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GIRLHOOD

by

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B.A. May 2015, West Virginia University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 2018

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ABSTRACT

GIRLHOOD

Tarin Kovalik
Old Dominion University, 2018
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Girlhood is the anatomy of a girl's soul. Her life is remembered through creative nonfiction essays and poems. The subjects include female menstruation, female trauma and pain, sex addiction, a search for love, and the insecurities surrounding a twenty-something girl who is not yet a woman.

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This thesis is dedicated to all women who have bled through their panties.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. WRITING THE BODY AS CONFESSION: A PREFATORY ESSAY	1
2. GIRLHOOD.....	11
PERIODS.....	14
HARPOON	15
BOYS,.....	16
3. GOOD GIRL.....	17
LOVE POEM: NECROPHILIA	25
PERIODS.....	26
OBSESSED.....	27
PERIODS.....	30
UNTOUCHED.....	31
4. INSIDE OUT GIRL.....	34
USED GIRL.....	87
BARE.....	89
APPENDIX: THESIS BOOKLIST ANNOTATIONS.....	92
VITA.....	114

CHAPTER 1

WRITING THE BODY AS CONFESSION: A PREFATORY ESSAY

“Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?”

--Virginia Woolf

The first book I fell in love with was *Season of the Body* by Brenda Miller. In her essays, Miller links the body to love, loneliness, and healing. Miller wrote in her introduction, “The body knows a language the mind never wholly masters.” I was assigned two chapters from *Season of the Body* for my undergraduate introduction to nonfiction class. I read the two chapters then the whole book, and I continued to read Miller’s words for the next six years. After reading time after time, year after year, I began thinking about my own body. It’s strange how I carry it around all day, all my life, but I’ve never quite felt present within myself. When I was twenty-three, to connect to my body, I began seeing a therapist. We meditated together. She told me to be aware of the body, be present. To ease my anxiety rattled head, she said, *Feel your feet on the ground, your arms rested at your side, and your breath deep inside your belly*. I took a deep breath. I pictured a spinning wheel inside of my stomach. When I sucked the air in, the wheel slowed. The tightly woven yarn of my mind loosened. My shoulders eased back into the chair.

Stories about the female body drew me in. I’ve never felt that my body was my own, so I gave it to every man within reach. I slept with men to feel something, to feel any connection to myself. An out of body experience, something said to happen when a person dies, was something I had always felt. When looking at pictures of myself, my first thought was always, *That’s not how I look*.

I grew up in the world of competitive dance where young girls, toddlers to teenagers, are dressed head to toe in full makeup and costume. The girls might have been comfortable on stage, but I always felt like I was on display. My body as a shell; we were separate.

When I read *Season of the Body*, I was taken aback by Miller's honesty. It was the first time I had heard acceptance of the female body. She was not critical of herself. Instead, she was confident, unapologetic, and accepting. The year before reading Miller, I was naked and drunk in a man's bed, and I didn't know him. When I saw blood on my thighs, I had never felt more disconnected from my body. A person had taken my body into his hands, and I wasn't his to have. I suppose Miller's essays would fall under the category of confessional narrative. In her essay "A Thousand Buddhas," Miller wrote:

Today I look at my hands. I remember the bodies I touched, the lives that came through them. I look at my hands sometimes and trace the edges of my fingers, like children do in kindergarten on newsprint with green tempera paint. Hands become what they have held; our hands shape themselves around what they hold most dear, or what has made an impression, or what we press on others.

Here Miller uses her body as reflection. In other sections, she uses her body as a tool, a comfort, an invitation, a machine, and an ornament to healing. I realized I, too, have a body. I think it will take more time for me to learn this body is mine, and mine alone.

*

During my time in the MFA program, my writing has transitioned from essays about my family to essays on the self. I began writing about my interior, my thoughts, and emotions. But I think the writing will always stem back to my family. It seems I cannot write a single thing that doesn't relate back to the relationships I have with my mother and sister. My mother: three

marriages and countless boyfriends. My sister: two marriages and countless boyfriends. I thought myself cursed. I too would be young and married and stuck. To break my fate, I moved hours and a state away from home.

At twenty- two I was at the peak of a sexual awakening. I was at the peak of sex addiction. I tried the confessional narrative for the first time when writing the essay “Winging It,” an essay about a one-night-stand and the self-destruction that came after. (“Winging It” has now been gutted and incorporated into “Inside Out Girl.”) I wrote about my sheets, which were not stained but smelled of sour, decaying flesh. I wrote about my body, how the hottest shower and the purest soap could not rid my body of his smell, his touch. And if I had left that one bedroom apartment, I would have had nowhere to go. If I had not left for a week, a month, a year, no one would have noticed. To feel noticed, I had another one-night-stand, and then another, and another.

Women inspire me, women who write, who are honest, and who are true to themselves. One of the many inspirations for my thesis was Karen McElmurray. When I worked with her in the spring of 2016, I was in awe of how much a person, let alone a stranger, could understand me. When I submitted “Winging It” for her to read, I was terrified. *What a fucking mess*, I thought.

McElmurray was not only supportive of my confessional mode, but she was not at all judgmental. That was new for me. After being in years of workshops, I was used to being criticized on the personal level. Someone once said, *Your sleeping around but not using condoms is just too disgusting and too distracting.*

My thesis is a collection of hybrid essays and poems. The poems are used to break up the essays and to act as transitions. The hybrid form made sense to me. I’m attracted to nonfiction

writing that goes against the grain; nonfiction writing that does not look or read like a traditional essay. Prose, poems, prose poems, fragments, lists, vignettes, essays, flash essays and so on, these are all literary forms included in my thesis. Olivia Laing once said in an interview, “The pleasure of writing is finding the connections between fragments.” I also think this is the most satisfying part of writing.

I write about women and sexuality. In my thesis, I questioned where these topics are placed in society and society's reaction to them, us. I most often structure pieces in list form. Lists might have then turned into poems and poems turned into prose. I liked the freedom hybridity gave me because I was able be myself on the page. As a human, I am not structured or perfectly in tune, and I am open to disruptive change. My writing must reflect the same or it doesn't feel whole to me.

The essay “Inside Out Girl” was dissected, altered, and revised countless times. The first draft of the essay was titled “Woman Up.” The story was a direct reaction to (and rant) on a piece released on the male birth control shot, which was not yet available because of four recurring side effects among patients tested.

In “Woman Up,” I attempted to connect my own experience with birth control to the controversy over the male shot. I wove in other frustrations concerning sexism and inequality, but it all felt displaced and incoherent. There was an opener full of half-assed research on the “in progress” male birth control shot, a meaty narrative on the pill and its side effects in the middle, and then an all-out feminist rant was the cherry on top, or rather, the end. I wasn't fully confident in the structure or the content, so I separated myself from the essay for a year. A light clicked on in my skull when I read *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson exactly one year after writing “Woman Up.”

In the book, Nelson used numbers to structure the prose. She referred to them as “propositions.” With this structure, Nelson was able to talk about many different subjects while still keeping her readers with her. *Bluets* is a book about Nelson’s obsession with the color blue. She referenced philosophers, religions, scientific facts, as well as her own love, and she keeps all of the subjects intact with a common factor, blue. When I started reading, I thought the structure was odd. But as I continued, it made sense. By using a list form, Nelson was able to accomplish blue within a short amount of space.

I wanted to keep the rant and the personal experience and the societal issues with birth control in the essay. But I also wanted to add more, too, like periods, slang, myths, television ads, tampon and pad stigma, and generally what it’s like to be on birth control and have a period. Not only a period but one with a mind of its own. And not only birth control, but pills that were able to alter my body. The list structure let me do all of this while still keeping my readers on a path. I also felt that the numbers were building up to something. To what I am not sure, but maybe it’s the bodily peace that I am still struggling to find. I also added a new birth control method, the IUD. I have sprinkled the male birth control shot research into the essay rather than having it as the opening. It felt too detached. The shot wasn’t the story; my experience was.

My birth control experience is the main contributor to discovering my body. Your body is hard to ignore when it’s going against you. Depression, anxiety, abdominal pain, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, and a continuous cycle of weight gain and weight loss kept me aware of my body.

“Inside Out Girl” is the longest essay in my collection. Another essay is “Good Girl,” a story with the definitions of the term good girl and what it means in society today, as well as where I am placed on the good girl spectrum. Definitions include: *Good girl, of adolescence, a*

girl who has done something right; Good girl, a woman who has sexually pleased a man; Good girl, one who is always sweet and happy; Good girl today is also known as cool girl, the one who is not needy; Good girl, a bad girl who hasn't been caught; Good girl, an idea of who a woman should be; Bad girl, the idea of a woman who is strong and confident; Good girl, a woman who has conformed to society's standards of what it means to be female.

In this essay, I give snapshots and small scenes showing my identity within the definitions. This is a term that society has thrown all over the place. Its existence is sexist and beyond frustrating. You never hear the term *good boy*, unless you're talking to a dog, of course. *Good guy* is another story. People only use this term when they talk of their ex-boyfriends: "I mean, don't get me wrong, he's still a good guy." The essay also includes two prose poems and a list poem.

The third essay included in *Girlhood* is titled "Girlhood." This is a short three-page essay. In its original form, "Girlhood" was fifteen pages long and held different moments of significance in my life. I have since moved these sections into "Inside Out Girl." To me, "Girlhood" felt like an introduction to the thesis. It's introducing my readers to my obsession, even as a child, with my vagina and my body. Through revision, I thought those scenes needed to be their own essay. The curiosity and discovery of my body are the themes that are present in all parts of this collection.

When outlining my thesis, I liked the idea of having essays of varying length as well as poems of different lengths and subjects. I decided to include poetry in my thesis because it felt right. I often had stories I wanted to tell, but I could not do it. Poetry helped me strip down the walls and discover what's inside. Subjects of other poems include, but aren't limited to, periods, period stigma, women, boys, rape, and, as always, my body. My experience with birth control lit

a fire under me. I now want to destroy every period stigma out there. They're just ridiculous. Poems like "Harpoon" and "Periods" are current with my theme of female menstruation while "Magic," "Boys," and "Love Poem: Necrophilia" lend to a more internal conflict, my want for love and wholeness. I'm unsure of what exactly "Used Girl" is labeled as, but I'd say it's a prose poem. "Used Girl" highlights my insecurities in finding love -- who would help carry this baggage?

The one story I am still not able to write is the one of my rape. I recently learned to say the word rape -- *I was raped*. The poem "Untouchable" details the night of my rape. The story is also discussed a little in "Inside Out Girl." I think it will take more years of therapy, self-acceptance, and forgiveness to write this story further.

Women in places such as Japan, Nepal, Malawi, and India (to name a few) are seen as being impure and imbalanced while on their periods. In some cultures young girls and women are forced into huts for seven days, without proper heating and sanitary napkins, while they bleed; they use cut up pieces of mattresses as pads. And in others, women are unable to prepare meals while bleeding and girls sit in shaded corners of their classrooms. These are just a few of the unjust treatments women endure. Here in America, homeless women do not have easy access to tampons and pads, as they are usually the most in-demand materials in homeless shelters.

My experience in America has been different. I can purchase pads, tampons, panty liners, and pain medication at my convenience. I don't have to tell any man when I am bleeding, and I have the privilege of birth control. I even have the freedom say which method of birth control I want.

I have been period shamed when there is blood on the back of my jeans. Men have asked me what's *hiding* in my pocket when I go to change a tampon. I have missed school, work, and

meetings because of menstrual cramps. I have suffered through four different changes in birth control pills. My pain is different than that of women in other cultures and different economic standings. I don't think it's my place to speak for these women and their menstrual pain, but I do think it's important for us all to share our period stories and fight back against the social norms and stigmas that keep our issues in the dark. Laing has also said, in terms of novice writers approaching a hybrid essay:

The first person can be very lightly done, as a way of containing and linking other approaches. Our world is so troubled right now, I think it's the writer's duty to look beyond the immediate experience of the personal and to grapple with the political in whatever way we can.

Menstrual cycles are political. All women experience shame when menstruating -- it's beyond stupid. I cannot understand where this stigma and negative view of periods comes from. With this thesis, I want to shine light not only on my experience with birth control and periods. I hope that my writing brings awareness to menstrual issues.

In her book of essays *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, Jenny Boully said, "The world then, was nothing more than lost messages, miscommunications--her heart, a daring carrier pigeon forever circling overhead."

*

During my whole thesis-writing-and-revising-process, I was very insecure. When writing, I felt paralyzed, like my fingers and my mind were not parts of the same person. But then came clarity with womanly insight. In her essay "On Pandering," Claire Vaye Watkins wrote:

The stunning truth is that I am asking, deep down, as I write, What would Philip Roth think of this? What would Jonathan Franzen think of this? When the answer is probably:

nothing. More staggering is the question of why I am trying to prove myself to writers whose work, in many cases, I don't particularly admire? I recently finished Roth's *Indignation* with nothing more lasting than a sincere curiosity as to whether Roth is aware that these days even nice girls give blow jobs.

I had a small epiphany then. Watkins went on to say, "I am trying to understand a phenomenon that happens in my head, and maybe in yours too, whereby the white supremacist patriarchy determines what I write." I was writing for the patriarchy, not for myself. I then, to use Watkins method, plucked out the little man in my head and threw him into the trashcan. In order to move forward, I purged my insecurities and wrote the bloody truth.

I laid it all out on the page. The confessional and I had found each other again. In the essay *Confessional Writing is Not Self-Indulgent*, Leslie James said, "Confession doesn't just allow – it incites." That's what Miller's, McElmurray's, Laing's, Watkin's, and Bouilly's work has done for me, incite. I have never felt more at peace with myself than I am when reading their words. I am inspired to confess wholeheartedly. Confession creates empathy; it transforms and transcends.

Before writing, I'd sit upright with my eyes closed and my arms to my sides. I breathed in and let meditation sweep away the debris from the little man.

*

The therapist and I were discussing my sex addiction, again, and I could tell she was annoyed with me. She rolled her eyes at my mention of another contraction of chlamydia, another man dirtying my sheets and taking my body for his keeping. She said with every new relationship I was further away from finding myself.

She said: *When I was in my 20s, I mostly hung around guys. I would sleep on their couches after partying and watch them bring girl after girl home. I can tell you this; they never said one nice thing about those girls. Those aren't the girls they married. You don't want to be one of those girls.*

That was our last session. I didn't like her word choice. *You don't want to be one of those girls.* I saw myself as a lost, hopeless, sex-addicted twenty-something, yes, but I was not stupid. I thought about my mother and my sister and all of the women who told them to be *nice girls*. I thought of all the people who told them to submit, to think every new relationship is an opportunity for a new life. I didn't want to be one of those girls, and I didn't like the idea of separating the *good girls* from the *bad girls*.

*

Like me, my thesis is a work in progress. I am connecting threads and *finding myself*. The next step, in my life and in writing, is to attend group therapy for sex addicts. I need to figure out why I feel so lost. I've had my IUD for six months now, and I no longer experience constant cramping, bleeding, or abdominal pain. I plan to end "Inside Out Girl" with the idea that maybe – *maybe* – an IUD is the real heaven, paradise birth control for me.

This work is about moving forward. It's about transitioning from girlhood to womanhood, or maybe to the post-girl, pre-woman limbo: a place where we are free to bleed and confess and be our best, imperfect selves.

