

AN UNSUITABLE SUM

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing

Department of English

The University of Utah

May 2014

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The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

Here in the twenty-first century, identity is more malleable than ever. Globalization, technology, gains in gender and racial equality, and the post-World War II middleclass boom have decentralized identity formation, rendering it a narrative of the self that is chosen, shaped, and constantly (re)rewritten.

Yet, like groups of violent editors and readers, lovers, family, technology, history, and culture, a myriad of Others often impose unwanted and destabilizing interpretations upon our identity. (Mis)Reading bodies like text and (mis)interpreting words, the Other produces external narratives that the narrative of the I must reject, invert, embrace, or incorporate. And although the body is usually a supporting visual text, the physical part of identity from which a large portion of the self's narrative originates, it can and does subvert identity through age, illness, intended improvement, or unintended decline.

Constructed from as many fragments and disjointed pieces as its author, this stream of (self)consciousness narrative explores an identity being destabilized by the onset of an unknown illness. Undermined by its dual obsessions — the tension between the narrative of the self and contesting narratives from the Other and the relationship between the speaking, thinking I (represented self) and the material I, the body (the enacted self) — and lacking the more familiar elements of plot, character, setting, and narrative trajectory the text fails to represent a cohesive whole just as its narrator fails to reassert a stable identity.

As a collage the text struggles to find a cohesive self to represent. Various self-portraits purposefully interrogate the idea that the face is the seat of the self as purported by the traditionally staid genre of portraiture. Paintings, photos of blood cells and hair and saliva and inherited objects constitute an effort to articulate the body through image. The language, while overtly an attempt at stabilization, further fractures wholeness: dreams become concerned with the material; suspension of meaning-making only results in critical introspection; the past exists in an irresolvable tension, at times beautified in order to reaffirm the narrative of the historical self while at other times its unabashed suffering serves as a reminder of age, deterioration and, death.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin in the beginning: Mom, thanks for playing the word game with me when I was a little girl: “Nebulous. N-e-b-u-l-o-u-s. His plan was rejected for lack of details; it was too nebulous for the legislature.” And thank you for ignoring Lance and me as we rolled our annoyed preteen eyes and huffed our irritated teen lungs as you followed us through the years, book in hand, cracking breathy voice full of feeling and seriousness, your eyes searching our faces for the moment of impact. Thank you for teaching me the beauty, pain, and passion of language. Thank you for delivering me to the shores of a world full of endless ideas. I’ll never leave. Ask Adam sometime about how I follow him around the house, book in hand. . . . And here it is, Mom, the moment of impact: I’m getting my MFA.

Lance, you are the world’s best big brother. You have been my cohort in trouble, you have been my savior when the trouble was my own, and you have been an inspiration my entire life. You showed me that it was possible to go back to school and you showed me how to do it while working full-time. And of course it must be said that I couldn’t have gotten this far without your math tutoring; thanks for helping me tame those god damn unruly formulas into something I could comprehend long enough to pass the test. In the eyes of your little sister, you will always be the smartest guy in the room.

Adam, you changed my name, you changed my life. Your loving voice taught me to believe in myself in ways I never would have had I not heard you. Your emotional,

financial, and technical support is instrumental in all of my achievements. I love the way we laugh together, dream together, pursue goals together — the way we make life better when we share it with each other. It has been thirteen years and I still look forward to seeing your number on my phone and I hope your face is still the first and last thing I see every day for the next thirteen years.

Lance, you have been my mentor, my advocate, my supporter. I would not be here if not for you. And I don't just mean here as in the completion of my degree, I mean that if I had not taken that class from you as an undergraduate, I would still be wandering the wilds of literature trying to find a style of writing that suited me. When the taps of my fingertips form words on my computer screen and the text finds its final shape and I am more myself in that space, it is only because you showed me the roads to travel, double-dared me to take the first step, and helped me along the way. Texts you introduced me to, things you said and stories that you wrote, all those crazy exciting ideas and styles broke the rules and made me. Thank you for being a rebel. Thank you for mentoring other rebels. Thank you for helping me discover an important piece of who I am.

Melanie, if human lungs draw angel's breath it is you exhaling. Never have I met someone who gives so much heart, so much attention, so much of themselves to a text as you. And when I say text, I mean students because we are our texts. Some people, especially here in the land of Zion, pretend to be kind, but truly kind people, when it is part of their soul, are rare — You are a rare and endangered species, Melanie, and I would consider it a mark of evil if someone were ever to utter an unkind word about you.

Your texts, your kindness, and your instruction are treasures. Thank you for sharing your knowledge. Thank you for sharing your talents. Thank you for sharing yourself.

Michael, I regret not having the honor of taking a class from you. You might even wonder why I asked you to be on my committee: It is because your name was always mentioned with excitement and the deepest respect. Clearly, you have the kind of distinguished reputation and admiration that comes from both skill and hard work. Even if we never had the opportunity to know each other as teacher and student, at least we will have had the pleasure of knowing each other through our texts. Thank you; I hope we meet again.

I end here: To those that make up my small but vital social network I say thank you for your listening ears; I say thank you for your generous words; I say thank you for sharing your laughter and your time; I say thank you for lending your energy and belief in my times of need; I say thank you.

I

THE TEXT'S BODY¹

¹ This document has been reformatted to meet University of Utah and ProQuest UMI formatting guidelines.

A version of silence. Suburbia's version — the soft hum of the refrigerator, the warm dusty breath of the furnace, the far-off whirl of the freeway — a sleepless lullaby for 3:17 in the morning. This malady rots slumber. I collect bad sleep the way other people collect stamps. Or grievances. Or Facebook friends. Tonight, the sounds lay over the seething grip in my abdomen, a delicate shroud too thin, too distant to obliterate this pain and carry me off to dreams. Or maybe the pain, a giant fist that squeezes organs and muscles punching upward with a serrated blade only stopping when it hits the throat, is just too strong, too present. Agony. Exhaustion. Life has become an Escher print, the sharp edges of furniture and language all distorted confusion. Hips and mind bruised. No amount of caffeine can prod my thoughts into anything quicker than a lopsided jog trot. I hunch over, a balasana half-fetus position, stomach on the tops of thighs. Rock back and forth. Try to make the leather couch squeal in time with the motor of the refrigerator.

My body might be clearing out some horribly imprecise disfigured fetus if my fallopian tubes weren't charred and twisted. There will be no babies in this house. Genetic dead ends the tribute to dead unions.

Curling and rocking with no money and no health insurance I need answers. Free answers. Still hunching over, I do a Quasimodo shuffle over to the computer. Somewhere out there, out on the Internet, a diagnosis is waiting to be found. I return to previous sites as if in the time between this attack and the last the sites have been updated with new information. Information that will light bulbs and ring bells. Information that will enlighten and direct. Information that will explain the cause and the cure. Information that will tell me which pill or special tea to buy from Walgreen's.

Information into whose contours my symptoms will slip. . . a glass slipper fit. Come on Internet, don't let me down. Don't let me down. Not now. Not when I need you the most.

Dear Internet, what's wrong with me? What is wrong with me? Tell me the answer. Or answers. What's wrong with my body? What is wrong with my body?

What's wrong with me? What in the hell is wrong with my stomach-ach? What is happening to me?

Google: stomach pain without nausea

Google: severe abdomen pain with no diarrhea

Google: pain in the abdomen all day but is worse at night

Google: cramp like stomach pain

Google: sharp stabbing pain in the abdomen with no constipation

Google: pain in the abdomen that moves around

Google: intense pain in midabdomen with no fever

Google: very sudden stomach pains

Dear, dear Internet, please tell me how to make this stop.

I wonder how long this attack will last. The last one was almost six hours. If this one goes that long, the pain should start to subside around 10:00AM. Sleep, I can sleep then, sometimes it's good not to have a job.

Please go away. Please. Please. Please. Please go. Please go away. Please go. Please.

There are so many different things it could be. My pain kind of fits all of these. . . .

Google: pain in the abdomen that wakes you up

Google: sudden and excruciating stomach pain

Google: what kind of abdomen malady gets worse with time

*Google: **WHY DOES MY STOMACH HURT SO FUCKING BAD***

Google: roaming pain in the abdomen that changes

Google: stomach pain that won't go away

but not exactly. Not a fit that

reaches the level of a diagnosis: Celiac disease, lactose intolerance, kidney stones, heart disease, food allergy, pancreatitis, stomach cancer, bowel obstruction, heartburn,

diverticulosis, irritable bowel syndrome, duodenal ulcers, gallstones, cholecystitis, urinary tract infection, ectopic pregnancy,

START AGAIN

Crohn's, *Google: strange things that cause abdominal pain*
Google: why does my stomach hurt after eating
inflammatory *Google: bloating and sensitivity in the stomach* diseases
of the colon, gas- *Google: bile and blood in bowel movements*
Google: pain so severe it causes inappetance troenteritis,
Google: will this pain stay

functional abdominal pain, GERD, protein allergy,

pelvic inflammatory disease, ulcerative colitis, colon cancer, liver failure, ovarian cysts, biliary disease, cirrhosis,

START AGAIN

abdominal *Yahoo: stomach pain* migraines, hypercalcemia,
Yahoo: severe abdomen pain with no diarrhea
Yahoo: pain in the abdomen that stays all day but is worse at night endometriosis, viral hepatitis,
Yahoo: cramp like stomach pain abdominal cutaneous nerve *Yahoo: sharp stabbing pain in the abdomen with no constipation* entrapment, hiatal hernia, biliary colic, abdominal muscular infection, and mastocytosis. So many things.

Dear Internet, what's wrong

START AGAIN

with me? I know the diagnosis is hidden deep in you, buried, somewhere. It *Google: stomach pain but I've had my appendix removed*
Google: ????????????
Google: FREE MEDICAL ADVICE
Google: abdomen pain that fills me up

just takes a little digging. I found my 1980s Barbies on you, my grandmother's Lane Danish coffee table, my first lunch box, some unclaimed property, my best friend from sixth grade, so many things. Oh, you wondrous keeper of information, reveal to me now what I need. You have porn and shopping and music and social networks and movies and directions and satellite images of my house. You must, you must have what I need now.



Self-Portrait #1

I stand in a small square of light. A few more steps into the hall and I'll leave it behind. Inside the air is old and still, trapped by close concrete walls. An uneasy compulsion draws me inward. I go slowly to let my eyes adjust. There is a black shifting mass deep within the hall. It is a man whose face I cannot see. His voice encourages my forward momentum. Where am I? What is this place I wonder when through the clotted air a voice, my voice, says, "Karni Mata." Yes, yes, the temple, I think, as the dark begins to swirl around my legs. I look down and realize that it isn't the blackness but the temple rats. They run in circles round my ankles, up my calves, up my thighs, moving up up up to my waist before spiraling down again. The man calls me onward. I try to shove the rats off but the man commands me to stop. I walk father and farther into the hall. It seems so far.

More and more rats jump from the walls and floor to join the scurrying skirt that encircles my lower half. What is that? One of the rats grazes the left side of my stomach with its teeth. Hot. Wet. Curious. Love's first kiss. The next rat bites, gentle, a nibble really. "Walk, keep walking" the man says. Soon all the rats are biting. Deeper and deeper. Teeth. I cannot tell one bite from another, they form a wreath of angry excitement around my stomach. Again I try to push the rats away but the man says to leave them alone and keep walking. What is that pain? But I know what it is. Energized by the smell of blood the rats bury their heads into my side, they take large choking gulps of flesh. I am getting nearer to the man. The rats are slick with blood, crawling in and out of the hole they have eaten through my side.

I hold my arms out to the man and he says, "See, the rats are part of you."



Self-Portrait #2A

Grandpa, tell me bout the war.

Why are you asking me about the war?

Because I want to know what you did there.

Why? Why do you want to make me remember those things? Little girls shouldn't be interested in war anyways.

But I am. I am interested. What did you do there? Mom said you told her that the men peed and pooped their pants on the boats on the way to the beach. Did they, Grandpa? Did they get sick? Was it smelly? Mom said it was.

Grandpa?

I don't want to talk about the war. It was a long time ago. I don't want to remember those things anymore."

What did you do? Why won't you tell me? Please.

Please, Grandpa.

Please tell me. I wanna' know.

Please, Grandpa. Just tell me a little. Just a little, please.

Please. Did they mess in their pants, Grandpa?

I was a medic. I had to go and gather up the wounded. It was my job to try to save 'em. The thing I will tell you is that soldiers, when they are wounded, they don't call for their mothers. They don't call for their wives. They call for me. They yell, "Medic! Medic!" It's me they are calling for.

And you went to them? Did you. . . did you carry a gun? Did you go to them?

Did you save the men, Grandpa?

Grandpa? Did you save lots of 'em? Did you carry a gun?

Were the men sick? Were they, Grandpa?

The bodies. . . . the bodies were hard to see, hard to make out — crumpled up that way, like heaps of trash. Hard to tell just what it was you were seein' at first. It wasn't some movie, bodies all laid out nice like. Men don't die that way. But, I suppose we got used to it. Found 'em quicker and quicker. Soon we got to 'em in no time at all. Even learned to tell the live ones from the dead ones after a bit.

Did you carry a gun? Did the men really pee their pants? Did they really, Grandpa?

Grandpa?

Grandpa?

Grandpa? Tell me.

Grandpa?



Self-Portrait #2B

Es war einmal a sun sunny day and the children, a little boy and a little girl, were making skate ramps. Wood boards stacked on top of a few bricks. A jump with a lip that was bigger than the girl wanted it to be. The boy was brave but the girl was timid. He said they could fly. But the girl had never seen anyone with wings. Is it good to be circumspect?

