother’s lingerie.

In secret, I do this for years — through elementary and middle and high school — put on these floor length, lace and satin dresses, spin around in her full-length mirror, billow them around my legs. Dark blue, red, white, light

pink. Things made for a woman's body. Things to make a woman feel beautiful. Things to remind her that she is desired and wanted.

Because they're elastic, everything fits me. All but the crotchless panties, which don't fit at all. I thought they were a bra.

As a consolation to how strange it feels to find out I've been trying on my mother's lingerie for years, I tell myself she never wears it anymore. She's put on weight. None of the gowns would fit her anymore.

At least with me, I tell myself in the mirror, they get some use.

7. Humor Me

My mother and I go shopping together regularly. Usually late at night, usually to dig through sale racks at the department store on school night.

She picks out bizarre clothing — bell bottoms made to look like brown and blue water, shirts with trailing trumpet sleeves, matching pink and pink sweater sets, floor-length orange paisley dresses — and has me try them on.

She always says the same thing: "Humor me." And dutifully, I do. And she buys the clothes. And I wear them to school. And I get made fun of — a second grader in adult women's clothing.

I love them though, the weird clothes, because my mom picked them out. Because she thought I'd look good in them, or that I'd like them. In any case, she gave them to me.

8. You Have a Beautiful Daughter

In high school, I want to go to college in Boston. I get accepted with a fat scholarship to Northeastern, a cool private liberal arts school, and my mom and I fly up for a few days to see if the campus will be a good fit.

It isn't. Boston has very limited green space, very few trees. The campus has a small concrete bound patch of grass they call a quad. And it is cold. So cold that it bites through my new Northeastern sweatshirt and into my skin.

So cold that my mom and I find a beautiful mall and a beautiful department store and she buys me the most beautiful winter coat, bizarre in its own right. Black and down to my knees. Wool. Covered zipper. Huge, expressive lapels that point up and over my shoulders like something a movie villain would wear.

I wear the coat out of the store.

We barely make it a block when three men zip down the street next to us on bicycles. One turns his head back to my mom and yells in his deep, Boston accent, "You have a beautiful daughter!"

A compliment made for her. My mother smiles.

9. Origin Story

When my mom is a child, my grandma is a hateful mother to her. She puts her down and calls her stupid. She tells her no one will ever want to be

around her, be her friend. My child mother, she believes it. My grandmother tries to break my mom because my grandmother is unhappy with herself.

“I love you, but no one else ever will,” my grandma tells her.

And so, my mom grows up thinking that’s true. And she does everything to combat what she’s been told: steals her sister’s records and gives them away, dates the valedictorian, then dates all his friends. She throws parties and wears revealing clothes, hoping that’ll make people like her, knowing she has a tiny, beautiful body.

She tries too hard. People think she’s phony. Years later, they still will.

My mother tries like this her whole life, tries to make people like her, tries to transcend her mother’s hurt. She thinks the only viable part of herself is physical. She was taught to think that.

And when she’s grown up, after she’s had three daughters, when she doesn’t see her body as impressive anymore, my grandmother’s still in her head, mothering.

10. Gowns

When my mom gets married, my grandma picks her wedding dress out of the Sears catalogue. Long lace chiffon train, finished with lace. Low but modest bodice. Beading, I think. Sleeves, because Jewish women are supposed

to keep their arms covered for their wedding. My mother gets no say. My grandma doesn't even get it altered for her.

This woman. For my mom's sister's wedding, my grandma has herself a custom gown made at Kleinfelds in New York City. Mint Green. Circle neckline. Chiffon cape. Sheer shoulder covering, removable. Only the best for herself.

This is the kind of person my grandmother is.

And my mother, mothered by this woman.

11. Cutting Up The Dress

My grandma's mint green dress hangs in the garage of my childhood home. Someone, either me or one of my sisters, decides to take it down and use it for dress up. I wear it around the house. I love the cape. I love the way it flows behind me.

And then we cut it up, jagged on the bottom like Wilma from the Flintstones. We think it is a good idea. We wear it around in our rooms and hope that our mom won't see that we've ruined the dress.

Funny thing is that my mom doesn't get angry with us. She should. She always does with these things. But clothing can carry ghosts. And scissors can stop you from being haunted.

12. Humor Me, In Reverse

In the fitting room at Talbots, I wait while my mom tries things on. She's making frustrated sounds, asking me to pull her different sizes. She has recently put on weight, and is up from her size six pre-vanity sizes, pre-childbirth, forty years younger body, to a women's 2X. She is displeased. She says everything makes her look fat.

I go with her to Talbots because I want to help her feel good about herself again. I like playing dress up with my mom. I also like to help her update her wardrobe, look less frumpy. My mother isn't a frumpy woman.

In the fitting room, she comes to an odd piece I've pulled for her, something with a tie around the neck, something patterned.

"This will look awful on me," she says. "I'll look so fat."

"Humor me," I say.

13. Hyde Park

My mother, in her endless pursuit to go above and beyond, decides that as a family we'll drive eight hours to visit the Roosevelt homestead, Hyde Park.

Once there, I am unimpressed. I only care about the gift shop and convincing my mom to buy me a purple glass mug with Eleanor Roosevelt's silhouette on it. On the back, it says, "A woman is like a tea bag — you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water."

When I give my speech as Eleanor Roosevelt, I wear one of my mom's high-necked red dresses. My mom lets me borrow her grandmother's cameo pendant and she helps me fluff my hair into Eleanor's poofy bun. It is not an attractive look. My mom helps me go over my report, and makes sure that I get it all in there: Eleanor's philanthropic mind, her tumultuous marriage, her lifelong struggle of feeling like an ugly duckling.

Up in front of the class, I imagine John McKennon, the ten-year-old love of my life, watching me as ugly duckling Eleanor Roosevelt. I don't feel ugly at all.

It doesn't matter to me what Eleanor looked like as much as who she is, what she did. In her clothing, adopting her demeanor, I feel strong and smart. Maybe it's because of my mother, or maybe it's in spite of her.

It's "you could have picked someone better looking to want to be," or her printing off articles, her taking me to Hyde Park, her confidence in me to be whatever kind of woman I wanted to be.

14. Drinking Tea, Alone

I grow up and go to college and move away. The Eleanor Roosevelt mug stays in my childhood home, safely hidden in an overcrowded kitchen cabinet.

I imagine my mom taking it out and using it late at night, purple glass so hot it's almost untouchable. And she doesn't mind the heat.

Because she came from hot water, grew up in hot water, and was strong enough to raise three confident daughters despite it, despite at times her own learned attempts to shake us, to break us. What she says is that she never wanted the childhood she had for her daughters. And she didn't give it to us. She gave us better.

She's decided to take up swimming, to start reading more, to listen to audiotapes while she drives. She's taking a class on mindfulness, on meditation. She thinks that maybe, it's her time to start building a self rooted in her mind and not just her body. Her mother is dead. She's proved her wrong. She's loved by others, she's raised smart and not just pretty daughters. She's overcome, or overcoming – always a process.

I don't blame my mother for the way I was raised, for the ways I sometimes feel bad about my body, or my mole, or my boobs. I blame a system of mothering, of raising children by the model with which you were raised. I can't fault her for that.

She doesn't know it, but she also taught me her strength, her way of resiliency. So when she commented on my body, I resisted it. It's twofold: her mothering, and the ability to withstand it. She gave me that too.

There are moments that stand out to me as benchmarks in the way my mother raised me. Moments that, alone, come out in my daily ways of being.

Moments that together, form a context and a narrative, a human history in my motherline that I hold too: self doubt, defiance, hot water, persistence.

And in this moment, in the tepid and cooling waters of late adulthood, of a self-definition not primarily as that of daughter or mother, my mom doesn't have to be strong anymore. She just is.

Late at night, drinking tea alone, up and out of her hot water, my mother is reading a book, trying to better herself.

My mother, mothering yet.

RIDE TO LIVE

My dad tells it this way: he and his father in the front yard, working on cars, Saturday mornings. Neighbors and friends dropping by, saying, “Tony, could you fix this? The clutch keeps slipping.” Cars, in a line wrapping around the block and out of view.

Or maybe that’s just how I imagine it when my dad talks about being twelve or thirteen and working with his mechanic father in their driveway.

I imagine them so close, Grandpa on the ground, laying face-up under the front of a car. My dad hands him a wrench or something, has this huge smile, waits ready at the toolbox.

For him, it’s an origin story: this is how he learned to love things with a motor.

When my dad drives now, he’s still sometimes that thirteen-year-old, foot sure on the gas, armed with the knowledge that he can go anywhere.