CHAPTER 2

GIRLHOOD

I loved to take baths when I was a little girl of six or seven. The suds turned my mother's bathroom into a lagoon somewhere far away, a place that was forever warm. I filled the tub to the top, or at least to the faded black line my mother drew for me. I knew the temperature was right when steam rolled out of the faucet and fogged the mirrors. I dipped myself in, toes first. Soaking in the water, I let my arms float on the surface, weightless.

I used every one of my mother's and sister's soaps, body bars, salts, and scrubs. All were a pale pink color, and all smelled like fresh roses. In a moldy shelf that hung from the showerhead were loofahs and sponges. I rested my head on a blowup pillow suctioned to the tub. The tub was spotted in rings from night after night of rearranging the pillow. My pale skin ignited red. My legs were still too small to reach the other end of the bathtub. I stretched them as far as they would go, toes pointed until my feet had grown sore.

The bath soaps and salts created milky swirls on top of the water, my own clouds in my own little sanctuary. I floated in the tub until the pads of my fingers shriveled and pruned, or when the water turned cold. I dissolved as my bones floated with the bubbles.

With weeks of bathing, I started to break out in a rash on my arms and legs, which was a reaction to something in the soaps and scrubs. The bumps polka-dotted my body and even found their way into my girl part, the part of me my mother said *no one is allowed to touch, not even you*. We said my girl part as my *pee pee*. The rash left a sting between my legs, a nibbling little bug that I couldn't squish. I remember feeling ashamed of myself; I thought I shouldn't know what that part of my small, delicate body felt like.

I played with the mysterious part of my body while I was alone in the bathtub, while I was alone in bed, while I was alone anywhere. If I rubbed the top, the peak, just right, I got a tingling sensation that crawled up my back and made my toes curl.

My *pee pee* amazed me, and I was in love with it. The smell, the soft, fleshy petals, and the idea that my *pee pee* was all mine, all the time. And my mother's lingerie catalogs, 90's low-cut jeans and mesh crop tops, boy band choreography, and Fiona Apple's *Criminal* mesmerized me. I was in awe of sexuality.

I lived in a house of women -- my mother, sister, and me. My mother was always missing. She was out on a date last night, and the night before that, and the night before that. Sister snuck out the window. She was tongue-tied with boys in backseats.

I spent nights with babysitters or at dance class. When I couldn't fall asleep, I cupped my hand into my underwear and played with my *pee pee* under the sheets. I parted the petals of my little flower bud. I rubbed my hand, or arm, or sometimes a pillow against myself until my girl part bloomed and my insides melted out. Then I sniffed the sour on my hand and licked the tips of my fingers.

The stars seemed holy in their big sky, a mouth agape with gassy, glowing teeth. I was magnificent, too, a little girl with the fragrance of pink flower. A hand to my crotch, a hand to my nose, I inhaled until I was high on myself.

Sister said one night I ran through the living room and shouted *smell my pee pee, smell my pee pee! Doesn't it smell good?* I shoved a hand into my mother's friend's faces as they ran from the couch, disgusted with the girl who touched herself.

I slept with a hand between my legs. When I heard my mother come home late at night, I ran from my bed to hers. My mother's bed smelled like skin, warm mom skin. I slept with my

head nestled into her arm, or her back, or my knees when she didn't come home, dreaming of her.

PERIODS

Grandmother tells me, *Move your products,*
the kids are coming over. I take tampons, pads, panty liners
from the top of the bathroom counter and hide them
under the sink. *I don't think it's appropriate*
for them to be out. I lie with a heating pad
between my abdomen and the band of my pajama pants. Later,
she says, *In my day, when Kroger sold sanitary napkins,*
they wrapped them in newspaper,
because people shouldn't have to see that.

HARPOON

When wearing a bikini
my friend laughs, says, *I am a beached whale.*

She has an athlete's build,
legs full, muscles firm.

We lie
on towels, poke our bellies,
jiggle the skin of our thighs.

We say tampons are *harpoons*.

Like a man at sea, I shoot
the rod into place, wiggle it
steady. Silence something
too strong
too complex
to be understood.

BOYS,

at our age, you
should have realized I
deserve
an orgasm,
too.

CHAPTER 3

GOOD GIRL

Good girl, of adolescence, a girl who has done something right.

My earliest memories are of fishing with my father. We left our campsite in the morning and headed to the only store within miles for supplies. We used worms and cheese cubes as bait. The worms were packed in dirt inside of little styrofoam bowls. They looped through each other and squished their blank faces against the lid. I opened the container to see if they were still squirming. They smelled of earth and rain. I used the tip of my index finger to push the worms around. A slimy film coated my finger for the rest of the day and all summer long.

Photograph: In a pink one-piece bathing suit standing on the dock, my arms extended holding a fishing pole with a smile across my face.

Baiting a hook was second nature to me. I worked to get each one perfect; tangling the worm around its hook, careful to pierce in the right spots. When I finished, Dad said, “Good girl. Those are looking about right.”

Sometimes I let the worms go by laying them in the grass. We hardly ever caught anything, and if we did, it was a bluegill, a palm-sized fish with spiked fins.

The hair on Dad’s knuckles was wet with lake water and sweat. He wiggled the hook out of the fish cheek and slid his thumb into its mouth. He held it steady with his other fingers below the bottom lip, the same way he held my chin to kiss my forehead. He bent over the front of the boat to dip the bluegill back into the water. We never tossed the fish; the force would’ve shattered their small bones.

Camping dinners were pizza sandwiches, or as we called them, hobo pies. On the boat, we munched on cheese cubes and crackers. I ate a cracker then threw one to the ducks. If the line jerked from a catch, Dad and I hurried to get up and reel the fish in. I placed my hand on the spinning rod, and Dad held his over mine. We spun together, waiting, hoping to see a fish on the end of our line.

At night, I helped Dad make the fire. We gathered wood from the pile behind our trailer cautious of the spiders or snakes that hid beneath. I slid on gloves then stacked the logs into a triangle. Dad lit a paper plate on fire then threw it in. I couldn't wait for the weekends, time at the campground, with my father teaching me everything.

Good girl, one who is always sweet and happy.

A group of men stood outside of the church across from my apartment. I walked down the front steps with books, folders, and papers in my arms. They shouted: "Oh, smile baby. What do you have to be so sad about? Smile for me. Come on, let me see that pretty smile."

Good girl, a woman who has sexually pleased a man.

"Good girl, good girl," the boy moaned as he positioned my head on his cock. He pushed, and I gagged. Spit poured out of my mouth and into my palm. I used it as a lubricant to move my hand as fast as possible. My mouth couldn't get to the same speed. If I tried, I'd look like an idiot bobbing for apples.

I hated when he called me that. I moved my hand, my mouth, my tongue together to get him off, to get it over with.

To help him understand my annoyance, I started calling him Good Guy, but, of course, he loved it. He was the first boy who actually respected me, or so I thought. We went on dates on the weekends, agreed on everything, and slept soundly. It was great, except for this one thing.

He moved the hair out of my face, but I waved him away. I didn't want him to see my five chins and spit-drenched mouth.

“That's it, that's it. That's a good girl.”

Good girl today is also known as cool girl, the one who is not needy.

I scrolled through the pictures on a then boyfriend's phone looking for a photo from our last vacation. Below the images from our walk on The Freedom Trail was a cluster of nude photos of a woman fingering herself in front of a mirror. On the mirror, hand smears and specks of toothpaste had clouded my view, but I recognized her as a friend of his friend's. Her index and middle fingers were used to pull the lips of her pussy apart.

The face was shaped into a pathetic attempt at something sexy. Her lips pursed into a pout, and her eyebrows were pushed together. Her breasts hung loose near her belly button. In another row of photos, I was that girl. Spread out in every which way, contorting myself into positions for him, bending and breaking, bending and breaking.

Photograph: Legs on both sides of a hanging mirror, sucking stomach in, open mouth, hard pink nipples, and a hand on my inner thigh.

I stared at the screen for what felt like hours. I considered sending the pictures to myself, but I heard my boyfriend walking up the steps and into the room. I set the phone on his pillow, adjusted myself under the covers, and tried to fall asleep.

Good girl.

She reads: *Five things men want in bed.*

She reads: *Why you should always shave your pubic hair.*

She reads: *Single girl's guide to finding a boyfriend.*

She reads: *How to make your breasts look two cup sizes larger.*

She reads: *Why he won't commit and how to get him to.*

Good girl, a bad girl who hasn't been caught.

Devil on my shoulder: *Meet him somewhere. Stay the night. Who cares? Just do it.*

Angel on my shoulder: *Think about it, who do you want to be? If you meet up with him, if you have sex with him, how will that make you look?*

A girl is divided between two sides; an axe splits her body. A girl wants to be the good girl. Wants to be the bad girl. Wonders if sweet and sexual are the same thing. Her halves are here. Her halves are not whole. Girl opened her legs and took a picture. He said, *So hot*. He said, *Fucking slut*. Girl walked through the door. Was told to live a little. Was told not to live too much. She gave one a blowjob for thirty minutes, told one it didn't hurt when he tried four fingers, told another he could have whatever he wanted.

Devil on my shoulder: *If you don't sleep with him you're a prude.*

Angel on my shoulder: *If you sleep with him you're a whore.*

Girl found love that was tainted by lust. He found another girl, and another, and then another.

She stayed. She stayed quiet. Waited for him to come home. Didn't want to cause a scene. Took

her screams and tears and forced them into a box. Lit the box on fire. Said, *I will never be that girl*. Left a piece of her with the boy. Leaving pieces of herself with boys all over town.

Good girl, an idea of who a woman should be.

A date walked me to my car and just when I was getting in, he made his move. He pushed my hips against the side and slid one leg between mine. He kissed my neck, my chest, and my mouth. He squeezed my sides and felt me up. We walked to his place hand-in-hand. We kissed in alleys and against walls, in the elevator and all through his hallway.

I woke up to use the bathroom and came out to my clothes sitting in a pile on the bed. He said he had work later that day, so, *You should get going*. He didn't look at me when he spoke. He kept his eyes down. I hurried to put my clothes on and only one shoe before I was out the door.

About a month later, his picture popped up on my dating app. His once empty bio then read: *I'm looking for a good girl*.

Bad girl, the idea of a woman who is strong and confident.

I was sleeping with someone when he said: "You should go on birth control so I can come inside of you." My body as a sock. I was his come sock, the thing he could release himself inside of, so he wouldn't need to clean up his mess. I let him have me any way he wanted. He could come onto my breasts, my ass, but never inside me.

I didn't tell him the month before we met I'd just started digging myself out of the hole birth control forced me into. A pill-induced depression so deep, I didn't see the sun for months. I

didn't tell him about my loss of health insurance. I didn't tell him I went off of birth control because the hormones made me feel like shit.

When I asked him to use a condom, he refused. He said, "I can't feel anything when I wear a condom. I want to feel you."

I said, "Even if I was on birth control, I would never let you come inside me."

Good girl, a woman who has conformed to society's standards of what it means to be female.

A little girl who camped with her father on the weekends lived with her mother on weekdays. Her mother was beautiful and quiet and submissive. Little Girl loved a book. Book: *Are You My Mother?* Mother was dating Ted, no Kevin, no she's married to Sam, no Robert. Black bob of hair framed her face. Mother, dressed in a skirt suit, tight. Such a lady. Poised. Little Girl sat on a wooden chair at the kitchen table. Hungry heart(s). Book open. *Are You My Mother:* Little bird fell from a nest, lost his mother, tried to find her, asked a dog, a kitten, a hen: Are you my mother? They're not. Looked for her in all the wrong places. Mother was on the phone. Cord wrapped around her arm. Man wouldn't come over. Told him she's sorry. What else? What else could she have done? Little Girl dreamed of screaming *fuck*. A mouth rinsed with soap. Mother and daughter, bonding. That's not ladylike. Sit with your legs together. Chew with your mouth closed. Keep your voice down. Don't throw a pity party. Little Girl held the book over her head. Asked: Are you? Wooden chair crumbled. Dishes flew from the cupboards. Walls caved in. Ghosts of men flew. House in ruins. Mother, still searching.

Girl

My father and I built a new bed. The old one was a platform with a vintage metal frame. About a year in, the bed collapsed in the middle. Two of the legs gave out, and empty cat litter containers were holding it together, one at each corner. The frame had dipped in the middle. It reminded me of a girl sucking her stomach in, her legs fighting to keep her skeleton upright.

I told Dad it was just a cheap bed. In reality, Good Guy and I had broken up. Before the bed caved in, my knees were on his shoulders; his face was buried deep inside me. Then he was on his knees behind me, and I was on all fours, and he was inside me.

Dad and I slid the mattress off and propped it against the wall. Together we loosened the bolts and screws of the decrepit bed. I organized slats on the side of my bedroom while Dad picked up the headboard and moved it into the hallway.

My apartment was one of five in an older house. The year before, I lived in a new construction, modern building. There were white walls, white carpet, and white noise was in the halls. I spent the year in coffee shops or hiding under the covers, imagining what it'd be like to see a white light.

Dad bought a truck when I transitioned cities. We knew the routine: Mattress strapped to the top, dresser and nightstands in the truck bed, boxes on the backseat, and my closet stuffed into garbage bags that fit wherever.

Dad said, "Where are you moving next?" He placed his fingers under my chin and his lips to my forehead.

Back in the apartment, we worked on building the new, sturdier bed. I read directions while Dad bound the parts together. When we finished the frame, we pushed it to the corner of

the room and pulled the mattress back on top. The old bed's metal legs dug deep scratches into the wood -- the scars from nights when I wasn't sleeping alone.

The year after I lived in the old house, I moved to a condo at the beach. Dad and I woke early to walk the shore, to see the sunrise. Our toes caked in sand, we ran towards birds and past our favorite breakfast diner, into the water and over the imprints of each other's feet. The sky was in shades of baby blue and soft pink. We stopped and stood at the shoreline. Our faces wet with salt as the waves crashed through our legs; hands flat against our thighs, eyes tilted toward the sun, and our chests pulsed in the same rhythm.

LOVE POEM: NECROPHILIA

after Donika Kelly

Nothing approaches a body like his. Hard
skin—like the shell of a roach. Eyes without flicker,
hands cold to the touch. My love: I seize each star,
each coyote of the night, moaning through a glow
I hope is enough to preserve your embalming. I would make
an angel of you, by which I mean a suitor, by which I mean
a rupture—my hands
making shovels of themselves prying you
from the newly packed dirt. I would make the sweetest
of sounds, halo against horns, there, at the point of afterlife. Love,
I pound the earth for you, I pound the earth.

PERIODS

I sleep in the living room.

My best friend's boyfriend says,

I saw that stuff in the bathroom—

don't be getting

your juices on our new couch.

OBSESSED

You dream: Mom

the homecoming queen.

Crown, rhinestones,

convertible, the works.

You stand on the sidewalk, watching her

parade. She throws candy,

and when she isn't looking,

you were hit by a car.

Blood drips into

the storm drain. She

glides down the street,

smiling and waving,

smiling and waving.

Mom stands

above you.

A hot pink sash across her

chest reads: *GET THE FUCK*

OVER IT.

*

fried eggs, chopped salads, dog food,
pastries, cakes]

I fear they're still lingering in the air.

If you walk fast enough, you'll catch a whiff,

like walking through perfume.

She hates perfume.

She still smells like the womb

to me.