Face in the lawn, his skate covered feet waved in the air, lungs and mouth raced after stolen breath. The girl readied herself. Fear settled into her stomach and joints. Who can tell where fear comes from: Failure? The untried? Being teased for skipping your turn? Or things that cannot be undone?

She disobeyed the fear and sped down the drive toward the jump. Into the sky then down again. Headed for the boy's body and she still did not know for sure what it felt like to fly. No brakes. No stopping bodies in motion. Futile gestures of control, first the wrists then the rest of her weight followed. Thin and tangled as barberry the children disregarded the sharp crack of snapping bone. Is the call of the air that hard to ignore?

Hours later the boy said her crying was sad and contagious and she should just go home. In bed her circumspectness grew. She wished they would have played the Willow Game instead. Their secret game, played away from the eyes of elders. Stripping long elastic branches off the boy's willow tree, and with a snap of the wrist, large red wheals, a lot of sting and, on lucky occasions, delicious little tears of blood — what determines the good fire from the bad?

A secret game full of welcome pain. They didn't hit where Mom and Dad could see, the need for stealth learned after worried parents convened over steaks and Budweiser to discuss the enjoyment children derive from welted bodies. By God, the

parents said, they hadn't worked their way into the middle-class so that their kids could play these weirdo bullshit sort of games. Despite what the children said there had to be a psychological motivation to it, something beyond the base pleasure of pain, something the kids were simply too young to name. Would it, would it, they stumbled at the thought, make Freud blush? Either way, the parents would not tolerate it; by God, the parents vowed, their offspring were going to grow-up straight as arrows. What is the relationship between an object's secret mass (*sm*) and its acceleration (*a*) and the applied force (*F*)? Is it hard to shape objects in motion?

$$***F = sma***$$

Is it hard to shape objects with secret mass?



Self-Portrait #3

This thing is growing inside me. Inside my stomach. When it kicks and rattles the skin stretches tight, bulges outward.

Yesterday I stood in front of the mirror and looked at my distended abdomen. How Picasso's hands made that girl in front of the mirror so pretty, the bright colors and black-curving *a small organ before it is released into* lines loved the swell of her stomach. Beautiful. *The surgical removal is called* And his hands make me love her too. *May be asymptomatic, even for years are called "silent" and do not require* But it is just too out of place in the *Symptoms commonly begin to appear,* flesh. Skin. *In humans, the loss, is easily tolerated* and bone. Organs. Blood *a characteristic symptom is an "attack," that may experience intense pain in the upper-right accompanied by nausea and vomiting, that steadily* Bloated and *often either asymptomatic (producing no noticeable symp* screaming. I *-other related or unrelated disorders) in its early stages.* look a little *perhaps distant, parts of the body), which is one of the* pregnant. Or *A positive Murphy's sign is common on examination.* maybe like *A patient may also experience referred pain. Often* one of those *Note that these can be symptoms of other problems* starving chil- *certain meals and happen at night, and after drink.* dren from *By the time symptoms occur, it has often reached* Africa — *Bloating of the stomach, usually after meals* kwashiorkor *Untreated, mortality is high, mainly because* bellies evidence *Loss of appetite, especially for meat is one* of nature getting *poor prognosis (5-year survival <5 to 15%)* her signifiers *Pain first, vomiting next and fever last* wrong. *recognized as one of the most common* Usually I bend over to *there is a high risk of rupture* hug the pain. When it *localized findings in the right* sleeps I convince myself *described as the classic* that I'm getting better. *the body* That the body is an engine of per- *fection.* That it is a closed system capable of healing itself.

I used to stand in front of the mirror and look beautiful, too. The eyes of Picasso's girl say she was somewhere else but I'm stuck here, in front of my mirror.

Dr. Tsai walks into the examination
room
and I make an effort to not look
surprised.

Dr. Tsai is about 6'2";
his skin, the color of morning coffee
with cream and sugar,
his rich black hair carefully messed,
teeth so straight and bright I'm
sure his breath tastes like fresh mint.

He wears black slacks and the sleeves
of a white button down shirt rolled up
to the elbows.

Clothes that speak to
me in the language of competence
and success.

If I have a fetish outfit for men,
this is it.

The fabric, a little loose, very
expensive and light, is the perfect
frame for his lean well defined body.

A diver or swimmer's body.

My heartbeat drops low and deep,
the pulsing ferment of pink flesh.
When Jan recommended Dr. Tsai
she had stressed he was cute.

I didn't believe her.

How could I take Jan's cute seriously

—

Jan's sweatshirts are decorated with
unicorns and rainbows,
Jan has crushes on Jim Brickman
and Michael Bublé,
poncy pretty boys with the
sexual charisma
of Kermit the Frog.

Jan probably gets aroused
at the thought
of waterfalls, candlelight dinners,
and flowers.

I get aroused
by bodies, minds, and four-letter words.

Besides, cute is a misnomer.

Cute fails miserably.

She should have said hot.

Dr. Tsai asks about my aching arms.
 I tell him it's the kind of pain old men
 have in their knees when
 the weather turns.
 Old men say that bones don't lie.
 The pain is a slow throb that emanates
 from the bones.
 Finger tips to elbow-joint.
 Dr. Tsai grins and wraps his hand
 around my wrist.
 A gesture that makes me feel
 ridiculously feminine.
 As we speak our eyes explore the face,
 dip down as far is socially acceptable,
 our mouths explode over and over
 into spontaneous smiles.
 Dr. Tsai runs his hands, warm and
 skilled, up and down my arms.
 Damn, who says you can't read a man
 by his clothes.
 Or his hands.

She should have said smokin'.
 She should have said sexy as hell.
 She should have said
 you'll want to fuck him so bad
 fire burns through your face and
 every turn of your guilty eye is
 the scream of a scarlet letter.
 Desire is the worst disease.
 Highly infectious, it circulates
 around bodies,
 enlivens skin, dilates the pupils,
 stimulates the secretion of fluids and
 agitates the mind.
 Worse yet, the cure inflames
 the disease — at least as long
 as the fuel of novelty lasts.
 Suddenly, I'm unsure about having
 Dr. Tsai as my physician.
 The only thing between
 a doctor and patient
 should be illness, cold but polite
 professionalism and a slight trace of
 antiseptic tweaking the air.

Patient Name: REES, TRACY, MARIE Date of Birth: 2/16/1973 Accession: 4108563
MRN: 9579236 Exam Date: 4/16/2009 15:24:40



Self-Portrait #4A

Patient Name: REES, TRACY, MARIE Date of Birth: 2/16/1973 Accession: 4108563
MRN: 9579236 Exam Date: 4/16/2009 15:24:40



Self-Portrait #4B

Dr. Tsai is exuberant about my x-rays.

“Look at those beautiful bones,”

he says.

“They are gorgeous.

Healthy.

Strong.

Beautiful bones.

Take these home

and hang them

on the wall.

I’m not kidding.

Gorgeous.

Beautiful.

You certainly don’t have RA.”

I sit on the patient’s table,

unable to stop smiling.

A normal response

to Dr. Tsai’s presence.

Our flirtation has

intensified.

His shirt is open.

One.

Two.

Three buttons.

His shirt is open.

If I move forward just an inch,

my nose and lips

will reach

his skin.

I could extend my tongue

and trace the divots and protrusions

of flesh-covered bone.

God, he is so close

I

can’t

breath.

Dr. Tsai's eyes darken
 and when he says,
 "Unbutton your top a little
 and pull it off your shoulders,"
 his voice is thick.

Dr. Tsai places his hands
 on the sides of my neck.
 A thumb traces the circle of my cheek,
 quick and delicate,
 maybe, maybe
 it was only wished for.
 He pushes the bra straps
 off my shoulders
 while I stare
 into the open-buttons of his shirt.
 Smooth creamy skin.
 I look up and the leftward-tilt of
 his mouth
 tells me that he has read my mind
 — cognitive penetration —
 I flush and force my eyes down.

I wonder, what would be the
 inciting event,
 of pleasure and shame,
 a licking-bite across the nipples,
 the tender probe of a finger?

I run my tongue across my teeth.
 And swallow.
 Hard.
 I sit up straight. Stiff. Tall.
 I pull my shoulders back.
 I can't see his eyes.
 But I feel them
 move across
 my hair,
 neck,
 shoulders,
 breasts.

I wish someone would speak
 and break this silence.
 The air is oppressive and hot.

As Dr. Tsai moves his hands
across my shoulders and neck

my body
involuntarily shimmies.

He laughs,
shifts his weight

and
leans closer.

I try to save a few remnants of dignity

by saying,
“That feels sort of like a massage.
I’ll have to take you with me.”

He says,
“Don’t tell my wife.”

I could wrap my legs
around his waist.

His lips are lovely.

I bet he is a wonderful
kisser.

I bet his lips
and

his tongue
move like his hands:
slow,
gentle.

The warm increase.

I wonder if he is ////

With his wife suddenly in the room,
and my own married state
at the mention of a spouse,
I get a handle on the air, my mind,
and the passing of real time.

Dr. Tsai has sent me for an
 electromyogram.

I wait in a hospital gown.

The doctor comes in and it is clear:
 we are both safe.

There will be no iatrogenic
 yearnings or blushes.

He inserts needles into my muscles and
 turns up the volume on the monitor.

My muscles sound like thunder,
 from deep in earth, an endless static
 ripping clap and boom without even
 a single gasp or moan

to break the sound

So, muscles sound like thunder, I ask.

The doctor is nearly wiggling at the
 thought and when the nurse joins us
 he tells her that I have said muscles

sound like thunder,

the sentence shimmering with glee

and out of his mouth

before the door has finished closing.

Straps and underwire removed,
 gravity sits hard on my breasts.

So soon, I wonder.

I'm not ready for the surrender.

The price for early maturation.

Just out of sixth grade
 and boys with licenses were
 staring.

One year more
 and men with full beards were
 asking.

And the early grade-school fascination.

The recess chases,
 the grab for another look.

Come here and show us

how much you've changed.

Come here behind these bushes

— where teacher can't see —

let us show you what our cousins
 taught us.

How many years left
 until the only man looking and asking
 is my husband?

The Internet is judging me. It has deemed me desperate, lonely, pathetic. A harvestable fruit ripe for commercial exploitation. I know the Internet has assessed me as such because it throws up ads that say: Hot Local Singles In Salt Lake; Yahoo Astrology: Is He Right For You?; Will You Find Love? Click To Find Out!; How to Tell if He Really Likes You; Find Your Soul Mate; Sexy New Singles Added Every Day!; Never Spend Another Saturday Night Alone; How To Get Him To Ask You To Marry Him.

It vacillates between thinking I'm an unsatisfied bored housewife to thinking I am planning my first wedding anniversary after the second date to thinking I haven't had sex in years and am ready to grab onto another body so long as it qualifies as male. Mostly it sees me as a lover of chic-flicks, a single unmarried woman that just can't find happiness until she has that marriage certificate, the official piece of paper, that public record that tells everyone I am good enough to be loved through sickness and health, wealth and poverty, employment and unemployment, single-digit size skinny jeans worn with form fitting I-tell-no-lies lycra tops to double digit stretch-with-you lycra jeans worn with hide-the-rolling-hills-of back fat baby doll blouses, until death or until something better comes along do we part promises.

In fairness to the Internet, it, locked inside its pixels and wires and electrical pulses and (un)self-unawareness and unconsciousness, cannot see me, cannot understand me, locked as I am inside my skin and nerves and electrical pulses, my self-awareness and consciousness, rolling in pain and asking it for answers it doesn't know. It does what it can, takes its best guess as to why I have spent nearly twelve weeks of sleepless nights watching cat videos on YouTube. Who, but a horny unsatisfied person, whatever

their marital status, would habitually watch videos of cats at 3:00AM? It cannot know that the videos are a respite. My final landing-spot after hours of reading and rereading and rereading symptoms and treatments in an effort to diagnosis this pain. I like YouTube's cat videos. Furry little bodies cuddling with other little furry bodies of a different species. Four-legged long-tailed bodies engaged in minimoments of anthropomorphic adorableness. Gleaming canine teeth and whiskered mouths meowing Justin Bieber's latest hit or Jingle Bell Rock or some other tune that is bearable only when sent forth from the mouth of a cat.

I smile when I watch cat videos on YouTube. Sometimes, when the pain is at its worst, the smiles are little more than brief pleasure impulses piercing wrinkle inducing facial paroxysms. Cats almost never suffer from stomach or digestive issues. Purists, they did not evolve to eat any foodstuff that might have begun to decay; cats will only feed on warm bodies, the lately late. There are almost no bacteria in cats' digestive systems and the hydrochloric acid in their stomach is strong enough to kill any bacterium that does find a way in. Cats are the only animals with a zero degree stride — the fashion world doesn't call it the catwalk for nothing. Unlike other animals, doomed to carry the human-like traits we hoist upon them or our idealized visions of nature, our culture accepts that cats exist simultaneously in opposing dimensions: kissable cuteness and graceful consort of death. In the exact same moment a cat can be a beloved pet and a demigod. And all their various characteristics caught by different monikers: cat, mouser, tomcat, tiger, kitty, pussy. Cats are unlike any other pet because they don't really need people. Cats allow humans to care for them; what an honor and privilege to serve such a beast. No wonder Freyja, the Norse goddess of love, fertility, war, and

death, rode a chariot drawn by two large white cats.