My dad feels most comfortable at the helm. He had his boating license when he was fourteen, and drove illegally long before that. My grandpa would hand him the wheel and they'd zip through Long Island inlets, circle Fire Island, anchor where the water was deep enough to stop but shallow enough to swim.

And when I say at the helm, I mean that my father is at his best captaining a moving vehicle: boat, car, motorcycle, jet-ski, snowmobile, riding mower. It's like his blood is part gasoline. It's like in a vehicle, he can push beyond the boundaries of his body.

Maybe that's because my dad cannot move very well on his own. Maybe because he's 450 pounds of man and gets winded going up the stairs, walking from the car in the driveway to the couch in the den, putting on his shoes. He complains that his ankle hurts, or his knee, or his back. His body is failing him.

But the driving isn't about that, about a breaking body or a lifetime of unhealthy eating.

It's about what's within reach in the driver's seat. It's about being free.

Plenty of people love to drive and plenty of people are fat. My dad is not simply either, and he isn't just both. He's not just a big guy who loves the wind in his hair or going fast. He's not all into modified cars or engine size. In fact, he's not really that invested in the act of driving itself.

He's the man who picks me up.

Whenever I visit home from the west coast, my dad always drives the two hours to Washington D.C. to meet me at the airport. Every time, I'm exhausted from the flight and ready to get home, but he always takes the long way home.

He peels incognito from the highway, I-66, to some back road, saying he needs to avoid the D.C. traffic. And then he remembers a winery up this road he wanted to show me, a neat old car parked on that one, the construction they've done over here, how cool it looks when the sun sets over this particular mountain ridge. He drives me anywhere but home because he can, because I won't complain about it, because he wants to share his domain with me, confined to the vehicle but limitless.

And he's always been this man, the driving one.

Most of my childhood memories are wound up in a backseat while he rests his arm casually on the steering wheel, checking his driver side mirror, making a lane change and only signaling for half a second.

"Wanna take a ride?" he asks. It doesn't matter where.

For Christmas one year, my mom bought my dad a Harley Davidson picture frame that said, "It's not the destination, it's the journey." He never

took the stock photo — two men on motorcycles riding across a dusty orange road — out of the frame.

It still sits in our living room, untouched, but for some reason displayed. Strangers who understand the need to ride, strangers who will feel the hum of the motor, follow the same sepia sunset, forever.

I wonder if my dad puts himself in the photo. From the look of the headlights, one of the motorcycles could be his. I wonder what he thinks of romanticizing the idea of traveling itself without anticipating pulling over, the “it’s the journey,” stuff.

Because he’s not all about the journey and he’s definitely not all about the destination. He’s somewhere in between, somewhere maybe with his dad or with me or with my mom, moving his body great distances, seeing the things he’s wanted to see.

He’s one of the two motorcyclists, I think, riding through the dusty American west. Because he’s always wanted to see the Grand Canyon.

He’s never wanted to climb it.

When my dad and I drove from Virginia to Washington state two summers ago, I touched the wheel for maybe six hours of the fifty hour trip. I kept offering to drive but he wouldn’t give it up. “Next stop,” he’d say, but it

didn't happen. It didn't happen through West Virginia or Kentucky or Indiana or Illinois and it didn't happen until we hit the Mississippi River.

When we got to Badlands National Park, I got out at the first lookout and took photos of the rocks as they folded in on themselves, were swept up in waves of erosion.

My dad stayed in the car. We dotted the rest of the park like this, him stopping the car and me getting out to take pictures.

He lived vicariously through those photos. We went on like this.

I climbed the lookout of Rushmore and he looked at my photo as we drove down the mountain. It was Father's Day. He pulled the car over in Yellowstone and I got out and zoomed in on the bison in the photograph, so he could see just how solid they were. I waited in a group of spectators to take a video of Old Faithful while he sat in a parked car behind a tree 100 yards away. He watched it on my cellphone camera and said it looked incredible.

The thing is, he was so close — thousands of miles closer than he'd ever be again, and still it was too far. Like 100 yards was a 100 miles. And maybe it was to him.

But that's my father.

"I could see a little when it shot up above the tree," he said, and put the car in reverse.

He shared my pictures on Facebook like he'd been there. "Friggin awesome," he captioned them.

And this is how it's always been with my dad, me on the move and him sedentary. Because for him, it's not about walking 100 yards to see what people come from countries away to see.

It's about him not knowing. Not knowing whether there will be a post to lean on or a bench to sit on. Whether people will be there to hear him struggling to catch his breath. If he'll twist his ankle on the way up. If he'll fall — because he's afraid that no one would be able to help him up. He told me this once.

My dad sitting in the car so close to Old Faithful, some would call it lazy that he'd choose to just sit there, but I'm beginning to realize it wasn't a choice.

No one would choose that for themselves.

The last time my family was at the airport together, my mom told the gate attendant that my father was mobility impaired. She did it without asking.

In the past, my dad had always said he didn't need a wheelchair and could manage. It was his pride. I have plenty of memories of being far ahead of him and looking back to see him wiping sweat from his forehead, holding

on to a railing, hunched over a little bit. I always go back and match my pace to his so he has someone to talk to.

But seeing him in the wheelchair that time felt like he'd given up. Felt like it, but that isn't what it looked like.

My mom pushed him fast so he could get "the wind in his hair," while he laughed. He poked my sister with the cane he'd been using for balance to tease her. He made light of it, maybe because the only other option was facing the fact that he wasn't at the helm, wasn't driving.

I suppose that's where the choice lies, in smiling about something that could crush you. In driving when you could choose to never see the world.

I worry about this, him giving up, him deciding just not to see. And then I remember his father, remember the gasoline in his blood.

We do what we can to live.

Harley Davidson's motto is "Live to ride." The first part is, anyway. I think it's a little too serious for my dad, who complains that the seat of a motorcycle hurts his ass after anything longer than twenty minutes.

The second half is "Ride to live."

Ride to live. Like gasoline in his veins.

Like having the freedom to go where his body can't take him.

My dad drives his truck like it's an extension of himself. He chooses it instead of his body. He knows how hard he can push the pedal, knows when to put in the gasoline and how much. He knows at what temperature it's supposed to run and how many RPMs he can push before laying off the gas.

And when broken down, he knows he can fix his truck.

At 57, 5'10, 450, it's harder to fix a body. Harder still, to think that you have it in you.

ESSAY, UNNAMED

Southern obituaries are convincing, because when they say that someone went to be with their Father in the kingdom of heaven, that someone left this earth to be with their savior Jesus Christ, that they were graciously accepted to rest among angels, I believe it. At my desk, AP Style Guide in hand. Me with no religion. It's in the language, the naming of things. Like "heaven," like "their father" – a claim on something the rest of us don't yet understand.

I edited obituaries for four months at a small-town newspaper in Virginia, the type where family members emailed me low-resolution photos of their loved ones with animals, where I called around to funeral parlors across the state and got to know directors by name.

I did other things too: type in land transfers, color correct photos of kids holding trophies, copy down police call logs, but mostly I felt like the person who edited obituaries.

I changed the way dates were written, deleted Oxford commas, capitalized names of cities. I read the obituary sections of other newspapers to see if we'd missed anyone. But I never wrote one. I dreamed of having the words at my disposal, of being the one charged with last presenting a life. It was a big job, and to get it right, a bigger one. As if there was a right way to communicate loss.

His started like this: Demko, Anton of Westbury on April 21, 2013.
Beloved husband of late Giovanna.

My grandpa, beloved husband of someone who is not my grandma.
She'd never have married him anyway.

—

We were looking for a dog park on the north side of town. Google Maps said it was somewhere nearby, but my roommate and I kept missing it, driving behind an old high school, a decrepit parking lot, circling back.

After a while, my roommate parked her old Lincoln and put the leash on the dog and we walked through the woods, following what most closely resembled a trail.

I remember my grandma's red Lincoln, fast asleep in the garage since my grandpa died. A metal widow left after he took such good care of her, the

car, she just sits. My grandma doesn't really drive anymore. She doesn't think she can.

The trail ran parallel to a fence, chain-link, wrapped in synthetic forest green, and behind it, a sprawling cemetery, a deep valley, evergreens climbing the mountainside.

No dog park in sight.

—

This keeps happening to me: early morning flights with connections. GEG to SEA to somewhere else, sleep-sand eyes.

Outside it's black night and inside the airplane it's black and I put on headphones and try to sleep, but there's always a woman. She's quiet at first, or even quiet the whole time, but she sits next to me, our personal space encroaching and mixing by virtue of both being airplane passengers.