PERIODS

I slip a tampon into my sleeve. *What was that?* My coworker asks. I say, *Nothing.* He eyes me, wondering what I do when I leave the room.

UNTOUCHED

I stumbled
out of his house
and onto Jones Avenue.

Drunk vision

left me

wondering

in the street,

but my body knew

what to do.

I ran

through back alleys, yards,

driveways, every shortcut

I knew--

I could've stopped

at this apartment or

that one

to cry

for help;

I kept going. I was

the blurred figure

in the street, blood

pumping,

dripping down
my legs. Thin
means nothing to me,
I'm running
from--
the night
he raped me
I was
drunk.
I was
alone.
Now, I run
my legs red
until they're trembling.
I am trying,
trying
to forget the body pulsing
on top of me,
focusing on every poster,
chair, and shirt in that room.
I run,
I run,
for then I am

in control: steady, swift,
untouched in the way
all moving things are.

CHAPTER 4
INSIDE OUT GIRL

1. Something dripped from my crotch. It was like warm, uncontrollable urine. My first period had come during middle school. I adjusted my bottom and surreptitiously pressed a hand to myself. I was wet. I raised my hand, asked, “May I go to the restroom?” I unhooked the hall pass from the door and ran to the girl’s room. I dipped my head underneath the first stall, empty. All of the stalls were empty. I slammed the metal door behind me. I unbuttoned my pants, and as they fell to my ankles, I felt a breeze against my crotch. *Oh no.* My underwear had soaked up a lot of blood. *Is this normal?* I thought the first period was supposed to be cute; a couple of penny-sized drops of blood, but this was gore. My underwear looked like someone had taken a knife and slashed me through the middle. The white of my panties was stained red, and it had seeped into my jeans.
2. The lights seemed to go dim, and the air was hot and thick. I didn’t have a pad with me. If a bead of sweat had dripped down my temple, it would’ve been the perfect scene for my little horror film. I balled up a wad of toilet paper and folded it into my underwear. I ran back to the hall. My locker was in the next building. I did my best speed walk to get to it, then the restroom, and back to class.
3. My emergency pad was crumpled up in the bottom of my backpack. My locker was a mess with toaster pastry wrappers and random pieces of paper: a note from a friend, my favorite shows listed in order and written in purple ink, a doodle of my cat. I grabbed my

jacket and tied it around my waist. I hoped no one had seen the blood. Back in the restroom, I opened the pad then wasn't sure what to do next. It wouldn't stick to my underwear because they were too bloody. Fifth class period, so I had just one more before I was able to go home. I molded the pad into my underwear as best as I could. I pulled up my big girl panties and braved the middle school hallways.

4. Two days before I started my period, I stayed home sick. My insides felt like they were at war. My head pounded from the blasts of fighter jets. The soldiers' base was in my abdomen. Two landmines blew as I tried to bring peace to the chaos with a heating pad on my stomach and a cold washcloth on my head.
5. Period slang: Aunt Flow is coming to town.
6. For my second period, my sister taught me how to insert a tampon. There are many kinds of tampons: light, regular, super, super jumbo, scented, unscented, plastic applicator, cardboard applicator, no applicator. We chose regular, unscented, no applicator. Big mistake. I used my index and middle fingers to push the tampon into place. *I have a hymen! It's not going to fit.* The applicator makes it easier to place a tampon in the vagina; it kind of glides it into place. But with no applicator, the cotton outside of the tampon deteriorated with each push.
7. My sister sat on the toilet seat while I stood with my legs spread wide apart and my knees slightly bent. I was thirteen, and I was afraid to touch it. My vagina. The thing was soft

and wet and sensitive. I didn't like touching it while I was bleeding. I pushed the tampon inside and as soon as my fingertips grazed my outer labia, *Ew, ew, ew!* I pulled the tampon out, took a deep breath, and I tried again.

8. Vagina slang: fish lips.
9. A friend showed me her vagina. She said, "Okay, don't make fun of it." She pulled her pants down to her knees. She leaned back on the bed and spread her legs open. She asked, "Do you think it's ugly?"
10. On my second period, the battle for my body started again. The landmines were cramps. The fighter jets were migraines. Two days before my period started, I woke with the pain. The pain lasted a week. Hot baths, heating pads, pain relievers, and sleep were the only forms of combat I knew.
11. I stared at her for a minute or two. Her lips were long and deep brown. Coarse strands of black hair sprouted out from the hole. Her anus was lost in a shadow of hair. "No, I don't think it's ugly," I said. "It's just different, I guess. What are they supposed to look like?"
12. Vagina slang: beef curtains.

13. She said, “I don’t know, but he said it didn’t look right.” She pulled her underwear back up. The fabric formed a crease between the lips of her vagina. “See?” She said. “It does look like a camel toe. It’s ugly.”

14. Vagina slang: pussy.

15. My mom and I lived at home together. For my first period, Mom bought me big boxes of maxi pads, tampons, and pain reliever. She said, “Sprinkle Epsom salt in the bath water to ease cramps.” And I did. “Drink lots of water and hot tea,” so I began taking thermoses to school, and I kept water bottles in my locker.

16. In the middle of period two, I called Mom from the school nurse’s office. I was crying the deep, painful cry of a little girl. “It hurts so bad,” I said through sobs and gasps for air. Mom asked, “What does?” I said, “The cramps. I can’t sit up straight, and I can barely walk. I want to go home.”

17. Period slang: riding the crimson wave.

18. Mom worked in the city in a big office with a view. She had meetings and lunches and clients. I met my grandmother in the school office. She signed me out and walked me to her car. “Sweetheart,” she said, “it’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re a woman. Your body is a beautiful thing.”

19. Vagina slang: cookie.

20. I started birth control when I was sixteen.

a. I was still a virgin.

21. Vagina slang: snake charmer.

22. My periods became more painful with age. Too painful to leave home or bed, my body bent at the center. My head was on my knees as brownish-red blood dripped out of my vagina and into my panties, or sheets, or down my leg. I only got up to dry heave my stomach into a trashcan. When I stood, it felt like my abdomen crumbled; the weight of one hundred hands pressed against my body.

23. Period slang: the red river.

24. As a girl, I'd slide Mom's body pillow from her bed to the floor. The pillow was of brown fur and thick, hard padding. My legs on two sides, I ground myself against the fur. I leaned forward. I arched my back and hoped for the chill, the melting ice of orgasm.

25. Mom said, "You're late for school." I put in a tampon. I unwrapped a maxi pad, stuck it to my underwear, and when I stood, it folded into my butt crack. I had a pad wedgie for the rest of the day.

26. Vagina slang: beaver.

27. To get through the heavy first days of my period, I needed to change my super tampon every hour. If the tampon leaked, and it always did, a maxi pad was there to save my underwear, my pants, and all seating areas from bloodstains.
28. Period blood: thin, thick, heavy, reddish-white, red, *ohfuckamidyin?* red, milky white-ish brown, brown.
29. My high school's attendance policy was that students could miss two school days per semester, unexcused. After two days, students needed to take final exams in all of their classes.
- a. My period lasted seven to ten days.
 - b. I hated studying, I hated tests, and I especially hated final exams, but even on my toughest period days, I made it to school.
30. If a woman is lucky, her underwear is there to catch the first blood of her period.
- a. My bed sheets are known rookies.
31. Pre-period blood: a gooey mixture of white discharge and brown liquid; it looks like the drippings of a melted vanilla-chocolate-swirl ice cream cone, but thicker.
32. I was crouched over on my desk. I moaned. I exhaled a long breath. My eyes were squeezed shut. I wore a sweatshirt, sweatpants, and slippers.

33. Period slang: that time of the month.
34. When class was over, I got up from the desk and dragged my waterlogged, bloated body to the girl's room. I sat and let the blood drip into the toilet. I cradled my head between my legs, taking in deep breaths. The smell of period blood is different than regular blood. Instead of a copper scent, it smells warm and earthy, like summer rain.
35. My stomach rumbled. I had diarrhea, or as I liked to call it, the period shits. The bell rang. I waited for the other girls to leave the mirrors so I could relieve myself. Period shit is not like other shit; it's loose and liquidy.
36. I was five minutes late for class. In the restroom, I refreshed my tampon, my pad, and my morning dose of pain relievers. I stared at myself in the mirror. I breathed in *one, two, three, four* and out *one, two, three, four*. The cramps eased for a minute or two. At my desk, I sat up straight, the pressure of ten concrete blocks on my abdomen. I rearranged my body with my knees under my butt and my arms wrapped around my stomach. I closed my eyes and dreamt of a quiet body.
37. And I wonder how women manage. How do we smile while our insides are rearranging?
38. The horse's saddle molded perfectly between my legs. Little girl me moved against the leather. I bounced up and down. The horse walked in place, but I rode him like he was galloping through mountains. I rode him like a pillow. My small, wet body hungry for

something dry humping could satisfy. Dad yelled, *Stop it! Right now!* outside the tent. I shivered; my body shook as I hugged the pony's frizzy mane. I pressed my lips against the back of his ear.

39. Vagina slang: twat.

40. The high school nurse's office was small and painted pale yellow. I sat on the wooden bed padded with a rubber mattress. The nurse handed me a tube of crackers and a glass of water. She said, "You already know the restroom is to your right and the box of sanitary napkins is below the bed." I nodded. She handed me a pamphlet. "Honey, you're in here every month, and I just want you to know that there are other options for coping with your period." I bent the corners of the glossy pamphlet paper. In big letters on the front: *The Pill.*

41. *Sanitary napkin* is a dumb name for a pussy diaper.

42. Vagina slang: cunt.

43. I thought the birth control pill was only for girls who were sexually active. I didn't know it could save me from my period.

44. Period slang: on the rag.

- a. During the 19th century, women used rags like dishcloths and washcloths to soak up menstrual blood. Women trimmed the fabric to match the size of their undergarments then held it in place with pins or sewing needles. Women washed the fabric for reuse.
45. Waterfall blood: when a woman rests for a long time, then stands up, it feels as if a waterfall of heavy blood has flown out of her vagina.
46. Today reusable menstrual pads are available but not widely used. They're made of bamboo or cotton and are often organic. Metal snaps or Velcro hold the wings of the reusable pad in place. (Wings are two flaps on both sides of the pad that fold beneath the underwear to keep the pad from sliding around.) This type of pad reduces waste and cuts the cost of buying menstrual products each month.
47. A box of tampons costs around \$9.00 per month.
48. A box of pads costs around \$10.00 per month.
49. A box of panty liners costs around \$3.00 per month.
50. A bottle of pain reliever costs around \$5.00 every month.
51. Birth control: Ortho Tri-Cyclen.

- a. Round, pink container that opened and closed like a powder compact. My little oyster full of cramp combating pearls.
52. A packet of birth control pills costs \$20.00 per month.
53. When I told Mom about my periods and my desire to go on the pill in hopes of bodily peace, she said, “Okay.”
54. Post-period blood.
- a. Goodbye, cute panties.
 - b. When a woman thinks her cycle has passed but a thin, reddish-white or brown smear has magically appeared in her favorite pair of underwear.
55. I don't remember Mom's period. I don't remember her ever complaining about blood or cramps or fatigue, but I do remember menopause. Mom had me when she was thirty-six. I joke out about it now, but I know I'm right; I was a mistake. My parents didn't plan for me. My siblings are much older, and my parents divorced only two years after I was born. So when most of my friends were sharing boxes of tampons with their mothers, mine was going through menopause.
56. The ice packs were stacked in piles in the freezer. I took two. I walked up the stairs and went into Mom's room. The air conditioner was turned to sixty-five, in late autumn, but sweat dripped from her forehead and onto the pillow, which was drenched. Her black hair

was slicked back into a small bun. I handed her the icepacks. She placed one on her forehead and one under her neck. The day before, a hot flash caused her to collapse in a store. A woman found her lying on the ground, half-conscious and disoriented. "I'll miss you when you leave for college," she said as I was walking out of the room. I peeked my head back inside. "I'll miss you, too."

57. During high school, I volunteered as a candy striper in the hospital gift shop. I spent my Sundays stocking and restocking the soda coolers. I delivered hot chocolate and balloons to patients' rooms. I hid magazines underneath the cash register to read when I thought the supervisor couldn't see me. I called out sick at least once a month. At high school graduation, one lucky volunteer candy striper won a college scholarship.

58. Menopause: when a menopausal woman becomes a scary, angry, hormonal monster.

59. I folded my cap and gown and held them under my arm. "What're you going to do, huh? What? Take out loans?" Mom said. She ran a hand through her hair. She shot me with her dagger eyes. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it." I looked at the ground, afraid to make eye contact. I didn't get the scholarship. She said, "Well, you better figure it out because you're not bleeding me dry."

60. The next morning, I woke to pancakes. Mom said, "We're celebrating your graduation." She smiled.

61. That afternoon, she threw the newspaper at the back of my head. She asked again, “How are you going to pay for college?” I got up from the couch. I told her I didn’t know. She said, “You won’t do anything. Worthless, just like your brother and sister.” I asked her to stop, to leave me alone. Mom picked up a metal napkin holder from the dining room table. She said, “Don’t even go. You’ll just end up back here anyway.” My hands shook. My breath was heavy. I said, “Fuck you, menopause.” She threw the napkin holder at my face, but it bounced off my shoulder and onto the floor. I ran up the stairs to my bedroom. I slammed the door behind me. “Get back down here. We’re not finished!” Mom screamed, screamed, screamed. The walls shook in her echo.

62. To calm her body, Mom began taking mood stabilizers. She and I shared boxes of panty liners when we were spotting. My period was just beginning while her period was forever ending.

63. One morning she found me on the bathroom floor. My pajama pants were stained red. She walked me back to bed. She called the school to say I wouldn’t be there. And when the doctor prescribed me the pill, Mom was there.

64. Period myth: bears can smell menstruation.

- a. In 1967, two women were attacked by grizzly bears at Glacier National Park. Officials speculated that the bears were attracted to menstrual odors.
- b. The wilderness was only for manly men.

- c. Years later, studies showed that bears were not attracted to menstrual blood or its smell more or less than any other object.

65. Side effects of Ortho Tri-Cyclen:

- a. Headache.
- b. Nausea and vomiting.
- c. Breast problems:
 - 1. Tenderness.
 - 2. Pain and discomfort;
 - 1. Enlargement and swelling.
 - 2. Discharge and nipple pain.
- d. Stomach pain.
- e. Pain with periods.
- f. Mood changes, including depression.
- g. Acne.
- h. Vaginal infections.
- i. Bloating.
- j. Weight gain.
- k. Fatigue.

66. *These are not all of the possible side effects of Ortho Tri-Cyclen.*

67. It took three months for my body to adjust to Ortho Tri-Cyclen. My first two periods were the usual: cramps, diarrhea, body aches, late for school, the nurse's office, and life in bed.
68. The third period: I woke to what felt like a small pile of stones piled on top of my abdomen. I took two pain relievers to knock them down. I dreamt of love, a body between my legs. The blood was a light, warm stream. It lasted four days.
69. I woke early to shower before school. Small red dots colored the pad I slept in. I peeled it from my panties then slipped in a regular tampon. A reddish-white liquid coated the tips of my thumb and index fingers. "Time to wake up," Mom said. "I'm already awake." I stepped into the shower. I lathered my pussy in creamy bubbles. Girl body gleaming.
70. When I was fourteen, my best friend fingered me until my whole body shook in orgasm. Her father was watching porn in the kitchen. He thought we were asleep on two separate couches. We were making our porno below a mantle of holiday cards and red stockings. I came to the picture of her family Christmas card: white background, white letters *Happy Holidays from the _____*, and white sweaters across their chests. My white on her fingers and in her mouth.
71. Before birth control, I bathed in my menstruation. Blood dripped down my legs and poured into the drain. I cupped warm water in my hands. I held the water to my vagina. Steam eased the cramps. The white walls of the shower lit red. My toenails stained red.