It must be some instinct, some morphogenetic road that we both began to trod upon thousand and thousands of years ago that makes the *homo* genus love the *felis* genus. So long now it's innate. Recent studies show that work productivity increases when workers watch videos of cats and kittens. Maybe future studies will reveal that watching cat videos reduces physiological pain.

It cannot be borne, this reduction into some algorithm where I'm lumped in with every loathsome stereotype of American females. The Internet has gotten it wrong. I watch YouTube cat videos to forget the pain, as a relieving distraction. It's all escapism. I decide to confuse the Internet. I start listening to Mongol Rap. Usually the lyrics to rap are too misogynistic, too prothug, too braggish about the material excesses of a capitalism, or counterfeit capitalist economy to attract me, but the language barrier is a lubricant and I slip into the rhythm unknowing, free from the burden of making moral judgments. In these late early hours I am too sick and full of sleep-deprived confusion to be navigating moral labyrinths. And the way they stick, coming back up later in the day, uninvited and unannounced. The intruder you can't kill.

I decide that Gennie is the best. Her beats hit my ears like footsteps: rapid, sure, and composed. There is no anger in her rhythms and beats. On some of the notes her mouth sounds tightly closed. It is the sound of crackling saliva and clicking of the tongue forced out of closely held teeth. It is a Mongolian sound. But I have to close my eyes when the subtitles appear, I don't want to listen. I just want to hear.

I also like Gee, but he does sound angry and some of his videos have cars and bling. The visuals do not tell if he is criticizing excesses or chasing them. Although Gee

is clearly criticizing American rappers in one of his videos: photos of 50 Cent and others, a look down the pants and laughter, a finger placed at the side of the head and rolled in circles. It is so hard to escape meaning. I finish his videos anyway. Some of the male artists incorporate traditional throat singing. Deep vibrations of throaty roots. Unseen chords plucked hard and low. Even the chest vibrates. With its traditions in mimicry of the natural world — rivers, winds, waterfalls, and animals — perhaps throat singing is the missing link between music and language. Throat singing, the first semiosis, the first real break between the human and the earth and the animal. But we were still close then.

One of my favorites, I watch it over and over and over and over, is titled “Fish Symbolized Stamp.” The sound with its rap and throat singing is old and new: the Mongolia that is and the Mongolia that was. Put on YouTube by Off The Map Tours, the images are a combination of low-budget bling and stereotypical images of a traditional Mongol people. I wonder if I’ve been taken in by some cheap promotional garbage, something that real rappers would hate me for, something that I could hate myself for if I knew more. But I am trying not to know. Ignorance wipe my mind, be my bliss. Ignorance, pardon my moral missteps.

Even if my favorite Mongolian rap video wasn’t made to promote tourism, that is what it is doing now. Come here. Come to Mongolia. We can offer you the modern. We have hummers, cities, restaurants, fashion, TV, and rappers. Come here. Come to Mongolia. We can fulfill your fantasies. We still have stout hairy ponies, gers, green valleys with wind-curtained grasses, hides and silks, throat singers, and yaks. Come here. Come to Mongolia. We have cars and we have river gods. We have electricity

and we have traditional values. We have hotels and running water for your comfort and we have nomads and shamans for your entertainment.

I know I'm a god damn hypocrite. I would go to Mongol if I had the money, no, that's not right. It is more honest to say I would go if I didn't have a marriage and a mortgage. The Antarctic. The Sahara Desert. Around the world. I watch it all with so much passion, consume the world through my little screen. There is no leaving.



Self-Portrait #5

The city threatens to burn. Piles of heat lie over the valley and distort the light. I fall out onto the blacktop, panting, desperate to see. Surely skin will melt. A lullaby-chorus line of new mothers shuffles along, nests of swaddled babes pressed to hearts. They all wear a hajib. Beautiful dark waves of temptation tucked out of sight. I know, it's safer for the men that way. I run my fingers through my hair. Where is my hajib? Where is my hajib? A ground-swell of pain in my stomach surges high and swallows my voice. It is a life tearing its way out. My empty arms drop to cradle my abdomen as I get into the back of the line.

I watch the women's coarse heels kick up dust on the way to the Mount Taygetos. Apothetae. A cleansing purge. A sick hope. No matter. We stumble up to the top of the exposed hill and watch the leaders grab infantile bundles and make the final choice: Who will make it to the bottom and who will make it to tomorrow. Let me out. Let me out.

Without permission these men will reach inside me to pull and tug. A magnificent liquid heat lashes my naked head and the baby that should be in my arms gnaws at my guts. I want to be still until the dark rises. But I am the last in line. Let me out. Let me out.

Tiny bodies rain down. Nanolives dropping like bombs, ending in an explosion of flesh and blood. We tiptoe around. Limbs of collagen drying in the light. I remember that unossified bones don't leave any evidence and I try to tell the mothers there is no need to worry, every significant forgetting takes time, but pain sucks speech. Let me out. Let me out.

*We all stop to watch a mother on her knees, a request for forbearance, she says,
“Gods, glutted on the weak, spare this one or spare none.” The tallest of the men steps
forward and tells her that Darwin’s already made it to the capital and he only roots for
the strong. He drags her to the edge of the cliff. Her arms encircle his waist as he grabs
her shoulders. Her gage is failed already. The shrieking bundle sticks tight. A slight
push and we watch her fall. She sings on the way down. Let me out. Let me out. We
have a similar build. They won’t tolerate the velvet degradation of a welfare state. She
smiled right before she hit the ground. Who will clean up the mess? Let me out.
No hungry mouths for the filling the women walk away, swollen nipples weeping white.
Only my shirt is dry. The baby chews faster. I can’t find my hajib.*

It’s nearly my turn.

Let me out.

I said, "When he shot the girl he was really shooting himself."

I said, "She was nothing. She was just a mirror that reflected back a better image of him, the means through which he could achieve the projection of a better self.

Imagine what it's like being so empty inside."

He said, "No. When he shot her he was shooting Love.

Love with a capital L because that's what Love with a capital L does, it forces us to view the object of our affections through a lens of perfection."

He said, "What he couldn't bear was the disparity between what he really was and what her Love showed him he could never be."

I said "No matter what the truth is we all hate waking up alone and paranoid."

He said, "It's okay, we can both be right, it's fiction."

She will forget all our names at the end. Even mine. We will creep into her hospital room, skitter around the bed choking up whispers and tears. The close of her final scene our forever drama. I will remember her grey skin, an opaque glass cool and still. Her head will arch against the pillow, mouth agape in some sort of frozen laugh or last desperate request for air, her fingers wrapped tightly around the edge of a sheet that has never been on her bed or anybody's bed. It is a part that I rewrite for grandmother over and over. But I didn't write the original story, no, it was the ending scripted for her ex-husband. A fleshy realistic narrative drafted by the Marlboro Man, middling poverty, and a God-fearing culture — a culture without compassion enough to terminate the ending none of us want and few of us plan for — but hallelujahs and Jesus were absent while we waited for the deepening kiss of his Judas lungs to shepherd him into an afterworld none of us believed in.

Angry. I was sweating and sobbing and angry and wild that the staff let us see his body like that. What was the point? Did they want us to feel his suffering? Did they want to shove down our throats that minds go without the visual mess, the corporeal unseen a mirage of quiet dignity, while bodies and all the materiality of their monstrosity can't help but make a pungent chaotic fuss? Or was it a macabre tableau vivant just too routine to bother about because I can imagine that after awhile the gasping and the shit and the frantic contortions and the hysterical dysphoria and the finality of it all cease to make an impression. But still, then, and still, now, it makes me angry that they left us to incorporate such an image into his personal narrative. And now, hers too. That incipient fear forever lurking around the periphery of their names. How could they not know that their ordinary moment would become our unordinary memory, the kind that breaks out,

bleeds, and sticks? Even the particular of names and disease are no inoculation. I wanted, wanted so badly to open the door and scream into the hall that he was a veteran and a welder and he could sew doll clothes and he blinked twice for six more hours instead of once for a tracheotomy and six more months and he was honest and loved animals and he was half-deaf from Japanese bombs and the diesel's exploding pistons moving cheap consumer ephemera from one end of the country to the other and he taught girls with red hair how to ride horses and taught their daughters how to breath through paper and he had war memories that made language run scared and he deserved to be presented with pride instead of terror and noble character instead of terrified animation but maybe none of that would have changed anything because maybe the nurses wouldn't have come running to rearrange the scene for this veteran, this father, this husband, this working class hero because we were listening to muzak and not Bruce Springsteen and we hadn't yet woken up and realized the American Dream was always just a dream and it was long before 9/11 and patriotism wasn't en vogue and only one of us in the room was dead.

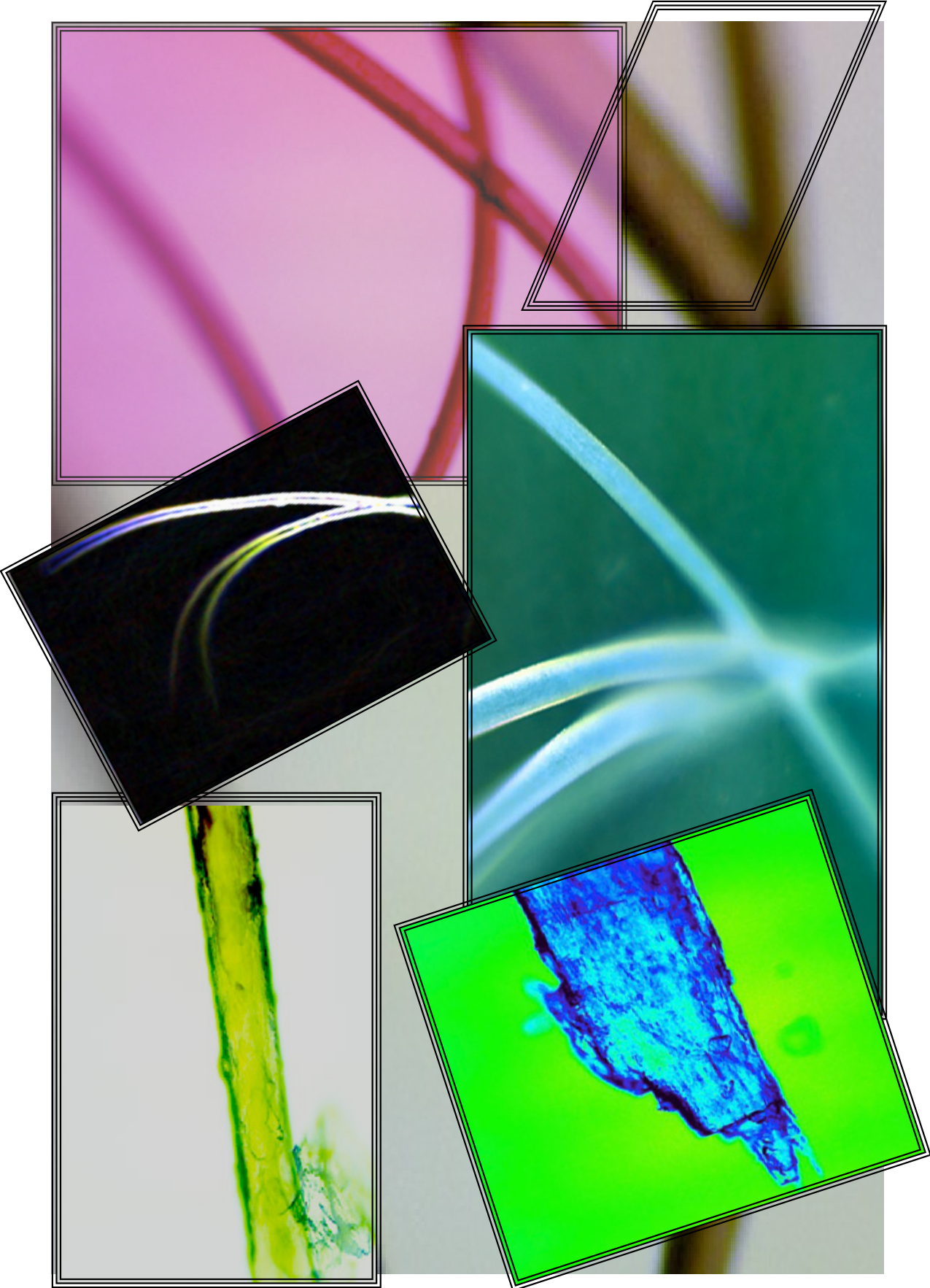
So, here we are, talking about her like she's gone. Hard not to when we already know who will still be standing when her mind surrenders to the last push. She clings on. I wonder: will it be easy to cry at the end? She never loved me. No, that's not right, I am misremembering. It is better to say that we never loved each other. I don't know. Could be the suffering or the mortality that will make us cry. Or it could be that I will cry because her ending will mean that she and I will never get to rewrite what we had, that we'll never get the chance to find a reason to love each other the way families do in other stories, stories that feel right and upbeat and hopeful but that really have nothing to

do with her and me and our kin. Or maybe it will be because in the last lucid seconds of her life she will blink twice when the doctor says once for the tracheotomy and six more months or twice for the morphine and six more hours and we will never have known until then that she was brave. Or it could be everything her and I will have been through or the relief of no more confused tomorrows or the hyperreality the rest of us will share in that moment. Hell, we will be damn alive in that room. Alive in our warmer than warm pink skins and streaming palms and faces. I will have her house key in my pocket and won't recall how it got there. And in that moment I will wonder if she meant all those words she said.