She's always older than me, probably by forty years. Sometimes she's well dressed and reading the newspaper, sometimes she's hanging on to the window, fingers white around her fingernails. She either blocks or doesn't block the whole window from view as we ascend. She's either going home or visiting someone. She's always travelling alone.

She always closes her eyes while we land. Maybe she's realizing she's not in the clouds anymore — that she's going back to the ground. Maybe, she's just hoping we make it.

My grandma never flies. Except when my grandpa took her back to the old country. He'd go and visit his sister. She barely wrote to hers. They had different definitions of family.

—

After months of reading and editing the same kind of obituary, the bare bones kind, I started to form this idea of what a perfect obituary would be. A person and their actions living and dying on a page.

I imagined a hundred words of a life that perfectly sum someone up. A page of newsprint made up of photos, departed smiles — every separate entry like the act of someone leaving.

Like the idea that after I die no one will compulsively rearrange VHS collections the way I do, sticking all the Jerry Maguire's together in thrift stores. I can imagine that loss. That tiny space an individual occupies in the world emptied and not refilled.

But obituaries aren't that. They're lists of family members and places a person has lived, with times of services and seemingly significant dates. Dear

partner of Irene Buynak, it said. Also survived by his sister Marta, many nieces and nephews. It said nothing about us, my sisters and me, though we called him Grandpa, though he held us as babies, taught us how to whistle.

My mom spreads open newspapers and says, “Oh, So-and-so died,” and I think about it for a minute but only that long. “That’s too bad,” she says and keeps perusing, looking just to see if anyone she knows is there.

—

We made it to the northernmost corner of the dog park where there was a huge drop off, right as the edge of the trail looked over a steep valley. My roommate, the dog, and I stood there taking in the empty air in front of us, inhabiting its open space.

Because behind us were piles, mountains, of refuse. Leftover land, unearthed and dumped, garbage bags, pieces of cement, metal rod spiders crawling into the sunlight. There were plastic soda bottles with brown liquid in the bottom, pieces of fence. Among it all, trees starting to bud, germinating among the fertile rot.

Grandpa grew tomatoes in his garden out back. Sometimes we’d accidentally send the kickball flying toward them when we were playing in the

yard. Old man, he'd take off running to save the tomatoes. He'd tenderly pull them up and wrap them back on their stakes. Then he'd bring us one to taste.

He loved the garden, loved growing things. We grew.

In the refuse, there was no dog park. No friendly waste receptacles or water jugs or discarded tennis balls. There was my roommate, the dog, and me. Us, and the building waste from 77 acres of cemetery.

Through the fence, behind the piles, we could see a bulldozer pushing around new dirt. And us, standing where they'd dumped the old.

We stayed facing the empty valley.

—

The first time I met an airplane widow, we were flying early morning Spokane to Seattle, both of us connecting onward. I was going to meet my family; she was going to meet hers. She hung to the window and kept saying how remarkable it was, though she'd flown plenty before.

She was all too awake for the early morning and I wanted to sleep. She, as far as I could tell, just wanted to fill the air between us with her old lady breath, with a voice I couldn't hear over the whipping propellers.

She said something about Alaska and her beautiful daughter that lived there. She told me about her family in Idaho, a son who was married to a nice girl. They had children I think, probably one on the way.

My grandpa, when he got drunk enough, talked a lot. He told me about the time he threw cow shit at Nazis. Either that or it got passed down, a family legend. He taught me that dobre meant good, and that slečna meant miss, young miss, meant me. He called me that sometimes, and I'd write it on return addresses, owning my Slovak heritage like a first name.

On the airplane the woman told me about her husband.

He'd been on a shrimping trip in the Gulf of Mexico, back when she was much younger. His boat overturned. His boat sank. His body was never found. His entire crew and ship were never found, she said.

She whispered this to me, lips touching my ear, the space between us evaporating in ocean mist, her breath humidity from the Gulf of Mexico.

—

I can be as reverent as I want looking back, but once I mutilated an obituary.

As both an editor and designer for the small-town newspaper, it was my job to mold content as well as visually represent things.

Truth is, a lot of your job as a newspaper designer is to work around stacks of advertisements while still getting in the content. So one day I cut up a dead person's life to accommodate for a paid advertisement for something, likely Sam's Hotdogs, buy one get one free.

It was something about NASCAR that I cut, I think, about how much this old woman had loved watching it, how she had moved to be closer to Bristol Motor Speedway. The obituary had the normal information which I left, of course: her acceptance into heaven and a long list of people who "survived" her, the date and time of her memorial service, a location for where to send flowers. Exactly what people expected. The information. The funeral. They had a time and place, they'd be there.

At his funeral, I met one of my grandpa's nieces and she told me a story about her raincoat for what felt like forever. She also reported some iteration of the cow shit story. Listening, all I wanted to do was correct her when she called him 'Uncle Tony,' because I called him Grandpa. Because to me, that was his name. It's who he was. It's also who he could never be.

The woman whose obituary I cut up, I don't remember her name. But I've never stopped feeling guilty, like I took the part out that proved she'd lived or that made her a person.

The back corner of the dog park had mounds of marble and cement and whatever gravestones are made of, were made of back then. There were mountains of broken up, misspelled grave markers that marked nothing at all.

There were headstones from the 1800's, chipped off pieces of mausoleum, plaques with names etched in them that sounded like people I could know. There were gravestones that looked like they had nothing wrong with them, as if the family had picked sandstone and decided to go with slate. Like slate better matched a personality.

His marker was grey. Next to his plot was the name of his wife carved into a headstone, Giovanna, the woman who had died before I was even born, the woman whose sepia photo stood up in the room where my grandma told us never to go. He was buried next to her. In life, he'd visited her grave every week for thirty years. Beloved wife.

My grandma purchased the plot on the other side of him, dear partner.

And so they'll all rest, in the ground, Grandpa between the two women he loved. They'll stay like that while the markers tarnish or get knocked over or covered with graffiti. They'll stay like that forever marked or not, whether or not we know who's there, what to call them.

Standing in the piles of replaced granite, I'd never thought about where headstones or markers go to die, that they could, even. Because for some reason stone feels solid, and engraved stone feels even more solid, like forever.

—

I'd had a free upgrade to first class, and a woman was already sitting when I got to our row. We'd been in the air a few hours and we hadn't spoken, except me apologizing for asking her to let me out, the relative small size of my bladder, the large amount of liquid I'd consumed.

I ordered champagne and she asked what I was celebrating. She was having gin.

"I just came from a graduation," she said, "so I just assume everyone else is celebrating."

And this was all until the near end of our flight, until I complimented her huge diamond ring.

"Thank you," she said. "I put it away for quite a while because I couldn't wear it after my husband died."

Like that. She just told me, self-identified. Widow.

Story is, Grandpa had wanted to marry my grandma. As children, my sisters and I would imagine their wedding, my short, eagle-eyed grandma, my rockbellied grandpa, hair slicked back. We'd try to picture her in a dress, looking beautiful.

I don't know if they could see it, but I never could.

She turned him down. Wanted the alimony from her ex-husband, my biological grandfather, or something. So they just lived together for thirty years, his clothes in a separate room from hers. His undershirts folded in drawers of the room we weren't supposed to go into. His late wife's photograph on the dresser. We keep these things when we can't keep people. Because we can call them whatever we want, they can carry the souls of whatever we need.

It was too pretty not to wear, the airplane woman had said. She wears it on her right hand now, or wore it there that day. She said it's because she's not sure she's still married, or maybe because she's not sure if she's still grieving.

I had, before all of this, said, "Your ring is gorgeous" and, "I can tell someone loves you a lot." Present tense, ongoing, having no idea that her husband had died. I don't know that it hurt her, my saying that, because I can't figure out if it's untrue.

I would've never known she called herself a widow, sitting next to her, her drink smelling like evergreens.

Maybe she doesn't.

While we were walking, my roommate and I met two women and a dog. One in a wheelchair, one pushing, one panting beside them, four-legged.

“It’s kind of an unofficial dog park,” the one in the wheelchair said.

“I think the city was going to designate it or build it, but then, this,” the other woman said, gesturing to the piles.

“It’s a damn shame,” said the other.

And I could tell you where the park is, you know, its address or coordinates. I could find the name of the cemetery and call them and ask them if they own that land too. I could get to know the funeral director and we could exchange emails. I could truncate the dog park and I could just call it a garbage center or a construction rubble area or a dump for unearthed cemetery junk.

Or I could tell you two girls and a dog went looking for a place to play and found a mountain of broken headstones, thorns, wildflowers growing, a sweeping view of the valley.

Are things what they are? What do you call them? Places, people, lives.

My grandma would yell at him in Slovak and he’d laugh, lips red with Fortissimo, sometimes translating what she’d said, sometimes bawking at it before laughing.