72. At the pizza shop, I ordered three slices of extra cheese, pepperoni, and a side of hot sauce. I bought ice cream then a large latte from the local coffee shop. I called Mom to ask, “What’s for dinner?” She said cabbage rolls, grilled chicken, or pasta. “Are you in the mood for anything?” she asked. I said, “Everything.” I ate two helpings. After dinner, Mom and I ate chocolate truffles. Before bed, I finished a whole bag of chips, popcorn, or a microwaved pocket of broccoli and cheese.
73. When my best friend fingered me, it felt like her perfect, tiny fingers had massaged my whole body, like I could turn to mush and die in her arms. When I fingered her, she felt like goo. She was raw meat. She was wet with juice as I molded my fingers into her soft gore. We stopped when she whispered, “Eat my pussy.”
74. I took my Ortho Tri-Cyclen at ten o’clock every night. The alarm on my cellphone reminded me. Before bed, I chugged a glass of water. And in the morning, I drank another glass. I stashed a case of water bottles in my locker at school. There was also one in the trunk of my car. I drank and drank and drank, but I only felt thirstier.
75. When we kissed, her mouth tasted like sour milk, and her lips smelled of dry blood.
76. Period myth: women aren’t able to urinate when using a tampon.
- a. Women menstruate from their vaginas, which is a separate hole from where we pee. There are three holes down there – the urethra, the vagina, and the anus. Women pee from the urethra; therefore, we can pee while we have a tampon in.

77. As I ate and drank, my teenage body changed. My hips widened. My ass jiggled. My breasts turned into big, bouncy melons.

78. I unbuttoned my pants to sit down. The seams had split in all of my favorite jeans; there were big holes in the inner thighs, and the waistbands had given up. I wore long t-shirts to hide my new body.

79. When blood dries, it loses the deep red hue and turns brown.

80. A friend's mom shook my tits while we were taking pictures before prom. She asked, "Where did these come from? What are you hiding in that dress?"

81. After a year on Ortho Tri-Cyclen, my periods became heavier, and the cramps had never fully gone away. I needed to sleep with a maxi pad in my panties. I covered my sheets with a towel, and in the morning, I still woke in a puddle of blood. My mattress had a permanent brown stain in the middle about the size of my head. My underwear was covered in brown stains. I bled through jeans and volleyball uniforms.

82. I hung around a guy. His lips were two clouds, and I desperately wanted to be his sky. We made out in my car. My head turned, but my body was facing forward. His hand was on my thigh. His tongue was in my throat. His hand was on the button of my pants. His teeth nibbled my bottom lip. I was wet. My ass was wet. The car seat was wet with red.
Fuck.

83. I kicked the boy out. I said it was homework. At home, I scrubbed the seat, but it wouldn't go away. My jeans stamped on the ass with a red stain. I was sitting in blood. *How long had we been there?* I threw the jeans in the trash. I laid a towel over the seat, another pretty brown stain. The next day I made an appointment with my doctor.
84. When the cramps hit, I kept myself at home. The boy gave me pot. Pot eased the pain, but it made me eat more. Dumplings and fried chicken and perogies and a regulated female body, these were my cravings.
85. My life a murder scene, brown stains of dried blood as evidence, and I was the dead girl.
86. After another hibernation period, I went to a friend's party. I kissed a different boy in a hot tub. His face was between my breasts. His face was dirty in half-grown facial hair. I ground on him. I wanted him. He was hard against my thigh, but I thought about my best friend's couch, her fingers, and her girl meat.
87. On average, women lose two tablespoons of blood per period, but it seems like much, much more.
88. Television advertisement: thick, blue liquid is poured from a cup onto a menstrual pad, in place of blood.

89. When he put me into his mouth, I climbed out of the hot tub. He swirled his tongue around my nipples. I threw one leg over the edge. He pulled me towards him. He traced circles with his teeth and bit the skin. I reached the edge with my other leg. My breasts bounced loose as I walked into the house.
90. My menstrual blood is red. My period is thin, thick, heavy, reddish-white, red, *ohfuckamidyng?* red, milky white-ish brown, and brown. My period is never blue.
91. I woke to blood. My bed a small pool of blood. A red kiddy pool and I was just splashing around.
92. A tiny bullet vibrator hid in my nightstand. *What else are nightstands for?* The upstairs was too warm, so Mom slept on the couch. I spread the lips of my vagina and rubbed the bullet against myself. My back arched, my knees pulled to my chest, and I came until my whole body was shaking.
93. Birth control: Loestrin 24 Fe.
- a. The doctor recommended this pill for it's no muss, no fuss reputation. At the time, it was the most used birth control for teenage girls.
94. The boy with pot took my virginity. He sat in the front seat of my car rolling a joint. He licked the paper and wiggled the joint between his fingers. I drove down the hill onto the back roads of our town. We listened to music turned low as he talked about college. I was

going, and he was not. His parents were happily married. Mine had separate homes, separate lives, and I'm not sure if they've been happy since. We drove around creeks and parks, through the rich people neighborhood and past the baseball fields. In his parent's driveway, we kissed. Long, deep kisses. My neck was sore when I stepped out of the car. I would've broken my neck to taste his tongue, to lick his teeth. The burn of paper on his lips. The taste of tree in his spit. Together on his bed, we watched horror films. I was laid flat. My hands in his black hair that hung past his shoulders. He was curled in an arch next to me, playing with my breasts, kissing my ear, and his fingers were hooked inside of me. A girl baited on the hook of a boy. I was high on weed and high on him. His fingers were soft and quick. We came through the morning as he rose again with the sun.

95. Side effects of Loestrin 24 Fe:

- a. Nausea.
- b. Vomiting.
- c. Headache.
- d. Stomach cramping.
- e. Bloating.
- f. Dizziness.
- g. Vaginal discomfort.
 1. Irritation.
 2. Itching.
 3. Increased vaginal fluids.
 4. Discharge.

- h. Breast enlargement and tenderness.
 - i. Nipple discharge.
 - j. Freckles or darkening of facial skin.
 - k. Increased hair growth.
 - l. Loss of scalp hair.
 - m. Changes in weight or appetite.
 - n. Problems with contact lenses.
 - o. Decreased sex drive.
96. One month on Loestrin 24 Fe and I thought I had died and gone to birth control heaven.
97. Television advertisement: a woman plays tennis dressed in a white top, white shirt, and white shoes while on her period. *Leak guard protection so you can keep moving.*
98. Side effects experienced on Loestrin 24 Fe: zero. I occasionally felt bloated, but it was rare and passed within a few hours. After two months, I lost my period completely. During my usual period week, I woke every morning in fear, but the monsters of my abdomen had quieted. I felt around the bed. I searched for the red river. I felt nothing, only the calm of body.
99. The boy with pot ate through me. He licked me to the core. A tongue so thick my orgasms shook the house.

100. In birth control heaven there were no painful periods, no tampons or stained panties. In heaven there was sex. I lost weight but *somehow* never lost my breasts-- the Goddess of Birth Control's will. Women slept in the flowerbed with white and lilac petals. Grass of soft green blades. We were naked. Our vaginas out and glowing. The most beautiful lips I'd ever seen.
101. We smoked and fucked in the backseat of his car, in the backseat of my car, in his bed, on the floor. I moaned *owww*, but he heard *mmm*.
102. In heaven, women used menstrual blood to paint and create. We were goddesses of the something, maybe the Blood Moon. Most often seen in the fall, the Blood Moon is a signal to the death of warmth and the coming of the inevitable cold. I was in heaven for two years before the chill.
103. I pushed the bullet vibrator against my clit. My whole body was warm. My toes pointed. My eyes rolled into the back of my head. Hand to my breast, I pinched the nipple. I clawed through my hips. I turned and wrapped the sheets around my legs. My chest flung forward, my legs bent at the knee, and my body paralyzed. I couldn't move for minutes, maybe even hours, as my body came down from orgasm.
104. My first day at college my dorm had a speed dating event. We sat in the dining hall dressed in our best jeans and t-shirts. I curled my hair. The girls sat at tables. After one minute of conversation, the boys rotated to the next table, to the next girl.

105. My pot boy and I outgrew each other. When I went to college, I forgot about him.
106. Television advertisement: *What does life look like on your period?* A voice asks. A woman laughs and smiles while on a waterslide. *Life looks great.*
107. “Are you a lesbian?” The first boy said. “What?” I asked. “The lip ring, all of the ear piercings, and the tattoo on your shoulder... Do you like women?” he said again. “Oh, I’m not sure.”
108. Semi-realistic television advertisement: instead of a traditional waterslide, why not one flowing with blood? The woman’s tampon has leaked. A red streak follows her down the slide, but she’s not embarrassed. She laughs. Everyone laughs. The pool fills with blood. People swim in blood. They’re all stained in her blood. *What does life look like on your period?* The woman smiles. *Life looks great.*
109. The girls in my dorm and I went out to the club. We dressed in crop tops and bodycon skirts. Our heels were four inches high. Our winged eyeliner was thick, our lips red. Our eyeshadow sparkled in the neon lights.
110. Realistic television advertisement: a woman stays at home while on her period. She bleeds, and sleeps, and bleeds, and eats. *What does life look like on your period?* *Life looks manageable. It’ll all be okay, just eat a cupcake and feel it out.* The woman attempts a smile.

111. My friend was grinding with a guy when I saw him slip his hand inside her skirt. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. *How many drinks has she had?* Her arms were limp against her sides, but she kept her body in rhythm with his. I saw him squeeze her breasts. He bit her ear and kissed her neck. He went back into her skirt, and then his arm pulsed as his fingers entered in and out of her.
112. We stood in a small group watching, our friend too drunk to realize what was happening. We were blind. It's strange how young women are taught to please men, never to question, to be gracious for any male attention. We are taught to say, *Well, why did she drink so much?* Instead of, *Why does he think he's entitled to her body?*
113. The next morning, we told her what had happened. The girls laughed, said, "You were getting dirty on the dance floor." She laughed too. She kept her eyes on the floor. She boxed up her breakfast and left the dining hall.
114. For my roommate's birthday, we walked to a party across town. Before we left, we played power hour: take a shot every minute for an hour. We poured cans out into shot glasses. Our desks stained with sticky rings of beer. My other roommate's brother lived across the street from the house party, so we stopped by for a drink. We played another game, we drank from the bottle, and we held each other's glasses while we peed. We left for the party. My roommates and I stumbled through the front door and into a dark haze.

115. My cell phone alarm buzzed against my leg. I dug my pill out of my pocket and took it with a swig of beer.
116. We were in the house. The carpet was beige, I think. The beer was cheap. A man looped his arm around my waist. I remember the cheer of my roommates as he kissed me against a wall. I drank purple then brown then yellow. He held the cups to my lips, said, "Drink." He smiled at me.
117. Birth control for men: condoms.
118. He walked me to his house. I kept stopping along the way. I think I asked, "Where are my friends? Where are they?" We sat on the couch. He lit a bong. He kissed my shoulder and my neck. I drank brown. I smoked green and blew white. We were upstairs. We were on the bed. We were on the floor. I was crawling to the chair.
119. A box of condoms costs anywhere from \$3.99 to \$15.99 depending on if they're average sized, large sized, latex, lubricated, lambskin, spermicidal, non-latex, ultra-thin, ribbed, glow-in-the-dark, flavored, textured, colored, warming, pleasure shaped, or edible.
120. He grabbed my ankle and pulled me toward him. He lifted me back onto the bed. He flipped me over. He threw himself on top of me. The prickle of his beard scratched my face. He was inside me. His breath smelled like an ashtray and stale beer. His body

was too hard. His hips were too boney. I stared at a poster on the wall. There were clothes thrown all over, his and mine. My knee was scraped. *Was it bleeding?* His bedroom was in the attic. I tried to crawl away, but he pulled me back, again and again. He lifted my shirt and sucked on my breasts. I wiggled away from him. I managed to roll onto the floor. He met me there. He propped my arms on a chair. He lifted my ass and put his dick back inside me. I tried to make noise. I tried to move, but he was in control.

121. I was on the bed passed out in a drunken stupor. I woke to my phone vibrating. I left. I ran out of the house with my pants around my ankles. There was blood. *Who is this?* He followed me to the front door. He asked, “Do you want to sleep over?” I ran through his front yard. The grass was sharp against my ankles. The sky was deep black. I followed the streetlights. I ran barefoot through alleys and onto campus, searching for my dorm.

122. Birth control for men: withdrawal or “pull out” method.

- a. When not wearing a condom, just before the man is about to come, he pulls out of his partner and comes elsewhere, like on her back, on her breasts, or on her stomach.

123. I didn’t think to look for a condom. I didn’t think to look for his come. I don’t know where he came. I was in fight-or-flight mode. I tried to fight. When I came to, something told me I needed to fly.

124. My roommates were asleep. I stepped into the bathroom. I peeled off my jeans. Dried blood matted the fabric to my thighs. I soaked a paper towel in cold water. I pressed it against myself. I bled into my hand. I sat on the floor. My feet caked with mud and dirt and tiny pieces of rock. The tile was white.
125. When I woke, my vagina and clitoris burned. I was rubbed raw. I wiped the makeup from my face. My roommates asked, “How was it? Did you hookup?” I said, “Yes.” They smiled, laughed, smacked my butt and said, “That’s my girl.”
126. *Was he clean? Should I get checked? What if I’m pregnant?*
127. Friends said, “How do you feel after getting that big dick last night?”
128. I said, “I’m aching. I may need a frozen bag of peas to sit on.”
129. *What if I see him on the street? Or in class? What was his name?*
130. A friend said, “My girl fucks.”
131. The following week, I skipped my classes. I took three sleeping pills to pass the day, the weeks. The resident assistant asked, “Are you okay? You weren’t at the past two floor meetings.” I said, “I’m fine, just tired.”

132. And the problem with my rape story is that I still don't have the words to say what I felt.
133. And I don't know what it was about him, but he took the voice from my mouth. He sucked the sound right out of my throat.
134. And I stalked him on social media just to make sure he's real. To make sure he happened to me.
135. Would it be cliché to tell you I floated out of myself and saw the whole thing?
136. And now when I sleep with men, I let them have all of me, because what are women if not selfless?
137. What if I said I floated out of myself and never returned?
138. And every time I'm in bed with a boyman, I feel that guy's hard bones against my skin.
139. Easy: when it takes nothing to get a woman to sleep with a man.
a. *Oh, her? She's easy.*
140. Predator: girl code for a bad guy.