We laugh about how the one grandchild she has always regarded with black tarry disdain is the one memory she clings to. My skirts were always too short and my lipstick too shameless. Skirts a little longer and lipstick a little less confident in the weeks before she will forget my name too and weeks before that she will start to forget me here and there. My face, unmoored loose, and free, will float back and forth between her shore and the fog of meaninglessness. In the end my name and her bitterness won't be enough to save her mind. My name will dissolve into doubt and frustration as she slips through the fingers of our present-time right into a gorgeous silk-lined box.

When I come to visit and she won't know that I was her granddaughter, I'll sit on the edge of her bed and fantasize about walking out into the sun and the street and a world where I am totally forgotten. Experienced and full of history but clean and new, the gentlest kind of memoricide. As if forgetting could be an epidemic. As if forgetting is ever that beneficent. Talk about a second-chance. Talk about being born again. The second coming we all dream of. I could do it. I could. Wake-up fresh as a blank void in

everyone's memories. I'd be all potential and future and becoming. I don't think it hurts to not be part of the past. In a prequel to nothing maybe I will only wear jeans and never paint my lips.



Self-Portrait #6

We stink of discontent and the grave of the hunchback king has been found.

Blindly, subconsciously we exaggerate our villains until failings are flagitiousness and difference is deformity. It's a social instinct. But bodies can lie. And when the two tiny princes disappeared the innuendo landed, shiny black slicing the air like a murder of crows. Even now the news reports are replete with "severe scoliosis," "spinal abnormalities," "curvature of the spine," "with the left shoulder visibly lower than the right," "cheated of feature by dissembling nature," d'formd, unfinished." The war long over and the throne free from threat, scientists can say the king's body still needs extensive examination and historians can prep for the (re)(re)(re)rewrite. I hope some one places roses on his new grave.

I have a doppelgänger.

She reads Pablo Neruda poems in Spanish and memorizes state capitols.

She smiles and plots a murder-suicide.

Gifts proffered on steel blades, a mouthful of buckshot, the musky perfume of exhaust.

The sweetest release.

In her daydreams is a funeral pyre of mementos:

photos, letters, crisp leaves and pressed flowers, cards, ribbons, a lock of hair,

small square teeth.

A damnatio memoriae bonfire.

She reeks of high octane, hesitates at the corner and asks,

“When they are found, what will the bodies say?”

I have a past.

He wears Levi overalls and the dense smell of pig shit.

His words are slurred by noon and all the store clerks call him Buddy.

When we happen to meet I stare at my toes,

pray he won't recognize the wave of hair, roundness of cheek.

He is prone to walk circles around me:

attempts to dispel the haze of distance

and anchor familiarity to a name grown foreign.

Awkward passing.

I stop at the bend and murmur well-worn threats of banishment asking,

“Why doesn't that stinking bastard move away or die?”

Dear Dad,

I am writing you this letter to
respond immediately to what you
to say.

was too
about

you for
more or
outrageo
to start hi

has
D

Sec
would "con
Lance and I

do not call yo
and Lance what

your house so
for it. You
you haven't
years!!! You
and I told

"not going to apolog
you to be the kind of
kind of daughter I sh
justify your decisions

and for the fir
minimum.

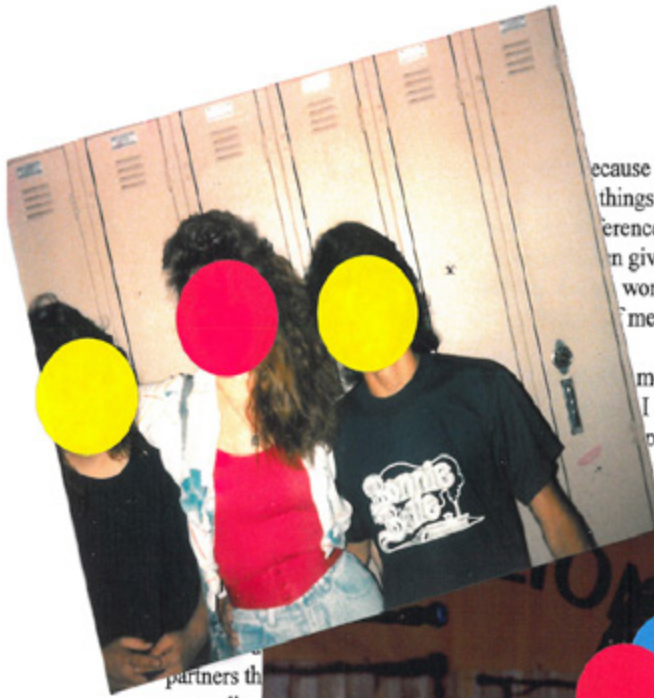
one for the ho
do not really
you feel special.

ns; Nick and Rose, M

with that. If you could have just let it g
and wanted to give we wouldn't be h
to be instead of accepting the kind o
want me to do. You want something
want me to "suck it up" and accept
to the same.



Self-Portrait #7A



because you are not
 things does not
 erence in what
 n give details
 wonder what
 memories.
 me much of
 I feel like g
 people wh
 like I have



partners th
 pretending
 further. A



feeling for
 place.

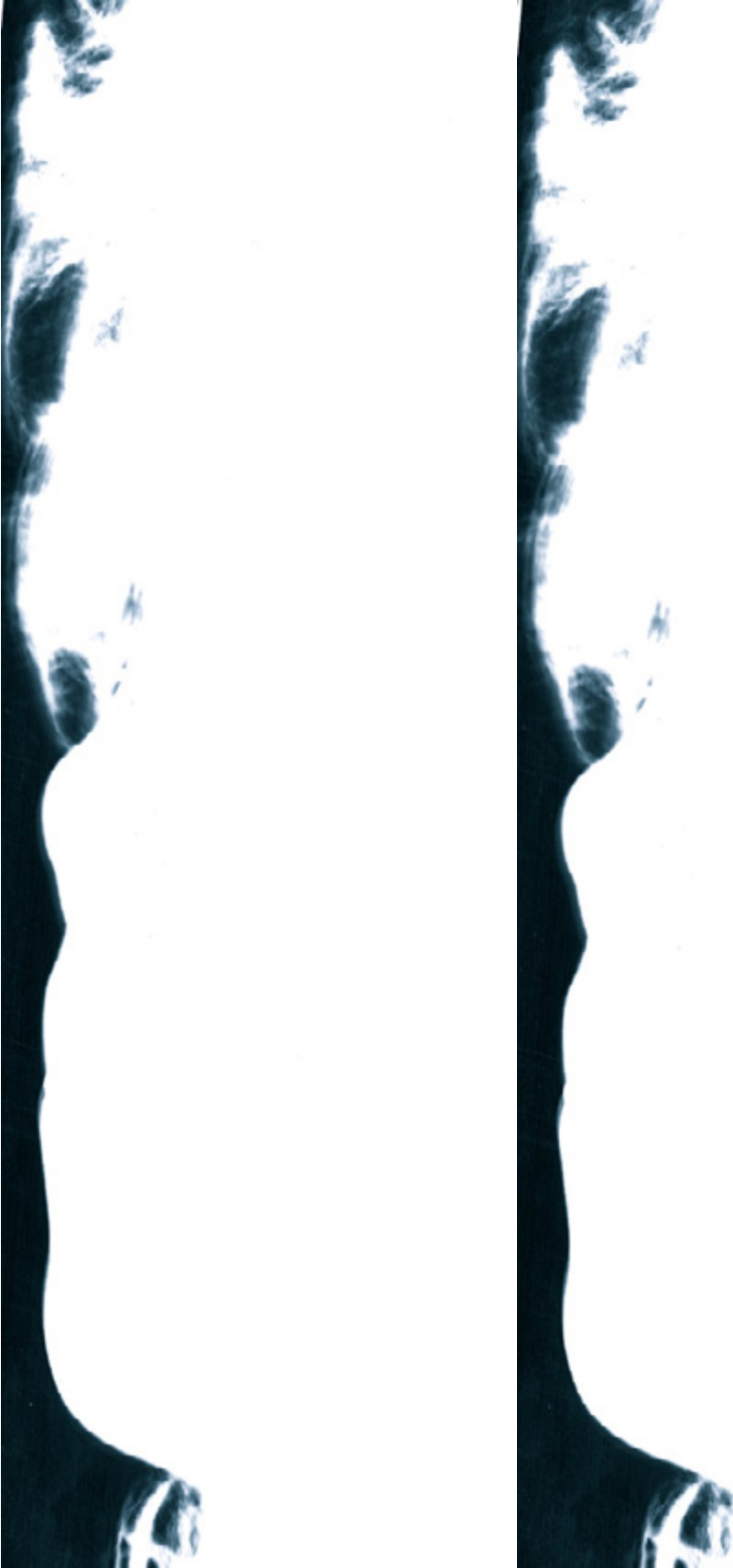
Tracy Marie



Self-Portrait #7B

the pain in my abdomen is punishment for a half-life's worth of sin: for the Drink Yourself Skinny diet plan of my twenties because I like Disco because I regularly indulge in egotistic absurdities because I dispensed to Teresa the pricking knowledge that her sister Kira spent five days in a hotel room with a body sandwiched between the box springs and mattress his pants filled with death's excrement because it took five days until his heroine and money were gone because I understood the cold logic of it because when Kira checked in for her UA I never stopped hugging her not even when the officers said it was unprofessional because I knew that was really just them saying what is wrong with you because we work with you and that is supposed to mean you are different because I believe we just landed on the other side of luck because I crashed through a dozen rock bottoms and kept going because it scared me the girls wanted to look for boys and all I wanted to do was drink because I didn't stop when the cocaine nosebleeds became a freebase cough because I am antisocial because I give people I don't like unflattering nick-names because the only rules and borders I respect are those that agree with my own because I did it again and again and I will do it today because Terry said Tracy you are so far to the left you're going to fall off the edge because I muted the drama of Lance's grand entrance from the closet with my quiet acceptance because at twelve I taught my parents a child's consent is essential to their authority because I refused to cry when they said you are going to be made a ward of the state because I held my parent's attention hostage with my out of control antics because Lance was forgotten and it is easier not to see the good son because God let Cain win, Lance I am so sorry and I didn't mean it because I didn't mean it because how could I know then that (self)destructing bodies are really just mutilated glass that make others

hemorrhage love because remember Lance they loved you too because they said so
because God, forgive me Lance because I live in the desert but still bathe instead of
shower because I am not warm and fuzzy because I am cold and hairless because I
forgot how to say please and thank you in Almir's mother tongue and still remember
the backyard bombs and postgang rape abortions and snipers waiting for the children
to come outside because children cannot live in the basement without the sun and
sexual seizure is now a weapon of war because at first I said yes and when I said no he
said it was too late to change my mind because I have consumed the terrified flesh of
four legged creatures and I will do it again and again and again and I will do it tonight
because I am a character of the Disneyland nation safely sanitized and thoroughly
theorized wasting opportunities some people never have because those memories don't
make me weep these days because I won the birth lottery and I have gathered enough
skeletons for years of Día de los Muertos because it took me four precious years to learn
that violence and passion are not conjoined twins because romance makes me
uncomfortable and I'll always prefer fucking to making-love because I couldn't
remember the last time because during those psychedelic liquid summers I let paranoia
creep into my core — sshhh, WHAT are those chastising voices saying????????????
WHAT ARE THEY SAYING???????????? because I can't stop changing everything I've
changed before because I take from the planet without giving anything back because
when I die the rich compost of my body will be withheld in a lacquered box or metal jar
but you won't let that happen because you'll plant me under the aspen trees at midnight
naked sans makeup synthetic free because my sin-free after life will unfold in the dark
loam of a fertile soil



Self-Portrait #8



Self-Portrait #9

It's 2:20AM. I squeak our
cold uncomfortable leather sofa,
hopeful that the agitated shakes of my
legs and hips will warm it up — though
the shaking is really more of an effort to calm the
avalanche of pain sliding through my abdomen.

START AGAIN

*Google: pain in the abdomen that wakes you
up*
Google: sudden and excruciating stomach pain
Google: what kind of abdomen malady gets worse with time
Google: WHERE IS THIS PAIN COMING FROM
Google: roaming pain in the abdomen that changes
Google: stomach pain that won't go away
Google: strange things that cause abdominal pain
Google: why does my stomach hurt after eating
Google: bloating and sensitivity in the stomach
Google: bile and blood in bowl movements
Google: pain so severe it causes inappetance
Google: will this pain stay

“Your stomach again?”

“Yeah.”

“Mmmm. That's no good.

You're going to have to go

to the

doctor.”

“I know. It's just that we can't afford it right now.”

“Jesus, you're not going to happily pay out the kind of money you do for the creatures

and then not go to the doctor yourself. That's stupid. Stop it. Stop it.”

*Google: stomach pain
without nausea*

Google: severe abdomen pain with no diarrhea
Google: pain that stays all day but is worse at night

Google: cramp like stomach pain

Google: sharp stabbing pain in the abdomen

Google: pain in the abdomen that moves around

*Google: intense pain in midabdomen with
no fever*

Google: Free medical advice

Adam trips out into the

living room, vision bloated

with sleep and his face puck-

ered with concern. “Hurt-

ing?” he asks, as if it isn't

obvious why I'm awake a

mere two hours after we've

gone to bed. “Yeah.”