She'd translate him back. When he'd get too drunk and forget we didn't understand him, couldn't keep up with the pocket dictionary they kept under their coffee table, she'd water down his words and feed them to us.

Once in a while he'd laugh and burst with some loud phrase, swat at her butt. She'd shoot him a dirty look and giggle. She'd refuse to tell us what he'd said, and our father would whisper the pieces of it he understood to us on the car ride home.

I couldn't recognize it then, their flirtation. I didn't even know what that was. The limitations of language.

—

GEG, SEA, SFO, November. My roommate and I were flying to spend Thanksgiving with my uncles. And she, she was flying to her childhood home to visit her mother. She travelled carrying her things in purple Crown Royal bags.

We gave her a shot of whiskey on that plane, two twenty-something girls and this woman, a week after her heart surgery, her wrinkle-softened hand spanking the bottom of the airplane bottle to get the last drop.

She wasn't a widow. She had this boyfriend, they'd been together 27 years. She was flying to San Francisco to get a break from him so she could recover. She loved him.

We talked about soap operas and she lent me her InTouch magazine. I did her crossword in pen and she didn't mind.

She said she was from San Francisco, and that no one was really from San Francisco anymore. She sometimes felt like she was from Spokane. She definitely felt like that now as she filled her house with plants, made it a living organism.

She was a botanist. She had a college degree. She was either the first or one of the first women enrolled at her college back then. This, how she self-defined.

She was a botanist but if she died from drinking so close to surgery with two twenty-something girls on a plane, her obituary would say she was a San Francisco native who died from complications of heart disease.

Even when my grandpa had been in the hospital for a few weeks, I still never thought he wouldn't come back out. It wasn't in his character, man doing a headstand in the backyard, man who whistled a little bit when he said particular words. I never thought he'd die there. I never thought he'd die at all.

And her obituary wouldn't say she died, the botanist, perhaps from being too far away from the man she loved, or from the lack of oxygen plants provide.

It wouldn't say was she survived by her elephant ears, green and waxy. They'd die without her anyway, but no one writes obituaries for plants. But they're just as much her as her body.

Tomatoes. Kickball. Fortisimo. Headstands.

—

I'd never travelled with a significant other before. I slept on his shoulder and held his hand when we were landing.

On our connecting flight, I'd watched the snow scraped mountains as we descended into Salt Lake City. I felt like I'd never seen anything so beautiful and ragged, the way those mountains looked like teeth, the range a mouth biting into the sky, taking a stand against unclaimed vertical space.

I love mountains, you see. My east coast rolling Blue Ridge. The valley expanse at the dog park, the empty air there. The real offense of making manmade mountains of dead shit debris next to it.

Heading into Spokane, I couldn't see any mountains. The woman next to me had pulled the shade down and was trying to keep her carry-on cat calm as we changed altitude. It mewed quietly from under the seat.

At his funeral, my stoic grandmother let out this sound, like something coming out of her. It was unbearable for a moment and then it stopped, was sucked back in.

I've never heard anything like it in my life.

In the front row, looking at his casket, my grandma did not move. She just stared at his body, Grandpa, Tony, Anton, and pretended the sound didn't come from her. Pretended the body was called anything but her dear partner.

While flying, I'm never worried about landing so much. I'm never even thankful that I do, because I expect it. But the runway had iced over earlier that day and sent an airplane sliding into a snow bank. We'd been cleared to go on anyway, but I kept imagining they'd made a mistake as we dipped downward.

I wasn't alone, but I still closed my eyes. I'd never been an eye closer before.

If we died that night, my obituary wouldn't have said I made it to meet my heavenly Father, but his may have. His family is Southern Baptist. In our 100 words, it would have said we were involved in a terrible airplane accident, and that would take up at least seven words. Seven percent of my life at the mercy of ice.

Neither of us would have been buried in a dog park. Cemetery, perhaps.

The woman beside me wasn't a widow, either.

No one would know I drooled a little bit on his sleeve while I was asleep even though I never drool. No one would know how much he loved the sweatshirt his brother got him for Christmas, that he didn't take it off for four days leading up to the flight. That he was still wearing it when we were landing, though the airplane was warm enough.

And what would've happened to it? His sweatshirt?

Crumpled up, probably, bloodied and thrown away, to be compounded and made into a mountain in some landfill. No one would know what it was. It wouldn't ever be someone else's favorite present, soft on their skin, sleeves elastic to keep the warm in. And how much it meant to him. VHS tapes, right. Fortissimo by the gallon jug.

We don't think about these things once they're gone.

We don't really have words for them at all.

Some of my cousins refused to call him Grandpa their whole life. Most of them, actually. They called him Tony, like he was my grandma's boyfriend, her dear partner.

It always felt deeply disrespectful, because he held me as a baby and because he sent me birthday cards and played with us outside until Grandma yelled that it was getting dark, that dinner was ready. He was my grandpa because he would sit across the table from me and make faces when Grandma talked. He'd crack himself up. His hair would sometimes come loose from its oil slick and hang like a shark tooth over his forehead. He'd match his button down to the accent color of the sweater vest he wore that day. He had the shiniest shoes. He'd drink Grandma's shitty shitty instant coffee and not complain.

They'd call him Tony, and when he died, they populated the funeral home, still calling him that.

The name Tony filled up the room we waited in for seven hours. Floated through the church during his service, was sewn into a funeral hymn. The name Tony went into the dirt to be buried, but listen, the name Grandpa did too. Possibly even the name husband.

They never married, my grandma and Grandpa, but the word Widow came out of the open casket and hung on my grandma's heart like a cinderblock on the feet of a drowning woman.

Because what do you call someone who has always but never really been your grandpa? Who has always, but never really been your husband? What do you call a bereaved non-wife or non-granddaughter?

And why do you have to call them anything at all?

Dog park. Cemetery. Airplane passenger. Widow.

—

An obituary: My grandpa used this brown bottle of grease in his hair. It would turn the grey back to a black oil slick, slicked back, lookin' slick. The bottle was called Youthhair and he probably bought it by the case before they stopped making it.

It stank like lead. And because no one else will ever use it, he's just gone.

But what do we call it when someone's just gone? When our hearts feel diced up, when there's no one to teach us to curse in Slovak? When we can't quite say what a person was to us, still is to us?

There's not a word for that. Perhaps, there shouldn't be.

THE POTENTIAL IN DIRTCAKES, SISTERS, GARDENERS

I'm a shit gardener, but once I grew a six-foot-tall marigold. It was an accident. I tilled the flowerbox soil in the front yard of my childhood home, planted last year's pulled petals, and watered them once or twice that spring.

I'd wanted a flower garden because there was something enchanting about burying something and having it bloom once I'd forgotten it — some kind of validation for being mindful only once. Validation because I've never been good at doing things daily: taking vitamins, showering, watering houseplants. I only feed the dog because he barks if I don't.

Outside, the ground barks for rain and the clouds supply. I was entirely outside the equation. I drove around all summer and worked late nights and the flowers grew anyway — towering marigold, thick stalked among the zinnia.

I don't know much about plant genetics and everyone I've ever told the story to doesn't believe me, but I swear my friend Elijah stood back to back with the marigold and the orange fringe petals poked over his head. He's 6'2.

That or the story is part of the mythology of that flowerbed, the one my parents tore down after I moved. They pried apart the wooden planks and returned it to just another area of lawn. Someone always hit it anyway, one of my sisters or me, as we tried to turn around on the top of my steep driveway. Then we learned to just back down.

And it wasn't much of a flowerbed anyway, it mostly just shot up weeds. Only once every five or so years someone would make it their project, me or my mom. We'd tug the deep-rooted stalks or get our gloves chalky white pulling apart tangled milkweed. Then we'd bring it back to life: plant things and watch them grow. Then we'd forget again and weeds would come back, giant spiders.

You can't keep something and only remember it once every five years. It's not that way with flowers, with growing things.

On one of the first grocery runs I made after moving out on my own, I bought a basil plant, already growing. The living plant was cheaper than buying just leaves. Anyway, I always forget basil in the bottom of my refrigerator. It shrivels up and rots, brown and curling.

I would never be the type to say that having something else breathing in the apartment made it feel less lonely. I just watered that little basil plant better than anything I'd ever grown before. It grew the height of the windowsill that summer. It sprouted leaves the length of my fingers. I made two batches of pesto a week.

It's been two years and the basil is barely alive. Barely, but it still towers, buds a few new leaves at the top, doesn't droop. It's naked besides that.

I'm starting to think there's some magic in the plant, because I've forgotten it for days and weeks, and then brought it back to life. And it always comes back.