- a. *Don't talk to him; he's a predator.*
141. I saw my rapist at another party. I dressed as *Alice in Wonderland*, and he dressed as an old-time gangster. A mustache was drawn above his lip, or was it there before? His hands were small, thin. He twirled a cane. He wore a black pinstriped suit and a fedora with a feather tucked into the band. Our eyes met. My body went numb. I waited for my white rabbit, but it never came. I left. I took a friend's hand and ran from the party. In my dorm, I took sleeping pills, and I didn't want to wake up.
142. Wifey material: a woman who doesn't hook up with random men; she is sweet, respectful, but she still puts out, just not *too much*.
143. I concluded that I wouldn't show he had hurt me, that he had violated me. I wouldn't let his relentless dick ruin my first year of college.
144. There's some unspoken girl code that says not to show pain or weakness. When a guy on the street screams, "Hey girl, want to come home with me? Damn, let me get a piece of that." Girls lift their chins. We might say *fuck you*, or *you wish*, but we never let it break us.
145. I danced with my friends at the club. We were four drinks deep, and the lights were neon. We were four drinks deep, and the boys were closing in. Like sharks smell blood, predators can smell a drunken girl's vodka lips from miles away. We were

grinding with random guys. My ass pressed up against a dick, and I felt the guy getting hard against my back. I rubbed my ass along the line of his shaft. He squeezed my hips. He moved his hand under my skirt. He felt the lips of my vagina on the outside of my panties. He said, "You're wet."

146. Loestrin 24 Fe discontinued. "Can you tell me why?" I asked the pharmacist. She said, "I'm not sure, but it's replaced by Minastrin 24 Fe, which is said to be the same thing." That afternoon, I called my doctor. She said, "It's fine, you'll like this one too."
147. I snuck a guy into my dorm room. He turned the volume up on the television. His hands were rough. His voice was loud. He was inside me before the first commercial break. He was inside me when campus security knocked. He slipped the condom off then threw it on the floor, and ran into the bathroom. I wore a robe when I opened the door. We were guilty of a noise violation, which meant mandatory room inspection. The security guard asked, "Where is he?" I said, "Where's who?" With the end of his pen, the security officer lifted the condom to my eyes. It was wet, bloody. "Where's the man that was wearing this?"
148. I was nineteen years old and on my third change in birth control pills. The switch wasn't easy. Birth control pills had put my body on a schedule. Literally. The pills were even color-coded to signify the days I should or should not have been on my period. White pills for off days and brown pills for on days. My body had taken to Loestrin 24 Fe. We were paradise.

149. Oh, and when the security officer picked up the condom, he said, “Ew.”
150. Male come slang: jizz.
151. Birth control heaven turned to hell. The sky went gray. The women fled, disappeared through ashen curtains. I was shot through the heart by a black arrow.
152. Minastrin 24 Fe was a chewable pill. I inspected the small, white circle with disdain. “I hope my doctor was right,” I said to the pill. “You better be the same as Loestrin 24 Fe.”
153. Male come slang: blow a load.
154. I popped the pill into my mouth. I mashed it with my teeth. The circle tasted like a chemical, stale cheese. It was gritty. I chewed, but the grains had cemented into my teeth. My tongue coated in film. Fluoride contraception. I drank a glass of water to purge my mouth of the flavor.
155. Male come slang: cream pie.
156. Female orgasm and come: understood by men as a myth.
157. Side effects of Minastrin 24 Fe:

- a. Nausea.
 - b. Vomiting.
 - c. Breast tenderness or swelling.
 - d. Freckles or darkening of facial skin.
 - e. Increased hair growth.
 - f. Loss of scalp hair.
 - g. Changes in weight or appetite.
 - h. Problems with contact lenses.
 - i. Vaginal itching or discharge.
 - j. Changes in menstrual periods.
 - k. Decreased sex drive.
158. Male come slang: skeet.
159. I met a guy at a pizza shop/bar. My roommate mouthed to me from across the room, "Pink shirt. Nooo." That was a deal breaker for us; we hated polo shirts and button-downs on guys, especially when pink. To make sure our theory was correct, I took him home.
160. Male come slang: bust a nut.

161. I still didn't have a period while on Minastrin 24 Fe, but my vagina smelled differently. A gutted fish that had rotted in the hot sun spread out on the side of the highway in mid-July, that's what my cookie smelled like.
162. My roommate and I both switched from Loestrin to Minastrin. She took her birth control very, very seriously. She was a football team groupie. She followed players around to bars and clubs and tried to hook up with them. She was sleeping with both quarterbacks at the time, but she feared pregnancy more than anyone I knew. Every month we celebrated her period. She took her birth control religiously with an alarm set at ten o'clock every night. And like clockwork, at ten o'clock I'd hear her dry heaving over the bathroom sink. She hated chewing the pill and gagged when taking it. Then she'd brush her teeth, straighten her crop top, and head out, as any dedicated groupie would.
163. Pink Shirt slept over a couple of nights a week. He licked me like an ice cream cone. I dripped all over his face. He squirmed when I used two hands to give him head, one rubbed against his cock and the other cupped his balls. My tongue worked in unison to play him like a flute. My fleshy little flute.
164. As weeks of chewing Minastrin passed, I began feeling thirstier and hungrier.
165. And when my rapist sucked the voice from my throat, I lost all sense of myself. Because of him, I felt too many things. When I fucked randos, when I was at a party or

the bar or dazed in alcohol, I at least wasn't thinking about him. You see, when he threw my body onto the bed, he took it as his own. This shell that I carry around all day, all night, it isn't mine. It's his.

166. A woman's body takes about two months to come off birth control. It takes another month for a new one to work fully. During the switch, my gynecologist suggested "backup" birth control, such as condoms, for extra protection.

167. Pink Shirt and I only used a condom once, the first time we hooked up. My roommate had a basket of condoms in her room. He didn't like the way they felt, so he didn't carry any on him. I let him fuck me from behind. My back was a table. My vagina was his come dumpster. Sometimes he'd come on my chest. Sometimes he came on my ass, but usually, he came inside me.

168. Like my time on Ortho Tri-Cyclen, my body grew fuller as the thirst and hunger were nonstop. I ate a granola bar in the morning, a bagel for post-breakfast, a sandwich and salad for lunch, another sandwich for post-lunch, often a whole pizza for dinner, and any snacks I could get my hands on at any time of the day.

169. Pink Shirt's hand wrapped around my jaw. I was limp, loose, a snake in grasp of the huntsmen. He squeezed my hips, slammed my head to pillows, or headboard, or onto his cock. He came inside my mouthsafe. We only spoke in tongues.

170. One morning my stomach growled with a familiar hunger, and my breasts were sore. Vomit bubbled up into my throat. My roommate said, “Maybe you're pregnant. I mean, how many times a week is he jizzing inside you?”
171. Emergency contraception: Plan B.
172. Male come slang: wad.
173. I took Plan B three times, and he still refused to wear a condom.
174. I woke in the middle of the night. I tapped my hands on the nightstand looking for a glass. I ran to the bathroom. I cupped water in my hands and drank, and drank.
175. Pink Shirt and I sat at the table. He was drunk. He couldn't keep his eyes open. I told him, “Leave. You're always drunk.” His Jameson breath turned my stomach. His gray skin disgusted me. Another girl called him, told him to come over. Drunk on birth control hormones, I grabbed the phone from his hand and threw it to the wall. I pulled him up from the chair, pushed him toward the door, and kicked his lower back until he was stumbling down the stairs.
176. In birth control hell, I lived in a hazy forest. Some days it was clear skies but most days were dark and gloomy. I gained weight. I smelled, and my vagina was wet all the time. It was a swampy little pond between my legs.

177. I woke as my body oozed into my underwear. *Great. My period.* I stripped my panties off and kicked them into the corner. A foul smell filled the air. I peed and wiped, but I still felt wet. The wad of toilet paper in my hand smeared with white goo. It looked like someone had spit a big loogie into my hand.
178. The goo was back the next day, and it was there the next week. I ignored it. As a sexually active girl, I feared herpes and syphilis and other STDS with everything in me. *It'll go away. It has to go away.*
179. I made an appointment with a gynecologist for my first Pap smear, and I wanted out of birth control hell. I wanted to be off of Minastrin 24 Fe. Before then, I visited my pediatrician or student health for birth control. A regular pap is needed after a woman turns twenty-one. Before then, a woman's cells are constantly changing, and a pap could come back irregular by mistake.
180. I was on Minastrin 24 Fe for two years.
181. Period myth: menstrual synchrony.
- a. Women who spend a lot of time together have synced their menstrual cycles, but this is, in fact, impossible.
182. A pap smear is an annual screening for cervical cancer and STDs if the woman chooses to get tested. I sat in the waiting room with a couple of middle-aged women. A

small, blonde woman walked down the hallway with a clipboard. She said my name. I took a deep breath.

183. When I was fourteen, my menstrual cramps were so terrible that I thought something was trying to blow me up from the inside. The pain was a constant pounding. As it turned out, I had an ovarian cyst.

184. The blonde woman left the room as I undressed then redressed into a hospital robe. “So this is your first pap?” she said when she walked back in. “Yes.” She typed on the computer. “Are you sexually active?” she asked. And again, I said yes. “How many partners have you had?” I said, “Eight.” She typed. “Are you wanting to be tested for STDs today?” I said, “Yes.”

185. The doctor did a sonogram to make sure the ovarian cyst was harmless. It was like a painful pimple on my ovaries. A week later, it passed on its own.

186. The gynecologist was three fingers deep inside of me. “What’s your major? What do you want to do after you graduate? Oh, your uterus is so narrow.” I held my breath. She pulled her fingers out then grabbed the lubed up stick on the table. “You’re going to feel a pinch.” She swabbed my vagina then she did a weird little bongo play on my boobs to check for lumps.

187. I met a guy through a friend. I was on all fours. He pulled my hair. He called it my *handlebar*. My pussy was dry, but he didn't stop. He fucked me until tears dripped from my chin, until the bedside lamp had fallen over. He fucked me hard. His hip bones pounded into my asscheeks. My thighs trembled. I never told him to stop. I couldn't form the words.
188. When I was a child, I was constipated for over a week. Mom was terrified. My stomach was bloated. She took me to a male doctor with cold hands. He asked me to take off my pants then lie on my side on the table with my knees to my chest. When he came back in, he shoved his finger in my butt. Mom waited outside the door. He wiggled his finger inside of me to make a path for my body to relieve itself. I screamed for my mother. After, my anus bled for days.
189. "So you want to change your birth control pill?" the doctor asked. I said, "Yeah, I just don't think this one is working for me." She looked through the pages of a book. The names of birth control pills listed in columns and color-coded. "I loved Loestrin 24 Fe, but I know it's no longer available." She said, "It's not, but it has a sister pill called Lo Loestrin Fe. It's a smaller dose of hormones than the other one." Before she could say another word, I said, "That one. I'll try it."
190. I brought a guy home from the bar. We were drunk. I liked his tattoos and his smile. He licked my anus. He kissed me. I sucked him off. The sheets were wet with our juices.

191. When Mom and I left the doctor's office, she said, "I knew he would do that." She stared at me with glassy eyes. She only cried after men left, but she took my hand in hers, she pressed her lips to my knuckles and held them against her face. Her tears ran down my hand and into the crease of my arm leaving thin, wet paths like tiny snails.
192. Another date. Another man. I don't think I spoke the whole night. Not when we watched television for hours, and not when he said he wanted more tongue, or when he said he'd spend the night. He asked, "Is it too soon, maybe because of god or something?"
193. We had sex. He didn't use a condom. He watched himself in the mirror, maybe even high-fived his shadow. He rocked the bed frame. He wrapped my hair into his hand and flung my head back, like pulling the reins of a horse. I made no noise. My voice was gone. My body was numb.
194. I thought about my mother. Her tomato sauce simmering through the afternoon as it always does on Sundays, and the background noise of the television as she falls asleep. Her pink-slippered feet crossed at the ankle. The black hair dye set at her roots, a towel dressing the back of the couch. She went gray when I was a girl. I mixed dye then combed the thick paste through her hair. The chemical smell stung my eyes. Beach towels spread across the bathroom floor; I was careful not to smear any dye on her thin face. I was careful to get it right. She'd wear an old nightgown dotted with stains of hair dye. I'd dress in my painting shirt. The one I wore when we repainted the living room or

my bedroom or the dining room as we often did after a man had left, like my father or my stepfather or one of her boyfriends.

195. I closed my eyes. I clenched my teeth. I brought one hand to the opposite fist and pinched. I tried to feel something. My skin between my fingers. His skin inside my skin. I held my breath. I planted my palms onto the bed, hard, and gripped the edge with white knuckles. The prayer of a girl losing her body to a boy.
196. Three days after my gynecologist appointment, I got a call: “You tested positive for chlamydia and human papillomavirus (HPV). We’re calling in an antibiotic for the chlamydia, but the HPV will likely go away on its own. Call back if you have questions.” And then she hung up. I stared at my phone with my mouth agape and a buzzing head.
197. There are two types of birth control for women: hormonal and non-hormonal. Hormonal birth control includes the shot, IUD, the patch, the bar, the vaginal ring, and the pill. These options contain the hormone estrogen or the hormone progesterone, and most contain a combined mix of both hormones.
198. Birth control with estrogen is more likely to cause side effects and bodily changes.
199. Birth control for women: shot.

- a. The main side effect is weight gain. Women are expected to gain up to thirty pounds after a doctor has administered the first shot.
200. The progestin hormone is said to cause fewer side effects. Progestin-only birth control is available in the shot, the bar, pills, and an IUD.
201. Birth control for women: interceptive uterine device (IUD).
- a. A little metal T that stays in a woman's uterus for up to ten years. IUDs are available in different sizes and hormone types. The insertion is said to be incredibly painful.
202. My chlamydia remedy was a one-time dose of two pills, no sex for two weeks, and a retest in one month to make sure the medication had worked.
203. Non-hormonal birth control includes female condoms, diaphragms, sponges, withdrawal, sterilization, and a copper IUD. These forms of birth control should cause little to no side effects.
204. Birth control for women: the patch.
- a. Worn on a woman's arm at all times and must be changed once a week.
205. Birth control for women: the implant or "bar."
- a. Injected into a woman's arm by a doctor and lasts up to four years.

206. Birth control for women: the vaginal ring.
- a. A flexible rubber circle that women insert themselves monthly.
207. Birth control for women: the pill.
- a. Must be taken daily.
208. Birth control for women: female condoms.
- a. The same concept as male condoms but only 79% effective against pregnancy.
209. When researching birth control, women take each side effect listed with a grain of salt. All bodies are different. One woman's body may not react the same way as another woman's body, and all women have varying tolerances for different side effects. The side effects of birth control are a lottery. We just have to cope with the pain once we've picked one or we'll choose another and start the process all over again.
210. The cost of birth control may vary from over one thousand dollars to no cost at all. Birth control is available for free at certain local health departments, and most times the option is a combined hormonal pill. The three brands of pills I had taken each cost me twenty dollars per month. This number could change based on a woman's health insurance. The cost of a vaginal ring is three times the cost of the pill and also needs to be replaced every month. An IUD can cost around a grand. The average cost of the shot, administered every three months, is sixty dollars. And like the IUD, the implant is upwards of a thousand dollars, but both forms only need to be inserted once by a doctor

and last four to ten years. A monthly supply of birth control patches ranges anywhere from thirty to fifty dollars.