START AGAIN

bing: pain that is hard to describe

bing: intense pain comes and goes

bing: suffering in the body during the day

bing: suffering is worse at night

bing: sharp knife like pain in the middle of the body

*bing: soreness, pain, chocking, tenderness, and things that can go
wrong*

bing: digestive disorders

bing: organs of the digestive system

START AGAIN

bing: ??????????????????????

bing: does eating make pain worse

bing: various dysfunctions of the body

bing: this hurt is getting me down

bing: pain in the trunk of the body

bing: suffering sickness in the stomach

bing: why does the body torture itself

bing: distress related to eating, sleeping, and breathing

“I know, but we are barely. . .

you know, let alone if we add a

bunch of medical bills on top of

it all.”

I take another look at Adam

in his black T-shirt. He looks good in black. His features, sodalite eyes and tawny hair and dark goatee, are emphasized in this unfamiliar context of sleepless sick breaking.

He looks new and

there is no cure

unknown, in a

way where we have

those over 50 years old

not had mutual

carnal knowledge an

a diagnosis of exclusion

uncountable

number of times.

lies entirely within the pelvis

Unfamiliar

and new in a way

a disease with a high social cost

such as balloon insufflation testing

clinical tests yield no abnormalities

may be more sensitive to certain stimuli,

where we have

not been together

A digital rectal examination elicits tenderness

disorder of the interaction between the brain and

60% of persons also have a psychological disorder, pa-

tients may develop depression and commit suicide

lower quadrant, except in children under three years.

over thirteen

years. Thirteen

This pain can be elicited through various abdominal

responsible for 800,000 deaths worldwide per year

tends to localize over several hours into the right

caused by an as-yet undiscovered active infection

years. And

some people think

Signs include localized findings in the bottom

typically anxiety or depression are reported

that’s an

unlucky number.

the upper wall becomes very sensitive

derailing of the brain-gut axis

He sits next to

me and rubs my

signs and can be severe

pressure (palpation)

shoulders.

I slow my rocking

to a shudder.

His finger trips are

strong and dry,

the wood of daily labor suckling away the moisture of his skin. The rigid texture of his

hands and the warmth of his squeeze give me the chills. I turn to look at him realize we

haven’t had sex in over seven and a half weeks. But who’s counting? And who wants to

fuck a diseased body?

The brackish muck of a wild
 inertia is subsuming and
 consuming the forward
 momentum of our married
 life. We are stuck. Where is
 our dreaming? Where is our
 laughing? Where is our love
 making? Where is our tell-
 ing? We have lost our
 forward momentum. Buried
 under sickness. This, my
 sickness. We lost our doing
 and being in my ailing
 body. All we do is wait and
 measure. Another day and
 another check of the
 progression — the proverbial
 thermometer. Hope for
 regression. This pathological
 forever waiting is killing
 everything that we are. I de-
 cide to put the truth on a diet.
 Not lying, more like minimiz-

1. *Signs and symptoms*
2. *Causes*
 - 2.1 *Physiological*
 - 2.2 *Psychological*
 - 2.2.1 *Cultural*
 - 2.2.2 *Historical*
 - 2.3 *Politics*
 - 2.3.1 *Cultural*
 - 2.3.2 *Historical*
 - 2.3.3 *Pharmo-Psycho-Medical Industrial Complex*
3. *Diagnosis*
 - 3.1 *Therapy*
 - 3.2 *Clinical*
 - 3.3 *Blood and Urine Tests*
 - 3.4 *Imaging*
 - 3.4.1 *X-Ray*
 - 3.4.2 *Ultrasound*
 - 3.4.3 *Tomography*
 - 3.5 *Scoring Systems*
 - 3.6 *Pathology*
 - 3.6.1 *Histologic Findings*
 - 3.6.2 *Psychological Findings*
 - 3.7 *Differential Diagnosis*
 - 3.8 *Bracket Creep*
4. *Pain and Symptom Management*
 - 4.1 *Pain*
 - 4.2 *Surgery*
 - 4.2.1 *Presurgery*
 - 4.2.2 *Postsurgery*
 - 4.3 *Holistic Alternatives*
 - 4.4 *Cleansers*
 - 4.5 *Fasting and Meditation*
5. *Prognosis*
 - 5.1 *Rates of Survival*
 - 5.2 *Side Effects of Treatment*
 - 5.3 *Other Risk Factors*
 - 5.3.1 *Genetics*
 - 5.3.2 *Life Style*
6. *Epidemiology*
 - 6.1 *Epidemiology in the United States*
 - 6.2 *Epidemiology Worldwide*
7. *Society and Culture*
 - 7.1 *Cost*
 - 7.2 *Length of Stay*
 - 7.3 *Financial Ruin / Bankruptcy*
8. *References*
 - 8.1 *Verified*
 - 8.2 *Unverified*
9. *External Links*
 - 9.1 *Other Resources*

ing. When he asks, “How

was your pain today,”

I’ll say, “Not too bad.”

When he says, “I think you

should make an appoint-

ment to see somebody,” I’ll

reply with, “Let’s give it

another day or two to see

how this is going to play itself out.”

I let Adam rub my shoulders but the pleasure chemicals pop-pop-popping in my brain can’t catch the pain. Screw it. I lean into him, grab his hands from my shoulders and place them on my breasts. He moves them back to my shoulders. “It’s okay. I know you don’t feel very well.” I remain silent. Maybe sex would take my mind off somewhere else. Relax me a little, a sort of tension release. The shoulder rub is but a pellet gun in a war. The pain is nearly choking me, but I de-

cide we should have sex. I decide we *need* to have sex. I

grab his hands again and place them on my breasts. I

Yahoo: WebMD
Yahoo: Symptom Checker
Yahoo: www.netdoctor.co.uk
Yahoo: MedicineNet
Yahoo: 1-888-Doctor
Yahoo: www.mayoclinic.net
Yahoo: www.healthline.com
Yahoo: Medicine Advice
Yahoo: Health Forums

leave my fingers over

his, holding his hands

there. “Are you sure,” he asks, worried about

my suffering. I say nothing but nod my head. I

look at him over my shoulder and smile. It feels

fake. I start to rub him over his flannel pants.

Celiac disease,
lactose intolerance, kidney stones, heart
attack, food allergy, pancreatitis, stomach
cancer, bowel obstruction, diverticulitis, heartburn,
irritable bowel syndrome, duodenal ulcers, gallstones,
cholecystitis, urinary tract infection, ectopic pregnancy, Crohn’s,
inflammatory diseases of the colon, gastroenteritis,
functional abdominal pain, GERD, protein allergy, pelvic
inflammatory disease, ulcerative colitis, colon cancer, liver failure,
ovarian cysts, biliary disease, cirrhosis, abdominal migraines,
hypercalcemia, endometriosis, viral hepatitis, abdominal
cutaneous nerve entrapment, hiatal hernia, biliary colic,
abdominal muscular infection, and mastocytosis

Bloating
Dysphagia
Loss of appetite
Weakness and fatigue
Blood and/or melena
Discomfort and
irritation
Progression into the
stages of entropy

Within in seconds I can tell he has been counting the seven and a half weeks and it feels like they have been frustratingly long.

He slips his hands under my shirt and his fingers find my nipples already taut and stiff from the cold. I turn and lie on my back and he says, "I love me."

"Are you sure?" he asks, nodding my head. If it weren't for the pain in my head, I would have thought this was the first time. He pulls me up. Even in his need he keeps his hands on my shoulders. The twitching corner of his mouth tells me it has been a long time since he's tried to run the way I do.

from my face. He has a smurking monk's grin. I try to think of a state. Ready to make a charge for the state. I try to think of a state.

stomach swells, engorged on its own. I try to think of a state. Redirected. That will bring his movement to fruition. But it's too late. I try to think of a state.

eyes before he could abort it. I pull my shirt back down and sit up. He kisses my forehead and I have to swallow hard or cry.

Adam stops, moves back next to me. I reach for my pants and reaches for the remote. I hate those TV people. They talk like machines. We've torn down Diderot's fourth wall and used it to build our houses. I vote for Telemundo, at least the language barrier makes for real TV: the women and homes so gorgeous they stun and fascinate. The women, unlike most of the female celebrities of the United States, have breasts and buttocks and curves. They look healthy. They look sexy, not like malnourished preteen girls with straight-board waists and only enough flesh for the already waning promise

of a breast or an ass. I read once that there was a direct correlation between the gains of the feminist movement and the decreasing weight of North American models. As if equal pay and access and freedom meant we had to occupy less physical space in the media — trading the width of our hips for more money and more choices. The unwitting prostitute. But I'm critical enough to turn eyes on myself and know they look more comely to me because they come closer to my own body type, the hourglass shape and breasts that were fashionable centuries ago. But that was before the hormones were raging out of control. These days I would be lucky to approach the pudgy beauty of the *Primavera* dancers or the soft generosity of the *Mona Lisa's* chin. At least, in these days, my home, albeit much much smaller, shares the uncluttered rooms, clean and full of sun of those on the Spanish speaking stations. The media of the Estados Unidos has taught their Spanish-speaking counterparts well, never show the poor or economic hardships, save that for documentaries and award winning dramas. Here, on the little screen, there is only enough room for beauty that stuns. A different kind of shock-and-awe.

I tell Adam, yes, turn on the TV and turn it to Telemundo where every shot is visual eroticism and there are not enough comprehensible words to infuse objects with the apparition of meaning. Pure pleasure in honest ignorance. We don't have to pretend. There is no plot we can follow, no dialogue to complicate our vision. Here, in this space, we don't have to pretend to be something other than seeing-somnambulists.



Self-Portrait #10A

Self-Portrait #10B



An epoch ago there was a princess. She favored the color red and all her smiles wore the shade of infectious nightmares. She was waiting on a rescue even though back then princes were not unlike ghosts, frequently talked about but never trapped by the lens of a camera.

Still, in the microaggression of one salty summer day a perfectly handsome and handsomely perfect young prince knocked on her door. The princess thought to herself, “Now here’s a man that has mastered the science of masculinity.” The scuffing of his heavy cowboy boots across the linoleum and the sparkle of his thick leather belt cast a spell over the princess. A spell that made her lick her lips and filled her head with hot parched blank spaces. A spell that made her confuse the pulsing of her clit for the beating of her heart.

The young prince had a wordless mouth framed by full lips and every conversation was a mirage, a white desertscape of nothingness that tricked the princess into drilling for rubix cubes of complexity. His spell was stronger than a love song and when he pulled up in his white pickup truck and asked for the princess’s hand, she climbed in ignoring the score and thinking of Jesus in the flesh.

The princess said to herself, “Love and war have more circulation than money. We will burn our own trash.” Soon, any day, the princess thought, that postman will deliver an ever after. But the handsome prince was busy teaching her the ending of new scripts. He rolled her up in barbed-wire words, rocked her to sleep inside iron maidens with crayon painted faces so like her own that she began to develop a prideless slouch and drop the g from all her gerunds. Moons and moons passed and the princess began to think her body was wrought from wolframite and that life was a claustrophobic dream.

The prince, getting the story wrong, had confused his roles. He would turn into a frog and swim to the bottom of cheap amber lakes. He made loud croaking and ribbit-ribbit sounds that the princess tried and tried to decipher. Is there such a thing as irrational noise, she wondered.

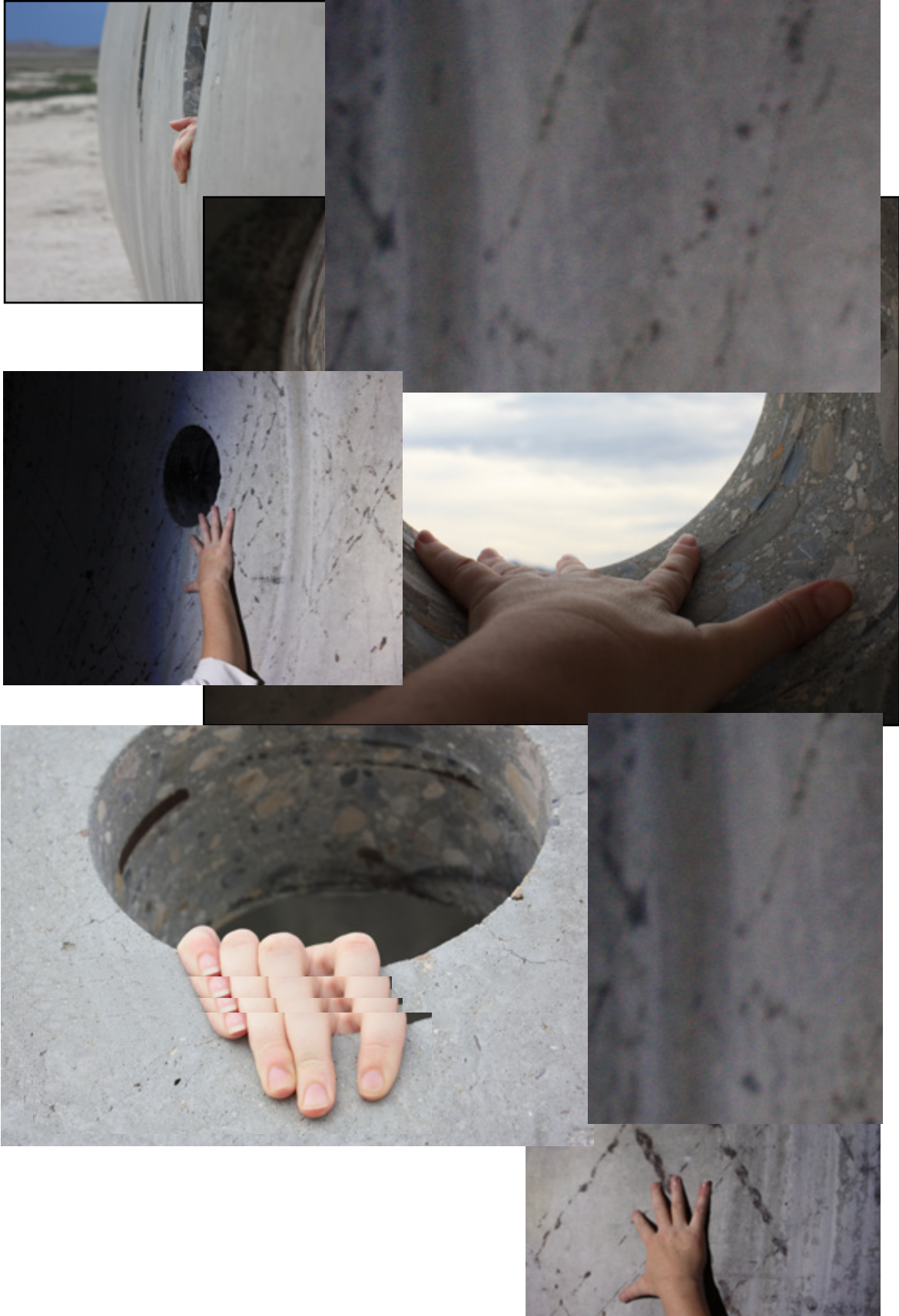
Soon, the princess began to chew her lips into the shape of bloody purple polygon flowers. “Oh, oh, oh,” the princess would pant in the mirror, “this lace and martyrdom can crush. I wonder, who will write my hagiography?”