And though it isn't what it was those first few months, I can't quite bring myself to throw it away, especially because I fault myself in its failure. Can I give up on a something because I can't stop being the noncommittal version of myself? And what if it's still trying, despite me?

This is the longest-living plant I've ever kept.

But I haven't kept it at all. It's kept itself, despite me.

Around the same time I got the basil, I bought a few of those pods from the dollar bin section, the one with a little dirt patty and a few seeds. The idea

is you put the dirt cake in a cup, eyedrop water onto it, and press the seeds into the loose dirt.

I bought three plants and not one grew. Cilantro and rosemary and tomato. Lonely cups of dirt on the windowsill, watching the triumphant basil, jealous.

I tell myself that it's in the nature of those things to not grow. Like it'd take some kind of plant genius to get them to push up anything at all. I tell myself this, but I always imagine making it happen: tending something so carefully that I could keep a fragile bud unbroken, get just the right amount of water and sunlight, grow something edible from dollar bin cardboard.

And maybe it's about prevailing against odds. Maybe it's about wanting to congratulate myself after having succeeded. But maybe it's just about liking cilantro, thinking that it goes well in eggs, homemade salsa, salad dressing. It's hard to dissect motivation with living things, with seeds.

I just can't stop thinking that the dirt cakes would've never produced anyway, that the seeds were dead long before I got to them. And though I can't help but imagine them growing, if they did it'd be nothing short of six-foot-tall marigold status, nothing short of plant miracle, freak accident.

Still, sometimes these things surprise you.

I chose Angel from files spread across my living room table, interviews stapled to photos, word association games, statistics. I'd narrowed it down to two girls – one who said she was an artist but whose family couldn't be sure of getting dinner some nights, and one who was Angel, whose favorite show was Keeping Up With the Kardashians, who said her one goal was to graduate high school.

I chose Angel for a little sister because I read her packet and thought I knew her. She could use the kind of sister I knew how to be, I thought, the motivating, educated kind. The sister who listened and provided solutions and insight. The kind of sister who'd been there, done that. And that's what I had to give a little girl, I'd said in my interview: a positive role model, a willingness to work with her to better herself and her situation.

They accepted me quickly. Twenty-two and in graduate school, volunteering my time though my schedule promised to be challenging. Giving back to the community by teaching a little girl what I knew of the world.

But Angel was from a different world. She had a grandmother who she called mom and a mother who did meth and a father she never spoke to. She had a sister who was my age and got kicked out at 18 for bringing drugs into the house.

She had, has, a life before me and after me.

Angel had long blonde hair and a beautiful face. Light skin, freckles, a nose that turned up a little bit at its end. A wispy little body. All of that and an unyielding need to be seen, bone deep. All of that and an inherited familial identity of never really standing a chance.

I'm brunette with wide, Eastern European cheekbones, and have an insatiable desire for purpose.

We became sisters but we were from different worlds. And though I know how to be a sister, how to take care of someone, I didn't know how to be a sister to her.

We were sisters but I was a shitty gardener. Still am. I didn't know it would matter.

Almost in fast-forward I can watch us miss each other:

Angel opens the door and my car immediately smells cupcake candy sweet. She sits down and buckles her seatbelt and flips down the sun visor, messing with her eyeliner or her concealer or her fake tan, smudged unevenly on her neck.

"Oh my God, dude," she says to her appearance and to me. "Ugh this is so messed up. My tan. This is so embarrassing. It's so streaky."

"So did I tell you about Zack?" she asks me. The question is always the same. Did I tell you, do you remember, can you believe this – all unprompted.

She talks the whole way to the mall, me just interrupting her for clarification or reminders. No Natalie's my best friend, no Tara's dad is the one who lets us smoke his weed in the basement. And the stories are almost always the same too, her sneaking out, using some illegal substance, being in a potentially dangerous situation with one or more boys, her sneaking back in, someone texting her.

I could never figure out why she told me those stories. Because I'm older than her, and she wanted to impress me with how cool she sounded? Because she needed help? Because she needed to get something off her chest? Because she just needed, needs, will forever need, like all of us, someone to just listen?

"Anyways," she always said when she finished a story. Anyways, like the story was beside the point. She flips back down the visor and looks at herself in the mirror.

At the mall I took her to Macys and picked out interview outfits for her: a black pencil skirt with a hot pink blazer. Khaki skinny leg slacks with a loose fitting blouse. A deep blue dress with cleavage enough to be appropriate yet alluring. I pulled high necklines and things with collars and she asked me why everything I pick is so lame.

“I’ll look stupid if I wear this stuff to an interview,” she said, 15 years old.

“Dress for the job you want,” I fed her – though I’ve never been sure about the line myself.

“I just want to work at Taco Bell so I can get the fuck out of my mom’s house,” she said.

She’d only try on clothes if I did at the same time, and because I picked out her outfits, she wanted to choose mine. She pulled two hideous one-size-fits-most dresses, pleated with paisley, made more out of elastic than fabric. She picked them only so she could make fun of me as I tried them on.

While undressing and putting myself in the ridiculous gowns, I looked in the mirror and thought it was worth it: the potential ridicule a fine trade for giving her what I thought were valuable skills.

What I didn’t realize is that I was just giving her tips for my life. What I didn’t realize is that she was right, it would be silly to wear a powersuit to a Taco Bell interview. Not only silly, but she’d stand out in a way she hated. Because she knew the world she came from better than I ever could, knew what didn’t go.

And I’m not saying we didn’t work out because we were from different classes of people, had different ideas of what success would look like, but I had this gross feeling of pride watching her fix the lapel of a \$200 Tahari blazer,

imagining that she, a seed cake, could grow six feet tall, could stand taller than a man.

To her, we were just playing dress up at Macy's.

Me, in elastic paisley.

When you sign up for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, you make an eighteen-month commitment. It's so you stick through with the match, and don't just leave a sibling stranded once she's started relying on you. Because in my training, we learned that the most important thing was to be consistent for your little sister, to be there.

So I listened to her when she came to me with her boy problems or substance problems or school problems. I thought that's what she needed – a sounding board. I was there when she'd call me from the guidance office, telling me I needed to be there in 20 minutes to pick her up because she'd been suspended and her mom wasn't answering the phone because she was asleep.

And I drove to pick her up and I bought her froyo and I took her to see the awful movies she wanted to see. And on her birthday, I picked her up and we went shopping and bought her a shirt that said “#RATCHET” because she wanted it.

But it's hard to be something other than what you are. It's hard to mold myself into the kind of person who could be just a support system, who could provide unconditional positive regard when I didn't approve of things she did. So I stopped calling her to hang out and she stopped texting back.

Abandoned flowerbed, weeds. I cannot forgive myself for this one.

The last time I saw Angel, I took her to Starbucks and we sat down with her math homework and did all of the problems together. We even did a few that weren't assigned, so I could try to help her learn. I tried to tutor her. I told her to tell me how she did on her math test, so that we could use it to practice for next time. I told her we could hang out like this every week. Again, I imagined her turning her grades around, starting to do well in math and then, starting to do well in all of school.

There was a part of me that thought tutoring her in math could make up for the other ways I didn't feel like I was succeeding in being a mentor. Because if her math grade improved, I could prove I was a positive force in her life.

But it wasn't what she needed. Because math grades are inconsequential to a girl who just wants to be seen. Because when her nights are filled with police and drunk drivers and friends getting hit by cars, when her nights were filled with unprotected sex and twenty-something boys feeding her alcohol

until she can't give consent, a math tutor can't stand in for a sense of stability, or even for a friend.

Taco Bell requires basic math knowledge, just enough to count change through a drive thru window. And we were plotting things on XY diagrams, solving equations, wasting time. Because whether or not she did well on her math test, it wouldn't help her turn eighteen or emancipate herself from her grandmother. It wouldn't help her find a rich boyfriend like she wanted, or move to California. Because for me, when I was in school, math test grades told me something about myself, either that I was smart enough, or that I'd worked hard enough, or that one day I'd be good enough to get into a good college. For Angel, a math test told her nothing about herself. Maybe it's better that way.

It was the last time I saw her, because what Angel liked was having a shopping buddy. And I couldn't accept that, or even her, probably. Because I just kept trying to help her.

During the three-hour training session I had for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, there was a large, bald, middle-aged man. He coached a softball team and loved kids, he said. He said he was an excellent mentor, a perfect role model. And when it came time to go around saying why we wanted to be surrogate siblings, he said he wanted to change a child's life.

I remember thinking that it sounded grossly self-important coming from his mouth, because volunteering your time wasn't about how you could mold a child or getting the satisfaction of being a force of change.