211. When weighing out contraceptives, women consider which option is best considering what they're able to afford and what will fit into their lifestyle. The shot, the implant, and the IUD are options for the woman that doesn't want to set the alarm on her phone to take a pill everyday or change a patch every week. Women don't need to think about these forms once inserted. In addition to cost and lifestyle, women must also consider which hormones and side effects they're willing to cope with.
212. For many women, like me, birth control is an avenue to bodily peace. Hormones may wreck havoc on the body, but they may also ease cramps, clear up acne, or decrease pain for women with diseases such as endometriosis.
213. Birth control: Lo Loestrin Fe.
- a. At ten milligrams, Lo Loestrin Fe was said to have the least amount of estrogen of any birth control pill on the market. To me, this meant fewer side effects, and finally, a regulated female body was in sight.
214. Side effects of Lo Loestrin Fe:
- a. Spotting or bleeding between menstrual cycles.
 - b. Nausea.
 - c. Breast tenderness.

- d. Heachache.
 - e. Acne.
 - f. Less sexual desire.
 - g. Bloating or fluid retention.
 - h. Blotchy darkening of the skin, especially on the face.
 - i. High blood sugar.
 - j. High fat levels in the blood.
 - k. Depression.
 - l. Problems tolerating contact lenses.
 - m. Weight gain.
215. Two months on Lo Loestrin Fe. My second chlamydia test came back negative, and I hadn't touched a man since. When I thought about a boy on top of me, I wanted to vomit. Sometimes I did. I woke early to work on my senior project. The sun shone through the blinds and patterned the carpet in thick lines. The coffee pot hissed. My stomach growled. I ran to the bathroom. Before I could make it to the toilet, I relieved myself in my underwear. The feces were thick, loose, and constant. I flushed. I turned to face the toilet. I vomited.
216. Later that morning, I ate toast to calm my stomach, but it erupted my insides. I brought my laptop into the bathroom. I sat on the toilet for hours. The bottoms of my thighs shaded in purple and blue bruises.

217. I bled for the first two months. Like a runny nose, my vagina was always dripping. The blood was brown, and once again, everything covered in brown stains. My sheets, my panties, my jeans, the toilet bowl had even darkened to brown shade.
218. The plus side: I didn't have any cramps. Instead of cramps, I had the period shits, migraines, mood swings, depression, and stomach pain.
219. I thought I was in birth control purgatory, but I was in hell. I never left the dark forest.
220. Six months on Lo Loestrin Fe. I graduated college, and when my family wanted to take pictures outside of the coliseum, I told them to *fuck off*. I got up from the ceremony twice to drink a glass of water and take a couple of pain relievers. Every sound bounced off my head and made my brain thump. Mom shook her hand in my hair. She said, "Lighten up." I whipped my head away. I walked towards the car. I said, "I just want to leave."
221. I moved back home for the summer before I moved away for graduate school in the fall. Since I started taking my new pill, I gained fifteen pounds. My body was yearning to be filled. When I wasn't eating, I was screaming at Mom to *go to the grocery* or to *leave me alone* or to *get off my back*. To lose weight, I started juicing. I combined spinach, strawberries, almonds, water, and yogurt into a blender. I drank two a day. Food

left my body as quickly as it entered. I sat on the toilet as I pissed from my anus. I hadn't taken a solid shit in six months.

222. I stopped masturbating, and I never wanted sex. The thought of someone seeing my inflated, bloated, cellulite covered body was sickening.
223. Ten months on Lo Loestrin Fe. My dream had always been to move out of my hometown after college. When I got to a new city, a new state, new sights, new smells, new people, new everything, I thought it would be bliss. But I only left my apartment for class, work, and the grocery store. I loathed my bed because I never wanted to leave it. If I got in, how would I ever get out?
224. I untied my robe and stepped into the shower. I turned the knob to red. I washed my hair, my face, and my body, twice. I turned the handle all the way to the left, the highest heat. I stood with my back to the showerhead. My skin sparked red. My skin melted off my bones and glided down the drain; left for dead like a deer carcass or a used up woman on the side of a highway. My beautifully burned skeleton with the rest of them. Inside out girls. The steam clouded my vision and gave me a small sensation of being high. My legs gave out. My knees crumbled to the bottom. I was facedown with my cheek against the tub. The steam made it difficult to breathe. I was there for minutes, maybe even hours, days, and months.
225. Weight gained since starting Lo Loestrin Fe: twenty-five pounds.

226. One year on Lo Loestrin Fe and I had experienced nearly every single one of those fucking side effects listed.
227. Two months off of Lo Loestrin Fe. The bed was white, the walls were white, and the carpet was white. A blank canvas. I couldn't leave the bed. If I did, where would I go? Who would I talk to?
228. Being on the pill was hell, but coming down from the pill was the fiery depths of hell. After six years of birth control pill hormones, then suddenly going off, my body went haywire. Diarrhea, headaches, depression, stomach pain, irritability, fatigue, and then, I saw a small white light peek through the hazy sky.
229. I bought a vibrator. I figured it was time to clear the cobwebs from my twat.
230. Three months after I threw the pills away, I woke with ease. I got up from the bed. I showered. I left the apartment. The flowers were blooming, the air was warm, and my body was free.
231. I downloaded the dating app *Bumble*. I hit it off with a redhead. I liked online dating because I didn't have to leave my apartment to meet someone. We both liked to cook. Him, tacos and me, jambalaya. So we cooked. Two bottles of wine, two plates, one couch, one or two hearts, no clothes. He carried me into his bedroom. I kissed his neck and along the tops of his shoulders. I sucked on his ear and bit the lobe. I groped his inner

thighs. He dipped his head into my stomach and licked me to the core. His body was frail. His skin was the color of milk. He said he wanted to use a condom as if I'd protest. I grabbed his back. When I wrapped my legs around him, he said he couldn't breathe. When I let go, he sucked the air out of the room. I was a fish out of water struggling to find the rhythm of his movements. I gasped for breath. I dried out. An empty body, floundering. His hands looked fragile, like the softest hold would still be too harsh. I didn't know how those hands supported his body above mine. I imagined him collapsing on me, hard, as our bodies turned to dust.

232. Myth: birth control is only the woman's responsibility.
233. The male birth control shot is currently unavailable due to the number of side effects endured by the study's male participants. The side effects included mood swings, depression, and muscle pain.
234. Birth control: no birth control.
- a. I was done. I was mentally, physically, emotionally finished. Fuck the pill. Fuck birth control. Fuck it all.
235. When women stand, we ask each other, "Is there anything on my butt?" We fear our periods have started, or we've spotted, or our tampons have leaked and formed red stains on our pants. We fear exposure, the blood of our pussies seen in the light.

236. At the friend of a friend's dinner party, I opened my purse. I pulled my tampon out of my vagina. I rolled the bloody thing in toilet paper then stuffed it into my purse between my cellphone and wallet.
237. The bathroom trashcan sat on the back of the toilet. It was a reused sidewalk chalk container. The container was round with a clear exterior. Day two of my period, the waterfall stage. The day my body said, *Release the floodgates!*
238. I had two options for disposing of my used tampon:
- a. First, I could have thrown the pussy plug into the sidewalk chalk container. People would see it, and what if the dog had gotten it? He carries the dripping trophy up to the dinner table. Host: *What is he eating?* The dog drops the tampon. The table gasps. People scatter from the room, disgusted and frantic.
 - b. Second, I could hide the tampon somewhere. Friend: *Can I borrow your lip-gloss?* The blood-soaked ball of toilet paper falls out of my purse. My cheeks redden. I hand her the tube of lip-gloss. I pick up the tampon, say, *Oops, I don't know what that is.* She says nothing.
239. Later, we left the dinner party and went to the bar. I drank tequila shots and mixed drinks and skinny shooter tubes. I stumbled into the bathroom. I opened my purse. I plucked the tampon out and held it above my head. I said, "This has been in here all night." The girls looked at the bloody mess in my hand. We laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

240. I was one year off of birth control and my periods were tolerable. The cramps started two days before I bled. The blood was heavy and lasted a week, but I still felt depressed. I started seeing someone to work through the leftovers of my Lo Loestrin Fe mayhem.
241. After the redheaded guy, I saw a Navy guy, and then a guy that liked cars, another Navy guy, a guy sprinkled in big, brown moles, a guy who was visiting town, one of my neighbors, someone I'd met at a bar, a waiter I'd left my number for on a receipt, another guy I met at a bar, a guy who didn't like using condoms, a guy I let come inside me, a guy that never came in front of me, a guy who was insecure, and a guy I'd never really liked.
242. "Sorry about that," I said. "My going off of birth control has caused extra discharge."
a. "Ew."
243. I can't have sex tonight; I'm bleeding a little from my period.
a. "Ew."
244. The rapist from college? Yeah, he still owned my body, and so did all of the other guys I was handing my body.

245. The therapist and I meditated together. I breathed in *one, two, three, four*. I held the air in my chest like a burning secret. I breathed out *one, two, three, four*.
246. Therapist: “How do you feel now?” I said, “Heavy. A boulder is on my chest.” She said, “Do it again.”
247. When visiting family during a winter break, I drove into a mountain blown through the middle. The highway now the vein of the gutted landscape. It took months to implode the mountain, months to split it in two. Less magnificent rocks and earth and reformed colors of brown and red now hold up the remaining sides. On the side of the highway, a sign read, *Beware of falling rock*.
248. My ears rang, and my head pounded as I drove through the mountain. A rise in elevation, eye level with the sun, and a cry echoed in my skull.
249. One and a half years off birth control, twenty new partners, two pregnancy scares, three more episodes of chlamydia, two months without sex, a new relationship, and he said, “I don’t want to have sex if we’re not using more protection than condoms. I think you should try going on birth control again.”
250. I thought, *How typical. A man wanting me to ingest chemicals so he could use my body for sex. A man wanting me to relive the hell of side effects so he can orgasm. A man looking out for my well-being and our future as responsible, childless adults. He’s right.*

251. The first time we had sex, I said, “Do you want to have sex?” He replied, “I just want to do whatever makes you comfortable.”
252. I chose an IUD because my health insurance had agreed to pay the full cost. I chose progestin only. I chose the smallest available. I chose the one that lasts up to five years.
253. The first time we had sex, I queefed. My pussy farted.
254. I walked into Planned Parenthood with nerves and an empty belly. My stomach growled in the waiting room. My doctor was a man. He said, “Open your legs, I’m going to insert the speculum now.” The plastic contraption held my vagina open. “And now I’m going to measure your cervix to make sure the IUD will fit.” He inserted something long. It pinched. “Okay, the IUD is up next.” The nurse was to my right. She said, “Take in a deep breath and hold it.” The doctor inserted the IUD. He clipped the string. The nurse said, “Release the breath and breathe normally.” His hands were covered in blood. He removed the speculum. He said, “Stay like that for about ten minutes.” They both left the room.
255. When we finished, I said, “I’m sorry I queefed. Ugh, that’s so embarrassing.” The boyfriend smiled at me. He said, “Why are you apologizing for something you can’t control?”

256. I meditated while laid out on the table. I was afraid to lean forward, to see if the room was bloody. The nurse popped back in. She said, “Take it easy for today. You’re going to feel intense cramping, but it will ease after a couple of weeks.” When I leaned forward, there was no blood on the walls or floors. She handed me a maxi pad for spotting.
257. I told my therapist, “This body has never felt like mine. I felt like my body was owned by my rapist, by these men I’m sleeping with. And my period and birth control have stopped me from having control over my body. I don’t know how to take it back.”
258. At home, I slept for days until I could no longer miss work. The cramps felt different from menstrual cramps. Instead of blasts of sharp pain, I felt constant inner turmoil, like my abdomen was on fire and slowly collapsing. My insides were constantly aflame.
259. Side effects of Kyleena IUD:
- a. Vaginal itching and discharge.
 - b. Ovarian cysts.
 - c. Abdominal pain.
 - d. Pelvic pain.
 - e. Headache or migraine.
 - f. Acne.
 - g. Abdominal cramps.

- h. Breast pain or discomfort.
 - i. Increased vaginal bleeding.
 - j. Depression.
 - k. Hair loss.
260. I broke up with my therapist after she said, “You’re trying to conquer small tragedies. Your problems are not life-altering.”
261. My vagina itched like all of the world’s mosquitoes had taken turns biting my outer labia, one by one. My lips were bright red. My little pebble, the clitoris, was so red some days it was purple. I scratched and scratched then applied lotion to calm the skin. And when that dried, I scratched some more.
262. Three months with an IUD and the cramps were constant. When I sat, landmines blew three at a time. When I slept, bombs exploded. When I exercised, there was a shootout and, unfortunately, there were no survivors. My vagina an open wound: I bled, and bled, and bled until everything I owned soaked in my bloodbath.

USED GIRL

Your chest has fallen now. When you sit, soft stretched breast skin sags onto the tops of your thighs; limp from the absence of hands. Your nipples are still round and the color of salmon. Your hands rest on your kneecaps where the skin is rough, scarred after years of kneeling, after years of praying to your god. Your god was the hand on the back of your head. You dropped before him. Men are your religion.

In the living room, the couch creases from hard bodies. The cushions flatten into thin sheets. The bed is unmade; the countertops unclean, you don't want to lose what's left of him, of them.

After making love, one said, *I wasn't expecting it so soon.*

one said, *I should probably head home now.*

one said, *I love how you can fuck without feelings.*

In the afternoon, when your fingers are inside you, you're careful not wear yourself any further. The nipples harden with a light breeze. Your vagina tightens with kegel exercise, but like a favorite childhood toy, you're worn out. Dirty.

one said, *What will you do if you're not with me?*

one said, *I didn't think you wanted more than sex.*

one said, *Maybe we should stop seeing each other.*

Before sleep, you slide yourself between cold sheets. The bed is large and quiet like a vast plain of the unknown. You slip a hand inside your panties and recite a prayer, the familiar touch of loneliness.

BARE

And though it may seem tedious
to people on the outside,
couples with their faces
touching while they sit
on the same side of the booth,
and I am zoning out from too
much caffeine and too
little inter-
action:
we're role playing now
he, the good guy and I,
the good girl, a date
feels like an interview to me
that is
the oldest newest thing
today, I am into hipsters
tomorrow, maybe athletes
and always dark hair
like my father's
who hasn't dated in 21
years, to be exact, and I think
if I could just show him

that there are people
out there willing to accept
that we don't open up easily
that we only eat
baked beans with hot dogs
and only
at the campground
where we caught crawdads,
and slept between rainbow
patterned sheets--
the day
I met a boy
we saw
colors in the clouds,
the questions paused,
for just a second, we
were humans, and I don't see
many when I am too busy
staring at myself in the mirror
wondering what my name is,
wondering how many rainbows
go unseen
how many

guys, like my dad,
are going
unseen, and if I could just
make myself
for one more day search
for one more boy
that could be magnificent
like things in the sky
like the tiny butterflies
in our tummies
bare,
for him to see me
then we
will make rainbows
with our bodies
in the shape of a C,
molded together
there is no world
outside, only the magic
of you
of me.

APPENDIX

THESIS BOOKLIST ANNOTATIONS

1. Contemporary: *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch

Yuknavitch, Lidia. *The Chronology of Water: A Memoir*. Hawthorne Books, 2011.

The Chronology of Water is a memoir of a woman's rage, passion, and confusion.

Yuknavitch details her adolescent life as a competitive swimmer with an abusive father and an alcoholic mother. After she received a swimming scholarship with a full ride to college, she drank heavily and dabbled in drugs. She failed out of college, birthed a stillborn child, and went through two divorces, and many other sexual relationships all while recalling what water and body and life mean to her.