A large muscular figure stands at the top of the stairs. It is a man. Skin hangs around his naked body in wavy distorted folds like hardened candle wax. Around his head is a pillowcase with mouth and eyeholes cut out in uneven ragged circles. A sailor's rope tied around his neck keeps the pillowcase tight. But even unseen, his face is known to me, only his name is forgotten.

He reaches down to the landing with impossibly long arms and pulls me to him. I open my mouth to scream but the sound cannot pierce through his laughter. He laughs just like me: loud and sudden. His right hand encircles my throat while his left hand inserts a long plastic tube down my open silently screaming mouth. The tube uncurls in my throat, hits the bottom of my stomach. The man's laugh moves into a hysterical pitch as the tube begins to fill me with battery acid. It sears. It fills me. Organs float in alkaline sea. Flesh stretches from the fullness and the pain. The acid comes all the way up into my gaping jaws.

The man, no longer laughing, gently removes the tube and in the silence wipes away the droplets that leak from the corners of my mouth. He speaks with a familiar voice that I struggle to remember. He says, "This is life from now on." I falter into the kitchen, being careful not to let the puss-colored liquid slosh onto the floor. I grab my husband's best knife, move to the bedroom, stand in the front of the mirror, and place the knife's tip at my belly button. But the man lifts my shirt and I stop at the sight of my swollen engorged abdomen. The man warns me about the mess I will make. He says it is already too late. A crack forms down the middle of my torso but I know it won't fully rupture. I stare in amazed protest at the gross deformity of this new body. The man hums a death dirge, music in hesitation. He says there is no easy way out.

65% Oxygen	65% Language
18% Carbon	18% Death
10% Hydrogen	10% Genetics
3% Nitrogen	3% History (Familial)
1.5% Calcium	1.5% Motivation
1.0% Phosphorus	1.0% Culture
.35% Potassium	.35% The Other
.15% Sulfur	.15% Fantasies
.15% Chlorine	.15% History (Global)
.05% Magnesium	.05% Passion (Psychological & Physiological)
.004% Iron	.004% Failures
.0037% Fluorine	.0037% Fear
.0032% Zinc	.0032% Instinct (Social)
.0001% Copper	.0001% Instinct (Animal)
.000016% Iodine	.000016% Memories
.000019% Selenium	.000019% Disbelief
.0000024% Chromium	.0000024% Misrememberances
.000017% Manganese	.000017% Unsuitable Things
.000013% Molybdenum	.000013% What Cannot Be Forgotten



Self-Portrait #11

We hit the freeway and roll the windows down, let the wind whip our hair, its rise and fall a schizophrenic dance. We are running south, down to our healing place of red sands and failing rocks. The albedo-skins in the carmine lands. It's been so long since our feet hit that ground.

Last week Adam tucked my hair behind my ear and said, "Let's go to the desert. We need to get away. Maybe you'll feel better. Crazy things happen down there." And here we are: three hours to go and we will be in the land of our mojo. In Mesoamerica souls headed south were on a journey to be tricked and tested and by the gods and souls headed north were on a journey to heaven. But we already live in the north and it is no heaven. Leave behind everything we own. Leave behind the burdens of the city. And in the south anything can happen. It's the heat and the color and the sun and the sand and the silence and the darker than dark night skies and the isolation. Dali only wishes he could have created that space. One day's preparation and we are on a journey south, a journey to outwit the gods, a journey to a place where we feel more surreal than a Dali landscape. We roll the windows down and turn up Fever Ray.

Never leave me
Walk close beside me
Your hand, my hand
Fits so easy
No tomorrow
Let us stop here
We did some great things
Or didn't we

Dry and dusty
I am a capsule of energy
You speak softly
We are capsules of energy

The world as I've been told
 It would turn I get money
 Small feet in the hall
 And I long for every moment

Dry and dusty
 I am a capsule of energy
 You speak softly
 We are capsules of energy

We talk very little in the truck when we take these trips. We let our minds and the music free. Words can only bring us back to things we want to let rest for a while. Settled in the backcountry we return to talking, but it never comes close to the nearly ceaseless stream of conversation we have at home.

It is only Adam and I on this trip. It is only Adam and me in that word for more than one, We:

We = Adam + me

Every time we say we. Every time we think we. Every time we write we. One and one. One and one and no more. We never wanted children. Those small little bodies with their monumental needs. A life sentence. Wending our way around the lines and corners of our offspring could we ever find one another again? I have seen growing bodies increase the space between Mother and Father. And without meaning to I would make my children all along their strongest points. And without meaning to I would break my children all along their weakest points. Their therapy on my head. Parents can't help but fuck it up. The goal is too fuck it up a little less than your own Mother and Father. Breaking the apple tree branch by bloody branch.

Father + Mother = more and more and more

Father + Mother = fractured wholes

Maybe the day of our daughter's wedding we would walk the length of her bridal room ignorant of each other's presence. The least in love people in the room. In the city. In the world.

Him – Me = We

So, here we are, our bodies decreasing with each year, a little less hair, a little less tall, a little less skin, and the space between the Him and the Me getting small. I've seen what happens to people that have children: the time between them grows hard. They get tired of waiting at home. Too many bodies in between, the space gets bigger. And then they break all along their weakest points. So, here we are. No children. And the space between is collapsing.

Memory come when memory's old
 I am never the first to know
 Following the stream up north
 Where do people like us float
 There is room in my lap
 For bruises, asses, hand claps
 I will never disappear
 For forever I'll be here

Whispering
 Morning keep the streets empty for me
 Morning keep the streets empty for me

I'm laying down eating snow
 My fur is hot, my tongue is cold
 On a bed of spider web
 I think of how to change myself
 A lot of hope in a one-man tent
 There's no room for innocence
 So take me home before the storm
 Velvet mites will keep us warm

Whispering
 Morning keep the streets empty for me
 Morning keep the streets empty for me

Whispering
 Morning keep the streets empty for me
 Morning keep the streets empty for me

Uncover our heads and reveal our souls
 We were hungry before we were born

Uncover our heads and reveal our souls
 We were hungry before we were born

Uncover our heads and reveal our souls
 We were hungry before we were born

Uncover our heads and reveal our souls
 We were hungry before we were born

Miles and miles later and the sand flies off the ground, roils into storm clouds under the weight of our tires. Orifices already filling with sand. I roll my tongue in my mouth and wiggle my clamped teeth. I can feel a fine layer of grit. First Nation people that lived in the desert had worn teeth because of the sand. It is one of the oppressive truths of this place. Along with the sun and the heat. And the sky. Outside of the mountain-cupped valley we call home we see for miles and miles. With nothing blocking our sight the path in front of us simply fades into a hazy gray. Human eyes can only see so far.

We cannot hear each over the music. Nothing needs to be said.

An apple and a berry plant
 Comes with a house
 On the grass, who is that
 To come by my house

Stands outside my window
 Sucking on the berries
 And eats us out of house and home
 Keeping us awake, keeping us awake

Can I come over, I need to rest
 Lay down for a while
 Disconnect the night was so long
 The day even longer
 Lay down for a while recollect

Five AM out again
 Triangle walks
 Magpies, I throw sticks at them
 They laugh behind my back

Getting a feeling
 Maybe I will dream again
 Having that feeling
 When there's no one awake
 No one awake

Can I come over, I need to rest
 Lay down for a while
 Disconnect the night was so long
 The day even longer
 Lay down for a while recollect

Off the main road we must constantly choose between east, west, north, or south as the unpaved paths branch left and right, up and down. Rocks and hills and token trees decorate the horizon, the gray haze that beckons our blank stares is gone. Vision sharpens. Still, we keep the music down so that we can come to nanosecond consensuses about directions. We are not ready yet for a flow of dialogue.

As we pass over the dendritic trails, in the distance I can see a large, tall rock and parked in the anorexic shade it offers is an old white sedan. The windows are rolled down and in the backseat is what appears to be an extremely elderly woman. I sit up straight and turn the music all the way down. "Should we go check that out," I ask Adam. "Maybe she needs help." Adam looks over and slows down. "Na," he says, "I don't even see a road out there. If the car is still there when we move camp tomorrow

we'll go over. I bet she's waiting for some hikers. ” He turns the music back up and turns onto another road without asking my opinion. I tongue the sand particles in my mouth, think about not grinding my teeth but do it anyway, wonder exactly how worn a First Nation person's teeth were by the time they were the age of that woman in the car, and wonder if the fact there is no visible road out to the rock isn't more reason to check on her.

So, I lost my head a while ago
 But you've seem to done no better
 We set fire in the snow
 It ain't over, I'm not done

Some do magic and some do harm
 I'm holding on, holding on
 I'm holding on to a straw

Who is the Alpha and what is made of cloth
 How do you say you're sorry
 And there's nothing to be afraid of

Is it dark already, how light is a light
 Do you laugh while screaming
 Is it cold outside

One thing I know for certain
 Ohhhhhh, I'm pretty sure,
 It ain't over, I'm not done

We find a camp spot, tucked inside a u-shaped ring formation of sand and rock.

We start setting up camp. It is a dance. Rational and methodical. Adam and I both know our parts. Choreographed to perfection over many many many times. In the red desert. In the mountains. In the white desert. In Utah. In Nevada. In California. In Idaho. In Colorado. In New Mexico. In Wyoming. In every season. In every type of weather. In every gradient of light. He unloads the back of the truck's bed and I unload

the cab. He gathers wood and digs the fire pit, sets up the chairs. I make up the sleeping bags, set out the toilet paper and contact lens cases. He loads the gun, sets up the canvases and bags of paint. Violence in color. I can't wait until the gunpowder arrives. I'm going to write poetry. Violence in text. He rolls. I open the beers and grab the snacks. Only I'm not eating or drinking or smoking on this trip. My pain seems to be worse when I eat and drink. Eating once a day, and as little as possible, helps stave off the attacks. I'm down to an apple and glass of milk a day.

In the middle of our silent dance there are suddenly four obese women. We are not surprised, but silence is shattered and voices sharpen. It seems we always meet strange people in the desert. In the city, in society, Adam and I always feel out of place. A little too awkward, a little too extreme, a little too. . . different. Anxiety before the party. And after. Reruns of what was said and what was done and what do you think of this and this is what I think of that. The frictional presence of the others. But here, in this surreal landscape, with our scorched soles and hot-heavy limbs we are the normal ones. We are born of sun and sand.

With heavy German accents the obese women ask us for a ride. Apparently they are the daughters of the old woman in the sedan. They each carry a small Dasani bottle of water and their skin is the baby pink shade of salmon ceviche — the early promise of a raging sunburn — by the time the stars come they will be the color of boiled lobster. By the time they board a plane they will be shedding like *Sceloporus magister*.

They are wearing shorts, tank tops, and tennis shoes. A fine layer of sand covers their exposed sweating skin and it is clear their low-riding shoes are full of sand. Arabs don't cover themselves from head to foot because it makes them hotter. A few centuries

in the desert taught the Arabs all about heat and sun. And yet, the misconception of all nondesert people that bare skin is cooler than a long, light covering of fabric persists. Sunburns, blisters, elastosis, mottled pigmentation, dry sticky mouth of dehydration, confused delirium, deep premature wrinkles, actinic keratosis, carcinoma, melanoma, freckles, telangiectasias: Carmine landscapes can swallow careless albedoes whole. Or piece by piece as doctors carve away the (pre)cancerous growths, that non-native invasive species, that burning unprunable bush. Sky and earth hunger for flesh.

We stop our dance. Adam takes the lead. He finishes pulling our stuff out to make room for them in the bed of the truck. The rest of our dance will have to wait. We give them water and food. Adam tells the four *fräuleins* to climb into the bed of the truck. Under the heat and exhaustion and their weight it is a monumental struggle. Especially for the heaviest of the girls. Adam, trying to help, pushes her legs as she inches forward on her stomach, arms swimming, getting nowhere. Her sisters lean forward and grab her arms. A push and a pull and she pops in. If they weren't so tired maybe they would cheer. And maybe I should find the whole scene amusing, but I'm too impressed that they made it this far and it makes me feel serious. All those fatty pounds, it must be like carrying around another person on your back. *Wie machen Sie du das eigentlich?*

Adam, lecturing about covering themselves for sun protection and taking more water for their next trek into the desert, takes them back to their mother while I wait at camp. I contemplate eating my daily apple, but deep in my stomach I can feel an attack threatening. We came here for relief. We came here to escape. Perhaps the only thing found will be four obese burnt German tourists.