The trainer shot him down, kindly, saying that we'd only be disappointed if we tried to change kids or put too great of expectations on how we could help them. What they really needed, she said, was a consistent adult in their lives. Someone who could nurture their individual dreams, who could be a role model without force-feeding ideas of success. That these kids needed constant positive regard. Someone to talk to.

This is how a child grows: with nourishment. From themselves. Seeds that can still grow, have potential. They need light watering, protection from too-bright a sun.

Children grow. You do not grow one, you see.

If Angel is the dirt cake and seed, then she isn't the basil plant. And she isn't the marigold, a freak accident, growing six feet tall against its nature and against its odds. If Angel has a chance of growing up and out of her situation, it comes from her, from the potential left in her after a shitty childhood.

I watered and nurtured the relationship, but I just didn't know how to help. I overwatered. And maybe I imagined her becoming something so much

more than someone who works at Taco Bell, because that's the standard I hold myself to.

Because maybe that dirt was once fertile, before it was freeze dried or pressed or packaged, before its nutrients expired sitting on a shelf for months. And maybe those seeds could've grown in different dirt, or could've grown outside, or could've just been duds themselves.

Or maybe she's just the type of person I not only don't know how to help, but have no business helping. Because at the end of the day, it isn't about me at all. Because it doesn't matter what kind of gardener or sister I am to someone who has such different circumstances than me, to someone who needs such a different kind of nurturing.

I judge myself as a big sister, and I think back and imagine that if she'd started doing better in math, I would've credited myself. Like the Starbucks sessions with me were actually helpful, and that there was a quantifiable and discernable way to measure my success in helping her.

But she would've been the one to take the test. She would've been the one improving. And if she did well, it would've been because she had it in her.

But she didn't. And I think she's engaged now at 15. But isn't that more important? Isn't that success to her?

Math tests. For her, a cilantro plant measured by its ability to yield a watermelon.

The problem is not that I cannot get the dirt cake, the cilantro or the rosemary or the tomatoes to grow. Maybe it's just that growing isn't in their nature. Not anymore, perhaps. Not now. That or their growing doesn't look the way I imagine in the checkout line at Target, my windowsill full with obviously living things. Maybe the problem's me: that the flowerless green shoot a dirtcake could manage would never be enough for me. Even that sounds judgmental. Because to push up anything is a feat. Angel, at a stable job at Taco Bell, with a man who wants to take care of her. And then, my vision of her in a cap and gown.

I'm the bald man at the meeting, you see, saying I know plants and how to grow them. Saying, I can grow basil with my hands, with my mind, with my experience, with my adherence to the way I was taught to be from the people who came from the same situations as me.

Things grow on their own though. People do.

So maybe the basil was just a good basil plant. So maybe it's strong enough to weather my forgetfulness, the weeks I go without watering it. I've killed plenty of other basil plants before. That, or maybe they just died.

There's something complicated in saying, "this is the longest living thing I've ever kept," because the plant did the work. It did the work while I abandoned and forgot it. I don't get to own that.

And maybe the marigold really was just a weed, and it didn't matter that I planted it. Because it crossbred with something else in the ground, and because I have no hand in mixing things, in making new kinds of plants. I might've put it in the ground, but I didn't grow a six-foot tall marigold. I just got to see it exist. I just get to tell people about it and watch their faces when they don't believe me.

Six feet, really. When a marigold is only supposed to be a few inches off the ground. And isn't that incredible, the strength in those seeds. A freak accident of its potential.

Part of the majesty of nature is that we have no hand in it, no claim to carving out mountains or changing the colors of leaves in the fall. Because the nature of nature is to grow, and the nature of people is to grow, and without our own proscribed assistance, things continue to be.

I am no longer Angel's mentor or sister, but she might get the job at Taco Bell and I'll have had no hand in it. She'll be happy, because it's what she wanted, because it's what was inside of her. And there's no changing what

things want to be. Six-feet tall. A living basil plant fighting someone forgetting to water it.

And the place where the flowerbox stood in my childhood front yard isn't scorched earth, dead and failed. It's just part of the grass now, gets trimmed and attended to. And maybe that's what it wanted to be all along.

Because you can't force flowers in a family that forgets to grow them. You can't force suburban ideas of educational success into a girl who isn't from the suburbs, for whom education is a requirement. You can't make a kid be something they could never be. And you can't credit yourself for the success they do achieve.

And maybe I have a black thumb and could have never succeeded anyway. But maybe it doesn't matter. Because maybe there's no such thing as a gardener at all.

There are just gardens.

And I'm sorry that I couldn't see them in you, Angel.

EKPHRISIS

Okay, so, grey, city sludge, concrete walls, train bridge. Spokane,
Washington.

A man stands on the corner, yellow stained underarms, white T-shirt,
cardboard sign. Anything helps, God Bless, it says.

I'm wearing sunglasses. I can freely stare without making eye contact.
Windows up, air-conditioning blasting.

He swivels on his heel and walks to face traffic coming the other way.
He flips his sign and shows Second Ave something different.

I can still read the words God Bless upside down.

The light turns green.

I watched the train bridge transform two summers ago. I had just
moved from Virginia and was on my own for what was basically the first time

in my life. It was 4 a.m. and I dropped my parents off at the airport and took I-90 to Maple to Second.

It'd be lovely to say that morning was when I first noticed the new paint job, the undersides of the bridge white, with penciled figures on top, bright as the summer sun rose.

Lovely only for me, a girl on her own in a new city. A mural going up two blocks from her house. Lovely because of the parallel: fresh paint, fresh start, myself and the mural taking shape the first day we were alone together.

Truth is, I watched it because I had nothing else to do. I didn't know anyone. And I'd never seen art being made like that.

Okay so here's how I was taught to paint: blur your eyes a little bit and find the shadows of your subject. Start there, with the darkest color. Black with a little bit of burnt sienna. Work from dark to light.

Instead of shapes, paint patches of lightness and dark, my teacher had said.

It's how to create depth, she'd said.

On the concrete walls of the train bridge, it started with the black underpainting, first in big chunky flourishes, then with a smaller brush, tackling shading and detail work.

It was becoming faces. An old man, from the looks of it. A child, pouting. An old woman, a Boston terrier, a woman screaming, a little girl with a butterfly just landed on her finger.

This was my introduction to the city: watching those ten-foot faces fill with color, cheeks with blush, as I drove by, sometimes doing laps: work, gym, home, gym, work, home.

I'm not sure when I came to think of them as the people of Spokane, as the faces of possibility. It seemed to me that the laughing old man with his glasses and stubble, with his smile lines and under-eye bags, could be my next door neighbor or my future grocer or no one at all.

The laughing old man, he lived there, Second Avenue, watching the cars go by.

Maple and Second. A part of downtown with Meals on Wheels, The City Gate, the Women's Hearth. The part of downtown concerned with lending a hand.

Maple and Second, where the mural went up under a train bridge. Where you could stand to get out of the summer sun, to stay out of the rain.

I don't know about before I moved to town, but the homeless seemed to congregate under the train bridge then. I can't stop wondering if the artwork

was put there to counteract their presence on a busy road. Like the bright colors could cover up the fact there were people who needed help.

Or maybe they followed the art, thought they wouldn't be missed if drivers were already looking.

But maybe they didn't think about it at all. Maybe they just wanted to stay in the shade.

It was strange how I only ever saw people working on the mural twice. How I'd watched it transform, almost mythic, almost on its own. And when I did see people painting, they were always in overalls, usually with a ladder.

Artists standing alongside the homeless, paintbrushes and cardboard, ladders and milk crates and shopping carts, Anything Helps, God Bless, Oh shit can you hand me the Mineral Spirits, Todd be careful, it looks like it may drip.

And after the black and the shading, the mural grew layers of yellows and reds. The background filled with stripes like the Tibetan flag, stripes, blazing out like a crown behind a smiling middle aged man, wavy brown hair, straight teeth, widows peak. My future yoga instructor, barista, car insurance provider.

And then the sun would go down and the artists would go home and the homeless would stay, stay, holding their signs. Drawn faces in front of drawn faces.

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Okay, so, meeting the faces of Spokane through artwork — the first people I came to recognize in a new city. And then.

I found out the mural was made up entirely of stock images from the Internet – images that could fill in for anyone, anywhere.

And real people below them, sitting on the sidewalk.

How do you get to know your city?

And who are you supposed to know?

I think what ultimately bothers me about the mural is feeling deceived. Like I bought into a façade and accepted it as authentic.

And I wonder about the people I had to look past to think that.

And I wonder about looking past people in general. What it is to not even grant a person your full attention?