The writing is quick and precise. Yuknavitch goes against traditional literary forms. The pacing of the essays kept the reader on her toes while the language mesmerized. Yuknavitch's writing was both poetic and honest. The essays written in one to three pages, and the essays were all organized in non-sequential order. A beginning-to-end structure would not have worked in this daring of a memoir; it would've felt forced. Her craft lies in honesty and clarity. Yuknavitch never apologizes for her wrongs.

The Chronology of Water is related to my thesis through content. No, I do not write about the death of a child or drug and alcohol addiction, but I do have essays about the body and the fluidity of sexuality. Yuknavitch's writing forced me to rethink every word in my manuscript. Her writing was so clean and precise, so engaging. During my revision period, I took the time to consider every word and every syllable and the way they're structured. This book reminded me to be conscious of stylistic choices. The memoir also reminded me not to be corny or trite. I often

find myself stuck in those cliché female essays of awakenings, cleansings, and *finding* myself. And it's not that any of those things are trite, but that writing about them seems to be.

2. Contemporary: *Too Much and Not the Mood* by Durga Chew-Bose

Chew-Bose, Durga. *Too Much and Not the Mood*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

This book of hybrid essays explores identity and identity politics from Chew-Bose's original millennial voice, a voice so necessary in today's world. The title is a quote from Virginia Woolf. Its meaning stems from the idea that writing does not need to please readers and that the process of writing is not pleasing to the self. Writing is work. Chew-Bose's essays unravel ideas rather than dissecting them.

Chew-Bose's essays are lyrical and personal, though not much confessional. The writer tells of her experiences then lets her readers swim in her river of words. As a reader, I did not feel force-fed. I felt the freedom to explore and judge Chew-Bose as I wanted and as she wanted her readers to. This book is about life's journey rather than hard definitions of the self. Chew-Bose's prose was new, fresh, and ever-changing. Her craft choices are minimal yet beautiful.

The essay that struck me most in the collection was "Heart Museum." Here, Chew-Bose used a free-flowing stream of consciousness as structure, or rather, to show how unstructured a person and a mind may be. Chew-Bose quickly jumps from topic to topic as if the reader is watching a quick reel of a person's life. She goes from missing a friend to visiting relatives in the hospital to explorations of her childhood, and her transitions are so clear and effortless. That's what Chew-Bose's work was to me, continuous exploration of life. The work felt natural like *of course* all of these things are intertwined. Chew-Bose's prose reminded me to be present. This

book inspired me to find meaning in the everyday things, like the workings of the heart or the life of a broken woman.

3. Contemporary: *Surrendered Child* by Karen McElmurray

McElmurray, Karen Salyer. *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey*. University of Georgia Press, 2004.

Surrendered Child is a memoir about the release then the remembrance of the son McElmurray gave up for adoption when she was a teenager. The author explains the birth of her son and the failed relationship between her and her son's father. The prose is raw. The writing is blatantly honest. McElmurray even details the day she met her son and his fiancé at her apartment, nearly thirty years later. Over the years, the author thought back on her childhood, her relationship with her parents, and the reasons why she gave up her son at age sixteen.

The craft choices and the book's structure are incredible. McElmurray uses italics throughout the chapters. In my opinion, italics were used to separate the authorial interpretation from the direct method show -- or rather, to separate the *show* from the *tell*. She shows experience and scene through italics. She tells what these times meant through plain text. The structure of the content is in non-linear form. The reader is given pieces of her life as a pregnant teenager and as a sheltered child. In the end, they come together to voice why McElmurray couldn't possibly care for her son at such a young age.

I used McElmurray's show and tell craft method in my writing. I found her method to be easily understood. Her writing relates to my thesis in too many ways to count. For starters, McElmurray is the reason I began writing confessional essays. She found a relation in my work. She encouraged me to dig deeper and to read more authors of the confessional mode.

Surrendered Child also opened doors to things in my childhood that I had not seen before, like shame and neglect.

4. Contemporary: *The Lonely City* by Olivia Laing

Laing, Olivia. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. Macmillan, 2016.

The Lonely City is hybrid in that it could identify as reportage, a collection of essays, biography, and maybe even memoir. Laing tells of her loneliest times when living in New York City after a breakup. She then relates her loneliness to that of famous male artists; artists such as Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, David Wojnarowicz, and Henry Darger. Laing gives few details of her personal life. The book is centered on the solemn lives of the artists and how Laing is beginning to group herself among them.

This book is interesting in that it does not give the definition or melodramatic sympathy to loneliness or lonely people. *The Lonely City* is rather a token on the subject. That is what draws me to this book; it does not rely on a phony epiphany or definition for its subject. The reader is not given a take away from Laing's life or any of the artists' lives. The reader is just there to observe, to educate themselves on the lives of lonely people. *The Lonely City* is an exploration of the self and the lives of others rather than a conclusion on the reasons for loneliness.

Laing inspired my thesis in many ways. To start, she gave me the confidence to continue writing about my *slutty* life and all feminist subjects, which I am forever trying to intertwine. When we met, we discussed "Good Girl" and other intended thesis essays. Laing seemed excited, and possibly even delighted, by the subject matter. This showed me I was on to something. As much as my insecurities held me back, Laing's guidance pushed me forward.

Secondly, she is a badass confident woman. Her writing is to the point. She never doubts herself and she knows who she is. This inspired me to be more confident in my writing, which is something I struggle with. Lastly, I'm inspired by her ability to be so raw. She is who she is, her confidence reflects her writing, and she is proud of every step that led her to be the successful writer she is today. I felt very lucky to have her as a mentor, even if it was only for a few weeks.

5. Contemporary: *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. Wave Books, 2009.

Bluets is a collection of prose poems or “propositions,” as Nelson refers to them, about the color blue. The book is written in numbered propositions. The author jumps from topic to topic, and the numbers keep the book structured. It reads like a fresh take on the braided narrative. Nelson is in love with a color. Because of this, she begins dissecting the color: what it means to her, what it meant to philosophers, and why it is the favorite of most humans. Blue is a character as well as an obsession.

Nelson uses the color to detail her pain and longing, so, in that sense, blue is a metaphor, but it is also literal. The craft choice of the numbered poems is really daring. I have to admit; they were hard to grasp at first. But I respect Nelson as a writer and an artist and, in the end; all of her craft and stylistic choices came together to enhance the structure and form of her subject, blue.

Bluets relates to the many prose poems in my thesis. I enjoy reading and writing prose poems because I get all of the information I need, right there, in quick snippets. I revised one of my pieces to mirror Nelson's form. I was weary of doing so. I decided to use the numbers because there was so much I wanted to discuss in the essay: my birth control and period

struggles, period stigma with men, women, and the general public, dumb period commercials, and the phrases and remarks used to undermine women while they are or are not bleeding. This did not seem possible without a structure that let me play around with time and braiding, but was still accessible for the reader. Nelson inspired me to take risks with structure and to let structure complement the writing.

6. Contemporary: *The Book of Beginning and Endings* by Jenny Bouilly

Bouilly, Jenny. *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*. Sarabande Books, 2007.

The Book of Beginning and Endings is a collection of fragmented essays that are merely beginnings and endings. The middle, the body, of the essay is always missing. The reader is then left to figure the middle out on her own.

The craft is well stated in the title. This book is incredibly daring and maybe even insane, but Bouilly pulls it off. The incomplete essays are written in lyrical form. The author purposefully leaves things out. I love this literary choice. As a reader, I could assume the body of the essays, but that's not what mattered. What mattered was the development and the outcome. The text is also full of imagery and abstract subjects, which continue to complement the form of Bouilly's writing.

The Book of Beginning and Endings relates to my thesis in that I, too, write lyrically and attempt some untraditional structures. This book is an inspiration for all hopeful essayists. It shows that we can be daring and weird, yet still, be somewhat understood. Or not. Maybe being understood is not what matters to essayist, but rather the bleak honesty of life is what we are attracted to.

7. Contemporary: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: an American lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

Citizen is a poetry collection that reads much like a collection of lyrical essays. Claudia Rankine writes of African American experience in today's world. The writing is painfully honest and visual. Rankine uses photographs in the text to support the writing. One photograph is of a white female tennis player that stuffed her top and skirt to make it look like she had larger breasts and a larger butt, much like a woman of color.

Rankine does not use titles in the collection. It's broken up into sections, and each section is named with numbers rather than titles. I loved this; it's as if the experiences speak for themselves. Numbers also suggest that these cultural experiences are continuing to happen and will continue to happen in the future. The writing is very concise. Rankine makes her point through scene and imagery.

Rankine gives an honest portrayal of the life of a person of color, and she does so through descriptive poems whose subjects are political and deeply personal. I hope to do the same in my own poetry and writing. *Citizen* defines what it is to be a citizen, what we have to lose, gain, or maintain to be so. In my own writing, I hope to have as loud of an impact. Rankine is quietly successful in her writing. I hope to have a similar effect in my thesis, because you do not need to be loud to be heard.

8. Contemporary: *Season of the Body* by Brenda Miller

Miller, Brenda. *Season of the Body: Essays*. Sarabande Books, 2002.

A book of essays and meditations, *Season of the Body*, is a look at Miller's body and how she has crafted herself and the bodies of others. A young woman attends classes to become a

masseuse and learns how to relax, relieve, and find beauty in people's bodies. The reader follows Miller as she discovers sexuality and finds her place in the spiritual world.

One aspect of *Season of the Body* I especially love is the incorporation of meditation in the prose. It gave the prose a very quiet tone. The reader is meditating with Miller. We are there to see and feel it all. I use a similar structure in my own essays. I started seeing therapists a few years ago, and I'm learning that meditation is the key to really let my feelings, emotions, and mind settle.

I am wholeheartedly in love with this book. Miller's voice is peaceful yet powerful. Her attention to detail and her use of sexuality and imagery are impeccable. Her writing makes me feel the inspiration and amazement that I long to find in all books. I will continue to look to Miller for guidance and inspiration.

9. Contemporary: *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* by Laurie Ann Guerrero

Guerrero, Laurie Ann. *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2013.

A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying is a poetry collection by the Chicana poet Laurie Ann Guerrero. In the book, Guerrero's speakers are all female. The speaker(s) is afraid of losing the men in her life, such as her son, her husband, and her grandfather. This is a remarkable collection that's often a little disgusting in subject. One poem details the cooking of a tongue, which is said to be common in the culture Guerrero grew up in. Other poems are graphic when speaking about the body, and the poet always keeps the body in mind. Guerrero's word choices are careful and calculated. Her poems are an honest look at what it is to be human and especially, what it is to long for something or someone.

A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying is about decay. For this reason, I chose to include it in my booklist. In this collection, the body is often rotten or disremembered or deceased, but it is no less beautiful. The body is a gross machine, and it is important to show that side of humanity. I hope to accomplish this in my own work, and with inspiration from Guerrero, I think I'll do so.

10. Contemporary: *The Kiss* by Kathryn Harrison

Harrison, Kathryn. *The Kiss*. Random House Incorporated, 2011.

The Kiss is a memoir by Kathryn Harrison. In the book, Harrison confesses to having an affair with her father when she was in her early twenties. Her parents neglected her as a child. Harrison spent her whole life begging for her mother's attention and hoping to one day have a father present. Their untraditional love triangle is one of selfishness, rebellion, and forced love. The book ends with Harrison happily married yet still haunted by her father.

This memoir is heavy on scene and reflection. Harrison gives scene and reflection in the same chapter and most times, on the same page. The first time the reader learns that Harrison has slept with her father, the writer immediately follows the confession with a reflection: years later all she will remember is that he was always on top and she was always as still as possible. This formal and structural craft decision was sometimes annoying in the text (the reader was not able to judge anything on her own). After reading and meditating on the book, I think now that the reflection was necessary. Being inside Harrison's head was like being on the scariest rollercoaster, and I loved it.

I chose to include *The Kiss* in my booklist because of its taboo subject and its beautifully precise prose. I'm of course not writing about incest, but I am writing about my period and other vaginal taboos. This book reminded me to be fearless and to disregard what the public may think.

From her, I was reminded to be honest. Regardless of the subject, Harrison's writing, pacing, tone, and voice are undoubtedly magnificent.

11. Craft: *The Art of Memoir* by Mary Karr

Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. Harper Collins, 2015.

In her craft book *The Art of Memoir*, Karr explains the ins and outs of writing memoir. The book provides guided details on how a memoir could succeed. Karr also talks about why memoirs often fail and how novice writers can make sure their memoir survives. The craft book is structured into numbers that act as progression in writing. Karr uses examples from her own experiences as well as the experience of others.

Karr uses her own experiences with writing and teaching memoir to guide the chapters. In the conclusion, Karr writes about her own insecurities and the things that kept her from finding her voice. I found this to be incredibly uplifting. I know writers are all human, but sometimes it feels like everything I do is wrong. To know that Karr also felt insecure makes me feel better. Of course, everyone feels bits of insecurity, but my thesis has been a lot of insecurity over the span of many months and many anxiety attacks. I'm sure Karr would understand. My thesis is not a memoir, but Karr's advice, exercises, and tactics are still useful.

12. Craft: "The Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay" by Amy Bonnaffons

Bonnaffons, Amy. "Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay." *The Essay Review*, 2016.

"The Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay" is a craft essay published in *The Essay Review*. The essay questions what it means for an essay to be lyrical. Also, the essay also explains the history of the lyrical essay. The term stems from the writings inability to fit into either the

nonfiction or poetry genres; a lyrical essay is a hybrid form of both. Bonnaffons explains the common craft choices that are found in these types of essays, such as white space and shorter paragraph structures. She also talks about how lyrical essays are most often written by women and that they are the queer one of the genres. Lyrical is many things rolled into one. And like queerness and gender, lyrical refuses to fall into any solid definition.

Lyrical essays refuse definition: “Perhaps the lyrics doesn’t enter, just presses its face against a window and longingly observes.” Lyrical essays are suggestive rather than exhaustive. Instead of making meaning, perhaps they shine light on the possibility of meaning-making. A network of similar topics becomes threads in the essay. White space is used to show the silence. Lyrical essays are quiet. A resistance of definition is what draws me to the lyric essay.

One piece of criticism I often receive is the “so what?” question. “Why am I reading this?” I never know how to answer these questions. Through lyrical essays, I have been able to side swipe those questions. I can give meaning through imagery and scene without beating my reader over the head with forced epiphanies or meaning-making. It’s important for me to be my most honest, authentic self in my writing, and lyrical essays let me be naked on the page.

13. Craft: “On Pandering” by Claire Vaye Watkins

Watkins, Claire Vaye. "On Pandering." *Tin House*, 2015.

On Pandering is a craft essay published in *Tin House*. Watkins explains to the reader a time when she experienced sexism. When working on her MFA, she offered to let a famous author and editor, who was reading at the campus, stay at her home. The writer had tried to sleep in Watkin’s bed with her and she continuously told him no. The next day, he published a blog post detailing his time at the university including how Watkins would not let him sleep in her

bed, which, he thought, was ultimately because she wasn't sure about him. Watkins goes on to explain the sexism in the post. Because she is a woman, the writer didn't see her as a writer. And because she wasn't a writer or a woman who would let him sleep with her, she wasn't a person. The writer described a male colleague of Watkin's as well. He used both the colleagues first and last name (he only used Watkin's first) and told his readers about the man's background, his family, his novel, and his plans for law school. Watkin's goes on to say:

The stunning truth is that I am asking, deep down, as I write, What would Philip Roth think of this? What would Jonathan Franzen think of this? When the answer is probably: nothing. More staggering is the question of why I am trying to prove myself to writers whose work, in many cases, I don't particularly admire? I recently finished Roth's *Indignation* with nothing more lasting than a sincere curiosity as to whether Roth is aware that these days even nice girls give blow jobs. I am trying to understand a phenomenon that happens in my head, and maybe in yours too, whereby the white supremacist patriarchy determines what I write.