Self-Portrait #12

Once, way back there, my mother was a hummingbird. She would flit around our porcelain kitchen with clipped crisp movements. We ate the iridescent light streaming off her wings. She telegraphed dreams through open windows. Stiletto heels and mini-skirts barely kept her tethered to the ground. Then, in the primrose sun of a late afternoon she broke free and was swallowed whole by a summer wind. We found her twenty years later. She had morphed into a manatee. Her girth was ponderous and her dreams slept in a little leather book. Her hair was the color of steel and her teeth the color of ash. “Mother, Mother,” I asked, “what happened to your beautiful wings?” “Dear daughter,” she said, “the air and the sun and the moon are burdensome. I flew and flew and flew and with each turn of the earth my wings grew heavy. Then, in the primrose sun of a late afternoon I fell into the water. Amongst the murky hyacinths and turtle grass I changed and I changed and I changed.” “Mother, Mother,” I cried, “please trade your flippers for wings and return to us in the sky.”

But she only turned up her tail and said, “No, here I must stay, weightless and floating through the watery roots of mangrove trees and silt of deep time. Good-bye, dear daughter. Come back to me in the primrose sun of some late afternoon when the welkin mass takes from you your wings.”

I say, "I'm going to pack my things, move to foreign shores. It's not that I don't speak this language. It's just that I can't bear the oppression: the monotony of the weather, the monogamy and the TV always on."

America says, "Flee the land of dreams and
shootings and you will certainly fall."

I say, "We are too different. I will run from the native land where I make an artless sum."

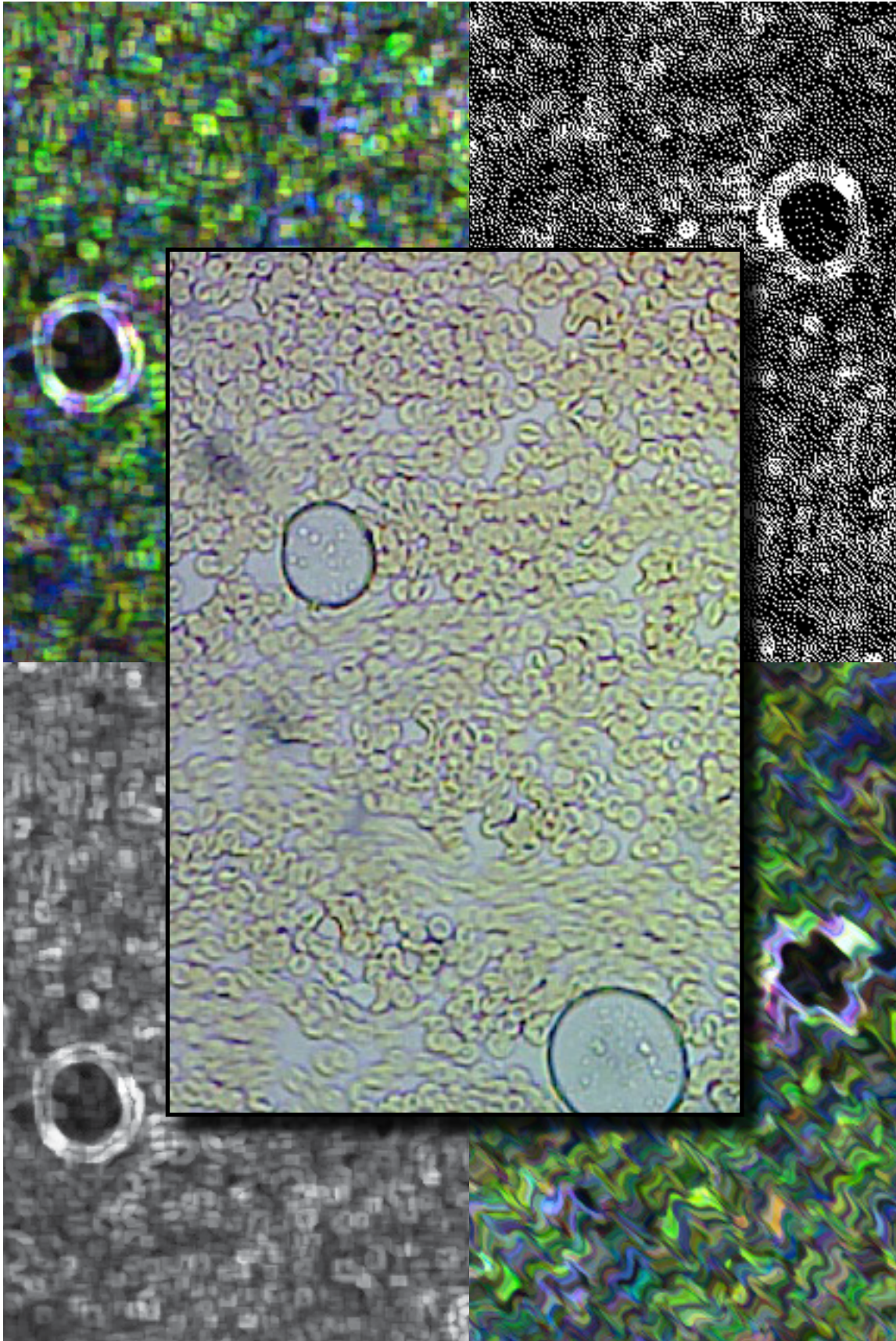
America says, "But you never could catch
your breath while talking."

I say, "I can predict the future. Look to the past. It's incestuous."

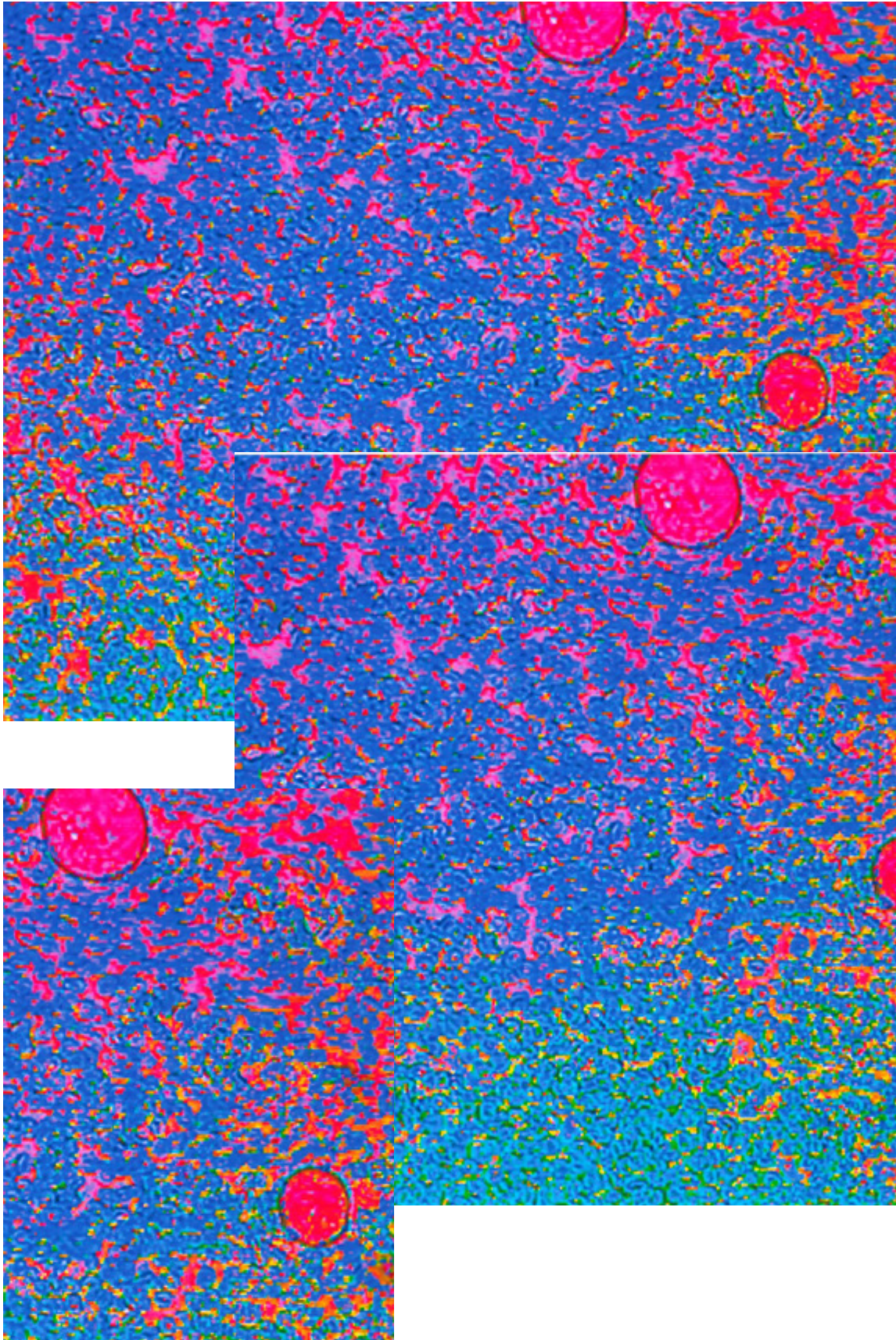
America says, "It's all just writing on
bones. Our gravitational well will never
diminish."

I say, "The low energy state of fidelity and the depletion of mothers, you and I have sacrificed endurance for replication. Prove me wrong."

America says, "You are no hierophant.
Thousands of miles and we will be
but an angstrom apart.
Prove me wrong."



Self-Portrait #13A



Self-Portrait #13B

I am here to see a Nurse Practitioner but this is a regular doctor's office: two or three chairs; a small counter and sink, boxes of rubber gloves, jars of long thin cotton swabs; charts and a framed landscape print from Walmart; a red plastic container labeled TOXIC WASTE strapped to the wall; the beige tiles of an elementary school floor, a quanta whiff of antiseptic; the room's centerpiece, a long examination table covered with bleached paper too thin to be butcher-wrap and too thick to be crepe, a Brawny towel for body juices freed from flesh, vena cava, oozing cavities. TOXIC WASTE. Outside of flesh bodies are TOXIC WASTE. Flush. Wipe. Wash. Throw away. As I wait for the nurse practitioner, I wander from wall to wall and look at the charts. Self breast exams. BMI index. Signs of a heart attack. One chart is an A-to-Z of medical terms in English, Spanish, French, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The first word is abscess and the last is x-ray. An audible scoff. Doubtful this chart has the power to overcome such linguistic gaps. What a strange and frustrating conversation: the patient tapping fingers on words for their ailment in the column of their native language, the doctor tracing over to the English side, exaggerated faces and dramatic gestures trying to collapse the space of noncommunication into comprehension. How do you say TOXIC WASTE in Mandarin? Suddenly an old irritation that I only think, speak, write and live in one language sets in. I want a range of linguistic codes. I want a polymorphous mouth — a life so big it can only be articulated with multiple tongues — I want my breath to smell of the globalized future. *Un deseo que llego muy tarde. Estoy atado por un manojo de palabras en español. Estoy atado por mi mente ingles, atado a un idioma oficial, atado al concreto de un pasado colonial que escondía otros idiomas en un abismo de silencio y aplastaba los acentos nativos con la lengua de tierra natal. Dios salve a la*



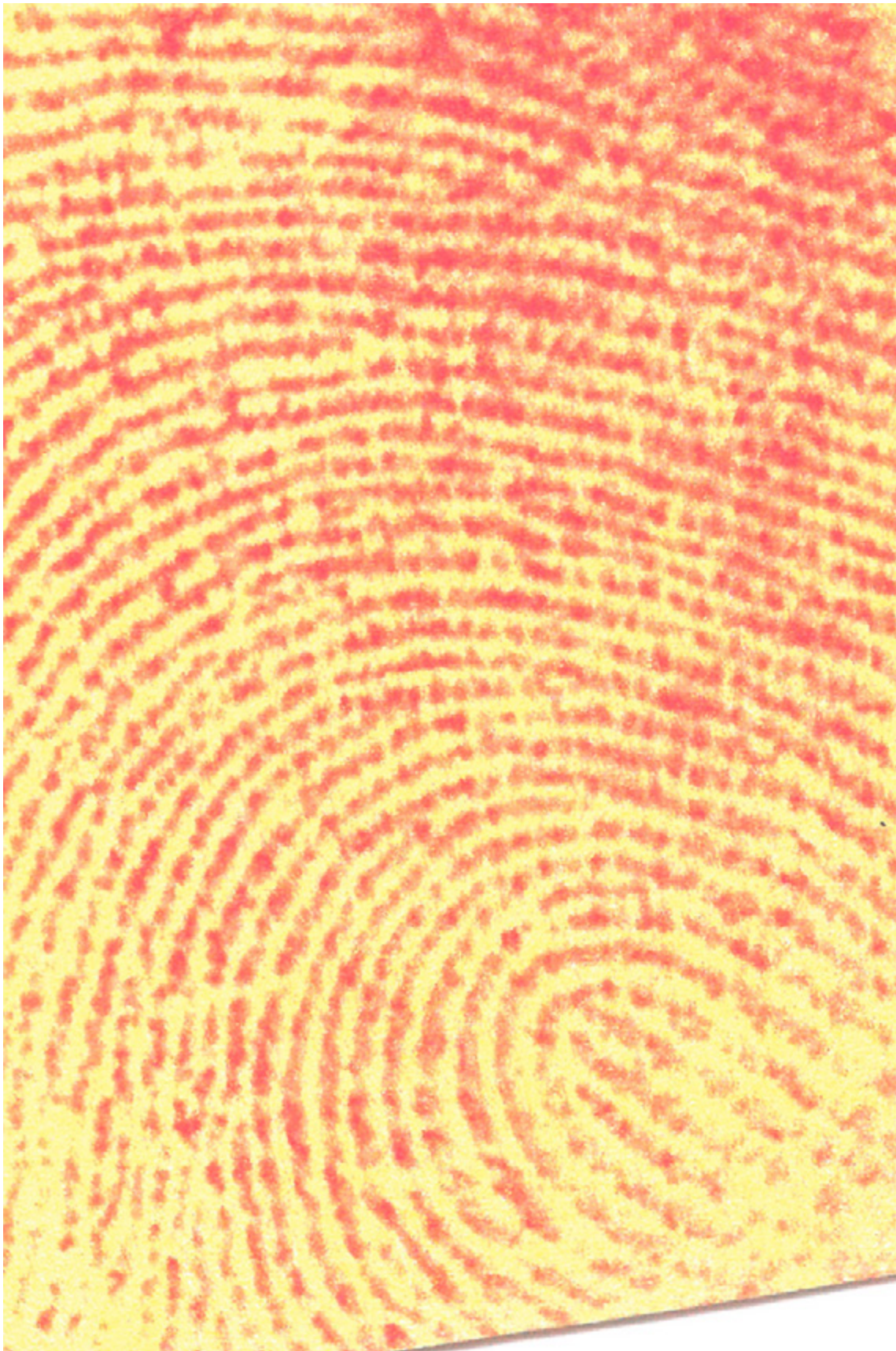
Self-Portrait #14

reina. Dios bendiga a América. Cómo se dice TOXIC WASTE en Keres?