Like the biggest city in these wheat fields almost convinced me its people were those, smiling and full of possibility. Presiding over Second Ave.

Okay so, bright yellow, orange, red. Wide eyes. A nine-foot-tall woman with her arms outstretched, her heart tied to a string in the sky. A woman sits cross-legged on the sidewalk, a dog dutifully sitting next to her.

Boston terrier, puppy, his head cocked to the right. Clipart.

Her dog, blonde, its tail swishing back and forth.

He climbs into her lap and puts his paws on her chest. She laughs. I
hear her clearly through my open window.

And I can't read her sign.

She's abandoned it facedown.

I can't quite untangle them, the real people from the mural. In a way,
they belong together. The real and the façade. Something so false and
something genuine.

The city I've come to know.

Patches of lightness and dark, she'd said. It's how you create depth.

I wonder if the artists ever quite knew the art they were making.

SELF PORTRAITURE

The only kind of rebellion I can speak to is this: acrylic paints, a room full of women, red aprons, sweet white wine on a Wednesday after work.

They're nervous, wetting the canvas to prime it. Like something could go so wrong just dipping the brush into water and painting thick, invisible strokes.

We were in a painting class, one of those where women pay \$30 to sit in a room, drink, and be walked step-by-step through the process of art-making. A man leads the class. We paint cherry blossoms on a river.

This, what women are capable of. Brushes raised.

The other day, I was in a room with three women and one said, "my whole life, I've felt like I've been pretending."

She says it almost every week when we meet, something about a lifetime of not fitting, of looking for permission to be. Every week, she talks

about the ways she's contrary, the ways she's felt like she's wasted her whole life forcing herself into the mold she came from. Small Midwestern town, family straight-laced, religious.

"I just never felt like I fit," she repeats.

I've heard it for more than a year at this point, but every week it's new for her, and every week it still feels pressing, this need to create a self unconcerned with what it's supposed to be.

She's sixty by the way. She's been trying to figure it out her whole life.

In the painting class, we started by mixing pond water, pulling royal blue to the center of our pallets, adding white. Some of us do it tentatively, careening our necks to see the blue the instructor used, trying to match our own to it. Most of us did that.

I pulled white and yellow and a little blue. I mashed my brush into the colors and mixed haphazardly, started throwing angry cyan stripes across the canvas and leaving white edges, unfinished borders.

I'm like that sometimes, unrestrained. I get this wild hair sometimes and I can't let people tell me what to do, where to paint.

Across the table from me, a woman my mother's age sat biting her lip and narrowing her eyes at her canvas.

We were told to make the blue cover two thirds of the canvas and she was measuring in her mind, trying to figure out exactly where two thirds sat. If she had a ruler, she would've pulled it out and pencil marked.

“The first stroke is always the hardest,” she told me.

“Last month, I had to call him over to get it started for me,” her mother said, sitting next to her.

And me, twenty-three, in a tailspin there at the table. Me, wild hair, paint on my cheek, sitting politely across from her, doing all I could to keep from screaming, don't you dare give him your brush.

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I've been a virgin my whole life, or at least acted like one. I've been a virgin or at least appeared to my parents and distant family members like one. Or tried. And it's never bothered me because my guarded intimacy has to do with being a private person, but maybe I've been pretending to be one of those too, spilling my guts only when it was appropriate – sleepovers with girlfriends, bars with strangers.

And I think this all came from growing up in the South with semi-conservative parents, or from going to public school, or from just some kind of innate societal doctrine that says I'm not allowed publicly to hold both my status as young woman, clean cut, and my status as human, sexual being.

Me talking about sex, that's not the way I'm supposed to be.

If it were a painting class and \$30, if I had a glass of white wine, owning my sexuality would be painting a banana right the fuck over the skyline we were supposed to be painting.

Someone did that once, they said. Painted a banana. And it was a man.

A few years ago I took a seven-week painting class, five hours a week, oil paints. We were supposed to finish three paintings by the end of it, and I finished one: a still life with too-soft edges. Our class of five women sat in a chilly studio, a room rescued from an abandoned school in the mountains. And for five hours, five women barely spoke to each other, because we painted — another way of speaking.

First I painted a bowl, a candlestick, and a coffee mug. Another woman painted a mason jar and a cow skull. Another woman sat in the corner doing a study in cubism. Another painted dunegrasses from memory.

I painted the still life to learn technique, with colors and depth and layering. For me, it was a study in the act, learning the rules before I could break them.

But my first few weeks in that painting class, I wouldn't have thought to break rules anyway. There was a task at hand, still life. I had a way to be, even in art-making, and so I was it: student, painting by convention, listening to direction.

I wonder if this is the first step, all of ours, finding out we have a way to be. I wonder if for the rest of our lives we're just trying to un-be it enough to become a person. And I wonder if we own it more specifically, women — our ways to be anchored so strongly in the ways we've been, or the ways we've been perceived.

Look, there's nothing wrong with being taught to paint. Because now I know. There's nothing wrong with being a lady and knowing which fork to use for salad and which for dessert but I'd lose my shit painting still lifes for my whole life, eating perfect little salads.

And you know, I keep wondering about that still life if it's my, our, sexuality.

Because for a while there, I was sleeping with a man who told me he hated it when I opened my eyes in bed. He also hated that I moved my body. Competition for his moving body, perhaps. Still life.

He told me this while on a six-hour drive across the state, where I couldn't escape him. Because he told me while we were on our way there, and I had to sit with it in the front seat of his Ford Ranger until we were back.

For him, there was a way to be, and I didn't know how to be it. And god, if that's the way to be, all but dead lying in someone's bed, eyes closed, stone-still, I don't want to be it.

On the same trip, he told me his favorite thing about me was that I was smart. Smart girl that I was, I resolved to never see him again. And then I forgot my watch, my favorite watch, a Chanukah gift from my mother, at his place.

The mother and daughter pair at the painting class, their names were Judy and Heather. And I'm not saying that they needed to be freed from expectations or liberated or anything, because two glasses of wine deep Judy said the f-word.

Then she said, "At my age, I'm done caring what people think of me. I'm tired of trying to get it right." She echoed a lot of someone else I knew, other women.

Judy still tried though, in her painting. She and her daughter followed the teacher's instructions for just how many trees to paint, for when to start dabbing the pink flowers of the cherry blossoms.

Some people are like that, I guess, rule followers, direction readers. Maybe it's just me but I can't follow a recipe to save my life. I dump spices, right. I sling paint.

But Judy and Heather are the reason these types of things are successful, paint nights, because some people want to be told what to do. And

some people need wine to feel unhinged and like they can alter the state of things: empty canvas to art.

The wife of the teacher said she was there as moral support for us painters. That if we got nervous or felt bad about our paintings, it was her job to feed us more wine and praise our artwork.

She said she'd sat down a few times to paint in the class herself, but couldn't do anything until she'd drunk enough to stop caring. And I just kept thinking, stopped caring about what?

This is what I'm saying: though it wasn't the purpose of paint night, the evening made me sad in the deepest places of myself — in the part of my gender memory that feels the need to ask permission, always.

Everyone's painting ended up different, either a little bit or a lot like the teacher's example, and mostly good looking, but product aside, I hate the idea that a group of women sat in a room wearing aprons, drinking wine and listening to a man give direction to feel like they had authorization to create.

I hate it but it's in me, too. I sat hoping the teacher wouldn't come over and see that I wasn't following directions or using the right brush. I didn't want to have to answer why I'd mixed a little blue into my foliage, or why I'd put yellow in the water.

When I lost my virginity, it was an accident. Or that's what he told me anyway. Accidentally, it slipped in. Accidently, he took from me what for years, I'd been working to protect, telling myself virginity was something to keep. I pushed him off me and could only think, that's it, I'm no longer a virgin. I want to be, but I don't have that option anymore.

The thing is, I didn't feel any different. Nothing was taken from me and nothing had changed. I felt the same, and I felt guilty for that sameness. And after that I let it go. A seventeen year-old version of myself that thought there was no way of reversing what had been done. So I just kept doing it, shame or not.

I'd been told my whole life to wait to have sex until I was married. And not that there's anything wrong with waiting, but I hate that young me just did what she was told. I cringe for my seventeen-year-old self who felt tremendous guilt, and even for my current self who feels like it's wrong to own an act my body wants.

And more than that, I'm pissed off that my high school boyfriend made the decision for me – just another way of telling me how to be. An opposite way.

He also told me he liked me best in baby blue, with a collar, wearing pearls.

When I dumped him, I dyed my hair hot pink and fucked someone in a bathroom.