She then describes the white man in her head that tells her what she can and cannot write. A light when off in my head when I read these lines; I too was writing for the male audience, one that might not understand or even *like* my work. Why did that matter? I should be writing for myself and my intended audience. And with Watkin's words, I purged the little white man from my head.

Reading this craft essay was crucial to my thesis. Without the realization that I could write to women about women's issues, I think I would've drowned in a puddle of my own tears. When talking about my thesis, I would often gaslight myself. I'd say, "Oh, I don't know what it's about," or, "It's such a mess." And the truth is, it wasn't a mess and I knew exactly what I

doing with it. I just needed to trust myself and remember the many women before me who did the same. The same women who also needed to purge the little man from their heads.

14. Craft: “What Quilting and Embroidery Can Teach Us About Narrative Form”

by Sarah Minor

Minor, Sarah. “What Quilting and Embroidery Can Teach Us About Narrative Form.”

Literary Hub, 2017.

“What Quilting and Embroidery Can Teach Us About Narrative Form” is a craft essay on braided narratives. Minor discusses quilting and stitching regarding the connections between one thing and another to create one big, beautiful thing. Braided narratives connect many different points, scenes, and experiences to give the effect of a greater whole. Minor discusses the work of many authors. She also explains how stitching the beginning of a work to the end is the idea of pushing whatever is happening then into what is happening next -- another thread forms.

One point I felt incredibly moved by in the essay was that essays begin in the center, where the story is really happening. Then the author works outwards from the center to piece together the rest of the essay. In this sense, essays may take on an untraditional form. Writers can make meaning through structural choices. I think I often begin in the center and work from there. It’s difficult for me to start anywhere else.

Everything I write is in some sense a braided narrative. Lots of different things come together to help me create a sort of sense of things and sometimes meaning. This essay reminded me to be conscious of the decisions I’m making while writing; to remember why I’m starting where I am and where I want to go from there.

15. Craft: *Writing Tools* by Roy Peter Clark

Clark, Roy Peter. *Writing tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. Hachette UK, 2008.

“Writing Tools,” by Roy Peter Clark, is a text I am constantly referring back to. When I feel that my writing is misguided or unclear, I turn to Clark’s advice and lessons to put me back on track. The book’s structure is with short chapters (two to three pages), and each chapter gives a short grammatical or stylistic lesson along with a “workshop” activity at the end to practice the lesson.

A couple of chapters that have stuck with me are ones on adverbs, -ing words, and clearing fluffer words. These are things that all writers can recognize when reading other works, but it’s often difficult to find them in your own work. Clark’s lessons are easy to understand, remember, and practice. They’re simple but important.

I read this book (for the hundredth time) when revising my thesis for the second time. It helped to remind myself of what’s important, which was the quality of the writing. With Clark’s guidance, I cleaned up the manuscript and felt more confident in my grammatical and stylistic choices.

16. Historical: *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Penguin UK, 2015.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a fictional story about a woman who has gone mad with solitude and begins peeling down the wallpaper in the room her husband has locked her inside of. The woman begins to hallucinate. She sees another woman in the wallpaper; she believes the woman is trapped behind bars and she needs help getting out. The woman is clearly mentally ill, but her

husband refuses to help her. Instead of approaching her mental illness, he would rather lock her inside of a room and pretend she doesn't exist. The woman is free after she has torn down all of the wallpaper and runs past her fainted husband.

The gothic elements of this story are what draw me to it. Gilman's uses of dark, eerie images are what let the reader see the craziness of this woman. The best part about it is that she might not have been crazy at all. The woman in the wallpaper is juxtaposition to the mad woman. They are both trapped inside of walls that are out of their control, and the woman's husband traps them both. When the woman rips down all of the wallpaper and frees the imagined woman, she becomes two: the crazy and the fleeing.

The man in this story would rather let his wife suffer inside of her mind than help her. I find his character most relatable to my thesis. I've written about too many men who would rather write me off than deal with me. This story shows a woman in all of her magnificent, patriarchal induced turmoil, and I just really love that.

17. Historical: *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. OUP Oxford, 2015.

In this essay, Woolf explains that she has been invited to lecture on the topic of Women and Fiction. Woolf imagines Judith Shakespeare as William Shakespeare's sister. Judith is a smart woman who's also a writer and an actor. Judith commits suicide when she realizes her intellect is not met by any socially acceptable standard. Woolf uses this fictionalized woman to show the potential of women during Shakespeare's time, but their passions could not be practiced because it was not socially acceptable. The essay also talks about the few works on women in fiction, all of which are written by men in anger. Women are also only permitted to

walk on the gravel of university grounds. As a woman in fiction, Woolf was often mocked or looked down upon. *A Room of One's Own* explains that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

Woolf's tone in this piece is obviously annoyed and somewhat angry. The voice of the narrator feels a little beaten down; no matter what she does, it's still not good enough. In the end, the narrator calls all women to action and asks them to look beyond the norms forced upon them. She also asks them to teach their daughters this lesson as well.

A Room of One's Own is an inspiration to break out of the boxes thrust upon me. I often fear that the essays I'm writing are “victim” narratives. But after reading this essay, I was reminded to move beyond that stereotypical mold; it's okay to be angry. My writing takes on an aggravated tone, much like Woolf's. Even if my pieces were victim narratives, I don't think that'd necessarily be a bad thing, but Woolf reminds me to push past barriers.

18. “Before I Got My Eye Put Out” by Emily Dickinson

Dickinson, Emily. “Before I Got My Eye Put Out.”

This poem by Dickinson, like most of hers, is themed with death. It's eerie and morbid.

The first line and the title say that the speaker's, the creature's, eye has been taken and she is now half-blind. It seems that Dickinson felt pain more than any other poet I am familiar with.

I admire Dickinson because she was a spinster. Dickinson was a woman who refused to do what made her unhappy. Though incredibly depressing, Dickinson's images are beautiful, and they stick in the mind of the reader. The speaker says, “All Forests—Stintless Stars--/ As much of Noon as I could take/ Between my finite eyes—.” I love the phrase *finite eyes*. As a woman of the nineteenth century, Dickinson was limited to the world because she was a woman. The poem

alludes to the speaker unable to fully see; she has accepted that fact, yet she still chooses to see stars.

I love the gothic elements of Dickinson's poetry. And while my writing might not be gothic, it can often be dark and depressing. When women suffer from depression, it seems to seep into all that we touch. Our smiles a little more crooked, our words a little rawer.

19. "One Girl" by Sappho

Sappho. "One Girl." *Poetry Foundation*.

In the poem "One Girl" by Sappho, a girl is beautiful though untouchable and undiscovered. In the end, she is trodden and forgotten. Sappho alludes to the objectification of women, how we are often pursued, tasted, and then let go of so quickly. I admire Sappho's honesty and her imagery. She uses metaphor and simile to speak to something greater, like a girl as beautiful as the red apple at the top of a tree. Her language is repetitive yet to the point. The repetition relates back to the theme that women are constantly pursued then forgotten. Sappho's poetry is very clear in meaning.

I hope to gain Sappho's use of quiet imagery in my own writing. I compare women and myself to other objects to create metaphor and perhaps meaning. But Sappho's writing is very precise, clean, and clear. She used simplicity to make greater meaning of her poems.

20. "[It's no use / Mother Dear]" by Sappho

Sappho. "[It's no use / Mother Dear]." *Poetry Foundation*.

"[It's no use / Mother Dear]" is another poem by Sappho. The last line of the poem, "she has almost / killed me with / love for that boy," hits my heart hard. Sappho is blaming Aphrodite

for her hopeless love. She cannot continue to weave without him, and for that, she apologizes to her mother.

Sappho's use of line breaks in this poem speaks to a yearning. She uses short lines and simple language to show lust; not even the poem is written because she is so in love. In this way, the form gives way to meaning by Sappho's creation of an obsessive speaker. The honesty of Sappho's writing encourages me to look at my own writing in hopes of deeper meaning. She was a lyric poet and a woman who knew how to write of love.

21. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. WW Norton & Company, 2010.

The Feminine Mystique, by Betty Friedan, is often noted as the first step into second-wave feminism. Originally published in 1963, this text was not only eye-opening for the feminist movement, but it would continue to be relevant many years after, and well into the third-wave feminist movement. Friedan focused on suburban women who were housewives and stay-at-home mothers. She asked them to look at their lives and to choose to change them. The text also included the issue of how women were portrayed in advertisements and the media.

One year after publication, Friedan's work had sold over one million copies and was one of the most popular nonfiction books to date. Friedan exposed the media and their use of women. Women are props in pictures, television, radio, and in the cinema. She challenged the education values of women as well as their rights to education. Friedan's goal was to motivate women to find their own identity, their own self-image, and possibly even their own lives separate from the male view and opinion.

My thesis is very third-wave feminism in its “slut pride” and sex-positive themes, but Friedan’s text continued to open me up to aspects of the second-wave feminism movement. The biggest takeaway I received from reading *The Feminine Mystique* was Friedan’s call to action that all women work as hard as they can and use their full mental capacity in everything they do. I took that energy and advice and channeled it into my thesis. Regardless of which wave of feminism we’re in, it’s always important to push other women to accomplish their goals and to cheer them on, and I felt that from Friedan.

22. *Scum Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas

Solanas, Valerie. SCUM Manifesto. Verso, 1971.

I learned of *Scum Manifesto*, by Valerie Solanas, from reading *The Lonely City*. Laing has a chapter nearly dedicated to Solanas, who was known as the crazy woman who shot Andy Warhol. It turns out, Solanas acted out because Warhol had not fulfilled a promise to her to help her publish this book. Out of rage for Warhol and the patriarchy, Solanas shot him and found other avenues to publish her book. She stood on the street to advertise her book. *Scum Manifesto* is a radical feminist text. Solanas asked women to eliminate the male sex because men have ruined the world. The text is often said to be satirical, but knowing what I know of Solanas, I would say it’s deeply legitimate and true-to-word.

Many feminists, including Friedan, have considered Solanas text too radical. I chose this book for my reading list because I wanted to read and understand radical feminist views. I’m also really fascinated by Solanas. I admire any woman that lets her crazy flag fly, especially Solanas, whose radicalism was truly hated and laughed at. Any woman fighting the patriarchy is really inspiring to me. And while I don’t agree with many of her opinions, I understand where

Solanas' anger comes from. She grew up in a time when women had few opportunities and when it seemed that men had ruled the world. This was a fun read that reminded me that it's okay to be angry and to channel that anger into literature.

23. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Faber & Faber, 2008.

The first and only novel written by Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* is the story of Esther Greenwood, a young woman, and aspiring writer. Greenwood accepts a summer internship in New York City. The internship is at a lady's magazine and Greenwood soon realizes that she doesn't fit in with the good girls and other stereotypically female characters, such as the sorority girl and a childbearing woman. When Greenwood returns home, her mother says she's not accepted into a summer writing program. Later, she finds herself depressed and in the hands of a psychiatrist by the request of her mother. Greenwood has a female psychiatrist who is pleasant and helpful. Greenwood expresses her jealousy of men for not being able to get pregnant. She is given a diaphragm. The book ends with Greenwood in an interview to potentially leave the facility.

I've read that *The Bell Jar* is Plath's life. The text first published in 1963, but I found Greenwood's story (and I guess Plath's too) to be scarily relatable to my own life. I became depressed after insecurities with my work and writing arose after I moved away from home, and I'm also terrified of pregnancy. I sometimes hate men too for not having to worry about all of the things that women do, like birthing a child. It seems that the pressures of life are sometimes too much to bear. This book broke my heart. Greenwood's hopelessness is so familiar to me. Plath's writing is riveting, direct, and heart-wrenching. The text is honest and unforgettable, and I hope

that Greenwood and Plath are symbols of a transition period for women, because there are now more avenues to cope with depression and suicidal thoughts.

24. “Diving Into the Wreck” by Adrienne Rich

Rich, Adrienne. *Diving Into the Wreck*, 1971.

The poem, *Diving into the Wreck*, by Adrienne Rich is a work of mystery, discovery, and identity. The speaker is quite literally diving into the sea where there is wreckage. The poem may be read in this simplistic way, but I think there’s much more to it. Rich’s poem was published in the 1970s and could be speaking of diving into the politics of the Vietnam War or the continued fight for women's rights.

The ending lines, “in which/ our names to do not appear,” gives way to the idea that we’re all just, for lack of a better phrase, trying to get by. She fought, protested but perhaps her name still would not be remembered, and that’s not the point of fighting. She was an activist because it was the right thing to do. I’ve read that for her National Book Award prize-winning speech, Rich dedicated the award to all of the unknown women writers. Maybe “Diving into the Wreck” is not defined. Perhaps its meaning is different for each reader, but I see it as diving into the mess of life, to always face life’s challenges head-on, and to do it with beautiful images and mermaids.

25. *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinem

Steinem, Gloria. *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. Macmillan, 1995.

Oh, Gloria Steinem. In her book of essays *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, Steinem uses humor, heart, and always, honesty to tackle female issues with her feminist view.

Steinem writes “as if women mattered.” Her words are timeless and read effortlessly. Steinem is a feminist icon, and her writing continues to remain relevant and inspire women writers.

The essay “If Men Could Menstruate” is hilarious and eye-opening. In my own clapback menstruation piece, I’m trying to show men what it’s really like to menstruate and feel female pain. Steinem gets it. *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* is a reminder that feminism is still needed in today’s culture, especially considering the #MeToo Movement and the Time's Up Movement. It seems that women will always be fighting until we are given equal opportunities and pay as well as fair and respectable treatment. And I think Steinem will be there every step of the way.

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Education

- 2018 MFA in Creative Writing - Creative Nonfiction, Old Dominion University
 2015 BA in Creative Writing & Professional Writing and Editing, Minor: Public Relations,
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Creative Work - Creative Nonfiction & Poetry

- 2017 “The Seasons of Sam,” Memoir, *Eunoia Review*. Published April 13, 2017.
 2017 “Harpoon,” Poem, *Roar: Literature and Revolution by Feminist People*. Published
 September 28, 2017.
 2017 “Love Poem: Necrophilia,” Poem, *Anti-Heroine Chic*. Published April 2, 2017.
 2017 “(Not) Sorry,” Poem, *Anti-Heroine Chic*. Published April 2, 2017.
 2017 “Rotten,” Poem, *Anti-Heroine Chic*. Published April 2, 2017.

Public Interviews and Blogs Posts

- 2017 “That’s What Makes It Worthwhile: An Interview with Olivia Laing,” Interview, *Barely
 South Review*. Published October 30, 2017.
 2016 “Cultural Appropriation, Scorpions, and Hobos: An Interview with Joe Jackson,”
 Interview, *Barely South Review*. Published Fall 2016.
 2016 “Writers in Workshop: The Perfectionist Versus the Experimentalist,” Blog Post, *Barely
 South Review*. Published December 9, 2016.
 2016 “To Assume is to Make an Ass of U and Me,” Blog Post, *Barely South Review*. Published
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