My annoyance manifests as an itch in my skin. Irritation seeps out my shoulders and arms. I stare at the chart, solve the world's problems, and scratch. Then I hear it. The faint sound of, thrrrrick. I pause, wide-open attention, hear it again, thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. I locate the source. Scratch a little faster. Scra-scratch. The noise is coming from an obnoxiously colored wall clock. The body and face are a deep black, the hour hand is neon-red, the minute hand is Halloween orange, the secondhand is canary yellow, and the numbers are a startling white. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Scratch. Scra. Scratch. I'm actually surprised to find a clock in an examination room, a bold move on the staff's part. Scra. Scra-scratch. Scratch. Reach fingernails around to my shoulders. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. I see that the secondhand is bent and nearly gets stuck as it turns over the numbers. Scratch. Scratch. The thrrrrick comes from the secondhand grazing over the hours. I huff, air-born disgust. Scratch. Difficult to scratch through my blouse. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. The clock was probably bought along with the print at Walmart; it is a white-trash attempt at modern design. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. Or maybe it came from a really expensive trendy shop. Scra-scratch. Scratch. A tragic victim of overdesign. Scra-sca-scratch. I sit down to wait and listen. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Scra-scratch. Scra-scratch. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Scra-sca-scratch. Scra-scratch. Scratch. The sound amps-up the itch in my upper-torso. I scratch harder. Dig the nails a little deeper. Scccccrrraaatch. Scra-sca-scccccrrraaatch. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Scratch. Scratch. Dig a little deeper still. Scraaatch. How do you say TOXIC WASTE in Spanish?

The realization that the bend of the second-hand is audibly registering seconds forever lost in this room seems ridiculous. A pun so literal it makes me laugh. Scra-scratch. Scratch. Scra-sca-scratch. A pun so literal — fuck puns. Maybe we should have buried them with their king, Shakespeare, his literary elephantiasis rendering nearly every pun since his quill went still a trite insult. And still my naked weapon is out. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Scra-sca-scratch. Scratch. Scr-scr-scratch.

I think about taking the clock down, opening up the face, and bending the secondhand. Scratch. Scratch. It isn't that I am waiting for the nurse practitioner to tell me I'm on some sort of fast track to death. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. There are worse things than death. Scccccrrraatch. No, I have a plan for that diagnosis. Scra-scratch. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. A plan, complete with acceptable odds and unacceptable physical limits. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. No, I am waiting for the nurse practitioner to tell me I'm morphing. Scratch. Scra-scratch. A disease of body and bone that slowly twists and turns. I am morphing. I am m-o-r-p-h-i-n-g = change. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. I will be something beyond recognition, eventually I will be something beyond change. Scratch. Scraaa, scratch. An unintelligible clump of flesh too sick to implement its own Master Plan. My skin will develop the seeping hue and slimy texture of a bruised peach. My hair will blow away in large fistfuls. My appendages will curdle into useless clubs, yes — scccccrrraatch, scratch, scraaa, scratch — I will curl inward, a fetus in reverse. I am a fetus in reverse. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. All physical signifiers consumed by disease. Scratch. Scratch. People will walk by my wheelchair and whisper, "Is that a boy or a girl? What happened to them? Oh, really. Tsk. Tsk. What a shame. How old are they? Can they still communicate?"



Self-Portrait #15

Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. If I had melodic looping feminine script then those questions — scra-scrascrach, scratch, scratch, scraaaaa — could be answered by writing my name across the back of my shiny new wheelchair. I always knew my androgynous name and terrible handwriting were bad omens. Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Maybe I could spell my name, T-r-a-c-i, with an “i” on the end — scratch, scratch, sccccrrraatch, scra — even dot it with a heart. Teresa once said, “You write like an eighth-grade boy. I know how to interpret handwriting and your slanted words say that you’re sexually aggressive and you pressing so hard the paper curls-up like a scroll says that you’re unstable.” Write slower — scratch, scra, scratch, scratch — Traci with an “i.” Write lighter. Cultivate the clean, easy-to-read, shy script of a seventh-grade girl, Traci without a “y.” Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. Decorate the page — scra-scrasccccrrraatch — with flowers, hearts, and rainbows. Dot your letter i with a heart. And do it now because after the mutation of disease your writing hand will be grandmother’s — scratch, scratch, scra-sccccrrraatch, scratch, scra-sccccrrraatch — the flatline of pen hardly able to indicate the presence of a letter, the soul too small — Thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick. . . thrrrrick — withered and dry for a flourish of the hand, the long upward sweep of an expressive I the ghost of a ghost’s memory.

Dear Adam,

Blank lines may be victorious.

Love,

Tracy Marie

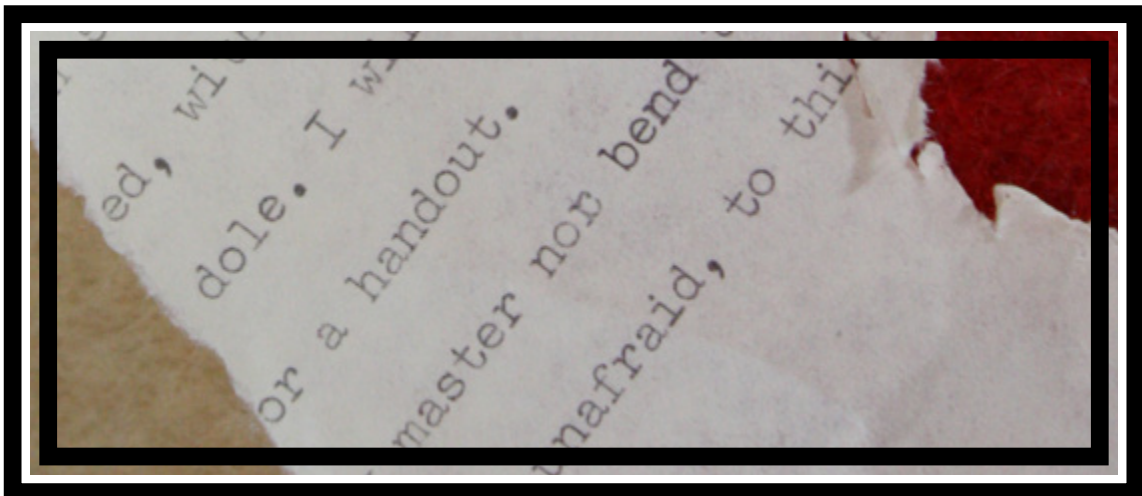
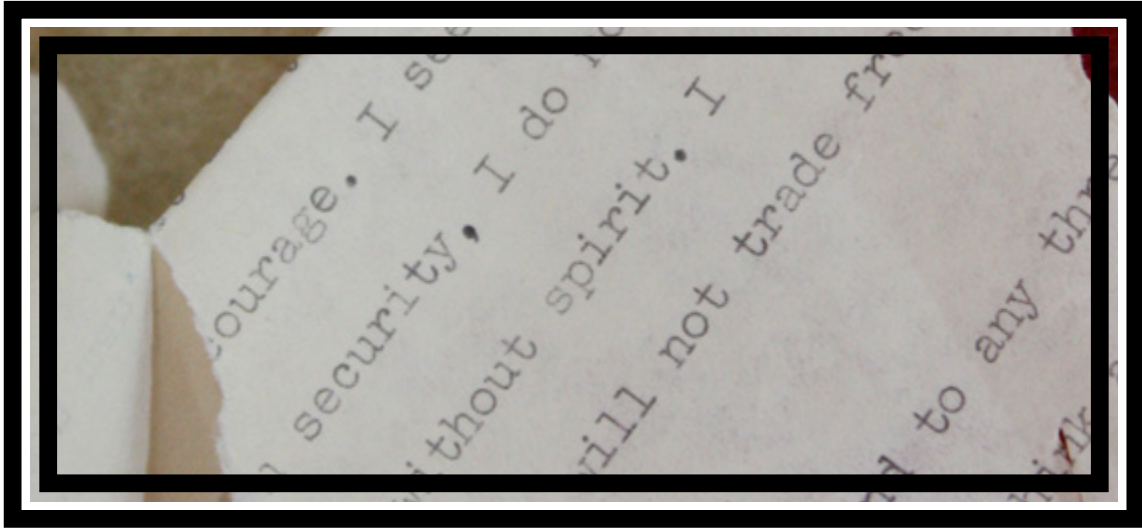
Grandfather returned from the war with all of his limbs attached: arms, legs, hands and feet, fingers, toes, every piece making the whole visible. His job was to gather the wounded. Perry Norwood, my grandfather — and isn't it funny that this American man with Welsh and English names was crawling a French beach to fight the Germans, I think that perhaps the world has always been flat — was sent among the gunfire and landmines to gather other men's legs, arms, anything, just so long as their was a head and torso to match. A violent bloody puzzle with his mind's timer ticking off the hurried seconds. Some say wars can be won or lost.

Grandfather returned from the war with all of his limbs attached: arms, legs, hands and feet, fingers, toes, every piece in the right place makes for a visible whole. His job was to place bullet filled bodies onto a stretcher and run them to a waiting first-aid jeep or station. Perry Norwood, my brother's grandfather — and isn't it bizarre that he shipped out of Pearl Harbor two days before the bombs fell only to enter one of the most energetic battles of a war — saved hundreds of lives and never killed a single man. Or woman. Or child. Saving and killing. Confusion and noise cut around the globe.

Grandfather returned from the war with all of his limbs attached: arms, legs, hands and feet, fingers, toes, visible parts are easy to account for. His job was to tell dying and broken men that they would be all and alright. Perry Norwood, my mother's father — and isn't it unfathomable that he and an entire generation volunteered for that sacrificial mess so that their children and grandchildren and grandchildren's children would say neither *gute nacht* or *konbanwa* — lost his wife during the war. She left him for another man. A man that wasn't a soldier. A man that neither killed nor saved. She took their daughter, Gail Marie and went to this new neutral man. The daughter and



Self-Portrait #16A



Self-Portrait #16B

I, the granddaughter, have the same middle name. Some losses and saves can be counted. Names can be perpetuated. Limbs can be counted and sometimes saved.

Grandfather returned from the war with all of his limbs attached: arms, legs, hands and feet, fingers, toes, so hard to count things unseen. His job was to bear witness to the suffering and dying of other men. Perry Norwood, my father's father-in-law — and isn't it true that war is always on the TV, a new war for a new president, a new telling of bygone wars and exposes of the wars unfolding all around — lost his right leg in a diesel accident in post-World War II America. I wonder if anyone stroked his hair and told him that it was going to be alright, that the ambulance was on its way, that there was no reason to keep screaming for the Medic. I wonder, in the hurried seconds ticking off in someone's mind, if they thought to look for his leg.

65% Oxygen	65% Death
18% Carbon	18% History (Personal)
10% Hydrogen	10% Silence
3% Nitrogen	3% Experiencing Self
1.5% Calcium	1.5% Remembering Self
1.0% Phosphorus	1.0% Language
.35% Potassium	.35% Moira
.15% Sulfur	.15% Mutations
.15% Chlorine	.15% History (Global)
.05% Magnesium	.05% Dreams
.004% Iron	.004% Guilt
.0037% Fluorine	.0037% Fire
.0032% Zinc	.0032% Specific Others
.0001% Copper	.0001% Instinct (Animal)
.000016% Iodine	.000016% Degeneration
.000019% Selenium	.000019% Disbelief
.0000024% Chromium	.0000024% Letters Never Written
.000017% Manganese	.000017% Unspoken Words
.000013% Molybdenum	.000013% Things that Can Never be Known