In that old schoolhouse, that painting class, women of all types would come together. Students and wives and farmers, we'd paint around each other. The presence was kind of like permission: being with other people who took time from their lives to do something nearly frivolous. It was allowed in that space, that kudzu-claimed school with the car parked out back, a man drinking vodka from a Sprite bottle.

I finished the class with one completed painting and one half mess, half self-portrait with eyes that didn't match my own. Two years later, I haven't touched the painting, oil-me with irises still too yellow, too spring meadow, too wet grass. Mine are more grey, cloudy, unforgiving.

I couldn't finish it because there was something complicated about looking at and seeing myself at the same time. I'd start the class open, freely underpainting my face purple blue, and end it staring at the scar by my eye, making it too dark and too big. Because what makes it a self-portrait is perspective: the painter is inherently the speaker of the painting. If I were anyone but myself, I would've probably not even seen the scar. I wouldn't have painted my mole, perfectly circular on my right cheek, the one my mother tried to have removed when I was a teenager.

Sitting there, I thought the marks on my face defined me. That the portrait would be successful because it communicated the version of me that seemed the most true.

Now, the painting sits wedged between my old dresser and the wall, safely hidden from the ridicule of my family. When I look at it now, it looks nothing like me, comical like a child's drawing. Blocky and dimensionless, with a nose that looks less like my nose than my idea of how a nose should be painted. A chunky black blob where hair should be. Cheeks too wide because I'm afraid my face is a perfect circle now that I've gained weight.

Less than a self-portrait, the unfinished painting is a portrait of my self-consciousness, or self-unconsciousness, my non-knowledge of self when I was painting it. My unsureness. I was different then.

And now. Now, I could tell you that I was learning something in that class, and it had nothing to do with painting. I could tell you that I was learning and unlearning expression, some days confident in my brushstrokes, some days afraid to make a mistake.

That was two years ago and I'm different now, but I couldn't quite tell you how. I could just tell you if I was to try again, I'd whitewash the whole thing and start over, unchained. Pick up a fatter brush. Wreck it a little.

I could tell he was a good person, the teacher of that paint night class. He was a painter himself, the real kind, soft-spoken and generous. And when he did come over and see what I was doing he asked if I was an artist, said that he could always tell who was in these classes.

Though I'd taken classes, and though I'd normally consider myself an artist, I couldn't quite get the words out to say what I was. I couldn't even give myself that permission, sober, hands covered in cheap school-grade paint, my canvas so obviously a departure, so obviously a part of a body of work I didn't know I've been working on my whole life.

And I'm not saying that my painting was good, but I'm saying I made a self-portrait in knobby black trees, in pink grey blossoms. And my roommate, who says she can't do anything creative, half a bottle of red wine and a finished canvas deep, told me that my painting looked like me.

Hers, where she'd left one of her trees without a shadow because she got up and started chatting, looks like her too. Her greenery dotted with the same freckles from her cheeks, her water shaded exactly like the instructor told us to, shaded exactly the same way she can follow a recipe and measure out two pinches of oregano without getting frustrated. She says she's not creative but she painted a self-portrait in walking away when she wanted to chat with the bartender, in not finishing.

And what I'm saying is that we have to stop apologizing for things like this, for walking away or for not following directions. We have to stop thinking departures are blemishes and that we're made up of them, scars and moles and eye bags. We have to stop asking for permission and validation because women are all painters and artists and creators, bone deep, biologically.

The woman I know who keeps saying she doesn't fit, she told me about going to a concert and getting stepped on, stepped over. She told me about getting married and having children and being bedridden for months, healing after a series of operations on her legs.

She told me that she's trying to figure out who she is now that she's not bedridden. Now that she's not only a mom anymore.

She says she thinks she's a writer, because she has so many things to say. Because she's spent most of her life shut up or not moving or getting stepped on. She says she's outspoken, but is still timid when she speaks.

And sometimes, when she cracks, she starts talking and she doesn't stop. Her father was a gunsmith. She remembers living in fear of the South Hill rapist. She went to college when women didn't. She volunteered for years and felt sucked dry from doing it. She worked with her hands. She loved being outdoors. She sat quietly in a recliner next to her husband. She enjoyed those quiet moments.

And what she needs isn't permission for speaking or permission for creating. She needs permission to be this person, the one with strong opinions, the one who's figuring it out.

She tells me she suffers chronically from writer's block but unhinges and just writes when we're together. So maybe it's about spaces, or it's about communities, or it's about a roomful of women, just women, just being however the fuck they think they should be. We should be.

Unmuted, unhinged. Willing very much to slash through the emptiness of a canvas, unable to stand something so stark white, so quiet.

Once, when I was seventeen, a group of four men grabbed me outside a movie theater downtown. I'd stepped out to text my then boyfriend, virginity thief. They held my body and passed me to one another, taking turns grabbing my ass and stomach and asking for a kiss and laughing about how scared I was.

And I couldn't speak, couldn't yell and mercifully, after a few minutes of groping and smelling and kissing, they left me in the hallway of the movie theater. They left me but they so easily could have done something else to me. And I wouldn't have, couldn't have, screamed.

And when I told my dad, he did the yelling for me. At me. Asked how I could be so stupid. Asked how the fuck I couldn't scream. And I took it, his anger, because I felt it myself.

But how do the parts of me that recognize bad touch scream when those that know good touch are silenced? If I can only talk about sex when it is bad, when it hurts or when it is violent, double, triple taboo, how can I give voice to the goodness of it? How can I give voice at all?

Funny thing is my then boyfriend, virgin slayer, yelled when I told him too. Like there exist different breeds of sexual violence, a hierarchy of bodily rape.

I like to think that I'd scream now, because of this wild hair called voice, or confidence, or called being tired of being told what I can't say, being told how I should be.

Because someone's opinion was that I should be meat, passed around. And someone else's was that I should be a young girl, screaming.

But I have a way to be, and here it is.

Sex, like painting, is self-expression. And I feel sorry that my sexual self could hurt someone or make them uncomfortable. I feel sorry that my dad could read this and get that tightening, churning feeling in his stomach that makes him want to throw up. But I feel sorrier yet that I have this list of

stories in my head of ways I've been told how be, and how not to be and what I can say and when I can't speak up. I don't want sixty years of this. I'm sick because my holding them back is perpetrating a cycle of violence, self inflicted, deeper yet than bodily trauma.

Because this body hasn't just seen trauma. This body has had sex to hair metal, has chatted straight through from foreplay to completion, has been self-conscious and proud, has been so close to complete strangers, to dear partners, has been wild. This body has had enough good touch to be satiated, if only for an evening or a morning before wanting again. This body is mine, and I choose to share it. I have that right.

In my portrait, for some reason I painted myself naked. I couldn't figure out what clothes to put myself in, what would represent the way I saw myself. And so I saw myself naked, as I am without aid, as if untagged by what was in style or what made me look thinner. I painted myself naked because it felt like the only way I could see myself honestly.

A sexual self. A self unhinged. I saw it then and I see it now and if I were to go back and try a self portrait again, that's the only part I wouldn't change, my nakedness. Because I knew it quietly then, and I know it louder now. Growing up has made me see this: that an identity is up to me to create. You can't just do what you're told.

My watch, I went back and got it. And while I was there, we had sex and I kept my eyes open and I moved my body and moved him to do what I wanted him to do. Because I wanted to do it. Because I get to want things in bed, and because I'm not obligated to do a single damn thing.

I ripped up that clean canvas, that quiet, docile girl he wanted me to be. And when I left, he sent me a text that said, "I feel like you're mad at me."

I never answered.

We have a way to be, women. Our own ways to be. It isn't a wild hair. And just like painting, just like sex, the point is figuring that out: what we have to say, what we like, what our perspective is what we want to highlight. How we want to occupy this world. What we want to paint: cherry blossoms, bananas, ourselves.

I'm not saying we can't be afraid or ask questions. I'm not saying we have to figure it all out. I'm not even saying we can.

I'm just saying don't you dare ask someone else to make the first paint stroke.

THESIS BOOK LIST

Notes of a Native Son, by James Baldwin

The Boys of My Youth, by Jo Ann Beard

All Over but the Shoutin', by Rick Bragg

I Feel Bad About My Neck, by Nora Ephron

The Blue Jay's Dance, by Louise Erdrich

Crazy Brave, by Joy Harjo

The Disappointment Artist, by Jonathan Lethem

The Undertaking, by Thomas Lynch

The Two Kinds of Decay, by Sarah Manguso

The Argonauts, by Maggie Nelson

This is the Story of a Happy Marriage, by Ann Patchett

Citizen, by Claudia Rankine

Lying, by Lauren Slater

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal, by Jeanette Winterson

The Chronology of Water, by Lidia Yuknavitch

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